Film review

Rossellini's 'Rise of Louis XIV'

PAUL SCHRADER

Roberto Rossellini's "The Rise of Louis XIV" was made in 1966 and first shown in the United States at the 1967 New York Film Festival. It was an unpropitious premiere. The theme of the festival was "The Social Film in Cinema" and there was a special seminar on the subject, "Reality Cinema: Whose Truth?" These were the halcyon (some would say corrupt) days of "cinema-verite;" five of the many documentary or documentary reconstruction films shown at the festival went on to obtain general release and a hitherto unknown degree of box-office success: "Titicut Follies," "Don't Look Back," "Warrendale," "Battle of Algiers," "Portrait of Jason." Lost in this rush for cinema-truth was one of the pioneers of the techniques of mobile camera and documentary reconstruction himself, Roberto Rosselini, and few took time to notice that the master had gone his own way, bypassing many of his disciples. Because of the cold critical reception of "The Rise of Louis XIV" at the festival, Rosselini was unable to get either the television or theatrical release for which he had been negotiating.

The New York festival was only a microcosm for Rossellini's difficulties in the sixties. On several occasions he had publicly quarreled with the leaders of the "cinema-verite" movement. At the 1963 UNESCO film conference he accused Jean Rouch of substituting superficial and immediate truth for moral truth. "Rouch," Rossellini told the director of "Le Joli Mai" and "Chronicle of a Summer," "you have a talent to create and you use it to tear down, this is not anarchism, it is sloth" (ART-SEPT, April-June 1963). In turn "cinema verite" theorist, Louis Marcorelles accused Rossellini of "forgetting his own early films" and of "pointless aeshteticism" ("Sight and Sound," Summer 1963). The "cinema-verite" spokesmen carried the day; their films were released, exhibited and praised. Rossellini was unable to work in the commercial cinema and like Jean Renoir turned to French television for support. His 1957 film "India" was never released in France and his subsequent documentary reconstructions, "Age of Iron" (1965) and "The Rise of Louis XIV" (1966), were not shown commercially outside of France.

But this year (1970) when "The Rise of Louis XIV" was finally released in New York the critical apathy had turned to enthusiasm. The New York TIMES, which in 1967 had described "Louis" as "a mounting bore," now wrote that "it is surely a masterpiece." The NEW YORKER, NEWSWEEK, and NEW REPUBLIC all followed suit with laudatory reviews. After a decade of "cinema-verite" films, audiences and critics seemed more willing to accept a documentary approach which sought truth not in the immediate moment but in study and reflection. The successful 1970 release of "The Rise of Louis XIV" may signal a return to what Rossellini calls "moral responsibility" in documentary films, and it will hopefully return Rossellini to a preeminent place in the field of documentary and documentary reconstruction.

"The Rise of Louis XIV" reconstructs the kingship of Louis (Jean-Marie Patte) from the death of his godfather Mazarin (Silvagni) in 1661, when Louis was 22, to his construction of Versailles in the 1680's. At the outset of the film the king is a bit of a dandy and a pawn of his guardians. After Mazarin's protracted death he announces "I will govern" and begins to consolidate his power. The Queen Mother Anne of Austria (Katharina Renn) is gracefully removed from her position of power and the vain Foquet (Pierre Barrat) is gracelessly arrested in his own capital. Louis' rise is climaxed when he constructs the immense Versailles, populates it with sycophants, and establishes extravagant rules of court manners and dress to woo the noble class away from the bourgeois and peasants and place them under his financial mein. His "dandyism" is transformed into a power structure, and his elders are the pawns. These Machiavellian maneuvers completed the king, in the final scene of the film, slowly strips himself of his many outer garments and contemplates a maxim by La Rochefoucauld: "Neither death nor the sun can be faced steadily." The ultimate fantasy of the aristocrat has been fully achieved and the world's last great monarch is firmly established.

"The Rise of Louis XIV" evidences a thoroughgoing economy of artistic means. There are many long four and five-minute takes and a minimum of lateral camera movement. The action and decor are meticulously organized within the frame and the camera examines them from a fixed position. The settings are fixed; the characters enter into them, discuss matters trivial and weighty, and exit. The emphasis throughout the film remains on the ornate decor, the elaborate, meticulously constructed late baroque world of Versailles and seventeenth century France. There is little "acting" per se. The actors are non-professionals who recite their lines rotely and without inflection. The editing is also extremely functional; it is the necessary glue which affixes one tableau to the next. One might suggest, as did Bosely Crowther, that these technical restrictions were the sole result of financial limitations ("Louis" was made for $150,000 in 23 shooting days), but it is also true that they reflect an aesthetic position Rossellini has been propounding for many years.

As early as 1958 Rossellini stated these humble intentions; "What I am trying to do is a piece of research, a documentation, on the state of man all over the world . . . as I find dramatic subjects I may move towards fiction film. But the first stage has to be research, the observation, and this has to be systematic" (SIGHT AND SOUND, Winter 1958-59). The first step in Rossellini's method is study and research. A film-maker must learn everything he can about his subject matter, from both history and act, works of the time and subsequent studies. The historically verifiable facts must be presented on screen in the most coldly objective manner possible; they are not to be tampered with. A film-maker cannot let his ego or emotion (or those of his actors, cameraman, or editor) editorialize upon or empathize with those facts. (Rossellini faults Fellini's "Satyricon" and Visconti's "The Damned" for doing this.) No one involved in a Rossellini film can project, act, or interpret what he does; there can be no attempt to evoke audience empathy.

From this "documentation," however, Rossellini hopes to draw a moral truth, not simply a factual truth. These facts must be framed and organized in such a manner as to reveal their essential truth, and this, of course, demands a moral aesthetic on the part of the film-maker. Here, then, is the paradox of Rossellini's method: on one hand the film-maker must be factually faithful to the past, not interjecting his emotions or interpretations; on the other hand he must have a sufficient aesthetic vision to structure events so that they reveal their intrinsic "truth" and are not simply anecdotal yarns or "cinema-verite" snatches of life.

An explanation for the success of Rossellini's latest films is, therefore, somewhat elusive. Like other masters of visual composition and structure, Ozu, Dreyer, Ford, Murnau, Rossellini's powers lie in his ability to LET an image reveal itself rather than to MAKE it reveal itself. No emotional or editorial contrivances are forced upon the image; it is not made to twist or turn, to run or jump, to hide or camouflage. Rossellini has a respect for the power of the photographed image, for its composition and lines of force, for its "inner dynamic." There is a moral truth which can be obtained by setting carefully composed pictures or objects side by side which cannot be achieved by a personal or cultural interpretation of those objects. This is simply the truth of art. Today there is probably nothing which has survived Louis XIV quite as well as Versailles itself. Long after the power has vanished, the memory faded, the political effect diminished, the truth of this work of art still stands. It has an order, a symmetry, a totally unfunctional ornateness which represents Louis better than all the historical records. In these halls, balustrades and gardens the sun king still shines.

In the same way there is a truth in "The Rise of Louis XIV." Rossellini has created a monument to Louis in film which stands as great as Versailles in architecture. There is a truth in the way he has set his scenes side by side. In Rossellini's film there is the order, decadence and vanity which created both the sun monarchy and the subsequent peasant revolt.

The film opens with the death of Mazarin. At his bedside the court doctors, one by one, sniff his defecation, and after some contemplation and debate they decide that, although his death is imminent, Mazarin should be bled anyway. Then the bleeding begins; the ghostly pale Mazarin wincing in pain as the blood is drained from his emaciated frame. From this point the excretory smell only grows stronger. Shortly before the young king's last visit to Mazarin's bedside, Mazarin paints himself with rouge and make-up to give himself the appearance of health. The falseness and sham are apparent to everyone, yet nonetheless effective for being false. Such is Louis' world.

The composition and editing also convey that cumulative smell or stench. Each frame has an ornate, sickly love of detail. There are few clear cut lines; red and yellows bleed into each other. There are few wide open spaces; the scenes take place in claustrophobic, baroque rooms with sychophants crowding for a place near Louis. Until the final thematic scene Louis is never seen alone. All of his activities -- love-making, eating, sleeping, politics -- take place in the cluttered public arena. Louis does not alleviate this claustrophobic decadence; he heightens and manipulates it. When he introduces his sybaritic mode of court dress, the frame becomes even more cluttered with trains and ruffles, with unfriendly clashing color schemes. Yet the stoical camera never reacts against this accumulation of discordant detail. It does not, like Visconti's camera in "The Damned," zoom, track and jump about these lurid settings. The stolid camera simply sits, soaking eve-

(please turn to page 67)