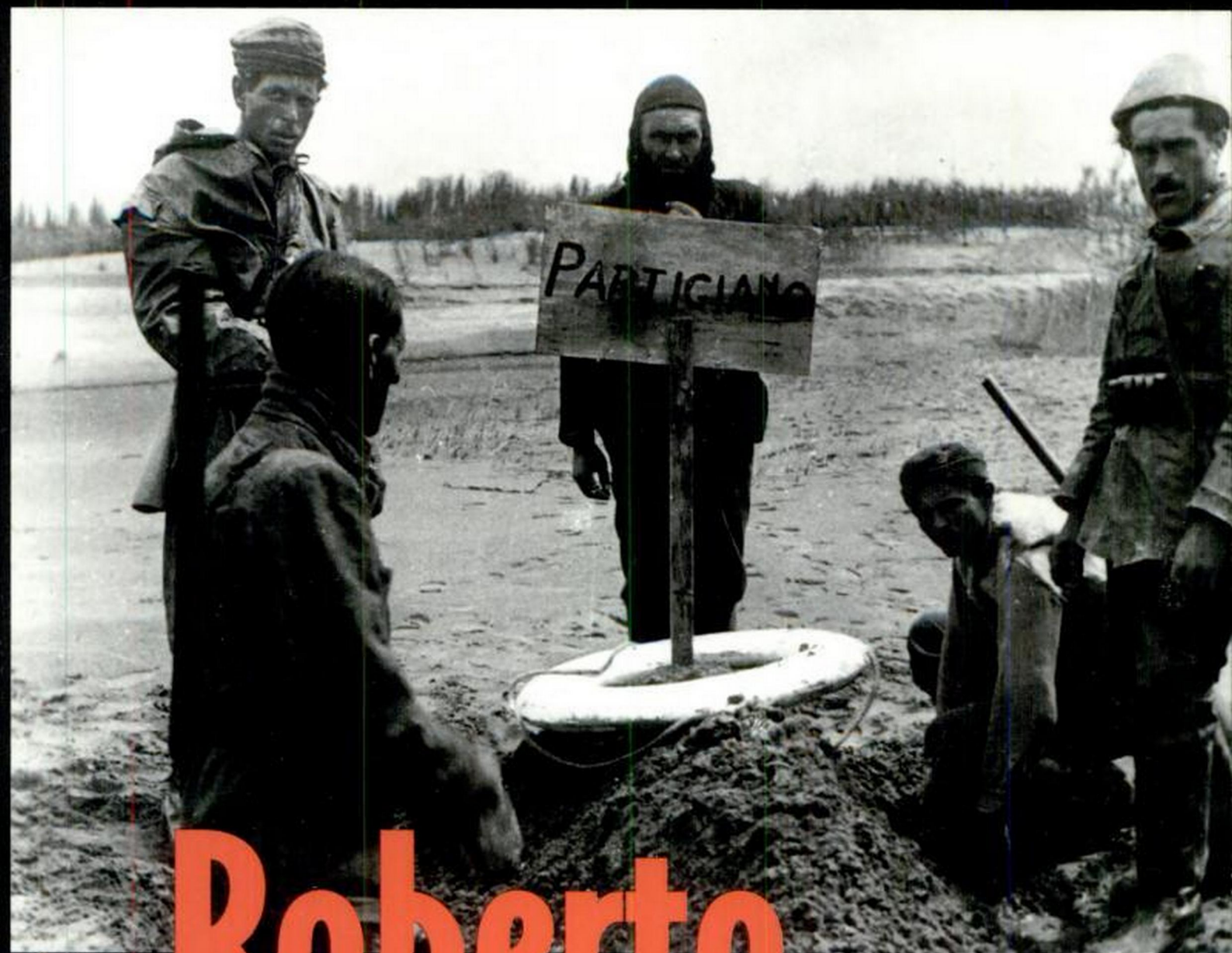




Roberto Rossellini

PETER BRUNETTE

8—

Germany,
(1947)

Year

Zero

Buoyed by the delayed, but substantial, acclaim accorded to *Open City* and *Paisan*, Rossellini next decided to internationalize his subject by shifting its focus from Italy to Germany. As with his previous films, an urge to document a particular reality and to bear witness to a given state of affairs is evident in *Germania, anno zero* (*Germany, Year Zero*), but now Rossellini also wants to pose a particular question: "The Germans were human beings like everybody else. What could have led them to this disaster?"^[1] The answer, as in *L'uomo dalla croce*, is a corrupt *idea*—though now the idea is of the Right rather than the Left—an idea that, exactly like the communism of *L'uomo dalla croce*, encourages "the abandoning of humility for the cult of heroism, the exaltation of strength rather than weakness, pride against simplicity."^[2] In the earlier film, Christianity was explicitly offered as an antidote to the poisonous idea of communism, but in *Germany, Year Zero*, there seems to be no counterforce available to match the despair caused by nazism, the war it made necessary, and, on a personal level, the death of Rossellini's son. The hope of the earlier films, as well as their benevolent priests and monks, through whom this hope was articulated, is now completely missing. In the films to come, like *The Miracle, Stromboli*, and *Francesco*, Christianity will be reinstated, but only partially, and certainly not in its institutional forms.

After getting clearance in Paris from the French occupying authorities to film in Berlin, Rossellini drove alone to the city, without any particular story in mind, some time in March 1947 to join Carlo Lizzani, one of the screenwriters on the project. He spoke of his initial impressions of the city in "Dix ans de cinéma," written in 1955 for *Cahiers du cinéma*:

The city was deserted, the gray 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 odor of rotting organic material constituted a solid wall through which one had to pass; you floated over Berlin. I went up a wide avenue; at the horizon, there was a single sign of life, a large yellow sign. Slowly I got closer to this immense sign placed on a stone cube in front of a store with a minuscule facade, and I read "Bazaar Israel." The first Jews had returned to Germany, and that was really the symbol of the end of Nazism.^[3]

In the meantime, Lizzani had been gathering information from the Communist party in Berlin on the condition of German youth, since the idea of having a young boy as protagonist had already been settled on.^[4] Rossellini was already a celebrity by that time, according to Lizzani, and so their work was undertaken in an atmosphere of constant receptions given them by the Americans, the French, and the Russians.

Finally, we ended up with about fifteen pages in hand which, however, were fifteen very precise pages. Each sheet contained one sequence, and each sequence was extremely clear. For example: "A horse falls, people gather around the dead horse, quarter it, each one takes a piece of meat, the child sees the scene, passes by and goes away." So, this great scene was actually written in three lines, but they were three very precise lines. Rossellini had this ability to concentrate and to synthesize his story in a few lines and in very clear scenes.^[5]

During their stay in Germany, all of the exteriors were shot, but to save money the company was soon moved to Rome, where the Berlin interiors were recreated in the studio. The result was a clash of realism and artificiality, much more obvious than in *Open City*, that has bothered many critics over the years but also provides for a resonant self-reflexivity. In any case, the fifteen principal members of the cast were moved to Rome, despite enormous bureaucratic difficulties. But a two-month delay in shooting because of financial problems and, according to Lizzani, "an emotional storm with Magnani," who had become Rossellini's mistress, led to unforeseen problems. During the month that they were in Rome, the starving German cast had begun to eat so much pasta that they grew immense: "The pieces didn't go together on the editing table, because the tall and thin gentleman walking the streets in Berlin, and approaching a door, when the door was opened, was another person, well fed, and with the face of well-being." Filming was suspended for two weeks while the Germans went on a diet.^[6]

The opening montagelike sequences of the film, when we first meet Edmund, its twelve-year-old protagonist, make very clear, with a minimum of dialogue, just how deep the city's misery really was. At home, the situation is equally grim: Edmund's father is sickly and unable to work; his older brother Karlheinz, a Nazi who fought the Allied troops until the very end, is afraid of being sent to a concentration camp if he turns himself in, and thus is ineligible for a ration card; and Eva, Edmund's older sister, a "nice" girl who tries to keep the family

together, is perilously close to losing her honor in her nightly encounters with the Allied troops, like the young *romana* of *Paisan*. They manage to stay alive only because the father has an attack and is taken to a hospital to recover, thus becoming one less mouth to feed, and for the first time getting some proper food for himself. Edmund goes to his former schoolteacher, an unreconstructed Nazi and homosexual, for advice on how to keep his father in the hospital; in a moment of impatience the teacher tells Edmund that he must accept his father's condition because the strong are meant to survive and the weak to perish. This remnant of a corrupt Nazi philosophy, coupled with the father's complaints that it would have been better for the family if he had died, lead Edmund to poison him, thinking that he is doing the right thing. When the enormity of his deed sinks in, after a superb and justly famous final sequence of his long, nearly wordless wanderings around Berlin, he throws himself out of a window and dies.

At a certain level the film obviously revolves around the archetypal theme of its young protagonist's passage from childhood to adulthood. But in the Berlin of 1947, the familiar rites de passage have become speeded up and horribly distorted, and Edmund is simply too young to shoulder the adult burdens, both physical and psychological, that are placed upon him. Though this twelve-year-old finds himself the sole support of a family of adults, his natural inclinations toward hopscotch and other aimless play continue to pull him back to a childlike

state that is irrevocably disappearing. His sister at one point calls him her "baby,"^[7] and his father insists that "he's still a child" and that his brief stint as a gravedigger (which we learn of in a lugubrious early scene) "wasn't any kind of work for a boy your age" (pp. 362–63). At the end of the picture, when its sad work is nearly accomplished, Karlheinz, finally assuming his proper authority, says, "Who do you think you are anyway? You're still a child." By this point, considering all that Edmund has been through, the statement strikes us as ridiculous, and the youth bitterly replies on his way permanently out the door, "How come you didn't think of that before, when I had to go out and get food for everybody here?" (p. 448)

Besides bearing the responsibility for feeding his family, Edmund is exposed to multiple corruptions that Rossellini clearly finds upsetting. He overhears his landlord's hints that his sister is whoring for the Allied soldiers she meets in a dance hall each night. She is not, in fact, but finds it necessary to be friendly at least, in order to cadge the scarce cigarettes that have become Berlin's new currency. The somewhat older teenagers with whom Edmund increasingly becomes involved—little better than rootless thieves—are cynically casual about sex and jeeringly force their young "moll" on him in a powerful, degrading scene.

The most grievous assailant against Edmund's innocence, of course, is the homosexual former schoolteacher, Herr Enning, who openly paws Edmund in a sequence whose effect may vary according to the spectator's own sexual attitudes, but which Rossellini obviously means to horrify. Enning has become a procurer of young boys for the former Nazi general with whom he lives, and his apartment reeks of moral corruption. For Rossellini this individual sexual depravity is emblematic of the wider philosophical and moral depravity known as nazism, and thus looks forward to the ugly sexual allegory of Pasolini's *Salò*. Ingrid, the lesbian Nazi of *Open City* functions in the same way, as we have seen, and even

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Enning's apartment recalls the Nazi headquarters of that earlier film. Again, it is the *idea* of nazism that so obsesses Rossellini, for it is this corrupt idea that has led to all the specific individual corruption that fills this film from beginning to end. Here, the situation is even worse because Enning is a *teacher*, and as such is in a privileged, and for the later Rossellini, nearly sacred, position, from which he is able to inflict his poisonous notions on the most vulnerable.^[8] He never actually tells Edmund to kill his father, of course, but this result is the logical conclusion of Enning's "philosophy," that same philosophy of the strong over the weak that Rossellini attacked in the Communists of *L'uomo dalla croce*:

ENNING: 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. This is a law that not even Man can escape. What counts in a defeat like ours is to survive. (*He distractedly fondles Edmund's neck* .) Come, Edmund, don't be a goose! You must recognize your responsibilities. Goodbye (p. 428).

Enning seems to be a man caught up, like Shakespeare's Brutus, with his own metaphors and does not really mean, in a specific sense, what Edmund thinks he means. As Edmund is still only a child, however, he is unable to distinguish rhetorical from literal language, and later, when his father moans that he is a burden on the family, Edmund takes him at his word.

Nor is the teacher the only Nazi influence on Edmund, for these pernicious ideas have penetrated the entire society. Thus, the landlord Rademaker early in the film calls Edmund's father a "useless old man" and an "old mummy," who he threatens to "put . . . away if he doesn't kick the bucket soon" (pp. 361, 360). Later he asks Edmund "When's [your father] going to drop dead and give us a little peace?" (p. 415). Similarly Edmund's cowardly brother Karlheinz keeps insisting that life is hopeless and that he should commit suicide. Nazi philosophy has also been responsible for the corruption of the natural bonds found within the family as we learn in a passing comment of Enning's: "Remember, Edmund, your father once handed in a forged certificate so you wouldn't have to join the Hitler Jugend, but you told me right away it was forged, because you knew what your duty was. (*He touches Edmund's cheek* .) And I ought to have reported him to the Party . . . and the reason I didn't was because I'm fond of you" (p. 386). This contrast between natural affection and artificial Nazi values, already supercharged in the context of sexual perversion, is reinforced gesturally when Edmund visits his father in the hospital after seeing Enning. There, the father caresses Edmund's arms in the same way that Enning has, and kisses him, as if to stress that the greatest evil is the warping of that which is most natural and innocent. We are also meant to see Edmund's situation universalized. Thus, at one point while they are waiting in line, one woman tells another of a boy who is "only ten, and he makes more money on the black market than the whole family put together" (p. 377).

In the deprivation caused by the war, Rossellini implies, humankind's natural inclination toward *coralità* is threatened. When the situation is further complicated by the infection of nazism, it becomes even less likely, and in this

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Nazism as corruption, again: Edmund (Edmund Moeschke) watches as his father (Ernst Pittschau) drinks the poisoned milk he has prepared for him in *Germany, Year Zero* (1947).

film any possibility of group solidarity is utterly destroyed. Eva at one point tries to convince her depressed brother Karlheinz to have hope—as we have seen, a key commodity for Rossellini—but later, and more convincingly, she asserts, "I don't believe in being helped by other people. Everybody has to help themselves these days" (p. 370). Edmund is continually rebuffed, for no apparent reason, by the other children he comes in contact with, and when he turns for community to a roving band of young thieves, their leader tricks him by selling him a fake bar of soap made from a block of wood. What surfaces is an existentialist vision of individual alienation, an emphasis Rossellini will maintain through the desolate period of the Bergman films, with the exception of the luminous *coralità* of the microcosmic society of *Francesco*.

Rossellini's attack on the Nazi idea continues in the fantasmagoric scene that follows Edmund's first visit to Herr Enning. Afraid of being caught himself, Enning gives Edmund a phonographic recording of one of Hitler's speeches to sell to the occupying Allied troops who now have the leisure to sightsee. The scene is especially striking because it takes place amid the rubble of the Reichs Chancellory and when Edmund plays the record on a portable phonograph for the benefit of two British soldiers, the effect of Hitler's voice is uncanny. Through-

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out the whole of the untranslated speech, the camera swings widely over the ruins, giving the lie to the puffed-up militancy of the Führer's words. His voice resounds through the debris-filled hallways as we cut to an old man walking hand-in-hand with a young boy (clearly symbolizing Germany's past and future). They marvel, though quietly, at the sudden reappearance of the familiar voice, and because it is both disembodied and incomprehensible to us, we understand it more abstractly as representing, again, a pernicious idea. The scene is especially effective because Rossellini foregoes any conventional attempt to explain to these two characters where the voice is coming from. They are just as baffled concerning its specific provenance when we last see them, and thus a symbolic point about the invisible pervasiveness of this corrupt philosophy (and its causal relationship to the ubiquitous ruins) is clearly made.

Despite the insistence by some phenomenologists that the film's themes are absolutely "unpremeditated," and by Marxist critics that the film contains no analysis, it is obvious, in other words, that *Germany, Year Zero* is a *film-à-thèse*. This can even be seen in its opening legend, which for some reason does not exist in the American release print, but which is reprinted in the English translation of the script. The legend further solidifies the link with Rossellini's earlier films and his partiality for the Christian idea:

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 (p. 353).

Since the camera has been panning the ruins of Berlin from the opening moment, even before the appearance of the legend, as well as after, an obvious cause-and-effect relationship is

again visually implied. In a sense, then, Rossellini's original question concerning German motivation has already been answered, and the rest of the film is simply its illustration. Just after the legend comes a voice-over, which is contained in the American version of the film:

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 realizing 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 act of accusation against the German people, nor yet a defense of them. It is simply a presentation of the facts. But if anyone who has seen the story of Edmund Koeler comes to realize 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 (pp. 353–54).

The first thing we notice in this voice-over editorial is the concern with fixing an exactly specific time and an exactly specific place, common Rossellinian interests. Also, the naive insistence on the objectivity of the film—"simply a presentation of the facts," as though it is ever possible not to have some point of view on these "facts," which helps *create* them—manifests a particular blindness with which, as we shall see, Rossellini was to have recurring bouts all his life. Even

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here, however, Rossellini blatantly contradicts himself with the obvious partisanship of the last sentence.

The poignancy of the intertitle also indicates how depressed Rossellini had become at this point in his life, his sensibilities rubbed raw by personal and public tragedy. The effect, unsurprisingly, is to accentuate the film's dark expressionism, the evidence for which has been repressed by most realist critics (who also begin to speak at this time of Rossellini's "crisis"). Expressionism is a notoriously problematical term, of course; here it means something like stylization of acting, lighting, or narrative, overt symbolization—in short, anything that calls attention to the film as artifice and tends to work against the easy illusionism of the traditional codes of realism discussed in earlier chapters. In the larger scheme of Rossellini's work, the term is related to his continual insistence on the importance of fantasy and the imagination, especially evident in films like *La macchina ammazzacattivi*, despite all efforts to make him out as a realist *tout court*.

The expressionist elements of *Germany, Year Zero*—which will also predominate in Rossellini's next film, *Una voce umana*, and will reappear even more strongly in *Fear*—can first of all be seen in the obvious clash between the exteriors and the interiors that was spoken of earlier. In addition, there is the film's often overt symbolism. The emblematic old man and young child, as we have seen, are thematically functional, being placed before us without any special concern for what would be most believable. The film is also populated with baroquely decorated yet dried-up fountains that obviously stand for the sterility of nazism and the present state of German culture. Trams operate the same way: the film opens and closes with the noise of their passing, and Edmund is forever jumping on and off them—well beyond the needs of the narrative—suggesting the absolute aimlessness of his life, in constant motion but never getting anywhere. Furthermore, the first place we see Edmund is at work in a cemetery

digging graves, which suggests his personal end, and even the ubiquitous ruined cityscape carries a consistent symbolic charge that goes well beyond *l'effet de réel*. At many points in his long walks in the city, Edmund is overwhelmed by barely standing buildings that emphasize his vulnerability and isolation and strongly foreshadow Antonioni's equally masterful symbolic use of a threatening urban environment.

The film's sound track often functions expressionistically as well. The bizarre music (composed by Renzo Rossellini) continuously calls attention to itself, rather than blending in unnoticed, especially the loudly pounding bass drums that force themselves into the spectator's consciousness at key moments of tension. The sterility of the ruined landscapes seems almost to become audible through the resulting noise. Just before Edmund jumps to his death, in fact, in a kind of final insult to his mind and body (and ours), a tram roars by with an obviously heightened, physically painful clatter. Even more important is the film's enormously stylized lighting; throughout, light and dark areas are overtly used both symbolically and for their expressive, emotional potential. We often see Edmund pacing between light and dark areas of an interior, for example, when he is feeling psychological pressure. The dark subway where he is initiated into crime, and the forlorn rocks where the gang leader, Joe, abandons

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him at one point, both suggest the sinister and the unnatural. When the gang strips the train in the railroad yard of its cargo of potatoes, the scene's finale is accomplished around a fire whose violent patterns of light and dark suggest a Walpurgisnacht or some hellish interior of the soul. When Edmund's former schoolteacher first takes him to his apartment, the two characters move from intensely bright light to the dark shadows in front of his building; the camera lingers, but we see nothing, suggesting perhaps the moral darkness that is about to engulf the boy. When the electricity in Edmund's apartment building is cut off because the landlord has been tampering with the meter, most of the interiors of the second half of the film, including the scene of Edmund murdering his father, are shot in a fantastic candlelight. Near the end, when the boy returns to his old apartment house after he has poisoned his father, and broodingly plants himself on the outer steps, the light of the hallway timer suddenly goes out, plunging him into darkness. The symbolic overtones are obvious—to Edmund as well, it seems—and he quickly leaves to begin the famous walk that will end in his death.

The expressiveness of the already highly artificial interiors is further heightened by camera placement and movement. Thus, while many of the interior scenes are in medium shot, they are somewhat tighter than conventional interiors—certainly tighter than in *Open City*—and the effect is claustrophobic. This is especially true because characters are often seen in normal two-shots that are drastically altered when first one, then the other, walks into a close-up directly in front of the camera, one head suddenly looming over the other, provoking a heightened tension in the spectator. In these interiors, and even more obviously in the exteriors, the camera relentlessly, suffocatingly stalks the vulnerable Edmund. Most critics have understandably focused on the obvious lateral tracking and dollying involved here, but even from the very beginning (in the cemetery scene when Edmund is being roughed up by the adults afraid of losing work to him), this tracking movement is often accompanied by an unique circular gesture that tightly pens him in. In the graveyard the camera becomes one more antagonist in the threatening circle that encloses him. As Enzo Ungari has pointed out: "Rossellini has no shame in *Germany, Year Zero* This is his profound lesson for modern

film: the implacable camera."^[9] As mentioned earlier, the director himself told the novelist DeAngelis at this time that he preferred making films to writing fiction because "I can adapt the camera to my talents and the character will be pursued and haunted: contemporary anxiety derives precisely from this inability to escape the implacable eye of the lens."^[10]

The editing figures here as well. During one interior scene in the kitchen near the end of the film, for example, the camera disconcertingly reverses itself three times. Elsewhere, the editing is awkward, causing scenes to begin and end abruptly, further contributing to the viewer's disorientation and thus making palpable the forces that buffet Edmund. Many early reviewers in fact complained about the film's rough editing, but, intentional or not, it contributes to the overall expressionistic effect. The framing and composition are also important in this regard. Early in the film, for example, Edmund moves, in an out-of-focus extreme close-up, into the frame that had been occupied solely by his father in medium shot. The effect, again, is threatening and foreshadows the more lit-

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erally physical displacement that is to come. At another point, when Edmund has been cheated out of the scales he was supposed to sell, he escapes the scene—but not really—by running further and further into the center of the image, trying unsuccessfully to make himself disappear into the shot's vanishing lines. The most suggestive use of framing occurs during the scene in which Herr Enning belittles the weakness of Edmund's father. At this moment, meant to represent the height of Nazi corruption, the framing is completely off, the composition is unbalanced and asymmetrical (but not in a way that would suggest reality caught *sur le vif*), the heads are partially cut out of the frame, a threatening black spike fence holds them in from behind, and Enning continually distracts the viewer by looking out of the frame, to the latest young boy found for the general.

The heightened expressionism of *Germany, Year Zero* is accompanied by the continuing tension between elements of the "real" and the prevailing code of realism, which was discussed in the previous chapter. For example, the British soldiers we see as tourists and to whom Edmund tries to sell the Hitler record are *real* British soldiers. In other words, they "play" themselves, they *are* what they play, and because of their inexperience as actors, they, like "Joe from Jersey" in the first episode of *Paisan*, have not cultivated the mannerisms and the delivery associated with realistic acting. Because they sound so false (precisely because they are so utterly "true"), they tend to disturb and even challenge the very illusionism and dynamics of identification that the film, at another level, is at pains to establish. We suddenly become aware, yet once more, that all is artifice before us.

The general strategy of the film, similarly, is toward an emotional distancing between Rossellini and the characters, which counters the "warmth" of his relationship with the characters of *Open City* but continues the bold experiments of *Paisan*. One *is* emotionally involved in this film, but the relation seems to occur not so much between the spectator and the characters as between the spectator and the film's formal elements, thus enhancing the sense of stylization. Edmund, who in a more conventional film would be the focus of audience identification, here seems rather a kind of null set, an empty integer, a focal point of effects. Rossellini's increasingly typical dedramatization is also at work in several scenes, and the lack of conventional emotional underlining makes us aware, again, of the film's status as constructed representation. The hospital scene of Edmund's initial theft of the bottle of poison,

for example, is, like the killings in *Paisan*, thoroughly unstressed. After an intercut close-up on the bottle for identification purposes (and what could be less conventionally believable than a bottle of poison left on a patient's hospital tray?), the theft is carried out quickly, without benefit of cuts, camera movement, or emotional buildup. The scene of the poisoning itself is equally underplayed, but even more thematically suggestive: while Edmund prepares the poison in a workmanlike fashion, we hear his father's voice offscreen droning on about the history of Germany. His words fill the space created by Edmund's silence, dedramatizing Edmund's activities (by distracting us) and yet suggesting at the same time a causal link between the history of nazism that he recounts and what Edmund is about to do.^[11]

The film's climax—emotional, thematic, and formal—comes during the stun-

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ning final sequence, which traces Edmund's aimless wandering through the Berlin ruins and culminates in his suicide. Even Rossellini's detractors have found this sequence brilliant; in a way, it has been overvalued, especially by the phenomenologists,^[12] for too many critics have taken too seriously Rossellini's own words belittling the rest of the film in favor of its ending:

Every film I make interests me for a particular scene, perhaps for a finale I already have in mind. In every film I see on the one hand the narrative episodes—such as the first part of *Germania, anno zero* . . . —and on the other the *event*. My sole concern is to reach that *event*. In the other narrative episodes I feel myself hesitating, alienated, absent.

I don't deny that this is a weakness on my part, but I must confess that scenes which are not of key importance weary me, and make me feel quite helpless. I only feel sure of myself at the decisive moment. *Germania, anno zero*, to tell the truth, was conceived specifically for the scene with the child wandering on his own through the ruins. The whole of the preceding part held no interest at all for me.^[13]

This is, of course, one way to account for the film's hesitations and rough spots, and many critics have been all too ready to agree with Rossellini that he was not really interested in what he was doing. It must be remembered, however, that the last sequence, no matter how striking, is mute, and that the development of the film's themes (as well as the power of the last scene), depends completely on everything that comes before.

Yet it is clearly the ending that makes the film unique. Here the "artificial" verbosity of the other scenes (exacerbated by having Germans improbably speak Italian—a complete, if practical, departure from Rossellini's standard practice) is reduced to nothing, and the plethora of words and theories and posturing is replaced by a deep, brooding silence of remarkable resonance. As at the end of Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967), the camera shadows Edmund even more relentlessly than before. At one point he passes a bombed-out church, and the sound of its organ fills the empty sound track; people stand about on the street in stylized, spiritually empty groups, reminiscent of a De Chirico cityscape. After pausing a moment or two, Edmund strides away from the ineffectual solace of institutional religion—ineffectual, at least, at this point in his life and in the life of an exhausted Europe. Other children inexplicably, but somehow appropriately, refuse to let him join their game; he is the pariah, cut off from all human community. He awkwardly plays hopscotch for a few moments in a last attempt to regress to a vanished childhood. Entering a building under construction,

located just across the street from his own half-destroyed apartment building, he climbs the slippery, stairless ramps (repeatedly and suggestively disappearing from the frame), plays with a hammerhead that he puts to his temple like a gun, and watches absently as a coffin-laden truck comes to pick up the one containing his father.

The new, unfinished building is the only future-oriented thing in the whole film, and perhaps can be seen as standing metaleptically for the prosperous Germany we know is to come. But Edmund cannot participate in this future and must cast himself down from it. His sister, Eva, calls to him, offering the con-

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solation of language and its promise of human community in the midst of this overwhelming cosmic silence, but having sinned too grievously, he cannot accept her solace. He hides from her instead. A few moments later he closes his eyes, and simply and suddenly jumps. One of the women who has been sharing the crowded apartment, known only in the film and the script as "the expatriate," runs to his side, but in this film marked by entropy and exhaustion—both physical and spiritual—she is not even able to cry out. She sits in a heap, next to Edmund's crushed body; where a Pietà might be expected in this thoroughly symbolic film, there is no contact between the bodies, and Rossellini's symbolic point is further underlined by the refusal to symbolize, the refusal to refer to an extratextual religious and artistic iconographic tradition that could signal some semblance of human love and possibility, as it does in Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* and later in Rossellini's own *Messiah*. The camera tilts up, and our last image is of the ruined apartment house that has been the site of so much physical and psychological destruction.

A great deal of diversity has marked interpretations of Edmund's suicide. The egregious Marcel Oms condemns the scene (and the entire film) because it proclaims "the necessity of the great pardon. In 1948–49, it was necessary to stick all the dead in a common grave, all of them: hangmen and victims."^[14] Borde and Bouissy, who in general think that *Germany, Year Zero* is Rossellini's best film because of its "documentary quality," reject the suicide as "a concession to the traditional rules of punishing the guilty," and fear the possibility of interpreting the film as "condemnation of the Allied victory," with Edmund symbolizing a Germany brought down by coalitions. "Across this Christian sympathy for the victims/hangmen [note the similarity to Oms' language], you can see the profile of a pardon of fascism."^[15] To find a pardon for fascism in this rabidly anti-Fascist film requires, it seems to me, a very determined effort. Rossellini's own view is idiosyncratic, but revealing in its insistence, once again, on a moral idea and its corruption:

The finale of *Germany, Year Zero* seemed clear: it was a true light of hope. . . . And the gesture of the child in killing himself is a gesture of abandonment, a gesture of exhaustion with which he puts behind him all the horror he has lived and believed because he acted exactly according to a precise set of morals. He feels the vanity of all this and the light goes on inside him and he has this moment of abandonment. . . . But it's the kind of abandonment to rest that has to come before any new action; and he abandons himself to the great sleep of death, and from there is born a new way of living and of seeing, the accent of hope and faith in the future and in men.^[16]

Given Edmund's death, one might ask in whom this vision and new mode of life is born, and in whom this new hope for the future arises. Apparently, Rossellini is positing a kind of symbolic reality to the humane, Christian ideas that have been raised, even if only implicitly, by their absence, and that have a real, if abstract, life of their own beyond that of any single individual like Edmund. In any case, it is clear how crucial the transcendental and, in stylistic terms, the expressionistic are to this "realist" film that seems finally to revel in its own multivalence.

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Una

Voce

Umana

(1947–48)

Rossellini's next film, of an awkward thirty-five minute length that forced him later to pair it with *The Miracle* in order to make it commercially feasible—they were released together as *L'amore* in 1948—is based on *La Voix humaine*, a one-act play by Jean Cocteau. Disparaged or avoided by most critics, the film is actually thematically and philosophically complex, even if its subject—the rejected woman—may not be particularly palatable, especially thirty-five years later. The realist-expressionist tension of *Germany, Year Zero* continues, but now the focus is so obsessively on the individual that nothing else remains. As we have seen, in *Germany, Year Zero* Rossellini appears to have lost faith in the *coralità* that animated the first two films of the postwar trilogy, turning back instead to the lone individual, as in *L'uomo dalla croce*, who tries unsuccessfully to make his or her way through a hostile world to personal salvation. If the group had lost its moral force in *Germany, Year Zero*, however, the environment still reigned supreme, a clear determinant of behavior. In *Una voce umana* (A Human Voice), not only does the group disappear—for no one other than the main character (played by Anna Magnani) is even seen or heard, except by inference—but the environment disappears as well. (Curiously, the presence of a dog serves to heighten the woman's isolation even more, rather than relieve it.) In this film, transcendence is no longer even a theoretical possibility. We are locked in a woman's tiny apartment (actually, the bedroom and bathroom) while she has her last telephone conversation with the lover who is rejecting her for another woman. That is the whole of the plot.

Coralità is now reduced to a single other voice, the lover's, of which we can just faintly hear the hum. Also barely noticeable are the sound effects of starting

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cars, a party, a crying baby (the last two clearly symbolic), which arise between calls. But the woman rejects all others, for they are just "people," who do not understand them and their love. The lovers have alienated themselves from human community because they have lost their reason, as Rossellini might have put it twenty years later, just like Edmund in the horrible act of murdering his father. In the earlier film, however, language is still a sign of human community, and when Edmund is ostracized (or ostracizes himself), language disappears. Here, however, we see language's other side: a means of falsifying feelings, the site of the struggle for mastery of one human over another, the place where narcissistic self-