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Building Figurations of Contingent and Substantial Communities

Differences between Italian and German Post-war Cinema Aesthetics

Abstract

In this chapter I will compare the film “Somewhere in Berlin” by Gerhard Lamprecht, which was and is still highly praised in Germany, with Roberto Rossellini’s “Germania anno zero” from 1947 and analyze the superficially similar and yet under the surface very different forms of staging community in both films. “Germania anno zero” was initially sharply criticized in Germany, but is now generally regarded as one of the paradigmatic films of Italian neo-realism. My aim is to outline these forms of staging community in a close reading of the films thereby highlighting the differences between German and Italian cinema of the time as differences in the audiovisual understanding of history and historicity. I feel it necessary to clarify the specific approach I take as a film scholar with regards to questions of history and historicity as audiovisual forms of experience. Having outlined my approach, I will analyze the specific mode of address unique to the medium of film using the example of the staging of community in the two films mentioned. My goal is an approach to understanding history, which focuses on the affective mode of address characteristic of cinema; a mode of address which makes the tension between individual historical experience and the historicity of these forms of experience themselves tangible to cinema audiences.

1 Introduction

A small canon of German films made immediately after the Second World War is still considered successful today in the sense that they have led an honest confrontation with the Holocaust, genocide, dictatorship and war crimes.¹ It has been repeatedly pointed

1 Robert R. Shandley, *Rubble Films. German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, Philadelphia 2001.

out that films such as “The Murderers are Among Us” / “Die Mörder sind unter uns” (D/SBZ 1946), “Somewhere in Berlin” / “Irgendwo in Berlin” (D/SBZ 1946), “And the Heaven Above / ... und über uns der Himmel” (D/US-Zone 1947) or “Razzia” (D 1947) were stylistically also oriented towards the features and subjects of Italian neo-realism: i. e. episodic stories of war returnees and the problems of those left behind, especially children and ordinary people; scenes shot mainly in original locations, especially in the cities of rubble in part the use of amateur actors etc. If this similarity in the forms of staging is also considered in relation to the aesthetic representation of their motifs, one comes to quite different results. On the one hand we are able to find a certain continuity with Nazi (propaganda) film in some German post-war films, which have until now been regarded as progressive. The films of Deutsche Film AG (DEFA), founded in the Soviet occupied zone on May 17, 1946, are an especially good example here. The notorious escapist entertainment films on the other hand experimented with quite new aesthetic approaches.

The examination of German post-war cinema begins with contemporary reviews, which, insofar as they have a (cultural) political claim, condemn almost all post-war productions.² At the beginning of the 1960s, the first scholarly works in the field of media studies were produced, reconstructing the cultural-political situation of the post-war period.³ In the following decades, this fundamental work led to a more nuanced debate.⁴ From the 1970s onwards, scholars began to critique ideological positions found in the subtexts of German post-war cinema.⁵ Since the 1980s, the ideology-critical orientation of the investigations has waned, but the analyzes are mostly limited to the interpretation of plot and narrative patterns.⁶

2 Cf. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, *Rettung des deutschen Films. Eine Streitschrift*, Stuttgart 1950.

3 Cf. Peter Pleyer, *Deutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1948*, Münster 1965.

4 Cf. Peter Stettner, *Vom Trümmerfilm zur Traumfabrik. Die “Junge Film-Union” 1947–1952*, Hildesheim et al. 1992; Christiane Mückenberger/Günther Jordan, “Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst...”. Eine Geschichte der DEFA von ihren Anfängen bis 1949, Marburg 1994; Gabriele Clemens, *Britische Kulturpolitik in Deutschland 1945–1949*, Stuttgart 1997; Jutta Gröschl, *Die Deutschlandpolitik der vier Großmächte in der Berichterstattung der deutschen Wochenschauen 1945–1949*, Berlin-New York 1997; Brigitte J. Hahn, *Umerziehung durch Dokumentarfilm? Ein Instrument amerikanischer Kulturpolitik im Nachkriegsdeutschland (1945–1953)*, Münster 1997.

5 Cf. Klaus Kreimeier, *Kino und Filmindustrie in der BRD. Ideologieproduktion und Klassenwirklichkeit nach 1945*, Kronberg 1973.

6 Cf. Hilmar Hoffmann/Walter Schobert (Eds.), *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen. Deutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1962*, Frankfurt a. M. 1989; Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nach-*

Since the turn of the millennium, discourse-analytical attempts to examine the post-war period from specific points of view, such as the social and cultural history of “Fräuleins und GIs”, have been increasing.⁷ They examine the staging of sexes under feminist or gender-theoretical aspects.⁸ Anthologies summarize the kaleidoscopic diversity of the social, political and aesthetic problems facing the media after 1945.⁹ Finally, research is increasingly opening up to a transnational perspective.¹⁰

This development has been noticeable in US and British research on German post-war cinema since the 1990s. While this research had for a long time focused primarily on National Socialist cinema, it was not until the late 1990s that it turned to post-war cinema.¹¹ Since about the turn of the millennium, some of the most important studies on German post-war cinema have come from international scholars, above all “Rubble Films” by Robert Shandley. For the first time, this study works with precise film analyzes that are oriented towards the logic of the films’ plots, and thus it arrives at quite ambivalent results, i. e. it comes to a position which redeems German post-war films to a certain extent from their previous condemnation. These results deal primarily with the basic question of ‘coming to terms with the past’ in the films. Shandley poses this question to the relatively small corpus of the so-called rubble films.¹² Other investigations

kriegszeit. Deutsche Spielfilme 1945–1949, Pfaffenweiler 1995; Wolfgang Becker/Norbert Schöll, In jenen Tagen. Wie der deutsche Nachkriegsfilm die Vergangenheit bewältigte, Opladen 1995.

7 Annette Brauerhoch examines this from a film-historical perspective: “Fräuleins” und GIs. Geschichte und Filmgeschichte, Frankfurt a. M. 2006; Maria Höhn examines this from a sociological perspective: GIs and Fräuleins. The German-American Encounter in 1950s West-Germany, Chapel Hill 2002.

8 Cf. Anja Horbrügger, Aufbruch zur Kontinuität – Kontinuität im Aufbruch. Geschlechterkonstruktionen 1945–1960, Marburg 2007.

9 Cf. Harro Segeberg (Ed.), Mediale Mobilmachung, vol. 3: Das Kino der Bundesrepublik Deutschland als Kulturindustrie (1950–1962), München 2009.

10 Cf. Johannes Roschlau (Ed.), Träume in Trümmern. Film – Produktion und Propaganda in Europa 1940–1950, München 2009; also id. (Ed.), Im Bann der Katastrophe. Innovation und Tradition im europäischen Kino 1940–1950, München 2010.

11 Cf. Heide Fehrenbach, Cinema in Democratizing Germany, Chapel Hill-London 1995.

12 Shandley, Rubble Films (see note 1), in particular the introduction in which Shandley points out this ambivalence and emphasizes the contribution of these films to the awareness of ambivalence. Cf. also Stephen Brockmann, A Critical History of German Film, Rochester NY 2010, who adopts this methodology from Shandley for the whole of German cinema (1895–2010); Jaimey Fisher, Disciplining Germany. Youth, Reeducation and Reconstruction after the Second World War, Detroit 2007; id., Deleuze in a Ruinous Context. German Rubble-Film and Italian Neorealism, in: Iris, no. 23, spring 1997, pp. 53–74.

deal with the performativity of the post-war situation in Germany¹³ or examine gender constructions in detailed analyzes and from a transnational perspective.¹⁴

I discuss this research in relation to my own investigation of image-space in order to examine the specific forms of the experience of historicity in German post-war cinema. So I am not interested in elaborating manifest or latent (sub)texts of cinematic narration; rather, I am interested in asking how post-war films address the viewer.

My main focus here is now on aesthetic stagings and motifs that stand at right angles to the existing canonizations. In the following I will compare the film "Somewhere in Berlin" by Gerhard Lamprecht, which was and is still highly praised in Germany, with Roberto Rossellini's "Germania anno zero" from 1947 and analyze the superficially similar and yet under the surface very different forms of staging community in both films. "Germania anno zero" was initially sharply criticized in Germany, but is now generally regarded as one of the paradigmatic films of Italian neo-realism. My aim is to outline these forms of staging community in a close reading of the films thereby highlighting the differences between German and Italian cinema of the time as differences in the audiovisual understanding of history and historicity.

To begin with I feel it necessary to clarify the specific approach I take as a film scholar with regards to questions of history and historicity as audiovisual forms of experience. Having outlined my approach, I will proceed to analyze the specific mode of address unique to the medium of film using the example of the staging of community in the two films mentioned. My goal here is an approach to understanding history, which focuses on the affective mode of address characteristic of cinema; a mode of address which makes the tension between individual historical experience and the historicity of these forms of experience themselves tangible to cinema audiences.

13 Jennifer Fay, *Theaters of Occupation. Hollywood and the Reeducation of Postwar Germany*, Minneapolis 2008.

14 Hester Baer, *Dismantling the Dream Factory. Gender, German Cinema, and the Postwar Quest for a New Film Language*, New York-Oxford 2009. Ulrike Sieglöhr (Ed.), *Heroines without Heroes. Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema, 1945–1951*, London-New York 2000; Erica Carter, *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman*, Ann Arbor 1997.

2 Poetics of the Historical: What is Historiography in the Field of Film Studies?

As a film scholar I ask less about which (usually written) sources determine the position of a film in film history, nor about how films represent historical events. Rather, I am interested in how films themselves function as creators of history: How they make history experienceable as a process of organizing time and space – as a tension between the past present and the vivification of the past in the present. The basis for this is the ability of cinema to create a mode of perception that allows us to physically experience our own everyday perception as something that has become historical. This position is a historical one in itself: optical media essentially first made it possible to experience the historical processes of the Twentieth Century. Instead of reproducing a previous reality, photography and film were the first visual media to actually structure access to a reality, which had been hitherto deemed inaccessible, incomprehensible, and indecipherable.

2.1 The History of Historicity

Siegfried Kracauer's project on the entanglement of film theory and the theory of history, which he pursued for more than 40 years, sees the possibility of experiencing the historicity of modes of perception and feeling as the central contribution of technical media to the 20th century. Film and Photography are the counter-draft to 19th century historicism and its manifestations, such as historical representations in film.¹⁵

In exploring the relationship between history and film, I primarily ask about this historicity of perception. This theoretical focus does not exclude current (film) historiographical methods, but rather seeks to supplement them: what I mean here is the study of written sources on the films,¹⁶ the analysis of the relationship between the films and the historical background they represent; and finally, the consideration of the films as sources of the history of mentalities or as such of material culture. It should be noted, however, that since the beginning of research into digital media (and actually from the

15 Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *History – The Last Things before the Last* [1970], Princeton 1995, pp. 126–129.

16 Written sources include reviews, production reports, economic data, etc.; this research method was only established in film studies in the 1980s with the so-called “New Film History”.

very beginning of all film theoretical considerations),¹⁷ film studies have rejected the assumption that film depicts reality. Moreover, since the entry of structuralism into film studies, in the 1970s, it has been understood that films cannot be analyzed exclusively through their narrative construction and their content.¹⁸

With this premise in mind, I see a clear intersection between history and film theory, which can help us find points of contact between both disciplines beyond the interpretation of written sources. It was the historian Reinhart Koselleck in his seminal book “Vergangene Zukunft” (“The Bygone Future”)¹⁹ who first suggested that by thinking about the relation between past, present and future we are immediately dealing with history. Koselleck remarks that the comprehension of time in western societies has been seen as transitory and irrevocable from the 18th century onwards. The differentiation between past, present and future includes the possibility of the intertwining, i. e. the simultaneousness of the three forms of time. According to Koselleck time and space have become an agent forming people and circumstances by influencing their feelings. Film historian Philip Rosen argues in his book “Change mummified” that it is this mode of thinking history that is then realized in cinema as a spatio-temporal experience of the historical in the audio and the visual.²⁰

With his formula of understanding history as an order of time and space, Koselleck puts forward a model that can also be understood as a fundamental cinematic operation, as the art historian Erwin Panofsky described it in the 1930s with his concept of “dynamization of space” and “spatialization of time”.²¹ How, then, would the question Koselleck poses to historical research be formulated here, how is the relationship between past, present and future arranged in film? How do films with their specific arrangement of this constellation themselves create an awareness of what is historical or how can history be experienced? Kracauer’s invective, which I referred to above, according to which film reveals the historical genesis of everyday experience, forms the basis for this line of enquiry.

17 Cf. Georg Lukács, Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kino [1913], in: Karsten Witte (Ed.), Theorie des Kinos, Frankfurt a. M. 1972, pp. 142–148.

18 Cf. Stephen Heath, Film and System. Terms of Analysis, Part I–II, in: Screen, no. 16, 1–2, springtime and summer 1975, pp. 7–77, 91–113.

19 Reinhart Koselleck, Vergangenheit Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten, Frankfurt a. M. 1989.

20 Philip Rosen, Change Mummified. Cinema, Historicity, Theory, Minneapolis 2001, p. 106.

21 Erwin Panofsky, Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures, in: Critique 1,3 (1947), pp. 15–32, at p. 18.

This is exactly the mode of understanding film which the philosopher Jacques Rancière regards as the systematic disposition of twentieth-century film among the arts. Rancière regards film as the dominant medium of the age precisely because it makes a specific experience of history possible. Film allows the spectator to experience the tension between past, present and future as “immediate experience”²² of historicity and not only as a cognitive process.

The historicity of film deals with a mode of experiencing timeliness because it configures a perception from which the visible and audible appearances of everyday life are emanations of the historical manifestation of this perception and of its change.²³ Seen in this way film does not only represent history but is itself capable of forming history by presenting the historicity of the perception of everyday phenomena.

2.2 The Historicity of Experience

In this sense, film deals with the tense relationship between individual historical experience and the understanding of historical courses of time as unique changes in the historicity of perception.²⁴ It is precisely this relationship that I systematically, theoretically and analytically seek to grasp in my study of the historicity of German post-war cinema.²⁵ When I regard films as empirical material that can create a historical consciousness as an immediate audiovisual form of experience, for example as an experience of the abyss between courses of history and personal experiences or as the gruff incompatibil-

22 Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theatre & Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, Cambridge 2001.

23 Cf. Hermann Kappelhoff, *The Politics and Poetics of Cinematic Realism*, New York 2015.

24 Paul Ricœur fundamentally analyzed this problem as the difference between historiography on the one hand and the historical experience and memory of the individual on the other. It is important to him to mediate between both levels, even to describe them as two sides of a dialectical development that represent a mutual corrective. Ricœur’s philosophical derivation does not give art an explicit, individual value that differs from other cultural functions. Nevertheless, his text is one of the fundamental works dealing with the relationship between history and the individual. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago 2004.

25 Bernhard Groß, *Die Filme sind unter uns. Zur Geschichtlichkeit des frühen deutschen Nachkriegskinos: Trümmer-, Genre- und Dokumentarfilm*, Berlin 2015.

ity of a “simultaneity of times”, as Achim Landwehr has described it,²⁶ I do so from a specifically film-scientific perspective on the relationship between film and history.

Landwehr examines, so to speak, the ‘imperial’ or ‘hegemonic’ side of the common and customary formula of the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, which wants social differences to be understood not as stages of development (such as ‘medieval fundamentalists’ versus ‘modern secular bourgeoisie’), but as forms which may be mutually dependent or as principles which are incompatible with one another. Turning to film theory, Gilles Deleuze’s cinematographic concept of time, the “crystal image”, is contained in Landwehr’s formula mentioned above: “The crystal image is constituted by the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is not formed according to the present that it has been, but simultaneously with it, time must be divided into present and past at every moment.”²⁷ In other words, film makes it possible to sensually experience the reversibility of time, as Einstein proposed in 1905 with his “Theory of Relativity” and Henri Bergson in 1896 with his book “Matière et Memoire”.

This perspective is inherent in a specific methodical concept, which does not only refer to the cultural hermeneutic interpretation of the film narrative, but directly questions the historically changeable audiovisual construction of film. In terms of film analysis, this means that the vanishing point of audiovisual construction of film is not its narrative, but vice versa, film narration itself only represents a specific case of different modulations of audiovisual construction. Accordingly, there is much more to analyze and theorize about a film than its plot and its statement. The spectator’s perception and the historicity of this perception are also shaped by the dramaturgy, figure design and rhythm of a film; perception is determined by the way in which this rhythm produces changes in forms, colors, light, tempos and musical progressions, tonality and silence, emptiness and abundance and their change in the duration of the film. The viewer is thus placed in world conditions that determine him affectively and somatically without him belonging to the film’s world itself.

The prerequisite for the understanding of the above is that filmic movement is not only represented movement. Montage, cadrage, re-cadrage and so on, cannot (only) be seen as a function of narration. It is necessary to think audio-visual modulations as forms of aesthetic experience, which create their own rules, their own space and time.

The specific historicity of film, however, depends on the dynamic change in a certain tension between the audio and the visual. This tension can be described by analyzing

26 Achim Landwehr, Von der ‘Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen’, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 295,1 (2012), pp. 1–34.

27 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema*, vol. 2: *The Time Image*, Minneapolis 1989, p. 111.

audiovisual space or to be more exact image space.²⁸ Image space is based on the idea of a unique mode of thought made possible by film and its audio-visual composition and modulation, i. e. by its alteration.²⁹ These audio-visual modulations can be understood, as in music theory, as the transition from one key to another, here transformed to the transition from the visual to the audio and vice versa. This is even the case for audio-visual history because its historicity is precisely the to and fro between the audio and the visual. This is because the afore mentioned oscillation has a certain temporality which can be described as a relation between the past, the present and the future.

This approach is pursued by the analysis of image space; it could be linked to Landwehr's plea for the "superficiality" of critical historiography in relation to the example just described, which here would mean examining the audible and visible in detail.³⁰ In the best case, such an approach can mean giving historical studies a heuristic impulse for their work from a film studies perspective by analyzing a field that is complementary to the field of historical studies.

This methodological introduction brings together the theoretical, analytical and historical parameters necessary for a new approach to research on the relation between Italian and German post-war cinema. This means understanding cinema as a place where the historical conditions of the individual first become experienceable. This also means that these historical conditions do not have to subordinate themselves to a prescribed meaning or intention or to the concept of a teleological notion of history.

From this viewpoint, I will argue that Italian and German post-war cinema have slightly different uses in the staging of community: The Italian post-war films ask how it is still possible to live or to live together once again after war and holocaust. And if there is a possibility of community who then is this 'we' that the films are talking about.

28 I understand film image-spaces as distinct from film plot-spaces. While in the understanding of film plot-spaces all cinematographic operations serve as effects of narration, the concept of film image-spaces views narration only as one effect of filmic operations amongst others. The concept of film image-spaces includes complex audiovisual processes, which are realized within the spectator and unfold themselves to him as an experience of aesthetic projections of worlds. The concept of image space is described for the first time by Walter Benjamin and developed into a film analytical concept by Kappelhoff based on Stanley Cavell's work. Cf. Kappelhoff, *Politics and Poetics* (see note 23); also Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged Edition, Cambridge 1979.

29 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema*, vol. 1: *The Movement Image*, Minneapolis 1986; id., *Cinema*, vol. 2 (see note 27).

30 To the term "superficiality" cf. Achim Landwehr, *Die Kunst, sich nicht allzu sicher zu sein. Möglichkeiten kritischer Geschichtsschreibung*, in: *Werkstatt Geschichte* 61 (2012), pp. 7–14, at pp. 11–12.

German post-war cinema instead asks how people can finally be alone or more precisely how is it possible for an individual to be alone in a community of two, three or four.

I will explain this paradoxical structure by comparing Rossellini's "Germania anno zero" and Lamprecht's "Somewhere in Berlin". Both films refer to the same structure of community, the so called *Volksgemeinschaft*; while Rossellini examines its base by unfolding more and more of its mechanisms, Lamprecht's dramaturgy begins with a new community and ends with the old, the familiar one.

3 The Logic of the *Volksgemeinschaft*: "Germania anno zero"

Edmund Koehler, the twelve year old protagonist of "Germania anno zero", is the youngest child of an 'ordinary' German family in post-war Berlin. He grows up in a world dominated by the theft of coal, the black market and an omnipresent 'brown' mentality. Edmund perceives this world but he can't understand it. He acts like the executive arm of an organism, embodying in his activity the ever present Nazi manner. Finally, Edmund kills his father by poisoning him before committing suicide himself.³¹

On the plot level it is Edmund's former teacher who guides his unarticulated wish to be part of a group towards a Nazi ideology by dividing those who "belong to Germany" and those who don't. Edmund can only 'belong to Germany' if he kills his father who's life is "unworthy of life".

To the question of community, "Germania anno zero" stages its own suicide by making the violation of civilization perpetrated by the Nazi regime, immediately experienceable and applicable to all human contexts.

Here I don't mean the aforementioned analogy between murder and suicide. Rather I want to draw attention to the audiovisual modulation of Edmund's suicide through which the spectator experiences the fundamental change of community from a homogenic, substantial community to a contingent community, a community of deficiency. A community that exists only because of the necessity of community. Here community

31 In the context of German post-war cinema, the following authors discuss the film: Brauerhoch, "Fräulein" und GIs (see note 7), p. 345. Brauerhoch emphasizes the documentary character of the film. Shandley points to the similarity of the death scenes in "Germania anno zero" and "Somewhere in Berlin"; cf. Shandley, Rubble Films, p. 124 (see note 1); Fisher discusses the film in relation to a comparison between Italian neo-realism and German post-war cinema in the light of Deleuze's cinema theory: Fisher, Deleuze in a Ruinous Context (see note 12), pp. 53–74; cf. also Christian Ziewer, Unter der Oberfläche, "Germania anno zero", "Deutschland im Jahre null", in: Hans Helmut Prinzler (Ed.), Das Jahr 1945. Filme aus 15 Ländern, Berlin 1990, pp. 315–318.

can be understood in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of community as heterogeneous, contingent, and without substance.³² Since the 1980s Nancy has tried to redefine the term "community" which was discredited in the second half of 20th century. Nancy's maxim of "being singular plural"³³ aims at a thinking of community which does not exceed the individual being taken up into something higher. Nor does the individual remain as substantial, as part of a community of monads. On the contrary Nancy understands community as the essential function of a being-between-the-subjects which forms the individual and the community as a permanently fragile relation. Edmund in "Germania anno zero" embodies a figuration which indicates this contingent, i. e. this "empty" form of community through his suicide.

I'd like to deepen this proposition now by analyzing the audiovisual space of "Germania anno zero": The magnitude of the social destruction in this film is not only conceivable by the frequent illustration of the rubble in the streets. What is experienceable here is the gap between the big city, which allows us to see suddenly so much of the horizon, and the spirit of the people which is as murderous as it had been in any of the previous twelve years. The dilemma unfolds in a closed community that conjures the values of the family and solidarity. Simultaneously a family becomes visible that utilizes its youngest part as a provider receiving nothing in return.

In the rhythmic repetition of the family scenes the spectator experiences their members as isolated. We see many characters who seal themselves from the misery of others. This is what I mean, when I talk about the 'lonely togetherness' of the community. Rossellini's film develops this contradiction of community most pointedly.

However this is only experienceable by watching the film itself. The question of the possibilities of living together only exists for the spectator. This happens through the camera's perspective of the boy's behavior. With his final suicide Edmund opens the spectator's eyes to the aforementioned dilemma. This is not because of Edmund's specific moral conduct but because of the staging of the boy's jump to his death.

The rising and falling of his body suddenly visualizes the fact that the vertical alignment that had been the dominant direction of the big city the previous twelve years is lacking in the world the film portrays. Despite the continuing influence of the Nazi mentality the visual aspects of the film are mostly presented along a horizontal axis (fig. 1). In doing so "Germania anno zero" stages a coincidence of past and present.

32 Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis 1991.

33 Cf. id., *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford 2000.



Fig. 1: Horizontal dolly shot: opening scene of “Germania anno zero” (I, D 1947, R. Rossellini).

This staging of the city begins with a horizontal dolly shot down the ruins during the opening credits and their exact repetition with the first introductory words of a voice-over-commentary. Then the camera accompanies Edmund while he searches the town for something to eat. In combination with numerous shots of the town’s waste land the horizontal alignment dominates the whole film.

This principle is interrupted only twice in the film: at the beginning with a vertical pan from the ground up (fig. 2) and then in the contrary movement at the end once again with a pan top down: Edmund’s sudden jump to death (fig. 3) and the following combination of a horizontal and vertical alignment, i. e. the movement of a tramway and the pan bottom up (fig. 4).

With Edmund’s fall the film emphasizes the vertical, i. e. the distance between the horizontal condition of the town and its ‘vertical’ perception by the inhabitants. The film unfolds this distance from the very beginning by enhancing the difference between the visual and the audio: we see Edmund’s ‘horizontal’ walks on the one hand and on the

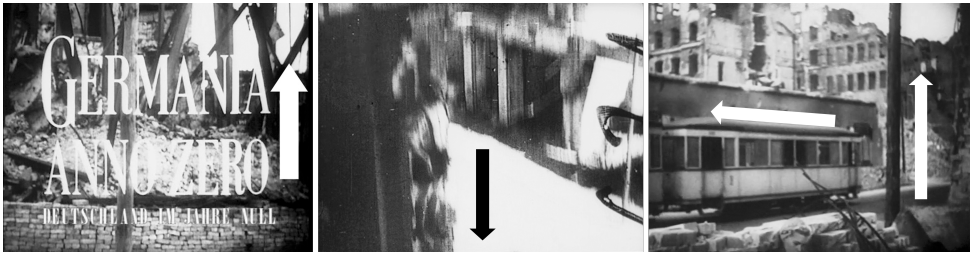


Fig. 2–4: Vertical dolly shot: Opening scene (up), Edmund’s fall (down), last scene (up and horizontal): “Germania anno zero”.

other we hear the reactionary dialogues especially of his family and his former teacher as if the center of the Nazi world were still standing. This difference first appears as a space-image which connects both of these layers through which it is possible to experience the fundamental contradiction between them, at the end of the film when horizontal and vertical alignment come together.

This jump visualizes the radical disruption of the myth of the *Volksgemeinschaft* which underlies the film. Not only do we see that this myth still exists (hearing the families’ dialogues) through the suicide we also see the disruption of it. So the spectator finally experiences the tension between a substantial and a contingent community.

4 Sacrifice for the Community: “Somewhere in Berlin”

There are other films which present forms of substantial communities on the image space level even if they have a progressive plot. Their staging of community doesn’t aim at the *Volksgemeinschaft* itself but rather at the experience of a community, based on a sacrifice, in which the individual dissolves. “Somewhere in Berlin” is a very concise example of this kind of continuity, a film that creates the opposite of Rossellini’s “Germania anno zero”.

“Somewhere in Berlin” tells the story of Gustav who lives with his mother in the ruins of Berlin waiting for his father’s return from war imprisonment. Once home the father first suffers from depression and is introverted but after a while starts the reconstruction of his destroyed car service station supported by Gustav and his peer group.

4.1 Comparison of Contemporary Reviews of the Two Films

For film-historians “Somewhere in Berlin” is considered a “well-made film”.³⁴ A key factor in this judgement is surely the opinion of the famous film art researcher Lotte Eisner who saw the film as the only German film between 1945 and 1950 in the tradition of realism and the so called German milieu films of the 1920s and early 1930s. She wrote in her famous book “The Haunted Screen” from 1955: “Despite its technical imperfection because of the economic situation at the time his post-war film ‘Somewhere in Berlin’ stands far above ‘Germania anno zero’. Rossellini’s film was handicapped because of the director’s ignorance of the German language and the German mentality.”³⁵

Eisner essentially confirms not only the contemporary affirmation of “Somewhere in Berlin”. She repeats the contemporary German critique against “Germania anno zero” as well. The few contemporary German reviews of the film³⁶ unintentionally describe the threatening nature of the film, which must be fended off; they also vehemently and sometimes polemically defend themselves against Rossellini’s “pessimism”³⁷ or, in addition to the “amateur directing”, criticize the imbalance of the presentation of the Germans: “These years were ... also a test of helpful, loyal humanity.”³⁸ This formulation foreshadows the categorical misunderstanding that Hannah Arendt later systematically takes up in her Eichmann report: “The London Statute underlying the Nuremberg Trials has defined ‘crimes against humanity’ as ‘inhuman acts’, from which the well-known ‘Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit’ have emerged in the German translation – as if the Nazis had simply lacked ‘humanity’ when they sent millions to the gas chambers, truly *the* understatement of the century.”³⁹

34 Pleyer, *Deutscher Nachkriegsfilm* (see note 3), pp.104–105; cf. also Becker/Schöll (Eds.), *In jenen Tagen* (see note 6), pp.66–69; Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit* (see note 6), pp.265–266.

35 Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* [1955], Oakland 2008, pp.323–324.

36 The film was first shown at the Locarno Film Festival in July 1948. In Germany it was shown only in April 1952 for a short time and with a few copies, afterwards only again on television, for the first time on October 2nd, 1978 in the third channel of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

37 The reviews are exemplary of Anonymous, *Das Leben steht auf Null*, in: *Der Spiegel*, no.30, 24.7.1948 (URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-44418648.html>; 2.11.2020); Annette, *Durch die schwarz-graue Brille. “Deutschland im Jahre null”*, in: *Berliner Film Blätter*, no.4, 22.2.1949; Hilde Spiel, *Film im Jahre Null*, in: *Die Welt*, 26.4.1949.

38 Ro, *Deutschland im Jahre null*, in: *Film-Dienst*, no.19, 17.5.1952.

39 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil. Epilogue* [1963], New York 2006, p.276.

The Germans as well as the German reviews refused to acknowledge anything that confronted them with the scale of their crimes. Rossellini's film was rejected in Germany, because it shockingly revealed the brutality at the base of Nazi convictions. A contemporary German critique of "Germania anno zero" on the occasion of the film's premiere at the Locarno Film Festival in July 1948 formulates this defense particularly drastically:

"Germany was not like this in year zero, and I, who was there, can testify to that, while Signor Rossellini 'in year zero' still had a lot of trouble interpreting his recently lost enthusiasm for fascism to the occupying powers and Italy's brave underground fighters. An anti-German-film? By no means. Not at all a film with a tendency ..., only of a frivolity which is worse than all intention. Rossellini does not pick flowers from a nation's grave in this film ..., he vomits into the coffin."⁴⁰

On the one hand, the film is not accused of 'evil intent' ("no film at all with a tendency"), but on the other hand of 'low motives' ("frivolity"). And in this formulation, we can see what is later drastically specified, the impudence, the impertinence of showing nothing but the physical death and the mortal remains of the boy. This senseless death builds the foundation of the afore mentioned form of community. This community is defined by contingency and absence causing the strongest physical reactions ("vomiting"). That Habe is referring to this "threatening ending" in Rossellini's film is revealed in his use of metaphor: When Rossellini "vomits into the coffin", it is to be spatially understood referencing the last scene of "Germania anno zero": The view from above, from a bird's eye view into the grave. And this perspective also frames the film. The first scene after the opening credits shows from this very perspective a graveyard where Edmund is digging a grave; he is expelled from this workplace because he is denounced as a minor. He may not dig a grave, but he is free to commit suicide.

40 Hans Habe, cited from Thomas Meder, Die Neuerfindung des Kinos fand 1947 statt, der Fluch der Deutschen war ihm sicher. Roberto Rossellini besuchte Berlin im Jahre Null und machte einen Film daraus, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 28. 7. 1998.

4.2 From a Contingent to a Military Community: “Somewhere in Berlin” and Nazi Propaganda Films

I will now concentrate in more depth on the aesthetic ambivalence of the two films⁴¹ referring in further detail to its staging of community. On the plot level “Somewhere in Berlin” and “Germania anno zero” aren’t so different: both are staged in the rubble of post-war Berlin, both have children as protagonists and weak fathers, uncles and so on. But on the level of the image space they are very different: In “Germania anno zero” the fascist community cannot be broken before Edmund commits suicide because only his death makes the ruptures of the structure of this fascistic world experienceable and by doing so also enables an experience of contingency. “Somewhere in Berlin” instead begins with the staging of a contingent community and transforms it to a substantial one at the end of the film. Focusing on this will help me to present “Somewhere in Berlin” as a film portraying the complete isolation of the community from everybody who isn’t part of it. The film does not need sacrifice to make the isolation itself experienceable (like “Germania anno zero”) but rather to establish a kind of military community.

Gustav and his peer group, the boys of his neighborhood are the center of the first half of the film. His friend Willy is an orphan, living with an elderly woman and her boyfriend who accommodated him by chance.

In the first half of the film the kids are playing war with fireworks Willy stole from his “stepfather”, a fence. These childish war games are marked by a well-known structure, the Freudian triad: remembering, repeating and working through. The children take the rubble as a marker for the presence of the war, renewed by their game which is staged as a brilliant extravaganza. This brilliance is supported not only by the fireworks themselves but by their vectorial movements which can be seen analogue to the changing hierarchy of the peer group (fig. 5). The “war community” of the kids is not a military but a contingent one. The substantial community of fixed hierarchies, structures the relations between the adults. Their influence remains at the margins of the film in its first half.

At a certain point during this game we see the coincidental beginning of the disruption of this contingent, temporary and aimless community. I call this community contingent and aimless because it is based on nothing other than the rules of the game which can be changed at anytime and without possessing any fundamental structure. Its equilibrium changes when the children destroy a picture belonging to a painter with a misdirected rocket. In the ensuing discussion Willy is marked as an outsider:

41 See all the references in note 31.



Fig. 5: A contingent community at the beginning of "Somewhere in Berlin" (D/SBZ 1946, Gerhard Lamprecht).



Fig. 6–7: Willy's expulsion as an orphan: "Somewhere in Berlin" (D/SBZ 1946).

Up to that point Willy was presented as a strong and self-conscious child, as worthy as anybody else of a place in his peer group because personal or family background had

never been important. However he becomes stigmatized by the painter's questioning his origin (fig. 6). Crying and unable to answer (the painter's question) himself, he lets his friend Gustav explain that Willy doesn't know where his parents are (fig. 7). Nobody knows whose blood flows through the blond boy. More and more desperately Willy tries to re-establish himself with his former peer group. But in the scene mentioned above the *mise en scène* of the children becomes as static as the previous scenes with the adults, i. e. less camera movement, less montage and less movement of the figures. Willy belongs to nobody and at the end, before he falls from a ruin he is staged as being isolated, something he had never been before in the film.

In a paradigmatic scene Willy looks for the first time at the ruin which he will later climb (fig. 8, 9); here he remains completely isolated because for the first time in the film the audio and the visual are separated. While he stares at the ruin, we hear another boy speaking from off space (fig. 10). From this point Willy's transformation as outsider is complete and so he can die and become a sacrifice.



Fig. 8–10: Willy's audiovisual isolation: "Somewhere in Berlin".

With this transformation Willy becomes one of the male film figures incapable of acting and thereby similar to the weak war prisoner coming back to his family. It is this change and the following similarity to the weak adults which turns him into a replacement for their sacrifices.

The dramaturgical development in "Somewhere in Berlin" is quite the opposite of that of "Germania anno zero". In "Somewhere in Berlin" the staged community changes from a contingent to a substantial one which needs a sacrifice as its base; a sacrifice which is the opposite of the new community, a sacrifice without substantial roots, i. e. without parents or without blood bonds.

The staging of this sacrifice as the initiation of a new community also shows us the stylistic ambivalence of German post-war cinema. These scenes are stylistically comparable to the sacrifices staged by the Nazi propaganda films such as "Hans Westmar. Einer

von Vielen” (D 1933, Franz Wenzler) or “Hitlerjunge Quex” (D 1933, Hans Steinhoff) as I will examine in the following.

Willy’s agony after the fall is staged in the living room of a mentally unstable soldier’s flat. Here he is visited by his (former) friends especially by Gustav and his father who swears on his life to rebuild his garage.



Fig. 11–12: Willy’s agony: “Somewhere in Berlin”.

The mad soldier keeps watch over the boy’s bed and reinforces the aural transformation by saying “soldiers die, soldiers die” in front of the other boys (fig. 11, 12). A complete change of light finally isolates the boy not only from his friends but from the surrounding space as well. This marks the boy’s last form of transcendence and the necessity of his physical obliteration in order to attain a frictionlessly pure and permanently stable image of innocence required for the foundation for the new community (fig. 13).



Fig. 13–14: The death scenes of: “Somewhere in Berlin” & “Hans Westmar” (D 1933).

We can find the same change of lighting with the same focus of narration at the end of “Hans Westmar” when the protagonist, harassed by the communists, dies in a similar way in front of his friends and, by doing so, the scene visualizes the myth of the Nazi movement (fig. 14). These Nazi propaganda films refer stylistically to the so-called Weimar Proletarian Cinema but they denounce their reference at the same time through their plot. “Somewhere in Berlin” oscillates instead between the Weimar- and the Nazi-Ufa-style on the one hand and neorealist scenes on the other.

Because of this oscillation we can not only imagine the presence of the past (as we have seen before with the war games of the children) but also the restitution of a military community, a substantial community which the film creates at the end on the base of the boy’s sacrifice. This new community excludes not only orphans but females as well: No woman (except for the mad soldier’s mother in the background) is allowed to follow Willy’s agony not even his “stepmother”; women increasingly disappear during the course of the film and even in the last sequence when we see the working military community of those who rebuild the garage the last girl remaining is explicitly excluded by the male adults.



Fig. 15–16: The building of a substantial community at the end of “Somewhere in Berlin”.

This last sequence of the film shows us a lot of boys working on a mountain of rubble that once was the garage (fig. 15). At the top of this group we see Gustav’s father and his son. The ornamental organization of this group builds a substantial community working for the same thing; the individuals disappear; the whole group is one homogenic vertical body (fig. 16). This is quite the opposite to the heterogenic and contingent community we saw at the beginning of the film: during the war game the figures were part of a disordered horizontal movement: Bundles of children were moving chaotically in different

directions. In this movement, there are only individuals and their antagonistic interests. Finally all these differences are flattened, the most different individuals have been excluded and everybody now wants the same things. Seen in this way the individuals of the film are alone together in the end.

5 Conclusion

While “Somewhere in Berlin” guides the spectator from the experience of a heterogenic and contingent community to a homogenic and substantial one.



Fig. 17: A contingent community at the end of “*Germania anno zero*” (I, D 1947).

“*Germania anno zero*” shows us the reason for this change and its price: the pietà of Edmund’s death shows us the only insubstantial community of the whole film, a com-

munity of those who must die (fig. 17). “Somewhere in Berlin” solves the question of community quite to the contrary.

“Germania anno zero” is a paradigmatic film which is relevant to both Italian and German post-war cinema. Even if its answer in this case is negative, its question is still how can we live together after World War II and the Holocaust, i. e. what can community be in these times? This is the question Italian post-war films ask. German post-war films ask the same question their answers however oscillate between the creation of substantial and contingent communities meaning that in the end they mistrust every form of community. In this way they allow the experience of an all-encompassing loss of innocence within which even friendship and family are no longer left ‘unblemished’ after a dictatorship has destroyed the difference between the private and the public. German post-war films then examine the possibility of individuals being together but can’t imagine a community that doesn’t kill itself.