



**Professor Edgar Reitz
Film Director
interviewed by Walter Greifenstein.**

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Greifenstein: Welcome to the BR-Alpha Forum. Our guest today is the author and film director, Edgar Reitz, one of the co-founders of the New German Film in the sixties, and author of a hitherto unique body of artistic work: 54 hours of film devoted to one theme, namely that of Heimat. A warm welcome to you, Herr Reitz.

Reitz: Grüß Gott.

Greifenstein: I am happy that you have found the time to come here. A frank question: doesn't it sometimes annoy you that your name has become almost synonymous with the concept of "Heimat", is it annoying to be associated only with that?

Reitz: Of course that's the title. I gave the whole thing the broad label "Heimat" but it is certainly no documentary film, and also not a thematic film, devoted only to a single defined issue, but it is a narrative: it is like the material of a novel, and is about many things and not just about Heimat. And therefore through all these years it was in no way a one-sided preoccupation, but it was truly a mirror image of life for me. Also, it was not as though 25 years ago I already knew how the whole thing was to end. No, that simply emerged from this everlasting dialogue with professional possibilities, and from my own life history, so that it became identical with a life fulfilled in work.

Greifenstein: But there was clearly a time in your life before "Heimat". Let's deal with that time next, so that we can learn about the course of your life history. I would like to begin with Edgar Reitz, the craftsman: I've read that your father was a clockmaker and your mother a milliner. How strongly did your family home, how strongly did this craftsmanship influence your later profession?

Reitz: There is a certain pride connected with it, that I know very well from my father. He always said: "A craftsman is someone who himself knows best

whether his work is well done or not". For a true craftsman economic success is no criterion for the quality of his work. Whether a craftsman can sell himself well is, so to speak, just an additional talent that he brings along ... But whether he does his work well, that he can judge for himself. That has been imparted to him by his training, his qualification and even his knowledge, how his colleagues go about their work. For clockmakers for example: it is their tradition that once they have a clock in their hands, they mark its inner workings with a secret sign. By this mark one can trace who has worked on this clock, who has repaired it, who has replaced a part and exactly when he did it. In that way any other clockmaker can immediately establish who made a mess of it, if something in it is not working properly.

Greifenstein: Did your father show you how to take a clock to pieces?

Reitz: Yes, I was put to learn the clockmaker's craft myself at the age of 14. In parallel with my High School career – that was an unusual course in our family – I learned the craft of clockmaking in fact from my father. He kept wanting me to take the apprenticeship exam, as he simply couldn't imagine that as an academic one could have secure ground under one's feet. He kept telling me that in any case I ought to have learnt the craft.

Greifenstein: When did you discover this other side of yourself, this aesthetic side?

Reitz: My artistic tendency was there very early on. At the age of 12, 13, 14 I was painting and drawing a lot. Then later I did a lot of photography. It's true that happened under my father's guidance as he likewise had an artistic vein. Earlier he had studied the goldsmith's craft and was altogether very gifted artistically. Also very early on, I sensed in myself a certain feeling that I was seeking something: I didn't know exactly where that would lead. I sensed very soon that painting was not my way. I simply didn't have enough talent for it. Yet photography too couldn't satisfy me because it didn't reproduce movement. Then at about 15 or 16 I turned more and more to writing. I wrote tales, poems and stories.

Greifenstein: So were you a loner in your family?

Reitz: Yes, completely. And I was a loner outside the family too, in that Hunsrück village. Neither in the family nor round about was there anything like it. I couldn't talk about it much there. It wouldn't be recognised there, people would think it crazy. That is why I kept it all more or less to myself.

Greifenstein: But it came from within you.

Reitz: Yes. In school there were one or two friends in the various classes, with whom I could exchange ideas. And later too one of my teachers played a big role, above all because he recognised and supported my literary talent. He really guided me: At the High School we had a studio theatre and a drama group for which I wrote plays, first with this teacher and later on my own.

Greifenstein: And then one day came that moment that you describe principally in the second part of "Heimat": the moment of leaving home. How did

that develop for you? Was it a painful business getting away from there? Or was it relatively clear and simple for you?

Reitz: My parents of course wanted me to take over the family business and follow in my father's footsteps. In that little place in the Hunsrück he had his clockmaker's shop and his jewellery business. My parents had worked really hard to build this business up for themselves, and of course they were justifiably proud of it. They just imagined that their oldest son – there were three of us siblings at home – would one day take the business over. When it became clear that I didn't want to, that in no way did I feel drawn to it, there were violent rows. There was resistance really from all sides: at that age I felt myself totally misunderstood. It was then almost a case of fleeing from that village in the Hunsrück.

Greifenstein: That was after you passed the Abitur.

Reitz: Yes, after the Abitur. I had planned to study in Munich, because there was a professor of theatre studies there whom I had heard of: Arthur Kutscher. I wanted at all costs to study there, because I imagined that academia was the quickest route to practice. And so I landed up in Munich.

Greifenstein: And with that we would be almost in the sixties. Or was that still in the fifties?

Reitz: That was still in the fifties, but this period of studying lasted till the beginning of the sixties.

Greifenstein: In 1962 there were the so-called "Schwabinger Riots". This sparked off that sixties' feeling of being really alive. At that point, in 1962, you were already 30 years old. That means, you belonged to a generation that could no longer be trusted, since there was then in the sixties the saying: "Trust no one over 30". Did you too perceive yourself like that, as being already a little older than the main representatives of the generation of '68?

Reitz: I have always felt myself to be a bit of a late developer. I felt entirely contemporary with the student generation at that time. The five, six, seven years' age difference really hardly bothered me. And I felt that I truly belonged to that protest generation. Of course it made a difference too that German film was likewise facing an uprising. Till then I had only made short films, like most of the others who then joined together in the "Oberhausener Group".

Greifenstein: That is the next keyword, the famous "Oberhausener Manifesto" for the year 1962: "Papa's cinema is dead, long live the New German Film!"

Reitz: We were all people who had as yet made no proper full-length film. True we struggled to do so, and had until then spent years in a world that was very hostile to the upcoming generation. I can see it now of course with quite different eyes, because the generation before us was a generation in which many film-makers during the Nazi period had had no chance. Then when the war ended they were still relatively young and naturally wanted to realise their life-long ideas at any cost, and not immediately to hand back the sceptre to the next generation at their heels. For that generation had indeed – or at least felt that they had – missed out and lost so many years during the war. We how-

ever were firmly determined to disempower the generation which was still suspected of having done things jointly with the Nazis and of being therefore still ideologically tainted. In that spirit a group developed which at the beginning of the sixties used to meet initially in a Schwabinger bar. Thence arose the idea: Let's make a big scene in Oberhausen! This became the so-called "Oberhausener Manifesto".

Greifenstein: This group included among others Alexander Kluge and Peter Schamoni.

Reitz: Kluge was, so to speak, the spokesman of the group. We read out a Manifesto in Oberhausen during the short film festival there. We hardly believed it ourselves, but then it became film history!

Greifenstein: Alexander Kluge is my next keyword, as following on from that you worked with him a lot. I want here to come back once more to Reitz the "craftsman": in the beginning you even operated the camera. Did that have anything to do with the clockmaker? The camera, doesn't it have something like the mechanism of a clock inside it?

Reitz: Yes, it had everything to do with that paternal instruction to approach things from a solid craftsmanlike foundation. That is why in those years - already as a student and immediately thereafter - I had tried to get the most solid craftsmanlike training in the subject of film. I began as materials assistant and camera assistant and then really fought my way through that jungle till I could be the cameraman myself. I also worked as assistant cutter in the cutting room, I worked in copying, and learned about all the work processes of film technique. Only after that did I find a way back to directing and to writing. Only after this "training period" did I feel entirely competent for it: when I had first acquired the craftsmanly qualifications.

Greifenstein: We have prepared a little clip about Cameraman Edgar Reitz, that we would like to show now. (Clip from the film by Alexander Kluge "Abschied von Gestern" [*English title: 'Yesterday Girl', more literally 'Farewell to Yesterday'*], Cameraman Edgar Reitz).

Greifenstein: True, that was only very short clip, but it showed nonetheless a good deal of enthusiasm for experimenting. Can you tell us a little bit about this film?

Reitz: Yes, what a scene that was! We were having a fierce argument out there at the Frankfurter Kreuz, on the autobahn. Kluge had the idea of turning this Rhein/Main interchange into images. It was really a literary metaphor that he wanted to realise. During all this, his sister, who was playing the lead role, was sitting with her suitcase on the motorway roundabout. At the Frankfurter Kreuz there is this roundabout where the motorway entries and exits intersect. So she was sitting there in the grass and planes were constantly flying over us on the approach to the Rhein/Main airport. When the argument got too much for me and I no longer knew what to do with my urge for activity, I simply started filming, and created those images that we have just seen. Afterwards, Kluge said that that was exactly what he had meant for the Rhein/Main interchange.

Greifenstein: At the same time you were starting to make your own first full-length film.

Reitz: Yes, that was at the same time. We were in Ulm then, as we had founded this Institute for Film Design and were active there as Professors of Film.

Greifenstein: Already at that age!

Reitz: Yes, yes. Anyway, that's where our first feature film projects started. There were two projects "Abschied von Gestern" and "Mahlzeiten". Both these projects were planned at the same time, but were then of course filmed one after the other. So I wielded the camera in Kluge's film and then immediately afterwards I directed my own first feature film, "Mahlzeiten".

Greifenstein: How did you come up with the idea of this film "Mahlzeiten"? It anticipates, so to speak, Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage". How did you come up with it?

Reitz: It was of course very obvious, as in those days, at that age, we were all affected by partnership problems, in very direct and quite practical ways. One had simply gone through a lot of it oneself. And at the beginning of the sixties all these themes like partnership or family background etc. were fiercely disputed, so that, inspired by my own life experience, it seemed to me an important theme.

Greifenstein: So have you seen this first feature film of yours again more recently? Have you had another look at it?

Reitz: It was shown again at the Festival in Pesaro in Italy a year ago. It is a festival of "young" film and therefore primarily the younger generation go there. The interesting thing was that the young people who were sitting there came out of my film and said: "That's a Dogme film!" They had rediscovered in it all the stylistic characteristics that nowadays one attributes to Dogme films.

Greifenstein: Everything in original sound, no music

Reitz: Exactly, and mostly filmed with a hand-held camera, etc. Now this film has something: it looks quite fresh and not at all dated or old-fashioned, but very serious. There are images in this film that still, I believe, have power.

Greifenstein: Then there was another film with Alexander Kluge: "In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod" [*International title: "In Danger and Dire Distress the Middle of the Road Leads to Death"*] That's a wonderful title. How did that film emerge?

Reitz: It is really a documentary film about what life felt like in those days among the squatters in Frankfurt am Main. Anyway, we began filming there. It is likewise a film that arose to start with without any big idea. We ploughed straight into the film and then jumped from one theme to another. But it was essentially a film of Alexander Kluge's, because the technique of montage which was used in it is not particularly my style.

Greifenstein: In that connection I'd like to read out something I found wonderful, namely a "Direction for use" of this film: "Anything in the film that may be confusing will organise itself in the memory, and that by a mechanism which resides in the spectator and does not function according to the intentions of the author." That is, it is an instruction to assemble the film more or less for oneself as spectator. It demonstrates again the enthusiasm for experiment in those days.

Reitz: We were simply trying to discover the laws of film in general. And it is quite obvious that one of the laws of the moving picture is that it does not assemble itself on the cutting table, but in the spectator's head. One doesn't really assemble the material of the film, but one assembles the inner images that are stimulated in people by the film. In my opinion that is the art of drama in the essential sense: that one works with the images that play themselves out in the heads of the spectators. If you stare too hard at your own film you no longer notice what it is saying.

Greifenstein: Then there came a few films from you that were very successful, for example "Stunde Null" ["*Zero Hour*"] and "Die Reise nach Wien" ["*Journey to Vienna*"]. They were however already approaches that bore some relation to your later trilogy "Heimat": since in them you were concerned with local history and went back to a Hunsrück village. Do you see it that way too, as development?

Reitz: Yes, after "Mahlzeiten" to start with I made "Cardillac". In that I was really concerned more with my father and with craftsmanship. This film is about a goldsmith who passes his life between craft and art, and is capable of great achievements. The problem with that is that each time he has to let his work go. The craftsman and the buyer, i.e. the businessman, are two polar opposites, who often live in conflict with each other and can't stand each other. It was a very important film for me. After that it went further with "Die Reise nach Wien". That film was also set in a similar background, as it portrayed a clockmaker's family from the Hunsrück.

Greifenstein: And Elke Sommer and Hannelore Elsner ...

Reitz: ... are these two friends who in the middle of the war go off on a jaunt to Vienna. It's really more or less a comedy. In those days in the seventies people didn't properly understand that one could create a comedy against the background of the war and the Nazi Reich. Internationally of course that had been established for ages, one has only to think of Lubitsch, Chaplin and others. But for Germans it was still almost sacred material, a sacred theme. I was trying to break through that with this comedy. And I think I succeeded too: It really became a quite beautiful film. Incidentally Mario Adolf plays in it too.

Greifenstein: Then came the film "Stunde Null".

Reitz: "Stunde Null" and "Der Schneider von Ulm" ["*The Tailor from Ulm*"] originated at about the same time. "Der Schneider von Ulm" was really supposed to be filmed first, but then the financing suddenly dried up and so I quickly interposed "Stunde Null". That was a very quickly produced film.

Greifenstein: That's also a film set in the provinces.

Reitz: Right, based on a script by Peter Steinbach ...

Greifenstein: ... with whom you then later wrote the first "Heimat".

Reitz: "Stunde Null" is set on the edge of Leipzig, in a district of Saxony that at that time before Reunification one couldn't get into at all. It was also a world that one no longer knew anything about, because in both the Germanies cultural things had grown so far away from each other. But the Zero Hour was of course exactly the suture line where they had begun to grow away from each other. So it's a story that really describes a Zero Hour: the end of one whole way of life and the beginning of a new one in 1945.

Greifenstein: And then came "Der Schneider von Ulm", from which we have also prepared a small selection, to put us in the mood. (Screening of several scenes from "Der Schneider von Ulm" by Edgar Reitz).

Greifenstein: What does this film mean for you today?

Reitz: It's likewise about a craftsman. I have already mentioned that I used to live in Ulm and worked in the College there. At that time I came across this material: it is an ambivalent subject in Ulm's city history just as it is in Baden-Württemberg generally. For this Berblinger – who actually is a historical figure – was demonstrably one of the great pioneers of aviation. And he was probably even the first person to perform a glider flight in a machine. Yet on his first public appearance he crashed: because of that he became an object of ridicule. He was utterly silenced for nearly 200 years on account of his failure in one crucial moment. This story really excited me: that there is a real sort of triumph that is enacted only in the inner world of one single man. That is the triumph of the inventor. Here too those themes crop up yet again: craft and business, art and money. There are always those two poles, between which it plays itself out.

Greifenstein: What was it like for you personally? "Der Schneider von Ulm" was no great success at the box office. And the critics were likewise very guarded.

Reitz: Now, that was just *one* critic. I can even see it now with a certain sense of humour. If you take up a subject like that, you obviously have to be aware that it has a personal relevance to you, and that the story you are telling is more or less your own story. So you can't complain afterwards if that actually is the case.

Greifenstein: So it was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy, so to speak.

Reitz: Basically I created a little satire on myself with this film – of course without being aware of it. But I think now, as I did before, that it's a lovely film.

Greifenstein: I think so too, and I've just seen it again.

Reitz: Above all, the flying scenes still have validity today. Nowadays it would all be done with digital technology etc., getting a man to fly in a historical ma-

chine like that. But in those days we couldn't do that. Instead, we did it completely for real. We reproduced this flying machine from Berblinger's old plans, really reproduced it quite exactly. And incidentally we thereby provided the proof that this man was able to fly. We shot those scenes in our film with the help of an experienced hang glider pilot. He had already been practising for a while in the historical machine. So we carried out all those flights for the film for real.

Greifenstein: Once, I think it was in your diaries, you wrote quite self critically that you were too intensely focussed in "Der Schneider von Ulm". You said you were too stressed to be able in any way to see the thing as a whole. Did that then have an influence on your next work, on "Heimat"?

Reitz: What was stressing me was of course the huge expense. It was a historical film with an incredible number of costumes and props and buildings. It was all financed by my own small production company. It was in fact too much for me. The stress that I speak of there comes from that. I really risked everything on this film. And I lost everything, too.

Greifenstein: You had mortgaged house and home – exactly like the historical Tailor from Ulm.

Reitz: Yes, I lost everything. When afterwards the film flopped in the cinema, I had nothing left: nowhere to live, no car. The whole middle-class foundation that one had created for oneself was gone. To that extent there is of course a direct parallel with that historical figure.

Greifenstein: But then out of that something new arose. Out of this crisis, that really was a big crisis, you were able to develop something new.

Reitz: That's how I would see it now: "Heimat", that huge enterprise, would never have arisen without "Der Schneider von Ulm". As I said, I'd lost everything, all the money I possessed and any other material goods I had acquired. It came to Christmas, the end of the year, and I found refuge with friends on the island of Sylt. While I was there, trying to sort out my ideas, there was a snowstorm. In that year of 1978 it was the winter of the century in Schleswig-Holstein. One couldn't get back off the island: the trains weren't running, all the railway lines in north Germany were blocked by snowdrifts. So I was a prisoner on the island. Then I started to write down this story. Initially I was in search of myself and my own roots. I was asking myself: How did it come about that this clockmaker's son from the Hunsrück wanted at all costs to become a film maker? It had brought me no luck, and so I wanted to find out why I had ended up in the wrong direction and in ruins. But I went a little further back in the story. I just wanted to research my life very thoroughly in depth, as a German does. I began with my grandparents' world and their story. My grandfather on my father's side was the village blacksmith. And there of course we have the first character in "Heimat". His wife, Katharina, was my grandma. In my parents' generation there was a person in our family who left the village. That was the man who said: "I'm going for a beer", and never came back.

Greifenstein: So that's Paul Simon.

Reitz: Exactly, that's the man who went to America. So I wrote down that story, at a time when I was going for long walks on the shore on Sylt. I used to keep setting myself a goal on the way. I took my bearings on a buoy or some other marker in the landscape and told myself: "By the time I get there I must have an answer to my story and know how it continues". When the snow melted and it was possible to leave the island, I had written about a hundred pages like that, in fact a manuscript, in which I was telling this story. Of course I never got as far as myself.

Greifenstein: At that time you couldn't have had any idea of the dimensions of this project.

Reitz: No, of course I still couldn't assess that at all. Anyway straight afterwards there was the film festival in Berlin, and as I had no car I travelled to Berlin by train, to meet people with whom I hoped to get back somehow into my career. There I met an editor from WDR and showed him this manuscript.

Greifenstein: Was that Joachim von Mengershausen?

Reitz: Yes. He said to me: "For God's sake, now what have you got yourself into! That'll keep you busy for at least a year of your life!"

Greifenstein: He really was a prophet.

Reitz: Yes, a true prophet. It would be 25 years from then on.

Greifenstein: Let's have a quick look here, as we have made a little compendium of the three series of "Heimat". (Film montage with clips from "Heimat", "Die Zweite Heimat" and "Heimat 3").

Greifenstein: That's TV people for you, we edit 54 hours into one and a half minutes. It is of course a vast arc of time that you encompass in these films. As we said, you couldn't possibly have gauged those dimensions at the start.

Reitz: In the work that we now call "Heimat 1", since back then it was simply called "Heimat", I was really pre-occupied with the world of my childhood. What I had then to narrate in those images – with Gernot Roll, by the way, as the best cameraman I have encountered in my life – were stories and images, such as one really only bears inwardly from one's childhood. Of course, that's only one side of the coin. If one left a world like that, then it was for the good reason that one could never really have developed further within it: However lovely and safe and cosy it may seem, yet the family is a very conflict-ridden space. I had to get away from there, and the drive towards freedom, out of that given world, steeped in tradition, into a world of freedom that one has chosen for oneself: that had to become my next film! I could never have left it at that, at having only made "Heimat 1". Then I would never have reached as far as my own self.

Greifenstein: So now we might be in the realm of autobiography. Hermann in "Heimat" is so to speak your alter ego.

Reitz: So people say. Of course I've done everything to make his character one that indicates he is not me. That's important, as one can ...

Greifenstein: He is also interestingly about ten years younger than you yourself.

Reitz: That partly makes up for my late development. It's anyway quite important to set a distance when one describes a character like that. He would never have been able to be a film maker. The fact that he is a musician and a composer and is studying music, which is quite unfamiliar to me, was the first step towards this distance. The second step is that in his physical presence he is a different person and outwardly doesn't look like me. That too was very important to me. And then naturally things happen in his life story that have nothing to do with mine. I have simply created them out of other experiences. Nevertheless Hermann has of course become a central figure for me throughout all three parts of "Heimat".

Greifenstein: You have just spoken about "Die Zweite Heimat": at the time that was a huge success with the critics all over the world. Only at home was it not so: The prophet apparently still counts for nothing in his own country. The viewing figures were not as desired.

Reitz: I guess that's a running gag with me.

Greifenstein: Even though the first "Heimat" had on average ten million viewers.

Reitz: Yes, that was one of the greatest successes there has ever been on German television. Now that's just such an ambivalence: I am happy that "Die Zweite Heimat" was a fantastic success in other countries. In Italy people are still talking about it today. That has made up again for everything. And above all it is the more beautiful film. When I look back over 40 years of film making I find that "Die Zweite Heimat" is the best that I made in all those years. It is the most mature and artistically profound of my works.

Greifenstein: Herr Reitz, you absolutely must come back again, as we have not gone into "Heimat" properly yet at all, and our programme slot is already ending. But I don't want to miss briefly introducing your wonderful book, namely "Die Heimat Trilogie". Where has the book been published?

Reitz: In the "Rolf Heyne Collection" in Munich. It's a book that at this year's Book Fair was designated the most beautiful film book of all time. It contains almost 3000 photos from all the "Heimats". The reproduction of the photos is of a print quality and beauty that exists nowhere else. It is certainly not a cheap book, but it is still a bargain in that it is of such quality and encompasses so much.

Greifenstein: It is truly wonderful to browse through.

Reitz: There you can relive those 54 hours all over again in one afternoon.

Greifenstein: So you can. Herr Reitz, many thanks for this interview. Come back again.