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Rossellini's Pictorial Histories

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# ROSSELLINI'S PICTORIAL HISTORIES

## DAVID FORGACS FOLLOWS THE ITALIAN DIRECTOR'S PATH FROM NEOREALISM TO TELEVISION DRAMA

The release by the Criterion Collection of two DVD boxed sets—*Roberto Rossellini's War Trilogy* and *Rossellini's History Films: Renaissance and Enlightenment*—reminds us of an important fact about the shape of Rossellini's career, namely that he moved from making films about the present or the very recent past to films about the distant past. His last completed feature was *The Messiah* (1975). It also raises a question about that move: what do the late historical films, made mainly for television, have in common with the neorealist films on which his international reputation was founded?

The later films still generally tend to be treated, as they were by most critics when they first appeared, like poor cousins of the early ones. The difference of treatment is reflected in these two DVD packages. Open the *War Trilogy* box and you find beautiful transfers of *Rome Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1948), together with the cornucopia of extras one has come to expect from Criterion. These include a forty-page booklet, original interviews, and video essays as well as copies of already existing documentaries and rarely seen archive film of Rossellini talking to students at Rice University in 1970. Peter Bondanella's audio commentary to *Rome Open City*, originally recorded for the 1995 laserdisc, is also included. In short, this is by far the best edition of these three films now available anywhere. By contrast, the *History Films* set, consisting of *The Age of the Medici* (three episodes, 1972), *Blaise Pascal* (1972), and *Cartesius* (1974)—all of them made for television—is released in Criterion's more economical Eclipse series, with no video extras, even though each disc has excellent sleeve notes by Rossellini's American biographer Tag Gallagher as well as subtitle and audio options. The same three films are released in France by Carlotta Films in the set *Une encyclopédie historique de Rossellini*, together with a fourth, *Augustine of Hippo* (1972). The Carlotta box does include some video extras, in-

cluding an interview with Pierre Arditi, who played Pascal, and introductions by film scholar Aurore Renaut, but they are skimpier than those that Criterion has attached to the neorealist films.

If we try to define the essential differences between the early and late Rossellini we cannot really pin them down to the change of subject or genre, the move from contemporary stories to costume films or from black-and-white to color. Many American and British directors who, like Rossellini, made war features or propaganda films, also went on, as he did, after 1945 or 1946, to make other kinds of film, including comedies, melodramas, and costume pictures. If anything, Rossellini was unusual in sticking with World War II for as long as he did. At the beginning of *Stromboli* (1949) Karin (Ingrid Bergman) is in a Displaced Persons camp. In *Europe '51* (1952) Irene, played again by Bergman, whose young son Michel has died after throwing himself down the stairwell, is told by her Communist friend Andrea that the real cause of Michel's action was the war and bombing that had scarred his infancy. Rossellini would return several times to the war in his later films: *Il Generale Della Rovere* (1959—also available in a new transfer from the Criterion Collection and in Italy in a two-disc set from Minerva Classics), *Era notte a Roma* (*Blackout in Rome*, 1960) and the early part of *Anno Uno* (1974). In other words, he never really let go of the war, or it never quite let go of him.

### DIFFERENCES

The most visible difference between early and late Rossellini lies in what seems to be a striking switch of style. The early postwar films, particularly *Paisan* and *Germany Year Zero*, are characterized, above all in their final parts, by a radical stripping out of dialogue. Spoken interactions between characters are replaced by a camera that observes isolated individuals moving silently across a landscape: panning to follow a dead partisan floating in a life belt down the Po river, tracking alongside the boy Edmund (Edmund Möschke) as he walks

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Filming *Germany Year Zero* in Berlin  
 Courtesy of Fondazione Rossellini, Rome.

past the rubble of Berlin before leaping to his death from an empty building. In both cases the places in which these figures move are also sites of memory. Rossellini recalled that the bodies of real partisans had remained afloat in the Po for weeks. The ruins of Berlin were a reminder of the terrible devastation wreaked by strategic bombing on the cities of Germany and of the death of over half a million German civilians, but they were also a visible sign of the internal damage done to the minds of the survivors. These shots, in which the images of the city are offset by a minimal music written by Rossellini's brother Renzo, seem to bear out Fellini's claim (in *Fare un film*, 1980) about Rossellini at this time having "an enormous trust in the things photographed." The camera records but it cannot explain. André Bazin wrote in his review of the film in 1949 that if we know anything about Edmund "it is never from signs that are directly readable on his face, not even from his behavior." Rossellini made *Germany Year Zero* while he was still grieving the death in 1946 of his nine-year-old son Romano, to whose memory it is dedicated, and he described the film in an interview with Fernaldo Di Giammatteo in November 1948, as "cold as a

sheet of glass." He told the critic Mario Verdone in 1951 that it was sequences like these that constituted "the decisive moment" in his films and he claimed that the "narrative" parts were of much less interest to him. This spareness, the suspension of dialogue, and the concentration on a photographed landscape is repeated in the films he made with Ingrid Bergman: in Karin's slow walk up the volcano at the end of *Stromboli*, Irene's first encounter with the bleak housing project in Rome in *Europe '51*, Katherine's drives around Naples and her walks through Pompei or among the smoking craters of the Phlegraean Fields in *Journey to Italy* (1954).

If we now compare the style of *The Age of the Medici* or *Blaise Pascal* with these earlier films everything seems to have changed. Although large parts of the television films were shot, like Rossellini's earlier films, in real locations, they are locations that have been dressed up, as in a living museum, with period costumes and details: furniture, everyday objects, wall hangings in the interiors, horses and straw on the roads. This is true also of his later reconstructions of World War II. Whereas the bomb damage we see in *Rome Open City*, *Paisan*, and *Germany Year Zero* is real, that in *Il Generale*



Rossellini sets up a Schüfftan mirror shot for *Socrates* (1971)

Photo: Gianni Assenza. Courtesy of Fondazione Rossellini, Rome.

*Della Rovere*, shot entirely at Cinecittà, or in *Anno uno* is reconstructed. Moreover, in several outdoor scenes in his later films Rossellini uses what is known as a glass shot or Schüfftan mirror shot—an optical trick devised by cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan and first used in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). The technique is illustrated by Tag Gallagher in his wonderful video essay on Rossellini’s *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966), also released by Criterion. The camera shoots through a piece of glass which is part clear, part mirror. A full-size built set or a real landscape in front of the camera, seen through the clear portion of the glass, is aligned in the viewfinder with the reflection, visible in the mirrored portion, of a model or painted set placed at a 45-degree angle behind the camera.

When Rossellini uses this technique the photographic image is no longer simply a record of a real profilmic location, as it was in his early postwar films, but a composite of a real place and an artificial set. In the two mirror shots with a painted Florence in the background in *The Age of the Medici*, unlike those with a painted Louvre or Versailles in the Louis XIV film, the disjunction between the painted and photo-

graphed parts of the image is very noticeable. The painted scene is eerily cradled in the real landscape.

The later films, finally, are in many scenes heavy on dialogue, and indeed on monologue delivered by the central characters, usually to one or more bystanders on screen, and they are deliberately instructional. Rossellini referred to his television films as *didattici* and, although the word in Italian has, like its Latin root, a more neutral connotation of teaching than the English “didactic,” which suggests preaching, they do nevertheless at times possess a didactic quality in the English sense too. Take, for instance, the scene in *Blaise Pascal* where Pascal defends his argument, based on experimental proofs, that a vacuum can exist in nature against the belief, derived from the ancient Greeks, that this was impossible. A Jesuit scientist has been brought in to confute Pascal’s claim by deftly restating the traditional view in modern terms. Pascal, in a speech lasting seven minutes, filmed in two long takes with one cut in the middle, demolishes the Jesuit’s argument with a demonstration of the logical coherence of his own proof, in which his tone becomes increasingly triumphant. Or take the scene in the third episode of *The Age of*



## ROME OPEN CITY AND PAISAN



Left: *Rome Open City*. © 1945 Cinecittà Luce, Renzo Rossellini, and Kramsie Ltd.  
Right: *Paisan*. © 1946 Cinecittà Luce, Renzo Rossellini, and Kramsie Ltd. DVDs: Criterion Collection.

*the Medici*, about Leon Battista Alberti and humanism, where Alberti (Virgilio Gazzolo) and Ciriaco d'Arpaso (Michel Bardinet) stand in front of Masaccio's painting *The Holy Trinity* and explain it to a nun who objects to its newfangled depiction of God with the dimensions of a man. The scene is in effect—and was intended to be—a lecture in sound bites for a television audience in the history of art and ideas:

CIRIACO: Masaccio's freedom is the freedom of mankind, for it is by our actions that we preserve our very autonomy. Unless you understand this the painting loses all its meaning.

ALBERTI: No, Ciriaco, that is not a full enough explanation of this Holy Trinity. In addition to its astounding visual expressiveness, Masaccio's art is the result of geometric laws, which he has applied to the new science of perspective. No painter or architect may ever again be free of these rules.

NUN: Perspective, you say? What does that matter? Where is the magnificence of Christ?

The nun here is set up as a stooge to express the prejudices of medieval religiosity. "Tradition," Alberti admonishes her, "has always used the dogmas of the Church to emphasize human frailty." In *Blaise Pascal*, too, it is a woman, Blaise's sister Jacqueline, who expresses traditional beliefs. In an early sequence a local tradesman's servant, Michelle Martin (Anne Caprile), is accused of sorcery and brought to trial. Jacqueline tells Blaise that she herself believes in possession and witchcraft whereas Blaise tells her that such accusations may merely prove people's credulity and show that there are illnesses that can affect the mind and distort one's perceptions. The scene that follows is very disturbing. Michelle is carried into the courtroom on a stretcher because her legs have been broken under torture and, weeping, accuses herself and begs to be burned at the stake.

## CONTINUITIES

The stylistic differences between the earlier and the later films are certainly substantial. They are to a great extent the result of Rossellini's conversion—the word is not too strong to describe it—during the 1960s to the belief that people in contemporary western society were being collectively seduced into passivity and ignorance, that their capacity to think critically was being blunted, that cinema had become an entertainment Moloch and that television, on the other hand, far from being an instrument of mass distraction, possessed enormous potential as a vehicle of popular teaching. He firmly believed that a television course in the west's great formative

ideas and periods—Socratic philosophy, Christianity, the Renaissance and humanism, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, Marxism—would help people see with their own eyes and think critically about the world.

Nevertheless, there are also a number of continuities between Rossellini's earlier and later films, including stylistic ones, even if these are not always immediately obvious. One continuity is in the sobriety of technical means. From 1945 onward he avoided shots that were unnecessarily elaborate or beautiful for their own sake (beautiful shots, he wrote in 1955, "are the one thing that makes me sick") as well as complicated forms of narrative construction. His narrative style was essentially linear and episodic, with just a few exceptions, such as the flashback he uses in the third (Rome) episode of *Paisan* or the ellipsis in the final (Po Delta) episode. In the latter, we are not shown the actual reprisal massacre of the peasant family but only its aftermath. Bazin famously presented this, in his article of 1948, "Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation," as an example of Rossellini's respect for the real: it gave viewers a series of "image-facts" whose meaning they had to assemble for themselves. Yet it was really a deviation from Rossellini's normal manner of showing events in temporal sequence. When he moved to television he carried this sobriety even further, for economic reasons as well as aesthetic ones. It enabled him to work fast on low budgets, to shoot a feature-length film for television in just three weeks. He increased the use of long takes and of the motor-driven zoom lens, which he himself controlled from his director's chair using a remote control device mounted on a tripod. The zoom and the dolly allowed him to minimize post-production by changing setups and framings directly in the camera. Another continuity was in his use of untrained actors, whom he trusted to produce just the right kind of facial expression and vocal delivery. He worked with trained actors too, from Magnani to Bergman to Vittorio De Sica and others, but his use of "found actors" had started in his prewar films and it continued through *Paisan* and *The Flowers of Saint Francis*, made in 1950 (also now available in an excellent DVD transfer from both Criterion and Carlotta), to his casting of Jean-Marie Patte in *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*. The diminutive Patte as Louis, draped in huge wigs, stares fixedly ahead, past his onscreen interlocutors, reading his lines from boards placed offscreen. As both Gallagher in his video essay and Colin MacCabe in the DVD booklet note, this "naïve" device works remarkably well to give Patte, as the Sun King, an almost otherworldly detachment and an uncanny authority over his court.



## GERMANY YEAR ZERO AND THE TAKING OF POWER BY LOUIS XIV



Top two: *Germany Year Zero*. © 1948 Cinecittà Luce, Renzo Rossellini, and Kramsie Ltd.  
Others: *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*. © 1966/2008 INA. DVDs: Criterion Collection.

Adriano Aprà, the doyen of Rossellini studies in Italy, has made a strong case for seeing the late “didactic” films not as clunky attempts at television for the classroom but as radical forms of avant-garde experimentation. Aprà has argued that Rossellini was aiming to create a sort of virgin moving image, denuded of the sophisticated accretions of cinema, which he felt television as a young medium was equipped to provide. In this respect, Aprà claims, the television films sought to return film to its origins, to the conditions in which it had existed before the onset of what Noël Burch termed the Institutional Mode of Representation, but they did so using the very technologies that modern cinema had elaborated—such as the zoom lens and the mobile camera—and were thus able to unleash the full defamiliarizing potential of the “primitive” moving image within the high age of cinema. Among the features of Rossellini’s neo-primitivism are the long take, frontal framing (characters stand against a background and the camera can follow them but not move around or behind them), the absence of offscreen space (what is on screen absorbs all of the spectator’s attention), the abandonment of shot/reverse-shot cutting, the renunciation of all forms of dramatic construction based on suspense, the reduction to a minimum of relations of cause and effect between successive scenes—each scene stands on its own as a separate tableau—and openness to making mistakes.

### FROM CINEMA TO TELEVISION

Regular television transmissions had resumed after the war in France and Britain and had begun in Italy in January 1954. One of the first films shown on Italian television, in February of that year, was *Rome Open City*. Rossellini did not elaborate his views about the educational mission of television until the early 1960s but already during the 50s he had started to express his disaffection with the cinema world. This world had at first feted him as a director of great talent and originality and had then, for the most part, rejected his films after 1949 as eccentric, too spiritual and aimless. The cineastes of the French New Wave were the most notable exception to this trend of rejection. For Rossellini an important turning point had come in 1959, when the thousands of feet of color film he had shot in various parts of India in 1956–57 with director of photography Aldo Tonti were shown as ten twenty-five-minute episodes on Italian and French television with his studio commentary. He used some of the same footage to cut the feature-length *India*, screened at Cannes in 1959 and then released in cinemas. In 1962 he famously announced at a press conference that “the cinema is dead” and he drew up plans to found a television production company that would

make twenty-five educational films a year for four years. In fact, between 1965 (*The Iron Age*) and 1974 (*Cartesius*) he directed or supervised a total of eleven projects for television, several of them in multiple episodes and most of them co-produced by his company Orizzonte 2000 with the Italian or French public service networks. Sergio Trasatti calculated in his book *Rossellini e la televisione* (1978) that Rossellini’s total television output had been forty hours, almost exactly the same as his total cinema output.

By the time of his death, following a heart attack, on June 3, 1977 at the age of seventy-one, Rossellini had already made several public repudiations of cinema—not just of a particular kind of cinema, but of all cinema. The most recent had been just a week before, when he had created a furore by persuading the Cannes Film Festival jury, of which he was president that year, to award the Palme d’Or to Paolo and Vittorio Taviani’s *Padre Padrone*, a low-budget 16mm film produced by the Italian public television company RAI. The day after he died the Rome newspaper *Paese Sera* printed his unfinished article “A Diagnosis of Cinema after the Experience of Cannes.” More than a diagnosis it was a post-mortem. Rossellini classified the contemporary *cinéma d’auteur* into three types: navel-gazing, superficially desecratory, narrowly political. He went on to observe that the structure of film production, distribution, and exhibition that had been in place for nearly eighty years had effectively broken down. Audiences were increasingly viewing films on television and film producers were begging governments to protect them instead of having the courage to take risks. Yet Rossellini also claimed that those in charge of public service television in Europe had become entertainment-oriented and lazy. In having the top festival prize awarded to a film made for television he wanted to give a slap in the face to complacent film industry executives, directors, and critics. But he also wanted to goad those responsible for television into fulfilling their remit to contribute to the social and cultural development of their countries.

If Rossellini’s polemic now sounds as if it belongs to a remote era it is because he wrote it just when everything was about to change. He did not live to see these changes but we can be certain that he would have deplored them. In 1977 television in Europe was still dominated by state-run or state-regulated providers, home video was still in its infancy and film producers still concentrated most of their energies on theatrical releases. Yet already in 1976 the Constitutional Court in Italy had ruled that the RAI’s monopoly of radio and television broadcasts was in conflict with the country’s constitution, in force since 1948, which gave all citizens the right



## CARTESIUS, THE AGE OF THE MEDICI, AND BLAISE PASCAL



Top left: *Cartesius*. © 2002 Istituto Luce—Roma. Next two: *The Age of the Medici*. © 2003 Istituto Luce—Roma.  
Last three: *Blaise Pascal*. © 2003 Istituto Luce—Roma. DVD: Criterion Eclipse.

to express their opinions freely in speech and writing and by any other means. The ruling opened the door to private broadcasters to transmit at local level and then, by stealth, at national level too.

In 1978 Silvio Berlusconi founded his first media corporation, Fininvest, and in 1980 he launched a national television network, Canale 5. By 1984 he controlled Italy's three main private networks. In the decade that followed, the RAI increasingly adapted its schedules to compete with Fininvest for audience ratings and advertising revenue. In France, too, where the state monopoly broadcaster ORTF had co-produced several of Rossellini's television films, privatization began in the 1980s. Europe's first terrestrial pay-TV channel, Canal Plus, was launched there in 1984. The ideal of public service television to which Rossellini had been committed, one geared to the transmission of ideas, which stimulated an audience to think and expand its knowledge, would become almost nonexistent in Italy. It would survive in the rest of Europe only in a few enclaves of "cultural" television: for instance in parts of the schedules of the BBC and Channel Four in Britain, ARTE in France and Germany. Yet it is to that former era, when cinema and television were still separate spheres and when television in Europe was a state monopoly, that Rossellini belonged. And it is only in the context of that era that one can fully understand the trajectory of his career, with his gradual repudiation of cinema and then his increasing dissatisfaction also with television.

### WHICH HISTORY?

If Rossellini's historical films belong to a particular moment in European television they also belong to a specific moment in the study of history. Already between the world wars historians in France associated with the periodical *Annales* had started to develop a set of approaches to the past influenced by anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Marc Bloch's *Les Rois thaumaturges*, first published in 1924, examined the popular belief, documented in Europe from the early middle ages to the late eighteenth century, that attributed to kings the power to cure scrofula by laying their hands on a patient. By the early 1960s the idea that one could produce accounts of the past consisting not of narratives of events but of reconstructions of popular beliefs (mentalities) and people's use of everyday objects (material culture) was well established, as was the idea that it was more appropriate to deal with these things over a long period (*la longue durée*) than in the shorter slices of time normally adopted by political historians. One also needed to draw on a wide variety of sources, from paintings and literary texts to local taxation records and the transcripts of trials for heresy and witchcraft.

Some social historians in other countries had also begun to argue for the importance of reconstructing history from below, that is to say from the standpoint of the lower classes, taking account of the testimonies of people with little formal education, including, in the case of recent events, oral history. The same year, 1966, in which Rossellini made *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* Carlo Ginzburg published his first book, *The Night Battles (I benandanti)*, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie published *Les Paysans de Languedoc*. E. J. Hobsbawm had already written *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and E. P. Thomson had published *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). At the same time a postcolonial history of Africa was starting to emerge, produced by African historians such as Albert Adu Boahen and Cheikh Anta Diop as well as by Europeans like Basil Davidson and Richard Pankhurst. Feminist history would come soon after. Sheila Rowbotham's *Women, Resistance and Revolution* appeared in 1972, the year of Rossellini's *The Age of the Medici*.

Rossellini's historical films have a more complex relationship to these changes in the study and writing of history than has generally been acknowledged. At one level they appeared to be, and perhaps were, simply out of touch with them. They seem to cling to a more old-fashioned view in which the past is organized around the biographies of great men: the founders or developers of religious movements (*Acts of the Apostles* [1969], *The Messiah*, *Augustine of Hippo*), inventors, philosophers, and scientists (Socrates, Pascal, Descartes), political leaders (Garibaldi in *Viva l'Italia* [1960]; Alcide De Gasperi, Italy's postwar prime minister, in *Anno Uno*). The civilization of the Renaissance is epitomized by one of its elite families, the Medici, and a prominent architectural theorist, Alberti. Rossellini's vision of history is also strongly Eurocentric. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith pointed out in "North and South, East and West, Rossellini and Politics" (*Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*), his idea of civilization was centered in the first instance on the Mediterranean, as cradle of the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations. From there western civilization had spread, through the European middle ages and the Renaissance, the scientific revolutions in Britain, Germany, France, and Italy, the Enlightenment and the industrial and technological revolutions. It is true that Rossellini planned to make films also about the history of Islam, the colonization of Central and South America, and the American Revolution, but he saw these too as ramifications of Mediterranean or European culture. His television project did not include films about the indigenous civilisations and cultures of Asia (including China and the Indian subcontinent, despite the ethnographic interest he had shown in India when he went there in the late

1950s) or Australia and the pre-Columbian Americas. The only exceptions seem to have been projects for films about the history of Japan, which he mentioned in an interview of January 1970 in *Nuestro Cine* with Francisco Llinás and Miguel Marías, and for a modern film about the life of Mao Zedong, as well as the inclusion in *The Iron Age* of a scene of a Chinese alchemist working in a Franciscan monastery.

And yet there are several aspects in Rossellini's history films that do have affinities with the new historiography. Firstly, they demonstrate a consistent interest in long evolutionary processes, and in particular in the developments of ideas and technologies over several centuries. This is most evident in his two long-range projects, *The Iron Age* in five episodes (conceived and written by Rossellini but directed by his son Renzo in 1964) and *Man's Struggle for Survival* in twelve episodes (made in 1967–69, broadcast in 1970). But it is also apparent in the way other individual films fit together into groups and these in turn make up a single encyclopedic project. Alberti, Pascal, and Descartes exemplify, respectively, a series of stages in the emancipation of the mathematical and physical sciences from revealed religion, and in the emergence of modern rationalist thought. Secondly, there is his interest in the history of objects—particularly tools, machines, scientific and medical instruments—and in the history of surgical methods and treatments. The inventions include Pascal's calculating machine and Alberti's intersector—a box, similar to a camera lucida, which he designed as an aid to drawing in perspective. The treatments include the making of a splint for Pascal's father Étienne (Giuseppe Addobbati) when he breaks his leg. The servants stand chewing and spitting out borage, which is immediately applied to the broken leg as a cold poultice. The leg is then wrapped in branches of herbs and splinted with bark and string. Thirdly, there is his sustained fascination with the materiality of past cultures: in details of clothing—there are several scenes of dressing and undressing in costumes with complicated fastenings—and in obsolete social rituals and practices, such as the queen clapping her hands in front of the courtiers during the levée in the king's bedchamber in *The Taking of Power* to indicate that Louis has performed his conjugal duty. One of the most striking scenes in the same film comes near the beginning where the physicians enter the room in which Cardinal Mazarin lies dying and one of them sniffs the air to diagnose the foul smell. He then sniffs Mazarin's sweat and his chamberpot and prescribes a further bloodletting.

Peter Burke, one of the exemplars of the new cultural history and author of *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1994),



Filming *Cartesius* in Italy

Photo: Gianni Assenza. Courtesy of Fondazione Rossellini, Rome.

argued in his book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (2001) that Rossellini's film was a remarkable piece of visual history both because of its concern with everyday life at a time when this was not yet taken seriously by professional historians and for its concentration on Louis's use of the "theatre of the court" at Versailles to tame the nobility. The film, for Burke, is a brilliant visualization of this aspect of Louis's power because it employs "spectacle as a means of analysing spectacle, its political uses and effects." The painterly color tableaux and extraordinary chiaroscuro lighting, under the direction of Georges Leclerc, who had been director of photography on Renoir's films of the late 1950s and early 60s, are wholly functional to this emphasis on spectacle.

These aspects of Rossellini's history films are evident continuations of his earlier films. The splinting of the leg in *Blaise Pascal* and the sniffing of the urine in *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* are forgotten practices, and the performance of them involves a purely speculative reconstruction, but they are filmed with a similar observational attention to detail as the scene in the last episode of *Paisan* where a peasant kills live eels with a circular motion of his knife, an action he must have performed many times in reality, to serve for lunch to his guest, the American intelligence officer Dale (Dale Edmonds). In both cases the implication is that these rituals are an important part of the culture of that community, part of what defines it as such, and therefore worthy of record. Just as the late films embody a dualism of high and



low history, the deeds or thoughts of exceptional individuals alongside the everyday actions of ordinary people, so too did the early films portray the deeds of “heroes” like Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero) and Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi) in *Rome Open City* alongside observations of the daily hardships of wartime, like the women looting a bakery to provide for their families or the sacristan Agostino (Nando Bruno) boiling cabbage on the priest’s stove.

### THE PARADOX OF PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

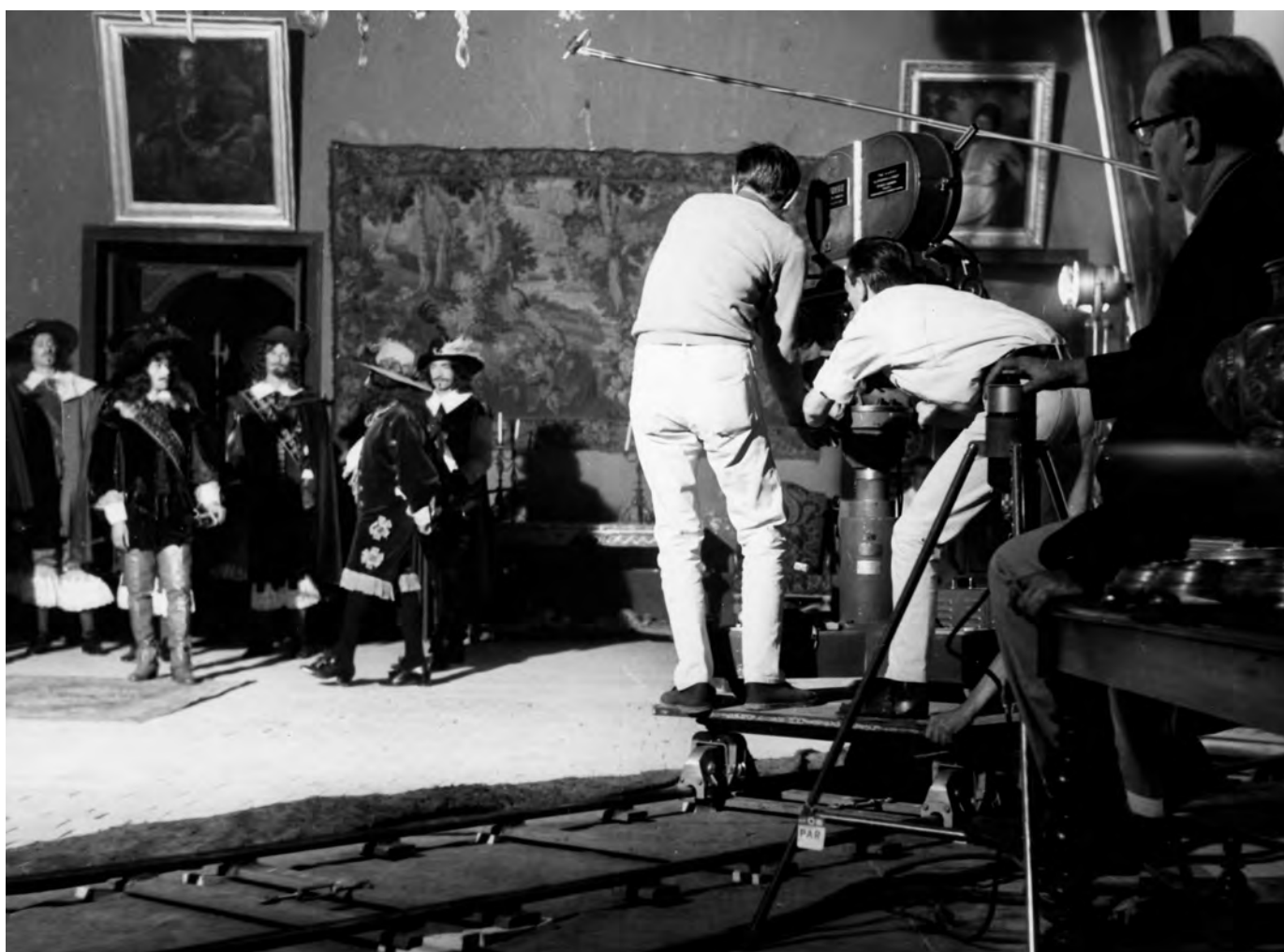
When Rossellini and his co-screenwriters began to develop *Rome Open City* in the autumn of 1944 the actual events to which it alluded—including the shooting of a woman in the street as she tried to approach her husband, taken away in a round-up by the Germans, and the execution of a priest who had helped the resistance—had occurred in Rome just a few months before. In the case of the execution of Don Pietro, Rossellini filmed it in the same military camp, Forte Bravetta, where Don Giuseppe Morosini had been shot by firing squad on April 3, 1944, and this gave the sequence a photographic authenticity and a value as testimony far greater than any reconstruction of the same event in a different location could have had.

Yet the film, by the standards of Rossellini’s later work, as well as in his own retrospective judgment, was also false. It used devices of empathetic involvement—such as the cross-cutting in the execution scene between the faces of the boys behind the wire fence (filmed in fact at another location, not Forte Bravetta), that of Don Pietro, and the nervous Italians in the firing squad—that he would later find crudely manipulative. It was also false overall as a historical record. This was not so much a matter of its misrepresentations in the staging of events, since Rossellini never claimed that his stagings were fully accurate reconstructions, even when the locations themselves were authentic. The falsity came, rather, from the film’s ideological reshaping of the recent past, its selections, omissions, and elisions of events. It played up the alliance between different groups within the resistance movement, the positive role of the Church, and the stories of heroes and martyrs; it played down the political divisions among antifascists, the role of spies, and Italian fascists, and left out the worst actions and war crimes perpetrated by the Germans during the nine months of their occupation of Rome. The most notable omissions were the deportation to Nazi death camps of more than two thousand Jewish citizens between October 1943 and May 1944 and the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine on March 24, 1944, where 335 civilians, fifty-seven of whom were Jewish, were murdered by

order of the SS in reprisal for the bomb attack against a German police division the day before in Via Rasella. For all the positive portrayal of the Communist, Manfredi, the values of Christian charity held up by Don Pietro are probably the dominant ones in the film. He is even allowed to suggest to Pina (Anna Magnani) that the war may be a rebuke to an oversecularized society for its neglect of God. This links up with the theme of the corruption of the worldly city, the *civitas terrena*, that will be expressed by Augustine (Dary Berkany) in *Augustine of Hippo*.

Photographic authenticity was thus combined by Rossellini with ideological fabrication. Yet, as his depictions of Rome in the war moved further in time from the events, first in *Blackout in Rome* then in *Anno uno*, and as the possibility of a literal photographic record of wartime Rome receded, new layers of historical memory were exposed to the surface and with them the possibility of new representations of the city in wartime. *Blackout in Rome*, like *Il Generale Della Rovere* (which is set in Genoa and Milan), was shot entirely in studio sets and indeed much of its action is confined to an attic. However, the narrative generates a sharp sense of a city pervaded by fear of spies and informers, the latter embodied particularly in the character of Tarcisio. It is also a film where news comes through on the radio (in a monastery) of the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine. If *Rome Open City* was a powerful, but in some ways detraumatized, filmic account of the war in Rome—detraumatized because it excluded these problematic memories—then *Blackout in Rome* retraumatizes the account by bringing those memories back. This is true also of *Anno uno*, where the noise of the Via Rasella bomb and the news of the subsequent Fosse Ardeatine massacre figure in the early part of the film.

As these examples demonstrate, a historical film may require distance from the events it represents in order to problematize them and thus present them in a relatively more truthful way. It would not have been impossible in 1945 to depict the political divisions among antifascists or the deportation and massacre of civilians but it would have been ideologically inappropriate, too negative for a film about popular unity and heroism. For similar reasons, not to have alluded to these divisions in 1974, when Italian politics had been polarized for over twenty-five years between Christian Democrats and Communists, would have been seen as an inappropriate and unconvincing omission. Not surprisingly, Rossellini’s most explicitly ideological films were the ones he made during the war itself under commission from the Italian armed forces—what is sometimes referred to as his Fascist war trilogy, consisting of *La nave bianca* (*The White*



Filming *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* in France  
 Courtesy of Fondazione Rossellini, Rome.

*Ship*, 1941), *Un pilota ritorna* (A Pilot Returns, 1942), and *L'uomo dalla croce* (Man with a Cross, 1943). Conversely, the films that are set back in a remote past, like *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*, *The Age of the Medici*, *Cartesius*, or *Blaise Pascal*, involve much speculative reconstruction and invention, and some falsification of the historical record, but they also have an observational engagement with the ideas and value systems of the past that gives them extraordinary power as historical representations.

More than thirty years have now passed since Rossellini's death. The media system against which he railed so acrimoniously, and wished to harness to new uses, has changed profoundly; so has our collective understanding of history and its processes. The relative stature of his later films continues to be called into question, as it was during his lifetime. Yet his greatness as a director can be seen throughout his work: in the restraint of his style, in his constant interest in people and material culture, and in the deeply compelling way in which, in scorn of fashion or celebrity, he remained true to an idea

that filmmaking could comment on the world and provoke audiences to both emotion and reflection.

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DVD DATA *Roberto Rossellini's War Trilogy* [*Rome Open City*, *Paisan*, *Germany Year Zero*]. Director: Roberto Rossellini, 1945, 1946, 1948. © Cinecittà Luce, Renzo Rossellini, and Kramsie Ltd. Publisher: The Criterion Collection. \$79.95, 3 discs.

*Rossellini's History Films: Renaissance and Enlightenment* [*The Age of the Medici*, *Cartesius*, *Blaise Pascal*]. Director: Roberto Rossellini, 1972, 1974, 1972. © 2003, 2002, 2003 Istituto Luce—Roma. Publisher: Eclipse from the Criterion Collection. \$59.95, 4 discs.

*The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*. Director: Roberto Rossellini, 1966. © 1966/2008 INA. Publisher: The Criterion Collection. \$29.95, 1 disc.

ABSTRACT A survey of Roberto Rossellini's filmmaking career with particular emphasis on the continuities and differences between the World War II films of his early career and the later dramatization of an older scientific, religious, and political history.

KEYWORDS Roberto Rossellini, *Rome Open City*, *Paisan*, *Blaise Pascal*, *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*