

Blaise Pascal (1972) and Roberto Rossellini's Search for Historical and Artistic Truth

Between 1964 and 1976, Rossellini made a series of historical films, many for Italian television. Critics today still debate their worth, some seeming them as a washed-up Rossellini turning from his original genius, others seeing in them the last stage of Rossellini's life-long search for truth and honesty in cinema.

- *India* (1958)
- *The Age of Iron* (1964)
- *Man's Struggle for Survival* (1964-1970)
- *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966)
- *Sicily: Idea of an Island* (1967)
- *The Acts of the Apostles* (1969)
- *Augustine of Hippo* (1972)
- *Socrates* (1971)
- *Blaise Pascal* (1972)
- *The Age of Cosimo de Medici* (1973)
- *Cartesius* (1974)
- *Anno uno* (1974)
- *The Messiah* (1976)

While his film about India was directed in 1958 before what has been labeled his commercial period (1959-1962), this mixture of documentary and story-telling foreshadowed his search for a new kind of cinema that was faithful to people and to the world. It was his 1966 historical film on Louis XIV for French television that gave him a new sense of where he was going. Between 1958 and 1966, Rossellini gave a series of five interviews to the French film journal, *Cahier du cinéma*, in which he struggled with explaining his thought processes concerning the destiny of film, television, art, science, and education. His ideas were, frankly, muddled, but in them one can nonetheless see a Rossellini who was seeking to push back against the Zeitgeist of the 60s, wanting to emphasize moral responsibility, objective truth, the values of the Western tradition, and the need for education of the masses.

Excerpts from Two Interviews

"Since I am looking for something absolutely sincere and absolutely true, I try to do away with too much preparation. I take someone who seems to have the right physique for a part to bring my story to an end. And since he is not an actor but an amateur, I examine him in depth, I appropriate him, I reconstruct him, and I use his muscular abilities, his tics, to turn him into a character. . . . because what I was aiming at was the honest discovery of the truth. However, in order to find the truth one must also have a moral stance. A critical judgment. . . .

"CAHIERS: What do you call a *moral* position? The advocates of *cinéma vérité* use the same term.

ROSSELLINI: First of all it is a position of love, and therefore of tolerance and understanding. And of participation. You see how things mix, complicate each other and always become tighter, closer to who you are, what you want. But the moment you stand back from any judgment, any participation, any sympathy, any tolerance, and say: "Be as you are, I don't give a damn," then we are no longer speaking of a moral stance but rather a very cynical attitude. . . .

But affection remains the only real moral stance. I cannot recognize anything lacking affection as artistic. In the case at hand there is no affection since everything depends on chance. What irritates me, what infuriates me in today's world? Today's world is too gratuitously cruel. Cruelty means the violation of someone's personality, the forceful extraction of a total and gratuitous confession. If it were a

confession aimed at something specific, I would accept it: but it is the practice of a voyeur, of a pervert. In other words: it's cruel. I react very strongly to all this because I firmly believe that cruelty is always an expression of infantility, always. Today's art gets more and more childish every day. Everyone seems to have a mad yearning to be as childish as possible. I don't mean naïve: childish. From infantility we have fallen to the bottom of the human scale. We have become anthropomorphic monkeys: we'll soon move on to the stage of the frog or the eel. This is what angers me. This total lack of decency. . . .

Let me explain myself. For art to be art, it has to have a language, it has to express things in a way that can be understood by average people. Without this it becomes totally abstract—by which, however, I do not mean to say that one must make commercial films: let there be no misunderstanding. I firmly believe we lack the basic elements. Today we lack something more than ideas, and language: we lack a vocabulary, an alphabet. I think it is necessary, to do worthwhile work, to reestablish the letters of the alphabet. It is not a matter of transforming art but of rediscovering it. To rediscover art—an art that has been completely corrupted, that has dissolved in abstractions, that has made us forget how to use not just language but the very alphabet on which language rests—we must do our best to reestablish language, and, once we have reestablished it, to make sure that each word regains its meaning, its value, and, becomes again the fruit of some profound thought, so that language may be again a real language and not just a collection of labels stuck on samples of things of which we barely know the existence. At that point it will be possible to salvage all the forms of art. This is what seems most important to me.” –Interview, 1963

CAHIERS: Could your cinema be defined as “a cinema of attention”?

ROSSELLINI: Attention and acknowledgement. When we look at a human being, what do we see? His intelligence, his desire to do things, and then his enormous weaknesses, his poverty. In the end this is what makes things magnificent. I was quite struck, as a boy, when I learned that at the siege of Toulon, Napoleon was so scared he shook like a leaf. An officer who stood next to him noticed it: “But you are shaking with fear!” he said. And Napoleon answered: “If you were as scared as I am, you'd be gone!” It's this double dimension in man that moves me, in all its infinite variations. He is small, lost, stupid, naïve. And he does great things.

CAHIERS: You have dealt with Louis XIV the way you once dealt with Saint Francis of Assisi: focusing on his lesser qualities, his shyness. He looks like a child.

ROSSELLINI: What moves me most in man is his weakness, not his strength. In modern life people have lost any heroic sense of life. They should rediscover it because man is a hero. Everyone is a hero. Our daily struggles are heroic struggles. To show this well one must start from the bottom. . . .

Every ideology has something good and something bad about it. But it always limits you in your freedom. And freedom is the center and the mainspring of everything. If you make a discovery while you are free, it is wonderful. But if you manage to achieve perfection in conformism, there is nothing heroic about that. My main concern is to bring this heroic sense back into our lives. If man has some ability, it must be that: the discovery of morality. Take Hitler: he makes people obey. They are within the boundaries of morality since they obey. The dangers are quite serious. If man can make a choice, he becomes a real man. But his choice must stem from total freedom, and assume all the risks of error, and adventure.

CAHIERS: And even the risk of getting lost?

ROSSELLINI: This is where he becomes a hero. What is a saint? Someone who has run the risk of losing himself, who is always about to get lost. Just a tiny false step and he can topple over. The only faculty belonging to a man and man alone is that of judgment. The rest of his behavior you can find in any animal, in different degrees: obedience, habits, etc. An animal's directions come either from instinct or

from tropism: it moves toward things that are simply convenient to him, very practically so. But life cannot be just a matter of practicality. Today, practicality has become the myth of our lives. What has happened to morality? This is a serious question.”—Interview, 1966



Discussion Questions

1. Is Pascal a saint? Is he a hero?
2. How does Rossellini's deliberately limited cinematography (color, camera angles) shape the history we are viewing?
3. Some have suggested that Rossellini's history films function more like living paintings than like plot-driven cinema? What do you think?
4. Likewise, how does the limited acting (amateurs, lines more important than delivery, limited physical expression) shape the history we are viewing?
5. How do the key conflicts of the age—witchcraft, religion, science, nature, pride, mysticism, tradition—drive this film?
6. What is the nature of mathematics for Pascal?
7. In the witchcraft trial, why does the maid confess to these things?
8. What role do the soundtrack and musical score play?
9. What does Pascal experience in his more mystical moments? Is there a relationship between illness and mysticism?
10. Describe Pascal's encounter with Descartes.
11. How does Pascal describe his wager on God?
12. Does Pascal experience the good death? Why and/or why not?