

Longing for security and stability.

Director Edgar Reitz on the concept of Heimat.

Presenter: Jürgen König

With “Heimat Fragments – the Women” Edgar Reitz concludes his Heimat epic. According to the Director, when he began the work 25 years ago the concept was a taboo subject. Yet as Reitz says, through the film itself a discussion developed about what Heimat means. Heimat always implies longing for security and stability.

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Jürgen König: “Heimat Fragments”, subtitle: “The Women” – that is the name of Edgar Reitz’ new film. Tomorrow he will present it at the Venice Biennale, today he is here with us. Good morning, Herr Reitz.

Edgar Reitz: Good morning.

König: At the centre of this new film stands Lulu, the 35 year old daughter of the musician Hermann Simon. She looks back over her life, and life generally in that fictional Hunsrück village Schabbach. Now the “Heimat Trilogy” is really finished. And even this film, we read, takes the story no further. So then, why this film?

Reitz: You must keep in mind that I have been pursuing this work for 25 years. In that time one penetrates so deeply into this fictional world that a lot of the characters at times seem more real to one than many a thing in real life. And it’s not so easy to say good-bye to something like that. One can’t just say: now that’s the end of the Trilogy. There are still so many unresolved feelings, so many questions left in the air.

König: so is “Heimat Fragments”, too, a film about time, and how we move around in it and change?

Reitz: Lulu, who is the questioning figure at the end of “Heimat 3”, is naturally as a young woman of our time especially interested in tracing and experiencing how a woman’s role and her own life-image have changed. And starting from that question we leaf through this material. There are about 40 scenes, originating from “Heimat 1”, “2” and “3”, that were never released and that correspond so well to the inner questions that Lulu poses to herself: How does memory really work? What happens when we remember? In my view that too is something very filmic. For nowadays film too is a way in which we remember. I think we can no longer imagine how mankind dealt with its own history, before film existed.

König: Without film, yes...

Reitz: Yes.

König: What was Heimat for you, when you at that time, in 1979, started on this film project and how would you understand this concept now, 30 films and 27 years later?

Reitz: It really was a taboo subject. Back then in the eighties, when we began, Heimat was still so laden with Blut-und-Boden ideologies, with a pseudo-folkloric tourism industry and whatever else, that one really didn’t want to touch this concept. It was also really hard to

carry on with the title, as in ARD people were still very hesitant about it. But then “Heimat 1”, as we now say, opened a door to it. And discussion on the subject of Heimat was kick-started by the film - even for me, I must honestly say, as it wasn't originally my intention to make a film that underlaid/underpinned [?] this concept and just clarified what Heimat truly is. It's simply a title, that denotes a great family saga. But in the process....

König: ... then it just hit a nerve, didn't it? And suddenly this idea of Heimat was in everyone's mouth. And people began to reflect, not even in the end really about this film, but about what Heimat is for us, and why should we only, as people said at the time, leave it to the reactionaries?

Reitz: Yes. And then we saw too, since the film had great world-wide success, we saw that this word doesn't exist in other languages and so is not adequately translatable. So this German word began to be transferred to other languages as a loanword so that people wondered: What really is it? We Germans have a word for a feeling and a situation and an experience that all men in the world know, but are in a way unable to talk about because they don't have this word. Ultimately this brought me to a comparison of this German feeling, of the German language, with the feelings of other nations, and other people, and their different languages.

König: Have we Germans in this way a different relationship to Heimat, heimatlich, love of Heimat, than perhaps the Poles, the French, the Italians, the Czechs?

Reitz: But one can't simply list all languages. In the Slavic languages, for example in Russian, there is an equivalent. And there's something like that too in the Nordic languages. But all the same in such important countries, important for us, like England, France, Italy, there isn't one.

König: Home? Doesn't that have a similar word root?

Reitz: Yes, but it has a quite different aura. Also in French, people have tried to translate it with “mon pays”, or some such; in Italian there is “patria” and ...

König: .. but don't they have a love of Heimat there?

Reitz: They have a love of Heimat and the feeling that we describe. But then there is a small difference: A certain melancholy always resonates in the German word. So Heimat is always something lost, something that at some time in one's life one believes to have lost, and it contains an element of memory and of longing or loss. The others don't have that in their translations. People there have a more realistic approach to things.

König: How do you find the current, rather intense public debate over memory, displacement and loss of Heimat?

Reitz: I have never systematically gone into that expression. I have become a bit uncomfortable in recent years with this discussion, because everyone is of course aware that we are adapting to a world that no longer offers this kind of security, nor above all permanence and stability. And the longing for something in our lives to be stable, for us to have something that we can keep with us through life as a good refuge or possession, this longing is very, very big. And of course it contrasts with everyday experience, in which we are somehow continually in fear of loss – of losing a job, of constantly having to move house, of instability in the family, and so on. Of course that is the reality that we try to respond to with this longing.

König: “Heimat”, “Die Zweite Heimat”, “Heimat 3”, that’s 30 films, 54 hours long. Aren’t you sometimes awed yourself by the monumental scale of this project?

Reitz: It’s always that way for me with writers. When I see a fat book like that I think: My God, he’s written all that! But once you break it down, maybe to five pages per day, you see that in the course of a year a gigantically fat book does indeed come into being... It’s spade work - during the work it never in any way has this gigantic format and yet in the end there is a lot of it. Yes, of course. I’m happy that I’ve succeeded in bringing it through to a conclusion. It wasn’t always easy, to be sure. And the times were less and less truly on the side of such an enterprise. In the end one was working very much against the tide, against the habitual practices of the media.

König: You largely financed this new film “Heimat Fragments – the Women” privately. Didn’t the film promoters and the TV companies want you anymore, or didn’t you want them any more?

Reitz: Oh no. I simply wanted to make it easier for myself for once. Then, all those proposals and those many many discussions, before one knew at all what was wanted, I have just lost all pleasure in it. And I simply wanted for once to give myself the personal satisfaction of making a film for which I didn’t have to ask anyone anything.

König: Yet in the beginning the project was really very much shared with ARD. Have the TV companies changed so much that that’s no longer possible?

Reitz: No. That’s an entirely natural process, when you take on a big project. You mustn’t forget that “Heimat Fragments” is a small film.

König: Well, it is still 140 minutes.

Reitz: Yes, yes. But of course it profits too from the freedom that I had earlier, in its material.

König: What are you going to do next?

Reitz: I have

König: Isn’t it ... I beg your pardon – may I? ... isn’t it a dreadful feeling now, that the final farewell to Heimat has really happened? What are you going to do now?

Reitz: Of course I’ve set myself a limit to it: “Heimat” goes this far and no further. But there is a project for the coming year that has nothing to do with Heimat and it’s a feature film.

König: the film director Edgar Reitz. He will present his latest film “Heimat Fragments – the Women” tomorrow at the Venice Biennale. In the late autumn the film will appear as a DVD from ARTHAUS Kinowelt and will also be shown in some selected cinemas.