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“Heimat” Trilogy

Goat Song beside the Loreley

Edgar Reitz completes his great cycle with “Heimat 3”- at the German Premiere in the Prince Regent Theatre. This time it is about loss of innocence, and new forms of egoism and egocentricity.

By H.G. Pflaum.

If a being from a distant planet were to ask us which films one must see to find out about Germany in the 20th century, Edgar Reitz’ “Heimat” cycle would be one of the most important recommendations.

The author and director has spent around 25 years, half a working life, telling a family history that begins in a little Hunsrück village and with its centrifugal forces drives the characters far away through Germany and other lands, but then has them returning again and again to their starting point.

With “Heimat 3” Reitz has completed his cycle of departure and return. What are presumably the last six episodes begin with the fall of the Wall and end with the Millennium. To bring these 11 hours into being, the film maker had to fight far harder than for all his previous work: Indirectly the film itself tells us this, how our cinema and media landscape has altered in those 25 years, how images and the writing of drama have had to change.

“Heimat 3” is a sometimes irritating mix of sarcasm and melancholy, of staged rushing into things and reining back. Sometimes it seems as though the work has lost the poetry that crucially gave the first and second cycles their power. Yet Reitz makes this the object of his narrative itself: the loss of poetry marks the development of his characters. The village of Schabbach, once, in spite of all the hardships, an idyll and a promise of “Heimat”, becomes complicit in the death of several people.

The political reunification runs parallel with the private one: Hermann and Clarissa, the leading characters of the “Second Heimat”, meet by chance in Berlin – just at the moment when the Wall starts to fall. “Since Berlin, I’ve known that everything will go well for us” enthuses the woman, yet the time of euphoria will not last long. Already after a few days Clarissa shows how she can arrange to profit materially from the Reunification. In “Heimat 3” it is again and again a case of the loss of innocence, of new forms of egoism and egocentricity.

The next generation of the entrepreneurial branch of the Simon family, after the death of the patriarch, will fight over the inheritance and drift into ruin. It was once said that the Hunsrück is a “Hunds buckel” (hunchback - Ed.), like a disability that you are stuck with: the microcosm of the family becomes a theatre of war.

The musician couple, Hermann and Clarissa, have a romantic lovenest built in the dilapidated “Günderode House”, on the edge of the Hunsrück, high above the Rhine, in a place bound up like no other with German myths. For a time the two of them have a goat: the ancient “Goat Song”, Tragedy, is not far away. From the high vantage point the Rhine looks painfully narrow, the view never evokes a feeling of freedom.

Even a new Nibelung treasure turns up, one mostly pillaged from the East, an art collection now hidden in a mineshaft. By the end it will be irretrievably destroyed, sunk in German

concrete. At one point, a gigantic Galaxy IV flies low over Schabbach village, which starts to shiver and shake, while the shadow of the US bomber lies over the place like Mephistopheles' cloak, that once brought men the plague in Murnau's "Faust".

Compared with both the previous cycles, this time Reitz had less time for his narrative – in concrete terms: less broadcasting time – and consequently metaphor sometimes has to be too obvious. The longer cinema version will remain far superior to the one shown on television. The screening in the Munich Prince Regent Theatre, compressed into one weekend, turned out to make more sense than the planned fragmentation into six television episodes: "Heimat 3" should be seen as a single self-contained work.

Only that way, for example, does the first part make sense: as an exposition that has to bear the weight of the past and the preceding stories. The triumphant success in Munich and the audience's enthusiastic reaction ought to give the cinema courage: the readiness of the public to engage with a work of this magnitude has not yet died out.

Sometimes one even wishes that Reitz had been in a position to make "Heimat 3" twice as long – that also has something to do with perspective: when looking back at distant decades compressing time is easier and more plausible. The nearer his epoch reverts to the present, the harder it becomes to shorten the time and the more the narrator has to condense it into metaphors and symbols, like for example a huge statue of Lenin landing up on field in the Hunsrück.

The ending of "Heimat 3" is remarkably open. Nothing is brought to a close. In place of the lifetimes that have ended, new ones have entered, and the next generation will not be free of the experiences of their forebears. The final image, a close-up shot, with a half fearful, half deeply moved gaze into the future, looks like a call to upcoming film makers to take up the threads and go on spinning: an optimistic gesture.