

VOYAGE IN ITALY: ROBERTO ROSSELLINI'S NON-DUALISTIC VIEW OF THE WORLD AND CINEMA

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Sommario

In questo saggio mi propongo di dimostrare che in Viaggio in Italia (1954) Roberto Rossellini ha usato una serie di strategie narrative e visuali volte a frustrare le attese del pubblico con il fine di suggerire che i nostri schemi mentali, e in particolare il dualismo, limitano la nostra comprensione del mondo. Sostengo inoltre che Viaggio in Italia è il primo passo nella creazione di un cinema inteso come attività che aiuta gli spettatori a liberare se stessi da stereotipi e preconcetti. Concludo affermando che Viaggio in Italia anticipa la caratteristiche estetiche e filosofiche del cinema storico e didattico di Rossellini, che culmina nella nozione della cosiddetta "immagine essenziale."

Alex, waking up in the car: "Where are we?"
Katherine, driving: "Oh, I don't know exactly."
Voyage in Italy, 1954

In this essay, I analyse the visual and narrative strategies that Roberto Rossellini adopted in his film, *Voyage in Italy* (1954)¹ to show that Rossellini invited his viewers to question their own dualistic perception of the world by offering them a series of antitheses (or oxymoronic juxtapositions) that he purposefully left unresolved. Also, Rossellini undermined conventional cinematic storytelling by de-

¹ Over the years, there have been many variations in the titles under which the film was released globally, including: *The Lonely Woman* and *Journey to Italy* in the United Kingdom, *Strangers* in the United States, and *L'amour est le plus fort* in France. The choice of *Voyage in Italy* for this article is taken from Tag Gallagher (1998:747).

dramatizing the action, blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction, inserting moments of self-reflexivity, and ending the film with a puzzling final sequence in which the camera abandons the main characters to focus on the people around them who had never appeared earlier in the film. Together, these two strategies enable viewers to be more detached spectators of the story, thereby putting them in the condition to reflect upon their perceptions of the world and the way films attempt to make sense of it. I also propose that this film marks one of Rossellini's first steps toward an aesthetic and heuristic shift that later reached its peak in his later films for television (1964-1975) and culminated in what he defined as his search for the "essential image," his attempt to capture the "tremendous innocence of the original glance" of things before language and theories alter this perception (Hughes, 1973:89). Rossellini claimed that, through his historical films, he wanted to help people to see and think for themselves – what he referred to as "autopsia"² – in order to free themselves from ideologies and prejudices (Hughes, 1973:89). My hypothesis is that *Voyage in Italy* is not only a film about life, as Rossellini seemed to suggest in a 1965 interview (*My Method*, 1995:155), or a film about death, as film scholar Laura Mulvey advocates (2000), or a *nekya* within the sacredness of the Neapolitan landscape as interpreted by Italian film scholar, Sandro Bernardi (2000), but it is mainly a film about the way viewers perceive the world through mental schemata and serves as an invitation for viewers to become aware of their perceptions and perhaps break free from them.

Critics often note that many of Rossellini's films are structured around contrasts, polarities and antitheses. *Voyage in Italy* has prompted many interpretations that focus on the contrast between the present and the past (Mulvey), North and South (Nowell-Smith), and the mythical and sacred character of the Neapolitan landscape versus the more modern world of Northern Europe (Bernardi). While some

² "Autopsia" (autopsy) is literally "the act of seeing with one's own eyes." Rossellini borrowed this concept from the seventeenth-century Czech pedagogue, Jan Amos Comenius (aka Comenius). Comenius expands on this saying that it means to "examine everything oneself, without submitting to authority" (Piaget, 1993:7). For the concept's importance for Rossellini, see Forgacs (2000:128) and Rossellini's *Utopia autopsia 10*¹⁰.

of these polarities can be detected in *Voyage in Italy*, it seems that Rossellini avoids proposing which element of the antitheses is the more important of the two by presenting ambiguous images throughout the film (particularly in the final sequence) and intertwining the dualistic elements in the story, allowing them to play together not only off each other. Even Rossellini's creative process – both in his writing and filming – mirrors this distrust in a representation of the world through antitheses and dualism. Rossellini often allows chance to dictate the development of the script and the filming process, thereby preventing even himself from resorting to those narrative clichés that reinforce ideological and dualistic bias.

At a visual level, *Voyage in Italy* distances itself from films of that same period. While the films of Luchino Visconti and Michelangelo Antonioni seem to pay close attention to formal details such as image composition and focus on strong stories, *Voyage in Italy* is surprisingly subdued despite the perceptible drama beneath the surface. Rossellini prefers the work of his director of photography Enzo Serafin whose predilection for diffused light matched Rossellini's penchant for de-emphasis, de-dramatization, and restraint in the use of conventional cinematic effects. Also, the film's original musical score is much less dramatic and expressionistic than in his earlier films, as music is included rather sparsely and, at times, ends abruptly such as in the scene at the temple of Apollo. In *Voyage in Italy*, Rossellini's camerawork and *mise en scène* seem less concerned with detailed attention to the building of an image than with the rendering of an idea that lurks behind the façade of the images. The elaborately shot sequence in the Archaeological Museum in Naples is a case in point. Scholar Laura Mulvey suggests that the goal of this scene, far from being a virtuoso moment, seems to be that of giving life to the ancient immobile statues as the camera explores them in detail, moving around and around each work, to subtly hint at the overall message behind the film: the polarity between life and death (2000:104).

Furthermore, Rossellini's calculated interplay between script and chance blurs the line between the film and the world outside the film, suggesting a deep reflection on the role of cinema. In addition, by frustrating his viewers' expectations, Rossellini unveils how our

preconceptions limit the way in which we view films and, by extension, insinuates that those same preconceptions mislead us when we attempt to make sense of the world. Author Tag Gallagher asserts that two important scenes – the excavation in Pompeii and the religious procession – were brought about by chance, and it is by chance that Rossellini used a crane during the religious procession scene. In Gallagher’s interpretation, Rossellini had “doggedly put himself in good luck’s path” (1998:413), perhaps a paradoxical case of planning the unexpected. By allowing the world to enter the realm of fiction, Rossellini somehow prepares the unexpected, subtly undermining the script and its rationale for being. This frees the film to go in multiple directions at once, denying viewers a solid reference point from which to draw conclusions. Also, in what can be viewed as a complementary strategy to his trademark openness to chance, Rossellini tended not to review his work once filming was complete, allowing room for interesting and productive mishaps – such as the shadow of the crane that appears in the last sequence of *Voyage in Italy* – and unplanned changes.³

On a more general scale, the making of *Voyage in Italy* exhibits Rossellini’s penchant for spontaneous creativity already displayed in his previous films (a shocking discovery during the filming of *Stromboli* for Ingrid Bergman who was accustomed to the Hollywood-style of filmmaking). When Rossellini started filming, he did not have a complete script, or even a title, but only a five-page outline of the story. He then made continual changes to the story throughout filming. He purposefully did not give George Sanders any direction on how to portray his character and had him stay at a different hotel, far from Ingrid Bergman and the rest of the crew. The first two weeks of shooting and much of the film budget were used for the sequence in the Archaeological Museum, leading to delays, financial turmoil and a sense of general disorientation amongst the actors and crew. It is possible that Gallagher gives too much credit to Rossellini when he states that all these moves were part of

³ One such change involves Rossellini’s son, Renzo, who took advantage of his father’s absence from the set of *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* and used a dolly, a device that Rossellini never liked very much, an event that Renzo recounted in the Special Features included in the DVD version of the film. In the same interview, Renzo Rossellini reveals that his father did not check the final version of his films.

Rossellini's highly elaborate plan to leave the actors in the dark as to what would happen, a choice that would give the viewers the impression that the story was unfolding "live" in front of their eyes (1998:413). Still, Rossellini did admit during a 1965 interview, "We never knew one day what we'd be doing next. Things came together on the spot – there's a certain logic to things that cannot be calculated in advance" but quickly added, "But this doesn't mean that you stand there and toss a coin to find out which way to film" (*My Method*, 1995:159).

Voyage in Italy was Rossellini's third full-feature film starring Ingrid Bergman after *Stromboli* (1949) and *Europe '51* (1952). At the time of its release, *Voyage in Italy* was a box-office and critical failure. It was released with minimal publicity on September 7, 1954, a notoriously difficult time of year for new films in Italy since most movie theatres are closed, schools have not yet opened and Italians are just returning home from vacation. Moreover, perhaps because it "flies in the face of both convention and the conventions of unconventionality" and "too many, of the few who saw it, saw (and see) nothing but pointless plotless meandering" (Gallagher, 1998:403), the film was immediately attacked by Italian critics. However, as in the case of *Open City*, French critics hailed it as a masterpiece while the young directors of the *Nouvelle Vague* (Truffaut, Godard) viewed Rossellini as an innovator who was pioneering revolutionary filmmaking. Thanks also to the positive reception in France, the critical assessment of the film changed and *Voyage in Italy* is "thought by many to be his [Rossellini's] finest and, in fact, one of the greatest films ever made [...] it regularly makes the top-ten listings of *Cahiers du cinéma*" (Brunette, 1987:155). Eleven years after its release, Italy caught up with the French when nine out of twelve writers for the Italian film journal *Filmcritica* selected *Voyage in Italy* as one of the top ten Italian films between 1943 and 1965 (1987:158).

The plot of *Voyage in Italy* revolves around Alex and Katherine Joyce, a British couple who travel to Naples where they spend seven days to sell a villa they inherited after the death of their Uncle Homer. It is clear from the onset of the story that boredom and mutual misunderstanding trouble the couple's relationship. The contrast

between Alex's work ethic and the Neapolitan notion of "*dolce far niente*" shapes his attitude toward Italy and seems to add to the couple's problems, leading the husband to unload his sarcasm and bitterness onto his wife. Katherine reacts to this situation by reminiscing about the past and repeatedly quoting the verses of an old poet friend, a British soldier who had passed away. Moreover, Katherine spends more and more time alone, visiting museums and archaeological sites unaccompanied by her husband. The relationship between Alex and Katherine progressively deteriorates to the extent that they contemplate divorce, but while discussing the issue at one point in the film, their host Burton suggests that they visit the archaeological site at Pompeii to witness an important discovery. Together at the site, Alex and Katherine watch as the archaeologists reveal the plaster reconstruction of a Pompeian man and woman, frozen in time by the lava, and Katherine is emotionally moved and leaves the site. On their return to Naples, they get lost and are forced to stop by a religious procession that is taking place in a small village. The couple has another argument, and Katherine leaves the car. In the crowded village street, somebody yells out that a miracle has taken place, and the crowd moves rapidly to witness it, sweeping Katherine away with the flow of people. Katherine cries out for help, and Alex runs to aid her. The couple talk, arrive at an understanding that they were just trying to hurt each other, and agree to remain married. Then, Katherine prompts Alex to tell her that he loves her, they embrace, and the camera pans away from the couple and comes in to close focus on some members of the marching band where it holds while the crowd flows in front of them. With this image, rather enigmatically, the film ends.

Rossellini makes clear his unconventional approach to filmmaking and to screenwriting right from the onset of *Voyage in Italy*, turning upside down the visual cliché of the stranger entering town and the stereotype of the South as a mythical place where the inhabitants are seemingly oblivious to problems and blessed by the presence of sun and sea. It may serve to compare the opening sequence of *Voyage in Italy* to that of Jules Dassin's film, *Never on Sunday* (1960) to further prove this point. In *Never on Sunday*, the film opens with a panoramic shot of Athens' harbour and, within three minutes, we are introduced

to the main characters. In the span of a few minutes, we are offered a clear visual of the topography of the area, meet the protagonists, understand their relationships to each other and where they come from, and even the main features of their characters: Ilia, passionate and impulsive; Homer, rational and idealistic.

In contrast, *Voyage in Italy* opens with the Neapolitan song “O paese d’o sole” (“The Land of the Sun”) playing while the credits are presented on a classic grey background that fades into the first images of the film as the song ends. Contrary to what we might expect, the song lyrics (“This is the land of the sun / this is the land of the sea / this is the land where all words / either sweet or bitter / are words of love”) do not prepare us for a shot of the sea, or the Gulf of Naples, or an idyllic landscape. Instead, for the first thirty seconds of the film, we see only what can be seen from a car in movement: a dizzying, moving shot of the paved road, some small billboards, and a train moving in the opposite direction. When the protagonists finally appear in the frame, Alex is caught in the act of waking up while Katherine is driving. There are neither smiles nor moments of recognition or intimacy between the two. Alex simply asks, “Where are we?” to which Katherine answers, “Oh, I don’t know exactly.” We discover through their dialogue that they are 100 kilometres from Naples and that they do not know much more than we do. Even Katherine’s words “I don’t know exactly” suggest that there may be symbolic value in this statement. No words of love follow but a simple, rather mundane conversation between a man and a woman who do not show any sign of affection for each other. Instead of showing the actual moment of entrance into a foreign space, like the arrival of a stranger by ship (as in many other films such as *Never on Sunday*), Rossellini chooses to show us two main characters who are already in a foreign country, thereby denying us the aesthetic and emotional experience usually prompted by classic arrival scenes. Unlike *Never on Sunday*, *Voyage in Italy*’s first sequence seems to have been designed to disorient rather than orient its viewers.

For *Voyage in Italy*, the constructs of an ending, as well as a beginning, appear to be no more than a convention as the film starts and ends with ellipses. The opening sequence coincides with the opening of the camera shutter on an ongoing story that will unfold

within the temporal limits of *Voyage in Italy*. Something was happening before, and something else will happen after the screen fades to black in the last sequence. Also, the impression of witnessing a story as it unfolds (unplanned, almost unscripted) is enhanced by the use of the *temps mort*, a trademark of Rossellini's shooting style. The sense of subtle displacement, announced by the first lines uttered by the protagonists, continues throughout the film, and Rossellini's way of filming – rarely self-conscious – mirrors the fluidity of the story that seems to proceed without dramatic twists. One important example of such an approach is the scene where Katherine visits the Temple of Apollo. Once she arrives at the site, she puts on her sunglasses and looks out in the distance at Capri, the island Alex is visiting without her. It is worth noting that the silhouette of the island is shown only once, quickly, at the beginning of the film, and that viewers unfamiliar with the landscape might have difficulty recognizing it as the place where Alex is spending the night. Katherine is clearly upset, her change of mood is almost palpable, but Rossellini does nothing to explain or accentuate this moment, even refusing to move the camera in for a close-up on her face, making it even more difficult for the viewer to connect with her emotional predicament.

Another scene in which the camera reveals the multiple layers of Rossellini's approach to filmmaking is a scene at the villa where Alex and Katherine stand at the second floor dining room window, looking out over a couple engaged in an argument spurred by jealousy below. Alex tells Katherine that he does not understand how the couple can be jealous *before* getting married, so Katherine explains to him that, "the time just before marriage is a very delicate one". Katherine returns to the dining room table and Alex closes the window. Alex's facial expression (shot in deep focus) subtly suggests that he is at odds with this new piece of information. Upon first viewing, we may not notice the change in mood on Alex's face or that the camera does not enter the living space but remains physically outside the window and the rest of the scene is shot through the glass. Once again, Rossellini does nothing to highlight that we witnessed a missed opportunity for intimacy or that the position of the camera might suggest the distance between Alex, Katherine and life as it passes

them by. Moreover, once we realize the function of the window, the scene seems to turn on itself. Beyond the window lies not only the world outside the villa but also the world of the viewers. The window thus transforms into a transparent barrier between the film and its viewers who are called to play the role of the Joyces in relation to the film. This barrier reveals that Alex and Katherine are severed from Naples and the flux of life, but it also reveals that the viewers are irremediably separated from the British couple and from the film *Voyage in Italy*, as if the window has become an extension of the camera lens. The window transcends its function and becomes a metaphor for the distance that exists between the viewers and the film. The Joyces filter their perception of the world through a series of mental frames, and the viewers perceive *Voyage in Italy* through their previous cinematic experiences. Just as the Joyces have difficulty making sense of the world, so too the viewers find themselves at odds with a film that escapes cinematic convention.

Rossellini punctuates the narrative with other examples of physical and mental barriers. During their first conversation in the car as they drive toward Naples, Alex and Katherine make reference to the possible presence of malaria in the area, highlighting their concerns about their surroundings. This fear of physical contamination foreshadows the deeper, symbolic contamination that will take place later in the story. And their environment – with its volcano and ebullient lava bubbling beneath the Earth's thin crust – seems to suggest that something is on the brink of surfacing, hinting at some imminent revelation and mirroring the increasing tension between Katherine and Alex. The peripheral position of Uncle Homer's villa (slightly outside Naples) prevents them from approaching the pulsating core of the city, while Katherine's excursions into Naples are limited mainly to museums and archaeological sites. Her sunglasses filter what she witnesses of the everyday life of the locals while the shell of the car she drives protects her from it. Alex, who does not seem as enthusiastic about exploring the surroundings alone, interacts with other people only on two occasions. On his return to the villa from his excursion to Capri, Alex has a conversation with a prostitute to whom he offers a ride. This conversation is confined to the car and, when the prostitute invites him to go somewhere else,

Alex turns her down, refusing to venture out into the real world and relinquish the protection that the car affords him. Once again, the car acts as a protective shell that prevents any direct contact with the place they are visiting and the people who reside there.

There are however deeper, mental barriers that prevent Alex and Katherine from understanding and embracing the world they are visiting, embracing each other and, ultimately, embracing themselves. Katherine's way of dealing with their marital problems and with their change in surroundings is to return to the past where she can find memories to make up for the lack of meaning in the life she leads. Her first and repeated point of reference is the couplet by her late friend – “[...] temple of the spirit / No longer bodies, but pure ascetic images, compared to which mere thought seems flesh, heavy, dim” – that she uses to interpret the present and also, perhaps, to make Alex jealous. In addition to providing solace in the present situation, the verses also suggest that Katherine prefers a more idealized, pure and perfect version of the world. As in the reference to malaria, these verses both hint at and keep at bay the fear of contamination. However, they do not provide Katherine sufficient protection against the blows of life, for they ironically anticipate the Pompeian couple Katherine will later see during the excavation scene. The image of this frozen couple, literally “no longer bodies” but pure simulacra that only the solidified plaster can reveal, upsets Katherine either because it reminds her of the caducity of life in general – of her life and Alex's life – or because the man and woman were together at the time of death, something Katherine fears she will face alone should she decide to divorce. In this way, the verses no longer can help Katherine distance and protect herself from the present but instead become a vivid physical manifestation of the present that Katherine had carefully tried to avoid. Moreover, the fact that the Pompeii scene was not in the script but unplanned and prompted by chance (Gallagher, 1998:412) mirrors at a narrative level the pre-eminence of the present (i.e. of the world) over the script and the mental constructions that inform it.

Katherine also turns toward the past by visiting museums, other archaeological sites and Pozzuoli. The statues she admires at the Archaeological Museum become a way to find the life she is missing. She recounts her museum visit to Alex: “To think that these men lived

thousands of years ago and you feel that they are just like the men of today". This scene is a failed attempt to articulate her emerging perception that the present is not only the present but contains the past as well, in an inextricable mix, as much as the ambiguous images scattered throughout the film contain unresolved antitheses. This episode belongs to a series of missed encounters. According to film scholar Angelo Restivo, each time Katherine seems to get closer to the Real (in the Lacanian sense) "the narrative is brought to a sudden arrest" (2002:97). Restivo also points out that the places that Katherine visits are all "metaphors of interconnectedness – although neither she nor the audience understands them immediately as such" (2002:97). This interconnectedness may refer to both physical space as well as temporal relationship: a connection between distant places, present and past, living human beings and those who have passed and, in general terms, present life and past life. If Katherine could recognize this interconnectedness, she would realize that the past is not separate from the present and eventually abandon this habit. Still, Katherine finds it more comfortable to deal with a simulacrum of life rather than with life itself. During these visits, it is clear that Katherine feels ill at ease with some of the comments of her tour guides. While not as unaccepting as Alex, she is often surprised and upset by what she sees around her. She notices the "complete lack of modesty with which everything was expressed" through the statues, a fact that is mirrored by the brazen comments of her tour guides at the museum and the Temple of Apollo. She falls prey to the temptation to compare the lifestyle and mindset of the past with that of the present and the Neapolitan customs to those of her own country, thus making sense of the world through the dualistic frames of Past vs. Present, Same vs. Other and, possibly, North vs. South.

While Alex does not receive as much camera time alone as Katherine, his mental barriers are visible from his first moments on screen. His first comment in the opening scene is one of disgust as he expresses his annoyance with the dangerous and reckless driving of a honking car that passes them: "I've never seen noise and boredom go so well together". Katherine points out that Uncle Homer spent many years in Naples "without getting bored" to which Alex responds, "Uncle Homer was not a normal person", introducing the Normality

vs. Abnormality polarity, a variation of Same vs. Other and Known vs. Unknown. In some instances, Alex expresses the desire to sell the villa as soon as possible so that they can return to England and he can return to his work. He is particularly reluctant to accept Katherine's invitations to enjoy life and refuses to join her in reminiscing about her late poet friend whom Alex refers to as a "fool". Alex's closure to Naples endures throughout the entire film even until the final moments. Upon seeing the religious procession, Alex judges the people who are participating in it as behaving like "children", suggesting yet another opposition between adulthood and childhood and attributing naïveté to the Other, therefore claiming a higher status of rationality and productivity for himself and his own country.

Towards the end of the film, Burton's wife Natalia tries to show Katherine something different from the archaeological sites and museums and drives her to the Fontanelle Cemetery where people pray in front of a display of skulls. Natalia explains that many Neapolitans "adopt" a dead person for whom they pray. In this way, the dead are perceived as alive and present. Even more importantly, at the end of the scene, Natalia confesses that she prays to conceive a child, enhancing therefore the presence of life, albeit only desired and potential. Once again, death and life coexist side by side, delicately intertwined and framed by the Neapolitan landscape.

The role of Naples in the film is an important one. Rossellini explained that he wanted to see how the story of a couple could be set against the Neapolitan background (*My Method*, 1995:105). Some critics interpreted *Voyage in Italy* as a *ménage à trois* between Alex, Katherine and Naples and defined the city and its landscape as the film's third main character. Such a choice is interesting but somehow limiting. Doing so means to equate Naples to Katherine and Alex, while it is vastly different from the protagonists of the story. Naples undergoes no character arc, has no beginning or end, nor satisfying conclusion to its story. Naples, as Rossellini chooses to show it, appears to be the place where life and death, past and present, present and future, sacred and profane interweave seamlessly. The images of life (pregnant women, couples in love, children playing) are intertwined with images of death such as the traditional funeral carriage seen during Katherine's first visit to the city and the scene in

the Fontanelle Cemetery. The past, represented by the statues in the Archaeological Museum, the archaeological sites, and the couple discovered under the lapilli, is intertwined with the present as modernity (human beings busy in everyday activities, cars, traffic) and almost perceived by Katherine as present. The sacred and the profane are shown in the same frame; for example, a priest first and a couple of nuns later are shown walking under a poster encouraging people to vote for the Communist Party. These opposites live together side by side in symbiosis, and Rossellini makes no attempt to offer the viewers a synthesis of these polarities.

Sandro Bernardi elaborates on the mythical qualities of Naples' landscape by interpreting Alex and Katherine's journey within the frame of a *nekya*, a journey into the underworld (2000:58). Similarly, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith suggests that Rossellini, especially but not only in his history films, measured everything against the Mediterranean paradigm that led him to what the scholar calls "Mediterranean-centeredness" (2000:16-17). Such analyses bestow upon the South the status of an idea beyond space and time, but Rossellini's representation of the South in *Voyage in Italy* challenges these analyses. Rossellini portrayed the South as a living entity, as an ever-moving flux of images that cannot be reduced to an idea, thereby undermining its alleged centeredness. Moreover, the South as myth (to follow Bernardi's suggestion) would ensure that Katherine and Alex's symbolic journey is successful, and that the balance and the wholeness sought after with such a journey are finally achieved, thanks to the healing power of the South and to its more "natural", less rational and more authentic way of life.

It appears however that Rossellini did not propose the South as a healing place but, instead, attempted to depict a different, more fluid and less stereotypical image of it. As in the case of the opening sequence, a comparison with *Never on Sunday* can be useful to highlight how Rossellini's approach to the South differed from that of other filmmakers. In Dassin's film, Homer Trace wants to find a cure for modern man and believes that Ancient Greece's values could be that cure. He wants to redeem Ilia by teaching her about Ancient Greece's cultural achievements that he identifies with order, logic and rationality. He eventually fails in his endeavour and leaves Greece

and Ilia as he had found them. Homer's mistake was to turn Ilia into the symbol of a symbol. For him, she is a symbol of Greece and Greece is, in turn, a symbol of lost perfection. While the film seems to teach that Ancient Greece is irrecoverable, in the end, this cautionary tale has become a victim of its own warning. The film's depiction of modern Greece appears to establish a new myth to live by, that of a Mediterranean (South) as the centre of a non-evolved, hence spiritual/good world that has the power to provide a cure for modern world's malaise. As we have already seen, there are no moments that justify and prepare a similar conclusion in *Voyage in Italy*, and the last sequence will definitely void its mythical substratum.

This final sequence is very important for our purposes because it is here that all of Rossellini's strategies, at a narrative and visual level, come full circle. First, it is helpful to analyse a couple of important visual details that prepare us to fully appreciate the extent of Rossellini's vision. Katherine and Alex get lost on their return to the villa from Pompeii and enter a village where a religious procession is about to take place. As soon as the car enters the village, quite a few of the villagers can be seen looking briefly into the camera, breaking with the cinematographic convention of the fourth wall. Later, when the camera, mounted on a crane, follows the religious procession, we clearly notice that other people in the film look up into the camera, as well.

There is another detail that seems to reinforce this documentary-like quality of the scene: the shadow of the crane and the camera on which it is mounted is clearly visible for four full seconds. Perhaps this was an error on Rossellini's part in that improvising on the set under the pressure of time (Gallagher, 1998:412-3) might have led to the incorrect placement of the camera and the crane with respect to the natural light source. As was his practice, Rossellini did not review his films once they were completed, and this could explain the possible presence of a mistake in the final print. On the other hand, Rossellini had filmed in very difficult situations before without incurring such "error". And the editor could have easily noticed and removed these few frames in the editing room. The possibility therefore that Rossellini left in these incidents to mirror the impromptu character of the plot is a strong one. Perhaps Rossellini

realized that the “error” was taking place and left it there because, by partially exposing the filmic apparatus, he was elaborating upon the concept introduced during the window scene, suggesting that *Voyage in Italy* was an object and therefore a part of the world that it seemed to contain but in fact was contained by it. This is part of Rossellini’s strategy to erase the “film vs. world” antithesis as he had voided the antitheses through which Katherine and Alex had tried to see the world. The gazes into the camera and the shadow of the crane reveal and destroy the magic of cinema, thus inviting the audience to fully comprehend the fictionality of the plot and its characters *right before* the ambiguous reconciliation takes place.

The final scene, which seems to hint at a reconciliation between the couple, is the most interesting and unsettling one, for neither Alex’s words nor tone satisfy the viewer’s desire for a clear resolution to their situation. Rossellini does his best to thwart his viewers’ expectations even in this last sequence, when viewers might expect a resolution to the couple’s problems that would make sense of the apparent chaos that surrounds them. While Alex expresses his love for Katherine, he does so only because Katherine has promised not to take advantage of him. The insincere quality of this last exchange is exacerbated by the gazes into the camera and the shadow of the crane that forcefully deprives the scene of any verisimilitude. This scene invites the viewer to realize its artificiality – consistent with the apparent filmic “mistakes” – at the same time promoting detachment and analysis rather than full emotional cooperation. The embrace between Alex and Katherine, the iconic filmic embrace between protagonists that brings stories to a close, is now as empty as the shells of the bodies of the Pompeian excavation site: Rossellini physically emptied the conventions of cinema and left us with the hollow structure of cinema to look at and analyse.

Thus, it appears that the scene’s main purpose is to frustrate the audience’s expectations, and this frustration is brought to completion and magnified by the images that follow. The camera completely abandons the two main characters and focuses on what appears to be the conductor of the marching band and the crowd walking in front of him, then it pans slightly to the right to hold on another unknown character before the frame freezes and fades out to the words “The

End". Given the non-diegetic nature of the images – as they are not shot from Alex or Katherine's point of view, either – it is possible to tie them to the shadow of the crane and to the reconciliation scene, and to assume that the purpose of this cinematic choice is in line with Rossellini's invitation to his viewers to think about cinema and its customary endings. With the last images, Rossellini is establishing a strong connection between Alex and Katherine's case and that of the viewers. Up until the final sequence, Alex and Katherine have viewed and made sense of the world via polarities: Same vs. Other, Known vs. Unknown, Present vs. Past. At a certain level, the viewers have done the same by viewing the fictionalized reality of the film through the clichés of cinematic storytelling in expectation of an ending to the story consistent with the conventions of this kind of narrative. Rossellini has put his viewers in condition to be aware of the cinematic apparatus and, by extension, invites them to look with their own eyes (*autopsia*), almost dispensing with the authority of the director who has seemingly stepped aside and let the camera move elsewhere to observe the facts as they develop. The destinies of Alex, Katherine and the viewers are tied together in that they all have, albeit momentarily, overcome the set of polarities through which they made sense of the world. Alex and Katherine's disappearance from the frame promotes *de facto* the viewers to the role of invisible protagonists of the director's reflection on cinema and its stories. This is one of Rossellini's first steps towards the second half of his career, which is deeply tied to the concept of the "essential image".

While it is perhaps excessive to assign to *Voyage in Italy* the privileged status of a watershed in Rossellini's oeuvre, it is nonetheless interesting to notice that, following its release, Rossellini directed only some lesser works (one sketch for *Amori di mezzo secolo*, *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo* and *Fear*) before his career reached its nadir and he travelled to India to shoot the documentary *India, Matri Bhumi* (1958). He later entered what critics have termed his "commercial period" with films from *General della Rovere* (1959) through *Illibatezza* (1962) often exhibiting disinterest in projects and abandoning some films mid-production. In 1962, Rossellini called a press conference at the Einaudi bookstore in Rome and announced publicly: "Il cinema è morto" (Gallagher, 1998:538). Rossellini

realized that he was deeply dissatisfied with cinema as he felt that it had nothing left to say. In his eyes, cinema had lost its main function, the civic and educational function it had during Neorealism. Therefore, Rossellini decided to follow a new direction in his career. He stopped working on films and instead dedicated himself to writing essays, offering interviews on what he thought needed to be accomplished to heal the malaise of contemporary civilization. In 1966, he remarked that “the press, radio, cinema, television, all the arts [...] tell us nothing about our civilization. They only tell us about our feelings of anxiety in relation to it. It is an important observation. But it has been made. Let’s move on” (*My Method*: 174).

From 1962 to 1964, he did follow through with his idea of writing essays, producing a couple of books and giving many interviews. In 1964, he decided to focus on the history of human civilization and, in order to reach a potentially global audience, he chose to direct films for television instead. From 1964 to 1975, he amassed some forty hours of film for the small screen, among which the much praised *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* and *The Messiah*. Rossellini maintained that he did not want to teach with these history films but only to inform. In 1973, Rossellini equated the word “educate” with “castrate”, implying that educating does not bring out a potential but in fact represses and eliminates it (Hughes, 1973:89). Rossellini extended this opinion regarding education to include ideology as well (Gallagher, 1998:626). To this predicament, Rossellini responded with the “mystery of the essential image” which referred to his intention “to recapture the tremendous innocence of the original glance, the very first image that appeared to our eyes” (Hughes, 1973:89). (The concept of the “essential image” is a controversial one that requires extensive analysis that cannot be addressed within the limits of this study.) Rossellini then elaborated on the filmic choices behind his history films in terms that appear to be very similar to the filmic approach he adopted in *Voyage in Italy*. He saw his films as “improvisations which confront the dasein [sic] of history” and highlighted the fact that the remote-control zoom camera related “unpredictably” to the events he was staging but added that there was “great logic in chance” (1973:89). He also explained that he would never look at the daily rushes because he denied himself “the need to

be perfect” explaining that “[i]mperfection and chance are the vital part of the fabric of history, and by neglecting them we increase our alienation, our inability to get inside things” (1973:89).

In 1974, Hughes and Gallagher interviewed Rossellini and pressed him to clarify how it was possible to achieve the essential image given that it was not a theory but rather a search (*My Method*, 1995:231). Rossellini’s answers were not completely convincing, and his steadfast belief in the camera’s neutrality is very problematic, but despite this issue, it is still possible to discern a set of ideas and techniques that he had previously tested in *Voyage in Italy* and that lead to the achievement of the essential image. These ideas include: the refusal to have theories or to have a religious credo, the conviction that following a theory means to castrate yourself (in this specific instance he is referring to Freud’s theories), and the belief that aesthetic preconceptions should not get in the way of the story the director is trying to tell (1995:228–34). Frustrated by Rossellini’s continuous refusal to be interpreted through a theoretical and aesthetic paradigm, Hughes and Gallagher tried to synthesize his overall approach by asking him whether his films were “trying to decondition people from having theories” to which Rossellini replied, “Yes, absolutely” (1995:233-234). Although we cannot immediately assimilate *Voyage in Italy* to Rossellini’s history films for obvious reasons (i.e. it is a fictional story), it is possible to see how it anticipates some of the visual and narrative strategies that will become a staple in Rossellini’s history films. It is because of these strategies that *Voyage in Italy* is more a study of a couple’s situation rather than just a sympathetic or moral narration. In addition, detachment and self-reflexivity challenge the viewers’ assumptions about the world it purports to portray and asks them to find the answers for themselves, a feature that Rossellini posited as the underlying principle behind his historical projects (Gallagher, 1998:594).

Voyage in Italy is not an isolated case in Rossellini’s oeuvre. It shares quite a few of its most important visual and narrative features with many of Rossellini’s earlier films and was filmed in his typical unorthodox fashion (i.e. lack of a completed script at the time of production and continual redaction of the script during filming).

However, *Voyage in Italy* also exhibits some important structural and aesthetic qualities that set it apart. The first, obvious difference is the absence of historical or fictional dramatic themes that constitute the backbone of the plots of his early films. In *Voyage in Italy*, the typical themes such as war, death, betrayal, torture, suicide, religious ecstasy, depression and alienation fall away to make room for the mundane story of a British couple's week in Italy. Moreover, even though having a British couple visiting Naples gives way to interpretations focused on the North-South polarity and the stereotypes associated with it, the two main characters – with their flaws and weaknesses – are not stereotypical which is a departure from some of the characters in Rossellini's earlier films.

The few "dramatic" turns of events in *Voyage in Italy* are almost imperceptible, and Rossellini's visual strategies further defuse their potentially emotion-provoking power. This leads to another interesting deviation from his previous films, that is, the audience's reaction to the characters' destiny. In his pre-*Voyage* films, although Rossellini tries to tone down the drama in his usual way, it is difficult not to feel emotions and/or sympathy for his other characters: Pina, Marcello, Edmund, Nannina, Karen and Irene, to name only a few. In *Voyage in Italy*, even though the film seems to focus mainly on a relationship that is sinking because of overwhelming and uncontrolled emotions, audiences fail to feel emotion for the two main characters, and the initial negative response from Italian critics (and Italian audiences) seems to confirm this. It is true that Alex's abrasiveness could be perceived at times as the main cause of their predicament, placing Katherine in the role of victim who needs to be cared for, but it is also true that Katherine, too, is oftentimes less than open to talking and working through their marital problems. Thus, Rossellini denies his viewers the opportunity to either root for or blame specific characters for the situation and places them in the position of detached spectators.

Such detachment plays an important role at a different level, as well. While there are moments in which Rossellini breaks with cinematic convention and reveals moments of self-reflexivity in his earlier films, these moments are somehow overshadowed by inherent drama and emotions of the story that draw the viewer's attention to

the main action and push these moments to the background. In *Voyage in Italy*, the plotless plot, the lack of dramatic turning points and the blandness of the *mise en scène* allow the viewer, undistracted by strong emotions and less involved in the story of the characters, to better perceive the “mistakes” and the moments of cinematic self-reflexivity and to make sense of them on a larger, structural level. All of these features of *Voyage in Italy* – the lack of drama and emotion, the sense of detachment, the idea of a plotless plot – place the moments of self-reflexivity in the foreground and offer the viewer a truly active cinematic experience that has less to do with the couple’s story and more with our perception of the world, and of the films that the world contains.

In *Voyage in Italy*, Rossellini suggested that it is impossible to understand the world through antithetic oppositions (dualism) or to impose on it consoling narratives. What seems to remain at the end is the total pervasiveness of unbridled life that flows and overcomes the physical and mental barriers that Katherine and Alex had erected around themselves. By allowing the cinema’s apparatuses and its limitations to be perceived and by allowing the non-fictionalized world to enter the realm of fiction, Rossellini showed with *Voyage in Italy* the possibility of developing cinema into a thinking tool, a fact noted by critic Bruno Torri in 1973 who claimed that Rossellini’s cinema was “a cinema of questions, not answers” (quoted in Brunette, 1987:127), later echoed by Bernardi who described Rossellini as “a philosopher, or a director who used the cinema to think” (Bernardi, 2000:51). Dispensing with emotions whenever possible, *Voyage in Italy* becomes a sort of heuristic device that invites audiences to think, paving the way for Rossellini’s later history films envisaged to help people understand the world in its multitude of facets without preconceptions.⁴

⁴ In his *Pensiero vivente: Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito wrote that Italian philosophy has been traditionally open to the conflicts and the traumas of the experiences of the world. For Esposito, at the core of Italian philosophy lies the category of life, with its ever tense and problematic relationship with politics and history. Rossellini’s philosophical approach fits surprisingly well in this frame of reference.

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