

Professors on Screen: Learned Authority and the History of Knowledge

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Films about pre-modern scholars rarely show university professors in the simple act of teaching. More often, they follow learned men taking their knowledge outside the classroom and into a wider arena, such as the court, the tribunal, the church, or even the princely household. Such films do not merely illustrate biographies: they show how learned authority was made visible in social situations. Tables 1 and 2 contain the titles and synopses of fifteen films that feature pre-modern professors. The three sections that follow focus on specific examples of academic thought in a social, scientific or legal context. Jean de Coras, in *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, shows humanist law confronted with the problem of identity and proof. Pierre Cauchon, in Bresson's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, shows university theology and canon law confronted with the problem of revelation and obedience. Galileo, in Losey's *Galileo*, shows mathematical natural philosophy confronted with the problem of observation, demonstration, and, finally, censorship. Together, these films suggest that pre-modern professors were not only transmitters of established learning. They were also mediators between specialised knowledge and public truth. Their authority depended on institutions, but it was tested in moments of uncertainty and conflict.

1 JEAN DE CORAS, AND *LE RETOUR DE MARTIN GUERRE*

1.1 JEAN DE CORAS: LIFE AND TEACHING POSITIONS

Jean de Coras, also known in Latin as Corasius, was born in Réalmont, in the Albigeois, probably in 1515, and died in Toulouse in 1572. He belonged to the generation of sixteenth-century French jurists for whom the law was no longer only a scholastic discipline inherited from medieval glossators, but also a field of humanist learning, one that sought to correct ancient texts through philology, understand legal traditions within their precise historical contexts, and apply these insights to contemporary political reflection. Trained in civil and canon law, Coras worked for several of the major centres of legal education in France and Italy. The relatively secure elements of his academic career are his teaching at Valence (de la Croix and Fabre 2021; Nadal 1861), Paris (Taisand 1721), and also at Padua (Negro 2003) and Ferrara (Arabeyre, Halpérin, and Krynen 2007) in Italy, before his appointment as a judge in the Parlement of Toulouse (Hanley 2010). Some authors also report teaching activities in Toulouse (Deloume 1890), Angers & Orléans (Taisand 1721), prior to the position in Valence.

His trajectory illustrates the permeability between university teaching, legal practice, and political office. After his studies and early teaching, Coras became one of the prominent French legal humanists of the mid-sixteenth century. In 1552 he entered the Parlement of Toulouse as conseiller. This transition from chair to court was not a move away from knowledge, but rather a conversion of knowledge into practice, as the *parlementaire* was expected to interpret custom, Roman law, royal legislation, and procedure.

Coras's later life was marked by the religious divisions of the French Wars of Religion. He became associated with the Reformed cause and was eventually caught in the violence that followed

Film	Figure	Academic status	Knowledge problem depicted
<i>Le Retour de Martin Guerre</i> (Daniel Vigne, 1982)	Jean de Coras	Law professor and humanist jurist; later judge in the Parlement of Toulouse.	Legal humanism, proof, testimony, personal identity, and the transformation of social memory into judicial knowledge.
<i>Procès de Jeanne d'Arc</i> (Robert Bresson, 1962)	Pierre Cauchon	Canonist, theologian, and rector of the University of Paris.	Legal procedure, the classification of revelation, and the institutional control of admissible truth.
<i>La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc</i> (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)	Pierre Cauchon	idem	Scholastic interrogation, clerical authority, coercive questioning, and the violence of learned judgment.
<i>Galileo</i> (Joseph Losey, 1975)	Galileo Galilei	Professor of mathematics at Pisa and Padua.	Observation, mathematical natural philosophy, instruments, public demonstration, censorship, and the social responsibility of knowledge.
<i>Galileo</i> (Liliana Cavani, 1968)	Galileo Galilei	idem	Scientific observation, Copernicanism, conflict with Aristotelian and ecclesiastical authority, and the making of new scientific evidence.
<i>Stealing Heaven</i> (Clive Donner, 1988)	Peter Abelard	Master of philosophy and theology in the Paris Cathedral school	Dialectic, scholastic method, charismatic teaching, and the relation between reason, theology, love, and institutional authority.
<i>Luther</i> (Eric Till, 2003)	Martin Luther	Professor of theology at Wittenberg.	Scriptural interpretation, university theology, conscience, reform, printing, and the conflict between learned exegesis and ecclesiastical authority.
<i>Jan Hus</i> (Otakar Vávra, 1954)	Jan Hus	Master, dean, and rector at Prague.	University preaching, reform theology, ecclesiastical trial, authority, conscience, and martyrdom.
<i>Paracelsus</i> (G. W. Pabst, 1943)	Paracelsus	Brief lecturer or professor at Basel.	Medical reform, anti-Galenic polemic, experience versus book learning.

Warning: *Paracelsus* was made in Nazi Germany and carries ideological baggage.

Table 1: Films depicting pre-modern professors

Film	Figure	Academic status	Knowledge problem depicted
<i>John Wycliffe: The Morning Star</i> (Tony Tew, 1984)	John Wycliffe	Oxford theologian and university scholar.	Biblical translation, academic theology, ecclesiastical criticism, and the circulation of reformist knowledge.
<i>Giordano Bruno</i> (Giuliano Montaldo, 1973)	Giordano Bruno	Itinerant philosopher; taught at Toulouse, Royal College, Wittenberg.	Cosmology, philosophical speculation, intellectual mobility, heresy, and the limits of tolerable knowledge.
<i>Tommaso d'Aquino</i> (Leandro Castellani, 1975)	Thomas Aquinas	Master of theology at Paris.	Scholasticism, theology as science, Aristotelian philosophy, and the institutionalisation of Christian learning.
<i>1492: Conquest of Paradise</i> (Ridley Scott, 1992)	Christopher Columbus before the Salamanca Commission	University scholars, clerics, cosmographers, and royal advisers; collective rather than individual professor figure.	Cosmography, navigation, expert evaluation, patronage, and the authority of inherited geographical knowledge.
<i>Zwingli</i> (Stefan Haupt, 2019)	Huldrych Zwingli	Humanist and reformer; professor at the Carolinum, Zurich.	Biblical humanism, preaching, public disputation, urban reform, and the transformation of learned exegesis into civic change.
<i>Miguel Servet / La sangre y la ceniza</i> (José María Forqué, 1989)	Michael Servetus	Physician, theologian, humanist, and professor in Paris.	Medicine, anti-Trinitarian theology, humanist learning, heresy, and the limits of toleration in Calvin's Geneva.
<i>The Name of the Rose</i> (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1986)	William of Baskerville, fictional	Inspired by William of Ockham, professor at Oxford	Books, libraries, censorship, logic, signs, disputation, and the control of dangerous knowledge.

Note: Historically, the “Columbus versus the ignorant professors of Salamanca” scene belongs partly to a later myth. The real issue was not whether the Earth was round; educated scholars generally accepted sphericity.

The serious objection was that Columbus underestimated the size of the Earth.

In the book *The Name of the Rose* other professors from the database are depicted:

Marsilio da Padova (Paris), Jean de Jandun (Paris).

Table 2: Films depicting pre-modern professors

the St Bartholomew's massacres. He was killed with other Protestant magistrates in Toulouse, in October 1572. His life therefore encompasses four central features of sixteenth-century learned culture: academic mobility, legal humanism, confessional conflict, and the passage from university learning to state judicial office.

1.2 CORAS'S CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Coras's contribution to knowledge lies first in legal humanism. Like other French jurists of his generation, he sought to renew jurisprudence by bringing to it the tools of Renaissance scholarship. He mostly wrote on civil law and legal methods. His *De iuris arte libellus* belongs to the broader sixteenth-century attempt to reorganise law as an art or science, rather than as a mere accumulation of authorities.

His most famous work, however, is the *Arrest mémorable du Parlement de Tolose*, his account of the Martin Guerre case (Coras 1561). The title page is reproduced in Figure 1. The book is noteworthy because it is at once a legal report, a narrative, and a moral reflection. It concerns the astonishing case of Arnaud du Tilh, who successfully passed for the missing Martin Guerre, lived with Martin's wife Bertrande de Rols, and convinced many villagers that he was the returned husband. Coras, as rapporteur of the case in Toulouse, was not a detached observer: he was personally involved as one of the judges who had to decide the matter (Tolosana 2026).

The *Arrest mémorable* matters for the history of knowledge because it shows the law facing a problem of identity before modern tools of identification. How does one know that a person is who he says he is? Through memory? resemblance? bodily signs? testimony? local reputation? marital knowledge? Coras turns a criminal case into a problem of evidence and epistemology. The case is also socially striking: learned judges had to evaluate the words and memories of peasants. The courtroom becomes a place where scholarly law and village gossips meet.

Coras's account also helped create a new kind of legal-literary object. By publishing a detailed narrative of a criminal case with learned annotations, he contributed to the transformation of jurisprudence into printed knowledge. The case did not remain locked in the archives of the Parlement; it circulated as a book, attracted readers, and became part of European literary and legal culture. This is why the Martin Guerre affair survived: not only because the story was extraordinary, but because a humanist magistrate turned it into a memorable object of knowledge (Poumarède 2008).

1.3 THE FILM AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Daniel Vigne's *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (1982), written with Jean-Claude Carrière, with Gérard Depardieu as the false Martin and Nathalie Baye as Bertrande, is not simply a film about imposture (Vigne 1982). It is a film about how a society knows. The plot turns on the progressive accumulation, circulation, and collapse of knowledge. At first, the returned man is accepted because he possesses convincing information: he knows names, gestures, family stories, debts, spaces, and intimate details. In a world without identity papers, to know the past convincingly is almost to be the person (Davis 1983).

The village recognises Martin not by abstract proof, but by a web of recollections and expectations. Bertrande's recognition is especially important: she is not merely deceived or passive, but becomes central to the construction of the returned Martin's credibility. The film thereby gives a powerful role to domestic and female knowledge, even though the final institutional authority remains male.

The arrival of the case before the Parlement of Toulouse changes the scale of knowledge. Local memory must now be translated into judicial proof. Coras and the other judges represent learned knowledge: trained, textual, procedural, sceptical, and comparative. But the film also shows the vulnerability of such knowledge. The judges can interrogate, compare testimonies, and reason; yet they too are almost persuaded by the impostor. The sudden appearance of the real Martin Guerre exposes the fragility of even the most careful legal reasoning.

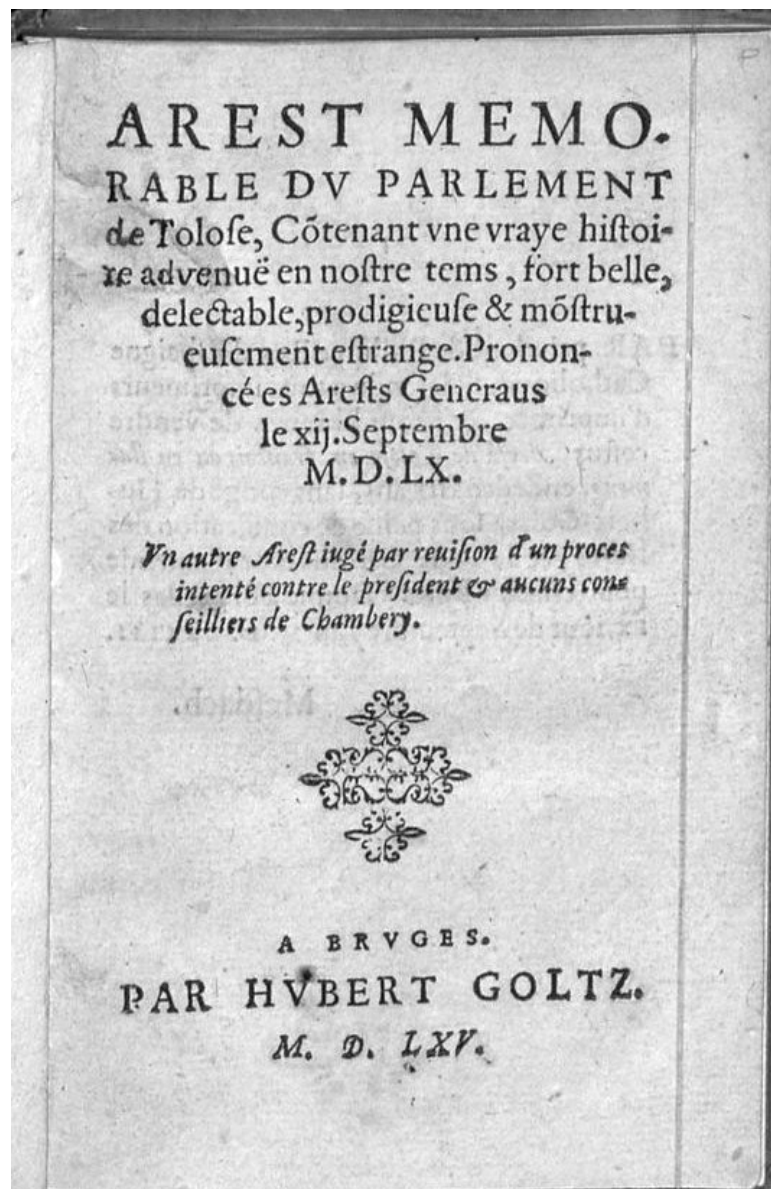


Figure 1: Memorable judgment of the Parlement of Toulouse, containing a prodigious story of our time, with one hundred and eleven fine and learned annotations, of which eleven have been newly added, concerning the trial and the execution of the said judgment. By Master Jean de Coras, counsellor in the said court, and rapporteur of the case. Pronounced at the general hearings on 12 September 1560.

For the history of knowledge, this is the film's strongest message. It does not present the rise of humanistic thought as a simple triumph of reason over ignorance. Rather, it presents a more subtle Renaissance moment: learned reason becomes more sophisticated, more attentive to evidence, more capable of doubt, but also more aware of its limits. Coras embodies that moment. He is a humanist judge, fascinated by the case because it reveals both the power and the danger of interpretation. The law seeks truth, but truth is mediated through the stories told, the hidden interests of the parties, the memories of past events, and the abilities of everyone to be convincing.

In this sense, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* is a very useful film for thinking about pre-modern professors. Coras is not shown in the classroom, but his academic formation is present in the courtroom. The film depicts what university knowledge becomes when it enters social life: a method for organising uncertainty. Humanist jurisprudence does not abolish ambiguity; it gives ambiguity a disciplined form. That may be the strongest reason why the Martin Guerre case became famous. It is not just a story about an imposter: it is a story about the relationship between observation and evidence.

2 PIERRE CAUCHON, AND THE *PROCÈS DE JEANNE D'ARC*

2.1 PIERRE CAUCHON: LIFE, UNIVERSITY FORMATION, AND ACADEMIC OFFICE

Pierre Cauchon was born near Reims, probably in 1371, and died in Rouen on 18 December 1442. He is remembered above all as the bishop who presided over the trial of Jeanne d'Arc, but this later notoriety should not obscure his earlier identity as a scholar. He studied at the University of Paris, the major theological and juridical centre of the French kingdom. He was trained in the arts, canon law, and theology, and he is described as a master of arts and licentiate in canon law (Genet 2019). He did not have the same kind of scholarly career as Jean de Coras (Clément and de la Croix 2025). The central academic feature in Cauchon's early career is his rectorship of the University of Paris. Some sources identify him as rector as early as 1397; others emphasise his rectorship in 1403. In either case, the point is clear: Cauchon occupied one of the most visible offices of the Parisian university at a young age (*Cauchon, Pierre* 1911). The rector was far more than a modern university president or bureaucrat. He represented the corporate body of masters and students, defended university privileges, and participated in the political life of the capital. Cauchon then became increasingly linked to the Burgundian party. He took part in the political conflicts of Paris in the 1410s, served the interests of the dukes of Burgundy, and later attached himself to the Anglo-Burgundian regime. He became bishop of Beauvais in 1420 and bishop of Lisieux in 1432, both places being under English control.

His political loyalty is essential for understanding his role in Jeanne's trial. Jeanne had been captured near Compiègne, within the diocese of Beauvais, which allowed Cauchon to claim jurisdiction. The trial took place in Rouen in 1431, under English power, but it was conducted as an ecclesiastical and inquisitorial proceeding. The miniature shown in Figure 2, probably made within a few decades after her death, strongly emphasizes the power asymmetry. Pierre Cauchon is enthroned, larger, richly dressed, and framed by clerics and officials; Jeanne stands below him, small, pale, and almost childlike, with one attendant or guard behind her.

2.2 CAUCHON'S CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Cauchon was not a creative author or intellectual innovator in the same way as Abelard, Luther, or Galileo. His importance for the history of knowledge is of another kind. He matters because he shows how academic and theological knowledge could be used in judgment. The trial of Jeanne d'Arc was not a simple act of violence disguised as law. It was also a carefully organised learned procedure, relying on canon law, theology, interrogation, written records, expert consultation, and the authority of clerical institutions (Champion 1920; Barrett 1932). The central question of the trial was epistemological as much as theological: how could one know whether Jeanne's voices came



Figure 2: Jeanne d'Arc before Bishop Pierre Cauchon and the judges of Rouen. Illuminated initial from the *Processus in causa fidei contra quamdam mulierem Joannam, vulgariter dictam la Pucelle*, 15th century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. Latin 5969, fol. 1.

from God, from demons, or from delusion? Cauchon and the court attempted to translate Jeanne's experience into categories that learned men could judge: obedience to the Church, submission to ecclesiastical authority, orthodoxy, but also clothing, signs, prophecy, and the status of private revelation. In this sense, the trial is a conflict between two forms of knowledge. Jeanne speaks from experience and memory. Cauchon's court speaks through procedures and written minutes. This makes Cauchon an important figure in the history of knowledge. He does not represent the expansion of inquiry in the heroic sense. He represents the capacity of learned institutions to define what counts as admissible truth.

The university-trained judge does not merely ask whether Jeanne is sincere. He asks whether her sincerity can be made compatible with the categories of ecclesiastical knowledge. The issue is not only whether she knows something, but whether her knowledge can be recognised by an institution that claims authority over revelation. The trial records themselves are also a major object in the history of knowledge. They preserve Jeanne's words, but they preserve them inside the apparatus that condemned her. The archive is therefore double. It is an instrument of domination, because it fixes her answers within hostile procedure, but it is also what made her voice durable. Later, the trial of nullification and the modern editions of the trial records made it possible to reverse the meaning of the documents. What had been written to prove her guilt became evidence of her intelligence and spiritual authority. Cauchon's involuntary contribution to knowledge is thus paradoxical: the procedures used to destroy Jeanne also helped preserve one noteworthy voice from the fifteenth century.

2.3 BRESSON'S FILM AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Unlike more spectacular films on Jeanne, Robert Bresson's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1962) is austere, brief, and almost entirely concentrated on the trial. Florence Delay plays Jeanne, and Jean-Claude Fourneau plays Bishop Cauchon. Bresson based the film closely on the records of the condemnation trial and the later rehabilitation proceedings, reducing the historical material to a concentrated sequence of questions, answers, prison scenes, and ritual acts (Bresson 1962; Sarmiento 2012). The film's importance lies in its refusal to engage in romantic historical spectacle. Bresson does not reconstruct the university, the battlefield, or the full political world of the Hundred Years' War. He instead isolates the machinery of inquiry. We see doors, chains, scribes, judges, guards, and repeated interrogations. The effect is to make knowledge appear as a procedure. Truth is not discovered in a sudden revelation; it is produced, constrained, and distorted by institutional forms.

The film asks us to listen to the difference between Jeanne's short, concrete answers and the court's learned questioning. Cauchon in Bresson's film is not a melodramatic villain. He is more troubling than that. He is the face of impersonal learned authority. He returns to the same points until Jeanne's experience has been forced into the language of heresy and obedience. This is why the film is so valuable as a history of knowledge. It shows that knowledge is not only made by books and lectures. It is also made by procedures of classification.

The film also makes visible the violence of transcription. Jeanne speaks orally; others write. Her answers are transformed into record, and the record becomes the basis for judgment. Yet Bresson's dependence on the trial text creates a second reversal. The written record, originally part of the mechanism of condemnation, becomes the means by which Jeanne is made present again. Bresson therefore presents a paradox of the archive: the document that captured Jeanne's voice for hostile purposes now allows cinema to recover that voice.

3 GALILEO, AND JOSEPH LOSEY'S *GALILEO*

3.1 GALILEO GALILEI: LIFE AND TEACHING POSITIONS

Galileo Galilei was born in Pisa on 15 February 1564 and died at Arcetri, near Florence, on 8 January 1642. He is one of the clearest cases, among the figures considered here, of a pre-modern university professor whose contributions became part of a larger transformation in the history of knowledge. After a period of study at the University of Pisa, Galileo taught mathematics privately and began to acquire a reputation as a mathematician and natural philosopher. In 1589 he was appointed to the chair of mathematics at Pisa (Gualandris and Vitale 2023), where he remained until 1592 (Various authors 2003). In that year he moved to the University of Padua (de la Croix and Vitale 2021; Facciolati 1757), where he held the chair of mathematics until 1610. Padua was part of the Venetian Republic, and this institutional setting mattered. It gave Galileo greater freedom than he would later enjoy under the more courtly and ecclesiastical conditions of Florence and Rome. The Padua years were decisive. Galileo taught mathematics, astronomy, mechanics, fortification, and practical geometry; he also gave private lessons, designed instruments, and cultivated patrons.

The chair of mathematics was not the most prestigious chair in the university hierarchy; philosophy and theology stood higher. Yet precisely from this relatively modest position Galileo helped to raise the status of mathematical knowledge. He treated mathematics not merely as a computational art useful for calendars and artillery, but as a language capable of describing nature. In 1610 Galileo left Padua for Florence, where he became mathematician and philosopher to Cosimo II de' Medici. This was a social promotion and a political risk. The court offered prestige and patronage, but it also removed him from the protection of the Venetian Republic, and placed him closer to the Roman ecclesiastical world. His subsequent condemnation in 1633 cannot be understood without this movement from university professor to court philosopher.

3.2 GALILEO'S CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Galileo's contribution to knowledge is usually associated with the Scientific Revolution, but it is useful to be precise about what changed. He did not simply "discover facts". His work helped make nature into an object that could be measured, represented mathematically, and debated through reproducible evidence. The telescope was central to this transformation. Galileo did not invent the instrument, but he rapidly improved it and turned it toward the heavens. In *Sidereus nuncius* (1610), he reported mountains and irregularities on the Moon, many previously invisible stars, and four satellites orbiting Jupiter (Galilei 1610). These observations challenged inherited Aristotelian and Ptolemaic assumptions. The Moon was not a perfectly smooth celestial body, the heavens contained more stars than the naked eye revealed, and not everything revolved around the Earth.

Galileo's support for Copernicanism became still more explicit in later works, especially the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632) (Galilei 1632). The dialogue form matters for the history of knowledge. Galileo did not simply present a theorem. He staged competing voices, inviting readers to compare arguments. Knowledge was made persuasive through literary form as well as through mathematical reasoning. His final major work, the *Discourses and Mathematical Demonstrations Relating to Two New Sciences* (1638), developed questions in mechanics and motion that had occupied him since his early career (Galilei 1638). Here again the innovation lay not only in particular results, but in the form of inquiry. Galileo helped establish a style of physical reasoning in which mathematical models and controlled situations could reveal general laws. Galileo matters as a professor because he showed how university mathematics could become a new form of natural knowledge.

3.3 LOSEY'S FILM AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Joseph Losey's *Galileo* (1975), with Topol in the title role, is an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*. Losey had a long connection with Brecht's play: he had directed the first American productions in 1947, with Brecht's active participation, before later adapting the work for the American Film Theatre (American Film Institute, n.d.; Losey 1975). In Losey's *Galileo*, the university professor is confronted with another problem: what happens when observation and mathematical reasoning undermine an authorised cosmology?

The composition shown in Figure 3 is especially evocative for a discussion of scholars on screen. Galileo is shown not simply as an isolated genius, but as a learned man confronted by other learned men. The cardinals evoke figures such as Robert Bellarmine, who was both a central ecclesiastical actor in the Galileo affair and a professor of theology at the *Collegio Romano*. The opposition staged here is therefore not between knowledge and ignorance, but between different institutional regimes of knowledge: mathematical demonstration vs theological authority. The confrontation with Bellarmine is particularly revealing. Bellarmine was not merely an anti-scientific censor; he too was a scholar trained in the same learned world of disputation as Galileo.

The film presents knowledge as public demonstration. Galileo does not only look through the telescope; he must persuade others to look, to believe the instrument, to accept that what is seen through an artificial device can count as evidence. This is one of the film's strongest lessons for the history of knowledge. New knowledge does not triumph merely because it is true. It must be communicated and made credible to audiences with different interests. At the same time, the film refuses a simple heroic narrative. Brecht and Losey make Galileo brilliant and sensual, but weak. He is not just a martyr of science. He is also a man who needs money, enjoys fame, and eventually recants. This is crucial. The film stresses that evolution of knowledge is not a procession of pure minds moving from error to truth. It is made by embodied people living inside institutions, responding to incentives. The recantation is therefore the film's central epistemological scene. The question is not only whether Galileo was right about the heavens. It is whether a scholar has duties toward the knowledge he has helped produce. Once knowledge has circulated, can its author withdraw it? Can truth survive the weakness of the person who first made it visible?



Figure 3: Galileo between scholars and judges. Wolfgang Heinz as Galileo, flanked by two cardinals played by Ekkehard Schall and Dieter Knaup, in a Berliner Ensemble production of Bertolt Brecht's *Leben des Galilei*, Berlin, 1971. This free image is not a still from Joseph Losey's 1975 film *Galileo*, but it belongs to the same Brechtian genealogy: Losey's film translates Brecht's theatrical Galileo into cinema.

The film answers ambivalently. Galileo's recantation is a failure, but the knowledge does not die. Students, and readers continue the work. As a broader reflection on pre-modern university professors, Losey's *Galileo* adds a third model to Coras and Cauchon.

4 FINAL THOUGHT

Coras shows learned law organising uncertainty about identity. Cauchon shows learned theology organising uncertainty about revelation. Galileo shows mathematical natural philosophy organising uncertainty about nature. In all three cases, the professor is not simply a classroom figure. He is a mediator between specialised learning and public truth. The films show that pre-modern knowledge became historically powerful when it left the lecture hall and engaged with society.

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