



CHASING THE REAL: ITALIAN NEOREALISM

Germany Year Zero (Germania, anno zero)

Germany Year Zero (Germania, anno zero)
(aka Deutschland im Jahre Null)

Director: Roberto Rossellini
Production Company: Tevere Film
In collaboration with: U.G.C., SAFDI
Technical Collaboration: DEFA
Producer: Roberto Rossellini
Producer: Alfredo Guarini *
Associate Producer: André Halley Des Fontaines
Production Manager: Marcello Bollero
Unit Production Manager: Alberto Manni
Production Secretary: Giancarlo Campidori
Assistant Directors: Carlo Lizzani, Max Colpet
Assistant Director: Franz Treuberg *
Scriptgirl: Renata Gaede
Screenplay: Roberto Rossellini
Screenplay: Carlo Lizzani *
Script Collaborator: Max Colpet
Italian Version Supervision/Dialogue: Sergio Amidei
Dialogue: Max Colpet
Original Story: Roberto Rossellini
Original Idea: Basilio Franchina *
Director of Photography: Robert Juillard
Camera: Jacques Robin, Emile Puet
Editor: Mlle Findeisen
Italian Version Editor: Eraldo Da Roma
Sets: Piero Filippone
Laboratory: Tecnostampa (Rome)
Opticals: Vincenzo Genesi
Music: Renzo Rossellini
Orchestra Conducted by: Edoardo Micucci
Sound Recording: Kurt Doubrawsky
'Dedicated to the memory of my son' Romano Rossellini
Cast:
Edmund Meschke (*Edmund Köhler*)
Ernst Pittschau (*Herr Köhler, Edmund's father*)
Ingtraud Hinze (*Eva, Edmund's sister*)
Franz Krüger (*Karl-Heinz, Edmund's brother*)
Erich Gühne (*Henning, the teacher*)
Jo Herbst (*Jo, the boy thief*) *
Christl Merker (*Christl, the girl thief*) *
Alexandra Manys (*Eva's friend*) *
Babsy Schultz-Reckwell (*Rademacher's daughter*) *
Hans Sangen (*Rademacher*) *
Hedi Blankner (*Frau Rademacher*) *
Barbara Hintz (*Thilde, pregnant woman*) *
Gaby Raak (*woman in general's house*) *
Inge Rocklitz (*refugee*) *
Franz Treuberg (*General von Laubniz*) *
Karl Kaüger (*doctor*) *
Italy/France/German Federal Republic 1948
73 mins
Digital (restoration)

* Uncredited

Restored in 2013 by Cineteca di Bologna and CSC-
Cineteca Nazionale at L'Immagine Ritrovata
laboratory, with the support of Cinecittà.

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SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

'The city was deserted, the grey of the sky seemed to run in the streets and, from the height of a man, you could look out over all the roofs; in order to find the streets under the ruins, they had cleared away and piled up the debris; in the cracks of the asphalt, grass had started to grow. Silence reigned, and each noise, in counterpoint to it, underlined it even more; the bittersweet odour of rotting organic material constituted a solid wall through which one had to pass; you floated over Berlin.'

So wrote Roberto Rossellini for *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1955 of his first impressions of Berlin, eight years after he'd driven to the city in March 1947. He was there to begin production on what would become – following *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946) – the final part of his so-called war trilogy: *Germany Year Zero*, a resolutely present-tense examination of the fallout from war. Despite a shift of national focus, *Germany Year Zero* – which follows a young boy through the wreckage of postwar Berlin – remained a profoundly personal work for a filmmaker still grieving the death of his own son, Romano.

Rossellini's intentions with the film are perhaps best summed up in the opening voiceover that accompanied the film's American release:

'This film was shot in Berlin in the summer of 1947. It is intended to be simply an objective, true-to-life picture of this enormous, half-destroyed city, in which three and a half million people are carrying on a frightful, desperate existence almost without realising it. They live in tragedy as if it were their natural element, but out of exhaustion, not through strength of mind or faith. This film is not an accusation against the German people, nor yet a defence of them. It is simply a presentation of the facts. But if anyone who has seen the story of Edmund Koehler comes to realise that something must be done, that German children must be taught to love life again, then the efforts of those who made this film will have been amply rewarded.'

Of course, *Germany Year Zero* isn't a documentary: the lines between realism and artifice are more explicitly pronounced than in either of the trilogy's previous entries. One doesn't need to know that interiors were shot in Rome – or that shooting was suspended while the German cast dieted after too much Italian food led to continuity errors – to be aware of the constructive elements of what we refer to as neorealism: the expressionism readily apparent in Rossellini's style, the melodrama in his brother Renzo's score.

Which isn't for a moment to suggest any reduction in its importance as an historical document. Few films capture a specific time and place with such elemental force. Edmund's long, silent wander through the rubble before the film's devastating climax is justly celebrated, but the looming, skeletal remains of the city that towers over him throughout the film proves as potently symbolic of his isolation and fate as his gravedigging introduction.

Matthew Thrift, bfi.org.uk 31 March 2024

Made shortly before he embarked on more metaphysical waters, *Germany Year Zero* effectively closes Rossellini's neo-realist period. As he himself has noted, having secured the promise of finance from UGC, he went to Berlin to look around, without any precise idea of what he wanted to film; and the resulting shock conjured a film which has much the same sense of raw

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Germany, Year Zero Germania anno zero (aka Deutschland im Jahre Null)

Sun 19 May 18:20; Wed 22 May 12:30; Mon 27 May 15:00; Wed 29 May 20:40

Bicycle Thieves Ladri di biciclette

Sun 19 May 20:20; Mon 27 May 18:00

Paisà

Mon 20 May 12:00; Wed 29 May 12:00

Shoeshine Sciuscià

Tue 21 May 20:45

Bitter Rice Riso amaro

Wed 22 May 20:40; Thu 30 May 18:15

A Tragic Hunt (aka The Tragic Pursuit) Caccia tragica

Sat 25 May 15:40

The Mill on the Po Il mulino del Po

Sat 25 May 18:20

La terra trema

Sun 26 May 15:00; Fri 31 May 20:00

The Bandit Il bandito

Sun 26 May 18:30

Lights of Variety Luci del varietà

Sat 1 Jun 13:15; Mon 10 Jun 20:45; Thu 13 Jun 18:00; Thu 20 Jun 18:20

Stromboli Stromboli, terra di Dio

Sun 2 Jun 18:15; Mon 3 Jun 12:00; Wed 12 Jun 20:40; Sat 22 Jun 15:30

Rome 11:00 (aka Rome 11 O'Clock) Roma ore 11

Tue 4 Jun 14:50; Fri 7 Jun 18:10; Sun 16 Jun 14:00; Mon 24 Jun 20:50

The Women of Italian Neorealism

Tue 4 Jun 18:10

Bellissima

Tue 4 Jun 20:35; Mon 10 Jun 18:10

Umberto D.

Wed 5 Jun 20:40; Sat 8 Jun 18:00; Wed 19 Jun 20:40; Sat 29 Jun 13:10

Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia

Thu 6 Jun 12:15; Sun 9 Jun 13:00; Tue 11 Jun 11:30; Fri 21 Jun 20:50; Tue 25 Jun 18:15

The Machine That Kills Bad People La macchina ammazzacattivi

Tue 11 Jun 18:10; Sat 15 Jun 13:40; Wed 19 Jun 12:20; Thu 27 Jun 20:55

Miracle in Milan Miracolo a Milano

Thu 13 Jun 20:40; Sun 30 Jun 12:10

With thanks to

Camilla Cormanni, Paola Ruggiero, Germana Ruscio, Marco Cicala at Cinecittà

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SIGHT AND SOUND

immediacy, of a community poised on the edge of darkness, as *Rome Open City*. The difference, of course, lies in the outsider's viewpoint, which transforms the partisan (and patronising) attitude common to the neo-realist films into an almost Olympian detachment.

Not that Rossellini is not himself moved (or moving), but he is more concerned to exact awareness than to arouse pity. The thirteen-year-old Edmund, though blond and angelic, is no moppet like the child in *Bicycle Thieves*. On the contrary, culminating in the extraordinary sequence that stretches with bleak neutrality between Edmund's rejection by Henning and his eventual suicide – with Edmund drifting aimlessly through the ruined city, instinctively shunned by the other children he encounters, repeatedly embarking on private games only to lose interest immediately – Rossellini's concern throughout is to demonstrate that there is nothing of the child left in him.

In his Rossellini monograph, Jose Luis Guarner has suggested that, with its opening images of Berliners digging graves in a cemetery, or eagerly crowding round to cut their share of steaming meat from a horse that has died in the street, *Germany Year Zero* should be considered as above all a horror movie. Its monster, as the horrified Henning realises when the child comes to him with his obedient boast ('I have done it! I have killed my father!'), is Edmund; and the monster's evident Frankenstein is the desolation of misery, starvation and corruption that is Fascism's legacy to Germany.

Probing further, however, Rossellini extends the definition of the monster's creator to include fear, despair, self-pity, hypocrisy. If Edmund's decision to kill his father springs primarily from his teacher's hollow parroting of a Nazi slogan, it also has deeper, ramifying roots: in his father's reiterated cry that his death would be a relief to them all, in his brother's frustrated 'I wish I were dead', in the exasperated Rademacher's 'Why doesn't your father die and leave us in peace?' Even the ostensibly admirable Eva, precariously gambling her honour and self-respect by haunting the night-clubs while forlornly awaiting the return of a prisoner-of-war fiancé, offers an example of defeatism (in the clubs, the proliferation of Allied troops might occasion an advantageous marriage).

It is this detachment of Rossellini's, in creating characters who are as much to be condemned as pitied (or vice versa), which saves the film from the neo-realist disease of miserabilism and turns it into a devastating analysis of human folly. That, and the extraordinary skill with which Rossellini paces an essentially contemplative film almost as an action thriller. Opening with a long tracking shot down an avenue of utter devastation, the film suddenly shifts gear, never losing sight of the incredible ruination of Berlin but refusing to linger longer than is necessary (even the shot of an old man, walking with a child in a quiet cloister and stopped in his tracks by the sound of Hitler's recorded voice booming out of the Chancellery again, is pared to the bone). It accelerates, brakes, then zooms off again at a tangent, with Edmund battered to and fro as helplessly as a pinball in his fruitless quest for positive action. Until time slows unbearably in the long, unbroken movement of Edmund's last, rudderless drift through the city which intimates an inevitable end in suicide and yet a reluctance, a secret hope that something may prove the gesture unnecessary.

Paradoxically, but anticipating the tenor of Rossellini's later work, Edmund's despairing act of self-destruction emerges rather as an affirmation, a refusal to continue being part of a despair which he can neither understand nor control.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1980