

Reliving a traditional memory:
reflections on *Die andere Heimat*.

Angela Skrimshire, October 2013.

It was an overwhelming experience to see this great film several times on a wide screen over five days in Simmern, among an audience of local people who had participated in its making, and whose history and culture it celebrates. The story is already pretty well known but see the end of this article for a brief synopsis if needed.

It's a wonderful film – a simple and moving story, quite new and in many ways unlike the first *Heimat*. The rural society of the mid-19th century is portrayed as simpler than that of the 20th, so that relationships and interactions are more direct, and there are fewer of the rich, complex characters of the earlier *Heimat* films. This is a very different work, though in its own right just as sensitive, funny, sad, heart wringing and heartwarming. But like the earlier films, it is in no way over-researched or museum-like, the sets seem natural and lived in and used. The picture of dire poverty is not just misery in the raw, but the life of ordinary people struggling with and through and beyond those circumstances. After the great departure of the emigrants, the last scenes, where those left behind return to a harsh 'normality' and its bitter compromises, are still a continuation of life, not a desolate end.

It has to be seen in the cinema. The architecture of the Cinemascope images is extraordinary, as Edgar Reitz explains in his 'Filmbook'¹. Depth is subtly created by following the flow of the characters' physical movements, often uncut and simultaneously on screen in different planes and angles of the same space. This seems well suited to the story of a community where people's feelings and relationships are far less self-conscious than in a more sophisticated society. Compare it for instance with the equally intriguing way of creating space and relationships by following the direction, not only of characters' movements, but of their attention, their glance and speech, in the Sommernachtsfest in Film 3 of *Die Zweite Heimat*, where the complex emotions and anxious self-awareness of 1960s Munich students spark through the house and garden like the 'Wort-Katzen'. In each very different case the cinematic techniques available at the time have been used for the same artistic ends. And as always in the collaboration of Edgar Reitz and Gernot Roll the depth and intimacy of the black and white images, the mobility of faces, come from a rich tactile quality of surfaces, of skin, textiles or vegetation, the subtleties of light and the many tones of dark. Once again we ordinary viewers can delight in the apparent spontaneity and "rightness" of what we are seeing, which belies the complex hard-won skill of its making.

As in the earlier *Heimat* films, heroic set design and painstaking acquisition of props have avoided the 'museum piece' effect of so many glossy 'period' movies. Furniture, tools and equipment are grubby, worn and used. The Gehlweiler smithy, though now a tourist attraction, is in the film still recognisably the dusty working smithy of my own English memory– the blacksmith who was my childhood friend worked alone, but the skill, the tools, the sounds and the smells were the same. The black and white photography may have helped in this, but as Reitz has shown, occasional glimpses of colour in the film and the evidence of

coloured stills and reproductions suggest that even in colour this film would have seemed authentic, due to careful use of traditional materials for building, road making, and creation of fabric for clothes, and perhaps above all to the subtleties of lighting.

It has been suggested that the film ‘romanticises’ the period, but though sometimes the sheer physical energy of the young actors belies the depth of want in which their characters dwell, the accusation of ‘romanticism’ sounds like a misunderstanding. The poverty, oppression and sickness portrayed in the film was stark and harsh, but, unlike many in Ireland or Scotland at the time, these people were not yet in the last stages of starvation, nor were they being forcibly evicted and directed onto emigrant ships. Like the Scots who had emigrated earlier in the century, they still had the strength and enterprise (and education) to negotiate their passage, surmount the trickery of the recruiting agents and the rigours of the new world, and eventually make a tolerable life there, if they survived the journey. Moreover, I think people nowadays underestimate the strong need and ability of people in poverty to preserve their dignity. Clothes are home-made and worn, but, except at work on the farm or the smithy, not dirty. In developing countries today people from poverty-stricken settlements come to religious festivities in bright, clean clothes, it is we westerners travelling out there who don’t know how to stay fresh and clean in basic circumstances.

The previous *Heimat* series were, each in its own particular way, richly fertilised with whole lifetimes of memories, reflections and understandings by the author and his colleagues. *Die andere Heimat* is a distillation of these in an intuitive reliving of a time still told in story, but well beyond living memory. It distils themes and echoes of the earlier films in simpler, more pared down form. It incorporates some of the same motifs from folktale and myth – the smith and his forge, brotherly affection and rivalry, the clever youngest son, the mystery of horses (the horses in this film are wonderful, straining over the Hunsrück clay, embodying the forces that compel to emigration). Some parallels are clear, like the overarching Heimweh-Fernweh-Sehnsucht theme, the contrasting characters of two brothers, or the freedom of imagination and love constrained by personality and circumstance. Others are less obvious. For example the elderly ‘factotum’ known as the ‘Unkel’ is a mirror in minuscule of Glasisch in old age – so that remembering Glasisch deepens the sense of who Unkel is and how he might have been when younger, and how the people he observed, aggravated and probably loved in his own way, would have seen him.

Looking back through the gamut of unforgettable figures in Reitz’ feature films from *Stunde Null* to *Heimat 3* reminds us that in the new film there are fewer intensely individualised characters, especially among the old and the very young. There is no Matiske, no ageing Ernst, no ‘bicycle boy’, no Matko. Though her part is relatively small, the Großmutter quietly shares the magical intuition of Katharina and Juan, and so in a way does Jakob, while Gustav has something of the down-to-earth brotherly personality of Clemens. There are many echoes of Paul, Hermann and the young Anton in the figure of Jakob. But there are no characters with the rich, over-the-top humour of Eduard and Lucie, or Renate, or Gunnar and there are also fewer intriguing minor characters.

Yet humour and human individuality are still as sensitively portrayed as in the earlier films. They are apparent throughout in many small delicate touches, in the resilient friendship of Jettchen and Florinchen, or Gustav's enterprise and good heartedness. Jettchen and Jakob in particular are fully and subtly realised characters who grow and change through time. Jakob is a multi-faceted personality, full of childlike spontaneity and enthusiasm and a sense of fun, but with a deep inner privacy and vulnerability. He is capable at times of unexpected strength, and always of an unstinting love for those dear to him. There is both humour and pathos in his avoidance of Jettche's playful approaches: "The Indians don't do that ...", or his flight from the great natural scientist von Humboldt, another encounter he might have dreamed of and treasured. Then there is Jettchen's wordless understanding of her father's mute depression, and of the agate gemstone he gives her, that becomes entwined in her own story. She grows in transition from awakening teenage to bereaved motherhood through her painfully ambivalent relationships with the two Simon brothers, culminating in her great strength in the hours before her departure, her determined realism, the hidden depth of her loss, her tenderness.

The heartfelt truth of the portrayals of people is due as much as anything to the delicacy of these performances. It allows the film to convey deep feeling and move one even to tears without sentimentality or dramatic manipulation of the audience. Gentleness and harshness go hand-in-hand in the family's treatment of club-footed orphan Margotche, or in the humour of poor Unkel's laying out, the dignity of his Sunday suit and the ongoing story of the gold coin it secreted. The film shows the acuteness and matter-of-factness of grief in real life, in the scenes of the children's funeral, or the near silent but different responses of her husband and son to Margarethe's death. Death lies very close in daily life here. Just three of Margarethe's nine children have survived to adulthood. In the course of the film three significant adult characters die and diphtheria takes a number of small children, one of them Jettchen's. Only Frau Niem, the shallowest of characters, makes a public show of grief, and it is she who tries to create a melodrama out of the final departure of the emigrants. All the rest, those who stay and those who go, make their farewells forever in silence.

These people are remarkably tough and resilient. Even the sensitive Jettchen and Jakob are soon forced to mature and surmount the twists of fate that hammer their hopes and their lives. No one but the midwife is concerned that the mother, Margarethe, wracked with TB, rises from her bed shortly after an agonising collapse into anoxia and unconsciousness, and goes to feed the pig. That scene does strain credibility, given her condition and the apparent duration of her anoxia. But then again time is subjective, and the film records not the objective duration, only the subjective experience of her terrified sons, and Jakob's perception of her recovery as miraculous. The whole event at first seemed implausible, a distraction from the tense preparations for the emigrants' departure. But at moments of great tension or loss things can happen that have no explanation and need none – maybe it is only in the unworldly space created by that 'miracle' that Jakob and Jettchen could feel free to come together again as they so briefly do. Dramatically the power of the sequences before and during the departure is overwhelming, as is the quiet wandering of the story into everyday life beyond it.

It is no coincidence that *Geschichten aus den Hunsrückdörfern* was shown on the morning of the German Premiere of *Die andere Heimat*. That beautiful documentary too is a poetic distillation in image and sound of a community's memories. The harshness of the past lives remembered in it, and the strength of those who contributed were not so distant from the lives portrayed in the feature film. The reflections, the actual words, of some of those who took part in it permeate the new film. It was great to see the older film in a pristine copy on a proper cinema screen among members of that community and their descendants.

The place of the new film in the canon of Reitz' masterworks is hard to define. This time it is not another great complex "novel" in film, but the distilled essence of all the director has seen and intuited and recreated of people's lives and memories, throughout his work. It is a homely story, woven by many singers into an epic poem in light and movement and sound.

Synopsis, a bare outline that gives no sense of the richness of the story:

In the 1840s a blacksmith and his wife, Johann and Margarethe Simon, in the village of Schabbach, have two sons and a daughter. In spite of an earlier period of some prosperity, when universal literacy was introduced under French rule, it is now a time of bad harvests, great poverty, hunger and sickness in this remote rural community, under oppressive and distant Prussian rule. Emissaries of the Brazilian emperor tour the area, recruiting workers to emigrate and settle in Brazil. Many families are already leaving, their household goods piled on huge wagons constantly trailing over the horizon. Of the sons, Gustav, the elder, is practical and outgoing, but young Jakob, dreamy and intuitive, is secretly immersed in travel books and the study of languages, much to his father's fury. He is fascinated by the South American Indians, among whom, he confides to his diary, he dreams of travelling and finding freedom. His sister, Lenchen, has married a Catholic vintner from the Mosel region and been rejected by their fiercely Protestant father. Jakob, on the way to take refuge with her when escaping his father's rage, is introduced to new political ideas by a boatload of 'revolutionary' students on the river. Jakob and Jettchen, lively and sensitive daughter of a gemstone miller, meet again as both work in the vineyard, and begin to fall in love, but during a village festival it is the exuberant Gustav who gets Jettchen pregnant and later has to marry her. Meanwhile Jakob, deserted at the festival, despairingly defends a gemstone engraver, Olm, in defiance of the power of local landlords, and ends up all winter in prison. Eventually Gustav and Jettchen emigrate to Brazil, after the death of their child, so that Jakob is now constrained to stay at home to help his father and support his dying mother. He marries Jettchen's feisty friend Florinchen (who has loved and lost Gustav), and continues at the smithy, while still privately researching South American languages. When a famous scientist and traveller with whom he has corresponded visits him, he flees into the forest.

Edgar Reitz has dedicated the film to his own late brother, Guido, a clock-maker whose secret study of linguistics was recognised in his lifetime only by the academics with whom he corresponded.

¹ Edgar Reitz *Chronik einer Sehnsucht*, Das persönliche Filmbuch zu *Die andere Heimat*, Schüren 2013