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Visual-spatial intelligence in propaganda and public relations discourse: The case of Roberto Rossellini's early and educational-historical films

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze two of the least known periods of Italian director Roberto Rossellini's career – the fascist trilogy and his educational project for TV – as a paradigm of visual-spatial intelligence, and show their contribution to the construction of a theory of film discourse in public relations. Regarding the fascist period, what stands out is the unique, anti-propaganda staging, a far cry from the fascist cinema of the age, and more characteristic of documentary cinema. By contrast, the films that form part of his educational project make them public relations techniques in the terms understood by filmmakers from the British documentary movement and PR practitioners like John Grierson. In those films, in order to achieve his purposes, Rossellini created a zoom lens device named *Pancinor* that can be considered a mechanism of visual-spatial intelligence as well as a public relations audiovisual technique.

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1. Introduction

Studies on the links between film and public relations have focused mainly on representations of the profession in fiction films (e.g., Ames, 2010; Miller, 1999). By contrast, with few exceptions (e.g., Halas, 1959; Parris, 1959a,b), less attention has been paid to documentary film as audiovisual discourse on public relations strategies, although in recent years, studies on John Grierson and public relations (L'Etang, 1999, 2000), Frank Capra (Xifra & Girona, 2012), and the role of documentary in public relations rhetoric (Anthony, 2012; Kilborn, 2006; Pompper & Higgins, 2007; Stokes & Holloway, 2009) has appeared as new objects of study in research into the elements of public relations film discourse.

This article focuses on the latter tradition to analyze the two less well-known and researched periods of Italian director Roberto Rossellini's career, leaving to one side his neo-realist films and those he made with his then-wife Ingrid Bergman, which have been the most common object of research work on the Italian filmmaker. Those films represent an example of visual-spatial intelligence, in particular the educational ones, in which Rossellini's, for staging purposes, invented and used a new zoom lens to improve the realistic effects: the *Pancinor*. This mechanism highlights the visual-spatial abilities of Rossellini, who becomes one of the great exponents of visual-spatial intelligence before the age of digital cinema.

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In the past century, numerous theories about intelligence have emerged. One of the more notorious was created by development psychologist [Howard Gardner \(1993\)](#). Gardner proposed that intelligence is not made up of one factor, but rather eight. Accordingly, one of the eight forms of intelligence is visual-spatial intelligence. People with high visual-spatial intelligence possess the ability to visualize the world accurately, modify their surroundings based upon their perceptions, and recreate the aspects of their visual experiences. They also have good spatial judgment and reasoning. That is, they are able to accurately judge the distance between them and an object, how far the object is to the right, etc. They are skilled at using their ability to imagine and their spatial judgment to complete tasks and projects that include design, judgment, and creativity. For this reason, they make good painters, artists, architects, designers, and filmmakers ([Gardner, 1993](#)).

Although we find between the contemporary filmmakers the most explicit examples of artists with a high level of visual-spatial intelligence (James Cameron, for instance, who relies on his spatial judgment and his ability to visualize creating alternate worlds for his movies, such as *Avatar*), filmmakers before the digital age have shown his ability of picturing the world. As aforementioned, Roberto Rossellini is one of them: he has visualized precisely the world – even the historical one – and has adapted his surroundings based upon his perceptions. Indeed, as [Brunette \(1996\)](#) indicates, in remarks made on a 1972 panel examining the state of Italian television, which were published in a book called *Informazione democrazia*, Rossellini stated:

“Images, with their naked purity, directly demonstrative, can show us the road to take in order to orient ourselves with the greatest possible knowledge.... All of our intelligence, as we know, expresses itself thanks to the eyes. Language. . . is the ensemble of the phonetic images by means of which, not being able to fix and save the images, we have catalogued all of our observations, the great majority of which are visual” ([Lopez, 1973](#); p. 59).

Considered one of the founders of neo-realism (e.g., [Caminati, 2012](#); [Cannella, 1973](#); [Frappat, 2007](#); [Gallagher, 1998](#); [Wagstaff, 2000](#)), Rossellini began his film career making three war propaganda films for Mussolini’s fascist regime and finished it with an educational film project unique until that date. In both periods, a common denominator is found in the use of narrative resources characteristic of documentary film, a form of expression which John Grierson, public relations professional and the man who coined the word “documentary”, and others (e.g., [L’Etang, 1999, 2000](#)) consider a public relations technique.

Indeed, in her study on Grierson and public relations, [L’Etang \(2000\)](#) stated that “public relations and documentary shared similar aspirations to objectivity and truthfulness while at the same time trying to encompass an educational and sometimes overtly persuasive role” (p. 90). On the other hand, [Kilborn \(2006\)](#) pointed out that documentaries are one of the few audiovisual genres to reach a better understanding of how institutions operate, stressing the full public relations potential of the genre. The definition of a documentary by American filmmaker W. Van Dyke is useful in this respect: “a film in which elements of dramatic conflict represent social or political forces rather than individual ones” (cited in [Fielding, 1978](#); p. 70). This provides a good verbal definition of the kind of films made for public relations and persuasive purposes, and especially those made by Grierson and other famous filmmakers like Robert Flaherty or Luis Buñuel.

The above definition by Van Dyke ([Fielding, 1978](#)) can be applied to the filmmaking of Rossellini which, although it may not be considered documentary in the strictest sense, employed a phenomenological approach to reality that often responded to a desire to document this reality in an even more reliable way than even a traditional documentary maker. This is why Rossellinian work is a good example of the above quotations, especially with regard to its “aspirations to objectivity”; that is, revealing the truth of what had happened during fascism, the postwar period and in the beginnings of the audiovisual revolution brought about by TV. And to achieve this, Rossellini used a very accurate staging technique.

From 1941 to 1943, Rossellini’s films formed part of the fascist regime’s propaganda filmmaking, within what was known as *crusade filmmaking*, which sought to justify and vindicate the military operations undertaken by the regime in certain territories ([Quintana et al., 2005](#)). In 1943, when Mussolini’s power waned and the allies landed in Italy to free it from German occupation, Rossellini distanced himself from official filmmaking. He changed direction and embarked upon the path that would allow him to make, from 1944 to 1948, films which glorified the struggle of the people and the Italian partisans against Nazi and fascist oppression. In doing so, Rossellini defended the cause of democracy and denounced the monstrosity of Nazi ideology ([Frappat, 2007](#)).

On the other hand, the director’s educational project came at the end of his career, with the making of nine TV movies: *L’età del ferro (The Iron Ageem, 1964)*, *La prise du pouvoir par Louis XIV (The Rise of Louis XIV, 1965)*, *La lotta dell’uomo per la sua sopravvivenzaem (1967–69)*, *Atti degli Apostoliem (1968)*, *Socrate (Socrate, 1970)*, *Blaise Pascalem (1971)*, *Agostino d’Iponaem (1972)*, *L’età di Cosimo de Mediciem (1972)*, and *Cartesiussem (1973)*. To these films we must add two works for the cinema, *Anno Unoem (1974)* and *Il Messia (The Messiah, 1975)*, as well as various short format works commissioned by different bodies, among them Italian national television. This cycle began to take shape in the project he undertook in India, working for the first time on an international joint production for television—*L’India Vista da Rossellini (RAI, 1957)* and *J’ai fait un bon voyage (ORTF, 1957)*—along with the feature film *India Matri Buhmi (1958)*.

Thus, these two periods of Rossellini’s filmmaking show how the Italian director’s work evolved coherently from propaganda to didacticism, approaching reality from the postulates of documentary cinema and always avoiding manipulation via cinematic language. This makes these films interesting objects of study for the investigation of a cinematographic grammar characteristic of public relations discourse, as opposed to the war propaganda discourse used by European and American cinema during World War II and the post-war years.

2. The fascist trilogy

In order to understand Rossellini's relations with fascist cinema it is necessary to know something of the conditions regarding Italian production between 1922 and 1945. Over 700 films were made during this period. Most were not works of propaganda, but intended to transfer the model of American commercial cinema to Italian idiosyncrasy (Gili, 1985). Fascism was basically a free market system and the cinema of the period, despite the high level of economic protectionism imposed by the state, responded primarily to the laws of supply and demand.

Mussolini's policy with regard to cinema was initially discreet and it was not until 1935, with the inauguration of the *Centro Esperimentale di cinematografia*, that policy began focusing on cinema's propaganda value. The fascist cinema model was initially based on a policy of entertainment, particularly comedy with a sophisticated tone, distancing cinema from realist models and seeking systems to parallel the Italian historical past and the present. It was not until the 1940s that fascist cinema would adopt a more direct propaganda policy, based on vindicating the military crusades undertaken by Mussolini's government in North Africa, Albania, and Greece (Quintana et al., 2005). During this period, Vittorio Mussolini, son of Il Duce, was editor of the magazine *Cinema* and one of the key figures in film policy.

It is for this reason that some voices were raised within fascist circles in protest against the dominant trend of promoting evasion rather than a return to a realist cinema. The fear was that realism would reinstate the specific cultural, social and political character of Italy, show what fascist Italy really was, and thus, serve to educate the people (Seknadje-Ashkenazi, 2000).

If we examine texts written at the time, we see that critical voices were first raised against the absence of an aggressive policy in the field of cinema. In his book on Italian cinema, Cauda (1932) noted the lack of a true Italian film industry and considered that the country's film production should represent something that belongs to, identifies, and characterizes the Italians, "both in terms of their qualities and their defects" (p. 22). Cauda (1932) welcomed the existence of the International Institute for Educational Cinematography and the LUCE Institute (Union for Educational Cinematography), but called for the creation of a true National Film School. He also called for Italy to support "cinema aimed at education, propaganda, tourism, science, and social prevention" (p. 24) and for the cinema as spectacle to "be brought closer to true and real life" (p. 25).

From this standpoint, Longanesi (1933) also beseeched the filmmakers of his country to abandon artificial scenery. The editor of the magazine *Lo Schermo*, Lando Ferretti, defended the idea of an industry that produced only two types of films: (1) documentaries, newsreels, and (2) fiction films where news of the day (e.g., the War in Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War autarky, the fascist youth) constituted the starting point and the frame of a tragic, dramatic or comic history lived by real people (Gili, 1985).

As Seknadje-Ashkenazi (2000) pointed out, there has always been some suspicion regarding Rossellini's early career, spanning from 1938 (when he served as head of the second unit on the shooting of *Luciano Serra, Pilot*, directed by Goffredo Alessandrini) to 1945, when he shot *Rome, Open City*, the film that opened the doors to international cinema and made him the standard of Italian neo-realism. This suspicion is due to the fact that during this period he directed a series of fascist propaganda films, two of which enjoyed the direct collaboration of Vittorio Mussolini, son of Il Duce.

This participation must be viewed in relative terms, however, since, as Mida (1953) suggested, Rossellini's first three films are an approach to the documentary form starting from a base characteristic of a fiction film. Indeed, with this trilogy Rossellini discovered a new way of presenting reality that "represented the first rupture at the heart of official fascist cinema" (Mida, 1953; p. 25).

For these reasons, researchers of the Italian director consider Rossellini to have undeniably moved toward a cinema inspired in realism, adhering to the documentary movement (e.g., Seknadje-Ashkenazi, 2000; Quintana, 1995; Quintana, 1995). That is, a movement that sought, in an unfavorable environment, to make films that objectively represented events that were really occurring, "instructively describing some objects and structures observable in reality. A movement which, when introducing elements of fiction, seeks to... shoot in natural environments with non-professional actors" (Seknadje-Ashkenazi, 2000, p. 31).

Consequently, a willingness to embrace realism and his didactic intention do not place Rossellini in total disagreement with the cinematographic orientation of fascist totalitarianism. From this perspective, Quintana (1995) argued that the Italian director's work undergoes a methodological evolution that began with the films shot during fascism. There Rossellini began to participate in a dialectics between reality and fiction, which culminated in his didactic years, where he finds a new dialectics between representation and fiction. Therefore, from Quintana's perspective, Rossellini's propaganda films are essential to understanding this methodological evolution: "Rossellini discovers fiction cinema and brings it into contact with a specific documentary-making tradition that polluted war cinema during those years" (Quintana, 1995; p. 39). This allowed Rossellini to make his first investigations into de-dramatization with his films during the fascist period, and should be highlighted, since "it constitutes the original contraction of all of his filmmaking" (Quintana, 1995; p. 39). This de-dramatization occurs due to the use Rossellini makes of dead time, of moments from everyday life, which plunged the epic values characteristic of fascist cinema into crisis.

3. Non-propaganda aspects of movie direction

Rossellini's stance, which some authors (e.g., Quintana, 1995) consider to be a moral one, was reflected in the staging of these three films. Despite having staging elements typical of propaganda films (inspired mainly in S.M. Eisenstein's 1925 film,

Battleship Potemkin), some narrative resources veer away from propaganda discourse. They belong closer to an audiovisual discourse more characteristic of public relations, as Grierson understood it (L'Etang, 1999, 2000). As Seknadje-Askénazi (2000) suggests, in the films that make up the fascist trilogy, “on a film representation level, there are manifestly few references. . . to distinctive signs of fascism. . . giving the impression that they maintain a certain distance from propaganda” (p. 49).

The three films that make up the trilogy are *La nave bianca* (1941), *Un pilota ritorna* (1942), and *L'uomo della croce* (1943). In *La nave bianca*, an explicit discourse can be observed regarding the concern of the naval forces for those wounded in battle and a parallel love story (between a sailor and a nurse) in a melodramatic tone which honors the sacrificed charity of the woman invested with the Christian cross. This coexistence of documentary and fiction, which Girona and Xifra (2014) consider a feature of public relations documentary discourse, is present in his later work, and in fact constitutes an identifying element of cinematographic neorealism.

Un pilota ritorna is the story of a military pilot who is taken prisoner at a Greek concentration camp following an air strike. The message of the film revolves around the military institution constituted as the core of life and the family. *L'uomo della Croce* tells the story of a fascist priest whose selfless mission is to save the souls of the Russian people living under communist creeds. In addition to the use of non-professional actors, the film is characterized by the dramatic suspension of certain narrative anecdotes that serve to describe small events exuding visual authenticity (Gallagher, 1998).

In the latter film, for example, soldiers do not give the fascist salute, but the military one. Also, except for one episode where a member of Mussolini's party is shot by the communists, the word “fascist” is never mentioned. In *Un pilota ritorna*, only one scene shows officials making the fascist salute. By contrast, *La nave bianca* is the film where it appears most, although, as the prestigious film historian Robin Wood (1980) states regarding this film:

Is there such thing as a “fascist” style? A fascist style would, I take it, by definition be dedicated to dominating and manipulating audience response, and would be characterized by “dictatorial” set-ups and angles that force us to look at only those aspects or details that immediately suit the director's purpose and to respond only as he decrees. If this definition is accepted, it follows that the two most notable fascist directors are (with the possible exception of Riefenstahl) Eisenstein and Hitchcock, and *La nave bianca* is a non-starter. In fact, the relationship of style to ideology is a far more intricate and complex one than any such description suggests (p. 887).

In any event, it is important to note that, as with *Un pilota ritorna*, *La nave bianca* films these moments rapidly in full shots or even master shots, and thus give the film a documentary feel. These scenes form part “of the reconstruction of a real environment, of its representation free from simulation or dramaturgical underlining” (Rondolino, 1989; p. 52).

In *La nave bianca*, a distinction can be made between aspects deriving from objective representation and those characteristic of exaltation or showing approval. The director's use of the camera is essential in making this distinction. For example, the nurse Elena Fondi wearing a fascist insignia does not imply the filmmakers' approval of the regime. It would be different if Rossellini had opted for a tracking shot or a zoom to show the insignia in close-up and thus emphasize its importance. This observation is critical in Rossellini's case, since, in his educational project, his detailed staging led him to invent the *Pancinor* lens technique for informational purposes. The *Pancinor* was a device which resembled the zoom and allowed the director “to vary the focal distance with great ease, he barely had to move the camera at all” (Bou, 2003; p. 11) and select the significant details that help him to better contextualize the historical moment (Giammatteo, 1990).

Watching Rossellini's first three films, one feels that the Italian director's concern, as well as representing acts of war, was to show the conflict in which Italy was immersed from a human dimension: everyday life and times of rest for the sailors, airmen and tank drivers; the lives of the wounded on a hospital ship; or an encounter between Italians and Russians in a Russian hut in the middle of the fighting.

In all three films, we find the recurrent and symbolic figure of the wounded invalid, unable to move on his own and whom someone else must help to overcome the tragedy. To this figure of the impotent invalid we must add that of the prisoner. These characters temporarily lose their ability to fight, their military status, to be immersed in situations where human relations prevail over acts of war. All of these elements contribute to awarding these films their relatively sober and anti-spectacular character and a human, non-heroic, non-warlike dimension to the characters that appear. The combatants in Rossellini films are not seen to perform heroic, superhuman, aggressive acts of war. When they are seen fighting, Rossellini is concerned to show that, like all human beings, they are afraid and they do not understand what is happening around them. We are therefore far from a *mise en scène* which is characteristic of war propaganda and closer to a more human one, where heroism is to endure suffering and cruel living conditions, and to have a sense of duty and sacrifice.

4. Rossellini and the humanization of art: from Fascinating Fascism to captivating humanism

Our approach is complex and controversial. Indeed, an important area of discussion about the films that make up the fascist trilogy could link with Susan Sontag's famous thesis in *Fascinating Fascism* (Sontag, 1975). This piece produced a sensation because Sontag had built her formidable standing in the 1960s as a cultural commentator who celebrated the formal properties of works of art. In this article, on the portraits of the members of the Nuba tribe made by Leni Riefenstahl and presented in the exhibition *The Last of the Nuba*, Sontag concludes that in the exaltation of the primitive there is a clear idea of finding purity outside civilization. She connects this with the ideas held in the commissioned movies that Riefenstahl

directed for the Nazis, which celebrated “the rebirth of the body and of community, mediated through the worship of an irresistible leader” (Sontag, 1975).

The three films of Rossellini are also commissioned works with the ultimate goal of propaganda for the fascist cause in the years of war. However, Rossellini’s and Riefenstahl’s work diverge in important ways. The main difference is that, despite complying with the order, Rossellini’s “look” is more concerned with exalting the foundations of a true Christian humanitarianism than with fascist representation. As Ben-Giath(2000) pointed out, Rossellini explores, through his movies, qualities that give a clear space to the culture of Christian humanitarianism: for instance, in the demonstration of the internal conflicts of the characters, or in the exaltation of faith or in concerns about deaths generated by War. The protagonists of the fascist war films are simple people who are subject to a crusade. Rossellini avoids any emphatic rhetoric in the use of camera movements and in the use of music. There is no glorification of the hero, only the search of the human being behind the hero. This same aspect will be present in the educational films of Rossellini. Indeed, in *Viva l’Italia!* (1961), the leading figure of Garibaldi is not considered as a hero but as a man whose famous patriotic sentences are pronounced with the same intensity as the gestures of everyday life.

If we examine the ideological peculiarities of Italian fascism, we find two important sources. The first one is the texts of Giovanni Gentile proposing a reform of the Hegelian dialectic to overcome the waste of both positivism and materialism, like catching the true and deep sense of reality understood as pure act. Gentile (1928) considered art as a dream, because it is the outcome of a creative process of human beings, which has not any link with the reality observed by practical people. Consequently, Gentile (1928) argued that art should not show everyday reality but only emerge from the life that takes roots in the mind of the poet, who in turn uses its own mood to represent life. Gentile’s poetry came to be “an aesthetic without ethics” (Quintana, 2003; p. 178) and, during the twenty-year period of Mussolini government (1922–1943), Italian art claimed the fascist rhetoric of falsehood and masking of reality. The dominant aesthetic postulates were the concepts of order, strength and clarity theorized by Gentile (1928). These principles were translated into film industry through the industry production of action films with escapist effects.

In his fascist trilogy, Rossellini opposes these postulates to show everyday life in the battleship of the army, the problems of a prisoner aviator in a refugee camp, and a priest’s struggle to follow the ways of their faith in a hostile world like the one led by communism. In his approach to the characters Rossellini begins to suggest an ethical dimension that requires the absolute predominance of aesthetics. From this perspective, he also contradicts the concept of “fascist modernism”, coined by Hewitt (1993). This idea, starting from the exaltation of modernity operated by Italian Futurism and led by the figure of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, seeks to capture the art of the new expressions generated by speed, movement and industry. Rossellini is not interested in machines, he is interested in persona. Indeed, in *La nave vianca*, although the Italian filmmaker is torn between the demonstration of the mechanics of the ship and the capture of everyday life of sailors, he finishes preferring human being.

All Rossellini’s subsequent films reject any postulate from Futurism and he looks for humanism. Rossellini believes that art and science should make an alliance to always be at the service of the human being. From this standpoint, Seknadje-Askénazi (2000) argues that Rossellini and his collaborators’ objective in their films aimed at fascist propaganda clearly depicted individuals free from any exceptional moral characteristics that distinguished them from other individuals in the group or groups they belonged to. They were ordinary people. Indeed, as Frank (1951) stated, the substance of Rossellini’s films is man himself, and the Italian director shows this “through a style of absolute originality: the dramatic via the undramatic, heroism via non-heroism, propaganda via non-propaganda” (p. 150).

Thus, the argument that the Rossellini’s fascist-period films should not be classified simplistically as fascist propaganda as propaganda of a different order. This order, which would classify the films as a hybrid of public relations and propaganda, can be seen as controversial for different factors. The most common one is to try to establish the thin red line (if any) that divides propaganda from public relations even before the foundation of the *Scara Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in 1622. Nevertheless, we have to go beyond this factor and take into account the impact of twenty century totalitarianisms in culture and society. One consequence was the emergence of some catholic movements that influenced different fields—even public relations. Andrew (1978) book on André Bazin, who later co-founded the renowned film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, emphasizes the specific role played by neorealism in the elaboration of Bazin’s cinematic theory. Becoming familiar with Emmanuel Mounier’s Christian phenomenology in French Personalist movement, Bazin considered that “neorealist films illustrated the aesthetic dimension of a new revolutionary humanism” (Eades, 2011; p. 111) that Rossellini (1954) defined in an interview with Francois Truffaut and Maurice Scherer: “The point is to come close to human beings, to see them for what they are, with objectivity, without preconceived ideas, without moral debates, at least in the beginning” (p. 1). This point of view conducted Rossellini to his education project. On the other hand, the French personalist movement led by Mounier influenced European public relations. Indeed, the so-called European School of Public Relations, which proposed Christian humanitarianism approach to public relations, has to be included as a part of the Christian phenomenology effects on the post-war French intellectuals, thinkers and scholars (Xifra, 2014). In one of his last papers, Lucien Matrat, the leader of this group of public relations scholars and practitioners, defended the idea that the public relations process can be compared with an education process. Accordingly, public relations can be approached as a “pedagogical operation” (Matrat, 1998; p. 38). So, the idea of Lucien Matrat and the European School about public relations stands on the same foundations as Roberto Rossellini films: human beings.

The realist and didactic tendency of Rossellini’s films was not restricted to this first stage of his career, but was rather a work in progress which continued throughout the neorealism years. It was marked by an ethical and aesthetic awareness in

the face of the disaster Europe had experienced with the Second World War and reached its peak with the didactic project the Italian director adopted from 1964 onwards.

5. The TV educational project

In its early years, Italian television was controlled by the Christian Democrats via the Ministry for Transport and Tourism. Although the first experimental broadcasts by RAI-TV (Italian public television) came in 1952, RAI did not broadcast regularly until 3 January 1954. The key figure in these early years was the director general, Rodolfo Arata, who instigated an “authentically monolithic state monopoly” (Grasso, 1992). This model was validated by the Italian constitutional court in 1960, when it declared the state monopoly legitimate due to all citizens having the right to a state-run television which should ensure objectivity of information (Morrión, 1978).

With the arrival of Ettore Bernabei as director general of RAI a new phase began in the history of Italian television, consolidating the monopolistic policy. His management (from 1962 to 1974) was characterized by a model of unidirectional dissemination, very much guided by the political power of the Christian Democrats. His principal goal was to use television as a pedagogical tool, to the extent that informative and educational programs came to occupy 26.8% of programming, compared to the 11.9% of the previous period (Grasso, 1992).

For the governing Christian Democrats, the function of TV was to educate. It was understood as a great pedagogical tool, “although they did not forget to include in educational programs a series of ideological values oriented towards Christian Democracy” (Galli, 2007; p. 135).

Within this context—and following the neorealist period, when he applied his ideas on filming reality, and the years in which he made rupturist films with his wife Ingrid Bergman concerned with redefining reality—Rossellini took the decision to abandon cinema to dedicate his time to experience the didactic possibilities of television. He wanted to configure a broad encyclopedia of television as a tool for educating via the image and announced his intentions in an act organized by the magazine *Filmcritica* at the Einaudi bookshop in Rome. This talk, which was later reproduced in edition 131 of the aforementioned Italian magazine, was a true declaration of principles. The text may be considered the starting point of an interesting methodological investigation which would reconsider some of the foundations of traditional cinematographic language. The text began with this reflection:

The crisis of today is not only a cinema crisis, but also a crisis of culture. Cinema, the broadcast medium *par excellence*, has had the merit of making the crisis palpable, making it evident. This is why I want to retire from the profession and think I have the obligation to prepare myself – in all freedom – to rethink everything from the beginning, to get back on track from entirely new foundations (Rossellini, 1963; p. 140).

To Rossellini, the cinema camera must observe things in the real world, similar to how a child observes the reality of his or her surroundings. The child’s innocent view of objects implicitly involves a question as to the why of things, a concern for knowledge.

The filmmaker began work on his project to create a television encyclopedia in 1964. His first work was the TV series *The Iron Age*, which over five episodes shows man’s path to an awareness of metal and its potential for manipulation. *The Iron Age* was presented as a series commissioned by the state steel company Italsider in a publicity effort for the opening of Italy’s fifth largest steel center in Taranto – a key piece in the Christian Democrats’ economic development policy for the South. Half of the cost of the film’s production was covered by a subsidy from Italsider (Bondanella, 1993).

In his encyclopedic work for television, Rossellini employed a methodology of vision based on a new definition of reality and valid tools for capturing and reconstructing it. To Rossellini, showing meant reconstructing the necessary time of events to uncover their profound underlying reason. Film thus became an extension of one’s vision. Rossellini only showed, he did not demonstrate.

From 1964 onwards, Rossellini applied his particular theory of this vision to his educational film project. Now however, it was directed towards historical reconstruction. The goal behind his television work was nothing more than to inform by using new approaches to this vision. His aim was to search for what he himself called “essential image”: an image that should have all the basic elements of information for understanding a (historical or contemporary) time viewed always from the present.

Rossellini’s reflections on the informative value of images coincided with the time when television imposed itself on the masses in Italy, reaching five million households by 1963. Rossellini believed the moral duty of state-run television to be the promotion of culture and education. Television was, to him, the ideal medium for developing his didactic theory as it allowed more flexibility in production rules and had a greater impact on the audience than cinema. Television had a duty to inform via images.

Rossellini’s working method was always very practical – few days of shooting, little editing and careful monitoring of needless expenses. His great concern was the preparation of the product, which never involved the construction of closed scripts, as these were rewritten and reworked during filming. Preparation meant above all considerable effort in terms of bibliographical documentation. The narrative of his films always began with the destruction of all systems of traditional dramaturgy. The characters and historical events served to produce a document tailored to reality. The narrative was adapted to the flow of this reality and reproducing it was based entirely on the idea of waiting. The concept of waiting, which Rossellini had developed in his fiction films, arose from the idea that it was necessary to award a temporal dimension to images, breaking

with the movement of classic cinema to show characters that seek, move or wait until some fortuitous disclosure might change their relationship with things or even with history.

During filming, the key element was the *mise en scène*. The camera was used as a microscope that had to seek out the truth hidden inside the characters. The work of the camera was entirely functional, serving the informative elements involved in staging. In order to capture reality without the manipulation inherent in all forms of staging, he invented the aforementioned zoom system, known by the name of *Pancinor*, which he himself manipulated by aiming it at the essential events of each scene. As [Bou \(2003\)](#) pointed out, through the *Pancinor*, Rossellini was able to maintain a directing style composed of long shots without having to prepare the actors' movements according to the location of the camera. From this standpoint, the *Pancinor* zoom can be considered a public relations technique for film discourse purposes—with scenes generally made up of sequential shots, Rossellini did not have to resort to the paraphernalia that a dolly or crane shot requires. Like the style of direct cinema, the *Pancinor* allowed improvisation during takes.

6. Rossellini's educational films, propaganda, and public relations

John Grierson, father of the British documentary movement and a public relations practitioner who approached propaganda from a public relations perspective ([L'Etang, 1999](#)), stated with regard to propaganda:

There are some of us who believe that propaganda is the part of democratic education which education forgot. . . We believe that education has concentrated so much on people knowing things that it has not sufficiently taught them to feel things. . . We can, by propaganda, widen the horizons of the schoolroom and give to every individual each in his place and work, a living conception of the community which he has the privilege to serve. We can take his imagination beyond the boundaries of his community to discover the destiny of his country. We can light up his life with a sense of active citizenship. We can give him a sense of greater reality in the present and a vision of the future (cited in [Marlin, 2002](#); p. 21).

These words could have come from Rossellini himself via his involvement in didactic and pedagogical cinema – a cinema he would strive to steadily construct over the years with his films. Rossellini almost always made films that served to educate the masses and that could be made with the help of the state. Thus, in his final period of filmmaking, Rossellini made “positive propaganda within a democratic framework” ([Seknadje-Askénazi, 2000](#); p. 237), while approaching, it in a thoughtful and selfless way. Aware, like Grierson, of the power of audiovisual media, Rossellini was also aware of the inevitable spread of TV and the need to use it to reach public opinion, crossing geographical, linguistic, cultural, and social boundaries, and leaving no room for the illusion merchants and advertisers that flood the airwaves and screens ([Seknadje-Askénazi, 2000](#)). Only thus, according to the Italian director, television could contribute to peace and knowledge.

Rossellini himself referred to the American propaganda of World War II to defend his cinema and his intentions ([Rossellini, 1987](#)). For the filmmaker, the pedagogue should use the same tools in peacetime, but this time “to show and explain all the great discoveries... and modern techniques, to propagate well-being and disseminate knowledge” ([Rossellini, 1987](#); pp. 262–263). Thus, propaganda and the tools it uses are acceptable if the planned intentions and defended cause are positive, that is to say “if it is used within a fundamentally democratic society” ([Seknadje-Askénazi, 2000](#); p. 235).

Unlike Grierson, whose thinking was focused on the role of propaganda in social or democratic education and social responsibility ([L'Etang, 1999](#)), Rossellini does not think about propaganda, but rather truth and information. He wished only to show that the viewer cannot be manipulated by the demands of interpretative drama, by the methods of staging. Instead, the viewer has to be able to watch the film with complete freedom.

Rossellini's cinematographic career, and especially the two periods analyzed in this article, confirms that documentary and educational films are an ideal technique for the purposes of public relations (see [Harivel, 1960](#); [Kilborn, 2006](#); [L'Etang, 1999](#)). We have highlighted how, in his fascist trilogy, Rossellini's directing intentionally veered away from the emphasis characteristic of war propaganda cinema and argued for a documentary narrative more typical of the concept of ethical propaganda ([St. John III, 2006](#)), making its education aims closer to that of public relations.

As [Curtin and Gaither \(2008\)](#) asserted: “Research suggests that propaganda can be either a phase in a process that leads to traditional public relations or synonymous with public relations, particularly in countries emerging from dictatorships and authoritarian governments” (p. 7). Rossellini's educational project aligns with this statement, because his persuasive vocation is obvious and fits within the class of educational or public awareness campaigns that some authors (e.g., [Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005](#)) include as types of public relations campaigns.

Equally, Rossellini's educational project, despite not being the result of a public relations strategy such as that implemented in the UK in the fifties ([Harivel, 1960](#); [L'Etang, 2000](#)), helps to define a specific type of staging for educational purposes that any form of documentary may have within the framework of a public relations strategy. The *Pancinor* zoom is the clearest example of this. Indeed, as [Brunette \(1996\)](#) pointed out, the first major benefit of the *Pancinor* lens is that it allows Rossellini to reframe without having to cut. “This does not mean that there are no cuts in the film; in fact, there are many, and they are handled much more conventionally—carefully cutting on head movements and other action—than in any previous film” (p. 222). However, when the filmmaker begins a take in medium or long shot and then wants to move in closer to pick up a character's expression, he is able to do so with the zoom, without having to cut to a closer shot. The

primary result is to enhance greatly the possibilities of the *plan-séquence* always so dear to Rossellini, and the only constraint on the length of the take is the amount of film stock that can be held in the magazine at one time (Brunette, 1996).

7. Discussion and conclusions

According to Gallagher (1998), Rossellini and John Grierson were mutual admirers and had occasion to meet in Canada in 1960. This is not surprising, as, although they each developed a unique style, the two filmmakers had common influences (such as the Russian filmmaker Sergei M. Eisenstein, an influence recognized by Grierson and evident in the opening minutes of *La nave bianca*) and shared the same principles (Caminati, 2012).

The periods analyzed in this article and Rossellini's neorealist period form a very homogeneous body of work that reflects one of the statements the Italian director made in an interview with critics from the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*:

I reject education. Education brings with it the idea of leading, directing and conditioning, and I think we should seek the truth in a much freer way than that. The important thing is to inform. It is true that education should be a given, yes, but freely, and when the information is comprehensive and complete (cited in Domarchi, Douchet, & Hoveyda, 1962, p. 5).

Regardless of the nuances characterizing each director, it is clear that this statement is complemented by the following from Grierson: "If we believe that public relations means education by communication, the influencing of public attitudes by the dissemination of information, then film offers an impressive medium for establishing a dramatic and articulate bridge between an organization and its public" (cited in L'Etang, 2000; p. 84).

Other parallels between the two authors are found in their stance against fascism and totalitarianism. Grierson anticipated and accepted the charge of totalitarianism arguing that morally "you can be totalitarian for evil and you can also be totalitarian for good. My position is that this is a time when we had better be totalitarian for good and totalitarian for the sake of humanity, if humanity is to be served" (cited in L'Etang, 1999).

We have argued that Rossellini was not characterized by a *mise en scène* typical of fascist propaganda, but rather than he was concerned with distancing himself by means of narrative strategies characteristic of the documentary genre. Indeed, despite the Rossellinian goal of wanting to inform and not educate, behind his intentions lies the same idea espoused by Grierson when recollecting the origins of the Documentary Film Movement. Grierson wrote:

Democracy was in danger of collapse, because its citizens did not know how to make it work. The weakness, therefore, was essentially in the realm of public education and information. The vast possibilities of the new mass media... had not been spotted as the key to the problem. Film, because of its obvious mass popularity, and the vividness of the visual image...was an obvious choice as a medium in which to put the theory into practice (cited in L'Etang, 1999).

Those educational films were seen by Grierson as a solution because they could "do something to bridge the gap between the citizen and the wide world" (cited in L'Etang, 1999), because even "if you can't teach the citizenry to know everything about everything all the time, you can give them comprehension of the dramatic patterns within a living society" (cited in L'Etang, 1999). Grierson saw education as an instrument for social action, declaring that:

its function is the immediate and practical one of being a deliberate social instrument – not dreaming in an ivory tower, but outside on the barricades of social construction, holding citizens to the common purpose their generation has set for them. Education is activist or it is nothing (cited in L'Etang, 1999).

The idea of objective and educational information is not new in the public relations field. At the beginning of the sixties, Harivel (1960) stated: "if a firm or organization wishes to establish good and lasting relations with the public, one of the best ways to achieve this is by providing young people with objective information of a purely educational nature" (p. 13). In his search for the *essential image*, the staging Rossellini used in his films was sober and voluntarily anonymous. This image, in order to comfortably inform the viewer, needed to be refined to the maximum, and not contain useless, transgressive, or disruptive elements. It was an anti-spectacular image close to reality.

This article suggests that public relations discourse will be more effective with proper staging, that is, with an adequate selection of narrative and rhetorical resources for each case. L'Etang (1999, 2000) has shown that documentary narrative is a public relations technique and, more recently, Xifra and Girona (2012) have analyzed the narrative of analepsis, or flash-back, as a resource in public relations discourse. Rossellini, however, never used the flash-back as a narrative resource, considering it an element of drama which, like all dramaturgical elements, interposed itself and denatured the truth. Therefore, public relations film discourse adapts itself in each case to the political context of filmmaking condition. Thus, while Frank Capra's documentary series *Why We Fight* had to emphasize the truth of its discourse through the use of flash-back, by contrast with what the Nazis were doing in their propaganda films, Rossellini's production context and ethical stance favored the use of the long take thanks to the public relations film technique of the *Pancinor* zoom.

From a historiographical perspective, Rossellini's educational films show that history can be written not only for propaganda purposes, but also for public relations goals.

Additionally, Roberto Rossellini should rightly be awarded a place as one of a group of filmmakers who, like John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Humphrey Jennings or Louis de Rochemont (Girona & Xifra, 2014), have played an important role in

creating a rhetorical and audiovisual dimension to public relations – particularly in the production of educational films and documentaries. Certainly, like Grierson, Rossellini saw educational films as an instrument of social action and a key source of social change.

Britain's early public relations pioneer, Stephen Tallents, who lent his patronage to Grierson's documentary film movement, had an "educational and patriotic conception of public relations" (Anthony, 2012; p. 63). Rossellini's filmography can be similarly approached as a useful body of work in the history of such a conception, with the *mise en scène* playing an essential role in both his early films from the fascist era and during his educational period. Indeed, to Rossellini, "what is important is to provide people with elements to aid comprehension. "That's what I try to do" (cited in Piault, 2000; p. 9). Like Grierson, Rossellini was concerned with the idea that films should be a tool for education and understanding among nations.

All those aims are an excellent example of what visual-spatial intelligence means in ages before the emergence of digital technologies to create social imaginary. Fieschi (cited in Gallagher, 1998) considered the *Pancinor* as Rossellini's "second youth" and the discovery of "a new concept of space" (p. 524): formerly the stage space was basically stationary, now it is basically fluid. Indeed, Rossellini's—as Sergei M. Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Leni Riefenstahl, Alessandro Blasetti and other great filmmakers that served to propagandistic and persuasive purposes—used his visual-spatial intelligence in staging, but he also went beyond all those filmmakers creating and operating the *Pancinor* zoom device to reach reality and truth. From this standpoint, and to sum up, visual-spatial intelligence helps public relations and other persuasive discourses to be more effective.

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