



Research article

Islands of Fire. Stromboli in the documentary by Vittorio De Seta

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Abstract: The present contribution is based on the methodological approach and on the typical objectives of cultural geography that sees the cultural work as an important source to read the territorial and landscape contexts. Through this paper we then want to critically report about the 1954 short documentary *Isole di Fuoco* (Islands of Fire), awarded in Cannes, that the director Vittorio De Seta mainly shot on the volcanic island of Stromboli, in Sicily, during an eruption occurred in 1954.

Keywords: landscape; Stromboli; cinema; volcano

1. Introduction, methodology and research objectives

The present contribution is based on the methodological approach and on the typical objectives of cultural geography that sees the cultural work as an important source to read the territorial and landscape contexts. As an example, just think of how the so-called travel literature, in its many forms and attestations, has contributed to landscaping studies for example [1]. You can actually consider travel as a geographical experience. In fact, it represents on the one hand the action that connects men with spaces [2], on the other hand it allows to start a deep journey of knowledge of the places visited, of the communities encountered and also of themselves. The journey, especially in its literary and artistic return, can then be considered as an important testimony to reconstruct territorial contexts and appreciate a privileged point of view on them [3]. The geographer Giorgio Botta has in this sense clearly put in place the heart of the matter: the journey, in the text (or the artistic work) reinter-pretation, (takes on the characteristics of a source for the reconstruction of the historical, landscape and cultural aspects of an area). Of course, this reasoning must be included in that approach (which is also typical of cultural geography) that places the role of man at the centre of

scientific interest, seen as an actor and interpreter of places and experiences connected to them [4]. In this sense, artistic elaboration takes on an important value. The sensitivity of the artists, also their habit to deepen the emotional ties between men, objects, spaces, become a valuable material for those who, like geographers, work to reconstruct cultural contexts. The analysis of the artistic work linked to the landscape image of a place then becomes a methodological tool codified in geographical research [5–7]. In this contribution we want to report about the short documentary *Isole di Fuoco*, awarded in Cannes, that the director Vittorio De Seta mainly shot on the volcanic island of Stromboli, in Sicily, during an eruption occurred in 1954. The contribution is articulated in the present premise (which identifies scientific, methodological and research objectives), in the paragraph Discussion (where the territorial context of the Aeolian Islands and Stromboli and the critical analysis of the work of De Seta will be compared) and in the final conclusions.

2. Discussion

2.1. Overview of the volcanological and territorial context of Stromboli

The Aeolian archipelago [8–12], consists of, from West to East, seven islands that occupy the South-East quadrant of the Southern Tyrrhenian Sea (Alicudi, Filicudi, Salina, Panarea, Lipari, Vulcano and Stromboli) represents, in its extension of almost 1147 km², the emerged part of a decidedly wider volcanic arc system that also develops underwater with several seamounts arranged as a hemicycle opened in a North direction, over 200 km long. This volcanic complex, whose territories from the administrative point of view depend on the Municipality of Lipari (ME)¹, appears arranged in a typical Y configuration that is characterised by the presence of three main lines that have in Salina the point of intersection. Stromboli [13–15], the closest to the coast of Calabria, forms the north-eastern end end of the Eolian NE-SW tectonic system.

The islands of Stromboli, Vulcano and Lipari are the only ones of the entire system to express an active volcanism, mainly explosive eruptions (Stromboli) and manifestations of thermalism (Vulcano and Lipari). The contribution, as mentioned, will focus on the island of Stromboli, administratively dependent on Lipari.

Inhabited by about 500 inhabitants (Municipality of Lipari²) scattered throughout the hamlets of San Vincenzo (or just the village of Stromboli, former village of farmers) with the historic small piers of Scari, Piscità and Ficogrande (which was once the village of the shipowners). To the south-west, on the opposite side of the island and reachable only by sea, there is Ginostra, permanently inhabited by no more than 50 residents. The entire economy of the island gravitates almost essentially on the tourism sector, since 2000 in fact the Aeolian Islands have been included, as a Natural site, in the UNESCO World Heritage [17].

¹ With the exception of the island of Salina where there are three autonomous municipalities: Leni, Malfa and Santa Marina di Salina.

² Municipality of Lipari, <http://www.comunelipari.gov.it/zf/index.php/servizi-additivi/index/index/idtesto/25> (Last visit, May 2020).

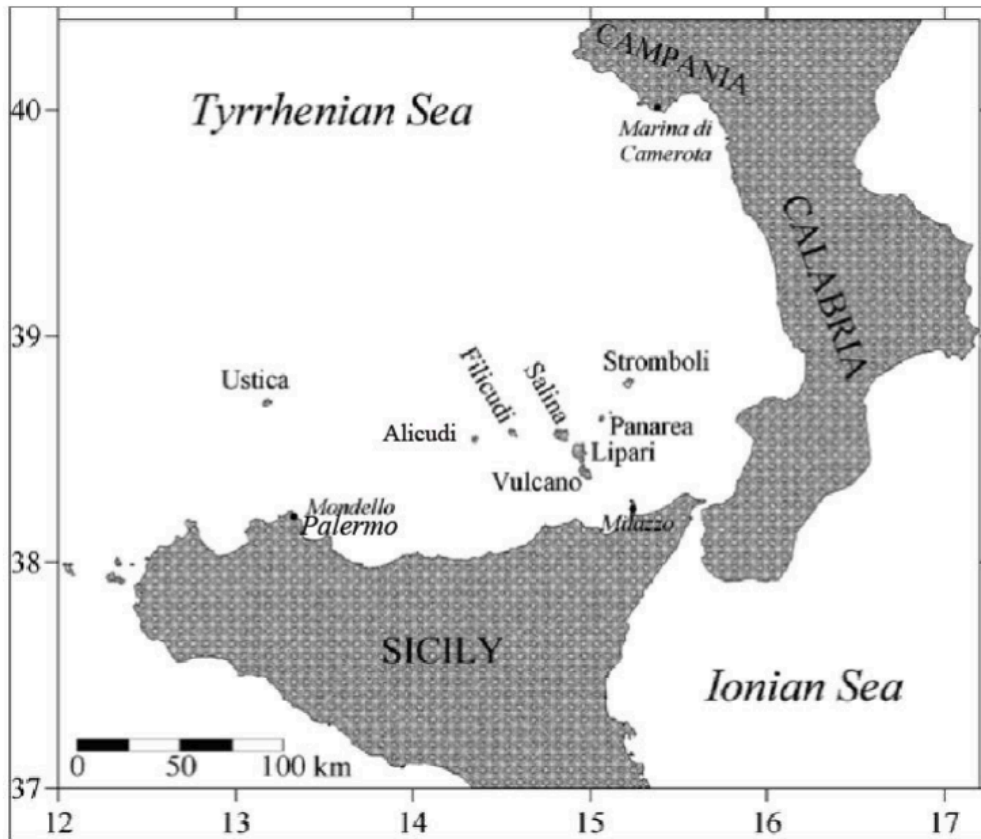


Figure 1. Schematic map of the Southern Tyrrhenian Sea. Source: [16].

The island of Stromboli (from the Greek Strongyle, round), one of the last of the archipelago to emerge from the water, represents the northern end of the entire Aeolian arc and rises from the bottom of the sea for 2400 m, starting from a metamorphic base, through an apparatus of almost regular conical shape that in the emerged part culminates with the peaks of Vancori placed at 924 m a.s.l. These last represent the top edge of an edifice more ancient than that which currently gives rise to the “strombolian” activity whose total volume, largely hidden under water, is at least 25 times larger than the visible part. The apparatus emerged develops on a total surface of about 12 km² and is morphologically characterized, as well as by an elongation in the NE-SW sense also underlined by the presence of the rock of Strombolicchio, from sides with a steep slope (45° slope) and from shallow sub-level areas on which the main inhabited areas or scattered dwellings are concentrated (Stromboli, San Vincenzo, Ginostra, Punta Lena) [17].

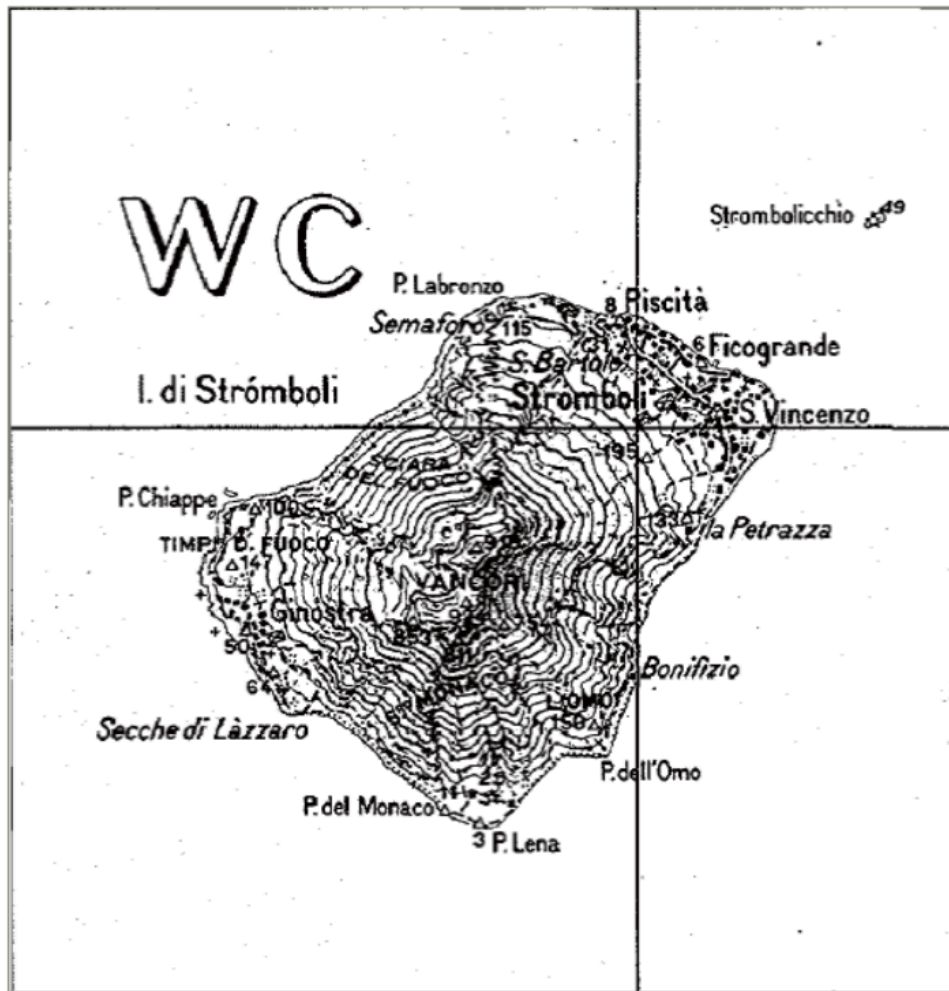


Figure 2. Topographic map of Stromboli. Source: private collection of the Author.

2.2. Stromboli, island of fire

The island of Stromboli, with its persistent active volcano, represented a territory that greatly stimulated the creativity and sensitivity of artists. Just think of Jules Verne who ended in Stromboli his *Journey to the center of the Earth*, the 1950 film by Roberto Rossellini *Stromboli Earth of God* and many other films directed by Nanni Moretti, Marco Tullio Giordana and Simona Izzo that had the island as a set [18].

To frame the work of Vittorio De Seta we refer to the profile traced by the *Encyclopedia Treccani*:

“Film director, born in Palermo on October 15, 1923. He was an innovative documentary filmmaker in the use of colour, in the almost total abolition of voice-over and above all in the use of direct sound, in an era in which Italian cinema practiced almost exclusively postsynchronization. In his films he showed an acute and analytical ability to observe and a rigorous sense of composition in

representing specific human dimensions, inserted in the socio-anthropological landscape and in the psychoanalytic-existential context³”.

Isole di Fuoco, 1954, is a shining example of the documentary attitude⁴ of De Seta. The short self-financed documentary (just under 11 minutes) in color and without narrating voice, powerfully returns both the morphological dimensions of the island and the anthropogenic ones, articulated in the continuous relationship with natural events and in a marginal socio-economic condition that forces migration⁵. In its first frame, the short film contextualizes through a written overlay, the condition resumed: “On the North of Sicily Stromboli and the other Aeolian islands rise from the sea. Here the fire still broods in the bowels of the earth and threatens the life of man. For this reason the inhabitants gradually abandon them and migrate to other continents”. The documentary won the Prix du meilleur documentaire—court métrage⁶ at the Cannes Film Festival in 1955 and the Silver Plaque at the David di Donatello competition in 1957. In 2011, the critic Goffredo Fofi expressed himself benevolently on the work, calling it “not of denunciation, but of observation⁷”.

In *Isole di fuoco*, mainly set in Stromboli, the director focuses on a night of eruption and storm, preceded by unmistakable signs: the sea is agitated, animals are nervous, the brushwoods are first caressed then lashed by the wind that gradually increases in strength. The volcano begins to rumble and the inhabitants take refuge in the house. It seems that they know it, fear it and respect it, because for all of them, it is “Iddu” (Him) the personification of the living volcano. The eruption ignites the

³ Available in Italian on http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/vittorio-de-seta_%28Enciclopedia-del-Cinema%29/ (Last visit, May 2020).

⁴ Available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLpTAn8_IMw (Last visit, May 2020).

⁵ For an in-depth geographical analysis on the socio-economic condition of the Aeolian Islands in the post-World War II period please read: “Recent anthropogeographical changes in the Aeolian islands. In the Aeolian archipelago (which belongs to Sicily and is united in the one Comune of Lipari, except the island of Salina) considerable transformations are occurring, which the author describes. The population is diminishing, except in the largest island, Lipari, which has the only town (of the same name). Emigration is continuous, nowadays particularly to Italy, and there is also movement away from the smaller islands towards Lipari. As a result cultivated areas and very many houses are abandoned. A serious problem for the islands is the lack of the water, especially since the development of a touristic activity; at Lipari reservoirs and vast installation for aching rain water have been constructed, but the supply is still largely provided by taking-boats. In the past agriculture was the chief means of subsistence of the population, but it is now in obvious decline; Malvasia wine and capers are exported, but raw materials are partly imported from Sicily or other countries and made up here. Stock raising, in spite of the increase in pasture due to the abandonment of the country-side, is also in the decline. Fishing is decreasing in the smaller islands, while it is still strong as an occupation in Lipari, thanks also to the founding of a fishermen’s cooperative. A characteristic industry of Lipari is the quarrying of pomice, of excellent quality, which since a few years ago is extracted and processed by mechanical means, more economical and more hygienic. This industry provides a considerable amount of export both to Italy and abroad. Tourism has become since the second World War an important activity, still being developed, first at Lipari and Vulcano and then in the smaller islands also. It brings considerable economic and social benefits. Many tourists come from abroad (especially French and Germans); accommodation to other services for receiving them have greatly increased, but there remain still difficult problems to be solved in order to satisfy completely the requirements of the customers and to promote further development of tourism” [19].

⁶ See <https://www.festival-cannes.fr/fr/films/isola-di-fuoco> (Last visit, May 2020).

⁷ See https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2011-11-29/vittorio-seta-mondo-perduto121150.shtml?uuid=Aaqk1fPE&refresh_ce=1 (Last visit, May 2020).

night with incandescent lava. The camera and the assembly, however, return, together with the violence of the upheaval, the sweetness of the evening despite the fear of the eruption: a little girl sleeps, a very small child seeks refuge in the arms of his father, who takes him with him in front of the fire, safe. The community of Stromboli, filmed in their simple and poor intimacy, is then at the center of the final sequences of the documentary. After the night of fire, a popular song accompanies the daylight rising and the return to the rhythm of everyday life, marked by work and the sea.

3. Conclusions

Cultural Geography, in its effort to reconstruct the constitutive links that connect communities to spaces, has made use of its own methodology of research of art and literature as privileged sources compared to the study of the natural and man-made landscape.

Here we wanted to report how the documentary work of Vittorio De Seta has been able to identify territorial and anthropic elements absolutely complementary to the reflections advanced in the scientific debate. The volcanic island of Stromboli, of which it has been proposed, for outline, an analysis of the territory from the morphological point of view, volcanologist and anthropic, represents an example of particularly marginal settlement for social condition but also an interesting example of the relationship between the human community and the environment particularly exposed to natural risk. The documentary by De Seta, without a narrating voice, focuses on the rhythms of work related to fishing, breeding and agriculture and, without lyricism, reports the ancestral relationship, almost mythical, between the volcano and the community.

Today the archipelago of the Aeolian Islands, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has found in tourism a powerful flywheel of development. The resident communities, especially in Stromboli, during the periods less favourable to tourism, have not, however, completely lost the margin given by the isolation and the depopulation; they still live in full the dialectic relationship with the volcano: in 2002 a violent tidal wave triggered by a seismic event related to volcanic activity, impacted the island. In the wake of that event, the community has equipped itself with an emergency plan, drafted by the Civil Protection and active since 2015.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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