

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Love (L'Amore) 1948

Roberto Rossellini

OVERVIEW

These two otherwise disparate and short films are linked by their shared exploration of a woman's tormented inner state. The first story (*The Human Voice*) was adapted by Rossellini from a play by Jean Cocteau written in the 1930s. The film actress who played the unnamed woman (Magnani) had actually performed this dramatic monologue on stage in Rome in 1942. In 1947, Magnani (who had starred in Rossellini's *Rome Open City* and soon become his lover) suggested the project to Rossellini, who was keen, especially when his filming of *Germany, Year Zero* was stalled. Moving to Paris, he shot the film in two weeks. Federico Fellini, who had assisted Rossellini in his earlier films as a scriptwriter, came up with the idea for the second story (*The Miracle*), which he co-wrote. Again, Magnani played the star role, a peasant woman convinced that Saint Joseph has appeared to her. When the paired films were first screened, critical response in Italy was cool, the main complaint being that the director had strayed from the neo-realist path. Looking at the two films now, however, we can see that the shared exploration of a woman's tormented inner state was presaged by the characters of Joe and Carmela in *Paisan* and Edmund in *Germany, Year Zero*. In the United States, *The Miracle* was decoupled from the first story and put into a three-part anthology (*Ways of Love*) and won Best Foreign Language Film at the New York Film Critics Circle in 1950. *The Miracle* was later condemned for its sacrilegious content and banned from cinema, leading to a Supreme Court case, which decided in favour of the First Amendment right to free speech. As some observers have pointed out, this was the real 'miracle', to have overturned a long-standing right to ban controversial films.

SYNOPSIS

The first story (*The Human Voice*) consists almost entirely of a middle-class woman having a telephone conversation in her apartment. She is distressed and we slowly learn that her husband or lover (their relationship is not clarified) is leaving her to marry another woman. She clings to paper-thin hopes that she can somehow salvage the relationship by apologising for the breakdown, but she is eventually plunged into despair, and possibly suicide. The second story (*The Miracle*) is similarly about a woman, this time a goat-herding peasant, who believes that a wandering man is Saint Joseph. She is overjoyed at this visitation by her 'beautiful saint' and asks him to take her up to heaven. She has also considered suicide because no one values her on earth. She and her saint/wanderer drink wine and possibly have sex, though this is deliberately left unclear. When she gets pregnant and claims it is a gift from god, local people mock her presumption and drive her out of the village. In an isolated church, she gives birth and suckles her miraculous child.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Story One	The only character is an unnamed woman.
Story two	Nanni is a goatherd woman.

STORY

I. The Human Voice

Alone A woman in her late 20s' or early 30s' wears a haggard look as she washes her face in front a bathroom mirror. She drags herself into her bedroom, picks up the telephone receiver, puts it down and looks at herself in a hand mirror. She hears her dog whine and throws it a little piece of food. She goes back into the bathroom to fill her hot-water bottle and again stares at herself in the mirror. She is distressed.

Telephone A phone rings but turns out to be a telephone in the apartment above hers. She lies on the bed, hears something of the conversation upstairs and again lifts her own phone, but puts it back again. Her dog whines and she tells it to quiet down. Her own phone rings and she answers with a shout: 'Is that you? I can't hear you! Hello!' Finally, she makes contact and sighs with relief.

Conversation She says she has been out all day with Marta, took pills for a headache and just woke up. The caller appears concerned with her well-being and asks if she's strong and hopes she hasn't taken too many pills or smoked too much. We can hear his voice, like a hushed whisper, but none of the words are clear. The line cuts out and she shouts to be heard. She confirms that she has packed his bags, including his letters and hers, and that he can pick them up anytime. She calls him 'darling' and tells him not to apologise.

Abandoned As the call continues, we understand that the man on the other end is her lover or husband. She is upset to discover that he is leaving the next day, but what that means we aren't sure. Then it is clear that he is leaving their shared apartment because she asks him to take the dog with him. 'It's like a lost soul without you,' she says, obviously thinking of herself.

Letters In despair, she asks him to burn all her letters and put them in a special cigarette box that she gave him. Then she breaks down and sobs. Again, the line cuts out. She calls the apartment manager and asks him to reconnect them, but her husband/lover is not at his usual number.

Lies She falls asleep and wakes up to piano music and a baby crying above her. It's lively and fun-sounding, in contrast to her sombre mood. He calls again and they talk. 'You're very sweet to call me back,' she says, trying to re-establish some kind of rapport. She admits that she lied to him. She didn't spend the day with her friend, Marta. She's just miserable in her apartment. She's been thinking of taking pills to kill herself. But she didn't have the courage.'

Jealousy When we learn that the man is getting married soon to another woman, the conversation becomes muddled, full of misunderstandings and he hangs up. But he's said he is nearby and will call back. 'My god, let him call back!' she screams to herself. She hears a sound outside on the pavement and hopes it's him. She hears footsteps on the stairs and goes to her front door. Then she hears another door close. It isn't him. Her hopes are dashed. The phone rings. It's him. Promise one thing, she says, that you won't stay in the same hotel that we used to, in Marseilles.

Love 'I love you,' she sobs. He hangs up and she keeps repeating, 'I love you, I love you.' Then there is only sobbing.

2. Love

Saint Joseph A bearded wanderer climbs the cliffs on the Amalfi coast, near Naples. A woman herding goats sees him and believes he is Saint Joseph. She is overcome with happiness, thinking that he has come in answer to her prayers. 'You're my beautiful saint,' she cries and begs him not to walk away. 'Give me grace,' she says. 'It's not hard for you. You just let me die and it's all done. And you take me up to heaven with you.'

Mad people The wanderer is intrigued and sits down with her, but says nothing as she explains how he has given her everything she's asked for in prayer. She says she's not understood by her fellow villagers, who think she is mad. 'Mad people can't go to heaven,' they say. She goes to the cliff edge and shows him how close she came to throwing herself off. But she lacked the courage and then realised it was the devil driving her.

Wine and sex? Still silent, he offers her wine from his flask. She rambles on about the glory of heaven and the devilish nature of earth. Slowly, as she gets drunk, they move closer together, with intimations of sexual desire.

Monastery She is awakened by her goats and sees that the wanderer has vanished. She returns to the village carrying a heavy load of firewood on her head. She goes to the monastery, where she has been given a place to live, and speaks with a monk. When she says she's seen a miracle, he says that he, too, sees one every day: the beautiful Madonna. But another monk says he's never seen a miracle in his whole life. During a church service, she furtively takes an apple from another woman's basket and 'the village idiot' asks her to give it to him. She sticks out her tongue at him, goes outside and bites into the apple, pursued by the idiot.

Pregnant As other women are picking apples in an orchard, she plays with their little children. Then,

she faints and her companions discover that she's pregnant. She is shocked and declares it a miracle, a claim that the others dismiss as nonsense. Running into the church, she falls down in front of the icon of Christ.

Mockery A nun advises her to go to confession because she's 'in sin,' but Nanni explains that she is 'in the grace of the Lord.' She is shunned by others, including the idiot, who throws away her meagre possessions and calls her the 'devil.' She picks up her rags and leaves the monastery, looking for a place to sleep. A kindly woman offers her work, but she declines, pointing toward her bump. Other people mock her for pretending that she has divine power. They follow her through the streets as if she were a saint and then make fun of her. Escaping their taunts, she goes beyond the village and sleeps in the wilderness.

Holy child When her time comes, she cries out for help but only hears a goat bleat in response. Struggling and in pain, she climbs up to a church on top of a high hill, followed by the goat. At first, she cannot get into the church, but then finds a side door, which she forces open and enters. The contractions get stronger and more frequent, until she gives birth and hears the new-born child cry. She offers her breast to feed the child of god.

THEMES

Story One

1. Love This is a story about the power of love, in particular its power to destroy a woman who has lost her man (whether husband or lover, we don't know). From the opening shot of her pained face to the final shot of her hysterical, repeated cry ('I love you!'), the woman falls apart before our eyes. Throughout the conversation, she tells the man that she is calm, and at times she appears composed, but those moments are swept away by alternating torrents of profound grief and desperate hope. The power of her love is measured by the depth of her despair when that love is taken from her. She loves him so deeply that even now, when he is leaving her to marry another woman, she does not want to hurt him. She apologises for any misunderstanding, for any slight criticism he might detect in her words. She calls him 'sweet' for calling her back and tries to put up a brave front so that he will not feel guilty. Slowly, as the conversation progresses, she seems to disintegrate, to become more shrill, more pathetic and more unstable until the final moment when she collapses in grief because the sound she heard outside is not his footstep. Only then does she fully accept that he has left her, and she has nothing left to live for. We know that she considered taking too many sleeping pills, and now we fear that's what she'll do.

2. Communication A second, less overt, theme is that of communication, a theme that Rossellini explored in an early film (*Paisan*). The story is titled 'The Human Voice' because it is a voice that stands between the abandoned woman and suicide. The conversation by telephone is the only contact she has with her ex-husband/lover and, in fact, with the outside world. It is what keeps her sane. 'Just keep talking to me,' she says. 'I want to hear the sound of your voice...If you hang up, I'll die.' Again, later, she says, 'If you didn't call back, I'd go out of my mind.' Her distress is increased when the line cuts out and she can no longer hear his voice. And when the line is restored, we hear the relief in her voice. The vital role of communication is also dramatized by the instances of miscommunication. Often she says that he has misunderstood what she meant and that she isn't blaming him. In the end, though, even her telephone can't save her. She has very little left. He is leaving her. She wants him to take their dog. His suitcases are packed and ready to go. He is about to burn her letters. All she has is the telephone, and his voice on the other end. Freud's 'talking therapy' had become popular in Italy, as elsewhere, by the late 1940s. Rossellini turned it into a harrowing cinematic experience.

Story Two

Religion Nanni's story illustrates the enduring question about the similarities between deep religious faith and madness. How do we distinguish hallucinations from genuine religious visions? The lines between madness and religious imagination had been blurred, as in the life of the English poet William Blake, for centuries. But, in today's world, or even in post-war Italy, if a homeless man claimed to be the son of god, who would believe him? More than likely, he would end up in a mental institution. In the cinematic story, appropriately titled *The Miracle*, Rossellini explores these questions through the pious Nanni. Of course, we see that the wandering man is not Saint Joseph, though he is made to resemble him. The point is that Nanni believes that he is her saint, her beautiful saint, who has come to her aid in the past. The story tries not to judge Nanni, but rather to pose a question

about the power of miracles. For example, when she asks two monks if they have seen miracles, one says everyday and the other says never. Then there is the second miracle, of her pregnancy. Again, the film is deliberately vague about whether or not she had sex with her Saint Joseph; one can argue it either way. Her pregnancy is real enough, but when she claims it's a gift from god, like a virgin birth, the local people mock her pretence of spiritual power. They are, presumably, devout Catholics themselves, but perhaps they fear a woman who has spiritual powers. Like the village idiot, they castigate her as 'the devil' and drive her away. Is Nanni a madwoman, unhinged and unreliable? Or is she a visionary, a person whose deep faith enables her to see what others cannot? Rossellini leaves the question hanging in the air. What is not in doubt is that the two miracles make her happy.

Both stories

Psychology The theme that connects these two very different stories is their exploration a woman's mind. Such a focus on the inner state may seem at odds with neo-realism's commitment to documenting the 'material facts' of social and economic realities, in all their gritty detail. However, Rossellini's earlier films (especially the war trilogy) showed a similar interest in dramatizing the psychological realities of its main characters (think of Joe and Carmela in *Paisan*, and of Edmund in *Germany, Year Zero*). The two stories brought together under the title 'love' can be seen as forming a whole in that one examines romantic love and the other sacred love. In both cases, the love is overwhelming to the point of mental instability, and in both the woman is abandoned. There are key differences, too. The unnamed woman in *The Human Voice* seems likely to commit suicide, something that Nanni did consider but then rejected. And now the simple peasant woman is at peace with the world, as she breast-feeds her miracle child. Another contrast, is that Nanni faces social ostracism, whereas the unnamed woman never ventures outside her apartment. Finally, the most important difference is that, in the end, the unnamed woman is left to confront her inner demons, while Nanni is able to rejoice in that birth of her miraculous baby.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Unnamed woman The woman in the first story is middle-class and perhaps in her thirties. She lives alone, except for a dog that she shared with her partner. She is suffering badly from the news that her lover/husband is leaving her for another woman. She oscillates between a pretence of calm acceptance and suicidal instability. As a coping mechanism, she tries to deceive herself and also to blame herself for the break-up.

Distressed From the opening shots we can see that the woman is seriously distressed. She mopes about, all alone in a dark, untidy room and checks her face in mirrors. That face is long and drawn. She grips a hot-water bottle, as if that is her only source of comfort. Even the presence of the dog seems to emphasise her loneliness, as does the sound of the neighbours above her. Otherwise, she is shrouded in silence, her eyes unfocused and sad. She is like a prisoner in her cell. Finally, the telephone rings and she is released from her isolation, but her voice is anxious because she can't hear the human voice on the other end. Within these first few minutes, we see that she is in agony.

Self-deceptive A key element in her complicated psychology is an attempt to convince her caller, and herself, that she is not distressed. Very early in the conversation, she sounds relatively calm and tells him that she went out for the day with a friend (Marta), which we later learn is not true. She also claims that she took only one pill when she had a headache (later we learn that she took many). 'Then, I packed your bags,' she says, in a flat voice, although this is the first indication we have that he is leaving her. She sounds chipper when she says, 'I'm very strong. Very brave' and later, 'I decided to be brave. And I will.' A moment later, she lies again and says she wore her nice satin dress when out with Marta. 'I've still got it on,' she adds, which we can see is not true. And so, she continually pretends that she's not in distress about his leaving her. She gives the impression to him that, of course, she's unhappy, but she is coping. Nothing to worry about, darling. Her words are spoken to herself as much as to him. And we watch as she tatters back and forth, between being just mildly upset and mentally unstable.

Unstable As the conversation develops, however, her fragility becomes more and more evident. 'I don't know what I'm doing,' she says. 'Get dressed, go out, come home. I'm like a robot.' A few minutes later, she admits that she considered committing suicide by taking a lot of sleeping pills. 'I'd sleep without dreams...and never wake up.' She took 12 pills, she says, and she was 'completely frozen and my heart stopped beating. But death wouldn't come.' This revelation is followed by two instances when the line cuts out and she becomes hysterical, praying to god that he will call back.

Without his voice, we sense, she will go over the edge and commit suicide. Her predicament worsens when he is about to hang up for the last time. She screams, 'No! No! I love you!' and then breaks down in tears. During the conversation, she has gone from the pretence of calm to a state of mental disintegration.

4. Apologetic Another feature of her complicated character is her appeasement toward the man she is talking to. Early on, she says, 'You, a monster? No, darling, no.' Later, she says, 'I promised myself that I wouldn't bother you' and 'I'm not blaming you for anything.' It's all her fault, she says. She is suffering because she 'wanted too much happiness.' These statements can be seen as another form of self-deception. Rather than blame her lover/husband and generate anger, she will absorb all the blame herself. That way the hurt is lessened. He did not do her wrong, did not lie, cheat or deceive her. That would be too great a pain for her to bear. Better to shoulder all that responsibility herself. Her apologetic stance might also be a sign of her low self-worth, to exonerate her partner and blame herself. Either way, her repeated apologies indicate a weak character.

Nanni Nanni is a poor woman who herds goats and only has a place to sleep because the monastery takes pity on her. She is a marginalised person and appears simple-minded. but she doesn't need others because she has a deeply satisfying emotional bond with Saint Joseph. Her religious faith is both a source of mockery by others and of strength for herself.

Devout The key to Nanni's character is, quite obviously, her devotion to god and, in particular, to 'her' Saint Joseph. Her first words, when she sees the wanderer, are: 'Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' She has no doubt that the man before her is the living saint to whom she prays. He is 'beautiful', he is 'sweet' and he is 'merciful'. She explains how she will jump off the cliff and let him take her up to heaven, 'to a sanctuary of Saint Michael, to a bell tower and see all the mountains and the sea.' When she becomes pregnant, she is certain that it is a 'gift from god.' People shun and mock her, nuns advise and condemn her, but her faith is rock-solid. Heavily pregnant, and now in labour, she struggles up at hill to a church, to find sanctuary. She feels that St Joseph is leading her there, up on the mountain, just as she hoped he would. And when she gives birth and the baby is healthy, she is convinced that it is a child of god. Her devotion, however misplaced or irrational we might judge it, has helped her to become a mother.

Self-deprecating Not dissimilar to the unnamed women in the first story, Nanni has a low self-image. She is a poor woman, who lives on the edge of society, herding goats on the cliffs and granted a place to sleep in the precincts of the monastery. When talking with the wanderer, she says she thought about suicide and laughs, 'No one will notice if I die. Even the goats can find their way back to the village.' Later, we see how the local people despise her because of her claim to visions and contact with divinity. Even the village idiot orders her 'to get out.' Forced out of the village and into the wilderness, she is at the low point of self-esteem. When she feels her baby kicking, she murmurs, 'Holy son, holy son. I'm not worthy, I'm too lowly.' Given the mockery and ostracism she's suffered, we can well understand why she lacks self-respect.

Serene Despite all her suffering (or perhaps partly because of it), she remains largely serene. She might struggle with the villagers who harass her, but she maintains an inner peace. Even after she's been driven from the monastery and is wandering about the streets, carrying her few possessions, she is able to keep herself calm. A woman she passes on the street asks her to help roll up a ball of wool. She sits passively, her arms spread, the wool between her fingers, as the woman winds it into a ball. It is one of the few restful scenes in the story, and it demonstrates a part of her character that is hidden by the drama of her visions and the public reaction to them. Another, more explicit illustration of her serenity occurs when she is told by a nun to seek confession for her sin. But Nanni knows this isn't necessary. 'I'm at peace with the Lord,' she declares, as if it were a simple fact. 'He loves me.'



(Story 1: The unnamed woman on the telephone)



(Story 2: Nanni looks to heaven)