

Germany Year Zero

Roberto Rossellini IT/FR/GER 1948 78m



In post World War II Germany the cities are in shambles and their people are barely surviving on food stamps. Each family gets an allocation based on the number of males in the family provided they're of age else they must find work. The story is told through a family who's patriarch is too ill and old to work; another in the household Karl-Heinz (Franz-Otto Krüger) is too afraid to try and hasn't even registered for his work permit for fear of being taken to prison for his wartime activities as a soldier. So the youngest underage son Edmund (Edmund Moeschke his only film!) who has a misplaced hero worship for Karl-Heinz must find a way to make up the difference for expenses. His quest leads him into various relationships with other children male and female who steal and eventually into working in the Black Market for a former professor (Erich Gühne) of his that he trusts. Many emotional scenes including Edmund's father (Ernst Pittschau) saying the family would be better off if he'd just go ahead and die. Watch it all the way to the end to get the full impact of this powerful film by director story and screenplay writer Roberto Rossellini (Paisà (1946)).

Classic Film Guide

Unlike the more aesthetically and intellectually conceived French New Wave, Italian neorealism was above all an ethical initiative—a way of saying that people were important, occasioned by a war that made many of them voiceless, faceless, and nameless victims. But this was, of course, a conviction that carried plenty of aesthetic and intellectual, as well as spiritual, consequences, including some that we're still mulling over today.

Deliberately or not, *Germany Year Zero* concludes Roberto Rossellini's War Trilogy by posing a kind of philosophical conundrum, a fact already signaled by its title, which he borrowed, with permission, from a book by French sociologist Edgar Morin. It was a title that stumped even Joseph Burstyn and Arthur Mayer, the American producers of *Rome Open City* and *Paisan*, and the fact that Rossellini, characteristically trusting his instincts, refused to say what he meant by it eventually encouraged them to back out of the project, which was largely financed by the French government. But even when Rossellini later tried to formulate what drove him to make the film—in its dedication to the memory of his son Romano (who died in 1946, at the age of nine, after emergency surgery for an inflamed appendix), or in a statement prefacing its international versions—he tended to contradict himself.

"This movie, filmed in Berlin in the summer of 1947," he declared in that statement, is "an objective and faithful portrait," not "an accusation or even a defense of the German people." Yet objectivity was clearly (and thankfully) the last thing Rossellini had in mind. Even the doom-ridden modernist score by his brother Renzo participates in the sense of unfolding disbelief and horror by suggesting some of the mood of science fiction. And the directive later in the preface to care about these Germans rather than call for any further retribution is actually more consistent with Rossellini's aims than any "objective assessment" could be. This was a brave and principled stance for him to take at the time, and it still places *Germany Year Zero* well in advance of most films about war made even today.

The film stars Edmund Meschke, an eleven-year-old acrobat from a circus family, whom many have said Rossellini cast largely because of his close resemblance to Romano. Playing a motherless boy named Edmund Koehler, who struggles to help support his desperate family (including an ailing father and older sister and brother), Meschke is the film's affective center and focus, clearly making it the most personal film in Rossellini's War Trilogy. It's a story concluding both horribly and logically with Edmund's suicide after he fatally poisons his father—an act that proceeds no less logically from statements by both his former teacher (espousing the survival of the fittest) and his father himself (about wishing he were dead).

Significantly, Edmund's family is split between his anti-Nazi father and his pro-Nazi older brother—perhaps no less significantly (and machocentrically), his sister's politics are simply ignored—but one never feels that Rossellini is limiting his sympathy to ideological allies. At worst, he may overload the motivations for Edmund to poison his father and the melodramatic villainy of two predatory pederasts, but these might ultimately be considered more flaws in his dramaturgy than humanistic failures. They count for little alongside the film's more acute and far more numerous everyday observations about postwar Berlin.

How we interpret this tragedy is a direct consequence of how we watch it, and how we watch it depends largely on how much we regard it as the personal expression of a particular auteur—and how much, neorealistically, as a reflection of the time and place where much of it was shot: Berlin, August and September 1947. The fact that a portion of *Germany Year Zero* was shot in Rome between November 1947 and January 1948—even though the story throughout has the same postwar Berlin setting—may complicate our grasp of what neorealism consisted of, but this is only part of the conundrum. The very title of the film offers not so much a documentary fact as a subjective reading of a documentary fact: not just a city and a population reduced to chaos but a terrain leveled spiritually and morally (which implies a place to build, but not necessarily or specifically what is to be built there).

It's easy to see how a leveling title that references a leveled country would form a major template for Jean-Luc Godard—cropping up most clearly in his hour-long 1991 film commemorating the collapse of the Berlin Wall, *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, but already fully evident in his earlier, Maoist-inspired notion, expressed most famously in *La Chinoise* (1967), to rebuild society “from zero” (that is to say, from the ground up). This has as much to do with a subjective reading relevant to auteurism as it does with any documentary fact traceable to neorealism. And arguably, the same ambiguous mixture can be intuited in François Truffaut's 1963 statement that “aside from Vigo, Rossellini is the only filmmaker who has filmed adolescence without sentimentality, and *The 400 Blows* owes a great deal to his *Germany Year Zero*.” Moreover, this is the first Rossellini film that Truffaut ever saw, turning him immediately into a convert.

But paradoxically, Rossellini himself was not much of an auteurist. He said that he made the film for its final stretch: “Everything that goes before held no interest for me.” The whole film “was conceived specifically for the scene with the child wandering on his own through the ruins . . . I only [felt] sure of myself at this decisive moment.” (All of these quotes come from Tag Gallagher's essential biography, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*.) It is especially in this closing section—anticipating Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967) in its depiction of a child oscillating between the contradictory reflexes and demands of childhood and adulthood, where suicide itself becomes the culmination of a child's game—that Rossellini's film achieves its devastating lucidity, and one is hardly surprised to learn from Gallagher that some of Rossellini's specific memories of Romano (such as his playing with a piece of rubble as if it were a gun) are integrated into Edmund's behavior, which also includes some desultory stabs at hopscotch and similar kinds of play.

Yet it's worth adding that even some portions of this climactic sequence—such as Edmund passing the fountain and church and playing with his feet—were shot in Rossellini's absence, by Carlo Lizzani, his (credited) assistant director and (uncredited) cowriter, while Rossellini was back in Rome coping with various marital complications brought about by his adulterous relationship with Anna Magnani. According to Lizzani, Rossellini “was of the opinion that the framing could be done this way or that, but if one shot enough and if the idea was clear, the material would be good in any case.” And according to a recent conversation with film scholar Adriano Aprà, who interviewed Lizzani on the subject, an enormous amount of material was in fact shot while Rossellini was away—enough to allow him plenty of choices in the editing after he returned. But selection clearly plays as important a role in defining an

auteur as any sort of pure "creation," especially when some form of documentary truth is what's ultimately at stake. A gesture of despair that emotionally fuses personal grief with an intense empathy for the dispossessed, *Germany Year Zero* is finally something closer to a cry of pain than a carefully worked-out and conceptualized statement, and this is what grants it a lasting authenticity.

Jonathan Rosenbaum *The Criterion Collection*

