

## Review of Edgar Reitz' film *Heimat-Fragmente: die Frauen*

By Angela Skrimshire, November 2010

(A re-working of a chapter in a much longer text, *'Heimat' of Memory, Imagination and Choice*, posted on this website in 2009 and currently once more under revision. The film itself is now at last available on DVD in a good English subtitled version as: *Heimat Fragments: the Women* (Second Sight Films, 2010))

*Heimat-Fragmente: die Frauen* is a beautiful, enigmatic film, which can be understood in different ways. It is truly an “epilogue” to Edgar Reitz' *Heimat Trilogy*, in the sense that it was created to append to the Trilogy, and refers back to it at all points. Unlike the documentary “prologue” *Geschichten aus den Hunsrückdörfern*, it does not stand alone as a complete work in its own right. At first it could bewilder someone who has not seen the Trilogy, though beauty of the images and subtlety of the small scenes may compensate for the strangeness. It sprang from a combination of very practical circumstances: lack of resources to continue Lulu's story in a conventional sequel to *Heimat 3*, and the existence of cans of unused material, outtakes from the filming of the three series of the Trilogy itself. The result is a poetic work, with many levels of meaning.

Some viewers value it most as a way of preserving and presenting the “fragments” themselves. That is understandable, since the context in which they are set, a flow of images, on digitally processed video, with many surreal elements, has a very different quality from most of the Trilogy. It is often pleasing, but lacks the subtlety and rich physicality of the old footage. It contrasts strongly with the images and language of the original work and the apparent realism of the familiar narrative, revisited in the “fragments”.

The “fragments” are a treasure trove, for their visual delight, and the way they enrich the characters and supplement their stories. The majority are on black and white film, and there are some especially subtle sequences, for instance the first outtake from *Heimat 1*, in which Hermännchen waits in the wash house for Klärchen. In a few seconds it becomes a microcosm of their whole story, one of those scenes to be watched again and again. Also, for sheer delight in the cinematography, there are many other “fragments” of equal power – such as the scene between Esther and Reinhard. The quality of the light and texture, the detail of the way people pass through spaces, as when Dorli and Helga enter Helga's lodging from the street, have

everything we have learnt to expect from the best work in the Trilogy. And as ever, there is fun and humour, ranging from delicate facial expressions to the glorious absurdities of Mamangakis' "Professor", in images illuminated by the mastery of cameraman Gernot Roll.

The outtakes on colour film, however, were already no doubt suffering from the same severe deterioration of the film stock that afflicted Reitz' earlier work, until its recent meticulous restoration. They may also have been further modified, perhaps to make them easier to distinguish from new material forming the context. Whole images have darkened, and parts of them have flooded with intensified colour, often blue, green or yellow, sometimes vivid red or white light, so the balance of light and colour and depth is seriously distorted. It is disturbing, and very disappointing, once one has grown to recognise the beauty of so much of the original work. It is hard to believe any deliberate modification was necessary – the "fragments" from their content alone are surely distinguishable from the new footage. Apart maybe from the sequences that represent Hermann's dreams, there was no need to make them look "unreal" to suggest they are images in Lulu's mind. Our own imaginations can do that.

The "fragments" throw new light on some of the familiar characters. The child Hermännchen learns what waiting is, from seeing Martha wait, weeping, for Anton to return from the war. Maria in old age becomes young again, dancing with Ernst. She asserts her independence, travelling to France to look for Apollonia. Glasisch hints at an ancient village suspicion about Paul. Clarissa in Wasserburg remembers a time when her mother rescued her and cradled her in her arms. We learn more about Galina's plans for a new life with Christian, and one significant, moving scene supplements the brotherly conversation of Hermann and Ernst, after Anton's death. In Munich Jean-Marie's huge shadow and lithe movements prey on a grieving Evelyne in a scene at once comic and Mephistophelian. Evelyne returns briefly and very painfully to Neuburg, in another powerful sequence. We see the first, brutal encounter of Ansgar with Olga, the spark of their sado-masochistic attraction. Later there are scenes, both touching and very funny, that fill out the character of Olga, and also several with a delightfully young and feisty Schnüßchen. There is the passage with Esther and Reinhard, illuminating the depth of Esther's anguish, and the indifferent eye of the lens. In a printer's workshop Reinhard proclaims that film is "more beautiful than reality", beside a cage of Chinese nightingales. Among the most fascinating and fully realised sections is the story of Dorli's visit to Helga in Munich on the day of the Fasching party at the Fuchsbau, followed by more fragments of the days in Dülmen. It is wonderful to see

so much more of Dorli, whose part was sadly truncated in the main film, especially since this was an early appearance of a remarkable actress. As in so much of Reitz' work, there is great subtlety of observation, humour, and skill of performance in these depictions of the three young women of Dülmen. There is also the hilarious story of Helga's visit to the Registrar in Munich, which counterbalances the grim development of her personality in the main series.

Most of the "fragments", these and others, are so subtle and moving, they rival anything in the films of the Trilogy. They probably do not make major changes to the images one has formed of the characters and their stories, but they revive them in one's memory, with delicate detail that justifies every minute of the "epilogue", and also rewards watching it again, many times.

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But this is not the only way to enjoy the film, there is more to it. One object of its making was somehow to continue the story of Lulu. Since sadly there were no resources to film a continuation of her life story in the "real" world of the Trilogy, this epilogue is a way of allowing her a kind of resolution of her situation through contemplation, reliving and understanding of her memories. They are memories both of her own early life and of what she has heard or imagined of the lives of her forebears and their contemporaries. At the same time, she reflects, and the film itself is a reflection, on the nature of memory and the art of film.

It was saddening to hear after the film first appeared that some viewers were wishing they could make themselves a version of the *Fragmente* from which Lulu's part had been excised. That was probably not a serious intention, but as a crude scissors and paste job on the film as we have it, it would have been vandalism! However, Daniel Kothenschulte, in one of the very few intelligent reviews of the film<sup>1</sup>, made reference to another film, Jonas Mekas' *As I Was Moving...*, in which "unsimulated and raw as the moment created them, the snippets run past one after the other like a patchwork rug many hours long. The form of these *Heimat-Fragmente* could have been just like that: no form." That is a tantalising thought. All the same, Lulu's journey through the images gives them a form which must have a special resonance for their author, and which projects illuminating interpretations back into the original films.

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<sup>1</sup> Frankfurter Rundschau: FR online 04.09.06

It's not that one does not at times feel impatient with poor Lulu when, after a delicate, funny, beautiful "fragment", she tramps over the screen with her spade and assortment of drills, to dig all too literally into her past. She so rarely smiles. It would be nice if she could sometimes share the joke of those self-conscious lapses into a looking-glass world. At the first two or three times of viewing, her words were hard to absorb, due to the language barrier. Even now in places they seem to verge on truism and cliché. But reflected on in conjunction with the "fragments" themselves, they give rise to a pattern that might start to do justice to the complexity and depth of this elusive film. Nonetheless that "pattern" may only impose on the film a structure of my own imagining, that it was never meant to convey. Spelling out my own reflections is as clumsy and intrusive as trying to analyse someone else's dream or poem, and maybe as pointless. Other people will surely have quite different ways of understanding the film. The richness of the *Heimat* films lies exactly in that multiplicity. I hope only to encourage other people to value the film as a whole work of art, as more than the sum of its parts.

At the dawn of the new millennium Lulu starts from a fixed, deeply depressed place: she cannot escape from the past. She has lost any sense of a future. This appears graphically in her face, more diffusely in her words. Nonetheless, she will go and start work at the metaphorical building site, "where life begins". Starting her "work", she "sees", imagines, builds stories about, her forebears when they were young, and the many aspects of their lives. In remembering, she is re-assembling disjointed fragments of memory into a new whole. "Time and logic have ceased to rule". For Lulu, in the flux of these still present images, the fixity of her situation starts to dissolve. She finds a new energy. The vitality and transience of remembered figures, of their suffering, dreams, loves and desires, and of her own too in childhood, revives her capacity to live creatively in the present.

Riding the flow of these fragments, she perceives the interchangeable nature of working with shifting memories and remembered stories, creating illusory images in film, and simply living fully in the flux of time. "Remembering is only one part of it. ... Life ... arises from thousands of beginnings. Never weary, always unsatisfied." At the end, she closes the cans of those reels of memory: "End of the picture. How do I get out of here? I don't belong to you. ... I want to become invisible." Whom is she addressing, to whom does she want to become invisible? To her parents and their friends? To her own obsessive imaginings? To her creator and his crew? To us, the spectators? She herself is a cinematic image, someone else's creation, and she does not belong

to us. In the G nderode House, surrounded by photographs and stills from the films, she announces “I am free, I am alive!”, and stands up and strides away. The pictures fade and crumble, into the Hunsr ck landscape.

Sadly, this final “resolution” is not so convincing on film as it feels on paper. That may be partly because it happens only in Lulu’s words, and is not related to her “real” life, which for us comes to an end with *Heimat 3*. She has had no opportunity to create any free-standing composition outside herself, from the inner images that she has been working with. Also, she does not look “free”. She moves with determination, but at the last she looks back at the pictures, and her face is still sombre and unsure. If only there had been resources for all of this to have had context in a film that also followed her life in the “real” external world, during that healing journey. But as it is, at each point the structure of her odyssey is subtly filled out and enriched by the “fragments”, so we should be content with all that wealth.

Lulu’s journey liberates the Trilogy both from those for whom it is a “text” to be assessed primarily in an historical, socio-political context, and from those of us who want to cling too simply to its documentary “reality”. It leads us to understand that what has seemed to be a linear, objective narrative is composed of subjective images relating to various intersecting times and moods. They do not depend on one context for their life. They can be differently interpreted in different contexts. The same character can be played by different actors, and his or her meaning for the author can change from one film to another, without invalidating the work. The same scene can be a “real” event, a memory, a fantasy, or a dream. It can illuminate the depths of a character or an intellectual thesis about the nature of film or society. How the author intends it in the course of the narrative, how Lulu perceives it, how any one of us in the audience interprets it, they all differ, and each is itself multiple. *Heimat-Fragmente* makes clear that the Trilogy is above all a living work of art, originating in the personal lives and craftsmanship of its creator and of all his colleagues, cast and crew. The work has its own form, which is evanescent and shape-changing, and life-giving.