

Review of Heimat 3 in FAZ 30.09.04

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The difficult legacy of a German epic.

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30 September 2004.

The memories are the best part. Back in summer 1984, the two day Munich Premiere of Edgar Reitz' eleven part film epic "Heimat" was a revelation. In its structure simply a village family chronicle over three generations, mirroring six decades of German history from 1919 to 1982, the action expanded into a symbol of the antinomy of perseverance and the struggle to get away, which Reitz subsumes under the concept of Heimat.

It was as though the spectator was drawn into a seemingly endless undertow: Tears of emotion and grief, the pathos of childlike joy and at times unholy terror were swept away in the flood of the narrative, and at the same time continually generated anew. Without quite realising what was happening to him, the viewer felt caught up in a new reality beyond his own, he was living in the fictional Hunsrück village Schabbach, and with each person in it, who became ever more familiar to him as the hours passed.

Besides the village there was always another longed-for place, the hint of an alluring unknown, the impulse to free oneself from traditional ways. But the people of Schabbach, even though some secretly felt an urge to leave, were able to feel cared for in the community, in the functions that were required of them, and above all in the local speech, the Hunsrück Platt with its shifts into High German.

Originally Reitz had not intended at all to paint a big picture of Germany just then. He wanted to tell a story about a few people from the region he came from. But in the process the characters in his search for his roots started to take on a life of their own. "It surprised me that figures from childhood should insist so stubbornly on the description of their lives, the history of their time and the nature of their personalities," he wrote at the time.

Triumph led to the challenge to go on. "The Second Heimat", 1992, now unfolded in thirteen film chapters, was less a continuation, more a further development, of the first epic: One sideshoot was looked at in all its ramifications. Hermann Simon, musically gifted, became the lead character. He dissociated himself from his family because when he was sixteen his mother had broken up his love affair with a woman who was twelve years older. He swore to turn his back forever on the Hunsrück, to study musical composition in Munich, and never to fall in love again. Reitz achieved the artistic feat of conjuring up the authentic Munich of the sixties and at the same time letting it appear as a place of the imagination. There life wonderfully took its course, just letting it happen: friendship and love, growing up, becoming an artist in adverse circumstances, dreams of self-liberation. On the way, as it were, Reitz also mirrored the history of the "Young German Film". Protest simply became a rule of life, until the hopes vanished, the utopias collided with the limits of the future, the sham revolts ran out of steam. What remained was the preserve of the petty bourgeoisie.

And now, twelve years later and in no more than six parts, "Heimat 3 – A Chronicle of Endings and Beginnings", namely the period between 1989 and 2000. This finale, for which Reitz had to fight much harder than for both the two preceding epics, appears at first a monument of perseverance that demands unconditional respect. To the television corporations, always involved as "co-producers", such an artistic endeavour is becoming ever

less understandable. The compromises, which even the stubborn director and author Reitz found himself forced to make, can only be imagined.

And so, sadly, it cannot be ignored that the conclusion of this work of film, as a whole so imposing in its audacity, can no longer stand comparison with its brilliant beginning. Back then, in "Heimat", Reitz captivated us with a way of telling his story which could not conceivably have been more careful and patient, showing almost physically what happiness could lie in being integrated into a village community and deeply rooted in the landscape.

But now he appears to us strangely breathless: as when Hermann Simon and Clarissa Lichtblau, who had lost sight of each other since the sixties, meet again by chance on the evening the Wall fell, and sink into each other's arms. There and then Clarissa reels off her dream that there might be a house looking over the Rhine and the Loreley Rock, where she could feel safe with Hermann, and almost at once the renovation of the house roars into gear.

To imagine that now it is all about arriving and having arrived is of course an illusion. Heimat – hitherto for Reitz it was a place and a state of feeling. But now the formula has to stand in for a time period. That is one fundamental difference. The other lies in his approach to storytelling. "I try to portray, without constructing any idea beforehand", was how Reitz once defined his effort to discover not analytic but imaginative ways into his narrative.

But now it is defined principally by big words laden with symbolism: the shared "House", where the clients (contractors - US) from the West and the builders from the East get to know each other, the "Inheritance" over which family ties become sorely frayed, and so on. Truly symbolism comes at a high price. As soon as the characters have designs projected onto them, they lose the basis of their power to convince from within.

And an equally fundamental realisation confronts us: Something has to be completely forgotten before it can be evoked from memory with conviction. So long as Reitz stays closely in pursuit of people based only on his own origin and inspiration, this immediately gives rise to the inner tension and patiently detailed listening to his characters, for which this director is always famous. But when he re-stages apparently far-fetched episodes, in the filmscript supplemented by Thomas Brussig with a view of the East after the "Wende", then he seems only to be drawing pictures, and no longer bearing authentic witness.

In general it is noticeable how distracted Reitz' narrative style is this time. At least one example: Hermann's brother Ernst, a passionate sports pilot, sweeps in with his Cessna. His friend, one of the builders, drops everything, jumps into the Trabbi and hurtles to the landing strip. The plane taxis up, the door opens – and then there's a cut. The image of some kind of greeting, to which the scene seemed to be leading, is left out. Instead, one sees the two friends exchanging dialogue in front of their house.

So "Heimat 3" is not only a Chronicle of Endings and Beginnings, but also a document that lurches from side to side. There are highly impressive passages, such as the unravelling of the Simon clan, whose former solidarity appears transformed into ruinous egoism, or the weary process by which Hermann and Clarissa grow closer in their supposed refuge, which becomes unexpectedly constricting again. These passages stand in contrast to a lame spelling-out of developments in the plot, whose comic elements, mostly wrung out in the Saxon dialect, threaten to take off independently, and whose content, in action supposedly "owed" to cinema, such as a natural catastrophe exalted to divine retribution, strikes us rather as redundant.

Not to mention the intrusiveness with which BMW, obviously a sponsor, had its vehicles drive again and again through the picture. How powerful, in comparison with such seemingly staged elements, is the moment when Hermann turns up again in Schabbach after a long

absence, when he goes hesitantly past the smithy, examines his parents' house, finds his way uncertainly. How the familiar feels at the same time strange – this bewilderment transfers directly from the character to the informed viewer of "Heimat".

Switching at will from colour to black and white shots, formerly explained by the director as distinguishing daylight from night time scenes, is less and less meaningful in "Heimat 3". The work of the famous cameraman Thomas Mauch has a really destructive effect here, in its cumbersome preparation combined with its pointlessness. When he veers over the landscape now to the left and now to the right, as in a quick holiday video, those scenes, so essential for an understanding of Reitz, are entirely robbed of their power to make an impression. Only in the last two parts, when Christian Reitz took over the camera, do the images attain a convincing perspective.

And finally, one can't help concluding that the leading actor has to be seen as a liability to the whole thing. Hermann, now purporting to be about sixty (or rather in his fifties- Ed.), appears so artificially aged, so heavily made up, and has a strange fixed grin. The actor Henry Arnold puts his character through a plot which, in his defence it must be said, mostly compels him to passive endurance. This failing is all the weightier, because Salome Kammer in the role of Clarissa can enact natural ageing and self-confidence even in moments of the greatest suffering, that are just as convincing as her outstanding musical contributions. Not to speak of the direction, true to form, of a cast of gambolling characters, with which Reitz proves that he is still the same as of old.. True that in the decade before the millenium a great many things of human and material value come to grief, true that many characters are deprived of their happiness in life, or are left with only the small comfort of fatalism – but Reitz does not like leaving the viewer without reconciliation, after what now amounts to thirty episodes of film, which quite simply became his life's work. In the generation of grandchildren in "Heimat 3", there is another child at the piano who may be spinning himself a fantasy that is his "middle of the world".