The Actress Is a Filmmaker: Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini’s New Erotics of Vision

Domietta Torlasco

It is just that whereas literature, art, and the practice of life—creating themselves with things themselves, the perceptible itself, beings themselves—can (except at their extreme limits) have and create the illusion of dwelling in the habitual and the already constituted, philosophy—which paints without colors in black and white, like copperplate engravings—does not allow us to ignore the strangeness of the world [...]"1

The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking.2

Among the many encounters brought about and recorded by Neorealist cinema, the one between Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman and Italian director Roberto Rossellini has attracted a remarkable amount of attention (critical and otherwise), blurring the line between personal and professional matters and provoking the adoption of disparate qualifying terms: scandalous, miraculous, serendipitous…3 Even the critics who praised the three films they made together—Stromboli, terra di Dio (Stromboli, Land of God, 1949), Europa ’51 (Europe ’51, 1952), and Viaggio in Italia (Journey to Italy, 1954)—found it difficult to ignore the love relationship that was binding actress and filmmaker at the time of the shooting. “The direction of Bergman here,” writes Jacques Rivette about Stromboli, “is totally conjugal, and based on an intimate knowledge less of the actress than of the woman,” indeed pointing to the impossibility of ever isolating off-screen circumstances from the technical and aesthetic decisions made during the production of a film. On the other hand, the letter that Bergman sent Rossellini after seeing Rome Open City (1945) and Paisa’ (1946) in a small New York theatre (a letter whose vicissitudes have been well documented) is short and discretely seductive:

Dear Mr. Rossellini,

I saw your films Open City and Paisan, and enjoyed them very much. If you need a Swedish actress who speaks English very well, who has not forgotten her German, who is not very understandable in French, and who, in Italian knows only “ti amo,” I am ready to come and make a film with you.4

It was not unusual for a Hollywood actress to lobby for a part and we know that Bergman exercised considerable pressure in order to play the role of the prostitute in Victor Fleming’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1941). Against the natural and wholesome image that the studio had been promoting, the role allowed Bergman to display a blend of openness, anger, and sensuality, a “voluptuous masochism” that would later become her signature in films such as George Cukor’s Gaslight (1944) and Alfred Hitchcock’s Notorious (1946).5 Yet, there is something peculiarly willful in these few written lines, as they systematically direct the director’s attention to the actress’s capacity to “speak” several languages, a sign not only of her dramatic intelligence but also of her readiness to engage with what
is foreign and uncharted. While remarking upon this case of “love before first sight,” Slavoj Zizek follows most commentators in emphasizing that Bergman’s eagerness to make a film with Rossellini stemmed from the desire to “help” a lesser-known director by putting her fame at his disposal.\(^6\) (After all, the border between on-screen and off-screen persona is quite a porous one and Bergman was famous for portraying characters who aid the romantic hero even at the cost of self-sacrifice).

Against the grain of this reading—of the letter and of the actress’s openness to experiment with a new kind of cinema—I will propose to interpret Bergman’s offer of collaboration as the mark of a different desire—the desire to show oneself; that is, the desire to be seen in a different guise. In its favoring a passive stance, this kind of desire might seem to comply with and even reinforce the framework that has repeatedly informed the relation between the female body and the camera and, concurrently, the spectator’s patterns of identification and enjoyment. The debate on the female image, on woman-as-image in the symbolic economy of cinema and visual culture, is too long and multifaceted to permit here even the most cursory outline. Let me just pose one of its central questions again, in medias res: is the visible that we see on screen, the domain of the spectacle, always and necessarily a trap for the subject who does not occupy a privileged (male, heterosexual) position? In her recent work, feminist film theorist Kaja Silverman argues that the desire to see so often equated with the subject’s aspiration to visual mastery is but the other side of a desire to be seen, to become visible in relation to a certain pattern—to appear according to a certain style or mode of visibility.\(^7\) Indeed, by drawing on thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Jacques Lacan, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Silverman reclaims the visible world as the site of a resistance to and potential transformation of the dominant order—a process that assumes display and, more specifically, self-display as its point of departure. “Whatever can see wants to be seen,” writes Arendt in a passage that becomes crucial for Silverman’s theory of perceptual signification, “whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched.”\(^8\) Passivity and activity stand in a relation of mutual implication and reversibility rather than opposition. It is in light of this re-elaboration of the tension between looking and being looked at—or, in phenomenological terms, seeing and being seen—that I will turn to the notion of “actress as filmmaker” and assert it as pivotal to a novel interpretation of Bergman and Rossellini’s films.

While hardly homogeneous, the trilogy of solitude comprising *Stromboli*, *Europe ’51*, and *Journey to Italy* finds in what I call the “actress as filmmaker” the figure of an encounter between actress and camera that challenges our understanding not only of authorship but also of the cinematic apparatus. Alienated or estranged from the surrounding environment, “doubly displaced” (from national belongingness and Hollywood cinema), Bergman inhabits these films less as a character in a story than a “seer,” to adopt Gilles Deleuze’s famous definition, in an opaque and fragmented world. She is one of those “actor-mediums, capable of seeing and showing rather than acting,” that is, of responding to situations through purposeful movement and dialogue.\(^9\) But, I will claim, as an actor-medium, Bergman is also a maker of forms—the pivot around which forms become visible and available to the camera. It is her desire to see and be seen that attracts and mobilizes the camera, contributing to affirm a mode of filmmaking that brings into appearance that which it records. Her role doubles the role of the filmmaker, almost anticipating and informing its rhythms, and simultaneously foreshadows that of the viewer. Indeed, it redefines both as a matter of exposure to the visible rather than apprehension or survey of the visible (as object or representation).

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological interrogation repeatedly invites us to understand that the visible is all around and not simply in front of us, as philosophy and, I will add, narrative cinema and its framing devices have conventionally led us to believe; if Rossellini can be effectively counted as “the
most modern of film-makers” it is also because he shares this fundamental insight on the nature of visibility. In Rossellini’s cinema, the actress acquires and irradiates a new power of vision not despite but through the visibility of her own image, in a process that disperses authorship and transforms the cinematic apparatus into a field of embodied relations. While leading the camera on a journey that explores the meanders of the landscape and of the human face, Bergman becomes the mirror through which the camera enters the perceptual domain, repeatedly exposing itself as internal and intimately connected to that which it registers. Ultimately, what I call the “actress as filmmaker” will emerge as the figure of an ongoing translation between the visible and the invisible both as carnal dimensions of Being, allowing us to re-elaborate the opposition between the bodily and the spiritual (which critics have traditionally posited at the core of Rossellini’s cinema) from the viewpoint of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh.

Stromboli: Desiring Bodies

*Stromboli* opens in a displaced persons camp, a site of traumatic memories and foreclosed desires that remains only partially identified (“Italy, 1948”) as if to better resonate with the widespread anguish of the postwar years. The encounter that will determine the trajectory of the film takes place between Karin, a Lithuanian refugee woman of cosmopolitan background (Bergman), and Antonio, an Italian soldier and former prisoner of war (Mario Vitale). After her visa to South America is denied, Karin agrees to marry him and move to his native land, the volcanic island of Stromboli, which he had described as quite beautiful. Their arrival by sea marks the unfolding of a narrative in three movements, all revolving around Karin and her relation to the remote island where she finds herself confined: the shock of the arrival and the refusal to accept such bare conditions of existence; the attempt to cope with and somehow adapt to the situation; the irrevocable decision to escape. On the formal level, these broad narrative movements coincide with three “expanded” long takes, three macro-sequences showing the encounter between the protagonist and the hostile insular landscape—the fuming volcano, the coarse black sand, the spare vegetation, the humble and unadorned houses, and, above all, the narrow-minded inhabitants. (At all stages, this encounter is simultaneously perceptual and socio-cultural, the landscape and its inhabitants bearing the traces of a certain history as much as the face of the displaced woman does.)

In fact, despite the use of edits, the effect is that of an almost uninterrupted connection between the camera and the female character—both relegated to the space and time of the island, camera and actress respond to each other’s call, mutually defining their path and mirroring, indeed exposing each other’s material limitations. If the actress leads the camera and orients its movements both indoor and outdoor, the camera seems to be incapable of not following, sharing the character’s restlessness and her obstinate involvement in the visible world.

A few sequences stand out for the intensity of the exchange between camera and actress—an exchange that soon affirms itself as occurring between two desiring bodies and not an all-seeing, disembodied eye and a body that is reduced to object of vision. When, after a quarrel with her husband, Karin exists their rudimentary dwelling and begins wandering in the labyrinth-like village, the camera first follows her from afar and above, and yet with absolute urgency and precision, as if a string or umbilical cord were tying them together. As she is running and crying to herself, “I want to get out,” we cannot but partake of her sense of entrapment. Then, as Karin calms down, the camera returns to street level and accompanies her in a long take that unfolds horizontally, along the edge of a wall made of large stones and interspersed with cacti and olive trees. A delicate plant sprouting amidst the rocks catches her attention and here, while gently stroking her face against its leaves—or, rather, while letting herself being caressed by its leaves as well as by the lens of the camera—Karin finds a brief respite from her struggle against the landscape. In the economy of the film, this is a
short-lived pause. While decorating the family house in the attempt to ameliorate her day-to-day life, Karin is met with the overt disapproval of the local women: here, she reacts by forcefully claiming her difference (“I am different,” she shouts at her husband’s aunt) and mobilizing the camera in a close-up that shows a new kind of resilience and vulnerability. Exposed to the wind and the harsh sunlight, Bergman’s face reveals those imperfections and unhinged micro-movements that would not cross the threshold of visibility in a Hollywood film. At the same time, the magnetism of her star image continues to remain active, taking hold of the camera and almost pulling it to the character’s side of the screen. In the final sequence, as Karin climbs the volcano for hours in the attempt to reach the other side of the island and flee by boat, her body endures a struggle with the elements that has the camera as her only witness. There seems to be no end to her solitary, desolate climbing. She soon loses her meager possessions while protecting herself from the overpowering vapors and, by nighttime, she is almost ready to give up. If her exhaustion and despair eventually turn into a kind of precarious stability or willed steadiness, it is by virtue of a series of close-ups—a few extraordinary shots that turn her face into a vibrant landscape and reassert her hold on the visible. Karin decides that she will not return to the village and, as the film ends, her body claims its place between the earth and the sky.

It is because both character and actress do not give up being, that is, being in the world according to a certain style or mode of appearance, that the camera cannot turn away from them. The camera’s power of vision is here inseparable from the female subject’s desire to see and be seen in a certain manner—the camera can see only to the extent that she offers herself to it, assuming the far-reaching implications of such a perceptual exposure. Indeed, camera and actress belong to each other not in the sense of submission or deference of the one with respect to the other, as if the camera were subordinate to a character-driven narrative or the actress obeyed the will of an omniscient camera-director. Camera and actress belong to each other because they both belong to the world—because, by erratically moving across the landscape, they bring out the encompassing nature of the visible, making us feel that the world is all around us and we see only to the extent that we are also visible. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and Rossellini’s new aesthetics of reality first manifest the commonality of their projects at this very juncture, in the determination to interrogate the reversibility between seeing and being seen.

It is easier, Merleau-Ponty suggests, to comprehend the dynamics of this reversibility if we consider touch, and the fact that it is in one and the same movement that my right hand touches my left hand and is touched by it: the body, we soon realize, can touch only because it is also tangible. Similarly, the body can see only because it is also visible, because it is enmeshed in the very fabric of the world. Only with respect to such an understanding of perception can we begin to appreciate what several painters have described—the feeling of being looked at by the things they have set out to observe: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me….I was there, listening….” The painter’s experience brings us back to the paradoxical reflexivity of the sensible, the reversibility between the seer and the seen, the toucher and the touched that characterizes all things and that the body remarkably exemplifies: “The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking.” Beyond all classical dichotomies, perception occurs in and through the intermingling of passivity and activity.

In his essay, “Letter on Rossellini,” Jacques Rivette celebrates the director’s singular capacity to see, comparing him to Matisse and suggesting that he draws with the camera in the way the painter
draws with the pencil. Rossellini’s eye is unique as it allows the film to remain a “temporal sketch,” pulsating and incomplete, while taking on the accuracy of the design. In turn, Rivette’s criticism repeats some of Rossellini’s essayistic gestures:

I’d like to have you feel (with your finger) more tangibly the powers of this look: which may not be the most subtle, which is Renoir, or the most acute, which is Hitchcock, but is the most active; and the point is not that it is concerned with some transfiguration of appearances, like Welles, or their condensation, like Murnau, but with their capture: a hunt for each and every moment, at each perilous moment a corporeal quest (and therefore a spiritual one; a quest for the spirit by the body), an incessant movement of seizure and pursuit which bestows on the images some indefinable quality at once of triumph and agitation: the very note, indeed, of conquest.18

Indeed, we can often feel the carnal, almost tactile intensity of Rossellini’s images—vision, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is but a “palpation with the look” and Rossellini is a seer that has long given up the defenses of voyeurism, the distance and invisibility required by conventional narrative cinema. Yet, Rivette’s vibrantly convoluted passage acquires new and expanded significance if we now reread it in light of the role played by Bergman as actress and filmmaker. The figure of Karin affirms itself as the pivot or hinge around which the activity of Rossellini’s look is constantly turned into its opposite, manifesting a power that is not only of “capture,” as Rivette puts it, but also of receptivity.19 In cinema as in life, we learn from phenomenology, the one who sees or touches is always already caught in a relation of reversibility with what is seen and touched—in Stromboli, the camera relentlessly shows this “other side” of its power of looking, the mystery of a passivity that lies at the very core of activity.

Rossellini’s cinema enables such a complicated visual exchange to realize itself by mobilizing the specularity traditionally associated with the female image, especially the image of the star, and displacing it onto the camera. As soon as they get ashore, Bergman steadily begins to seduce the camera into visibility, leading it to expose itself and its engulfment in the landscape. In turn, the camera calls for Bergman to take hold of the scene and delineate its unfolding. On this island of which the volcano and the sea are the external and constitutive limits, the camera is as incarnate—and sensual—as the actress herself. In a sense, both actress and camera reveal themselves to be figures of the outside, their place and movement being defined by that which they cannot control (the volcano, the sea, the culture of the islanders) but to which they continue to oppose some form of resistance. Their power is the power of the look as it sees that of which it is part and with respect to which it wants to rearticulate its position. Their accord mimes the sustained and unsettling relation of those who are bound to each other in a fatal embrace and can find some sort of freedom only by sustaining their reciprocal tension. If Stromboli offers us images that are at once of “triumph and agitation,” to borrow again from Rivette, this is because it foregrounds the tumultuous nature of the visible—its being the site of a negotiation that is at once perceptual, libidinal, and political.20 It cannot be considered inconsequential that the protagonist of this postwar film is a woman, a refugee with a dubious and painful past, and that here, despite her marriage and a pragmatic sexual affair, her passion and intelligence refuse to be directed toward a male lover.21 The strength of Rossellini’s cinema is such that the camera does not turn into that absent male lover but remains an indeterminate body, indeed the cipher of an ambiguity, a porosity, a permeability between seeing and being seen that is of the real as a network of mutating relations.
Europe '51: The Face of Bergman

Unlike Karin in Stromboli, the character played by Bergman in Europe '51 initially does not see, indeed she does not even look—not until her young son dies in consequence of a suicide attempt. An upper middle-class woman married to a wealthy businessman (Alexander Knox), Irene lives in postwar Rome as a foreigner who does not need to cross the boundaries of her cosmopolitan social circle. As the film opens, we see her driving a luxury car across the city and then hurriedly getting ready for a dinner party. She is charming, controlling and, in the conversation with her unhappy son, easily irritable. The camera follows her without any particular affect, documenting her movements from a distance. It is only during the dinner, when she speaks more intimately of her son and of the special bond they developed during the traumatic war years, that the camera gets closer to her countenance, as if to register its vibrations and hidden disturbances, and almost warn us about the suffering to come. Later, after the tragedy, Bergman’s face appears at her most vulnerable and lost, completely surrounded by the white pillow on which she is resting. The scene ignores the rules of conventional editing and, as Ora Gelley accurately notices, confers the close-ups their own “alternative rhythm,” independently of dialogue and narrative continuity.

In their excessive duration and stillness, these shots inaugurate a process of mutation that will occur on and through Bergman’s face—a change in the experience of seeing that will find its constitutive mirror in the actress’s physiognomy. It is here that the first decisive transition occurs, as the camera registers and transmits the intensity of a vision that is being formed, of a capacity for perception that Bergman is painfully, laboriously acquiring. What the camera shows is a vision “in reserve,” a vision that struggles to emerge not only by expanding laterally as light and pressing against the frame, but also by moving toward that invisible zone which we call the pellicle of the film, where the camera touches the actor and is touched in return.

In the attention it devotes to the actress’s face and the role it plays in transforming the film’s mode of vision, my reading of Europe '51 differs from the one proposed by André Bazin. While praising the abstraction of a mise-en-scène “whose aim,” he writes, “is not to demonstrate but to show,” Bazin seems to implicitly view Bergman’s face as the remainder of a style that Rossellini is otherwise superseding:

For Rossellini […] the aim is to reject the categories of acting and of dramatic expression in order to force reality to reveal its significance solely through appearances. Rossellini does not make its actors act, he doesn’t make them express this or that feeling; he compels them only to be a certain way before the camera. In such a mise-en-scène, the respective places of the characters, their ways of walking, their movements on the set, and their gestures have much more importance than the feelings they show on their faces, or even than the words they say. Besides, what “feelings” could Ingrid Bergman “express”? Her drama lies far beyond any psychological nomenclature. Her face only outlines a certain property of suffering.

If I agree with Bazin in foregrounding the role of the mise-en-scène, I am nonetheless convinced that Europe '51 finds in Bergman’s face the privileged medium for showing a certain existential quest, a journey that take place in the domain of vision. There is, in other words, a mise-en-scène of the face and its function is to modulate the relation between the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. By renouncing dramatic expression, Bergman lets her face act as a surface that is intermittently receptive and projective, becoming the mirror through which the world around her takes shape and acquires an incipient, precarious sense. What Merleau-Ponty says of Cezanne’s painting can also be said of Rossellini’s cinema—that it does not have to choose “between feeling
and thought,” striving instead to portray a mode of seeing that corresponds to a thinking of the sensible, a manifestation of the way in which the world “thinks itself” in us.  

Compare the close-ups of the bedroom scene to those marking Irene’s return to Primavalle, a desolate neighborhood at the outskirts of Rome, to visit the family that she has met through her cousin, a Communist journalist, and helped purchase medications for their sick son. Finally on her own, Irene takes a slow walk through the _borgata_ clad in a black coat and standing against the empty fields, she has now reached some sort of stability or, rather, she is pursuing a vision that, for the time being, is not escaping her. Her face shows here a receptivity that is turned toward and attuned with the outside—the children at play, the drowning accident, the shacks and the dunes on the river bank all become visible as the other side of her newly acquired power of vision. It is as if the close-ups of Bergman’s face mirrored the images of the surrounding landscape, and vice-versa, in a temporary and yet fundamentally expansive accord. The people and things she sees constitute not the object of her look (as it would happen in a conventional eye-line match) but the very lining of her seeing. Again, it is Merleau-Ponty who most accurately describes the extent to which the one who sees is always already enveloped in and by the visible. The alleged subject of vision is in fact:

 [...] a self, not by transparency, like thought, which never thinks anything except by assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought—but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt—a self then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future.

There is, between our carnal being and things, an interpenetration that defies all classical dichotomies (subject versus object, body versus mind)—the body and the world are made of the same “stuff,” which Merleau-Ponty would eventually call “flesh.” Perception unfolds in this zone beyond the autonomous self, where activity and passivity can hardly be differentiated and it becomes impossible to establish who sees and who is seen. For this reason, the self-display or showing that Bergman’s close-ups manifest is already a kind of seeing—a mirror phenomenon capable of revealing the contours of a fresh vision as it takes hold of both character and spectator.

Later, when Irene volunteers to work in a factory, the images of her surroundings once again assume the sharply abstract quality they presented during her initial visit to the housing project, suggesting that she is not fully in the space where we see her—not yet or no longer there. The camera still positions itself next to Bergman but Bergman soon lets it go: she is detaching herself from its look and withdrawing the luminosity that emanated in the shots near the river bank. She is about to enter a new phase and, this time, it is the camera that needs to learn how to see differently. (In the meantime, we are given beautifully stylized montage sequences of the factory’s grounds and machineries, but they do not belong to Bergman in the same way the previous shots did. The estrangement is mutual: she does not belong to them either.) The close-ups that define the rest of the film (in the apartment of the dying prostitute, at the police station, and at the psychiatric clinic) will in fact realize the character’s final transition to a world of invisible forms. What she is attempting to see or, rather, inhabit, and what will ultimately confirm her as mad in the eyes of society, is the other side of the visible world—the multitude and perhaps strange simplicity of forms existing behind the religious and political dogmas of her times. If the film ends with Bergman’s face behind a barred window, it is because the actress does here what the camera alone could not do—in her restrained sensuality, she traces the lines of a withdrawal that is not renunciation of perception but redefinition of its possibilities. Her face has now acquired the capacity to aim at the invisible by showing itself as it retreats from the film.
Journey to Italy: Proliferation of Forms

Irene’s quest for the invisible returns in an inverted form in Journey to Italy, the last great film that Bergman and Rossellini would make together. As Katherine Joyce, a wealthy English woman who is traveling to Italy with her husband Alex (George Sanders), Bergman is at first trapped in the cliche of the vista. Upon their arrival in Naples and, later, at uncle Homer’s villa (which they have inherited and have come to sell), the Mediterranean landscape exercises on her the attraction of the foreign and the shots/reverse shots marking her encounter with it only heighten this extraneousness, a disconnection that is of both space and time. Katherine is there in the present, in the time of the purposeful trip, while the city and its “Vesuvian topographies,” to adopt Laura Mulvey’s resonant formulation, belong to a time that is layered and disorderly, a concretion of archeological strata that defy methodical exploration. It is only as her marriage deteriorates and she decides to take sightseeing trips on her own that the film begins to restructure itself, looking for a viewpoint, a point of contact with the landscape, that is inseparable from the body of the actress and yet in excess of it. Katherine’s “journeys,” as Mulvey notes, seem to follow a reeding temporal line: in the course of three days, we move from the Museo Archeologico, with its classic Greek and Roman antiquities, to the prehistoric site of the Cumaean Sibyl, and finally to the volcanic formations of the Phlegraen Fields.

Each visit is introduced by a montage sequence in which street scenes alternate with shots of Bergman driving through the city and talking to herself about her marriage. Pregnant women and women pushing strollers, a funeral procession, men and women in love, Madonna altars—what renders these scenes singular with respect to the cultural repertoire from which they are drawn is the relationship between them and Bergman, that is, a rearticulation of the encounter between the actress and the camera. All street scenes are filmed from inside the moving car and yet they often bear no trace of the window frame, acquiring an impersonality that, in turn, produces the impression of an automatic, unconscious vision. It is as if Bergman could see only intermittently and independently of her will, through moments of contact or porosity between inside and outside, in response to a desire that cannot be clearly located or assigned to an individual body. In fact, Bergman’s desire is but the desire she absorbs from (and returns to) her surroundings, without understanding it fully, the play of life and death that she repeatedly witnesses and of which she is inevitably a participant. Here as in the shots documenting each specific visit, we see an upsurge of forms, a proliferation of images that finds in the actress both its center of gravity and, paradoxically, its point of dispersal.

The first sustained transformation of Bergman’s (and of the film’s) look occurs at the archeological museum. A montage sequence of rare beauty shows a series of classic statues from a viewpoint that at times coincides with or is close to Bergman’s actual position in space, at other times is high above it, suspended in mid-air as if it belonged to another gigantic statue or simply to no one. Yet the camera always moves in a personal, essayistic manner, miming the movement of the eyes. As a result, Bergman’s look, together with ours, appears to be emerging from the past of the statues, a past which we have never lived directly and in relation to which we now experience a paradoxical mix of estrangement and familiarity. The past is coming to us from behind our shoulders, encircling us, so that we feel it before being able to see it on display in front of us. It is as if the time of the ancient artifacts were being projected onto the place which Bergman occupies without “filling” it, without erasing the fissure between past and present. That Bergman is visible in many of the shots showing the statues, closer and closer to them, depicts a permeability or contamination between subject and object that is of the visible as well as of time. Indeed, we find here the same impersonal
quality which we observed in the car sequences and which will return again during Katherine’s visits to the catacombs, the lava craters, and the Fontanelle cemetery.\(^9\) Saying that, in all these instances, vision becomes impersonal, anonymous does not mean asserting it as disembodied or neutral or coldly objective. On the contrary: it is because character and landscape have entered into a relation of reversibility that the camera can assume a viewpoint in excess of but not independent of Bergman’s situated look—a viewpoint that does not try to mime the all-seeing eye. In these shots, Katherine simultaneously loses and finds herself anew, as she comes to perceive herself from a distance (of both space and time) that does not negate her body but indeed can only realize itself through it. By the end, she will have come to see and be seen through the city and its inhabitants, including the dead of Pompei, in a time that absorbs and diffuses her vision and ours alike.\(^30\)

As it finds its precarious conclusion in the couple’s reconciliation, which takes place in the midst of an exuberant religious precession, \textit{Journey to Italy} might seem to offer us the reversed image of \textit{Europe ’51} and its finale of seclusion. In \textit{Film Fables}, Jacques Rancière sets up this contrast as simultaneously ambiguous and absolute, positing it as the structuring axis of Rossellini’s cinema:

Rossellini’s heroes, his heroines especially, are always traveling between these two poles, between asceticism and idolatry: the renunciation of the images in the mirror, of Pharisaic values and of the security of one’s own home culminates in Irene’s asceticism in \textit{Europe 51}; contact with the proliferating Madonnas, the cult of the dead, the programmed miracles, and the quasi-pagan excesses of Neapolitan Christianity culminates in Katherine’s critique of “pure ascetic images” in \textit{Voyage to Italy}. The scandal that gives the fabric to Rossellini’s films is always somehow related to an ambiguity at the point where renunciation and incarnation meet.\(^31\)

Katherine begins by searching for the “pure ascetic images” of which a former admirer, a poet now deceased, had written, and she reaches the end of the film engulfed in an upsurge of corporeal, earth-bound images—even the dead have a body, if only the cast that, in Pompei, archeologists have learnt to extract from the empty spaces preserved underneath the lava.\(^32\) On the other hand, Irene’s journey could be described as a slow withdrawal from the world of images, a weight-less fall into asceticism. Yet, as I approach the end of this article, I will suggest that the scandal of Rossellini’s cinema does not lie in the opposition and crossing of renunciation and incarnation or, in Rivette’s language, of the corporeal and the spiritual. Rather, it is to be found in the repeated exchange between the visible and the invisible as carnal dimensions of Being, in the discovery that the invisible is not devoid of sensuality and the spirit is always also a question of the flesh. There is vision, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, because there is entanglement of the visible and the invisible, because “the surface of the visible is doubled up over its whole extension with an invisible reserve”—because the invisible is not opposite of the visible but its latent and inexhaustible counterpart.\(^33\) The notion of flesh as “flesh of the world” or “flesh of things,” which traverses the unfinished pages of \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, represents the very attempt to interrogate what traditional philosophy has not yet named. Neither mind nor matter, the flesh is an “element,” in the sense that water, air, earth, and fire were elements for the pre-Socratic philosophers: not things in themselves but “rizhomata,” the roots of all things. An internally differentiated mass, the flesh is itself endowed with the unending reflexivity which our body so peculiarly manifests: the reversibility between the seer and the seen, the touching and the touched, before and after any clear-cut distinction (subject versus object, body versus mind) is drawn and yet independently of coincidence or conflation.
If Rossellini’ cinema, as Rivette indirectly suggests, is a cinema of touch, it is because it struggles to display our radical enmeshment in the fabric of the sensible, to “make visible how the world touches us” by virtue of that constitutive coiling of activity and passivity that Merleau-Ponty calls the reversibility of the flesh. It is here that desire’s incessant labor begins and a non-hierarchical erotics of vision delineates itself. Bergman is the figure of this desire—of reversibility as desire of the other—as it pulsates on our skin as on the skin of things, bringing forms in and out of visibility and delineating the traces of a visibility to come. Without this desire the camera could not see or show the world anew. It is this desire that, in excess of any verifiable indexical link, enables Rossellini’s cinema to acquire the urgency of the document and develop into the imprint of an existential drama. Beyond the opposition of look and spectacle, the actress as filmmaker exposes and interrogates our entanglement in the perceptual field, to the point that identifying with her turns into a strange adventure in narcissism, a gesture of self-display that is not confirmation of the self but questioning of its perceptual and libidinal boundaries, perhaps even surrender to the specularity of all things. The scandal of Bergman and Rossellini is indeed a scandal of the flesh.

Domietta Torlasco works at the intersection of film theory and practice and is currently an Associate Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at Northwestern University, where she is also affiliated with the Screen Cultures Program. She is the author of The Time of the Crime: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Italian Film (Stanford University Press, 2008) and the digital film Antigone’s Noir (2008-09). Her second book, The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming in 2013), looks back at both cinema and psychoanalysis from the viewpoint of digital arts, exploring how contemporary forms of creativity can help us trace new aesthetic and political genealogies.

Notes

4 Quoted in Peter Brunette, Roberto Rossellini (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 375.
5 The expression “voluptuous masochism” is from Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 196.
9 On Bergman’s “double displacement,” see Landy, Stardom, Italian Style and also Gelley’s article on Stromboli. On the character as seer rather than agent and the notion of actor-medium, see Gilles


11 As Gelley notes in her article on Stromboli, this is a history of volcanic eruptions and emigration to distant lands: “So many people have left,” says the village priest to the couple, “or are waiting to leave...to Argentina, America, France, England. Wherever they have a relative who can send them money for the trip.” He continues, “Life is hard here. And also the land is hard...But our patron, Saint Bartolo, will protect you. He saved our houses from the lava and the fire in the eruption of 1941.”


14 It must be noticed that this close-up at once draws upon and radically re-signifies Bergman’s star image. Writing about the five films that Bergman and Rossellini made together, Gelley cogently argues that “these works do not [...] aim to destroy the Hollywood aura or show the ‘real’ Bergman underneath the star. Rossellini’s used Bergman’s star status in revolutionary ways, ways that no only re-defined her image significantly, but also strongly influenced the evolution of the director’s own so-called Neorealist aesthetics [...]” Bergman’s face constitutes the focus and medium of such a process of re-signification, becoming “the surface through which is reflected the damaged fabric of the postwar urban landscape.” See Ora Gelley, “*Europa ‘51: The Face of the Star in Neorealism’s Urban Landscape*,” *Film Studies* 5 (Winter 2004), 39 and 52.

15 However, Merleau-Ponty warns us, it would be reductive to consider the example of the hands touching each other as a metaphor adopted to elucidate what happens in a separate domain. Vision and touch, the visible and the tangible must be thought as interweaving dimensions of perception. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

16 The complete quote appears in “Eye and Mind,” 129. Here Merleau-Ponty quotes André Marchand saying, after Klee: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me... I was there, listening... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it. ... I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.”


19 In my re-reading of the passage, I am strongly indebted to Kaja Silverman’s proposal for a revised notion of authorship. Silverman maintains that, in his late films, Jean-Luc Godard positions himself not as a creator or a producer, but rather as “the site where words and visual forms inscribe or install themselves.” Here the artist himself seems to become the medium, and yet the fusion is never complete: “I am a person who likes to receive,” Silverman quotes Godard saying, “the camera cannot be a rifle, since it is not an instrument that sends out but an instruments that receives. And it receives with the aid of light.” See Kaja Silverman, “The Author as Receiver,” *October* 96 (Spring 2001), 4 and 5.
For a reading of phenomenology that emphasizes its socio-symbolic implications, see Laura Doyle, ed., *Bodies of Resistance: New Phenomenologies of Politics, Agency, and Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001). In adopting the term “tumultuous,” I de-emphasize the aspects of “agreement” that are usually associated with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility. In discussing the Bergman and Rossellini scandal, Gelley remarks that, unlike their French and even Italian counterpart, the American audience was “not ready for this, a female heroine whose ‘force, will, energy’ were not directed at a male love object—a heroine for whom, in fact, the promise of romantic love seemed to hold no interest.” See Ora Gelley, “Ingrid Bergman’s Star Persona and the Alien Space of *Stromboli,*” 37.

Gelley, “*Europa ’51: The Face of the Star in Neorealism’s Urban Landscape,*” 46.

André Bazin, *Europa ’51,* in Bazin At Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties, eds. Alain Piette and Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 139.


In “Eye and Mind,” 125, Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that “the world is made of the very stuff of the body.”

For a different interpretation of the close-up and its functions, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

See Laura Mulvey, “Vesuvian Topographies: The Eruption of the Past in *Journey to Italy*,” in Roberto Rossellini: *Magician of the Real.* During this additional visit and the drive that leads to it, Katherine is accompanied by Natalia, the wife of Tony, the manager at uncle Homer’s villa. She had told Katherine, “you have understood nothing about Naples,” and offered to be her guide.

Again, the echo of Merleau-Ponty’s last work reverberates throughout this reading, as he writes of “an anonymous visibility,” “a vision in general” that characterizes the flesh, the “stuff” of which both the world and our bodies are made, dissolving the distinction between subject and object, ego and alter-ego. See *Visible and the Invisible,* 142.


During their last day, Tony insists on taking Alex and Katherine to visit the excavations at Pompeii. Here, they witness an incredible, profoundly disturbing event: the recovery of the “bodies” of two victims from the AD 79 volcanic eruption. Buried underneath the lava, the bodies disintegrated and left behind a hollow which preserved their shape and could then be “filled” by liquid plastic and retrieved as a cast. As the process reaches its final stage, the bystanders realize that they are uncovering the figure (the “imprint,” as Mulvey notices) of a couple.

Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible,* 152. Such a doubling, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, is in principle reversible: like “the finger of the glove that is turned inside out.” See *Visible and Invisible,* 263.

I elaborate on the relation between reversibility and narcissism (especially as it pertains to the cinematic image) in “I am you, if I am: Notes for a Phenomenology of Narcissism,” *World Picture 4* (Winter 2010).