

Reflections on the structure of *Heimat 3*.

by Angela Skrimshire 07/05/06.

There are links to the interviews I quote from at <http://www.heimat123.de/english.htm>. Other references relate to the recent Discussion of 'Heimat 3' on the mailing list of the English website <http://www.heimat123.net/index.html>, soon to appear there in pdf form.

None of the three "*Heimat*" series is intended to be a single unitary work, with the clear dramatic shape of a conventional film, novel or play. Each "*Heimat*" is a tissue of interrelated stories, a tissue which has no defined edge or boundary, either in space or time. It's a bit like a map drawn on the surface of a globe. We may focus on one area of the map, but the lines of the seashores, rivers, roads, mountain ranges and so on are not bounded by our field of vision. So it would be foolish to seek within that field a whole, self-contained and designed structure that would fit neatly into a frame.

But at the same time there is structure – as land and sea, valley and hill, interact and define each other. And there is both direction and a dynamic variation in density of the information contained in the map – and also in intensity of vision as the focus changes.

Ultimately the dynamic and density of the work comes from the imagination, experience and thought of the author. He has given us guides to this in his interviews and writings, but as Anton says in *Heimat 3*, "A picture shows more than a thousand words".

For me the image that contains the kernel of what *Heimat 3* is about and how it is structured comes at Anton's funeral. It is that extraordinary unspoken counterpoint of continuing life and death, love and rage, when Lulu at the funeral bleakly carries her living child through the churchyard directly behind her cousin Hartmut (who caused the death of the child's father) bearing his own father's ashes to the grave. But each viewer will have his or her own defining image or images.

This kind of image, at the micro level of the individual stories and their interrelationships, is at the heart of Edgar Reitz' intuitive gift, the root of his authenticity. But conceptually he sets it in a wide historical context, consciously interweaving and reflecting in each other the characters' individual lives and the socio-economic changes of a decade. At that level the broad structure of the the series is easy to follow.

Henry Arnold says [interview in VPRO television documentary 19/12/04], "It is characteristic of *Die Zweite Heimat* and *Heimat 3*, and probably *Heimat 1*, that Reitz is telling the story of a decline or dismantling [Abbau]". So the action goes from the euphoria of the fall of the Wall and of the reunion of Hermann and Clarissa, to the high point on the Zugspitze. Then, even as Germany rejoices in winning the World Cup, an "unsettling" [Thomas Hönemann in 'Discussion', quoting Gottfried Hartlieb] gradually takes over, so that relationships start to crumble, dreams go sour, brutal economic and social realities start to intrude, change becomes a source not of joy but of anxiety, and individual lives are challenged by financial failure, sickness and death. At the Millenium there is a frantic need to recover hope and faith in yet more change, but the series ends in a mood of disillusion, realism grounded in the family, and maybe tentative hope. Alan Andres [personal communication] describes this succinctly as "the human journey most of us make from idealism to realism, and often, to resignation, with family being a regenerating constant".

In parallel with this world view, goes a sense of despondency at a personal level, so that Hermann "the idealist" is a bearer of the concept "that applies to all intellectuals these days, they are at a loss in a special way... they cannot turn back and make their way again, despite

all their experience, knowledge and ideals.... Hermann increasingly lacks language his character becomes steadily less outspoken, more a rather pale character, finally he is almost like anyone else” [Edgar Reitz in an interview with Maarten van Bracht (24/12/04)]. One of the most disconcerting aspects of the series, especially the first half, is that Hermann and Clarissa have both become quite different people from their incarnations in *Die Zweite Heimat*, as the actors of their parts describe in the VPRO documentary (19/12/04).

Within this framework, the shapes of the individual episodes are not always so clear. Episode 4 sweeps you along with the current of the narrative, and some of its sequences have a space, coherence and power that remain with you long afterwards. Some other Episodes move rapidly through events, in a rather breathless way, or contain disjointed sections of very different character and mood, so that it is hard to discern the basic design and identity of each film. This is in contrast to the episodes of *Die Zweite Heimat*, which each have a distinct and memorable character.

We hear plenty about the nefarious influence on *Heimat 3* of the TV editors and the financial backers, who are reputed to have curtailed the original 11-part design of the series and maybe instigated the introduction of the “Hollywood-style” catastrophe in Episode 6. However, the work as it now exists is the 6-part version on the DVDs, so there is no point in attempting to re-construct notionally an 11-part “original” that was never filmed.

All the same, watching the films again and thinking about them more deeply, I have found that if one or other of them seems in places disjointed and uneven, it sometimes helps to imagine it as a combination of separate episodes, each with its own mood and dynamic, that had to be compressed into one film.

Episode 1:

For a start, we know from his interview with Maarten van Bracht that Edgar Reitz shot about an hour of film that was never used, which covered a whole day in Berlin celebrating the fall of the Wall, and gave more depth and credence to the reunion of Hermann and Clarissa, so that “the two would not have arrived in the Hunsrück before the end of part 1.” This might have given a quite different balance to the series, the significance of the “Wende” might have become more accessible to non-German audiences, and we might even have felt less of a sense of loss and disbelief in the new incarnations of the leading characters.

After that, it might have been less disconcerting to plunge into a new, speedy housebuilding episode, full of the energy of the recent upheavals, with perhaps more space to develop the skillfully interwoven individual stories. As it is, it was not till after having watched the whole series that one came to understand and appreciate the new East German characters in depth, as more than figures in a kind of docu-drama. Nonetheless there are still the brief subtle moments with Ernst, or Rudi and Lenchen. And then a culmination on the Zugspitze, with its sad and funny aftermath.

Episode 2:

Seeing this again, a clearer pattern emerges. One major theme is of movement back and forth over the former border between the West and the East, the other is of ups and downs in the fortunes of individual characters. There are a lot of black and white sequences in this part. Reitz has explained that “they only appear when the scenes take off into the sphere of universal validity or contemporary history. These are for example scenes dealing with the fall of the Wall, historical flashbacks or people in borderline situations, moments detached from the plot” [interview with Ingo Fliess]. However there seem to be other subtleties at work as well here.

When black and white film marks the movement of characters back into the East, not only does it announce that these scenes are historical, that by the time we view the film the old

DDR no longer exists, but it also suggests two opposing meanings – representing both the idea that from the West the East looked merely dingy, backward and oppressed, but also possibly something like nostalgia and humour among those now looking back who lived in the East through those times.

At the same time, black and white film seems to be associated with a kind of anguish, the dark places we look back at from the daylight of “normal” life, the cracks in the surface of things. It appears when Gunnar drives off in angry distress, contemplates throwing away his wedding ring, and sets out to survive in a dilapidated part of Berlin. Colour only reappears for him with the newly washed tee-shirt, the first gesture of warmth that he has received, which then irradiates the whole dingy tenement. There is something the same in Episode 5 where the scenes of Clarissa’s illness in hospital are all shown in black and white, until the day she is discharged. And in Episode 3 the agonising archetypal confrontation of the elderly brothers is also filmed in black and white.

In addition, black and white in Episode 2 may help to enhance the distancing effect of the comedy in some places. There is a lot of comedy in this episode, the prime example being the progress of Lenin, which is as hilarious on third viewing as on first. There are other less successful comic passages – the situation of the redundant DDR army and its equipment, and (mostly in colour) Gunnar’s adventures as his luck appears to turn. Whether or not pure fantasy, as Alan Andres [*in ‘Discussion’*] intriguingly suggests, the sequences of the double wave, the pneumatic secretary, the Elton John piano and so on, are intentionally comic – but rather less subtle than the tragicomedy of his predicament in Episode 6.

For the Easterners, especially Udo and Jana, and Tillman, and in material terms apparently even for Gunnar, this is a time of rising fortunes, new business, new cars, travel. For the Westerners, there are shadows on the horizon. Ernst with typical over confidence misreads the signals, underestimates political realities that the Ossies know only too well, and comes to grief beyond the border. Hermann and Clarissa, hoping to regain their initial “faith” in the dream house, are still torn between their creative lives and their romantic ideal. Anton has had his first stroke and Hartmut’s rebellion is stirring. But for both East and West, Germany wins the World Cup.

Episode 3:

This Episode is preceded and followed by big gaps in time and in what we learn of the characters’ stories. To start with we never get more than a bare outline of what has happened to Ernst and Tobi. I believe somewhere it is told there was footage of Ernst’s meeting with the “Russian-Germans” in Russia, or even in Kazakhstan, which might have enriched our understanding of his relationship with these people, and smoothed the awkward transition between the episodes.

Of Tobi we learn only that he is sensitive to the underlying current of the times, and, having been let down by Ernst in the West, re-establishes a materially unsuccessful but creative and personally satisfying life in the East. Tobi is a character who might well have deserved an episode of his own, a fascinating performance in his own right, and in his aspirations and achievement a kind of foil both to the Simons in the West, and to Gunnar and Udo in the East. Like Ernst, he is a borderline figure, in many senses. As Reitz says of Gunnar’s absence from the Millennium party [*interview with Ingo Fliess*], Tobi’s absence from the rest of the story “really hurts”.

This Episode as we have it focusses on the effect of Reunification on the West. Social changes (vacation of the US airbase, settlement of the refugees, threat to small businesses from predatory asset stripping and globalisation) combine with complex family and cultural tensions among both the incoming Russian-Germans, doubly refugees, and the Simons. The convergence of these factors in the story of Anton, Mara, Hartmut and Galina should make

for a taut and moving episode. The dramatic ending with Lutz' death, irrevocably linking Lulu with the story of Anton and Hartmut, is a powerful ending to the episode – but at the same time it points to something unsatisfying in the structure of the 6-episode series.

We have seen Hermann and Clarissa starting to face the failure of their romantic dream, but neither in this episode nor in the remaining ones, do we see enough of Lulu, who is another pivotal character in the family drama. In Episode 4 we learn almost incidentally that Lulu after the tragedy stays with Hermann and Clarissa for the birth of her child, yet she remains bitter towards her father, linking her earlier resentment of him with the attempt by Anton and Hartmut to “compensate” with money for the death of Lutz. Somewhere in this rather diffuse third episode the two parallel and equally powerful stories of Hartmut and of Lulu have been cut and pasted together, at the expense of Lulu's.

Episode 4:

Dramatically and emotionally Episode 4 is the centrepiece of the whole series. It is not actually in the middle of the existing 11 hours of film, but that makes no difference. Its powerful sequences have more space and depth than is accorded to the earlier episodes, and they all interweave around the central themes: the decline and dismantling of a society, a way of life, a complex family, and of an ageing intellectual's sense of his place in the world. The stories have so much of Reitz' intuitive subtlety, for example in what Ivan Mansley movingly calls Anton's “taking his leave” on the empty football ground, and the themes are fully developed by the stories alone. The characters grow and act from their inner roots, as it were, and there is no feeling here, as at first in earlier more compressed episodes, that they are merely figures in a docu-drama. “There is hardly a false note in over two hours of film” [*Ivan Mansley in 'Discussion'*]. To many of us it seems the most coherent, integrated film of the series.

Roughly in the middle of this “central” episode comes the black and white scene of the mysterious old man by the Rhine. Through his slightly crazed apocalyptic millennialism he symbolises the central themes of *Heimat 3*. As he limps away he mirrors the despair from which Hermann, having abandoned his walking stick, will one day emerge. It is a kind of suspended point, between the earthquake in the small hours of the previous night, and the death of Anton at 4 am the next morning. Who or what have “announced themselves” we do not need to know. “Traum von ihnen ist drauf das Leben” (as Delveau might have said....)

Episode 5:

Personally I found this a slightly less coherent episode than the one that preceded it. It became helpful to watch as though it were simply two consecutive episodes, closely related, but with different energy and mood. After Ernst's death, the scene where Hermann lies weeping in Clarissa's lap is abruptly cut. We are suddenly confronted with the family gathered to consider the inheritance a few days later, and seem to be launched into an altogether new episode. Apart from Matko's silent ceremony with the red carnations, there is no further mourning for Ernst, no funeral, no expression of grief. He is hardly mentioned again, except in connection with the inheritance, or the guilt that Schabbachers now feel about rejecting the museum plans. In episode 6 we get a glimpse of his gravestone with the flying bird. Nothing else. Again this “really hurts”.

If there had been no constraint on the number of episodes, I feel that the story of Ernst's museum plans, his fondness for Matko and search for a son, and his death and and its personal impact would have been enough for one film. Then for a following episode, the bankruptcy of Hartmut and the tragedy of Matko would have made another moving film, with a different quality of sadness, especially in Matko's story. Unlike Ernst and Hartmut, Matko has done nothing to bring his distress upon himself. He is resilient and trusting and so young, his death is hideously unnecessary. Neither of these two “episodes” would have needed to be

as long as the existing one, were it not that the TV schedules required parts of roughly equal length.

Episode 6:

In the same way, Episode 6 becomes easier to appreciate if one thinks of it as a sequence of three distinct parts. The first in Munich, starting with the beautiful image of a huge white cloud above the city, moves from the strange elation of the eclipse, the joy of Clarissa's newfound health and voice, to Lenchen dumb with grief at Rudi's deathbed. These images foreshadow later sections of the episode. But then this first part focusses on Gunnar's wild tragi-comedy, which has a mood all of its own, generated by the spectacular scripting and acting of the role. Laughter, exasperation, and tenderness, all in one half hour or so.

The second part follows Hermann back to the Hunsrück, while Clarissa takes care of her manipulative mother. I think I read somewhere that there was unused film of Clarissa also returning to her own childhood home of Wasserburg. If so, maybe that was intended for here. But Hermann's return, his sense of belonging, his dreams under the magic tree, Rudi's funeral, and the failure of the museum plan, all belong in Schabbach and its surroundings, and involve a sense in which Hermann is uncomfortably revisiting memories and feelings once rooted in this place, now outworn. For me the "Hollywood" earthquake and flood sequence remains as unconvincing and intrusive as it seemed at first, however many times one watches it. If only the art collection were "really" lost to the Inland Revenue and the global art market, via the big red lorries, as in the first of Hermann's "dreams", it would make more sense. Either way, there is the powerful scene of Lulu at the crossroads, once more leaving Schabbach, not knowing what to do, having to persuade Lukas, and then slipping back to overturn the vase of flowers they had just set up. Is she abandoning her shrine for Lutz, moving beyond her mourning?

Then immediately another disconcerting cut, to Gunnar ordering megabucks' worth of fireworks from prison. Again this feels like a plunge into a different episode. However the next scene, of Clarissa returning with Mother Lichtblau is more like a bridge. It consolidates the fundamentally unromantic nature of these homecomings, and at the same time foreshadows the final moments of the film. It also leads into Tillmann's announcement of Gunnar's party plans. After this there is a gap of several months, and we are in the artificial snow of the Millennium party. This is a fascinating episode, with its shifts and balances, its skilful choreography, its undertone of illusion and disappointment, the hurt of Gunnar's absence. And then the final moments, Clarissa's loving and impossible promise to Hermann in the field, Lulu returning from her dying friend to her son and her father, and weeping at the window. Disillusion, realism, love, maybe hope.

I hope it is clear that in thinking and writing about the films like this I am definitely not trying to construct a fantasy version of *Heimat 3*. That would be stupid. I am simply recording how I found a way into the shape of the narrative within the six episodes, a way which helps me follow and remember the mood and dynamic of each part of the story. It may only work for me personally, and not make much sense to anyone else.