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‘Heimat’ in Central European Cinema

Since 1989 Central European film-makers have drawn on the idea of Heimat to relate aspects of contemporary identity. There is, however, a considerable contrast in the use of landscape, nature and folk traditions between Czech and Russian film-makers and their German contemporaries. For directors like Jan Svěrák, Ivan Fila and Nikita Mikhalkov, Heimat represents a source of national identity and pride, however problem-laden the present may be. For Germans like Tom Tykwer, Andreas Dahn, Vanessa Jopp and others, the natural scene and in particular the Baltic coast function as a symbol of the desire to find peace within a disturbing and threatening world.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, re-unification and the subsequent re-invention of the German nation, film makers have revisited Central European cinematic traditions with a view to placing themselves creatively in the context of its intellectual and artistic heritage. One of these legacies that served as a starting point for a new departure has been the Heimatfilm. This genre survived the Nazi era, the post-war years and the economic miracle in the East and West alike.

Films from directors like Tom Tykwer, Andreas Dresen, Thomas Jahn, Vanessa Jopp, Peter Welz or Andreas Kleinert, who in their work and autobiographies bring East and West together, discover Heimat anew. The same can be said for Czech productions like Kolya, the Russian documentary Anna or Prague-born Ivan Fila’s Lea set in Slovakia and Germany. Yet, while eastern European directors rediscover their countries’ natural beauty, German directors seem to rediscover lost territory by ascribing symbolic value to the Baltic Sea in particular, as a show-down location in the concluding scenes of their films. Their protagonists take refuge in a countryside that could not be further removed from the associations of Alpine beauty and touristic folklore as seen in the traditional German and Austrian Heimatfilm. On the contrary, the Baltic stands for the rough elements of nature on Germany’s coastline, and drives home the message that the only certainty in life is change. While Germany as a nation comes to terms with past injustices and future uncertainty, the backdrop of the boundless, timeless forces of nature serves as a corrective to human fate. Thus, we see a re-orientation from the south to the north, a paradigm shift in the Heimat genre from the west to the east, and a rapprochement in setting and thinking. However, this
could also be misunderstood as an attempt to lay territorial or moral claim to a region rightly belonging to eastern Europe. This paper will probe the political and ideological message underlying this rediscovery of the Baltic region and Sea as part of a renewed surge of Central European Heimatfilme.

The Central European Heimatfilm Tradition

As a genre the Heimatfilm is renowned for its restorative stance. It often uses dialect and renounces topical issues, advocates traditional gender roles, has an anti-modern impetus of rural, pastoral, often Alpine images, and expresses a longing for pre-modern times, for the good old days that supposedly still exist away from the urban centres. The Nazis used Heimatfilm in an effort ‘to idealise “Bauerntum” as the site of desirable traditions and stereotyped the foreign (most often the urban) as the breeding ground for moral decay. Veit Harlan’s Die goldene Stadt (1942) is an excellent example’. As a genre, the Heimatfilm has certainly seen transformations. Early examples were Leni Riefenstahl’s Das blaue Licht (1932) that aimed to overwhelm the spectator by the monumentality and sheer massiveness of the Alpine homeland and the popular Louis Trenker films (for example Der Berg ruft, 1937). After the Second World War, the genre still resorted to glorifying depictions of Heimat such as in Ernst Marischka’s Sissi trilogy (1950s) which has provoked a series of anti-Heimatfilme as the ‘cliché-ridden, Agfa-coloured images of German forests, landscapes, and customs, of happiness and security, appeared to be deceitful movie kitsch’. But the genre also showed signs of a renewal as film makers used it for a more realistic presentation of homeland such as Edgar Reitz’s Heimat (1980-84) and Die zweite Heimat (1988-92), which advocates a new form of regionalism. Likewise recent releases like Joseph Vilsmaier’s Herbstmilch (1988) and Schlafes Bruder (1995) or Tom Tykwer’s Wintersleeper (1997) have successfully reclaimed ‘this traditionally reactionary genre’ for art house film.

The genre has also been stigmatised by association with National Socialist ideology. Many Heimatfilme produced in the second half of the 20th century were indeed remakes of films from the Hitler era and offered the struggling population of Central Europe familiar images and ideals. After all, Heimat post-1945 for Germans ‘signified an experience of loss, a vacuum that Germans filled with nostalgic memories’. Not surprisingly the Heimatfilm genre has therefore been a popular category particularly in Germany and Austria and saw its heyday in the 1950s, with about 300