

Die Zeit interview of 16.12.04 with Edgar Reitz.

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“I admire loyalty that expects nothing in return”

The ARD is broadcasting the last part of Edgar Reitz’ great TV-saga “Heimat”. A conversation about the search for what is dependable, in love, in art and in Europe.

DIE ZEIT: Herr Reitz, your ‘Heimat 3’ running from 15.12 ends on New Year’s Day 2000, with the weeping face of Hermann’s daughter, Lulu. In the last four years the mood in Germany has greatly changed. Is it still the land of your films?

EDGAR REITZ: The last few years have not changed so much as the years before that. It is worth noting that one can barely discern the point in time when these changes began. The year of the “Wende” 1989/90 was full of euphoric new departures. Hundreds of thousands at that time rethought their ideas about life. From where we are today we can only say that it is over, that everywhere there is a feeling of something lacking, not just a lack of money, but also a lack of meaning and purpose. An imperceptible sense of loss has set in, not only in individual life, but also in politics. And when we take a look beyond our borders, we can see that this has happened everywhere. The whole of Europe is mourning the same loss.

ZEIT: So what has happened?

REITZ: Clearly we have made a mistake, namely in thinking that the Market rules everything. What is meant by property, and work, is no longer bound to a place, and people are left behind helpless. We as human beings are not really mobile, we are tied to our bodies and our history, and our minds are searching for somewhere in the world to stand still in familiar places. But happiness in life has dematerialised. That is unbelievably hard to describe, because it is something that happens in the atmosphere. Our sensuous intuitive perception (‘Sinnlichkeit’) has become disoriented. That is also a problem for me as a film maker, as I am dependent on images, and nothing has been more devalued than images. A plague of images has broken out. Where on earth can pictures still speak for themselves?

ZEIT: What might be done about it? Do we need more “Values”, as they are called?

ER: Values too are only abstract, but some of them have been painfully fought over in history, and to that extent they are important. For example tolerance, the opposite of fundamentalism. We have still not properly entered into our inheritance from the freedom movements in Europe. The USA is a fundamentalist society, cast in religious mould. It was once a role model in many questions about how to live. But today, no more, because it can no longer answer our questions.

ZEIT: And what might those questions be?

REITZ: Americans cannot live without making a distinction between Good and Evil. We however can see that in everything we deal with, in the family, in personal life and also in the realm of politics, good and evil are not separable. We in Europe have to learn to work with ambivalence. Hence we still have not found our European identity. Seen this way, the concept of “Heimat” is also a European question.

ZEIT: Most people who talk about “Identity” mean nothing like this liberal ambivalence, but rather something solid and dependable, etc.

REITZ: The desire for what is dependable is legitimate too. Above all in relationships, in the family. The family since the sixties has been a much contested model of human relationships. It is no model for a “idyllic” world. All the conflicts that there are crop up in a more acute form in the family, yet in the background there is always the question of resolution. The family is a model for resolution, if you like, the model of drama, tragedy and catharsis. When one goes out away from it, conflict resolution can no longer happen.

ZEIT: When one is said to be resolving family conflicts, aren't politics looming not so far in the distance?

REITZ: I would put it the other way round: Politics are very distant from people. Politics have become a detached, independent form of activity. A new kind of politics can only be conceived from private experience: When I understand *myself*, I will be understandable to others. These days, what is purely personal has a reactionary taint and is unjustly suspected of evading responsibility.

ZEIT: *Heimat 3*, even more than the earlier series, is a family epic. Can you point out in the Simon family what it is you mean?

REITZ: I have hit on a point of tension: Hermann, who is a little bit my Alter Ego, this young educated man, who charged out into the world with all his artistic ideals, set in motion energies that aimed to “change the world”. Now he comes back out of the world, curiously empty and weak. When he meets his brothers, especially the family patriarch and entrepreneur Anton, he would like to be someone who is bigger and cleverer. But he isn't. Naturally the heroes of '68, who charged out into freedom, would like now to stand there and say: We have the answer. But today the intellectual is remarkably helpless. All the same, I sympathise with this helplessness.

ZEIT: What is left then?

REITZ: In the end, it seems as if we must start all over again from the beginning. That, and also because I know of no final answer, is why I have set the image of the family at the end. For after all the whole clan is still together at the end. And even Lulu, when she weeps, is in her father's house. She is experiencing a bit of continuity. So, just as the prosperous years have gone, so also have the years of the big words.

ZEIT: In 1984, when you used the concept of “Heimat” for your film, people took notice, because you were showing a private experience of the period, beyond the judgments of historical writing. At that time, you claimed that there was an “innocence” in what was “heimatlich”. Would you still say that today?

REITZ: No, that innocence is gone, perhaps it was never there. But I would insist that “Heimat” is the bearer of a narrative. The joy of telling a story goes *kaput* if one is forever controlling it morally. Story-telling is not an intellectual activity, but it consists in this, that we put together countless fragments of our memory in a new way. We build ourselves a new life. A story is always a reconstruction out of the ruins of a lived life, and that can only work if motivated by joy. I feel in myself this desire to tell stories, but to do so I must first lay aside moral controls.

ZEIT: The viewer has directly experienced the time period covered by *Heimat 3*. Will he adjust his version of contemporary history to accord with the film, or will he always know it better than the film?

REITZ: I hope above all that he will come to value his own life better. There are many characters offered, among whom one can choose one's favourite. That makes room for one's own life: the viewer *could* appear in the story. Besides, the whole thing takes place in this all-pervasive medium of television. As an author, one has one's difficulties with the medium, but ultimately there is nothing to compare with it. A broadcast on a major channel is thus a great mark of honour, not for the film, but for the human experience that is represented in it.

ZEIT: Is there still a TV public for it?

REITZ: I hope that even people who have given up TV will start watching it again. It is a loss that intelligent people have withdrawn from watching television. On the other hand, that's my chance, if people see that their life is the stuff of a film. That could redeem one's life for a bit longer.

ZEIT: It's not only Hermann who wants his life redeemed in what is familiar, all the characters seem to be involved in the same pursuit. Is that something German?

REITZ: That's very German indeed. For centuries people in Germany could not be safe in their surroundings. And when security prevailed, it was mostly fatal for their neighbours. So a typical German feeling for the landscape developed, filled with all our romantic notions. The German country is always viewed with special eyes, it is always a landscape of the psyche in all its ambivalence, for within it there are also sinister fears. Crucially however, it never presents a uniform image. But I find that all right, for in this fragmentation the right questions at least remain open. In my discussions abroad I find again and again that our German sensibility for the landscape is met with great astonishment.

ZEIT: So is the film heading beneath the historical towards a mythological stratum?

REITZ: Film can generate its own myths, film as a genre, but also the *Heimat* trilogy - it too has fashioned its particular myths. There are figures with downright mythical power, like the Grandmother in *Heimat 1*, also Maria. Hermännchen as intellectual, eternally failing to arrive, has it too. I think that a figure like Anton is a German myth that is dying-out but still extant: the classic German brooding inventor. In these figures there is a certain universality, although that was never intended. Symbolism was never at issue.

ZEIT: Is the mythological, the universally valid, the saviour of Art?

REITZ: No, not only that. There is also the individual momentary experience, what is special in one second, that only the art of film can describe. The light in the morning when Hermann meets Clarissa from the train will always relate to the moment: My wife is leaving me. This second-long experience is in no way universally valid, but through the film it can be rescued from transitoriness.

ZEIT: Do just the characters have experiences like these, or does the viewer have them too?

REITZ: Every viewer. Truffaut once said, a film puts itself together in the head of the viewer. The film exists in as many individual variants as there are viewers, so that I as author cannot know how many versions there are. I only know one thing, my images record the moment when the camera was rolling. That becomes clear to me when I see the actors ageing. After 20 years they have changed. It touches me when I see that someone long dead can still today move a viewer, with a bodily presence that has now passed away.

ZEIT: Is that why *Heimat 3* gathers its cast again and again in *tableaux vivants*?

REITZ: Exactly. I believe we cannot find happiness in ourselves alone, happiness seeks company. And there is happiness only in what is remembered, for it affirms itself first only in memory.

ZEIT: The film is occasionally melodramatic and resorts to the methods of soap operas etc.

REITZ: I wouldn't talk about "soaps". It is really fatal that the art history of the 20th century has tabooed certain aspects of human nature, love, sickness, parting, death. The big things no longer count as material for art, they are left to the entertainment industry. I told myself, you are on the wrong path, if with a subject called "Heimat" you were to duck out of them.

ZEIT: Is the film also rebelling against a certain 'Coolness' in film, against a prohibition of pathos?

REITZ: The prohibition of pathos is a legacy of Protestantism. The Italians for example have no problem with such elements of "Soap", think of Fellini or Visconti. There people are not ashamed of feelings. I don't like taking part in this artistic Protestantism. By the way I am one of the few German film makers who come from Catholic regions. I say that, although the Church plays no role for me anymore, and hasn't for a long time. I know that I am setting the teeth of many "protestant" critics on edge with this. But my audience sees it differently.

ZEIT: What is so provoking about big feelings?

REITZ: that one lets oneself be moved without exactly knowing why. And that one can't immediately theorise about the feeling of being moved. I would not want as film maker to stand there like a parson, who immediately takes people's emotion away by subjecting them to various questions of faith. There are moments in the film where sentiment must be given a place, as around Anton's death. Why does his son sit there silently weeping by the death bed, although all his life long he has been downtrodden by his father? If one looks carefully, it becomes clear that the scope of such scenes is entirely different from that of soap operas.

ZEIT: is that why the characters seem to be so heavily charged with meaning? Hermann and Clarissa too are the high pure pair of lovers that preoccupied the Romantic poets. How far does this romantic vein go in your film?

REITZ: Love is a cultural concept. Whoever uses it falls back on countless models of love that are in circulation, presented by pop music, film and literature. Everyone who is in love wants to live up to the pretensions therein. Hermann and Clarissa are in this respect extremely romantic. They had got to know each other early, and now that they meet again they want to build a life together entirely out of love. That is of course highly idealistic. The attempt to turn their expectation of happiness into reality cannot go well. For me there is an important contrast here: I would like to describe people's Ego-Ideal in confrontation with reality. How does life knock people off the pedestal of this Ideal-Self? We all have these romantic ideals, and the most romantic ideal around is the concept of a career. Success is just the wonderful fulfilment of the Ego-Ideal. That is why everyone is at a loss when love is over or a career breaks down: they have no counter-concept to their ideal image of their own personae.

ZEIT: Is that a call for self-effacement?

REITZ: No, there is no alternative to the Ego-Ideal. Simple self-effacement would be just getting absorbed in a social mechanism. In the sixties and seventies there were such ideal-concepts of a politicised world youth, but now that seems ridiculous to us.

ZEIT: So then Romanticism might be a source of the modern, of a modern life, which we could not escape from, etc.

REITZ: Romanticism is the source of individualistic modernism, the dreams of love, of being an artist and also of growth and mobility, of this idea of being always at the beginning, and seeing life as a journey into unknown distances, artistic, or simply just personal. In Germany that is always deep in our hearts and today it is of course being commercialised.

ZEIT: Is that an experience peculiar to a generation?

REITZ: My generation and that of '68 is very strongly caught up in these questions. I am looking for a story-teller's answer to our idea of a life-image, to the question: What is left of all that I have wanted in my life? It is still legitimate to want to save something from one's dreams.

ZEIT: How does that transfer to the post-'68 generation, in the film to Lulu's generation?

REITZ: I can see that hubris is not so strongly marked in the next generation. Young people foster a much stronger relationship among one another, their interest in continuity takes priority. Just think of Lulu's loyalty to her dead partner, the father of her child. I find this loyalty admirable, for it expects no return. Lulu has her studies behind her, gets the chance to use her knowledge, and this chance is suddenly taken away from her. For Lulu's generation the question is: where that leaves skills and knowledge. Whether what one is proud of still keeps its value. Lulu finds out that all her skill has become a commodity, in the market she is suddenly no longer needed as an architect. This is another situation in which Hermann was a true "child of the German economic miracle". I am very worried about Lulu.

(The original German interview was conducted by Thomas E Schmidt).