

'The Death Of Louis XIV': Review

19 May, 2016 | By Allan Hunter



Dir. Albert Serra. France, 2016, 105 mins.

A monarch's devotion to duty and service endures until the last breath in *The Death Of Louis XIV*, a painstakingly realised portrait of the agonising final days of the Sun King. Based on extensive medical records and the memoirs of the Duke of Saint-Simon and other courtiers, Catalan director Albert Serra's film has a documentary-like authenticity, matching the unblinking instincts of a modern reality television series with the visual allure of the old masters.

Serra has found his perfect Louis in Jean-Pierre Leaud.

A perfectly-judged central performance from *nouvelle vague* veteran Jean-Pierre Leaud adds to the film's appeal, although the subject matter and sombre approach hardly scream commercial juggernaut. In regal cinematic terms this is more of a companion piece to Roberto Rossellini's *The Rise Of Louis XIV* (1966) than a crowd-pleaser like the Alan Bennett-scripted *The Madness Of King George* (1994). The film's formal rigour and the presence of Leaud should still be sufficient to endear it to significant numbers of hardcore art house enthusiasts and history buffs.

At the court of Louis XIV (Leaud), there is no such thing as privacy. Everything the King says and does is a matter of public record and frequently witnessed by the Royal household. Any loss of appetite or sign of vigour is considered an omen. Crowned King in 1643, Louis's reign

is the longest of any European monarch. The film begins in 1715 as the aged King suffers horrible pains in his left leg and is confined to bed.

Royal obligations continue as a group of doctors, including Fagon (Patrick D'Assumcao), seek a remedy in a change of diet, the consumption of donkey's milk, recourse to bleeding and other futile suggestions. Gangrene sets in and the leg turns black. It becomes apparent that the situation is hopeless and that the King must prepare for death, leaving instructions for what is to happen to his organs and the question of succession.

It is the attention to detail and the refusal to compromise that allows Serra to create such a compelling, coherent vision. The film unfolds entirely within the treacherous darkness of the King's chambers. Candles provide the only points of light in a life that has literally retreated into the shadows as the disease advances like a conquering army. Cinematographer Jonathan Ricquebourg creates a visual look that echoes paintings by Holbein or Hogarth.

Working with professional actors for the first time, Serra has also found his perfect Louis in Jean-Pierre Leaud. The make-up department do a fantastic job of creating a sickly pallor and Leaud is also given a spectacular plumage of frizzy gray hair that resembles two poodles fighting over a bone. Leaud plays with a weary indomitability, determined to carry on, gracious and dignified in his terrible suffering. The attention to detail extends to his performance with barely glimpsed grimaces of pain, the discomfort of swallowing, faraway looks and sudden moments of fierce concentration all building the impression of a great force fading away. It is easily the actor's best role and most noteworthy performance in some time.

Cannes Q&A: Albert Serra, 'The Death Of Louis XIV'

21 May, 2016 | By Elisabet Cabeza



The director speaks to *Screen* in Cannes about his new film *The Death Of Louis XIV*, which plays as a Special Screening.

A performance commissioned for the Centre Georges Pompidou that never saw the light of day was the starting point for *The Death Of Louis XIV*, by Catalan film-maker Albert Serra [pictured collecting his Golden Leopard in Locarno in 2013 for *Story Of My Death*]. Serra's latest film paints a masterful portrait of the slow and painful death of the Sun King at the hands of his incompetent doctors. Iconic French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud plays Louis XIV, commanding scenes with his regal presence and servicing both Serra's sense of humour and his taste for tableaux.

The Death Of Louis XIV could see Serra reaching a wider audience, beyond the auteur and festival circuit. Produced by Andergraun, Capricci and Rosa Filmes, the film is sold by Capricci.

How did you make the transition from a museum performance to a film about the death of the Sun King?

The original project already had Jean-Pierre Léaud in it. He had to perform the death of Louis XIV over the course of 15 days. Visitors could see him perform and the idea was to film the whole thing.

When the project fell through, the story stayed with me and we still had some budget left, so four years later I took it in hand again with the same idea at the core: the death of Louis XIV in a single location, mainly his bedroom, and condensing the 15-day span to an hour and a half in a conventional fictional narrative.

We have tried to be accurate both in the screenplay [written by Serra and Thierry Lounas] and the production design, in which I got involved myself. I'm also very happy about the cinematography [by Jonathan Ricquebourg]. A lot of people have mentioned Rembrandt as a reference but the truth is that was not on my mind despite the fact that I'm more influenced in my work by art than I am by film history. More than Hitchcock, I grew up loving avant-garde artists.

In your film, the almighty Sun King faces the moment in which he's slowly losing everything. There's a sense of the everyday life of a historical character and a subtle sense of humour, too. How keen were you to explore all this?

The idea of absolute power combined with a state of total physical helplessness was very attractive. It's also a kind of little revenge that we artists can take in front of the powerful: to show them that, facing death, we are all the same. I also wanted to escape the cliché that a palace runs like clockwork. He calls for water and they take forever to tend to him, for example. It was his sunset but that of the system surrounding him as well.

About the sense of humour: irony is very present in my filmography, even in subjects like death. Jean-Pierre Léaud's performance worked in that sense too. He was very original in the way he played with his own persona and that of his character.

When Léaud at one point stares at the camera, you are making reference to the history of French cinema, linking that scene with his role in Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*.

Yes, it's one of the moments in which the interaction of the iconic charge of the actor and that of his character is most powerful. I liked the idea of him escaping the contemporary and urban image he is so associated with and working with him in a radically different context.

Could the film have a wider distribution, given that it's more accessible than your other films?

How it works in Cannes will be decisive in that respect. I know there has been interest by international distributors at the market, more than I had experienced with other of my films. The theatrical release might be different too, more ambitious. We'll have to see. In France, say, whether we come out eight or 10 prints or 50 is yet to be decided.

Are you already working on another project?

Yes, a film called *I Am An Artist*, about the world of contemporary art in today's society. We are working on the pre-production and I'm aiming to shoot in 2017. It's a comedy, a farce about how an artist comes to be. Is it the rest of the world that decides who is an artist or yourself? I'm in it as a producer as well and we are looking for more partners, a co-production, possibly with Portugal, France, Germany and maybe an American producer too.

'The Death of Louis XIV' ('La Mort de Louis XIV'): Cannes Review

11:07 AM PDT 5/19/2016 by Boyd van Hoeij



French New Wave veteran Jean-Pierre Leaud stars as the bedridden Roi Soleil in Catalan filmmaker Albert Serra's latest.

Even though his mannered Locarno Golden Leopard Winner *The Story of My Death*, about the eventual meeting of legendary (and thirsty) figures Casanova and Dracula, clocked in at a butt-numbing 150 minutes, the new feature from the Catalan king of stasis, Albert Serra, proves he's got still more to say about dying — and, specifically, dying very slowly — in the 18th century. The good news is that *The Death of Louis XIV* (*La Mort de Louis XIV*) isn't only the ultra-arthouse director's first feature in which he works with professional actors instead of amateurs, but it's also by far Serra's most accessible work to date. Buyers and programmers familiar with the auteur will of course understand this hardly puts the film, essentially a death-chamber piece, in *Avengers* territory, though commercial prospects are certainly better than usual.

The film's only exterior sequence comes at the very start, as the 76-year-old Louis XIV (French New Wave legend Jean-Pierre Leaud) surveys his famous gardens at Versailles, which were partially constructed during his 72-year reign. He's in a proto-wheelchair because his leg already hurts and it certainly can't be a coincidence that the monarch's overlooking his estate in the twilight hours before retiring to the palace, a place he'll only leave again a fortnight later, a dead man.

For almost the entire film that follows, Serra keeps the viewers inside the king's bedroom, with practically no expeditions to even the adjacent room and corridors. The

claustrophobic setting within what viewers presumably know is a vast expanse of real estate (which in turn was a tiny fleck of property within the Kingdom of France), is clearly meant to humanize the man who believed he ruled France by divine right but who, in his waning days and hours, looked just like millions of others on their deathbed. Ailing and bedridden, almost all of the king's worldly possessions aren't just offscreen but also literally out of reach for him and with this simple economical trick — no large sets or huge budgets required — Serra manages to scale a man-god back to increasingly fragile human dimensions.

The Death of Louis XIV, which unspools in chronological fashion, first sees various members of the court ask Louis to join their parties and gatherings, which he politely refuses. It's clear from the early going he's not well, with Serra and co-screenwriter and producer Thierry Lounas explaining both the brownnosing at the court and the king's fragile health in a single short moment, as courtiers applaud after His Royal Highness has managed to eat a cookie for the first time in a while.

Louis tries to continue to run the country from his bed, receiving people asking for funding of coastal fortifications and instructing his 5-year-old potential successor (the future Louis XV). But it is increasingly the likes of his physician, Fagon (Patrick D'Assumcao), and grave-looking men of the cloth such as Le Tellier (Jacques Henric), who crowd around his bed as his royal leg not only hurts but starts to show the ink-black spots of gangrene that will finally kill him.

Fagon is hardheaded and doesn't want to admit other experts but as Louis's health deteriorates, eventually a group of doctors from the Sorbonne as well as an oddly accented quack from Marseilles with a life-saving elixir are admitted to his bedside. How much political and personal fights were fought over this kind of access is unclear, as Serra always remains within earshot of the titular protagonist, with the film almost unfolding like a diary reenactment of his last days on earth (and the day following his death).

If this sounds like this could be the recipe for a film full of longueurs and repetitions and scenes that might benefit from a wider view, then that would be technically correct but also exactly the point Serra is trying to make. By cataloguing every spoon of food not eaten, every sip of water not swallowed and every sigh and every groan uttered, the myth becomes a man and the inherent paradox of being a divine ruler is revealed.

The more metaphorical meanings of Serra's work will no-doubt please arthouse aficionados but what makes the film accessible is what's actually onscreen. Firstly, there is Jean-Pierre Leaud's regal performance. Though it still takes a little effort to see the actor's now leathery countenance without flashing back to his fresh-faced appearance as a 14-year-old in the most famous freeze-frame in cinema history, he does disappear into the role quite quickly. He's dignified one moment, imperious the next — in one scene, he seems to prefer to choke rather than drink water from a glass that's not actually crystal — and increasingly feeble and febrile. As befits a king, he commands attention even when he's physically a wreck. Appropriately, all others around him are just satellites, deriving their importance and right to be their from his will and power, though they do remain behind and Serra has a deliciously ironic last line in store for one of the supporting characters.

Secondly, the film simply looks stunning. Unlike the anachronistic, mannerist or intentionally somewhat barren production design of some his previous features, Serra here opts for a painterly approach that combines a certain realism (if also an enormous opulence) in costumes, wigs and furniture with a rich, painterly look full of flickering candles and enveloping shadows. The light is literally dying in Jonathan Ricquebourg's richly textured cinematography, while Sebastian Vogler's production design is an

impressively coordinated assembly of red and gold velvets, silks and brocades that, despite being no-doubt the most luxurious in the kingdom, do nothing to alleviate the ruler's pain. The extravagant wigs, which flank Louis's increasingly hollow features, are similarly overflowing in an unnatural way that contrasts with the banality and nakedness of the person slowly dying underneath them.

The film's most piercingly emotional moment is an unexpected instant in which Louis stares right into the camera in a medium shot as a Mozart mass plays on the soundtrack. Time suddenly seems to come to a halt and the commanding legend that was Louis XIV surfaces for a moment before the ailing mortal returns and is allowed to continue to die.

Production companies: Capricci Production, Rosa Filmes, Andergraun Films, Bobi Lux
Cast: Jean-Pierre Leaud, Patrick D'Assumcao, Marc Susini, Irene Silvagni, Bernard Belin, Jacques Henric
Director: Albert Serra
Screenplay: Albert Serra, Thierry Lounas
Producers: Thierry Lounas, Albert Serra, Joaquim Sapinho, Claire Bonnefoy
Director of photography: Jonathan Ricquebourg
Production designer: Sebastian Vogler
Costume designer: Nina Avramovic
Editors: Ariadna Ribas, Artur Tort, Albert Serra
Music: Marc Verdaguer
Sales: Capricci

THE INTERNATIONAL FILM MAGAZINE

Sight&Sound

The Death of Louis XIV – first look

Six decades after he broke out with *The 400 Blows*, Cannes' favourite son Jean-Pierre Léaud plays out the dying of the Sun King in a stately, majestic study of flesh and emblems from Catalonia's Albert Serra: surely the most beautiful film at Cannes 2016.

Jonathan Romney - Updated: 23 May 2016



Actors inevitably carry their history with them to the screen, and of course older actors bring a longer history. But few film actors have personal histories that are as charged, not to say as mythical as that of Jean-Pierre Léaud. It's a particularly significant experience to see a new film in Cannes with Léaud as lead, given that the festival – and indeed French cinema – has derived so much of its prestige from the revolution announced by Léaud's first lead role in 1959, François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*.

Then, as the nascent *nouvelle vague*'s embodiment of reckless innocence, Léaud was a 14-year-old princeling. Today, aged 72, he plays a dying king – nothing less than *le Roi Soleil*, Louis XIV. The fourth feature by Catalan director Albert Serra is the French-language *The Death of Louis XIV*, a chamber drama depicting the final month in the monarch's life, as recorded in the famous *Memoirs of Saint-Simon* and the less celebrated reminiscences of the Marquis de Dangeau. The film begins with an outdoor shot in which the king returns from a hunting trip with a pain in his left leg; the rest of the film takes place entirely within the royal bedchamber, as courtiers gather over a month to witness the king's decline and death from gangrene of the leg.

It could be said that Léaud's is a very physical performance, in that what he does is entirely a matter of the fact of his bodily presence. In truth, he doesn't do very much, not in conventional terms. For nearly the entire film, Louis is all but motionless; he lies in his bed, receives visits

and undergoes medical examinations, for the most part says nothing (except in one scene where he gives advice on statesmanship to a young child, soon to be Louis XV).

There's one remarkable gesture, however; as the ladies in his court make coy pleas, visibly by rote, for their monarch to join them in some *divertissement*, the monarch graciously declines, but promises to grace them with a "grande salutation". He calls for his hat; it's brought to him. He lifts the vast feathered object to his head, hoists it above his peruke, then makes a flamboyant if mechanical gesture of doffing it. He then calls for his hat to be taken away. At last, the ladies applaud.



Serra's film doesn't mock or make heavy weather of the notorious layers upon layers of ritual and protocol that distinguished the royal court at Versailles; this one scene stands for much of it. But throughout we are sharply aware of the stark dichotomy between the corporeal presence of the king – a dying, rotting body which will be dissected and dismantled by royal surgeons at the end of the film – and the idealised nature of the 'royal body' as pure symbol. Léaud's wig is the most visible manifestation of this: a massive fluffy white construction from which his face emerges like that of a decrepit God peering out of a cloud.

There are still traces of the intense heron-like young man that Léaud was in the 60s and 70s, in films such as Rivette's *Out 1* and the later episodes of Truffaut's *Antoine Doinel* cycle. But there's more of the ruined splendour of the eccentrics that Léaud played for directors such as Aki Kaurismäki (*I Hired a Contract Killer*) and Olivier Assayas (*Irma Vep*). The intensity of his gaze, here somewhat fogged and inscrutable, is nevertheless felt to powerful effect in a long take near the end of the film, just the king gazing silently at length – an image that some critics in Cannes compared to the closing freeze-frame of *The 400 Blows*, as if to complete the circle of Léaud's career.

Serra is generally associated with the 21st-century 'slow cinema' tendency (I advisedly call it that rather than a movement), his films so far focusing on mythical figures from fiction, legend and history – Don Quixote in *Honour of the Knights*, the Magi in *Birdsong*, Dracula and Casanova in *The Story of My Death*. In his latest 'sacred monster' study, he has made a film in a somewhat classic mode – 'classic' in the sense of contained, stately, solemn, somewhat in the manner of Straub-Huillet – and a film that is extremely beautiful and even moving, in a rigorously detached way. Time stretches and shifts subtly in the editing (by Ariadna Ribas, Artur Tort and Serra himself), one sequence flowing seamlessly into another, as the confines

of the king's bedchamber become absolute – Jonathan Ricquebourg's candlelit cinematography echoing the chiaroscuro of 17th-century painter Georges de la Tour (as well as John Alcott's work on Barry Lyndon).

There's a lot more to say about this strange, haunting film and about Léaud's performance, but for now it struck me as a modest yet profound contemplation of mortality and history, and perhaps the most beautiful film seen in Cannes this year – where, although it was not part of the official selection, it would certainly have merited a place in the Competition itself.

filmcomment

Cannes Interview: Albert Serra

By [Jordan Cronk](#) on May 22, 2016

Known for his provocative reimaginings of Don Quixote, Casanova, and the Three Kings, Catalanian director Albert Serra has, over the course of 10 years and four features, established himself as an artist of singular talent and irascible temperament. With *The Death of Louis XIV*, Serra again looks to the past for inspiration, but the results are, surprisingly, more reverent than rebellious. Starring Jean-Pierre Léaud as France's longest-reigning King during his final days as he slowly succumbs to the effects of cardiac arrhythmia and gangrene, the film observes in a patient, crestfallen manner how one of history's most famous rulers and a selection of his closest confidants approach an inevitable fate with dignity and reserve. Restricting the drama to the confines of the King's bedchamber and sparing in his use of extraneous formal gestures, Serra has crafted a ravishing, darkly witty evocation of 18th-century aristocracy and a neoclassical period piece as reminiscent of the historical films of Visconti and Rossellini as the modernist literary adaptations of Rohmer and Oliveira.

Serra sat down with FILM COMMENT at Cannes shortly after *The Death of Louis XIV* premiered as an Out of Competition selection to talk about his unique on-set process, his film's more restrained tone, and working with one of French cinema's most beloved actors.

You once described your previous film, *Story of My Death* [13], as “unfuckable.” Your new film, *The Death of Louis XIV*, isn't all that difficult by comparison. In fact, it's almost classical. It's fuckable!

[Laughs] Yes, it's fuckable! It's a very classical film. I originally used that term because I tend to shoot my films in the present, in near real-time, at least psychologically—as a kind of performance. It can sometimes be very difficult for people to figure out the ideas behind the films, or to see my intention. *Story of My Death* is a total magma of despair and crazy ideas. It's very difficult to say what the film actually is, or even if the film was different that it would somehow be better or worse.

The actors contribute to this effect as well, through the mystery and despair inside them. They don't really get to work with ideas. Because of my process, which is based around non-communication, it can be difficult for them to even have an idea of what I want. Because I might not even know what I want! I shoot the film to know, or at least to live and watch these images. The magic of cinema is not to create images but to watch images. It's an instant. It's a

moment. It's not an idea of an image—it's an image. They're not interchangeable. Each one is unique. So if my films are unfuckable, it's because they're unique.

This film is much more reverent than some of your past works, in which you play fast and loose with the material. There's a solemn tone to the film that's appropriate to the subject.

If it seems more reverent, it's because of the subject. In this story there's a unity of time, a unity of space, a unity of action, a unity of character. It's difficult to be iconoclastic here, without just being provocative with empty ideas. So there's a more inherent homogeneity to the film. And in the end it might be more conventional, which I am a little bit ashamed of [*laughs*]. I'm sure everyone was expecting more crazy things. But this was the best possible edit for the film. If crazy ideas would have worked better for the film, then I would have done it. I didn't know, because of my process, how it was going to turn out—that it would actually be so smooth.

But I think it's still probably crazy enough for most people [*laughs*]. The rhythms are still quite slow, and there are a lot of repetitions in the action. We are in one room, and we are very close to the action, and we have an external point of view—but even still, we are not in contemplation. Even though some people have been telling me that the film is moving, there is no identifying with the character—at least not for me. Maybe it's just on the edge of being moving, or of being sentimental.

There seems to be a lot of very specific detail in the King's demeanor and in the actions of those around him. Did you base the film on any specific texts?

Yes, on the memoirs of Saint-Simon, a very important French writer of the time. These were what I like best, but we also did further research and looked at some other historical texts. The film is very faithful to history. But there is also some poetic license, because otherwise the film wouldn't feel present. One idea behind the film is the idea of living the present through the past. Not living the past through memory. I'm respectful with the past and with the story. But then again, I am an artist.

The King is incapacitated for much of the film, but you make room for a few revealing and intimate moments. At one point he talks to his great-grandson and lends him both moral and bureaucratic advice.

Another idea behind the film was the idea of how someone with absolute power deals with impotence. You can have all the power, but because of illness and aging, how do you deal with the finishing of your body—and, for those who know history, with the end of the State? Even if

you're the Sun King, you have no power over the end of this. It's a beautiful lesson, and it's one that he tries to relay to his heir.

Your images are not only painterly, they seem as if they could be directly replicating 18th-century painting. Is this something you look at while making the film?

No, not really. I mean, I know and respect these works—and there's a plastic aspect to my films—but my way of working doesn't allow for that kind of consideration. We were shooting with three cameras and in continuity, so I couldn't really be stopping to so carefully compose every shot. On set I'm more concentrated on actors. For me it's boring to be thinking about light or the plastic aspects of the image while shooting. I prepare most of those details—such as the colors and costumes—beforehand. But during the shooting I prefer to be working with atmosphere and actors. My system is an attempt to destroy a lot of previously held ideas and historical precedences. I like to focus on that destruction while I'm on set.

Did you shoot the film on a stage?

In a castle, actually. But in a barren castle. All the floors and ceilings and walls were cement. Everything you see was created from zero. In the beginning we were supposed to use some of the other rooms in the castle, plus some of the furniture. But that didn't happen. So it was on location, but in an empty one [*laughs*]. It's all part of how I shoot, though. I like a little bit of chaos. It creates an atmosphere on set that I love. Plus, it's more funny. I decided to start making cinema because it's funnier than routine life. Sometimes you have to create these funny moments. And to get these funny moments, chaos helps.

Did you always envision Jean-Pierre Léaud in this part?

The collaboration actually started three to four years ago as a project commissioned from the Centre Pompidou. It was to feature Jean-Pierre performing Louis XIV's death over the course of 15 days while lying in bed inside a glass cage. The project was ultimately canceled because of budget problems, but a few years later we decided to revisit this same idea, but for the cinema. But we tried to stay faithful to this original idea, of his death as a performance and with a unity of space and time and everything I previously mentioned. And maybe that's the point: that, despite this unity, it can be a lively scene for the spectator.

Jean-Pierre had his own ideas about a few things, of course. But my approach is strong enough that it ultimately subsumes the actors' process. It's like lava from a volcano, covering everything and turning everything black, everything uniform—creating an erosion and reforming everything as one color. But what's important is the atmosphere that results from

the methodology, and what creates the intensity that you see on the screen afterwards. So in that way, Jean-Pierre was perfect. I admire him as person, but I wasn't interested in his past as an actor. For me it started with his integrity as a person and his character. And from there anything is possible.

Jordan Cronk is a Los Angeles-based critic and programmer and contributor to Cinema Scope, Sight & Sound, Cineaste, Reverse Shot, and The Los Angeles Review of Books.



How the Cannes Film Festival Made Movies Exciting Again — Critic's Notebook — Eric Kohn

Uncompromising Visions

It's always exciting to encounter the work of a filmmaker who reliably produces great material but never the same way twice. So far, that's the trajectory for Chile's Pablo Larraín, who followed up last year's "The Club" with "Neruda," a wondrous riff on the famous poet that begins as an artificial melodrama before transforming into a sly commentary on just that. Two steps ahead of his audience, Larraín knows how to keep them watching, which bodes well for his upcoming English language debut.

But no film in this year's lineup offered a more engaging example of uncompromising storytelling than Albert Serra's "The Death of Louis XIV." Starring the legendary Jean-Pierre Leaud as France's beleaguered king, who died from gangrene in 1715, Albert Serra's engrossing followup to inventive Casanova drama "The Story of My Death" maintains a clinical air as it tracks the regal character slowly fading from existence. While the king's closest advisors swirl around him, speaking in frantic, whispered tones about their options, "The Death of Louis XIV" evolves into a nuanced treatise on the aimlessness of wealth and power in the face of mortality.

Like most of Serra's work, the movie's spare, contemplative approach is not engineered to impress everyone — and yet "The Death of Louis XIV" played quite well at Cannes, igniting interest from buyers drawn to its haunting atmosphere and historical vision.

Serra, an iconoclastic filmmaker who works entirely on his own terms, seems to have made a movie with some commercial potential for that very reason. It's a welcome reminder that the future of cinema matters less than relying on artists to figure out ways of keeping it relevant in the present.