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Interview with “Heimat” director Edgar Reitz  
**“Television is no longer a narrative medium”**

**The native Hunsrücker has completed his life’s work: the 54-hour “Heimat”, the most extensive film project of all time. A conversation with an exhausted genius.**  
*SZ-Magazin-Interview: Johannes Waechter and Jan Weiler*

SZ-Magazin: Your Heimat project rates as the most extensive cycle in the history of film: there are by now thirty films  
Edgar Reitz: The full length runs to 54 hours.

SZ-Magazin: How do you keep track of all this material?

Edgar Reitz: One can only do it by coping with the tasks of each day as it comes. So as not to lose touch with the work as a whole, there were reviewing periods, when I worked back through the whole strategy.

SZ-Magazin: How greatly has television altered since the broadcasting of Heimat 1 twenty years ago?

Edgar Reitz: Television is now no longer a narrative medium. Story telling needs time – but television makes us feel we are permanently short of time. Every film is hemmed in fore and aft by the programme schedule. Some may not suffer from that, but the art of narrative needs room to breathe. The breathlessness of television programmes has an effect on the viewer and his faculty of perception. I even notice in myself, that I have become more impatient as the years go by.

SZ-Magazin: You are opposing this process with an artistic slowing down?

Edgar Reitz: Slowing down would seem too little. My own and every other art is an attempt to give permanence to the moments that determine our lives. To bring a bit of eternity to the little things of life, that is one of my aims as a film maker. What moves us must be torn off the merry-go-round of consumer society.

SZ-Magazin: But ARD will have an interest in it, wanting the ratings to be better than they were for the Second Heimat.

Edgar Reitz: There are millions of people in the world who still love the Second Heimat to this day! Knowing that gives me great professional satisfaction. With the Third Heimat, I knew beforehand that I was going to tell a story that would stir many people’s memories. The day after the fall of the Wall, the feelings people had in the last decade – all that is still alive. Most adult Germans will recognise themselves and the feelings that have moved them since then, in the film.

SZ-Magazin: How did you start to get to grips with the story of your “Heimat”?

Edgar Reitz: As so often in life, a personal crisis was the trigger. In 1978 I produced a difficult film, “The Tailor from Ulm”. On this big spectacular film I lost everything I possessed. I found refuge over Christmas with friends who had a holiday house on (the island of) Sylt, because I had to get out of my home in Munich. I was completely desperate. Then a snowstorm swept over north Germany, so heavy that the points on the railway lines froze up. It lasted for over a week, until the tracks were free again. So I had plenty of time to think things over.

SZ-Magazin: What did you think about? Why on earth did I become a film maker?

Edgar Reitz: A bitter question at the time, as I was cursing everything that had got me into this financial mess. I sought the grounds for it in my family, and I started with my grandparents. Self-therapy, if you like. I began, as far as I could simply from memory, to write down stories of the Hunsrück. By the time the snow had gone, I had written a draft plot of a hundred pages.

SZ-Magazin: You then called the piece "Heimat".

Edgar Reitz: It was called "Geheischnis" at first, until the filming started.

SZ-Magazin: "Geheischnis"? What does that mean?

Edgar Reitz: It's a Hunsrücker dialect word and means something very much like safety, nearness to people. The word originally came from farming. It is related to the word "Gehege" (pen, enclosure, fence etc), the fenced-off space in which men and animals live. My grandmother would say when taking me to bed: "We two have a 'Geheischnis'".

SZ-Magazin: Apparently an incomprehensible title outside the Hunsrück.

Edgar Reitz: People on the camera team wrote "Heimat" on the clapperboard, because they associated the word "Geheischnis" with it.

SZ-Magazin: And then that took hold?

Edgar Reitz: Not immediately, but Bernd Eichinger, who visited us once during the shooting because he had taken on a small role in the film, saw what was written on the clapper and said: You must use "Heimat" as the title!

SZ-Magazin: That was risky. "Heimat" was a non-word in the eighties.

Edgar Reitz: It was weighed down with strong negative memories. "Heimat" was a propaganda word under the Nazis. Then in the fifties there were the shallow kitsch "Heimat" films. But I was convinced that one could free the word from this encumbrance, and said to myself: Neither the Nazis nor the folk musicians invented this word; its true sense is really innocent. The idea of "Heimat" has a great past in the history of culture. I saw eminent philosophers at my side who had concerned themselves with it, for example Ernst Bloch. In his "Principle of Hope" it says: "... so there arises in the world something that shines in everyone's childhood, but where no one has yet been: Heimat". The sentence contains the idea that "Heimat" is something that every one of us has lost.

SZ-Magazin: That is a romantic theme. Weren't you afraid of looking old-fashioned?

Edgar Reitz: It works in every period. There is a poem of Eichendorff's that Robert Schumann set to music: "Out of the Heimat beyond the red lightning/ the clouds come over to us/ But father and mother are long dead/ No one knows me there any more" In this magical distance that we have all lost, lies in truth that which we call "Heimat". I said to myself, if I call the film that, and if the film manages to purify this word and simply exorcise the false associations from it, then it has succeeded.

SZ-Magazin: And? How would you judge the film today?

Edgar Reitz: It has succeeded as I hoped it would. A few days ago a journalist from London was here, who claimed that the word "Heimat" has since then become a loanword in the English language.

SZ-Magazin: Have they no word of their own for "Heimat"?

Edgar Reitz: Right. No, they haven't. The feeling, the experience, is known to all men. It's only the word that not everyone has. In Russian there is "rodina". That means somewhat the same. But there is no direct analogy to "Heimat" in either English or French or Italian. It is a melancholy concept. It definitely contains an element of something lost. I once talked to a philologist. He thought the word could be traced back to the time of the "wandering of the peoples", in the sixth to the eighth centuries. At that time people as adults only rarely had a

house or bed in the place they had come to know as children. The migration of whole tribes led to permanent estrangement from familiar places. The word "Heimat" could well have arisen in the field of that experience. And aren't we once more living in a time of the wandering of peoples?

SZ-Magazin: In the big art book on the "Heimat" trilogy you wrote: "I think that a second land exists unnoticed, in the inner topography of countless people; the one they live in, the other is hidden inside". How should one understand this statement?

Edgar Reitz: I'll try to explain it to you in an image. In my street there's a petrol (US: gas) station, a pub, traffic lights, shops and the like. These are things that are found everywhere in our lives, with which we live, and by which we orient ourselves. They are in general also equally valued. But if I were to say: In my street, just before it rains, there is a smell that reminds me of a certain afternoon I experienced when I was a child – then this street is something secret that no one else living in the street necessarily shares with me.

SZ-Magazin: It is barely possible anymore to communicate these perceptions because they are no longer understood in the global village.

Edgar Reitz: I'd rather put it this way: these things are not commercial. But when I tell their story, I know that with it I trigger something in a whole lot of people.

SZ-Magazin: So, as you tell us, you find in principle there is no end. What happens in Heimat 4?

Edgar Reitz: I know what doesn't happen. It won't happen that I write a film script and hand it to a television editorial department again, or submit it to a committee. When a film project has to start like that, one is already far away from one's source of inspiration.

SZ-Magazin: That sounds bitter.

Edgar Reitz: Absolutely not, as I did finally bring the Third Heimat into being. But finding financial support for the project simply took too long. For ten long years I did nothing but fight.

SZ-Magazin: Are you very pig-headed?

Edgar Reitz: I am not corruptible. That is perhaps a big word, but I have never in my life given in to the temptation to adapt my work to earn easy money. But for now it is a lovely feeling, that I have managed it and that I was able to complete the trilogy with Heimat 3. That's thirty full-length films! And then this art book, a wonderful weighty book that I am exceptionally happy with!

SZ-Magazin: The book is coming out now, the film comes on television at Christmas. What are you going to do on 1 January 2005?

Edgar Reitz: I've been waiting for years to write a book about film for children. That is a great wish of mine, as the art of film is dependent on a public that has standards. In civilised countries we learn to read and write at six years old,. But where do we learn to understand films? To children one could reveal the mysteries of the art of film in a way that is fun. And if a book like that was complemented with a collected edition of beautiful films and exciting film scenes on DVD, it would inevitably inspire a lot of children. I have the hope that if someone has seen the most beautiful films in the world when he is young, after that he'll no longer enjoy any old shit.