

**GERMANY YEAR ZERO; Roberto Rossellini,
1948 – The Skeleton of Nazism**

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Movie review
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Factuality, objectivity, truthfulness, these are all important criteria according to which we will evaluate the film adaptation of a historical event or historical reality. When it comes to a feature film, and pure fiction, then under the term “objective” we can consider as faithful a recreation of the spirit of the times as possible. It is not necessary to studiously present and analyse historical facts, but to re-examine the attitudes and patterns of behaviour created in given historical circumstances. In that type of film, the artistic film genre known as *Italian neorealism* shone. Often described as “the seekers of the truth”, Italian neorealists (among whom we include directors and screenwriters whose work will be marked by anti-spectacularity of dramatic actions and pseudo-documentary portrayal of social reality of the most vulnerable members of society) found their stories among the common people. They were interested in the “here and now”, with an emphasis



on the suffering that had to be morally overcome. The hero could be a pensioner who doesn't have enough to feed his dog, a single mother or a priest who helps the resistance movement, or two boys who earn money by shining shoes to buy a horse to ride. Their goal was to narrate the brutalities of the past, to raise awareness of the sufferings that accompany the present due to the devastating consequences of that same past and to point out the inevitability of taking responsibility for the future. Director Roberto Rossellini was one of the proponents, although firmly adhering to his own paradigm, and the film *Germany Year Zero* is a clear example of these tendencies.

Germany Year Zero, a film made in 1947/8, is today considered the third part of Rossellini's so-called *War Trilogy*. Rossellini's *War Trilogy* is a harsh depiction of the misfortunes that befell primarily Italians in the very twilight, and then in the epilogue of WWII. While *Rome, the Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946) are films about Italian resistance, about martyrdom and the duties that every Italian, be he a priest, a soldier or a simple peasant woman, must fulfil, the film *Germany Year Zero* tells a story of the consequences of the lack of resistance of an entire nation, but also a story of a potential new start, based on a special kind of martyrdom.

Essentially, Rossellini made a film about the depressing moral consequences of a historical catastrophe called – Nazism. For Rossellini, *Nazism* is an ideology that has condemned humanity to destruction simply because, as he says in the foreword for the Italian version of the film, it “estranged itself from the eternal laws of morality and Christian charity”. He primarily imagined and succeeded in attacking the idea of Nazism in this film, looking back at the toxins that did not leave German society even after the ceasefire. The characters of high-ranking officials do not appear in the film and there is no talk of war criminals. Not so exceptional individuals are followed. What the director considered an “objective portrayal” is more of a suggestive depiction of a desperate lack of empathy among countrymen and, even worse, among family members. It is a film set in liberated Berlin, which is actually still occupied by the Allies, after the Second World War. In the centre is a twelve-year-old boy, Edmund Kohler, who we follow in his efforts to provide his family with some means of existence. There is no mother figure, while the father is seriously ill, due to lack of nutritionally rich food. The film exudes uneasiness from the very beginning.



Berlin is destroyed. Restoration is not nowhere in sight. Rather, the opening aerial panoramas of Berlin offer depressing images of a lack of initiative. People are unpleasant. They fight for honey, margarine and jam, which are available only to English soldiers on the black market. Society seems to have been reduced to a hunter-gatherer society. As the icing on the cake, Rossellini introduces Edmund into the plot as an illegal, or underage, gravedigger. Digging graves, although a bit morbid, could have been the most lucrative or at least the only safe job in the first days of the war. For the Germany of year zero, graves are the present. Burying the past is necessary in order to start from “year zero”. For Edmund’s sake, the shame the German people feel from their defeat in the Second World War should be eliminated. This shame, mixed with a strong commitment to self-preservation, that is to say self-endurance, is what makes it difficult for little Edmund to grow up.

Rossellini does not gloss over the tragedy that struck post-war society. The film itself was born with the tragedy. Namely, Rossellini was drawn into this venture by the death of his own son, Romano. As he died suddenly at the age of nine, Rossellini decided to find solace in making a film whose protagonist would be a boy burdened by hard times. And, in order to overcome the sad reality of leaving this world, Edmund needed to be freed. He needed to be freed from the black market, where a ruthless, affluent “gentleman” would swindle him. He needed to be moved away from the street fights over the remains of the dead horse’s meat. He needed to be spared the trouble of watching his sister, who had to entertain French officers and think of prostitution to earn cigarettes in order to tramp them. His burden needed to be lifted, if only his father was not bedridden, and his older brother, a former soldier in the Wehrmacht, a selfish coward. Edmund is not exempt from the above. After all, the camera is also pressing on him. In the opening scene at the cemetery, the other workers surround him, reducing his “living space” with their own figures. And when he tries to escape from the fact that he was cheated in the exchange for a scale or that his peers are cheating him by giving him fake soaps, he only manages to escape to the centre of the frame and thus further expose himself to us, the audience. In the cramped family home, the frame is often in the foreground, right next to the lens, even when it is not participating in the exchange of protests with the members of the household. Edmund becomes a part of that world of grown-up de-

ceitfulness, more than he should be. Rossellini's strategy is to make the boy as vulnerable as possible. The film can also be seen as an "anti-coming-of-age" film because the sympathies are directed towards the twelve-year-old, who was not given a fair chance to indulge in the carefree joys of childhood.

While *Rome, the Open City* and *Paisan* speak of Nazi barbarism, *Germany Year Zero* emphasizes Nazi degeneracy. He sees them as sexually perverted. In this film, the character of the teacher is a monster who deceives the children. Enning is Edmund's former teacher, with faint, subtle, paedophile traits. He will be a key influence on Edmund. Through him, Rossellini presents the antithesis of his moral position. The thought that "we should have courage and sacrifice the weaker" is deeply embedded in Nazi propaganda, and here we can hear it in the post-war period, in a serious manner from a teacher, with real, tangible consequences for a young and confused mind like Edmund's. And not only is it rooted among Nazi followers, but also Edmund's sister Eva, a girl who just seeks the return of her beloved (another prisoner of war), believes that everyone should fight for themselves. Enning is right when he tells Edmund that "we are moulded by the times we live in".



Although neorealism in principle rejects wider political analysis, in a few cases Rossellini attacks the followers of Nazi politics extremely harshly and somewhat cynically. The first example is an accidental meeting between teacher Enning and an acquaintance of his while the latter was cleaning the street from rubble as a convict (POW). His words – "we used to be National Socialists, now we're just Nazis" – are an ear-splitting remark. Before they were somebody and something, and now they see them only as criminals, maybe that's what he wants to say? It's that ever-recurring feeling of embarrassment. Edmund's brother, Karl-Heinz, also demonstrates this. He will beat Edmund

when he spends the night outside of the house, stealing potatoes with a bunch of kids that Edmund's father will, of course, call hooligans, but he doesn't have the courage to go out into the street. He is depressed by thinking that there is no life for a soldier outside of the war they had lost. He makes fun of, as he calls them, "the so-called victims of Nazism", people from whom he does not want to receive alms. Overall, in Rossellini's Berlin there is a great aversion to foreign aid. Enning calls them "stupid". Edmund's sister Eva sees them as opportunistic traitors.

Rossellini decided to mention Hitler as well. What is Hitler to him, what had he given the Germans? At the teacher's persuasion, Edmund tries to buy a gramophone record, that is to say one of Hitler's speeches. He brings it to the American and English soldiers, and plays it. What exactly is heard and seen? Hitler's thunderous speech about the victory and the glory that awaits the German people is heard, while the camera, in the most ironic act of the entire film, shows the extent of that glory. On the surface, it is an economically ruined country. A little deeper, it is a painful thought, for which Rossellini has no mercy: the German people confronting their own collective guilt. The birth of a sense of guilt, that is to say of conscience, will be presented by Rossellini in the bitter but cathartic Edmund's final onslaught. Then Edmund's wandering around Berlin will get its necessary, spiritual aspect.





This is where Rossellini's poetics and vision of realism lie, within that truth and objectivity. There are no special techniques that would establish what is true, but only a correct moral position. Rossellini deprived the crisis period of adolescence of sentimentality because he aspired to what Andre Bazin, in his key analyses of neorealism and Rossellini in the volumes *What is Film?*, calls "psychological objectivity". "Neither the actor nor the event excites us, but the meaning we have to extract from them", says Bazin. Edmund travelled a rocky road, but the key is how within him, despite his predominantly expressionless face, a child's sensitivity and social frenzy collide. I have said a lot about how to behave in order to prevent additional human tragedies, because the film was made with that thought in mind. The film *Germany Year Zero* culminates with a strong call for freedom from the heavy burden of someone else's blood on one's own hands. This film is Rossellini's prayer to all who know children like Edmund. Because, just as the unknown girl in the "la pieta" pose mourns Edmund, we too should feel infinite sadness. Rossellini says to all of us that we should commit ourselves to teach these children how to love life again.