

THE FILMS OF ANNA MAGNANI AND ROBERTO ROSSELLINI: THE *POLITIQUE D'ACTRICE* IN THE TRANSITION TO MODERNITY*

MARGARIDA CARNICÉ

INTRODUCTION

This essay analyses the films made by the actress Anna Magnani with director Roberto Rossellini from 1945 to 1950, when post-war European cinema was in the process of its transition to modernity. With reference to the three films they made together, *Rome, Open City* (Roma città aperta, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), *The Human Voice* (La voce umana, 1948) and *The Miracle* (Il miracolo, 1948), as well as criticism from the period and biographical sources, the study focuses on the impact of Magnani's performances, and particularly on the potential of her *politique d'actrice* (Moulet, 1993) to serve as a foundation for some of the innovations associated with modern cinema. Through an examination of Magnani's work from the perspective of star studies, the aim of this article is to highlight the importance of actresses to the development of the main aesthetic and dramatic transformations to the cinema of their time, as well as their role

as creators of an artistic approach that transcends the films identified with it, and that can be understood as a corpus with a significance of its own.

ROBERTO ROSSELLINI'S "MAGNANI FILMS"

Scholars of modern cinema have often considered the potential for stylistic innovation offered by actor direction (Bergala, 1994, 2005; Font, 2001; Bou, 1999, 2015; De Lucas, 2008). However, the importance of the acting approach (or what Luc Moulet calls the *politique des acteurs*) as a foundation for innovation has rarely been taken into account in the analysis of the relationship between directing and acting. Star studies offers a pathway for examining the evolution of cinema based on the specific impact of actors and actresses (Dyer, 2001; Dagrada, 2005; Pitassio, 2003; Jandelli, 2007; Pravadelli, 2015). It can thus shed light on the nature of actresses as subjects of representation and creators of their own dramatic and figu-

rative approach, and on their contribution to the debate over the status of the star within the industry, especially in a period like the one discussed here, in which worn-out classical formulas in cinema were giving way to a discourse of reflection not only on cinematic narrative mechanisms, but also on the star system and the *ontology of the star* (Jandelli, 2007).

For all these reasons, Anna Magnani's oeuvre provides a useful opportunity to observe the transformation of cinematic aesthetics from the perspective of the *politique des acteurs* (Moullet, 1993; Brenez, 2013; Carnicé, 2015). Traditionally associated with the creation of paradigmatic elements of neorealism, her on-screen presence engaged with the main visual movements of her time. Beginning on the stage in the inter-war years, she began her film career in the realist movements of the postwar period (*Rome, Open City*) and consolidated her star status in Italian commercial cinema in the 1940s and 1950s in films such as *Peddlin' in Society*, (*Abbasso la ricchezza!*, Gennaro Righelli, 1946), *Angelina* (*L'onorevole Angelina*, Luigi Zampa, 1946) and *Bellissima* (Luchino Visconti, 1952). After conquering Hollywood, where she became the first Italian woman to win an Oscar (*The Rose Tattoo*, Daniel Mann, 1955), she began building a mature, self-reflexive corpus that bore witness to her own particular *politique d'actrice*, in films such as *We, the Women* (*Siamo donne*, Luchino Visconti, 1953) and *The Golden Coach* (*Le carrosse d'or*, Jean Renoir, 1953). As a result, she took part in the construction of key elements of the cinema of her time: not only the creation and international expansion of Italian neorealism, but also the development of the modern female character, in both auteur cinema and mainstream genre films (Carnicé, 2021). Her status as a creator is reflected in the self-reflexive dimension of her later films, such as *Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962) and *Roma* (Federico Fellini, 1973), and specifically in performances that bear the self-re-

IN GENERAL, MAGNANI'S APPROACH CAN BE SUMMED UP IN A MANIFESTO ON CHARACTER CREATION AT A TIME WHEN THE QUALITIES OF MODERN FEMININITY WERE PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE EUROPEAN REALIST MOVEMENTS OF THE POST-WAR PERIOD

rential features associated with certain discourses of late classical cinema.

In general, Magnani's approach can be summed up in a manifesto on character creation at a time when the qualities of modern femininity were pushing the boundaries of the European realist movements of the post-war period (Siehlohr, 2000; Jandelli, 2007; Pravadelli, 2015). Her popular heroines offered new possibilities of representation that challenged classical melodrama and the direction of filmmakers who, in the transition of the 1940s and 1950s, sought to break with the conventions of the classical melodramatic narrative inherited from Hollywood, often with stories that ascribed special importance to the exploration of the female character's emotions (Font, 2001; Dagrada, 2005; Jandelli, 2007; De Lucas, 2008). One such filmmaker was Rossellini, whose work in the period from 1945 to 1950 evolved from *Rome, Open City* to *Stromboli*, described as founding works of neorealism and modern cinema, respectively (Bergala, 1984). In this period, he filmed *Love* (*L'amore*, 1948), a piece that experimented with the actress's work, which he dedicated precisely "to the art of Anna Magnani" (Rossellini, 1948). Combining two medium-length films, *Love* offers a view of the actress's pioneering performance as a system of cinematic construction, an approach that would later characterise the work not only of Rossellini, but also of several other auteurs of modern European cinema, particularly in the sub-genre referred to as "couple films" (Font, 2001). Perhaps because its

unconventional format limited its success, *Love* is accorded minimal importance in key studies of Rossellini (Bergala, 1984; Brunette, 1996; Gallagher, 1998), who would not begin highlighting the role of the actress in his work until Ingrid Bergman's appearance in *Stromboli* (*Stromboli, terra di Dio*, 1950), which is considered a landmark film in the development of modern cinema. In this context, Magnani and Rossellini's films together are often cited for their adherence to the aesthetic manifesto of neorealism, or even as anecdotal to the couple's romance, but rarely as representative of the aesthetic transition between postwar realism and the films of European auteur cinema that they influenced. Yet *Love* exhibits certain stylistic features and aesthetic and discursive approaches that are essential for understanding the evolution of Rossellini's films towards modernity, inviting us to reconsider the significance of his films with Magnani as representative of this paradigm shift.

THE POLITIQUE D'ACTRICE AS A STAGING DEVICE

Magnani's performances in Rossellini's films foreshadow a key element of the *politique d'actrice* in the *mise-en-scène*, whose influence would continue in the subsequent work of both creators and which at the same time foreshadowed the centrality that actors would acquire in modern cinema, particularly in the sub-genre of the "couple film" (Font, 2001). The term *politique d'actrice* used here refers to the performer's agency in the construction of the film narrative, based on stylistic and discursive features that are repeated and recognised as a sign of authorship or as a personal signature (Carnicé, 2015). In other words, the *politique des acteurs* (Moulet, 1993) or *politica delle star* (Jandelli, 2007) vindicates the autonomy of actors from the authorship of their directors, in a manner similar to the way that the *politique des auteurs* (Bazin et al., 1972) identifies a genuine, autonomous signature of the classical director

within the limits of the Hollywood studio system and the norms of genre narratives. Nicole Brenez (2013) identifies four essential influences of agency in "actor poetics": on the historical context, on the other elements of the cinematic device, on the expressive and rhetorical challenges posed in the films, and on the anthropological challenges of their time.

The challenging approaches proposed by Anna Magnani in Rossellini's *mise-en-scène* are an extension of what the actress had already become identified with in other cinematic contexts, including neorealism. Her creations for the "Magnani films" share these common features of the figurative, rhetorical and discursive repertoire of their author: characters whose nature and development is explained more by her presence and her gestures than by the script or other elements of the *mise-en-scène*; the narrative autonomy of her performance and a tendency to eliminate responses and reverse shots, especially in romantic or melodramatic narratives; the construction of a female subjectivity that pushes at the boundaries of classical melodrama and embraces new ways of being captured on film; and, finally, the recurring idea of gestation, pregnancy and motherhood as character motifs and as metaphors for power, continuity and resilience. It is the transformative and discursive capacity of this approach and her ability to convey a strategy that is not only aesthetic and figurative but also discursive that allows the characterisation of Anna Magnani's authorial traits as a *politique d'actrice* (Carnicé, 2015).

Love, which in a way is a film that moves beyond neorealism, can be read as a manifesto on Magnani's versatility outside the neorealist canon. In figurative terms, it is one of the actress's most ambitious works. In the first part, *The Human Voice*, she plays an anonymous woman having her last phone conversation with her lover, who has decided to leave her. Her performance challenges the conventions of melodrama as she must contend with the absence of the affective

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reverse shot that is key to the construction of the classical romantic dialogue (Bou, 2002). In the second episode, *The Miracle*, she plays Nannina, a simple goatherd girl who, after being sexually assaulted by a wandering traveller, comes to believe the fantasy that she is pregnant with a divine being. This character embodies a radical transformation through her representation of pregnancy and childbirth as transcendent experiences, and it reflects the shift in Rossellini's filmmaking from neorealist ensemble pieces towards the individual existentialism found in his subsequent film, *Stromboli*. In both sections of *Love*, Magnani's body is central to a minimalist mise-en-scène and serves as the focal point of a camera that seems to be seeking new forms of narrative construction by scrutinising the character.

Human Voice was filmed at almost exactly the same time that *Rome, Open City* was earning international recognition both for Italian neorealism and for the director and actress as its chief creators. While the simultaneous occurrence of two such disparate styles did not contradict the historical perception of Rossellini as a founder of modern cinema (Bergala, 1984), it does pose an obstacle to a critical reading of Magnani, whose influence on the creation of the various aesthetic currents of her time has been constantly evaded by critics. As early as the 1980s, reconsiderations of her legacy by authors such as Matilde Hochkofler (1984) and Patrizia Pistagnesi (1988) were revealing an authoritative signature and creative potential obscured by the various myths

constructed by the critics and press of her time (Cantatore and Falzone, eds., 2001), which would ultimately converge into the unruly and lonely image critiqued in 1950 by Indro Montanelli in *La Magnani*, one of the hagiographies published at the time that condense the actress's marginal role in the cultural industry of her era.

Even by the time of her international breakthrough, Magnani had already introduced an uncomfortable hint of impurity as one of the few professional actresses in neorealism, a movement that supposedly eschewed artifice. Her ability to mimic the norms of Italian post-war drama dazzled and bewildered critics. The first acknowledgement of this disruptive quality can be found in James Agee's review for *The Nation* after the première of *Rome, Open City* at Cannes in 1946. Fascinated by the acting, Agee highlights the presence of "a magnificent woman named Anna Magnani", avoiding the use of the word "actress" and indirectly excusing himself for it: "She conveys the impression that everything was done too quickly and with a sincerity too fierce to get stuck in mere artificiality or meditation" (Agee, 1946, 1). This type of reaction is probably the source of the legend of Magnani as a non-professional actress, resulting in the historical invisibility of her legacy. And yet it was this very meditation of artifice denied by the critics of the era that defined the stylistic approach proposed by Rossellini for Magnani in *Love*: "*A Human Voice* offered me the chance to use the microscopic camera. The phenomenon to be examined was Anna Magnani" (Rossellini, 1995: 66).

**THE MAGNANI-ROSSELLINI
COLLABORATION AS A FUSIONAL MODEL**

The collaboration between Magnani and Rossellini occurred at a time when both the director and the actress were moving away from a collective form of filmmaking towards an individual approach. In Magnani's case, this translated into

an emancipation from the realism of her post-war heroines to more mannerist, reflexive and self-referential characters, like those she would portray in the 1950s with filmmakers such as Luchino Visconti (*Bellissima; We, the Women*), Jean Renoir (*The Golden Coach*) or during her Hollywood period. For Rossellini, his well-known transition from neorealist to modern cinema can be summed up in what differentiates the films known as the “War Trilogy” (Rome, Open City, Paisan [Paisà, 1946] and Germany, Year Zero [Germania anno zero, 1948]) and the so-called “Solitude Trilogy” (Stromboli, Europe '51 [Europa 51, 1952] and Journey to Italy [Viaggio in Italia, 1954]). Although some authors (Bergala, 1984; Brunette, 1985, 1996) have pointed out the role of romantic conflict and the treatment of emotions in a supposed “Love Trilogy” (the two parts of *Love* and *Stromboli*) or the importance of Ingrid Bergman in the so-called “Bergman films”, such categories have more to do with the biographical circumstances that connected the director romantically to his misnamed “muses” than with the importance of the actresses as autonomous creators or discursive agents. Significantly, although some of these authors do recognise Anna Magnani’s “bravura” (Brunette, 1985: 44), the literature on Rossellini does not assign the “Magnani films” a place of importance as a subcategory of analysis. However, in *Love* Magnani introduces the idea of the star system as the axis of formal innovation, in what could be considered the first example of the European “couple film”.

AN ETHICAL EROTICS OF FILMING

The couple film was a cinematic trend of the post-classical era that foreshadowed the rise of romantic conflict as a thematic motif, the star system as a phenomenon for observation and an interest in the female character—specifically, in her suffering—as a dramatic motif (Bergala, 1984; Font, 2001; De Lucas, 2008). The Godard-Kari-

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na, Antonioni-Vitti and Bergman-Ullman partnerships in European cinema and the Cassavettes-Rowland pairing in the United States offered a cinematic approach to romantic conflict through the use of gestures by iconic actresses who were often playing versions of themselves. These films were effectively the work of partnerships, with the filmmakers’ camera capturing the everyday gestures or biographical expressions of the female protagonists, exploring the limits of realism and tackling what Bergala argues was the fundamental question of modern cinema: “Can truth manifest itself in a film?” (Bergala, 1984: 1). According to Domènec Font (2001), the male-female dialectic is key to the synthesis of a poetics that reflects on the evolution of the couple’s romantic relationship, projecting the director’s gaze onto the mystery embodied by the actress in her otherness as a woman. Antonioni (1990) refers to the actresses in these films as “Trojan horses”: attractive figures possessing an inner quality that is mysterious and essential to the filmmakers’ aesthetic quest yet threatening to their *mise-en-scène*. With her authentic presence, the actress energises the image, challenging the monolithic conception of authorship posited by the *politique d’auteur* (Bazin *et al.*, 1972) and leaving open the question of her real participation in the film.

This fetishistic yet cautious gaze on the actress’s power posited by Antonioni contradicts

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the idea of her autonomy, as it suggests a directorial style characterised by an invasive and threatening use of filming devices. The desire to draw out of the figure “the more or less controlled declaration of her truth” (Font, 2001: 3) often involves the symbolic violence of a directorial style that resembles a ritual of extraction, an exercise of forcible midwifery in which the director asserts his authority, using the medium in an intimidating way. Terms such as “torture device” or “theatre of cruelty” (Bergala, 1984) are common in theoretical interpretations of these films, many of which associate the control of the performance with a form of possession on the part of the directors, as unquestionable auteurs of the works they direct. In this sense, Bergala compares Rossellini’s camera on Ingrid Bergman with forceps, suggesting a form of extraction with an unequivocally obstetric resonance that contrasts with the metaphor of the microscope used by Rossellini to describe his approach to Magnani (2005: 64). As a neutral instrument, the microscope suggests a desire for scientific, almost anthropological observation, which neither forces nor invades the body in its desire to reveal (not to possess) its mystery.

It is important to note that Rossellini and Magnani had emerged from the foundational experience of neorealism, involving a stance that is moral or *ethical* first and *aesthetic* second (Rossellini, 2006). Their approach is therefore based on a humanist understanding of cinema that seems to have no room for power or domination. As Patrizia Pistagnesi (1988: 9) points out, in one of the most comprehensive retrospectives on the actress:

The films that come to life out of the clash between Magnani’s personality and Rossellini’s poetics are charged with meaning. Not even in his widely praised films with Ingrid Bergman is there such equality of mettle between the actress and the film camera, nor is there a comparable feeling of interaction with the set [...]. While Magnani represented herself, Ingrid Bergman represents something else, something she cannot know, and that belongs only to Rossellini.

The Rossellini-Magnani *fusional* model also exhibits a formal equality, so that the duel between the two creators is carried out on an equal footing. This *fusional* model also responds to other studies positing the direction of actresses as central to innovation, such as the model proposed by Alain Bergala in his essay “Une érotique du filmage” (1994), based on the filmography of Jean Renoir. According to Bergala, *A Day in the Country* (*Une partie de Campagne*, Jean Renoir, 1946) contains one of the first signs of a break with classical transparency in Sylvia Bataille’s tearful gaze at the camera at the end of a scene in which her partner has forced her to kiss him. After analysing the rehearsals, Bergala shows that this expression was the result of Renoir’s tireless direction with the aim of exhausting Bataille in order to obtain an authentic reaction—in this case, a reproving look at the director for his relentlessness.¹ The author stresses that the revelation of an extra-diegetic look between director and actress is key to understanding how it pushes the limits of the traditional narrative, as it acts as a destabilising element in the depiction of desire in the image. In this case, the director’s presence interrupts the classical erotic relationship that is so essential to the architecture of the shot-reverse shot or the exchanges of looks between the characters of melodramatic fiction (Bou, 2002). By focusing his research on the direction of actors, one of the most fertile fields for innovation in modern cinema (Bergala, 2005), the author supports the hypothesis of the

actress's role as the potential epicentre of a crisis in the classical image.

In light of this *erotics of filming* theory, it is significant that Magnani's films with Rossellini take the negotiation with the rhetoric of the shot-reverse shot, the progressive dissolution of the affective correspondence and the disappearance of the male partner to their ultimate consequences. In narrative terms, *The Human Voice* is a melodrama with no reverse shots. It is a medium-length film based on sequence shots, many of which are close-ups, focusing on the single motif of a suffering woman having her last phone conversation with a lover who is leaving her. It is thus a deconstruction of the genre of melodrama determined by the elimination of the male counterpart as a result of the autonomy of the female image, which takes the position of subject of the story. The success of this approach lies in the capacity of the actress's body to absorb this aesthetic shift of the quintessential classical plotline: the story of heterosexual love, which represented the ideal of the Hollywood canon in that decade (Bou, 2002). This question runs throughout Anna Magnani's filmography, in which the expansion of the desire of her unconventional female characters cannot easily be inscribed in the codes of melodrama (Carnicé, 2015; 2021; 2023). Indeed, the progressive disappearance of the romantic exchange may reflect the difficulty male partners have in maintaining the reverse shot to Magnani's increasingly imposing heroines, to the point that the leading man ends up being replaced by a child in the so-called maternal melodramas (Morreale, 2011).

This expansive condition was already present in the couple's first film, *Rome, Open City*, especially in the famous scene of Pina's death, which also bears signs of a melodramatic discourse in crisis. In a scene that has come to be cited as a metonym for Italian neorealism, the pregnant *popolana* runs after the Nazi truck taking her beloved away on the very morning of their wedding and is shot down by a hail of bullets. In Magnani's despera-

SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON NEOREALISM INTERPRETS THE EFFECT OF THIS SCENE AS A SYMBOL OF THE RESISTANCE OF POST-WAR CINEMA TO THE OLD CINEMATOGRAPHIC CONVENTIONS INHERITED FROM THE HOLLYWOOD TRADITION AND FROM THE ITALIAN FILMS OF THE FASCIST VENTENNIO

te move to be united with her partner and in the voices of the two lovers each calling out to the other, the phantasmal presence of the rhetoric of the shot-reverse shot somehow evokes the visual conception of the entire "couple film" genre that would follow it. Scholarly literature on neorealism interprets the effect of this scene as a symbol of the resistance of post-war cinema to the old cinematographic conventions inherited from the Hollywood tradition and from the Italian films of the Fascist *ventennio*. It is interesting to note the intuition of attributing the photogenic nature of this episode to the actress's gesture, in a scene whose improvised nature made it quite different from its original description in the script (Roncoroni, 2006). This is how Magnani herself recounted the filming, confirming the importance of her gesture to the construction process (Hochkofler, 2013: 72-73):

For the death scene I didn't do any rehearsals. With Rossellini, being the great director he was, you didn't rehearse. He knew that by preparing the setting for me, I would work. During the action of the raid, when I came out through the gate, I suddenly returned to the time when the boys on the streets of Rome were taken away. Because it was people, ordinary people, who were lined up against the walls. The Germans were real Germans taken from a concentration camp. Suddenly, I wasn't myself anymore. I was the character. Yes, Rossellini had prepared the set in a really amazing way. The women went pale when they heard the Nazis tal-

king to each other. This filled me with an anxiety that I then brought to the screen.

On repeated occasions, Rossellini spoke of his desire to pay a professional tribute to the woman he considered one of the best actresses of his time (Rossellini, 2006a: 52). In this sense, the "Magnani films" also bear witness to the extent to which her performance constitutes the figurative transgression implicit in neorealism not only as a filmmaking approach that broke with the past, but also as a foundation for the modern cinema of the future.

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE STAR

Despite its transcendent nature as an aesthetic that embraces the non-professional gestures of actors, it would be naïve to imagine that an aesthetic shift as important as the one that occurred in post-war European cinema could dispense with the actor's body as a site of inscription. Georges Sadoul recognises this in his history of cinema: "With *Rome, Open City*, Anna Magnani introduces a new kind of *tragédienne*" (1961: 330). Magnani's *politique d'actrice* redefines the star system and the classical image of the woman in cinema. Its merit lies in revealing and capturing the photogenicity of the human condition without embellishments, in the marginality of an unglamorous virtuosity and a femininity always in crisis and always capable of being heroic. In *The Human Voice*, Magnani turns the figure of the rejected and devastated woman into an epic image. In *The Miracle*, she achieves the same by portraying a victim of violence marginalised by her society. Her performances vindicate the importance of anonymous women, rendered invisible by the social barriers imposed by the patriarchy, who as they carry on in their daily struggle become important bodies, inviting us to reinterpret the tradition of female heroism.

Magnani's style connects with modern dramatic art by confronting the spectator with images

that do not facilitate identification but do guarantee an experience. Her performance encompasses unstable identities, defined by the emotional mobility created by an identity in progress, without a clear destination. Faced with the impossibility of immersing themselves in the transparency of the story, viewers are invited to acknowledge the process of construction of the subject, turning the viewing experience into a lasting memory. In this sense, Magnani's performance in all her films is a sensory experience that transcends the story, acting in the "subterranean movements between the states of the character and those of the spectator" (Bergala, 1984: 3). In this demonstration of Magnani's power, the critics saw an imposition of her personality as a star, a reaction that might reflect their bewilderment at the audacity of an actress too close to anonymity and the ensemble role that characterised neorealism. However, Brunette (1996: 90) identifies the transgressive dimension of the film in the actress's self-conscious gesture:

The Human Voice thus establishes an ontological identity between the actress and the character she plays, intermittently collapsing the two categories while deconstructing its own superficial realism through the pre-existing reality of Magnani herself.

This self-conscious dimension is another unequivocal characteristic of modern cinema and also a common feature in Magnani's work, as her personality is repeatedly evident in her figurative approach. All of her oeuvre, especially her films after her work with Rossellini, and the films she made in the 1950s with Visconti and Renoir, is imbued with a star discourse. Her mature period, witnessed by filmmakers such as Pasolini (*Mamma Roma*, 1963) and Fellini (*Fellini-Roma*, 1973), would serve as a kind of a tribute to an actress who always portrays herself.

Magnani's metanarrative dimension begins to take shape in her work with Rossellini, through performances that reflect a virtuosity that

overwhelms the director's authorship (Pistagnesi, 1988), but also the biographical intrusions that ended up constructing a parallel story in the media of the time. The Magnani-Rossellini partnership would end in 1950 with the sensational episode known as the "War of the Volcanoes" (Anile and Giannice, 2010), involving an invasion by the nascent tabloid press into Magnani's control over her own image, with inevitable effects on her later career. A key element of this often romanticised story is the telegram that arrived in Italy from Hollywood in 1949, in which Ingrid Bergman placed herself at Rossellini's disposal to work with him on a film.³ In this story, the media attributed to Magnani the role of discordant third wheel, or more specifically, the jilted lover of whom many imagined they saw a foreshadowing in the character she had played in *The Human Voice*, and who would end up taking revenge on Rossellini by making *Volcano* (Vulcano, William Dieterle, 1950) as a rival film to *Stromboli*. From this point on, Magnani's public image would be affected by media intrusions into her private life, and thus her actress and character identities would begin to fracture with the impact that her decision to star in *Volcano* had on her image.

While this was unfolding in the public sphere, the type of performances we find in this first stage of her career as a mature actress are notable for a tone that reflects on the phenomenon of stardom, the factors that give rise to it and its contradictions. The actress's recurring character and the profusion of roles with a self-referential or biographical resonance collectively reflect a stage characterised by the transparency of the *politique d'actrice* as a mechanism. The meditation on the art of acting and the elements that make up the actor's identity would be recurring ideas in her Italian and international films of this period. The progressive change to her identity as an actress in films such as *Volcano*, *Bellissima*, *The Golden Coach*, *We, the Women* and *The Rose Tattoo* is significant in the context of a decade that

was so decisive for the history of the star system. International projects such as the Actors Studio in New York City and the emergence of new generational models of actors in Europe and the United States drove a discursive trend related to the on-screen body that Cristina Jandelli (2007) maps out with her concept of the *ontology of the star*. In the context of the aesthetic transition from classical to modern cinema, the emergence of new media and changes to the forms of consumption also affected the conception of the star system and the treatment of film stars.

INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS SUCH AS THE ACTORS STUDIO IN NEW YORK CITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW GENERATIONAL MODELS OF ACTORS IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES DROVE A DISCURSIVE TREND RELATED TO THE ON-SCREEN BODY THAT CRISTINA JANDELLI MAPS OUT WITH HER CONCEPT OF THE ONTOLOGY OF THE STAR

The interest in the biographical intrusions of directors and actresses in couple films would continue to be symptomatic of this context. In this sense, the "War of the Volcanoes" constituted an extreme expression of a narrative trend in the historiography of criticism that often reads this evolution of modern cinema through love stories unfolding behind the camera, and tends to prioritise the actress as a focus of speculation by default. Although the competition between the two rival teams was essentially expressed in their respective production strategies,⁴ the controversy would focus on the romantic conflict of the Rossellini-Magnani-Bergman triangle, and would be personified in particular in the Italian actress (Sorgi, 2010). *Volcano* had been a film conceived to compete commercially with

Stromboli, and Magnani's decision to star in it was interpreted as a personal act of revenge. The depiction of Volcano in the headlines of the period reflects a personification of the conflict in the character of an actress who had been humiliated by the fact of being replaced in Rossellini's life and work (Genovese, 2010). The tabloids constructed a communication strategy that personified a conflict with economic and cultural dimensions in Magnani's jealousy, since the "War of the Volcanoes" involved not only the two rival films, but also Italian and international cultural identities due to the involvement of Ingrid Bergman and the Hollywood production system. In a way, it foreshadowed the opening up of a film industry still in the process of reconstruction to international co-productions in the decade that followed. The legacy of Volcano can also be identified in Magnani's Hollywood period, and in a star image constructed on the essentialism of female passions, fearsome in their strength and as unpredictable as the fury of a volcano, which would leave its mark on future Italian female stars in Hollywood (Carnicé, 2021; Vaccarella and Vaccarella, 2003).

MOTHERHOOD AND RESILIENCE: THE PREGNANCY MOTIF AS A METAPHOR FOR CONTINUITY

Other biographical perspectives of this period, far removed from the sensationalism of the tabloids, shed light on aspects that are crucial for understanding modern cinema and the new aesthetic direction taken in the films of Magnani and Rossellini. It is interesting to note that the couple's last film together foreshadowed the basic drama of *Stromboli*: the lonely struggle of a woman trying to escape social exclusion and motivated by the hope offered by a pregnancy. Like two embryos conceived in the same womb, *The Miracle* and the film it was partnered with share this curious twin drama.

WHEN THEIR ARTISTIC AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BEGAN, ROSSELLINI AND MAGNANI WERE BOTH MOURNING THE LOSS OF A CHILD. ROSSELLINI HAD TRAGICALLY LOST HIS ELDEST SON, WHILE MAGNANI, WHO WAS A SINGLE MOTHER, HAD BEEN SEPARATED AGAINST HER WILL FROM HER ONLY SON DUE TO AN ILLNESS THAT COULD NOT BE TREATED IN ITALY

When their artistic and personal relationship began, Rossellini and Magnani were both mourning the loss of a child. Rossellini had tragically lost his eldest son, while Magnani, who was a single mother, had been separated against her will from her only son due to an illness that could not be treated in Italy (De Marchis, 1996: 60). The circumstance of shared grief is significant, both because of the profound mark left by the death of Rossellini's son on his work (Rossellini and Roncoroni, ed., 1987: 104), and because of the key role that motherhood (both literal and symbolic) would play in Anna Magnani's films and star image (Hochkofler, 2013; Carnicé, 2021). When filming for *The Human Voice* began in 1946, Rossellini had just finished *Germany Year Zero*, a film dedicated to Romano, his late son, and often considered the work that marked the end of neorealism with its heartbreaking image of a child suicide, symbolising the existential abyss and despair of the post-war period (Deleuze, 1985). The connection between these two films, which deal with love and death as simultaneous and opposing phenomena (and which, it is interesting to note, Rossellini explicitly dedicates to his loved ones, in this case Romano and Anna, respectively), is analysed by Rosa Delor in her article "La muerte del hijo" [The Death of the Son] (2010) in a meticulous biographical study that is rare in the literature on

MOTHERHOOD, IN ITS PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS, MARKS ANNA MAGNANI'S ENTIRE FILMOGRAPHY, AND HER FILM STAR HAGIOGRAPHY

Rossellini. Delor concludes that Rossellini's identity as a parent is reflected in his obsession with the figure of motherhood as a source of creativity. This obsession was alluded to by Isabella Rossellini when she described her father's regret at not having been able to get pregnant and give birth to his own children (Rossellini, 2006: 29-30). Delor interprets this obsession as an essential component in *Love*, in which the filmmaker expresses his need to immerse himself in femininity as a regenerative *topos*:

In the films he made from 1947 to 1954, Rossellini projects himself onto his lead actress, who becomes a mirror in which he obsessively analyses his own feminine side, his frustrated desire to be a mother, because in the woman—she who at all times loves and penetrates—he pursues that part of the knowledge of the other that has been denied to him as a man: the inner, physiological, instinctive knowledge, which only the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding can give (2010: 109).

Motherhood, in its physical and symbolic dimensions, marks Anna Magnani's entire filmography, and her film star hagiography. It is probably not accidental that Rossellini's films with Magnani, from *Rome, Open City* to *The Miracle*, constitute a corpus marked by themes of passion and the desire for union, ideas that are also expressed at a formal level. Along with the reflexive use of the reverse shot and the rhetoric of correspondence, they contain the recurring themes of pregnancy and birth as metaphors for life, continuity and resilience. Delor argues that *The Human Voice* constitutes a cathartic realisation of

the capacity to express pain after the extreme experience of Germany, Year Zero, and as a film that initiated a cinema of the feminine and of the *grembo* (womb). Magnani would return to these questions over the course of her career in Italy, and in Hollywood her torrid Mediterranean heroines would be constructed on notions of fertility, sexual desire and reproductive ability (Carnicé, 2021).

Delor's work constitutes an interesting contribution to the literature on Rossellini, eschewing orthodox approaches to embrace a perspective as familiar and undisputed as the procreative mystique surrounding Rossellini as a historical figure (Delor, 2010: 102). The creative *telos* that permeates his work, with its recognised humanist dimension, has made Rossellini an intellectual icon often metaphorically associated with fatherhood: the father of neorealism, the father of modern cinema, and the father of those filmmakers who would become his disciples, who reproduced his aesthetic and narrative formulas and who expressed their sense of orphanhood upon his death, exchanging telegrams of condolence with his biological children. "Now we are alone in the forest" wrote Godard in one such telegram to his family (Rossellini, 2006b: 141). Rossellini's own words might serve best to conclude the idea discussed here, with the vindication of his creative signature: "I refuse to accomplish any creative act. The only creation possible is to build a child" (Rossellini, 1995: 234). Magnani herself reiterates this symbolic dimension of the mother in one of her later roles, as the protagonist in *Mamma Roma*, an *ad hoc* character who inevitably reveals her unequivocal star presence by combining the features of the three most common macrofigures in her filmography: the mother, the sex worker, and the actress.

It is interesting to note that by rejecting the conventions of classical representation, the Magnani-Rossellini *fusional* model allowed Magnani to explore the expressive possibilities of the fe-

male body. While in *Rome, Open City*, Rossellini's camera had extracted from her presence a political gesture of resistance through the combative (and pregnant) character of Pina, in this model it seems to take an inverse approach, drawing on mystical iconography to convey the debt that cultural codes owe to the most essential and instinctive of human gestures. *The Miracle* offers a conclusive view of womanhood as a source of revelation and of the capacity of the *politique d'actrice* to respond to this aesthetic quest. From both a figurative and symbolic perspective, it reveals the significance of the figure of motherhood, which Rossellini would use as a transitional key in his "Bergman films" and Magnani would adopt as a recurring theme and focus throughout her career (Grignaffini, 2002; Hochkofler, 2013; Carnicé, 2021).

In contrast to Renoir's methodical direction of Sylvia Bataille, or the violent forceps suggested by Bergala to describe Rossellini's on-screen relationship with Bergman, it could be argued that the director who observes the actress's process of artistic creation in the "Magnani films" does so with the active and clinical fascination of an attendant at a childbirth. What Rossellini seems to explore in Magnani as a performative phenomenon is a study of human behaviours in terms of the capacity to create presence and life that the bodies of the actress and the woman both possess. There is a sense of reciprocity in the fact that the journey of the pregnant woman as a neorealist *topos* should conclude with images that inscribe Rossellini's work with the symbol of an ending in the form of a birth. According to Adriano Aprà, this symbol would prove decisive for the conclusion of the era of Italian postwar cinema (Brunette, 1996: 96). The creators of *Rome, Open City* thus ended their cinematic journey together with an image that vindicates their ethical, humanist (or however we may want to define the film corpus they constructed), *fusional* model as an act of resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

Anna Magnani and Roberto Rossellini made very few statements about their relationship, but those they made were very clear. Magnani asserted: "I believed in Rossellini. They may have been the most important years of my life. I thought there would be no limits to what we could do together or be together" (Lerner, 1988: 37). Rossellini, meanwhile, defined Magnani as "a very important person in my life. Important as a woman and extremely important as an actress. Then there was all her humanity, her availability, her enthusiasm, her fears... She really was an extraordinary, rare human being. I don't know who could not love her" (Vermorcken, 1979). If the birth of modern cinema is understood through the work of filmmakers who found discursive material in their lives and bodies of fiction in their romantic partners, we can conclude that Anna Magnani and Roberto Rossellini brought together the essential features that critics would attribute to the aesthetic paradigm shift of the period: the director's gaze as a substitute for the gaze of the male partner (Bergala, 1994), the loss of correspondence as a transgression of classical poetics (Bou, 2002), the trigger for an alternative construction of the female subject (Pravadelli, 2015), and the imposition of this new image as the epicentre of modern cinema (Font, 2001). If modern stardom is interpreted in terms of its discursive and self-referential capacity, what Magnani brings to Rossellini's work is essential for understanding the shift towards modernity not only in direction but also in acting. Significantly, her "Rossellini films" marked the beginning of a self-conscious stage in which the filmmakers who emulated her style would do so with the aim of portraying the performative gestures of the actress.

In this context, the *politique d'actrice*, understood as the capacity of the performance to articulate the *mise-en-scène*, offers an alternative perspective on the role that film history has assigned

to actresses. Recognising their active role in the construction of cinema and reconsidering their dimension as architects and creators rather than merely passive textual elements or directors' muses is crucial to understand the evolution of cinema away from figurative models and to approach the work of film actresses as creative subjects. With their undisputed impact on each other's work in the context of the cinema of their time, and on the figurative and anthropological conventions of the post-war period, the films made by Magnani and Rossellini bear witness to a fruitful and fascinating creative actor-director relationship, while also offering a key for the interpretation of other possible directions for film historiography, in this case from the perspective of the *politique d'actrice*.

NOTES

- 1 The questions of direction raised by Bergala serve as the basis for *La direction d'acteurs par Jean Renoir* (1969), a short documentary directed by the actress Gisèle Braunberger, who submits herself to Renoir's on-screen direction and to this type of strategy of exhausting the gesture.
- 2 This argument was put forward during the famous encounter between Jean Renoir and Roberto Rossellini in the 1950s, documented by André Bazin: "I had an interesting experience with *A Human Voice*. I wanted to establish the film's capacity to penetrate to the very roots of a character." And again: "[A]n experience that has been useful for me because then I was able to make and treat the characters in a certain way, because I had taken this experience, this search, to the extreme" (Rossellini, 2006a: 145-165).
- 3 "Dear Mr. Rossellini, I saw your films *Roma*, *Open City* and *Paisan*, and enjoyed them very much. If you need a Swedish actress who speaks English very well, has not forgotten her German, is barely comprehensible in French and who can only say 'Ti amo' in Italian, I am ready to come to Italy to work with you. Ingrid Bergman." (Rossellini, 2006b: 75).

- 4 Although the historiographical discourse has characterised *Volcano* as a facsimile of *Stromboli*, the origin of the film is more complex. It had originally been conceived by Roberto Rossellini, who had been commissioned by Panaria Films to develop it under the provisional title *Stromboli*, and it was to be the director's fourth film starring Anna Magnani. The planned collaboration was thwarted by the director's sudden departure to the United States in response to Ingrid Bergman's famous telegram. Rossellini took the original idea of the project for his new film to be financed by Hollywood magnate Howard Hughes. Faced with this betrayal, Panaria Films, which held the production rights, decided to internationalise its own project and compete with Rossellini, securing David O'Seiznick as producer and William Dieterle as director. This was how two rival films with the same premise were born.

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THE FILMS OF ANNA MAGNANI AND ROBERTO ROSSELLINI: THE *POLITIQUE D'ACTRICE* IN THE TRANSITION TO MODERNITY

Abstract

This essay analyses the films made by the actress Anna Magnani with director Roberto Rossellini from 1945 to 1950, when post-war European cinema was in the process of its transition to modernity. With reference to the three films they made together, *Rome, Open City* (Roma città aperta, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), *The Human Voice* (La voce umana, 1948) and *The Miracle* (Il miracolo, 1948), as well as criticism from the period and biographical sources, the study focuses on the impact of Magnani's performances, and particularly on the potential of her *politique d'actrice* (Moullet, 1993) to serve as a foundation for some of the innovations associated with modern cinema. Through an examination of Magnani's work from the perspective of star studies, the aim of this article is to highlight the importance of actresses to the development of the main aesthetic and dramatic transformations to the cinema of their time, as well as their role as creators of an artistic approach that transcends the films they feature in, and that can be understood as a corpus with a significance of its own. The collaboration between Magnani and Rossellini is presented as a model of balanced interaction, in contrast to the power dynamics present in the direction of actresses in the "couple films" of modern cinema. The work of both creators is interpreted as a fusion of styles arising from a desire to experiment with new ways of representing female subjectivity, motherhood, and pain—recurring themes that would shape the evolution of modern cinema and the representation of women.

Key words

Anna Magnani; Roberto Rossellini; *Politique des acteurs*; Couple films; Feminist film theory; Star studies; Modern cinema; Motherhood.

Author

Margarida Carnicé holds a PhD in Communication from UPF. She is a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts at UdL, and a member of the research groups TRAMA-UdL and DHIGECs-UB. Her lines of research focus on the analysis of audiovisual media from a gender perspective. She is the author of several articles on the impact of actresses in European audiovisual culture and has published work in academic journals such as *L'Atalante*, *Estudios Feministas*, *European Journal of Women Studies*, *Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies*, and *Schermi*. She is currently co-leading the R&D project *MaterScreen*, which explores the representation of motherhood in contemporary audiovisual fiction. Contact: margarida.carnice@udl.cat.

Article reference

Carnicé, M. (2025). The Films of Anna Magnani and Roberto Rossellini: The *Politique d'actrice* in the Transition to Modernity. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 40, 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.63700/1247>

EL CINE DE ANNA MAGNANI Y ROBERTO ROSSELLINI. LA POLÍTICA DE LA ACTRIZ EN LA TRANSICIÓN A LA MODERNIDAD

Resumen

El presente ensayo trata sobre la colaboración que la actriz Anna Magnani y el director Roberto Rossellini mantuvieron entre 1945 y 1950, años en los que se opera en el seno del cine europeo de posguerra la transición al cine moderno. Tomando como referencia el estudio de las tres películas de la pareja, *Roma ciudad abierta* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945); *La voz humana* (*La voce umana*, 1948) y *El milagro* (*Il miracolo*, 1948), la crítica de este periodo y las fuentes biográficas, el análisis se centra en el impacto de la interpretación de Magnani, y en concreto en las posibilidades de su política de actriz como eje vertebrador de algunas de las innovaciones atribuidas al cine moderno. El objetivo es destacar, a partir del caso Magnani y desde la perspectiva de los *star studies*, la importancia de las actrices en la confección de las principales mutaciones estéticas y dramáticas del cine de su tiempo, así como su condición de artífices de una propuesta artística propia que trasciende los límites de las obras que la convocan, y que puede ser comprendida como un corpus de significado autónomo. La colaboración entre Magnani y Rossellini se presenta como un modelo de interacción equilibrada, en contraste con las dinámicas de poder presentes en la dirección de actrices del cine de parejas de la modernidad. La obra de ambos se interpreta como una fusión de estilos, que se encuentra en la voluntad de experimentación con nuevas formas de representar la subjetividad femenina, la maternidad y el dolor, temas recurrentes que marcarían la evolución del cine moderno y la representación de la mujer.

Palabras clave

Anna Magnani; Roberto Rossellini; política de los actores; cine de parejas; teoría filmica feminista; *star studies*; cine moderno; maternidad.

Autor/a

Margarida Carnicé (Barcelona, 1985) es doctora en Comunicación por la UPF, profesora lectora en la Facultad de Letras de la UdL y miembro de los grupos de investigación TRAMA-UdL y DHIGECs-UB. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en el análisis de los medios audiovisuales desde una perspectiva de género. Es autora de diversos artículos sobre el impacto de las actrices en la cultura audiovisual europea y ha publicado en revistas científicas como *L'Atalante*, *Estudios Feministas*, *European Journal of Women Studies*, *Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies* o *Schermi. Storie E Culture Del Cinema E Dei Media in Italia*. Actualmente co-lidera el proyecto de investigación I+D+i *MaterScreen*, sobre la representación de la maternidad en la ficción audiovisual contemporánea. Contacto: margarida.carnice@udl.cat

Referencia de este artículo

Carnicé, M. (2025). El cine de Anna Magnani y Roberto Rossellini. La política de la actriz en la transición a la modernidad. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 40, 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.63700/1247>

recibido/received: 02.12.2024 | aceptado/accepted: 16.05.2025

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com