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Mutations and Mutants in Europe after World War II: *Germany, Year Zero* by Roberto Rossellini

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the perfecting of neo-realism Rossellini was able to realize beginning with *Germany, Year Zero* in 1947 – towards a new wave of cinema and a new age in representing European identities and cultural landscapes. I will be focusing specifically on the very strong analytical structure of *Germany, Year Zero*. Through the radicality of Edmund's experience, a perfecting of neo-realism is indeed at stake. Beginning with *Germany, Year Zero* – after the relegitimation of the Italian people through the redemptive stories told in *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan* – a new chapter in Rossellini's understanding of reality begins. His new cinema can still be defined as highly political, but in a completely different sense involving a mystical aspect. A new type of character is required, active in a totally different world – that is to say the world after Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima.

Keywords: Roberto Rossellini, *Germany, Year Zero*, Europe.

Referring to *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), *Stromboli* (1950), *Europe 51, Journey to Italy/The Lonely Woman* (1954), Gilles Deleuze wrote: "Rossellini's great quartet, far from marking an abandonment of neo-realism, on the contrary perfects it [...] *Germany, Year Zero* presents a child who visits a foreign country [...] and who dies of what he sees" (Deleuze 2. Emphasis added). My paper will examine the perfecting of neo-realism Rossellini was able to bring about, beginning with *Germany, Year Zero* in 1947 to then proceed towards a new wave in cinematography and a new age in representing European identities and cultural landscapes. I will be focusing specifically on the very strong analytical structure of *Germany, Year Zero*.¹

From the very first shots, the standpoint of the camera reduces individual human subjects to small elements of a wider system which – as I will attempt to show – is ideological. As a matter of fact the camera acts as a sort of microscopic lens proceeding from the general (the aerial view of Berlin and its architecture: the ruins of the Chancellery – Hitler's headquarters) to the specific (zooming down: the cemetery and the people busy digging graves). Finally Edmund,

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the only child digging, is soon rejected by the adults as a crook and a liar, accused of taking “food out of the mouths of people who have a right to work” (*The War Trilogy*, 356).²

Rossellini started his career making documentaries. In his first shorts – almost all involved in exploring nature and its creatures – he had for a while the opportunity to observe fish, insects or snakes, developing a new cinematographic language defined by his discoveries and experiments with the camera. *Undersea Fantasy* (1938-1940) is one of the first documentaries shot by Rossellini: a story of fish in a fish tank – and indeed this is the way Berliners are seen in the aftermath of the Second World War. That being said there is no cynical eye on them, as Rossellini’s reference is rather sociological: the title of the movie is borrowed from the book *L’An zéro de l’Allemagne* by French sociologist Edgar Morin.

Furthermore, the personal involvement is extreme: consider that *Germany, Year Zero* is dedicated to Rossellini’s son Romano, who was similar in age and appearance to the German protagonist of the film, Edmund Koeler, and died prematurely in 1946: 13 year old Edmund Moeschke, found in a travelling circus where his parents were performers. In the 1970s, while working on didactic television documentaries, Rossellini would recall in “The Intelligence of the Present”:

Rome, Open City and *Paisan* where also didactic, and even *Germany, Year Zero* was didactic, because I was making an effort – I am quite sure of this – to understand events that had involved me personally, and that had overwhelmed me. They were explorations of historical facts, but more particularly of attitudes, of types of behavior determined by a particular historical climate or situation. Even at that time I felt a need to orient myself properly in order to understand things, and this is just what moves me even today: taking the phenomenon as my point of departure and exploring it, to discover all its consequences, including the political ones.³

From the very beginning of *Germany, Year Zero* – despite the aim expressed by the off screen speaker “that German children must be taught to love life again” – death appears to be the major consequence of the phenomenon Rossellini was exploring: the effects of Nazism and its ideology on individual subjects. In Rossellini’s understanding criminal madness is the direct consequence of the horrendous crimes of such an ideology, as we read from the legend after the opening titles of the film:

When an ideology strays from the eternal laws of morality and of Christian charity, which form the basis of men’s lives, it must end as

criminal madness. It contaminates even the natural prudence of a child, who is swept along from one horrendous crime to another, equally grave, in which, with the ingenuousness of innocence, he thinks to find release from guilt (Rossellini 353).

I would like to recall here, on Roberto Rossellini's behalf, the category of *lucidity* in Emmanuel Levinas's analysis of Nazism for which evil – this tricky word – is the consequence of a mistaken vision of being, that is to say, of the total abandonment of transcendence in the understanding of human life and the specificity of human visage/face: "Le visage est ce qui nous interdit de tuer" (*Totalité et infini* 5). In *Germany, Year Zero* Rossellini seems deeply involved in understanding what will be Levinas's definition for *lucidity*: "an opening of the spirit towards the truth"⁴. This spiritual position is actually at the very roots of neorealism's aesthetics and moral attitude. I quote these words from Luigi Chiarini's 1950 lecture "Discorso sul neorealismo": "there doesn't exist a *technique* for capturing truth [...] only a moral position can do it."⁵

In *Germany, Year Zero* such a moral position implies a general collective guilt, involving Fascist Italy in its association with Nazi Germany, and Rossellini's own coming of age as a man and an intellectual during Mussolini's *ventennio*. As David Forgacs recalls:

Rossellini was almost certainly never a committed Fascist, but neither was he one of the anti-Fascist directors and critics... He was one of those numerous relatively apolitical bourgeois artists and intellectuals who made their compromises with the regime [...]. Rossellini was therefore, at the time the regime collapsed in the summer of 1943, a film-maker with a Fascist past who needed to remake himself. On the other hand, his post-war self-remaking involved, again almost certainly, a sincere recantation and change of attitude and was not merely an opportunistic or cynical self-recycling (Forgacs 62-63).

Mr. Koeler – Edmund's father – is a key character to understand the historical perspective Rossellini gave to his movie. He had fought in the First World War, experiencing the terrible German defeat and the consequences of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. During the years of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), he ended up considering himself a loser, responsible for Hitler's rise to power. I quote from the script:

We saw the disaster coming, and we didn't stop it, and now we're suffering the consequences. Today we're paying for our mistakes, all of us! You and I both! But we have to recognize our guilt, because just grumbling doesn't solve anything (Rossellini 434).

Now – extremely sick and a burden to his family – Mr Koeler is begging in front of his children: "Lord, why don't You take me?".

Germany, Year Zero is the story of three generations of Germans caught between two world wars and their loss of identity. There is no mother, and this is an important detail, since Rossellini stresses an interrupted patriarchal line: a line of defeated soldiers. Eva, Edmund's sister, is also included in this line through her relationship with her missing boyfriend, who is being held in a POW camp somewhere. Karl Heinz – Edmund's elder brother – is a veteran soldier back from the campaigns of Africa and Russia. The battle of Stalingrad (now Volgograd) – between Germany, its allies, and the Soviet Union – represented the turning point of World War II in Europe. It took place between August 21, 1942, and February 2, 1943, and it is so far the bloodiest battle in human history, with combined casualties estimated in excess of 1.5 million. Karl Heinz is traumatized by his experience in the *Wehrmacht* and is now hiding at home, i.e., another mouth to be fed. Edmund is the link to the third generation, and takes responsibility for everything. In a sense, everybody is Edmund Koeler: Rossellini himself is Edmund as a child and a young man. Addressing individual responsibility in such a moral way turned the Italian-dubbed release of *Deutschland im Jahre Null*, on May 30, 1948, into a total failure. The screening was extremely disturbing to the intellectual *élite* present at Cinema Barberini in Rome, as partisan and Italian Communist Party member Gian Carlo Pajetta recalled: "The sight of Berlin in ruins hadn't 'grabbed' the audience [...]. The night of *Germania anno zero's* premiere was bitter indeed [...] The year zero of the new Italy was behind us. And not all the hopes had become reality."⁶ About that night Rossellini remarked: "I don't think it's possible to say more bad things about a film than were said about *Germany Year Zero*" (Gallagher 266).

In his introduction to *The Trilogy of War*, Stefano Roncoroni openly recalled the catholic sacrament of confession: "*Germany, Year Zero* is the last act of the confession [...] one of the high points of Rossellini's art and anticipates in its style a religious spirituality." It is an incomplete confession though – and willingly so – since there is no redemption (or oblivion) for what happened in Europe under the eyes of many. Despite the fact that Rossellini was from Rome – Rome being, while an "open city" (from September 11, 1943, to June 4, 1944), the tragic theatre of the most infamous *Judenrazzia* (October 16, 1943) on Italian soil – he never addressed the specificity of the *Shoah* directly, and he is very careful in omitting it even in *Germany Year Zero*. I believe that this omission is quite significant, as it often is the case. The themes of 'natural selection' and 'survival of the fittest' is, instead, directly applied to an average German family: the

Koelers. Their sick patriarch ends up being poisoned by his youngest son, Edmund, his corpse left to the care of the neighbours, who eventually steal from him the last useful clothes: his undershirt and wool socks. The Holocaust is a sort of unthinkable, horrific frame, only implied by the uncanny scenes involving Mr. Koeler's murder, and is vaguely addressed in Rossellini's other movies. As, for instance, in the catholic prejudice against both chaplains – the Jewish and the Lutheran – in *Paisan's* episode V, or the theme of displaced people camps in *Stromboli*. Such a theme is also present in *Germany, Year Zero* through the character of Thilde, the expatriate neighbour Karl Heinz would not initially trust – “Hah! These so-called victims of Nazism. We know their type” (Rossellini 366) – and finally in the sequence of the Jews praying before the execution in Roberto Rossellini's *General Della Rovere* (1959). Still, the analysis Rossellini is suggesting through the morbid scenes involving the neighbours chatting about the corpse of Mr. Koeler – “But that's awful! When I die I don't want to be buried in a sack!,” says Fraulein Rademaker (Rossellini 443) – implies a reference to individual responsibilities for what was going on in Europe under Nazism and Fascism. With *Germany, Year Zero* Rossellini wanted to overcome the identification of Germans with the inhuman estranged enemies of the Italian Resistance in *Rome, Open City*, while, at the same time, intending to answer a list of questions he had on the origins and development of Nazism. How Nazism could happen is the very phenomenon he is interested in. I quote from Rossellini:

The Germans were human beings like us. What could have led them to this disaster? False morality, the very essence of Nazism? Abandonment of humility for the cult of heroism? Exaltation of force rather than weakness? Pride rather than simplicity? This is why I decided to tell the story of a child, of an innocent whom the distortions of a utopian education inspire to perpetrate a crime [killing his invalid father] thinking he's accomplishing an heroic act. But the little flame of morality is not extinguished in him: he kills himself to escape this uneasiness, this contradiction (Rossellini 230).

On individuals and ideology I would like to open a parenthesis and specifically refer to Louis Althusser's 1970 essay on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus.”⁷ Discussing the relation between State and individuals, Althusser is asking – like Rossellini – why are individuals obedient, why do people follow the laws and obey. Developing the classical Marxist theory of the State and its distinction between «State power» and «State apparatus», Althusser comes to the conclusion that state power is held through the exercise of “Ideological State Apparatuses”: Churches, Parties, Family, Schools, Cultural ventures, etc. While “State Apparatuses” (the Government,

Administration, Army, Police, Courts, Prisons, etc) are repressive and function by violence within the *public* domain, the “State Ideological Apparatuses” are part of the *private* domain, and function “by ideology.” Althusser finally isolates the “educational ideological apparatus” as the dominant one in mature capitalist societies. I quote:

To my knowledge, *no class can hold power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses* [p.146] [...] I believe that the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological State apparatus, is the *educational ideological apparatus* (Althusser 152).⁸

This is also why the didactic aims of Rossellini’s work are so important and need to be understood in the context of a replacement of ideologies after the end of the Second World War. With *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*, Rossellini was acting among the organic intellectuals of the new Italian hegemony, helping to replace the old fascist values with new antifascist ones. These new values had sprung roots at the very foundation of the newborn Italian Republic and society during the civil war of 1943-1945.

Another extremely important element in Althusser’s analysis that helps us understand the mass identification of German and Italian crowds with Nazism and Fascism is the irrational energy involved in ideology. Individual subjects are the pivots of ideology through an imaginary relationship that both pervades and eludes the real conditions of their existence:

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence [...] What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live. [...] (Althusser 162-165).

In making *Germany Year Zero*, Rossellini was indeed driven by what Chiarini defined as a characteristic of neorealism, “a greater curiosity about individuals [...] and the most subtle aspects of their souls” (Rossellini 267).

There is a sequence in the movie in which Rossellini is particularly careful in showing such curiosity. After his first casual meeting with Mr. Enning, his former teacher – a convinced Nazi and a pederast – Edmund sells a phonograph and a record of one of Hitler’s speeches that Mr. Enning gave him for the black market. The scene takes place inside the Chancellery, where Hitler’s headquarters were already a tourism attraction for Anglo-Americans soldiers, who

would eventually buy the record. It could be easily interpreted as the representation of a dream or of a hallucination, with the weird couple – a grandfather with his maybe 3-year-old grandson strolling with his toy chariot – appearing in such a site of ruins, while the voice of Hitler sounds aloud again. Who are they? And who are the German people? How could Nazi ideology and Hitlerism have won the masses *if not* through an “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”?

Rossellini shows this paradox through the sequences in which he inacts and visualizes a total estrangement from the ‘reality’ that these words from Hitler’s recorded speech produce and represent:

Gone forward in rain and in sunshine, and above all in time of storm, and I am proud to be the Führer of this nation, and I am particularly happy to be so in difficult times, and I am happy that in this country’s days of glory, for which I am responsible, it can again put its faith in me, that I can again rouse the entire German people and say: Germans, do not fear, we will overcome all with victory which has only just begun (*The War Trilogy* 396).

In *Germany, Year Zero* Rossellini represents what Althusser helped us understand: the link between individuals and ideology assured by the educational ideological apparatus. Edmund kills his father after a second meeting with his former teacher, a Nazi whose judgments Edmund trusts. Compelled by the conditions of Edmund’s father, Mr. Enning tells his former pupil these words I quote from the script:

That’s how life is. We were molded in other times. You’re afraid Papa’ll die? Learn from Nature: the weak are always eliminated by the strong. We must have the courage to sacrifice the weak [...]. What counts in a defeat like ours is to survive [...]. Come, Edmund, don’t be a goose. You must recognize your responsibilities. Good-bye (Rossellini 428).

The abnormity and monstrosity of Nazi ideology with its manipulations of Darwinism are implied here: the consequences of such an utterance on Edmund’s acts and life are enormous and irrevocable. Edmund, an innocent and an infant represents for Rossellini the individual – any individual – facing state power and its ideology. His story works as a sample in Rossellini’s didactic attempt to understand how Nazi and Fascist ideologies imposed themselves on individuals – demasking their tricks and aberrations in order to prevent them from ruling again in the future.

The “moral position” Chiarini was referring to (“there doesn’t exist a *technique* for capturing truth [...] only a moral position can do it”) is at the very foundation of neo-realism, the aesthetic movement that played a central role in redefining Italian national identity after

the Second World War. The Holocaust is only implied by Mr. Enning's words, yet the unimaginable kept on asking Rossellini for a vision of postwar Europe that would enable him to capture – only by omission – such an unspeakable truth. Rossellini did not forget the European Jews – and all the other victims, including disabled persons and political prisoners – sacrificed in the Holocaust, since they represented a sort of premise to his thinking and understanding of reality in the aftermath of the war. That is to say survival, reconstruction and recovery – erasing parts of the past – from the traumatic effects of both Fascism and Nazism in Europe. This is how Rossellini recalled the beginning of his search for a “story idea” on Germany after Nazism:

Without any preconceived idea I went back to Germany, not to shoot but to visit and bring back a story idea. I arrived in Berlin in the month of March [1947], by car, around five o' clock in the afternoon, as the sun was going down [...]. On the horizon was the unique sign which stood on a stone block in front of a tiny storefront, and I read: "Israel Bazaar." The first Jewish had come back to Berlin. This indeed was the symbol of the end of Nazism (Rossellini 230).

Through the radicality of Edmund's experience, a perfecting of neo-realism is indeed at stake. Beginning with *Germany, Year Zero* – after the relegitimation of the Italian people through the redemptive stories told in *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan* – a new chapter in Rossellini's understanding of reality begins. His new cinema can still be defined as highly political, but in a completely different sense involving a mystical aspect. A new type of character is required, active in a totally different world – that is to say the world after Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima. Edmund and Karin (*Stromboli*), or again Irene (*Europe '51*) and Katherine Joyce (*Journey to Italy/The Lonely Woman*) are seers and visionaries – if not saints – in a world in which the effects of the war are over, though only apparently. Their sensitivities are embedded with the mutations of Europe after the Second World War – of landscapes and identities – and they act as initiates in a new society whose mysteries they grasp without being considered a part of it. According to Gilles Deleuze, they are mutants representing:

a new type of character for a new cinema. It is because what happens to them does not belong to them and only half concerns them, because they know how to extract from the event the part that cannot be reduced to what happens: that part of inexhaustible possibility that constitutes the unbearable, the intolerable, the visionary's part (Deleuze 19-20).

As a matter of fact these characters inaugurate a new wave in understanding cinema. They have – and ask the spectator to assume – a dysfunctional gaze⁹ on reality that can be perceived as the pure gaze

of the insider/outsider. In this sense Edmund Koeler is anticipating characters like Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) in Francois Truffault's *The 400 Blows* (1959) or, again, Alessandro (Lou Castel) in Marco Bellocchio's *Fits in the pocket* (1965). With the final sequences of *Germany, Year Zero* – Edmund's wonderings inside Berlin's space-time, his final jump to death and the future – Rossellini connects his film to posterity more than he could have thought possible.

Although Edmund is represented as the sample individual caught in the structural frame of ideology – his story being a didactic instrument in the hands of Rossellini the moralist – Edmund is innocent and free inside the gaze of Rossellini the director. As André Bazin wrote in his "In Defense of Rossellini":

Rossellini directs facts. It is as if his characters were haunted by some demon of movement. [...] Gesture, change, physical movement constitute for Rossellini the essence of human reality. [...] The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning (*What is Cinema?* 100).¹⁰

Edmund is a believer: he believes in facts. From the very beginning of the movie he is the only one who takes complete responsibility for life and survival – and for every required action – never giving up hope: curious and strong like the child he is. Edmund is the one mothering his brother Karl Heinz, providing food for him while taking his defense against his father, who would like Karl Heinz to report to the police in order to get a job, and then the ration card for food rations. And Edmund protects his sister Eva: he reacts to the allusive remarks of neighbours on her going out late at night. And Edmund is finally the one who takes care of dirty jobs: he kills the old patriarch believing he has been asked to do so, by both his teacher and his own father's prayers. When he realizes what he has done he is less worried about morality than about facts: Edmund is overwhelmed by facts. In his scenario Rossellini focuses on guilt and morality, following his own search for truth and the understanding of the past, but Edmund Koeler, as projected onto the screen, is and will remain free. Where is Edmund? In the last scenes of *Germany, Year Zero* Edmund decides not to answer the calls of the women – his sister's and the expatriate neighbour's who will find his body. Edmund is not there anymore, for anybody's calling: he makes the final decision not to be in such a present, a living cemetery, since he did not want to live in a cemetery. Edmund is not there anymore, but leaves us spectators his epiphany like an angel – maybe the angel of history Walter Benjamin was referring to:

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There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. [...] The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm ("On the Concept of History" 392-393).

After the end of the Second World War Germany will be driven by history into a stormy progress indeed. In Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* Edmund represents German future generations, overwhelmed by the memory of the past, from which they need to disconnect. The other disconnection from such memories embodied in Edmund's final suicide – which Rossellini could not know – envisions, to our posthumous eyes, the years of armed terrorism against the state, both in Germany and in Italy. As a matter of fact, Edmund Koeler and Ulrike Marie Meinhof – the terrorist leader of the suicidal *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Faction, acronymized as RAF) Baader-Meinhof – were born in the same year, just after Hitler's rise to power in 1933.¹¹

NOTES

¹ On Rossellini and Italian Neorealism the bibliography is extremely rich, among the most important contributions see Lino Micciché, *Il Neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, 1975. Also see Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 1987. On Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, see Peter Brunette's *Germany, Year Zero*, in *Roberto Rossellini*, 1987, 76-86, and *A History of Italian Cinema*, 2009, 80-81.

² Quoted from the scenario.

³ Roberto Rossellini, "L'intelligenza del presente", originally published in *La trilogia della guerra*, edited by Stefano Roncoroni (Bologna: Cappelli, 1972), then, as "The Intelligence of the Present," in Roberto Rossellini, *The War Trilogy*, XV-XVI.

⁴ *Lucidité* in Levinas's terms is an «ouverture de l'esprit sur le vrai». See *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 1961. Also see James Hatley, *Suffering Witness. The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable*, Albany: State University of New York P, 2000, in particular chapter 3, "The Transcendence of the Face," 73-102.

⁵ Luigi Chiarini, "Discorso sul neorealismo", a lecture delivered on April 11, 1950, then published in *Bianco e Nero*, July 7, 1951, and quoted in Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, 1998, 267.

⁶ Gian Carlo Pajetta, *L'Unità* [Rome], June 4, 1977 (Gallagher 266).

⁷ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy*, 1971, 127-186.

⁸ Emphasis added.

⁹ Francesco Casetti would call it *occhio, sguardo*. See *Inside the Gaze: the Fiction Film and its Spectator*, 1998. Also see *L'occhio del Novecento. Cinema, esperienza, modernità*. (Milano: R.C.S., 2005).

¹⁰ Bazin, André. "In Defense of Rossellini. A Letter to Guido Aristarco, Editor-in-Chief of *Cinema Nuovo*." *Cinema Nuovo*, August 1955. Then published in Bazin's *What is Cinema?*, 1971, p. 100.

¹¹ On Ulriche Marie Mainof and her generation, see Agnese Grieco, *Anatomia di una rivolta. Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin. Un racconto a più voci*, 2010.

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