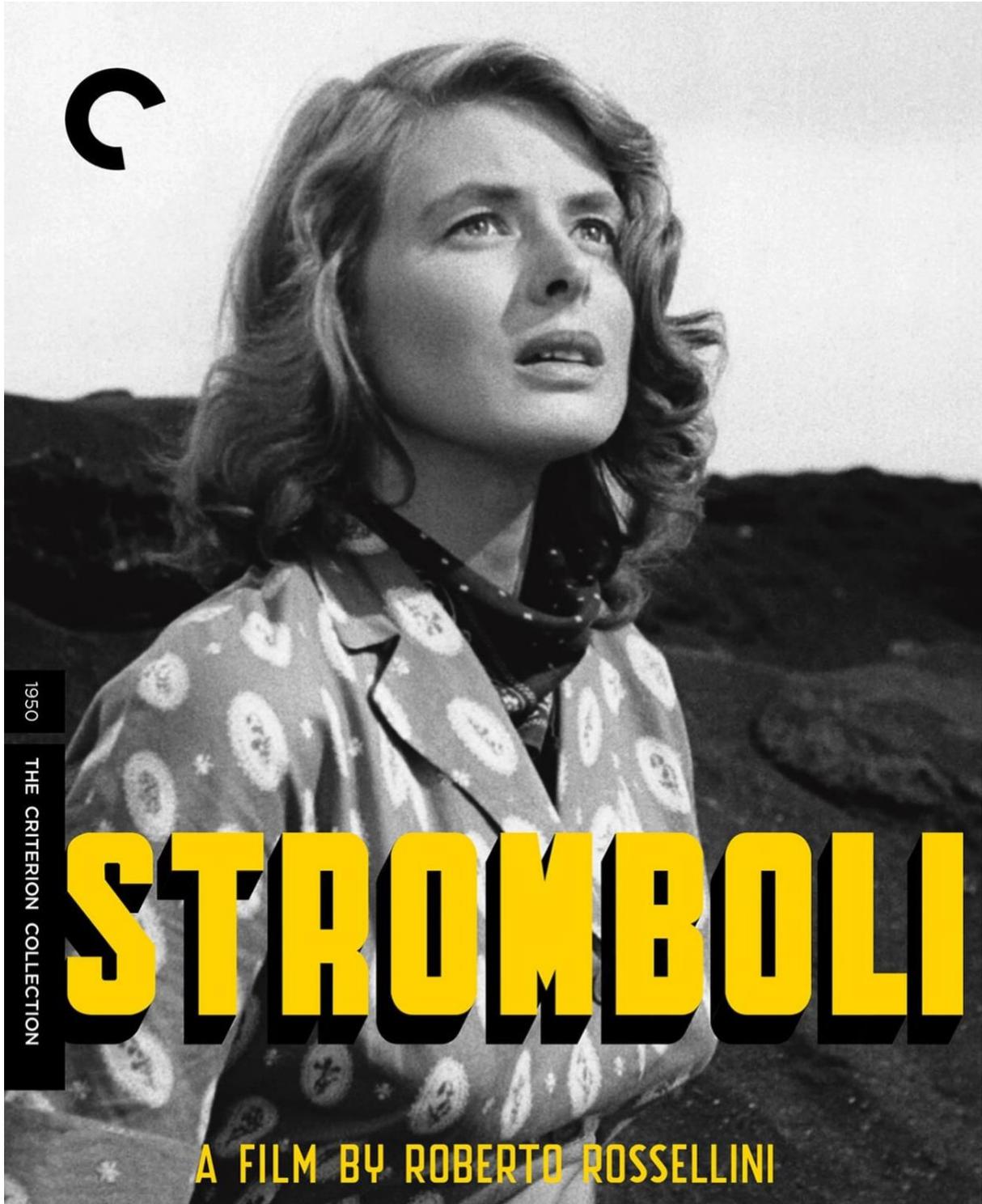


'Modern Marriage on *Stromboli*,' Essay on Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950), with Ingrid Bergman. Booklet to the *Criterion Collection*'s (New York) DVD of the film, September 2013 (<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2908-modern-marriage-on-stromboli>).



Modern Marriage on Stromboli

By [Dina Iordanova](#)

When I first saw *Stromboli* (1950) years ago, it resonated with me as no film had before, intensely and unswervingly—not least because I was identifying with Karin, the heroine, a woman cast out and traumatized, living in limbo and acting rashly to get herself out of that state. Seeing *Stromboli* now, after so many years, I am no less amazed by what Roberto Rossellini accomplished: the film is so direct and unforgiving, so absorbed with its flawed yet captivating protagonist . . .

To me, the greatness of this film is that it does not seek to flatter. Rather, it tackles head-on the tribulations and the insolence that a woman may experience in the process of her emancipation. Faced with the consequences of her disquiet, *Stromboli*'s protagonist is one of those people who need to take action, even at the risk of getting into a still more convoluted situation than the one they seek to exit. She would rather be foolish but be a “doer”; she seeks to act rather than reflect, wait, or let go.

It is just after World War II, at the height of personal and historical dislocation for thousands. So many fates have been shaken by the conflict. People have had to smuggle themselves across borders and live in camps, unable to plan and waiting for a new lease on life, perhaps somewhere as far away as Latin America. There is no hierarchy of preferred destinations, no choice. Any place that promises some stability is appealing. New starts are made from a lower vantage point than one could have ever imagined.

At twenty-six, Karin has already been through a lot. She is in an Italian internment camp for displaced individuals, determined to get out. Refused a visa to Argentina, she soon decides to marry a camp guard, a fisherman from Stromboli. She could have given herself some time to recuperate and see what other options there were. But no, she will feel better if she acts as soon as possible, choosing from among the immediately available alternatives. And she knows she has made a mistake when she first catches a glimpse of her new home, the desolate volcanic island. “This is a ghost island!” she proclaims on arrival. “Nobody lives here!”

But what did she expect? Didn't she consider where she was going? Karin comes from one of those peculiar backgrounds of the European periphery that make her a foreigner everywhere. A Lithuanian with a Scandinavian name who lived in Czechoslovakia, married to an architect—it is not likely that many people at the time would have visited the places she was coming from. Yet the scattered references to her background also imply higher class and pedigree, even if linked to obscure and lesser-known cultures. She is so European and at the same time so eccentric. She is preordained to belong nowhere, and she is not really searching for a retreat. She wears her foreignness on her sleeve and is quite articulate about being different.

Taller than her new husband, she is lustrous and sleek in her capri pants, not plump and short-legged like the local women. She has no designs on fitting in. Almost immediately, she turns judgmental on the locals: so many of them have lived in America but have opted to return to this wretched place to breathe the volcano's fumes. Later on, she will learn that this island is also a camp of sorts, as many of the inhabitants have either already left or are preparing to leave.

Stromboli is like a prison, a bunch of narrow staircases and square houses with pathways in

between, all surrounded by water and overhung by menacing billows. Yes, it is part of Italy, a country that, for Karin and people of her class, nominally falls within the realm of acceptable social spaces. Yet it is so remote, so difficult to get to, so difficult to get away from.

Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman worked and lived together between 1949 and 1954, a turbulent relationship, and ultimately a marriage, that was memorialized in five features—*Stromboli*, *Europe '51*, *Journey to Italy*, *Fear*, and *Joan of Arc at the Stake*—and three children. These films all involve issues of dislocation and belonging, and the first three, especially—all set in Italy—also profoundly question the meaning of modern marriage. It was clearly a period during which the director's concerns were focused on women's emancipation. *Stromboli*, *Europe '51*, and *Journey to Italy*, while featuring married couples, focus primarily on female tribulations. In all three, the male characters remain sketchy and underdeveloped. And while the couples in these films are all married, the director's view of marriage is jaundiced; it challenges and radically undermines traditionalistic narratives. Here, conjugal coexistence is treated as the emancipated partnering of autonomous individuals who have entered into a provisional union that will last only for as long as the marriage caters to their respective needs. *Stromboli*'s portrayal of marriage is trailblazing in that it drops any flicker of high-strung romantic drama to show the institution as a series of negotiations over agency and power. In that, Rossellini set the tone not just for his next two films with Bergman but for all modernist cinematic forays into the intimate universe of spousal anxieties for the next two decades.

Stromboli shows a woman who is self-centered and independent and who, as a result, is more alone in a marriage than she would be if she were single. It asserts that a woman's need for

companionship and continuous emotional support may matter more than pecuniary maintenance or dogged loyalty.

Karin has hurriedly accepted a husband who is not her equal and now understands this may mean bearing the consequences for many dreaded years to come. She claims it is difficult to communicate with her spouse; his command of English is so limited, she says, that she must address him “like a child.” However, it is not about language. Even if they shared one, they would still not be able to connect. She is, supposedly, a complex and eloquent person. He is an inarticulate drudge, who may indeed be able to make a good point now and then, but there is no chance that they will ever converse meaningfully (“I am your wife, but I am not like you!”). Staying with this husband would prompt her to incessantly point out his deficiencies, while simultaneously knowing she was not being fair. Nothing is wrong with him; she is frustrated with herself (“I understand him, but who understands me? I am going mad, I am so unhappy”).

For Karin, marriage cannot be an end in itself. Affairs, matrimony—men—have a role to play in her path toward self-fulfillment, but they are not the aim. Rather, she knows how to put them to use. When she needs support, she reaches out and finds a man to assist. She flirts with everybody, without regard to standing or appropriateness, as long as they can offer backing. She does not even hesitate to make a pass at the priest. It does not work, so she settles for the lighthouse keeper. But Karin is not a woman who spends her life dreaming of her next lover. Men are nothing more than a way out, means to realizing an ambition.

The promotional posters for the film refer to “raging passions” and feature a couple kissing in the shadow of an erupting volcano. But there is nothing like scorching desire in the film. The couple are shown sleeping separately, a setup that seems improbable in the austere quarters they inhabit. The supposition that they must copulate from time to time lingers in viewers’

minds—how else would Karin’s pregnancy have come about? Yet sex and sexual attraction somehow do not fit into the overall picture. Still, the meta-discourse around the film gives the proceedings a certain erogenous pull, because we know of the real-life affair between Rossellini and Bergman that was taking place on the set and that resulted in the birth of a real child, a son, in February 1950.

Amid all these considerations, a new concept of marriage emerges: as a complex and highly conditional union of strangers. The marriage in *Europe ’51* cannot possibly last, as Irene, with her efforts to help the poor, has displayed disdain for her own class; even her mother, who is called in on an emergency mission from America, disapproves of her charitable obsession and gives her blessing for Irene’s confinement. The marriage of Katherine and Alex in *Journey to Italy* is already in deep crisis when the film begins. Throughout, they are shown negotiating over the terms of their relationship—but Katherine is repeatedly seen spending time alone, as if preparing for the life of solitude and reflection that is likely to follow. And although at the end their marriage seems to have survived, there is a lingering feeling that this is only a temporary resolution. They may stay together for a little longer, but in their minds, their union, profoundly scrutinized and reassessed in every aspect, is more a burden now than a source of excitement.

Profound personal transformation as a result of inadvertent exposure to a foreign yet riveting reality is a key element in all three films. In *Europe ’51*, it is Irene’s going to the slums, and mainly the day she spends at the factory. In *Journey to Italy*, it is the visit to the excavations at Pompeii, where Katherine sees the mummified couple conserved in a last, desperate embrace. In *Stromboli*, it is the remarkable scene of Karin witnessing the fishing, where rough men sweat and sing while struggling with a school of huge tuna. This scene is

universally identified as the highlight that accounts for the film's brilliance, a superbly naturalistic yet lyrical sequence that is an acknowledged pinnacle of neorealism.

Interestingly enough, however, while leaving viewers impressed and inspired, the rough poetics of this encounter do not have the same cathartic effect on Karin. On the contrary, it seems to set her in motion. Witnessing the tuna fishing makes her see what life on Stromboli is all about. It may be enthralling and awesome in a way, but it is strange and bewildering nonetheless, a universe she now knows she does not want to be part of.

A cinephile friend recently told me he also loves *Stromboli* and that, even after so many viewings, he still finds the end very, very moving.

Reportedly, Rossellini and RKO disagreed about the conclusion. The studio version featured a voice-over according to which Karin returns to the village. The director's version leaves her near the top of the volcano. It is not possible to say which way she will go next; it is, as critic Chris Fujiwara has put it, "a moment of radical indeterminateness."

Karin may be in limbo at the opening of the film, but she is even more so at the end. At the beginning, her options are concrete (immigrate to Argentina, marry an Italian fisherman). The options at the end are much more abstract and existential. The physical dimension involves the challenge of crossing over the top of the volcano and getting to another fishing village, where possibilities of escape may or may not open up. The metaphysical dimension is fraught with risk and uncertainty and implies profound soul-searching. Now she is no longer alone but carrying a child. Does this make her more motivated? Will her selfishness dissolve? Not likely. She is not seeking to save an unborn but herself, and she is determined not to succumb to fate. The child could happily be born on Stromboli and be taken care of there, just like the

invisible baby she hears cry annoyingly several times in the film. Karin is seeking to break her entrapment for her own sake. At this extreme moment, she turns to God for guidance and mercy, asking for strength, understanding, and courage.

But does she find God? The answer may lie in the film's epigraph, from Isaiah 65:1, "Judgement and Salvation":

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me.

The original plan for *Stromboli* was to have Anna Magnani, Rossellini's erstwhile lover, star. Had things gone as planned, it would have been a different film altogether, and perhaps most of the themes would not have come across the same way. This presents an opportunity to reflect on the importance of star personas and how they, ultimately, determine not just the look but also the very feel of a film.

All three of these films feature strangers in Italy, the plotlines dictated by the foreignness of star Ingrid Bergman. It is striking how much her appearance and demeanor change from film to film. She is tall, slender, and confident in *Stromboli*; angular, large, and insecure in *Europe '51*; and regains a poised elegance, yet remains apprehensive, in *Journey to Italy*. Could it be that the way she looks in these films reflects the way she was feeling about her personal life? There must have been alternating moments when she would feel aroused or trapped by the life she chose, in Italy and with Rossellini.

Like Karin in *Stromboli*, Bergman acted as a bold, modern woman who sought self-fulfillment with astounding confidence. Her much-quoted letter to Rossellini, intended to propose collaboration but also saying that the only words she knows in Italian are *ti amo*, is

wonderfully daring. It charts a scenario for the thrilling and self-destructive love affair that was to follow, children and films in tow. Hollywood first backed the film and then abandoned it, awarding a “zéro de conduite” to director and star for having misbehaved by falling in love. *Stromboli* was the only film of the series that RKO financed; the later collaborations of Rossellini and Bergman were bankrolled by less puritanical European-based producers, such as Ponti–De Laurentiis (*Europe '51*) and Italia Film (*Journey to Italy*). The outrage of a woman seeking affection, plainly and unequivocally, did not go down well in 1950. Yet *Stromboli* did cut the path, irreversibly, for a host of unflinching takes on modern marriage, from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960) and *La notte* (1961) to Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973).