

## **Impressions of Edgar Reitz' *Das Frühwerk***

by Angela Skrimshire, July 2009

By now it is well known that the Kinowelt/Arthaus DVD edition of *Das Frühwerk* contains a large proportion of Edgar Reitz' "early work", ie. films made before he started work on the *Heimat* cycle. It comprises six feature films made between 1967 and 1978, and, on a seventh disk, six shorts and documentaries, of which five were made between 1960 and 1966, and one in 1977. Every one of the films has been expertly and painstakingly restored under the strict supervision of the Director himself, as he describes in his online *Begleitschreiben* (Director's "accompanying note" – see Appendix below). Each DVD contains as an "Extra" an excerpt from the long, very interesting interview given on video over several months by Edgar Reitz to Thomas Koebner in 2007. An edited version of the entire interview was published the following year in book form as *Edgar Reitz Erzählt*. Each of the first six excerpts relates directly to the film on the same DVD, while on the seventh disk there is a longer excerpt giving Reitz' own account of how his career as a film maker began.

The feature films (though not the shorts or extras) have optional German subtitles for the deaf, very helpful for those of us whose ability to read the language outstrips our listening comprehension. The DVDs are accompanied by a booklet of masterly introductions to the individual films by Professor Thomas Koebner himself. These, together with Reitz' own accounts and reflections in the interview and his other writings, especially those on his own official website, and also some material in pdf form on the DVDs themselves, amount to a wealth of information and comment on this body of work, which is readily accessible to everyone who can read German. We can only hope that one day some at least of the films and the accompanying material will be available in a subtitled English edition.

In what follows I will refer at times to those German sources, but not attempt to summarise or reproduce them for English readers (apart from appending a précis of the Director's "note"). I am recording my impressions as a lay spectator who has greatly enjoyed the work in its own right and is also intrigued by ways in which it foreshadows and at times rivals the later *Heimat* cycle, the culmination of one and the same life's work.

### ***The short films and documentaries.***

All but one of the short films on the seventh DVD were made before the feature films. They can mostly be appreciated regardless of the language barrier, the images often depending relatively little on dialogue or commentary. Moreover, the long, fascinating extract from Reitz' interview illuminates so much of what followed later.

One significant thing about this DVD is the living insight that it gives into the world remembered and fictionally recreated in *Die Zweite Heimat*. It is as though the material on the

DVD performs something of the function of the *Hunsrückdörfer* documentary, or Reitz' grandfather's introductions to his macabre Stückelscher, in rooting the fictional stories in the real world, and substituting in a small way for the memories that we from different origins and generations cannot legitimately share.

The voices and manner of both Reitz and Koebner in their interview on video, even more than the text reproduced in their book, bring alive the intense excitement of that 1960s decade of young experimentation and creativity. When Reitz speaks as he has so often before about his craftsman's roots and approach to his work, or when he warmly recalls and names the wide range of friends and colleagues he learnt from and worked with and whose enthusiasms he shared, or describes the hardship of supporting a family without compromising his artistic development, one recognises the still living authenticity of the second *Heimat* series. It is moving too that he pays affectionate tribute to Norbert Handwerk, prototype of the fictional Konsul, the Amfortas whose pain young Hermann could not assuage.

At the same time the short films themselves, the audacious experimentation, the craftsmanship involved in their making, the mixture of naivety and subtlety in their young view of the world, have a power to represent their creator's generation as sharply as the fictional representation of the young musicians and film makers in the second *Heimat*. In the interview, Reitz speaks of his fascination with the world of avant-garde technology and music, and the intellectual questions it raised. The short commercial films were his "laboratory" in which he could experiment and work on technical problems. Like Rob and Hermann, he must have felt for a while the intoxication of a sorcerer's apprentice. This intoxication spills over into the films, their focus on exuberant detailed patterning of technological equipment, on its intricate movement and skill, its power to affect human life. The early *Baumwolle* ("Cotton", 1960) intersperses depictions, sometimes quite abstract, of the details of industrial processes, or beautiful ingenious images of the range of pests that threaten the crops, with sequences celebrating the daring flight of crop-spraying aircraft, a delight in flight which later echoes through the *Heimat* cycle. *Kommunikation*, made for the German Post Office in 1962, dwells lovingly on elaborate technologies, now outdated but still intriguing and aesthetically satisfying.

A year later *Geschwindigkeit* ("Speed") is already far more fluid and elegant, reflecting perhaps the freedom from commercial and other external constraints afforded by the generosity of Handwerk and Insel Film for its development. It is an extraordinary film, that grows with repeated watching. In its own structure and dynamic it is itself a bridging work, marking a swift transition between a clear bright impersonal vision of engineering and technological structures developed through the preceding films and an ever deeper exploration of space, light, texture, movement and the passage of time, and binding the two. In his interview, Reitz celebrates what he calls a sensuality of seeing ("eine Sinnlichkeit des Schauens"), of apprehending the flow of mind and physical movement. He speaks of true sensuality having an element of practical objectivity, direct sense perception not yet overlaid with distorting emotion, fantasy or concepts. This is something recognisable throughout his later work: one has only to remember the gleaming

shell of Otto's unexploded bomb and the texture of the mud clinging to it, or the stark beauty of the images in the scene of Evelyne's hideous encounter with Ansgar's mother.

*Geschwindigkeit* exemplifies this. The film starts with luminous spaces, intricate textures of water and landscape, until one is swept into sequence after sequence of exhilarating movement, swift unpredictable passage through an world of natural and manmade structures, at once precise, concrete and vanishing. It is as strange and disorienting as the "Wilde Jagd" of fighter jets over Maria's funeral in the first *Heimat*. This film is the first to be indisputably "Reitzian".

Interdependent with the speed, come brief images of stillness – a buzzard hangs in the sky above fleeting hedgerows, a girl in slender silhouette is juxtaposed with the passage of an express, movement spins round an impassive equestrian statue, a still image holds a diver in midair, one structure resembles a huge radio telescope imperceptibly tracking distances measured by the speed of light. There is power in the potential for speed in stillness, and the potential for stillness in speed. By the end of the film, all perception has been fragmented and brought to a standstill.

A feature of these earliest films distinguishing them from those that come later is the virtual absence of original natural sound. In the interview, Reitz explains that the first camera he used as a student could not record original sound, but I don't know if that still applied by the time he was making the commercial shorts. Whatever the reason, Riedl's compositions add another dimension in the distancing and deconstruction of the material, affirming the experience of film, like music, as an essentially abstract art.

Yet Reitz' power of observation and intuitive interpretation of people's lives and expressions is already evident. Even static images of massive ruined structures in *Yucatan* (1960), in showing the texture and violence and beauty of the stones, hint too at the human ingenuity and awe immanent within them. The mystery of this ancient, terrifying culture, and of its disappearance, always lies implicit in the images. As he says, it was too strange to be overlaid in filming by any preconceptions of his own. *Baumwolle*, like the *Hunsrückdörfer* documentary, focuses on the demeanour, faces and hands of people intent on their work. It is concerned with their vulnerability to destitution when their crops are destroyed by pests. It even seems to show an intuitive prescience of the still largely disregarded dangers of exposing the workers to pesticides, the "miracles" of science and progress that the film was supposed to promote. Or maybe it was not so much prescience, as clarity of vision and uncompromising accuracy of recording, also characteristics of "Reitzian" film making.

Sensitive details of eyes, mouths, ears and hands feature in *Kommunikation*, juxtaposed with impenetrable manmade walls and fences that obstruct communication, so that faces then appear distorted by that frustration. Hands writing a letter recall the hands of old Cerphal writing his Will. As in *Baumwolle* the focus on hands foreshadows studies of craftsmen's hands in many of the later films. And there are images of non-communication – people passing each other in a swing doorway, walking briskly in all directions without interacting in a crowd of isolated individuals, or walking endlessly alone.

The traces of storytelling implicit in these observations are harbingers of the change of direction that Reitz' work took from about 1966, after the spectacular though short lived experiment of *VariaVision*. Reitz in the interview assures Koebner that his departure from the principles of the Oberhausener group, for whom film had to be deconstructive and abstract, and narrative was taboo, was in fact not a repudiation of his earlier style, but simply a change of subject, to which he brought the same intensive sense perception, the "Sinnlichkeit des Schauens". So in the 11-minute short *Die Kinder* (1966) he brings this perception to bear on a game of make believe played by small children, dressing up and taking the roles of adults. Though the game was presumably instigated by his direction, the children seem to adopt it as their own and put their whole hearts into it. They have a lot of fun, while at the same time quite seriously fulfilling their own concepts of the roles, and the result is charming, without being false or sentimental.

The last of the shorts on this DVD, *Suzanne Tanzt*, was made much later, in 1977. In it Reitz observes his own daughter as a very young woman performing and practising dance, which is her passion. Her performance is given on a busy traffic island. She is selfpossessed and strangely insulated from the passing vehicles and from an ironic voiceover proposing absurd solutions to the city's traffic congestion. Then she works at her practice in various other situations. When she has to stop rather distractedly to eat or do domestic things, a sense of her anxiety is intensified by manipulation of the images and distortion of the soundtrack. The film watches intimately as she concentrates on putting in her contact lenses. It shows the same tenderness towards women's ordinary lives, while observing their faces and movements and their absorption in some idea or task, that runs through many of Reitz' feature films, with the two women in *Die Reise nach Wien*, for instance, or Maria in *Heimat*. However, for me this film is somehow sad, the girl works at her dancing with intense, concentrated dedication, but there is little joy in it – perhaps this is a failure of my own understanding.

Apart from *Geschwindigkeit* these short films may be relatively minor works, but all are very skillful, and enjoyable to watch. Together they amount to a body of work that is particularly interesting because it is perceptibly working towards the major films that succeeded it.

### ***Mahlzeiten* (1967)**

Edgar Reitz' first feature film is both beautiful and intriguing. It is shot in luminous black and white, in an all pervading, fine white north European light. The narrative is chronological, but as in real life it is not always clear on first viewing where it has got to or why. It is episodic, and causal links between events are not spelt out. Part of the fascination is that it is left to the viewer to reconstruct them, either at the time, or in retrospect. Again as in real life, interpretations only emerge as one reflects on connections between the characters' personalities gleaned from a whole succession of encounters, on the one hand, and what happens to them, on the other. In this it is a recognisably "Reitzian" narrative style.

However the main characters are more distanced and less rounded than those in the much later films, and it is harder to feel so much warmth towards them. Most unusually, Reitz himself in the long interview offers a judgmental interpretation of his characters, which is reflected in Koebner's introductory commentary. In this version a "devouring" young earth-mother ("vampire" is Koebner's word), not particularly intelligent but with a strong instinct for her own survival, overwhelms her man, as his mother, a rival she "respects", had done before her. His story then becomes a kind of ironic counterweight to hers, as he sinks into depotentialization and depression, culminating in his suicide which, though tragic, is also comic in its stubborn, ridiculous detail. Thereafter she survives to marry again and continue, still without insight, to enthuse about her perceived "happiness" in the new relationship.

But the intriguing thing is that the film itself, seen before one has read the introduction or watched the interview, tells a more complex story. It can rouse sadness and sympathy for this mismatched couple, as well as amusement at the sharp ironies of the narrative. Both Rolf and Elisabeth lack boundaries, in complementary and ultimately destructive ways. Elisabeth's enthusiasm for life as she sentimentally dramatises it, and her almost indolent fecundity, know no limits. Everything and everyone else is drawn into a heightened world of her own construction, so the film starts with her voiceover recital of a list of rich colours, while trying to photograph a grey winter sea. But in another context her energy could have been heart-warming and creative. A simpler, more grounded partner, with strong boundaries of his own, might have introduced some tough realities and collaborated in a more lasting, if fiery, relationship, though maybe not in the controlled world of Mormonism where after Rolf's death she seeks it.

Rolf's boundaries seem to have been so invaded by his strong mother in the past that he can only shrink from his wife's railroading energies. It is as though he has been made to feel that he is not competent to meet the depth of a woman's emotions and intuition. So when he does voice an insight, he is immediately discouraged by her seizing on it and trumping it with her own. Her enthusiasm exhausts him. She assaults him with her "understanding". His feeling of inadequacy attracts him to her strength, but finally undermines him, not only in their relationship but in his career and his state of mind. Yet the stubbornness of his determination to die betrays a ruthlessness and selfabsorption that match hers. His despair could have held the seed of a more creative way out.

As in *Geschwindigkeit*, the camera's gaze is sensuous but impersonal. Rather than being speedy, many of the luminous sequences are slow and full of subtleties. Are the extreme close-ups of the girl's eye or lips born of love, lust, or distaste, or all three? The eye resembles her own camera, unblinking, and capturing within it an upside down miniature of the man she sees. In many images of her the question remains, whose eyes are lingering on that face? Are the couple seeing each other, or is Elisabeth seeing herself through the eyes of her own narcissism? She can appear beautiful, sexy, romantic, strong. Which of them most wants her to be like that? Characteristically there can be an enigmatic disjunction between image and spoken or unspoken response. Near the start of the film Elisabeth's eyes attract Rolf in close-up from behind fine snowflakes. Later in their relationship, he gazes at her as she works. She smiles at him, and he

turns to look out at the cold snowy street below, saying finally “that’s how *I* see you”. Is the coldness a symbol of what he sees in her, or his refuge from her awareness? She is puzzled, then loses interest and looks out of the window herself. Another time, when he sees her walk fascinated among the dying fish, is it her image of herself that shocks him, or turns him on?

After seeing the film several times, many enigmas remain. Does the sequence of images of Elisabeth’s friend Irina show her as Elisabeth thinks of her, or as Irina sees or tries to create herself, or as the narrator sees her? Who is the narrator, how does he know? Does Rolf think about the effect of his suicide on his mother, his children, Elisabeth? Is it an act of vengeance as well as escape? Is the ecstatic cry and image of their love-making in a meadow an image, for him, of his death? Does Elisabeth think of him at all, while she fantasises an elegant mourning in black lace, manipulating it like the black cloth over her camera? There are no answers, but the riddles keep drawing one back. *Mahlzeiten* may lack the depth and authenticity of the *Heimat* films, it is of its time, showing traces of conceptualised, ironic cleverness that *Heimat* transcends. Yet it remains very fresh, with a fine humour that Reitz attributes to acute observation of absurdities, a fascinating film.

### ***Cardillac (1969)***

*Cardillac* is easily the darkest and most powerful single film in this set of DVDs, perhaps in the whole of Edgar Reitz’ *oeuvre*. It is a striking film, visually very beautiful, psychologically both subtle and savage. It is recognisably “Reitzian”, in its episodic narrative form, and the sensitive, intuitive observation of human faces, hands, gait and speech. But it is very different in feeling and orientation from Reitz’ other work, something of a *film noir* in the European tradition, a *genre* to which he seems never to have returned. It is sad that it has up to now been remembered mostly for the fraught history of its production in 1968/9, rather than as the enduring work of art which it undoubtedly is.

It was ironic that an *auteur* film maker, attempting to realise in film his independent vision of an artist so obsessed by the need to keep possession of his works that he is driven to murder their purchasers, should be obstructed by young “revolutionaries” clamouring for “collective control” of the film making. The film itself had an overt political agenda of its own to which the “revolution” might have been thought sympathetic: the goldsmith Cardillac bitterly resents the degradation of the artist, who becomes “anonymous ... cheated out of his life’s work” when one of his priceless creations is desecrated by sale on the market to a wealthy client for whom it is no more than an investment or vanity purchase. The theme of the artist and original inventor undervalued by capitalist society motivated the Oberhausener Manifesto. It recurs in the story of *Der Schneider von Ulm*, or the reflections of a real-life Kirschweiler cameo cutter in the *Hunsrückdörfer* documentary, or the declarations of the young film makers and musicians of the 1960s fictionalised in *Die Zweite Heimat*.

Reitz has celebrated the work of creative artists and craftsmen in most of his films, portraying real-life individuals in documentaries, and many fictional figures (like the jeweller Robert Kröber whose watchmaker's hands are said to have been substituted in *Heimat* by the Director's own), but has not elsewhere plumbed the depths of an obsession in this way. In *Cardillac*, author and actor (Hans-Christian Blech) collaborate subtly to create an extreme manifestation of such a character, based on a story by Hoffmann. Being forced to relinquish his jewellery to the market, so as to afford the materials for new work, induces in Cardillac a state of bitterness and impotence, leading to profound depression that he can relieve only by a compulsive act of violence. His whole world is subsumed into himself, everything and everyone in it, even ultimately his own life, is reduced to an object that he must possess and control, create, enjoy or destroy, or enjoy destroying. The role is built up in many practical non-verbal ways, for instance in the meticulous attention he gives to ordering a pattern of pliers on his workbench, or to patiently constructing the macabre, ludicrous apparatus of his own electric chair, ironically admiring his reflection under a "crown" of electrodes.

Although the outline of the plot is announced at the start, detail betraying the character's inner tension creates an almost Hitchcockian suspense. Outwardly he appears the respected, sophisticated craftsman, even if stubborn and reclusive. Yet the portrayal is enriched with sensuality and eroticism, not in words, but very subtly in the actor's face and behaviour. There are so many instances: Cardillac's priestly stoop as he places jewellery around his daughter's throat; his rapt face as he contemplates his delicate handiwork, glowing gold against her brown skin; the powerful sexual imagery of his masterwork, the "snake's-nest" pendant, between her breasts; the relationship he conducts, with private sadistic humour, to prepare for the first of two murders and the flickers of gratification on his face as he commits it; the open elation of the second followed by relief from depression, when he becomes aware once more of a world full of sensuous beauty – autumn leaves, gold in the sun, reflected in water, and intricate wrought ironwork on fences and gates. It is a masterly, sensitive performance and sad that Blech did not live to see the renaissance of the film on DVD.

Ultimately Cardillac becomes an object of fear to himself – he starts to despair of freeing himself from the cycle of loss and violence, and to fear that he could murder his own daughter, who when modelling the jewellery is reduced to another ritual object by a blindfold. It is ostensibly to protect her from the light, but also maybe from seeing the recovered jewellery or even his lust. He seeks escape in an attempt to create exquisite work from a foam of gold and air, too fragile to handle, and hence liberated from the market (like Tobi's massive "land art" in *Heimat 3*), but it is at the limit of even his skills. Dreading decline, but still the master of his own world, he makes a final and now successful attempt at suicide. His crowning achievement will be his chosen death, surrounded by his greatest pieces of work, enthroned in an electric chair of his own ingenious design, his rubber boots full of water.

The whole story is shot through with an undercurrent of black humour. Moreover the narrative is often distanced by voiceover commentary, from media reports and interviews, from the supporting characters, and from the actors themselves in clips salvaged from the chaos of the

filming process. The fragmentation, perhaps initially unintended, provides a context in the “normal” world, a window onto the strange power of Cardillac’s monomaniacal artistry.

As in so many of Reitz’ films there are countless images of breath-taking beauty, in black and white, sepia, or glowing colour. Sepia is often used for images of Madelon, wandering playfully in a sunlit garden, or preparing to display her father’s jewellery on her brown skin. The black and white film is as luminous and exquisite as any in the *Heimat* trilogy, delicate images of people, architecture, objects and their shadows, the background often flooded with light. There is at one point an intriguing scene where Cardillac and his assistant discuss the anonymity of the artist, around a glass display case with their images separated by angles and reflected in different planes. The colour film was specially restored for the DVD and, according to the Director’s explanatory note, combined now with the black and white film in subtle ways that were once technically impossible. This new edition reveals the gold and jewellery in its full magnificence for the first time.

Much of the soundtrack is natural sound, with occasional passages of Bach on piano, organ or orchestral instruments. Sometimes moments of suspense are accompanied by dripping water or light percussion. One of the most remarkable passages is the long scene where Cardillac in silence arranges his tools and his workroom, against a luminous white wall and its shadows, before carrying his chair upstairs to prepare his first suicide attempt. The camera lingers on the tools and the work bench, on the light and shadows on the walls and stairs, and on a small reproduction of a Hieronymus Bosch picture. The only sounds are those of Cardillac’s movements, and the clicks and clatters as he handles the tools in his workshop or the equipment for his electric chair, a dripping tap and a faint hissing which may be tinnitus in his own ears. Tension builds throughout the scene.

The supporting and minor characters are of interest mainly as representing the external, capitalist world on which Cardillac wages war, and showing it to be no less driven and self-absorbed than the artist himself. They are often unconsciously quite funny, and this helps to lighten the film. Young Olivier, Cardillac’s assistant and business manager, a vaguely well-intentioned but weak and self-seeking subordinate, and something of a poseur, schemes to make his own fortune on the back of Cardillac’s genius, and is shocked to find himself ultimately disowned. Others are (for a Reitz film) unusually one-dimensional. This may be due to the vicissitudes of the production, but it also reflects the way Cardillac himself sees them. Von Boysen, Cardillac’s last victim, is a wealthy aristocratic collector of precious stones, as isolated and eccentric as his murderer. In a long, probably too long, episode he is shown obsessively devising “scientific” methods for training a heavy cart-horse to overcome its plebeian origins and out-perform thoroughbred racehorses, whatever the cost to the horse. (Is the large stuffed horse in his house a conscious homage to Truffaut?) As the narrator puts it, in other circumstances von Boysen and Cardillac might have been indispensable to each other. Gunter Sachs plays himself, as another rich art collector. Threatening light drumbeats and a sequence of surreal images accompany a recital of his own motivations to Cardillac, which would have sealed his fate had Cardillac lived.



The beautiful black child-woman Madelon, Cardillac's emotionally if not physically abused daughter, is the one truly innocent victim, and a lovely, subtle unselfconscious performance by Catana Cayetano. Outwardly her relationship with her father seems normal and affectionate, but he denies her an independent adult life, she is confined to the house and garden except for routine household shopping. She is his possession, an instrument of his art, and no one else may have her. It is unclear, even disturbing, what may have happened to her mother. Like Paul Simon in *Heimat*, Madelon assuages her loneliness with a world-wide network of unseen contacts reached by short-wave radio from the attic. In unthreatening situations she is sociable and confident, but at times she falls into child-like behaviour, a refuge maybe from an alternative unspeakable reality in her father's relations with her. Embarrassed by the attentions of Olivier, she babbles of a childhood pet, a tortoise with a pretty "breastplate" that died – and it recalls the poignant image of herself, half naked under her father's gaze, and on her breast the gold ornament just retrieved from his murdered client. Yet her father is her only close companion, and when he dies, she is the only one truly to mourn him. She is shocked, not by the murders but by the fact that she did not know: "I loved him so much, and he loved me too, I don't understand why he never told me ..." She is courageous, and after his death manages to make her own way. But the last pathetic scenes of the film show Cardillac's final legacy to be neither the wonder of his works nor the memory of his macabre crimes, but his daughter's bewildered, damaged life.

### *Das goldene Ding (1972)*

I find this film difficult to appreciate, and consequently hard to write about. However it is clear from what others have written that they have found it charming and magical, or seen it as a reflection on the "dialectic" of the natural world and the rationality of the Enlightenment. Thomas Koebner, in the book of the long interview, calls it "a summer holiday's dream adventure", and in the Extras he and Reitz discuss how it originated after Reitz and his friends withdrew from the political turmoil of 1968 and sought a way to integrate life and work in a deeper, more inward sense. They became fascinated with the figure of Medea as a feminist icon, and read in an original Greek source that at the time of the story of Jason and the Argonauts, in which Medea helps Jason to capture the Golden Fleece, the characters were all very young, and in our culture would be no more than children. From this came the idea of a movie in which Jason, the Argonauts and Medea were to be played by children between the ages of ten and sixteen. The friends took this seriously. They were ingenious and resourceful, and having a very small budget, they spent a winter cobbling together props and costumes for it, and ferocious monsters, unaided by digital technology. Then they repaired to the Traunsee in nearby Austria to construct the sets where they and their children seem to have spent a very happy summer making the film. The happiness and relaxed holiday mood, and the sensitivity of the child actors, the refusal of the cast to grandstand or take themselves too seriously, are major sources of the film's charm and vitality.

It is not an amateur production, many of the adult participants had professional experience in film or theatre, but it does have a home-made feeling, not just in the sets and costumes and lack

of make-up (those pale middle-aged male bodies in scanty clothes), but also in the simplicity of the script and the story. To an English viewer of my generation it comes across as almost a kind of hippy “Swallows and Amazons” story, about sailing round a lake in a boat, but with the crucial difference that the best of Arthur Ransome’s books were stories of rather old-fashioned children having adventures they had discovered and developed among themselves, whereas for this film the youngsters were having a great time acting in a story devised and directed by their elders, who also took part in it. In this way it differs from Reitz’ early short *Die Kinder*, in which much younger children seem to imagine and act out their own concepts of adult roles, making the game their own. In contrast too to the great French film *Jeux interdits*, *Das goldene Ding* is not a fictional story *about* children imagining and playing, it is an adult story happily enacted by children.

The seeming innocence and rationality of these middle-class teenagers nearly forty years ago feels now incongruous with a savage ancient myth. It is true that the young Argonauts behave with casual violence to the strange peoples they encounter, and come to regret it, but it is a passionless violence, without excitement, sadism or triumph. The film is not an exploration of unthinking childhood cruelty like Truffaut’s *Les Mistons*, or Golding’s mythic *Lord of the Flies*. It would be interesting to know whether acting in the story would appeal to young teenagers today, it seems so far from their own lives and interests, or the kinds of electronic fantasy adventures they are bombarded with.

The Argonauts’ fleeting remorse for the accidentally slaughtered Dolione, and their tentative explorations of other early adolescent emotions are touching, but apart from the delicate encounter of Hylas and the Nymph there is nothing here to approach the depth of the young characters in *Stunde Null* or the *Heimat* trilogy, the depiction for instance of Matko, or Gunnar’s children in *Heimat 3*. Visually the film is sometimes quite beautiful, but it lacks the subtleties of light and shadow and texture, the moulding of shapes and spaces, that characterise Reitz’ best films. For me it is only Mamangakis’ music that manages to create a sense of magic and strangeness that transcends the ordinary. I guess it is stupid of me to reproach this film for not being what it was never intended to be, I wish I could just lighten up and enjoy it, but somehow I have failed to do that. It was clearly made with great skill and warmth, I hope others writing in English are able to do it more justice.

### ***Die Reise nach Wien (1973)***

This delightful, accessible film was another new departure for Reitz. It starts firmly grounded in the daily life of a definite time and place. The story is told straightforwardly in action and dialogue, with many subtle moments but few enigmas, and a glorious humour.

Two young women in the small Hunsrück town of Simmern in 1943, holding the fort for husbands who are absent at the Eastern Front, grow weary of their dull wartime existence and feel life is passing them by. They long for happiness “somewhere, somehow, some day”. When one of

them finds money hidden by her husband they can realise their dream of a holiday in Vienna, still in their eyes glamorous and untroubled by the war. But things do not turn out as they hope, they are deceived by a sophisticated con man and the only soldiers they meet are touchingly ordinary, far from their fantasies of gorgeous lovers from the military elite. When they return they are faced by family disruption and loss, and have to circumvent a dangerous threat from the authorities by hilarious, if very cruel, trickery. In the last scene they and their town are descending into the disorienting experience of alien occupation.

The women, Toni and Marga, are portrayed with all Reitz' sensitivity and precision of observation, with great humour and sympathy. They are played by well-known stars of the time, Elke Sommer and Hannelore Elsner. Unlike some of their supporting cast, these actresses do not speak the Hunsrück dialect, but this is not so disturbing to an ordinary English viewer, for whom they anyway do not stand out from the rest as famous names and faces. Toni's lover, Fred, a randy PE teacher turned local Nazi group leader, is splendidly played by the international star, Mario Adorf, brought up in the Eifel. Reitz mentions that the part of Marga was first offered to Romy Schneider, but as a spectator one can't help being glad she turned it down, since the performances of Sommer and Elsner seem so perfectly balanced and exactly right, and the chemistry between them so brilliant on screen (though off screen apparently they became fierce rivals).

The men are less fully portrayed, and tend to be somewhat caricatured, especially Fred, who is a wonderfully played figure of fun from the start, until his unhappy end. But others are shown more sympathetically, as themselves victims of their wartime service. The young fighter pilot, Rudi, who returns as a hero with a prestigious military decoration, speaks of the stress and loneliness that drove him to a hasty marriage he is now starting to regret. The two soldiers on leave whom the girls pick up in Vienna are both in their own ways traumatised by their experiences and one is living in dread of return to the battlefield next day. The reality of his vulnerability and fear intrudes on the girls' self-seeking fantasy of adventure, at a moment when their own dreams are catastrophically crumbling. His gentle reproach to Toni's heartlessness is moving. Though she tries to repair the hurt, he is desolate when she can bear no more and flees, leaving him alone on the pavement on the way to the station.

Sadly the film had a disappointing reception at the time of its release. German society was not yet ready for comedy set in the Nazi period. It was then, and still is, shocking to see the streets of Simmern full of swastikas and Nazi uniforms, with well-organised flag-waving crowds cheering their local hero. These historical reconstructions seem to have been made with the same meticulous care as in the *Heimat* films, and there are many nostalgic details reminiscent of the Home Front in rural Britain at the time: propaganda, shortages, a pulling together and making do by the local community, as well as the household furniture and utensils, the vehicles and fashions, the drab colour and texture of everyday clothes, the occasional glimpses of glamour. But there are also stark reminders of the true nature of wartime Germany, even in a remote country town. This is a society whose elite consists of high ranking officials in the Nazi Party and distinguished members of the armed forces. Patriotism here is of a different quality from its counterpart in

Britain, the elite are objects not only of fantasy but of fear. Ordinary people, even those who are not Jewish or socialist, live in fear of their own authorities. Whereas “black marketeers”, however useful in practice, were prosecuted and generally despised in Britain, in Germany they faced the death penalty if caught, and so in this story do townsfolk who have secretly slaughtered a pig. Toni’s husband has obtained money from a Jewish family he had provided with a travel permit before the war, and hidden it, not out of shame for profiting from their fate, but out of fear of the consequences for himself and his family. Toni grumbles that the “evacuees’ ” unclaimed possessions still lie concealed in her cellar. In “peaceful”, seemingly prosperous Vienna, the streets are assailed by the voice of Goebbels hectoring from loud speakers on every corner. No one protests. In the film, the authorities and the army in the person of Fred and other supporting roles (like the police chief, a splendid cameo by Reitz’ friend and former teacher Karl Windhäuser) are ridiculed, but sinister undertones of the situation remain unmediated. There is also a feeling which, being a child at the time, I do not remember in England, namely a dread already in 1943 that that the post-war world could only be as bad or worse than the wartime one. The husbands might or might not return, but money would be worthless and youth would have passed, and opportunities for escaping a narrow rural life would have entirely vanished.

The dark side of the film underlies its heart-warming humour, born of Reitz’ way of seeing his characters both with love and with utter clarity, unsentimentally, and without judgement. The two women are “Reitzian” in a sense we have learnt to recognise from the later work, precursors of figures like Lucie and Frau Moretti. They are lively, very funny, faithless, sexy and warm, but capable of heartless cruelty. The performances interweave and spark off each other, rich with small intuitive nuances of mutual response. As in all Reitz’ best films, they work through subtle facial expressions, and intimate observation of gesture and dialogue, in public, in private, even (tenderly and with laughter) in the bathroom. The friendship is moving and rings true. It is full of mischief, as when they conspire to seduce the young “hero” Rudi, or stuff the doorbell with newspaper to deaden Fred’s importunate ring. Toni is greedier and sharper, but fiercely loyal to her friend. Marga shows more compassion for her absent husband, and even for her lover of one night in Vienna, in a scene of great sensual warmth and delicacy. Yet it is she who devises the crude, hilarious peasant revenge the girls mete out to Fred. However justified his fate, one ends up feeling sorry for him, he has after all made a belated attempt to turn the wrath of the law away from them. Near the end of the film the two women quarrel bitterly. It is a kind of sudden, highly illogical explosion between people who have become unbearably vulnerable to each other, as they move from being inseparable sisters in arms to being, as it were, partners in “crime”. But at a pompous ceremony later in the year they are able to share a black joke about the empty, recyclable coffins for the war dead (who include both their husbands, as well as the young fighter pilot Rudi, and poor Fred). In the final scene, where the townsfolk watch a Yankee tank getting wedged in an alleyway, Toni and Marga are standing on opposite sides of the road – but still shyly wave to each other.

The magnificent hotel and costumes for the Vienna episodes contrast dramatically with the small town setting of the first and last sections of the film. One night before leaving Simmern the

girls model for each other the stunning, stylish clothes they have made for their trip. The scene has many echoes in the one in *Heimat* where Maria and Pauline return from the cinema with their heads full of Zarah Leander. Toni and Marga's home-made clothes are the height of "chic", copied from Viennese magazines, and worn with intuitive elegance. Later, in Vienna, Marga sighs with delight and longing over the fashions in the shops, "and the hats, the hats!" There is a lovely moment at the end of the "Extra" interview where Edgar Reitz tells how his mother, to whom he dedicated the figure of Marga, saw the film in old age. Her only comment: "We were more *chic*".

As in other Reitz films, the camera dwells on many subtle details of gesture, gait and glance – like Marga's hands in the jewellery shop, or the women's feet as they trail exhausted into their grand hotel room, kicking off their shoes and skidding on the floor. On the train to Vienna, the girls, despite their sophisticated appearance, are clearly still naive and vulnerable. As they encounter Molteanu, the "aristocratic Romanian officer" who swindles them out of their new wealth, there is a wonderful complex dance of hands and eyes among the three characters. The exchange is subtly observed and very funny. Ferdy Mayne, playing the part of Molteanu, hams it up in a delicate, elegant way, a kind of mixture of Ealing Studios and Max Ophüls. By contrast, when he eventually meets his come-uppance at the hands of the two women and Marga's army major with a few soldiers, there is something ugly about their arrogant plundering of his apartment. Molteanu ducks and weaves, ironically playing several parts – the hapless victim, the obsequious waiter, the disdainful, offended gentleman, while still managing to conceal some of his valuables from ignorant eyes, but the intruders are greedy and rather brutal. One thinks of their probably racist stereotype of the "foreign swindler", of other apartments the soldiers may have raided, and a host of other, quite innocent victims in the city and beyond.

The film is shot in exquisite colour, newly restored, that makes the most of the women's contrasting beauty and styles, and of their elegant clothes. There is lovely lighting in scenes like their private "fashion show", or the early morning when Marga and her major awake in the hotel bedroom. The music provides an enchanting, ironic commentary on the characters' moods and fantasies, with a mixture of Viennese waltzes and aching popular songs of the period.

Although making the film brought Reitz back to the Hunsrück for the first time and in that sense opened the way to the making of *Heimat*, it is different in spirit. It makes use of memory and remembered observations and it was inspired by deep personal curiosity about a family story, but it seems not to be a conscious reconstruction and re-imagining of personal and family memories like *Heimat*. It is a more conventional comedy film, aimed at an outside audience, and though set in Simmern and involving some amateur actors and extras from the area, its main protagonists make little attempt to play Hunsrückers. Apart from Windhäuser's hilarious, irascible police chief, or briefly perhaps, Tante Hilde, there are very few memorable Hunsrücker character parts. Nonetheless it is a forerunner of *Heimat*, and it has many echoes in the later film series.

For a start, the sets and even some of the props seem familiar to viewers of *Heimat*. The interior of the clockmaker and jeweller's shop in both films is based no doubt on the Director's

father's shop. Some of the streets and steps of Simmern feel familiar, and perhaps a view of the landscape as the women return to the Hunsrück. The furnishings of the houses, especially Tante Hilde's, could equally have been found in the houses of Schabbach. The dance hall famously reappears later in *Heimat*, though then with memorably more beautiful lighting and atmosphere. Marga and Rudi have a quiet talk in the same gallery where Maria and Otto sit, and like them are shown dancing together alone and late (though perhaps only in Marga's fantasy).

Above all, the film is a significant step in the development of Reitz' fascinated, sensitive observation of women's lives, aspirations, behaviour and moods. Toni and Marga are precursors of several comic or tragicomic characters in the *Heimat* cycle, and their friendship and even appearance also occasionally rather movingly recalls that of Lotti and Klärchen, though they are very different people at heart. Their longing to escape their narrow lives is mirrored in the frustrated dreams of Maria and Pauline, or Dorli and Marianne. But on the other hand, though it is interesting to trace the threads that link *Die Reise nach Wien* with *Heimat*, comparisons only distract from appreciating the earlier film as a work of art in its own right.

### ***Stunde Null (1977)***

*Stunde Null* is perhaps the closest in spirit to *Heimat* of any film on these DVDs. Though set in Saxony, not the Hunsrück, it has a similar feeling of coming from a deep level of imagination, a story found inwardly, not merely devised and presented, one that almost told itself, as though seen through the eyes of a child. This is in spite of the fact that the script, originating with Peter Steinbach, was worked on by several authors, and there are Brechtian echoes in the situation, the political discourse and some of the characters. Yet as a completed film each scene has a sense of rightness, so that one cannot imagine it being otherwise.

The simple tale is sparsely told, its course often still and slow, but it never drags. I still think of it as a short film, and it never feels as though nearly two hours have passed by the end. As in *Heimat* there is space to develop the subtle unspoken nuances of every scene. "Zero Hour" is a moment out of time, between the end of the Second World War and the start of the "Cold War", as the American forces leave what will become known as East Germany, and the Russian forces move back in. Meanwhile many country people have fled to the city, while those still left await their "second liberation": some with hope, many in trepidation, some expecting nothing. In that small space of unknowing, a tiny shellshocked remnant of a community starts to live again for a single night, when a Polish travelling showman turns up with his carousel. Next day a party of rag-tag Russian soldiery move in, and with no premeditated ill-will, carelessly crush the tentative shoots of warmth and freedom.

The rural setting, though in the script just on the outskirts of Leipzig, feels even more remote than Schabbach: a few houses and a graveyard, by a station (Möckern) and crossing gate on an abandoned single-track railway line. None of the actors was at the time well-known, some were amateurs, and much of the dialogue is delivered in the local dialect. The story is told through a

handful of characters: Mattiske, the old crossing-gate keeper who has since the 1930s been a secret activist in the socialist underground; a footloose teenager, Joschi, who arrives from the town on a motorbike, wearing a US airforce jacket; Franke, a Wiegand-like figure, an ex-Nazi opportunistically turned communist; Frau Unterstab, a widow running a small market garden, with a teenage niece Isa; her harshly treated employee Paul, a crippled veteran of the war in Greece, disturbingly obsessed with Isa; Motek, the Pole; and a little urchin with a bicycle much too big for him, who lives somewhere nearby with his mother and is the keen observer of everything that goes on. At one point his own face is impishly reflected in a wing mirror. Reitz says the authors and many in the team were of a generation to identify with him, and the end of his story reflects the cameraman's own childhood experience.

This is visually one of the most beautiful of Reitz' films. He and Gernot Roll, working for the first time together, have produced a constant flow of luminous black and white images. Watching again, one keeps pausing to enjoy them, and re-playing to let the light and movement and sound run through them. Early on, there are Rembrandt-like scenes in Mattiske's house and workshop, backlit through a part dusty, part open window, or lamplit at night; later, the subtle lines of the railway track dwindling into a faint mist are seen from low down at a child's eye level. Sunlight shines through leaves onto Joschi and Isa with Motek and his wares. There are close-ups of faces, half lit, almost three dimensional – beautiful expressive faces of Mattiske, Joschi, Motek and the bicycle boy. As in *Heimat*, light and shade mould shapes and carve spaces, defining textures of hair and clothes, metal, wood and stone. These products of light have a concrete, tactile quality, ill-described in mere words.

Again as in *Heimat* the music is composed by Mamangakis, and much of the soundtrack is filled with natural sounds and silences: the motorbike, the rattle of the bicycle and scrunch of cart wheels on rough roads, footsteps, hooves, voices, birdsong, crickets, the clatter of tools. Apart from the cows commandeered by the Russians, there are strangely few sounds of farm animals, no hens clucking (though the widow keeps chickens). Unlike the Hunsrück the countryside here is desolated. Later, there is the music of the carousel and Motek's records, and the radio that Joschi mends, and then the noisy incursion of the soldiers.

All we know of the characters is gathered gradually from scraps of dialogue. They are mostly suspicious of each other, watching each other, isolated in their poverty and their shattered lives. They accuse each other of a Nazi past, while trying to cover up their own. Of the adults, only Mattiske and Motek still retain their dignity and former sense of worth. The one vestige of normality is the bell that rings when Mattiske dutifully raises and lowers the crossing gate to allow small groups of refugees over the unused line.

The story starts with the teenager, Joschi, still a product of his Nazi upbringing, who nonetheless hangs around a US army post and has become besotted with all things American. The Americans roughly tolerate him as the nuisance he is, and one officer vaguely befriends him. Now that they are leaving, he rides off into the countryside, following a rumour of buried treasure in a graveyard, which might enable him to emigrate to the States. He is initially brash and insolent,

but it is moving how he finds refuge with Mattiske. The old man is quiet and firm, and does not judge, and they start to trust each other. In the morning, Joschi spontaneously says “thank you” to Mattiske for a cup of coffee. Soon the lonely youngsters, Joschi and Isa, become aware of each other. In an unforgettable passage they go for a walk along the railway line, she tight-rope walking on a single rail, he bragging of a fictional wartime past, and fantasising hungrily of “rescue” in the future. Gradually they grow silent and reach out to each other. The camera follows them up and down the line, in a succession of sensitive, beautiful images.

The old man Mattiske is a lovely performance by Herbert Weißbach, an elderly actor of long experience and at home in the local dialect, but seemingly not widely known. Actor and Director have worked together to create a whole memorable person, in face and bearing and voice, unforeseen in the dialogue alone. Now that no trains run, Mattiske mends bicycles. He welcomes people and lets them talk, and says relatively little. He befriends lonely, embittered Paul, and Joschi sleeps safely as they talk in the lamplight. But at last Mattiske can with impunity speak of his sympathies and even his secret work for the railwaymen’s union and the resistance, positioned as he was on the railway line linking cities and peoples across frontiers, into the free world. It was nothing heroic, he explains to a puzzled Joschi, the aim was not a hero’s death, only survival. Yet now he expects little from the Red Army. “I’m already liberated” he tells the ranting Franke, and inwardly indeed he is. He is kind and patient, behind a gruff exterior, with a great sense of humour, and a stillness that others seem to recognise as wisdom. When the small boy loses his bicycle to the Russians, Mattiske is the first person he runs to. When everything else goes wrong for the community, it is Mattiske who persuades Motek to speak to the Russians, and thinks of a way to help Joschi and Isa escape.

The bird-like Motek is almost a fairy tale figure, a forced labourer in Germany now returning to a wandering life of “doing business” and making people happy. When he appears mysteriously over the rise, with his carousel packed on a pony cart, he is singing a bitter Brechtian song. He is a stranger, and vulnerable, but he has a delicate intuitive awareness of other people, and recalls Juan in *Die Zweite Heimat*. Almost his first act is to encourage Paul to use his wits to overcome his disability, and he offers him a job. With his well-fed pony and his enthusiasm for a future that he can make, he brings new spirit into the forlorn hamlet.

At night when the villagers come to celebrate Motek’s magic, a space beside the widow’s house is turned into a small fairground, carved out by shadows and lights and movement. Characters we otherwise never meet wander in from the darkness and greet each other. Others go back to the shadows to pee, or be alone. Mattiske cries: “People, we have peace! That means we can have lights without being penalized!” Is there significance in the name of the frail, elderly late-comer, Frieda? People gather at the outdoor table, consume wine and food preserved for a victory that never came, laugh, get drunk, burn swastikas, ride on the carousel, sing and dance. Even the belligerent widow, keen to expunge memories of her husband’s Gestapo career, becomes life and soul of the party. Motek, who asks the uncomfortable question: “I’d like to know how someone becomes a Nazi?”, is told to forget politics and start the music. As so often in the *Heimat* cycle, a vein of darkness and denial underlies a celebration. In contrast the two young people slip away



out of the light, and later steal into the graveyard to find Joschi's "treasure". It is touching – at one moment they are tender new lovers, at the next just adventurous siblings. Returning, they cover their escapade by providing an entertainment with radio and lights from the other side of the track, and people wander over the crossing to join them. They run freely back to the shadows again together, as their elders dance to American "Music for Night People".

The day of the "second liberation" brings a herd of cows ahead of a straggling contingent of Russian troops, in carts and a few jeeps. The last party of soldiers stay to take over the rail crossing and surrounding settlement. Franke's welcoming committee and the fluttering red flags are ignored. The community, at first bewildered, then in apprehension, watch as the ill-disciplined peasant lads, far from home and relieved of the rigours of war, ride like children on the crossing gate, and refuse to return the precious bicycle. Then their play turns to hooliganism, and the day of "freedom" becomes a day of terror. When Isa and her aunt are discovered in hiding, the widow bravely and absurdly offers herself to the soldiers in a pathetic hope of turning their attention from her niece. Isa screams, Joschi, as immature as the soldiers themselves, fires a pistol, and the whole community is suddenly lined up against the wall, under threat of execution. Even after the situation has been resolved, and people creep back to their homes, the fear remains, and recriminations begin among their once more divided selves. The roof of the carousel is smashed, houses have been looted, Joschi's motorbike roars around under a load of young Russians, and the bicycle is gone. The young boy, unbelieving, speechless in the face of this injustice, walks away down an endless road, his back stiff with rage and distress. Mattiske suggests Joschi and Isa find refuge with his brother in Cologne, and the camera crane watches above the roof as they run through back gardens into the woods,

For moment it feels as if the film will end there – but it does not. There is yet another layer of illusion to strip away. Joschi cannot relinquish his dream of reaching America, and this is only reinforced when the box from the graveyard proves to contain real gold and jewellery. Isa fears the fantasy, telling him: "You aren't an Ami". In the woods the weary teenagers comfort each other, and struggle on to find the Americans. But when, triumphantly, they reach a road where US vehicles are passing, the jeep they flag down carries Military Police who suspect Joschi of thieving, and finally drive off with the jewellery, the airforce jacket, and a distraught Isa, leaving him raging and desolate in the road.

Through this simple story of two or three days in a few unimportant lives Reitz has mirrored in microcosm a momentous juncture in European history. The battle of ideologies has shifted its course, but still goes on. Illusions of peace and freedom, utopias of many colours, have melted away. For one night a small group of people abandoned their preconceptions and lived in a moment of unknowing, in mutual recognition, in shared enjoyment, in freedom, but nothing lasting came of it. Zero Hour has passed and the world has not been made anew.

Nonetheless what one remembers most vividly from this film is not an abstract idea, but the concrete depiction of a stricken rural place and the hard lives and humour continuing in it, light and shadow and evocative sounds, the expressions on faces, the contradictions and changes in

people. Joschi is arrogant and insolent, yet he desperately wants to be adopted or “rescued” by someone like the American Captain. After only a couple of days or so with Mattiske and Isa a gentler person starts to emerge, only to be trampled on by the final disillusionment. Paul has participated in dreadful scenes and been traumatised, he is bullied by the widow, his concern for Isa’s safety has itself a dangerous element, but both Mattiske and Motek offer him friendship. The widow is harsh, and in denial of her husband’s Nazi past, yet she is mourning her lost son, and at the fairground party she is generous and good company, and later would sacrifice herself for her niece. Motek has faith in the future of his “business”, is perceptive about people, wants to make them happy and believes that he can. Yet he is a realist who sings a bitter song and asks uncomfortable questions, and fears to speak up for the community until the Russians start to wreck his own property. The young imp with the bicycle suffers the first adult betrayal of his trust. As always, it is because Reitz’ characters are complex and fallible and subject to damage and growth, and are not simply bearers of theoretical concepts, that this film, like all his best work, has such power.

### *Der Schneider von Ulm (1978)*

The film, which notoriously failed in the cinema and left Edgar Reitz almost bankrupt and in despair, is very difficult to write about adequately. It is often visually beautiful, and its subject is intriguing, and close to the Director’s heart. The principal character is one of the dedicated craftsmen found throughout his major work from *Cardillac* to many of the *Heimat* films. It is fascinating to learn that the film itself vindicates the work of Albrecht Berblinger (played by Tilo Prückner), the historical inventor and “Tailor of Ulm” whose life spanned the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Berblinger’s “flying machine”, derided in his lifetime, was painstakingly reproduced for the film from his own original drawings, preserved in the local museum. An expert hang-glider pilot doubling the lead actor was able to demonstrate repeatedly, live on screen, that with a few adjustments the “machine” could fly from a high hill, exactly as the tailor had claimed. That historical evidence for such early manned glider flight is alone enough to justify the recreation of the story in a costly period drama.

A recurring theme contrasts lightness with heaviness, the airy vision of free flight with the obsessive invention of a “machine” that flies; the exhilaration of flying it with the struggle under its weight on the ground; the upwind that lifts it from the hill with the downdraught that drops it into the river. The fascination with flight foreshadows many incidents in the *Heimat* cycle. The interaction of Berblinger’s vision with his obsession is mirrored in the lifelong rivalry of the Simon brothers, Ernst the “airman” and Anton the “pedestrian”, in which nonetheless each brother, like the Tailor, in his own way suffered the creative tension of both vision and obsession warring within himself.

The light/heavy theme is reflected elsewhere in the Tailor’s life: his sparkling, tightrope-dancing muse Irma (Maria Colbin) who all too soon vanishes from the story until nearly the end,

is the converse of his anxious wife Anna (a sober, almost unrecognisable Hannelore Elsner), largely ignored at home, until she reluctantly leaves him. Moreover the same contrast affects elements in the wider society, personified in Berblinger's friend Fesslen, the master printer who has been to France and become enthused with a lofty Jacobin faith. While there, he had heard the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* proclaimed in the sky from a hot-air balloon. Back in Ulm, the stirrings of revolutionary idealism are brutally crushed by the authorities, and Fesslen, after years in prison, emerges, very sick, only when the Revolution has been "betrayed" by Napoleon and by its own excesses. Fesslen is sceptical of the Tailor's invention and the uses to which it could be put, yet he himself dies still struggling to achieve the propagation of his own visionary "Testament": "My Republic will only begin when men no longer need government, when each one farms his acre or makes his shoes and does not let himself dream that he might do more if he took over the direction of public affairs, than if he made shoes..."

The whole momentum of the film itself travels from air to earth, as it were, though with fluctuations of fortune on the way. The brief first part in and around Vienna is airy and light, as Irma floats in her balloon and Berblinger, tricking his former employer, is inspired and eager to work with new found friends, who share his enthusiasm for the science and technology of flight. It may be a little over the top that he is involved in rescuing Irma from peril twice, the second time almost at the cost of his own life. So also may be the length of some of the splendidly costumed and orchestrated scenes where the flight engineer Degen's machine and Irma's aerial performances are displayed.

Ulm however is a worthy bourgeois city, under heavy control by the municipal authorities. The Tailor, once home again with Anna, continues to pursue his experimental study of the mechanics of flight with intense energy in his spare time, but his vision is not appreciated. Degen and Irma, now married, pass through on the way to make their fortune with a new flying machine in Paris. All the sparkle has gone from Irma, who seems to regret her marriage. As Irma and Berblinger exchange glances, Anna regards them with suspicion, but the Tailor, characteristically oblivious, is overjoyed to be with his friends and able to show his work, and eager to find out if Degen can already fly. Then Degen refuses to take him to Paris, wanting all the kudos for himself, and Berblinger is plunged back into his lonely world. To Anna's distress, he continues to struggle with the heavy machine which repeatedly fails to fly. It injures him, he finally yields to Anna, gives up and smashes it.

The downward trend goes further: on the rebound, Berblinger is drawn into the visionary politics of his kindred spirit, Fesslen, and when the citizens' movement is suppressed and Fesslen and his followers are sentenced to forced labour, the Tailor is with them, breaking stones, and floating messages back to the town in a mini hot-air balloon, a small spirit of freedom. By the time he is released his house is distrained, his business lost and his wife has left him.

There is nothing left but to go on living in Fesslen's house near his workshop, rethinking and rebuilding his machine, and trying again. For a long while his only achievement is cleverly to invent a jointed false limb for an injured Jacobin comrade. As the forces of Napoleon bombard

the city, he finds a young boy to help him, and together they work until almost miraculously the machine can fly. The scenes of Berblinger's first flights are beautiful, swooping over trees and fields, soaring against the sky, enhanced as they are by Mamangakis' lyrical music. Meanwhile he has learnt that Degen has given up the attempt to fly, after an ignominious crash in France, and the Tailor is distressed that his friend has not written to him.

Fesslen is released, mortally ill but still passionately advocating freedom and an anarchistic utopia and not much impressed with the idea of mechanical flight. Others however are at last showing interest, including those with political and financial power. A French delegation offers to support the development of Berblinger's machine if he will "work with the Revolution". The inventor "has to think about it", and leaves the Frenchmen waiting indefinitely. Irma turns up again with the French invasion, seemingly separated from Degen, and now an independent, adventurous young woman ready to share the excitement and burden of Berblinger's invention. The city authorities also start to court the man whom they had ruined and derided, and Irma and Berblinger plan a first public exhibition of the flying machine for the citizens of Ulm, much as Fesslen would approve. But now that the former kingdom is restored, emissaries insist that the first exhibition should be reserved for a command performance of a flight across the Danube, in the presence of the King of Baden-Württemberg and his brother the Duke. Again Berblinger stubbornly "needs to think about it", but after the death of Fesslen he complies.

The final disaster is predetermined by the constraints of the situation. He has to perform at the whim of royalty before a huge crowd for whom he has become a local hero. The performance is neither under his control nor in a place of his choosing. He boldly postpones it for a day because he senses the conditions are unfavourable, and is meanwhile pressured once more to defect to the French delegation. Tension rises and falls through these rather long-winded dilemmas, and by the time he finally emerges on the second day, he has perceived that over a river there is no upwind, only a downdraught. But it is now too late to withdraw, and in the end, trembling, he takes off, and plunges into the water.

The historical Berblinger survived for many more years as a craftsman and inventor, though not of flying machines, and the film is given an upbeat end. He flees for his life from the enraged and scornful populace whose dreams he has betrayed. Exhausted, he is picked up by Napoleonic troops and awakes among a cache of looted valuables in their wagon. Ever resourceful, he uses a hollow gilded lampstand or table leg and pieces of mirror to make a periscope through which he can see beyond the hood of the wagon to an upside-down world of landscape and sky which merges with his own fantasies. Visionary dreams and craftsmanship win through.

The story is told in a straightforward conventional way. At times the dialogue among minor characters at least seems devised largely to further or explain the plot (at the feast in the tavern for instance, or among the Jacobins). Some of the set pieces, such as the crowd scenes in Vienna, or the Jacobin challenge to the army in Ulm, are magnificent. The beautiful light and movement of the latter scene, the careful historical reconstruction, the ancient architecture, the tension between soldiers and citizens, the curiosity of the townsfolk, the final violence, all combine in a

subtle cinematic tour de force. But somehow it remains a distanced historical narrative, that does not clutch at the heart like the much simpler scenes of the arrival of the Russian army in *Stunde Null*, the people involved are not known to us in the depth at which we come to know the people of Möckern, and it is hard to empathise with them as individuals. Even Fesslen lacks the originality of Mattiske, as a portrait of a former political activist.

Throughout the film the colours and many of the images are very beautiful, in particular the sweeping, lyrical freedom of Berblinger's flights over hillside, woods and fields. However, it feels sometimes, especially in the busier, more crowded scenes or those where the figures are subsidiary to the whole composition, as though the screen of a domestic TV set cannot do them justice. In places there seems to be too much going on, and less of the dynamic interconnected structure of gatherings of people in the *Heimat* films. In the book of his interview Reitz comments that he still regrets that Gernot Roll was not available to work with him on this film, after their collaboration in *Stunde Null*. Nonetheless, more intimate interior scenes involving two or three characters work well on the small screen. They are beautifully lit, at times in natural lamplight, and often look as though they have been consciously designed to recall paintings of maybe Dutch interiors, albeit with costumes of a later period. Sometimes the design feels too "conscious", for example an image of Berblinger at his desk with rolls of paper and other objects tastefully arranged to form a "picture". This is in contrast to Roll's images in which the space and composition seem to be formed from light and shadow and focus, and the movements and glances of the figures. In these scenes the sets are furnished with period objects that look authentic but also have the pristine quality of reproductions of museum pieces. I cannot help thinking of Mattiske's workshop and living space in *Stunde Null*, where the props (tools, coffee pot, storm lamp, old radio set etc.) look old, and recognisable from our childhoods. Those things have been used, and have stories of their own, just as Mattiske has. They are integral with his character. The sets of *Der Schneider* on the other hand, apart from Fesslen's room with the old printing press, sometimes *feel* like historical reconstructions.

Maybe this carping is only personal preference, and very unfair. I am curious to understand why I personally can engage less well with this intriguing film than with some of the others in the DVD set. In the book of the interview, Reitz and Koebner discuss Koebner's "only point of criticism" in terms of the personality of the actor Tilo Prückner, who does not fit the ideal type of the romantic lead. However, I cannot help thinking that the problem lies not in the actor but in the character himself, and the development of his story. In the early scenes in and around Vienna, Berblinger is lively and responsive, strongly attracted to Irma, and enthusiastic in his friendship with Degen. It feels as though these three are heading for the kind of comradesly romantic triangle that crops up in the later *Heimat* films. In Ulm, there is the added complication of the hurt feelings and suspicions of Anna, an undeveloped part on which the beauty and huge talent of Hannelore Elsner seem sadly wasted. But once Berblinger is left alone to develop his machine, his obsession takes him over. A passionate man, his one passion is now flight and the flying machine. Other people, however dear, even Anna, are taken for granted, as parents might be by a child. Unlike Cardillac, he shows no sign of pathological depths, just no access to much

other depth at all, as far as he is created and portrayed. When he smashes the machine and gives up his project, he finds a substitute in an alternative dream, Fesslen's revolutionary idealism. Though this brings him both companionship and suffering, he remains at heart a loner. He is a good friend to Fesslen and prepared to help him in practical ways, but when Fesslen comes out of prison, broken and very sick, Berblinger can only greet him with: "Do you know I can fly – really – I've done it!" It is Fesslen who asks the crucial question to which he has no reply: "Where do you want to go with your flying, and who do you want to take with you?" Even when Irma returns, it is not clear that he now sees and treats her as anything other than a soulmate and indispensable colleague. When he finally escapes from his pursuers, he still runs away even from his friends. Degen cannot understand it: "Where is he? He knows where we are". Irma replies: "He has that in common with all his friends. You wanted to be alone in Paris when everything happened ... You drove me away only because I knew how despairing you were, when I saw how you cried". This may be based on accurate intuitive observation of such a personality, but it leaves a kind of vacuum in the film, as maybe it would in the life of the person himself.

The film itself has had an unhappy history, which is curiously paralleled in the fate of its protagonist. Yet in a way Berblinger's visionary flight was never meant to bolster the power of overweening political authorities, and in failing, his machine and his own genius were preserved from serving such vulgar earthbound ends. If the film itself crashed, its failure led to a way of reinvigorating the authentic artistry with which Reitz produced *Stunde Null* and the earlier films, so that he could go on to create the *Heimat* trilogy.

### ***The DVD edition***

This DVD pack is a treasure house of fascinating films that have long been out of access. It is well produced, with interesting extras in video and pdf, and the films have been spectacularly restored. One has only to compare the new version of *Die Reise nach Wien* with one on an old, admittedly imperfect video which I have seen, presumably recorded from a TV broadcast. Professor Koebner seems to have been a kind of godfather to this new edition, having written the very informative and perceptive introductory booklet, as well as conducting, and editing the book of, the long interview which is partly reproduced in video on the DVDs. Expressing his unfeigned delight in the films, with his gravelly voice and enthusiastic hands, Koebner comes across as something of an endearing "Reitzian" character himself! We owe a big debt of gratitude to him, and to all who worked with the Director to restore the film stock and produce this magnificent edition, which enriches our understanding and appreciation of Edgar Reitz' work.

## Appendix

### A. English Summary of Edgar Reitz' *Begleitschreiben des Regisseurs*

For the German original see:

[http://www.edgar-reitz.de/cms/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=299&Itemid=1](http://www.edgar-reitz.de/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=299&Itemid=1)

When in 2006 Edgar Reitz received a request from an Italian film distributor interested in republishing his early films, he had specimen copies made of the films he had shot in the 60s and 70s, but these were found to have suffered damage during nearly 40 years of storage. The colour film in particular had lost nearly all its original colours, and was almost unrecognisably distorted by red staining and fading, as well as by countless cinch marks, smudges and perforations. Splices had worked loose and the material was crumpled, dried out and corroded with dried glue. Reitz points out that that this is a world-wide problem threatening whole areas of film culture.

Thanks to financial help from the Rheinland-Pfalz Cultural Foundation he was able to salvage the six most important feature films and other shorts and documentaries from his "early years". The original negatives were digitized, frame by frame, in "2K" resolution, so that each frame could be broken down into over 3 million pixels and recorded layer by layer. Since an average feature film consists of about 150,000 frames, one can imagine the scale of the work of reinforcing the remaining traces of colour, removing blemishes, and restoring the whole aesthetic of the colour scheme in a critical "Grading process", in each of these individual frames. To do this Reitz set up his own digital processing studio. Working together with British software developers, technicians from ARRI in Munich, and his own trained team, it took over two years to retrieve the six feature films now presented in the Kinowelt/Arthaus DVD edition of *Das Frühwerk*. Reitz and his cameraman were personally in strict control of all stages of the process.

The restoration gave him the chance to realise original ideas for which he had formerly lacked the technical means. In *Cardillac* he was finally able to combine colour with black and white images and highlight the gold tones, in subtle ways he had imagined but been unable to achieve. In *Die Reise nach Wien* in 1974 the distributor had insisted on cutting out certain scenes, and Reitz was now able to produce an unmutated version for the first time. After that, all the other films too were restored to original "Director's cut" versions and remastered for the DVD.

During the months of work devoted to each film, Reitz and his team had to put themselves back into the original time and circumstances reflected in its style, technique and means of narrative. He says it was "a great adventure" to see how different the conditions were then, and how they had managed with ridiculously small budgets, clumsy and heavy equipment and minute crews to produce sometimes quite astounding effects. Particularly striking was the huge structure of forethought that lay behind all these films, so that not even the smallest, most incidental moments were filmed thoughtlessly or carelessly, perhaps a virtue born of necessity at that time. Now after 40 years these films still represent what he is astonished to recognise as his own most original personal vision.

## B. References and some further reading in German

DVDs: *Edgar Reitz – Das Frühwerk*. Kinowelt/Arthaus DVD edition 2009:  
[http://www.kinowelt.de/material/presse/090302\\_ReitzFruehwerk.pdf](http://www.kinowelt.de/material/presse/090302_ReitzFruehwerk.pdf)  
 Contains a valuable introductory booklet by Thomas Koebner

www. Edgar-Reitz.de <http://www.edgar-reitz.de/>  
 Follow links to *Spielfilme* and *Kurz- & Experimentalfilme*, and click *Details* for individual films. For some of them the Details also include a further link to *Pressartikel*

Thomas Koebner, Michelle Koch (Hg.): *Edgar Reitz Erzählt*, München (edition text+kritik) June 2008,  
 ISBN 978-3-88377-924-9

Reinhold Rauh: *Edgar Reitz, Film als Heimat*, München (Wilhelm Heyne Verlag) 1993, ISBN 3-453-06911-0