

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Rossellini's Films

SOCIETY

Introduction Rossellini's neo-realist cinema is largely confined to documenting the horrors of the war and its aftermath. In his later films, he tended to examine emotional truths rather than those of socio-political reality. However, one film that does offer a sharp social critique is *The Machine that Kills Bad People*, which functions as a transition from the war trilogy to the later psychological dramas. Another film with a social theme is *Germany, Year Zero*, with its focus on Edmund's loss of innocence.

The Machine that Kills Bad People Another target of the film's commentary is social change, which is turning the town upside down. In the inventive opening sequence, we watch as a hand sets up the town with cardboard cut-outs, much like a property developer promoting a project to potential buyers. Then we have the influx of the Italian-Americans, with their money and their 'big ideas' to knock down the medieval castle and build a luxury hotel: nothing could be more symbolic of change than that. Notice also that the hotel is to be built on land that is the town's old cemetery, where the war dead are buried. Clearly, the new entrepreneurial spirit of the 1950s is sweeping the past aside. Bill's young niece, in her revealing bathing suit, also symbolises new life-styles that the town will have to confront when the tourists pour in. On top of all this, the film suggests the dangers of new technology, the very backbone of modernity. The visitors whiz into town in a new-fangled jeep, but that is not the 'machine that kills.' That label is attached to the innocent camera, which only indicates that the real dangers of technology are not always apparent. Given the subtle political messages in the film, we might say that its title refers also to the dangerous machines developed by Hitler's fascist regime. The science of eugenics and the invention of the gas chamber were manifestations of modernity in Nazi Germany. The atomic bomb, used by the Allies, was also a killing machine, and at one point, Celestino actually likens himself that nuclear device. However we choose to interpret the title, it seems clear that the 'machine' stands for the industrial and technological revolution that was changing life in traditional towns like that in the film. Change is so pervasive that we cannot even tell a saint from the devil.

Germany, Year Zero Alongside more sociological content, this film also dramatises the loss of childhood innocence, as seen in the story of Edmund and other youngsters in the film. Aged about thirteen, Edmund is both a child and a young adult. In post-war Berlin, though, he is thrust into adult roles much too early, while still clinging to his boyish pursuits. With his father ill and his brother in hiding, little Edmund must contribute to the family finances, which he does by lying about his age to work as a grave-digger, by trying to sell a scale and a record (of Hitler's speech) on the black market and by learning the tricks of the trade from Jo, a slightly older and much more corrupted boy. Edmund has no idea what Christl is doing with Jo and his gang, not until he hears accusations about his own sister's immoral behaviour. His young eyes opened, he goes back to the gang and tries to 'rescue' Christl, but she pushes him away and calls him a 'baby.' That scene illustrates his transitional status: he knows that sex is not right for Christl, but he is too young understand or do anything about it. He himself is the sexual target of Henning but only seems to grasp that the man's interest is wrong. Similarly, he hears that his father wants to die and his teacher says something that seems to justify poisoning his father, but he is mortified when the act is done. He is simply too young to have undertaken such a task. Even at the end, before his suicide, we see that Edmund is still a boy. He wants to play football, he makes an attempt at hopscotch and he plays with a toy gun. When he falls from the building, it is the culmination of a story of a boy thrust too early into the role of a man.