Journey to Italy

Director: Roberto Rossellini
Country: Italy
Date: 1954

A review by Fernando F Croce for *Slant.com:*

In his 1950s collaborations with Ingrid Bergman, the great Italian director Roberto Rossellini captured his wife and muse in a light completely different from her glamorous Hollywood persona. Drawn, fretful, and confused, the Swedish star wanders through these films as if looking anxiously at the man behind the camera, begging for direction while the exploratory Rossellini sought emotional truth by dropping her into alien landscapes. It's a harrowing series of portrayals of unsettled female consciousness, and also a glimpse into a complex behind-the-scenes romance as revealing as the films Josef von Sternberg made with Marlene Dietrich some 20 years earlier.

If not quite their *The Devil Is a Woman*, the 1954 masterpiece *Voyage to Italy* is similarly awash in the emotional unease of a relationship racing to its end, a meta-sketchbook where the disillusionment of the protagonists seems to irresistibly mirror that of the actress and the filmmaker. That out all of this emerges one of cinema's most transcendently hopeful works is the kind of contradiction surely appreciated by Rossellini, an analytical yet emotive visionary who could film miracles as if they were part of the everyday fabric of life.

The first image finds a road stretching endlessly into the distance; a change in angle reveals Katherine (Bergman) and Alex Joyce (George Sanders) driving their car. The Italian countryside is the setting, though, for the visiting British couple peering through the windshield, it might as well be another planet. Traveling to Naples to dispose of an inherited villa, they're thrown together after years virtually separated by their familiar social routines. Katherine is a neurotic romantic who, hungering for meaningful contact, remembers a young poet's love; meanwhile, Alex wears an armor of condescending irony and sees no difference between a poet and a fool. "I realized for the first time that we're like strangers," she tells him in one of the many passive-aggressive barbs exchanged between them. As Katherine visits ancient touristic sites, the Mediterranean location gradually shifts from mere scenery to active character. In a magnificent sequence set in a museum, millenniums-old statues confront her with their staring eyes and sinewy sensuality. At the foot of the Vesuvius volcano, the earth melts and smol ders. Alex flirts with having an affair with a socialite and picking up a coolly desperate prostitute, only to return to evading his wife's (as well as his own) painful emotions. A divorce seems inescapable.

As befits a filmmaker who defined as well as challenged the definition of Italian neorealism, Voyage to Italy unfolds as a thorny narrative and a profoundly personal documentary. The fictional tale of a married couple in crisis isn't just a reflection of the brittle Rossellini-Bergman bond, but also a snapshot of a pair of bewildered, irritable Hollywood stars purposefully misdirected by a wily, searching auteur. Nowhere is this combination more astounding than in the famous scene where a real-life excavation amid the ruins of Pompeii is integrated into the body of the story,

with the exhumation of the conserved bodies of two lovers hitting Katherine like a ton of bricks. "Life is so short," she abruptly says afterward, the only words she can find to express the weight of the centuries and the frailty of her existence. The discovery of such dimensions is what weaves the cosmic into Rossellini's de-dramatized approach, the humbling recognition of life and mortality, of funeral hearses and baby carriages and pregnant women and rows of skulls. As in Stromboli and Europa '51, the trajectory is a steady progress away from traditional conventions and toward a new understanding dawning on the heroine's face.

It's no secret why Voyage to Italy became a cornerstone of the art films of the 1960s and beyond. Its deliberately vacant spaces and deeply existential spirit ("In a sense we're all shipwrecked, trying so hard to stay afloat," a girl says at a party) can be felt in the alienated wanderings of Antonioni and Wenders, in the inquisitive breakdowns of Godard and Rivette, in the contemplative fusions of Kiarostami and Ceylan. Rejecting simplistic despair, however, Rossellini opts for hope in a wondrous, much debated finale that forces the couple out of the metallic shell of their car and into a turbulent surge of humanity. Swept along by the people at a religious procession, Katherine and Alex are separated and reunited amid cries of "miracolo!"

Rossellini in later years would boast of his atheism, yet here he surveys the mysterious happenings from a celestially elevated crane. Clinging to each other as if to a life raft, the reunited protagonists are given no guarantee of a happy ending, but instead something more profound—a new awareness of themselves and of the world around them. A noisy crowd becomes an intimate epiphany, and a rigorously understated film becomes an overwhelming vision.

From: http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/voyage-to-italy

Further viewing:

The impact of this film on other directors can be seen in the works of the six mentioned in the penultimate paragraph above. Our favourite examples include Michaelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1974, Italy), Wim Wenders' *Kings of the road* (1976, Germany), Jean Luc-Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963, France), Jacques Rivette's *Celine and Julie go boating* (1974, France), Abbas Kiarostami's *The wind will carry us* (1999, Iran) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once upon a time in Anatolya* (2011, Turkey).

This *Winter Wednesdays* film season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

BFI Film Audience Network

Supported by The National Lottery®