

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Rossellini's Films

FALSENESS

Introduction Although we can identify elements of deception in several Rossellini films (such as *Fear* and *The Machine that Kills Bad People*), it is a theme only in one. *General Della Rovere*, in fact, is shot through with falseness, despite the fact that it is based on a real story.

General Della Rovere Underlying the overt politics of the film is the intriguing theme of appearance versus reality. Who is the protagonist? He is a distinguished-looking, well-dressed, charming, middle-aged man named Emanuele Bardone, who is a gambler and a conman. However, he introduces himself to others as Col Grimaldi, now an engineer, though once an officer in the Italian cavalry. In truth, he was dismissed for debts and embezzlement and then convicted for various crimes from fraud to bigamy. Then this man impersonates General Della Rovere as part of a bargain to free him if he identifies a partisan leader held in prison. In effect, this is the story of a double imposter (Bardone who is both Grimaldi and Della Rovere) who is charged with the task of identifying another man. Such deception, lying and spying is unavoidable in a country occupied by a foreign power, when one loyalty is laid on top of another. But the film emphasises this ambiguity in both plot detail and characters. First, there is the prominence of the ring, a fake ring that Bardone has given to his girlfriend. For the opening third of the story, he tries to sell it, claiming it is 'rare' and 'oriental' and a 'sapphire,' when, in fact, it is practically worthless. Second, there is Bardone himself, who is a fantasist, a man who believes in his own lies. He even appears to be convinced that the ring is genuine. His most significant example of self-deception, however, is his successful impersonation of the general. When he dies at the end, we are left wondering if he might have really become the hero he so desperately would have liked to be.