

Review of:

Rachel Palfreyman: *Edgar Reitz's Heimat: Histories, Traditions, Fictions* (British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature), Bern (Etat neuf - Peter Lang) 2000, ISBN: 0820453102, 236 S.

I have just been asked to review this interesting book, but must make clear that I am not qualified to comment on it from an academic point of view in the author's own field. I have no relevant expertise, other than familiarity with the films, and can only write from the perspective of someone in the cinema or TV audience.

The book opens up intriguing ways of thinking about *Heimat* which lead at times to illuminating observations. Perhaps its greatest value lies in the careful arguments in defence of *Heimat*, against the critics who accuse the films of being "revisionist", and of "ignoring the narrative of the Holocaust and concentrating on rural innocents and the banal". The author examines various aspects of the films that have fuelled those points of view, and in understanding of them, but in reply she makes very pertinent points. She shows how Reitz took steps to "unsettle the notion that the film text carries a fixed meaning or conveys an unmediated, uncontested reality". She explains that he "wanted to create a popular narrative but one that would not shy away from the complexities of the task of remembering, one that would not replace the false memory of ignorance and resistance with an equally false memory of monsters and raving ideologies." Above all she makes the point that cannot be too often repeated, that "if we are to learn anything from genocide then it is also important to consider perpetrators as well as victims. The attempt to understand why ordinary people allowed these crimes to take place is a ... task" equally as serious as "the vital work of documenting the history of the Holocaust".

Maybe she does not make quite enough of the fact that the stories told in *Heimat* are not historical records, they are not represented as oral history, they are records of memory, mediated through the intuition and imagination of a creative artist. One has only to compare the wartime memories represented in Reitz' fictional films with those recorded in his documentary, *Geschichten aus den Hunsrückdörfern*, which tell mainly of dramatic wartime events and adventures. The fictional film, on the other hand subtly depicts things half-heard, half known, willfully ignored, but still traceable in the undergrowth of memory. It is able to do this because Reitz' aim here is not to record and analyse oral history, but to tell stories. The stories are invented from his own memories, or those of his family, or those told to him, which his own intuition and experience lead him to consider authentic *as memory*.

The book makes use of the analytic system of binary oppositions, a method which often seems to the non-specialist to depend overmuch on theoretical preconceptions about what constitutes a relevant pair of opposites, and how far they really are "opposite". It is perhaps too easy to think of the "oppositions" as representing independent, orthogonal dimensions, when it might be more interesting to analyse empirically the interdependence among them, and maybe thereby identify deeper dimensions of the structure that they define. However, Rachel Palfreyman can be refreshingly careful to describe the complexities within each pole of a binary variable, as well as the defining contrast between them. For instance she argues that the "duality in the concept of *Heimat* does not just represent a binary opposition, but an oscillation between two poles which contain the negative within each other." Nonetheless her method at times leads

her into some rather strange conclusions, especially in her discussion of the portrayals of characters in *Heimat*.

Perhaps this is because a focus on abstract concepts is inadequate when analysing the work of a story teller who, at his best, creates characters who are no more reducible to bearers of such concepts than are any of our own living selves. Her system fails her most painfully in analysing the character of Maria. She recognises the complexity of Maria's personality, which she rather naively conceptualises as "the coexistence in one character of the two poles of the binary" ("oral Mothers"/"Heimat women" vs. "phallic" or "exotic others"). But for her, "this equivocal representation is undermined by images that reinforce the myth of Heimat". So all Reitz' authentic recreation of aspects of the daily life of a woman like Maria in the society and period when she lived only "suggests the close identification of a conservative ideal of Heimat with a restricted view of 'woman' as Heimat and as 'Mother'". (In the same way, the village smithy is called "'pure' idyll", whereas for those of us old enough to remember the reversion to horse-powered agriculture in WWII it was, and in memory still is, just as mundane as the car mechanic's workshop in the local garage.) The analysis is ideological and a-historical. The association of these evocative images of real hard-working life lived in the past, with a "conservative ideal" or an "idyll", lies in the mind of the modern observer, not of the generation that experienced it, nor of the story-teller. The fact that such images were misappropriated by earlier inauthentic Heimat films does not invalidate their use as authentic reconstructions. To do her justice, the author some pages later complicates her stereotype by noticing that the image of Maria's breadmaking is juxtaposed with shots of Anton's dark room, and an argument with Wilfried about the value of technology in the modern world. In her perception, this constitutes a deliberate "undermining" of the "eternally comfortable image of the mother as Heimat". But why should it be anything other than an observed and authentically recreated memory of such juxtapositions in a real pre-war childhood, giving depth and realism to the story?

Furthermore, Rachel Palfreyman is curiously insensitive to the development of Maria's character in middle and old age. She sees it as drawing on "the soap opera technique of both exploiting and yet subverting identification with the characters, so that a character may appear quite different in various different narratives", and claims that "the recasting of Maria into a monstrous old woman is also a gender issue, particularly in view of her oppositional stance to her artist son". This seems an impoverished reading of the narrative, a failure to understand how people are affected by experience and the passage of time. For me, the character is a triumph of Reitz' skill, the changes wrought in her by age and tragic circumstances are entirely consistent with her personality. There is no wonder that her life has hardened her and made her more defended and depressed and alone. No wonder, either, that she clings with unwise, oppressive devotion to her remaining son, all she has left from Otto. Had Otto lived, they together might well have been more relaxed and open towards Hermann's relationship. Even as it is, Maria is conflicted, and nearly softens on reading Klärchen's letter. The irony is that neither she nor Anton are "monsters", unlike some of the parents in *Die Zweite Heimat*, who, even when not truly monstrous, are mostly seen only unidimensionally, through the eyes of the younger generation. Maria too, from episode 8 or 9 onwards is increasingly represented only in the memories of her sons. But we in the audience have seen both her and Anton otherwise, as mature and complex people, with whom we can identify and

sympathise. This makes the story of the trauma they inflict on Hermann into a multidimensional tragedy, richer than similar stories depicted in *Die Zweite Heimat*.

The addiction to abstract binary oppositions also clouds the author's perception of other characters. Klärchen for instance is a more adult and emotionally aware woman than the "wood nymph and nature spirit" whom the author needs to contrast with the "fashionable and assertive" Lotti. The assertion that the "positive representation" of the effects of Anton's business enterprise on the community "is achieved despite, not because of, Anton, the self-important and conservative 'Heimat' man" simply fails to recognise the wholeness of this character. It is exactly his solid, craftsmanlike, conservative values that have contributed to his success, and in this context the defensive need for control which grows into his authoritarianism is entirely explicable. Empirically, these are concomitant, not opposing attributes of such a character.

Those and similar examples seem to constitute a weakness of the book, but nonetheless there are other, more satisfying passages. For instance, there is a discussion of the interaction of history, fiction and authenticity in *Heimat*, though again there seems to be insufficient understanding of the story teller's art, and of the role of creative imagination. There is interesting insight into the representation of 1968 in *Die Zweite Heimat*. Above all, the volume is redeemed near the end by a short but unexpectedly perceptive and moving section on Hermann and Clarissa, headed "Artist Twins and Split Selves".

I am aware that this book was published way back in 2000, and may well have been written some time before that. The author by now will have moved on from it, and I would not want my responding to it in this way to be discouraging. I hope that she continues to write and to enrich our experience of the *Heimat* films.

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