

Interview with Edgar Reitz in FAZ 09.12.04

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“Heimat” – Director Reitz A Brother is a Brother.

15. December 2004. “One must first go away, to discover what one has at home”, says Edgar Reitz. Conversely, the watchmaker’s son, long ridiculed in his Heimat for his artistic ambitions, also had to go away first, so that those at home might discover what they have in him.

With his epic, the prodigal son gave the Hunsrück not only work – 2478 extras collaborated in “Heimat” part three alone, for forty euros a day – he gave his Heimat identity as well, and procured it international attention. As a reward Reitz received the honorary citizenship of Simmern, the county town of his Heimat, and a life-long right to live there in Schinderhannes’ Tower. The robber captain who died in 1830 was long considered Simmern’s most famous son. We met Reitz for the interview at the Premiere of his film at the 8000-Seelen-Ort in the Hunsrück .

What drives you to keep on working at “Heimat”?

There is something that I claim to have invented: it’s this form of a fictitious chronicle. I’ll let you into a secret: basically this dramatic form is the realization of a saying of Karl Valentin’s (a Bavarian comedian 1882-1948 – Ed.). He said: “So long as I live, I have to reckon with the fact that I am going on living”. That is the anti-dramatic principle par excellence, and the closest to real life. In the following episodes you will come to see a series of deaths. But dramatically that has absolutely no meaning, in the sense of something in the narrative coming to an end. From that point on there are always the germs of new stories. For me, stories begin there, when someone is buried. From this comes a feeling of unending narrative.

And what about births?

When a child is born, there is not much to say about it. They are all alike, only the parents are crazy. Describing the craziness of parents is great! When someone dies, he is surrounded by clamouring adults. A person is hardly under the ground, and there are his relatives fighting over his place. When the dead man is lying there, and someone asks the question: “Actually, is there a Will?” At that moment a hundred stories are born. That’s what it’s about for me. That is the kind of story-telling I enjoy. And I find that it never stops.

Are you already thinking about “Heimat 4”?

It won’t have “Heimat” on the label, but it will be Heimat inside.

What about your own mortality? Does it frighten you? Is the fear reduced by an “immortal” work?

Knowing that we die makes us human. That is the germ of philosophy, of love and of art. Every artist tries to wrest a bit of territory from death. Otherwise everything goes under just like that. When one tries to produce a fragment of immortality, it is a triumph. It can be achieved by science or art, and by not very many other means.

What is really your relationship with ARD? You had to severely shorten the episodes. How much joy did you get out of that?

None. The film was completed first in the form for the Premiere. So it existed in a version that could be screened, in a 35-mm copy. But then the editorial section of ARD, or rather SWR and MDR, declared: ninety minutes, to be exact 87.5 minutes. No part may be any longer.

Was that clear from the start?

Yes. There is a contract between the broadcasting corporation and the production, and it says that the individual parts have to be 87.5 minutes. I was hoping to convince them with the finished film. But that wasn't possible. I believe that the decision not to show it in full length was taken at the highest level, that is at the level of the Director of Programmes.

So you shortened it under protest?

I shortened it because otherwise I wouldn't have got my money. My contract stipulated payment in fixed instalments, and the last payment depended on reducing the final version. So we had to shorten it. Questions of artistic considerations became irrelevant.

How big was the budget?

The whole budget is twelve million euros. Barely half was contributed by ARD. Rather more than half comes from abroad through participation in coproduction, and through German and European film subsidies.

In the second episode one notices the collaboration with Thomas Brussig. How did that work?

Wonderfully. Thomas Brussig has a new novel on the market. It is called "How It Shines" and is a story of the "Wende". The roots of this novel grew from our collaboration. The lovely thing about Brussig is that he has firm ground under his feet as a writer. The problem with filmscript authors is that, if they have no literary standing of their own, they are envious of the director, and can't accept that the written work will one day become obsolete and a film will emerge. That is not the case with Brussig. He knows well enough that he has his own domain as a writer, and was therefore unbelievably easy going. He took the people from the East under his wing. The characters existed before we started working together. They were there, but their development especially in the dialogue is entirely the work of Thomas Brussig.

What will become of the "Günderode House" that Brussig's people built in the film?

We have donated the house to the town of Oberwesel. Normally we would have been required to dismantle it. But demolition costs money too. The community plans to set up a museum for the film there. There is already a collection of props. There will be a small restaurant as well, as far as I know.

Do you actually have merchandising rights for "Heimat"?

The word "Heimat" can't be protected. It's a quite ordinary German word. One can't appropriate it outside the film. One firm tried it, though. They sold a drink called "Schabbacher Herrmänsche", a schnapps. We intervened with a court order.

So is "Heimat" translatable?

The word exists not only in German but also in Russian. Nevertheless it is not translatable into the Romance (Romanic) languages. It doesn't exist in French, Spanish, Italian or English. Being a German is very interesting, when one considers the history of culture. When I create a work like Heimat, I not only have to say I am a Hunsrücker, but I have to ask myself: What does this mean, being a German? I don't encounter this here but I do abroad. The further I travel, the more German I am. When I go to South America, the United States or Asia, I am just a German, and from there one defines it anew. But I'll tell you one thing: There is nothing more painful than not being understood in one's own Heimat.

Heinrich Heine would endorse that.

His “Loreley song” plays an important role in Heimat 3 too. In my opinion there is no place more German than the Loreley. There everything resonates with this exaggerated feeling, drifting into sentimentality, into an entirely poetic relationship to landscape. But I basically tell family stories. So that every Eskimo can understand me. I never made my films just for our own country. I would like to be understood everywhere.

Family as the meaning of life?

The family is a force. It possesses an astonishing ability to survive as a cultural achievement. We have lived through a time in which it has been viewed unbelievably critically. Since Freud it has been considered the cauldron of the neuroses: Everyone in the family bears psychic scars from it. But we have no concept of anything else. We know nothing that is more binding and reliable.

The so-called freedom to choose one’s partner, which seems to us so indispensable – does it make us as happy as we think? That is still the question. A brother is a brother, even when he’s a rogue or a complete idiot. He remains a brother and we have to argue it out with him to the end. Even if this brother were your best friend, he’d get a kick in the arse and be thrown out of your life. What fundamentally interests me is describing people whom I like. Why should I devote my life to a monster?

That’s why I would never make a film about Hitler. He is not worth my devoting myself to his life. Far better someone like Rudi Molz. Sadly he died shortly before the start of the filming on “Heimat 3”, from a stupid accident – he fell out of the hayloft. So then I sat down with the family and asked them: In the film there’s an innkeeper. So have you anything against us calling him Rudi Molz, because I liked Rudi very much? Now he is part of my film.

A memorial in film.

People are wonderfully preserved in their legacy and in the memories of others. This plays quite a big role in Judaism. Perhaps a film lasts a little bit longer than people’s memory. We can do no more.

The questions were asked by Michael Seewald.