

The Taking of Power by Louis XIV

Italy | 1966 | 100 minutes

Credits

Director Roberto Rossellini
Screenplay Philippe Erlanger, Jean Gruault
Photography Georges Leclerc, Jean-Louis Picavet

Cast

King Louis XIV Jean-Marie Patte
Jean Baptiste Colbert Raymond Jourdan
Cardinal Mazarin Silvagni
Anne d'Autriche Katharina Renn

In Brief

Filmmaking legend Roberto Rossellini brings his passion for realism and unerring eye for the everyday to this portrait of the early years of the reign of France's "Sun King," and in the process reinvents the costume drama. The death of chief minister Cardinal Mazarin, the construction of the palace at Versailles, the extravagant meals of the royal court: all are recounted with the same meticulous quotidian detail that Rossellini brought to his contemporary portraits of postwar Italy. The Taking of Power by Louis XIV dares to place a larger-than-life figure at the level of mere mortal.

The Taking of Power by Louis XIV: Long Live the Cinema!

In 1962, Roberto Rossellini called a press conference in a bookshop in Rome and announced that the cinema was dead. "There's a crisis not just in film but culture as a whole," he explained. Increasingly, Rossellini had understood the great task of film as education, but he had been unable to find anyone in the cinema to share his passion. So, he said, "I intend to retire from film and dedicate myself to television, in order to be able to reexamine everything from the beginning in full liberty, in order to rerun mankind's path in search of truth."

When informed in Hollywood of Rossellini's pronouncement, Alfred Hitchcock, who had never forgiven the Italian for stealing his most beautiful leading lady, Ingrid Bergman, sardonically remarked that it wasn't cinema but Rossellini who was dead. In fact, however, Rossellini was setting out on yet another new life in film, one that was to absorb him for his last fifteen years and of which *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* is undoubtedly the most striking and successful work.

When Rossellini made this astonishing change of career, he was already one of the most influential filmmakers of all time, certainly the most influential European filmmaker ever. He had burst to prominence at the end of the Second World War, when, with the studios unusable, he took his camera and borrowed film stock into the streets to make an unforgettable image of Rome as the city passed from German into Allied hands. The use of realistic exteriors and nonprofessional actors in Rome, *Open City* (only the two stars, Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani, were professionals) gave a whole new style to the cinema that came to be known as neorealism. Rossellini was to make two further films in this mode, *Paisan* and *Germany Year Zero*, rounding out a trilogy that captures Europe in the immediate aftermath of the war with a force that can still unnerve. These films remain one of the most active influences in contemporary cinema. Each year brings forth movies—from filmmakers as diverse as Britain's Ken Loach and Brazil's Walter Salles—that find their direct inspiration in the method and style of Rossellini's war trilogy.

Rossellini's cinema, however, soon took a different turn. He had gone to America and returned with Ingrid Bergman, then at the height of her Hollywood stardom, and proceeded to make a series of films with her—*Voyage in Italy* the most famous—in which the methods of neorealism were used to focus on the intimacies of a couple rather than the sweep of broad social moments. All these films, unlike the war trilogy, were commercial flops, but they found a small and very significant audience among the young critics of *Cahiers du cinéma*. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that for Truffaut, Godard, and Rivette, Rossellini was the model director and *Voyage in Italy* the template for modern cinema.

Between 1962 and his death in 1977, Rossellini was to make forty-two hours of historical films, treating topics as diverse as the Acts of the Apostles and the life of the seventeenth-century French philosopher Descartes, and at his death he was working on further historical projects, including one on Marx. Almost all these films were made for television, and although they have never attained great popularity, they mark the most serious attempt by a great director to film history. It is not impossible, indeed, that for future generations they may rank as even more important than his earlier films.

The Taking of Power by Louis XIV was, unlike Rossellini's other historical films, a project that the Italian director joined late and with the narrative arc already developed. The story begins in March 1661, with the death of Cardinal Mazarin, who had run France as chief minister for nearly twenty years. We then watch the twenty-two-year-old King Louis XIV confound both his mother, Anne of Austria, and his court, particularly the powerful minister Fouquet, by carrying through his determination to rule by himself. This determination climaxes with the arrest of Fouquet. But that is merely a minor part of Louis' great stratagem, which is to remove the fractious nobles



who threatened his crown and life as a child from their local fiefs and parliaments to the great Palace of Versailles, where they will be entirely caught up in the fads and fashions of the court. The assumption by the sovereign of absolute power has, as its condition, the creation of the iconic figure of the Sun King, who is the source of all authority: economic, social, and cultural. The political intrigue that ends with Fouquet's arrest, however, is merely a sideshow for Rossellini to the king's deliberate creation of himself as a demigod. Indeed, the most dramatic moment of the film, as D'Artagnan steps forward to arrest the most powerful man in France, is seen only in long shot and from Louis' point of view. But the camera does lavish its attention, in a scene that Rossellini added late in the scripting process, on the preposterously extravagant suit that Louis designs himself, and that he painstakingly explains will both ruin his nobles economically as they attempt to outdo each other in the latest style and keep them in check politically as they pour all their energy into fashion.



In many ways, Rossellini's film methods never changed, even if his subjects did. He always wanted to shoot on location rather than in a studio, he disdained the use of flashy camera movement—he called cranes “vulgar and stupid”—and, above all, he always wanted to use nonprofessional actors, believing that they brought something real to the set for the director to work with. But for Rossellini, realism was as far from banal questions of representation as it is possible to imagine; the real, for him, was something that flashed up as camera and setting miraculously combined, and for that miracle to happen, he wanted nothing to do with professional actors and their carefully turned dramatic phrasing, nor with contrived sets where the camera was granted pride of place. For the streets of Rome, he substituted the Palace of Versailles and, to the horror of the French crew, shot where reverses were impossible and conventional “cover” unachievable. Instead, he relied extensively on a Pan Cinor zoom lens, which enabled him to use incredibly long shots, taking the viewer right through a scene. Nor was he ashamed of using the most transparent devices to dispense essential information. We witness the extraordinary moment of the “levée,” as the whole court gathers round the king's four-poster bed before he wakes. As a servant draws back the curtain, the queen claps her hands. A visitor to the court inquires what this means, so that we can be informed that it signifies that the king has performed his conjugal duties the night before.

These incidental details, it can be argued, form the real subject matter of all of Rossellini's history films—from the Athenians clicking their fingers instead of clapping in Socrates, to the assessment of taxes in Blaise Pascal, to the rolls of papyrus that constitute Augustine of Hippo's library, Rossellini is fascinated by the material reality of previous cultures, which film is uniquely able to render for a contemporary audience. There are endless examples of this in *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV*, but one could single out the doctors' examination of Mazarin at the beginning of the film and the extraordinary banquet that comes close to the end. As the doctors sniff Mazarin's sweat, examine the contents of his chamber pot, and then bleed him, we are aware of the immediate physicality of a world before the flush toilet, deodorants, and modern medicine. The banquet comes as the climax to our introduction to the world of Versailles, where the French aristocracy is locked away in a luxurious palace with room for fifteen thousand. We watch the dishes being prepared in a kitchen teeming with cooks, we follow the umpteenth platter as it is formally escorted through the corridors and staircases, until it reaches an enormous table, where the king sits alone, dining in front of his whole court. And when the suckling pig is finally laid in front of the king, his doctor steps forward to say that he thinks pork is a bad idea, and the dish is jettisoned without even being tasted—a stunning illustration of the conspicuous consumption of the Sun King's court.

One of the great triumphs of the film is the performance of the office clerk Jean-Marie Patte as the young French king. Patte had never acted in front of a camera. He was extraordinarily nervous and quite incapable of learning his lines, which therefore had to be held up on boards for him to read. Nothing could be better proof of Rossellini's dictum that a nonprofessional actor brings something to a set that the director then has to use: Patte's nervousness and the fact that he is never looking at his interlocutor because he is reading his lines from prompts is used by Rossellini to demonstrate Louis' complete triumph of will over circumstance. It is this that makes all the more poignant the final scene of the film, when Louis, in a rare moment of solitude, strips himself of his finery and reads out La Rochefoucauld's maxim “Neither the sun nor death can be gazed upon fixedly.” By turning himself into the Sun King, Louis has effectively aligned himself with death—he can no longer participate in the life of the court he has created.

There is only one moment in the whole film when we move outside the court, and that is the opening scene, as yet another doctor approaches the palace to visit the dying Mazarin. A group of peasants discuss the monarchy and remind us that it is only recently that the king of England has been executed. Watching Louis' court from the present, we know that Versailles is incubating another royal execution, that a century after Louis' death, his palace will be stormed and his descendants hauled off to the guillotine. Rossellini provides us with a picture of absolutism more powerful and telling than any history book, but he makes sure that as we watch the beginning, we never forget the end.

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Blaise Pascal

Italy | 1972 | 129 minutes

Credits

Director	Roberto Rossellini
Screenplay	Jean-Dominique de la Rochefoucauld, Marcella Mariani, Renzo Rossellini, Roberto Rossellini, Luciano Scaffa
Music	Mario Nascimbene
Photography	Mario Fioretti
Cast	
Blaise Pascal	Pierre Arditi
Jacqueline Pascal	Rita Forzano
Étienne Pascal	Giuseppe Addobbati
Luogotenente criminale	Christian De Sica

In Brief

One of the most beautiful of Roberto Rossellini's unsentimental, highly analytic, deeply moving present-tense histories, *Blaise Pascal* examines seventeenth-century Europe from the perspective of a scientist, philosopher and mathematician who helped change the world by advancing the cause of reason. Among his many accomplishments, Pascal invented the mechanical adding machine.

The film begins matter-of-factly, in the middle of a conversation in the street, and ends on the threshold of eternity. Pascal's painfully difficult life ended before he was forty; his life consumed by his struggle to know God. But how? "To penetrate infinity," he tells Descartes, "we need a multitude of methods." Subtly, mystically lit, Pascal's death scene intimates Rossellini's, if not God's, mercy across time—a sober, stunning, luminous passage.

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Not being French Catholic, I don't know much about the hero of Rossellini's film, other than his influence on Eric Rohmer movies; *MY NIGHT AT MAUD'S* especially, where the luscious Françoise Fabian attempts to seduce Jean-Louis Trintignant, he of the furrowed brow and delicate chin, by making him stay up half the night to discuss Pascal. Although *MY NIGHT AT MAUD'S* was a huge art house hit in New York, I doubt if many people in the audience were familiar with what was being discussed, and simply assumed it was typical French bedroom chatter.

In *Blaise Pascal*, Rossellini has found an sympathetic and characteristically complex figure, a man of science whose mind takes him beyond the orthodoxies of his time while his soul attempts to penetrate the mysteries of God and faith. Pascal, in addition to writing the *Pensées*, one of the cornerstones of Catholic theology in France, also discovered the existence of the vacuum, which was then considered against the teachings of the church, for how – as the Priests ask Pascal in Rossellini's film – can God exist in a vacuum? In a way, Christ and the vacuum are similar, for neither can be seen, although their existence is felt, the latter in nature, while the former impresses itself upon men's minds (or at least, this would be the argument of a Catholic.) What interests a contemporary audience (and I think Rossellini) is not the ultimate certitude of Pascal's theology, but rather the uncertainty of a rational man grappling with the idea of faith, continually faced by an existential vacuum that dogs his footsteps and is expressed in this film by the expressive camera, reframing the actors and thereby redefining the reality of what we are seeing (while suggesting the changing perceptions of reality the main character is going through.)

Whereas *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI*, in its attempt to visually evoke the contradictory impulses of the Renaissance, might be described as a cross between a Kabuki performance and a musical by Minnelli, Rossellini's portrait of Blaise Pascal is much closer to the work of Robert Bresson, intimate, severe and mysterious. The performances, especially Pierre Arditi as an ardent but sympathetic Pascal, are much more realistic and low-key than the off-putting yet surprisingly affecting acting found in *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI*.

BLAISE PASCAL is set in the French village of Rouen in 1639, where Blaise's father Etienne, accompanied by his son and daughter, has arrived to work as a tax supervisor for King Louis. The film begins with Pascal as a scientific thinker, solving an "impossible" geometry problem at the age of 18. Pascal, unfortunately, had a debilitating illness for most of his life that made even the simple act of writing words on a page a deep and unending struggle. The theme of the film is similar in feeling if not incident to Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground*, with the main character losing everything that has meaning in his life, and rediscovering the essence of his being in a relationship with a God that is simultaneously unfathomable yet intrinsically close, a mystery that can never really be satisfactorily resolved.

BLAISE PASCAL takes us into the heart of darkness of the Counter Reformation's renewed religious fervor alongside the intimations of our modern age due to increased scientific investigation – typified by Galileo, who was forced to recant his discovery that the earth





revolved around the sun to avoid being burnt at the stake. It's a little hard to believe the events in this film took place only 350 years ago, as the mind set of most of the characters are focused on superstition. When a child of a shop owner refuses to kiss his father, for instance, the townspeople ascribe this behavior to witchcraft and set about to find the guilty party. In its ability to evoke feelings of horror and fascination, these scenes are similar to watching Don Siegel's *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, where seemingly rational people are possessed by aliens.

While the camera in *BLAISE PASCAL* often seems to be floating on air, it does so in order to penetrate into the soul of the film's characters, a slow and delicate dance that focuses our attention on the inner life of Pascal by

an immersion in the physical world around him. For example, during the trial of a witch in the beginning of the film, the zoom lens compresses space, keeping Pascal on the edge of the frame behind the accused as she confesses to fantastic things that Pascal, from his expression, finds impossible to believe. As the accused witch continues to speak, the camera zooms in even closer, turning the figures around her into elongated shadows, evoking the intensity of a spiritual experience, whether sacred or profane, it is impossible to tell.

Unlike the complexities – both narrative and stylistic – of *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI*, *BLAISE PASCAL* has a directness that parallels its main character's generosity and natural curiosity. While the colors and compositions still evoke paintings of the period, Rossellini sets up his scenes with a simplicity and emotional austerity that takes one back to the sense of being in the moment of creation that is similar to his early neorealist films shot on the streets of Rome during the last days of the Occupation, such as *OPEN CITY* (1945).

In the film's cumulative power of detailing a man's downward spiral emotionally and physically while ascending upward spiritually, *BLAISE PASCAL* is equal in its dramatic vision and visual purity to Bresson's *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*. When Rossellini's film was screened at MOMA, I was so moved by what I had just seen that afterwards I went to a synagogue for the first time since my teens. The building was locked and dark, and I peered through the windows for some kind of comforting vision, not unlike Pascal in this film, as he bends over his manuscript with pen in hand, initially unable to think of a single word.

In its extraordinary visual design combined with a story of mesmerizing seriousness, *BLAISE PASCAL* is a film not to be missed, less "educational" (though funded by Italian public television) than visceral in its power and appeal. As someone who has long resisted the verities of faith, I found Rossellini's film particularly compelling, a fascinating character study as well as a stunning visual experience. It's a movie that I will look at again, both for its beauty as well as the attempt to illuminate that portion of the human consciousness, which, like the vacuum, impresses itself upon our lives without actually being seen.

Mark Gross, www.filmsinreview.com

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Rossellini's History Films

The Age of the Medici

Italy | 1973 | 255 minutes

Credits

Director	Roberto Rossellini
Writers	Francesco Guicciardini, Niccolò Machiavelli, Marcella Mariani, Roberto Rossellini, Luciano Scaffa
Music	Manuel De Sica
Photography	Mario Montuori

Cast

Cosimo de' Medici	Marcello Di Falco
Leon Battista Alberti	Leon Battista Alberti
Carlo degli Alberti	Adriano Amidei
Ciriaco d'Arpaso	Michel Bardinet

In Brief

Roberto Rossellini's three-part *The Age of the Medici* is like a Renaissance painting come to life: a portrait of fifteenth-century Florence, ruled by the Medici political dynasty. With a lovely score from composer Manuel de Sica (son of Vittorio), this grand yet intimate work is a storybook conjuring of a way of life and thought.

The *Age of the Medici* will be shown over three consecutive weeks, one per episode.



THE AGE OF THE MEDICI plays like a cross between THE WIZARD OF OZ and THE GODFATHER in its detailing of the often violent intrigues between the Medici family and the noble Albizzi family amid the transformation of Florence into a hub of artistic and mercantile activity. Rossellini's Florence, brought to life by a myriad of matte and mirror shots, is a kind of Quattrocento Emerald City, a place where almost anything can happen, and usually does. The film is filled with magical moments, especially at the beginning, where a group of riders disappear into a matte shot of a 15th Century etching of Florence superimposed on a natural landscape of trees and grassy knolls.

As in THE GODFATHER (released the same year, 1972) THE AGE OF THE MEDICI begins with a public ceremony – in this case the funeral of Cosimo de Medici's father, Giovanni – where all the main characters are introduced. In particular, we meet Ilarione de' Bardi (John Stacy), the "consigliere" to the Medici family (similar to the role played by Robert Duvall in Coppola's film) and Rinaldo delgi Albizzi (Tom Felleghy), the leading noble in Florence who manipulates the Signoria, the ruling democratic council, behind the scenes (like Don Barzini in THE GODFATHER) and is committed to Cosimo's destruction.

At this time, the city of Florence, under the control of the Albizzi family, was involved in a bloody war with Lucca, mostly because the Albizzi were looking for new sources of income so they could compete with the Medici. Through the instigation of Cosimo's agent de' Bardi, an anti-war feeling is aroused, especially among workers and merchants who are tired of paying high taxes and also complaining about the poor business war invariably brings. (The fact this film was made during the later stages of the Vietnam war gives these scenes a very contemporary feeling.)

The Albizzi, clinging to power at all costs, has Cosimo arrested under trumped-up charges, with the intention of having him executed. At the last minute, however, de' Bardi bribes the Gonfalonier (the "mayor" of Florence) with a purse of 250 gold pieces, and Cosimo is sent into exile instead. The Albizzi, concerned that a new Signoria – the council was replaced every year from the names of citizens drawn at random – will be more hospitable towards Cosimo, takes to the streets in an armed uprising.

Like Michael Corleone in THE GODFATHER, Cosimo is a somewhat haunted figure, sympathetic yet capable of the most heinous acts in the name of business and family. Cosimo begins with a veneer of idealism, and then becomes increasingly pragmatic as the film progresses. The actor playing Cosimo, Marcello de Falco, shows his character's transformation through shifty sidelong glances, putting one in mind of Vincent Price or Bela Lugosi. (Mr. Di Falco had worked at a restaurant Rossellini frequented. In spite of the theatrical nature of his mannerisms, they seem perfectly appropriate in this context.)

Leon Battista Alberti (Virginio Gazzolo), antiquarian and architect, who is the other major character besides Cosimo, first appears as a young man in Donnatello's studio, asking questions about form and its connection to ordinary experience. A curate working for the Pope, who is in exile in Florence because of an ongoing war, Alberti becomes enmeshed in the creative life of the city. These sequences, in their mixture of daily life along with the inebriation of artistic inspiration, are similar in feeling to James Joyce's novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In particular, I want to point out a moment where Alberti and a fellow scholar walk along the banks of a river. Women are washing clothes that hang along the ancient walls that edge the water. While Alberti's friend recites a poem about the pleasures of lovemaking, Rossellini's camera zooms out among the wet garments of yellow and red amid smiling faces. In a way, Alberti can be seen as a kind of mirror figure to Cosimo, becoming more expansive as Cosimo turns more inward. At the film's



conclusion, Alberti is teaching Lorenzo, Cosimo's grandson, among the ruins of ancient Rome. "Acting is the only possible outcome of knowing," Alberti says, as if speaking to each of us directly.

What Rossellini uses as both metaphor and guiding principle is Renaissance painting, that extraordinary amalgam of scientific investigation and intuitive artistry, taking its inspiration from the human figure, so both form and feeling are in perfect balance. About halfway through the film, Alberti is a guest at Cosimo's country house, and they attend a church service at the Collegiata in nearby San Gimignano. On either side of the nave are frescoes detailing the life of Christ. Stretching from floor to ceiling, the paintings, produced in the middle 1300's by Lippo Menni and Bartolo di Fridi, have that mysterious quality of late-gothic painting where impulse and idea are merged inexplicably, so that Christ is simultaneously human being and concept, icon and emotion. As a priest gives a sermon attacking the then current fashion of reading

ancient secular texts, Rossellini slowly zooms back while tracking forward through the parishioners, creating a vertiginous sensation in a viewer not unlike the emotion expressed in the frescoes. Suddenly, the camera pans upward and over to the back wall of the church, where a gigantic fresco of Christ ascending resides. Painted about 100 years later by Benvenuto Gozzoli, a follower of Fra Angelico, this image of Christ naked is much more intimate, not to mention tenderly realistic. Instead of theology, the contour and consciousness of a human being has taken over the representation of Christ. One senses an immense change, not only in painting, but in the way people live and think.

In other words, Rossellini's method in these history films is not blind immersion, but instead demands that viewers become collaborators, making sense intellectually, if not emotionally, of the ideas and images put before them. Because of this, Rossellini is able to show the "strangeness" of history, not only by photographing the 1400's in the harsh light of the everyday ca. 1972, but also in presenting the Renaissance as a harsh break with the past, one that seems to have little hope of surviving. Throughout the film's four hour plus running time, characters constantly refer to the art, philosophy and banking practices of the time as "pure folly" and being "against God and nature." Armies rise up to crush the Medici, religious leaders attack much of the "new" art as heretical, yet somehow this movement, funded by gold florins and instigated by the inquisitive natures of Florence's artists and scientists, comes to define an age.

I would like to briefly address the acting, in which the performers, many of them non-professionals, recite Renaissance texts objectively, rather than inhabiting the characters and investing the words with invented emotion. I admit at first it's odd to see Italians not gesturing and raising their voices, but then again, this is probably not something that Florentine nobles did anyway. Besides, who can say how people in the Renaissance actually behaved? Although this is initially off-putting, it makes more sense to present these texts for what they are, rather than pretend these are intimate conversations being overheard, as is the case with most historical films. (I can't help but be reminded of the London Times review of *THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY*, in which the critic wrote: "Michelangelo had a hunchback and was also homosexual. In this film he is played by Charlton Heston.")

For most of his career, Rossellini was opposed to conventions of naturalistic acting, generally hiring non-professionals. Even when he worked with Hollywood actors, Rossellini directed them in ways that often went against their training. For instance, during the making of *VOYAGE IN ITALY* (1954), Ingrid Bergman (according to George Sanders' autobiography) was upset that Rossellini simply told her to look without emotion to the right or left, instead of letting her play a character.

Ultimately, it's not the subject matter, but the way Rossellini is engaged by his subject and responds cinematically that interests me. I'm sure this would have saddened Rossellini, as I think he was attempting to transcend the trap of imagery and all that entails in our consumer culture. The story Rossellini has to tell in *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI* is fascinating, not to mention his characters – from the ambiguous banker Cosimo de Medici, transforming the laws of his society in order to find new markets for trade while making possible the creation of artworks, buildings and scientific investigations in a frenzy that hadn't been seen since Ancient Rome; to the architect Alberti, striving for a method that merges the verities of the past with the sudden sense of necessity the present brings. Still, *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI* compels me to watch not as a work of education nor scientific investigation but as cinema. And it is as a work of cinema (with apologies to its maker) that I give this film my highest rating. In its visual style, *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI* is an epic that is constantly in the process of reinventing itself – as painting, as theatre, and as a document of its own making – paralleling the film's subject about the invention (or if you like, collective improvisation) of what we call the Renaissance.

Mark Gross, www.filmsinreview.com



Cartesius

Italy | 1974 | 162 minutes

Credits

Director	Roberto Rossellini
Screenplay	Marcella Mariani, Renzo Rossellini, Roberto Rossellini, Luciano Scaffa
Music	Mario Nascimbene
Photography	Mario Montuori

Cast

René Descartes	Ugo Cardea
Elezac	Anne Pouchie
Guez de Balzac	Claude Berthy
Servo Bretagne	Gabriele Banchemo

In Brief

Rossellini finds a kind of hero in Rene Descartes (Ugo Cardea), the subject of his two-part 1974 effort, *Cartesius*. The man who uttered the immortal phrase, "I think, therefore I am," is like an engine of reason, a human machine that is constantly seeking newer and better ways of understanding. The film follows him from his school days to his joining French society, on to war in Holland, and beyond to visit scholars all across Europe. In each environment, Descartes engages the thinkers of the day, challenging the ideas of our perception and trying to find a balance between the religion that fires a man's soul and the science of provable truth.

As profoundly simple as its hero's famous statement "I think, therefore I am," Roberto Rossellini's *Cartesius* is an intimate, psychological study of obsession and existential crisis

CARTESIUS is the Latin word for Decartes, imparting to a peripatetic personality a somewhat timeless character, at least linguistically. The film CARTESIUS could be seen as the reverse side of BLAISE PASCAL, in both its story and camera style. While Blaise Pascal, because of illness, was confined to the small town of Rouen and his own haunted mind, Rene Decartes traveled from place to place, especially spending time in Holland, far from Paris, and the community of philosophers and poets he considered his base of operations.

An image that is repeated throughout the film is of Decartes riding a horse along the seashore, with the waves splashing around him. Partially this continual travel was to avoid being burnt at the stake (Holland in the 17th Century was Protestant, and therefore outside of the influence of the Catholic church), as Decartes' investigation of consciousness led him to parallel the process of mathematical proofs Galileo evolved for the operations of the universe. Unfortunately, the Catholic church considered anything linked to Galileo heretical. Back in those days they burned heretics (which Rossellini shows by detailing the burning in effigy by the citizens of Paris of a fellow scholar of Decartes who defended Galileo) reinforcing Decartes' resolve to decamp immediately for Amsterdam. However, Decartes' method, partially by design as well as by temperament, was to avoid coming to a conclusion, all the while obsessively exploring the parameters of an idea, in a way almost fleeing the consequences of his own thoughts, and looking for almost any distraction, a new place or a new face, to put off setting down ideas or, for that matter, residence.

I must confess I find Decartes a less compelling personality than either Leon Battista Alberti or Blaise Pascal, creating an emotional absence at the center of Rossellini's fascinatingly detailed and beautifully made film.. Rossellini admits as much in an interview included in Mr. Gallagher's liner notes to the disc, stating "(He was) a son of a bitch, a coward, a lazy person. He was quite repulsive, of course, not simpatico. But I don't care about that. He was intelligent."

Watching a person who spends most of his time in bed or avoiding intimate human contact during his waking hours is not a particularly cinematic subject. Nonetheless, CARTESIUS may be the most personal and visually stimulating of Rossellini's history films, taking as its theme the idea and development of consciousness by detailing Decartes' attempt to scientifically document thought. Rossellini uses the camera to show consciousness in movement, making the space between the actors shimmer with intent, until colors and objects take on the capacity of ideas, through the camera's constant re-composition and relationship to these things, transforming "objective" reality into an interior space the better to understand Descartes own cerebral entrapment.

Somehow, in Rossellini's hands, this method, which seems a bit abstract in description, is utterly compelling and fascinating to watch, not only for its beauty, but also because these ideas which we watch Decartes come up with after such avoidance and effort, ultimately becomes a matter of life and death, as dramatic as a Danish Prince avoiding a decision whether to avenge his father's death, and as visually fascinating as the motes of light on the shoulders of a young woman in a painting by Vermeer.

I also like the subtlety of Rossellini's approach which places critical aspects of Descartes life and times on the edges both of his narrative and as well as his frames. For instance, there is a scene where Decartes is walking with one of his philosopher friends in Paris arguing





about the validity of Galileo's discoveries while dead bodies are being thrown into carts, something the people on the street completely ignore, as if this is an everyday occurrence.

Descartes also manages, while fleeing most intimate relationships, to bring a child into the world, by a woman named Hélène (Anne Pouchie) who speaks in homilies and horrible clichés, lending a touch of humor missing from the other films in the set. There is something Buster Keatonesque about Ugo Cardea, the actor playing Descartes, whom Rossellini, quoted in the liner notes, likens to a "thinking reed." Mr. Cardea's Descartes looks upon life with an almost resigned expression, teetering between the ridiculous and gently absurd, yet his stoicism and persistence imparts a significance belied by his rabbit-like demeanor.

CARTESIUS is a much easier film to watch than write about. I've never experienced 162 minutes go by so quickly. The transfer appears freshly minted, beautifully detailed with gorgeous color, as if the film was made last year. CARTESIUS is a film that, in its use of the camera, is as epic in its capacity for wonder as THE THIEF OF BAGDAD, while maintaining an intimacy and innate suspense about what takes place between human beings that evokes the films of Jean-Pierre Melville.

Never before has procrastination been made so dramatically compelling nor visually arresting, a paradox that ultimately needs to be experienced rather than described. CARTESIUS is a perfect conclusion to a set of Rossellini's late history films, a film that is simultaneously epic and enigma, a historical road movie and quizzical self-portrait, a low-budget quickie and a sublime meditation, taking its cue from Rembrandt, both visually and emotionally, on history and the passage of time.

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