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Papa's got a Brand New Kino
German Wartime Memory in Edgar Reitz's
Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany
Nathan Maclean

Throughout the twentieth century, West Germany had to cope with the memory of Hitler's Nazi Party, which orchestrated one of the most heinous genocides in the twentieth century. Following the end of the Second World War, Germany was split in two by the allied forces and faced the humiliation of being administered, both politically and militarily, by foreign countries, mainly The United States and The Soviet Union. On one hand, this American influence manifested itself in the adoption of Wall Street economics and American mixed capitalism resulting in an enforced stability and economic growth. On the other hand, the influence of American culture denigrated much of German history and perpetuated a forced shame on all German citizens for the crimes of the Nazi Reich. The dismantling of the German Empire and Nazi war machine would, ultimately, leave an immense wound on the German psyche colouring how Germans saw themselves both in terms of identity and history. The emergent question of the mid-to-late twentieth century thus became: How could Germans be proud to be German in light of the events of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the post-War struggles?

One immediate reaction was denial. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the leadership of West Germany decided to push aside memories of the war years and the Nazi atrocities in order to stabilize the country (which had split from East Germany in 1949). It was not until the 1960s, then, that many Germans began to revisit the history of WWII. This desire to revisit the history of WWII was driven by a generation of young Germans who did not readily accept the stories passed on by the older generation of what happened during the war. Neglecting discussion of WWII for over a decade left many Germans unsure how to navigate Nazi history, and the question of how one should interpret the events of WWII was not without controversy in the arts and academia in Germany. Were Germans to place Hitler and the Nazis amongst the larger annals of German history, or was this period so utterly unique that it should remain separate from the rest of history? This essay will examine *Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany* as a case study of New German Cinema (NGC) in the German reconciliatory period

following WWII. Originally crafted as an eleven-hour film, director Edgar Reitz split *Heimat* into an episodic narrative in order to be aired on German television. Reitz's finished product defies the simplistic responses of naive apologists of Nazi atrocities and draconian critics of German culture, offering instead a nuanced and sophisticated treatment of German history, encapsulating both the immaculate heights and horrific depths of the human imagination. Reitz presents a complex vision of how Germans ought to understand German identity in light of WWII but he is by no means monolithic, and this diversity of experience and identity is reflected in *Heimat*'s plot, which manages to simultaneously condemn the crimes of the Third Reich while humanizing the plights of the German people. In order to answer that question, this essay will begin by locating *Heimat* in the larger contexts of German cinema before covering the plot of Reitz's film in depth, specifically analyzing several key scenes and plotlines which illustrate the various facets of German response to WWII, German identity, and German guilt.

I. Contextualizing Heimat: Edgar Reitz and Post-WWII German Cinema

In the intervening years between Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 and the end of WWII in 1945, film had been used extensively by the Nazis as an effective tool of propaganda. In the aftermath of WWII, film evolved as a cultural medium through which Germans were able to address the major issues affecting their country. In particular, two major styles of film emerged after the War: Rubble films and Heimatfilm. Whereas other popular films tended to depict an idealized or propagandistic vision of Germany, Rubble films focused on the gritty realism of contemporary life and the ways in which the condition of modern German society was the product of atrocities committed during WWII (Rasch 3). In the late 1940s, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, many films were produced with a gritty Rubble aesthetic, including popular films such as *The Murderers are Among Us*, *A Free Country*, and *Somewhere in Berlin*. Many Rubble films, however, were not well received by the general population because they simply showcased what Germans could already see all around them (Moeller 125). In other words, the German people did not need, or want, a harshly realistic style of film to remind them of the harsh realities that their country had endured. In contrast, the genre of film known as Heimatfilm utilized a nostalgic perspective that largely avoided WWII and the Nazi period. Popular from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, Heimatfilm drew upon nostalgia for an idealized, pre-WWI Germany in order to divert the German people's attention away from the destruction that surrounded them. German citizens, however, required a higher calibre of film to stimulate cultural renewal (Fehrenbach 9). Neither Rubble films, which remained largely descriptive of the

obvious failures of the German government, nor Heimatfilmes ,which remained largely delusional regarding the actual condition of German citizens, adequately addressed the complexities of German involvement in WWII. By producing films that sought to address post-WWII Germany in a more nuanced and critical manner, without stooping to mere idealization or demonization of Nazi-era Germany, New German Cinema provided a platform for directly confronting WWII and Nazism.

Released in 1984, *Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany* was written and directed by Edgar Reitz, a prominent NGC filmmaker. Reitz made *Heimat* in order to contextualize the Nazi period in German history and provide an alternative to American influence in the German film industry, but there is also an intensely personal dimension to Reitz's film. While Reitz's overriding goal is to contextualize and revitalize German culture, his approach is largely autobiographical. In a sense, *Heimat* serves to document Reitz's own German heritage, and in so doing to illuminate and consolidate the seemingly contradictory facets of German identity. Thus, while *Heimat* addresses issues of national prominence, Reitz's film never strays far from the filmmaker's personal life. In fact, Reitz's small-village upbringing played a crucial role in shooting the film, influencing his decision to set *Heimat* in a fictional town in his home region of Hunsrück. This geographical specificity proved to be vital to Reitz's artistry, with film scholar Dagmar Stern noting that "the film's magic lies in [Reitz's] depiction of two simple German families... drawing upon his and his co-author's formidable memories, family tales and oral history of the region to create a panoply of sympathetic characters" (Stern 10). By bringing the stories of WWII down to a local, personal level, Reitz managed to capture something of the authentic German experience, devoid of propagandistic idealism or ideology of any kind.

One of the methods Reitz employed to attain this intimate atmosphere was to interview many real German citizens and incorporate these stories into *Heimat*. Together with fellow writer Peter Steinbach, Reitz set out to tell the story of small-town Germany by taking inspiration from the real-life accounts of his family, friends, and many others who lived in rural regions of Germany during WWII (Angier 38). Reitz believed that consulting people who lived during WWII would allow him to depict a more genuine German history.

By interviewing family and friends who lived in Germany during WWII, Reitz sought to create a film that located the Nazi period within the annals of German history. While the Nazi period was undoubtedly rife with atrocities, Reitz felt that focusing exclusively on this period, as many filmmakers had done, reduced the delicate interplay between multiple German identities into a single monolithic

force. Likewise, he refused to ignore crucial facts that might tarnish German history. Adolf Hitler served twelve years as Chancellor of Germany (1933-1945), and it is an undeniable fact that, during this period, Nazism shaped the culture, history, and identity of Germany for better or worse. Thus, to be German is to engage with Nazism in some capacity. Reitz acknowledged this by depicting both Nazi crimes and German suffering at a human level. Drawing on anecdotal stories of real German citizens, Reitz is thus able to convey the complex realities that Germany faced during the war. Rather than depict Nazism as a strictly demonic force, he shows the human face of the Third Reich, and in so doing defies prescriptive ideologies through the power of a shared humanity.

Further, by portraying Nazi crimes and German suffering side by side, Reitz challenges the idea that the Nazi period is a unique historical anomaly and shows that Nazism should instead be understood as part of a larger German history. Reitz's choice of setting contributes to this historical contextualization of Nazism. The story of *Heimat* spans the years from 1919 to 1982, encompassing German history both before and after WWII. While the shadow of WWII looms over many of the episodes and character arcs, *Heimat* is not exclusively preoccupied with the war. In fact, while WWII undoubtedly serves as the backdrop of the story, large sections of film pass with scarcely a mention of history's deadliest war. Reitz presents the Nazi period in such a manner to show people, especially the Germans who feel ashamed of their past, that there is more to German history than the Third Reich. Reitz understood that fixating on the enormity of *Mein Kampf* while ignoring the majesty of Goethe's *Faust* or Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is tantamount to a lie, or at least a partial lie, a hypocritical censorship of history in order to suit the narrative of German culpability. The reality Reitz attempts to convey is one in which there is no either/or, a reality in which Nazi atrocities and German suffering exist side by side, neither one compromising the severity of the other.

However, before Reitz and Steinbach could depict Nazism and German suffering in such a way, however, Reitz and many of his contemporary filmmakers struggled through decades of political support for escapist films that tended to either ignore the war altogether or fixate on the barrenness of post-war life. In these early years of the NGC, filmmakers like Reitz were forced to compete with the popular, and often government-supported, Rubble and Heimatfilms as well as Hollywood blockbusters. Reitz's *Heimat* emerged as a response to one such Hollywood production called *Holocaust*, a cliché-ridden American miniseries ... which Reitz felt traduced German history in the Nazi era." (Jeffries "The Nazis, Communism and Everything"). Released in 1978, *Holocaust* received widespread

critical and commercial acclaim upon release, especially in America. However, many Germans agreed with Reitz. These Germans desired a style of film that would appropriately contextualize the Nazi period while also avoiding the trap falls of condescending American paternalism. While NGC films certainly attempt to address the question of how to depict the Holocaust, they are also part of a wider European art phenomenon that produced cinema in response to American domination over native art forms (Knight 32). Thus, while the movement began as a response to the national conditions of Germany, the NGC must also be understood in the context of these increasingly Hollywood-influenced films.

Comprised of young directors and writers frustrated with the state of German cinema, the NGC criticized 1950s German films on the grounds that such films did not confront the realities of WWII and yet still received government funding, while innovative NGC projects had to make do with practically zero support. In response to this lacklustre funding, a group of NGC filmmakers, including Edgar Reitz, signed the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962 (Knight 13). The Oberhausen Manifesto called for federal funding of New German Film. Those who signed the Manifesto recognized the inadequacy of the old style of German film and the potential of the NGC. Ultimately, the Oberhausen Manifesto successfully secured funding for German filmmakers to produce films that could compete with Hollywood blockbusters. By reclaiming funding and providing a voice for the NGC, Reitz and his fellow signatories felt they were reclaiming German cinema and German memory.

With the NGC now receiving federal funding, the movement quickly began to develop more concrete characteristics. While the NGC remained diverse in scope throughout its history, it had three unifying elements: the directors were all born around WWII, the films involved an artisanal mode of production (meaning the creators of the film served as both director and writer), and these artisanal writer-directors actively sought out audiences with whom they wanted to share the messages in their films (Knight 2). Reitz was considered a major influence in the NGC, having been one of the signatories of the Oberhausen Manifesto, as well as a founder of West Germany's first film school, the Institut für Filmgestaltung. Reitz was consequently considered a prominent figure in Germany throughout the 1960s. However, despite the success of the Oberhausen Manifesto, however, NGC filmmakers continued to receive modest funding, and as the years wore on, government subsidies for independent directors declined. As a result, Reitz and other independent directors lost a great deal of esteem in the ensuing decades (Knight 18-20). Thus, *Heimat* seemed to many like a last ditch effort on Reitz's part to keep the spirit of the NGC alive. This has led critics like Julia Knight to

argue that the NGC met its demise in the late 1970s or early 1980s and that *Heimat* should not be included amongst the movement's filmography (Knight 6). Thomas Elsaesser, on the other hand, argues that history is found by turning inward to family and home, and that because of the manner in which its content focuses on the notion of a German sense of home, *Heimat* is an epitaph of the NGC (Elsaesser 278). Part of this debate stems from the title of the film, *Heimat*.

II. *Heimat*: A Chronicle of Germany

i. *Defining Heimat*

The most basic translation of *Heimat* means home, but the word can also be used to describe home life, homeland, or any rural, agricultural setting before the time of industrialization. In titling his film *Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany*, Reitz, thus, left his film open to interpretation. Reitz himself defined "Heimat" as:

A word lined to strong feeling... Heimat is such that if one got closer and closer to it, one would discover that at the moment of arrival it is gone... [Heimat is] fiction, and one can arrive there only in poetry, and I include film in poetry. (Kaes 163)

Even though Reitz's definition of *Heimat* is somewhat vague, offering more of a discourse on the elusiveness of definition than any attempt at a concrete definition, it is telling that he ends his quote by stating that one can understand the meaning of *Heimat* through film. By saying that the truth of a word can only be reached through poetry, Reitz suggests that there is something more to the truth than mere facts. That is the reason it is so important to capture the idiosyncratic experiences of rural people, and why it is essential that concrete ideologies and explanations be left behind. Capturing the atmosphere of life, the soul, as it were, of individual people defies blanket ideologies and trite clichés. By titling the film *Heimat*, Reitz believed that he "was countering two things: the pseudo-folklore form of *Heimat* used by the tourist industry, and its ideological use during the Nazi period. It was difficult to remove *Heimat* from its previous uses in German history" (Jeffries, "The Nazis, communism and everything"). While Reitz focuses on rural life in *Heimat*, his portrayal was not overly romanticized, as is the case in the tourist industry, since it deals with the severities of the war. Reitz, thus, managed to avoid using *Heimat* to convey a false, idealized German homeland as propagandized by the Nazis.

ii. Heimat: The Plot

In terms of the actual plot, *Heimat* showcases the lives of a German family from 1919 to 1984 in the fictional rural village of Schabbach, located in the Hunsrück region. The story of *Heimat* centres on several generations of two main families trying to maintain simple lives: the Simons, headed by Paul and Maria, and the Wiegands, headed by Alois and Wilfried. In the first episode, Paul Simon comes home from the First World War and goes to work with his father (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 1). However, not long after Paul begins a family of his own, however, he leaves for America and does not return home until after WWII. The film then focuses on Paul's wife Maria as she raises their two children, Anton and Ernst, with the help of Paul's parents Matthias and Katharina. The film glosses over the interwar years and makes no mention of significant historical events including hyperinflation and the Great Depression. The film does, however, briefly reference the growing anti-Semitism in the 1930s and the Nazi seizure of power. The film covers the wartime period over the course of four episodes and uses life in Schabbach to showcase the hardships of the home front. These episodes also touch on some major aspects of the war such as the Eastern Front and the Holocaust. The rest of the film revolves around the post-war rebuilding of Germany with the re-education of former Nazis, the American post-war presence, and the economic miracle (Reitz, *Heimat* Episodes 1-11).

The era *Heimat* depicts stretches from the end of the First World War to the early 1980s, and in that time, Germany underwent tremendous changes, both economically and socially. At the end of the First World War, Germany was defeated and economically drained. Like many other European countries, Germany was vulnerable to extreme political groups. The main character, Paul Simon, returns home from WWI silent and solemn. Paul appears defeated and unwilling to move forward. This sentiment was representative of many Germans who felt betrayed and disillusioned in the aftermath of WWI and the Versailles Treaty. Reitz makes ample use of colour and sound to project this feeling of hardship and sadness. For example, this early section of the film is shown in black and white along with slow, sorrowful music. By combining these audio and visual effects and associating them with Paul's return from the war, Reitz reminds the audience of the broken spirits of Germans following WWI and how this downcast atmosphere contributed to the growing support for the Nazi Party. German national morale was defunct and Germany longed for a sense of strength and pride again.

iii. *Heimat: Implications of the Plot*

The 1980s were characterized by the complicated nature of placing the Nazi period into German historiography. Reitz argues this was difficult because “the problem with us in Germany is that our stories are blocked by one thing: history. In 1945 everything started from scratch, erasing all that had gone on before. It’s like a gaping hole in people’s memories and feelings” (Kilborn 87). In *Heimat*, Reitz tries to fill the gap in people’s memories by discussing the events before 1939 and after 1945. In the first episode, Reitz attempts the vexed proposition of contextualizing the Nazi period in the annals of German history by presenting a portrait of life before WWII. In doing so, Reitz’s film echoes the critiques of the historian Ernst Nolte who argued that the history of the Third Reich should be removed from isolation and studied in the context of the time period. For Nolte, the demonization of the Third Reich was unacceptable (Nolte 3). Like Nolte, Reitz does not underplay the horrific nature of the Nazis’ brutal crimes but instead tries to situate those events within their appropriate context in order to more critically understand them.

In light of Reitz’s aim to accurately depict German suffering, it is curious that significant interwar events, such as the Weimar Revolution, the hyperinflation of the 1920s, and the Great Depression, are absent from *Heimat*. Instead of including these events, Reitz focuses on a rural village whose people are trying to live peaceful lives without too much influence from the cities.

iv. *Village Life in Heimat*

In *Heimat*, the people who live in the village of Schabbach try to live a life free from the influence of the technology that comes from the cities. This point is demonstrated in the comparison between Paul and his father Matthias. When Paul first returns home, he initially helps his father in the blacksmith shop, but not long after, Paul begins focusing his time on radios and other technologies (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 1). Here, Reitz displays the separation between rural ways of life and the influence of city technology, with the latter coming to represent Nazi and American influence. In *Heimat*, Reitz consistently shows a disdain for technology and urban development, which he sees as harbingers of Nazi and American ideology. For example, in the first episode, Reitz idealizes the rural setting through his portrayal of the relative happiness of the Simon family; however, in the second episode, the introduction of technology from the city is shortly followed by an outbreak of diphtheria. By having diphtheria infest the village in such short order after the introduction of new technologies, Reitz criticizes the negative aspects he attributed to technology and portrays technology’s capacity to destroy life. This

idealization of rural life and mistrust of technology is no coincidence. In numerous interviews, Reitz described how he wanted to show the joys of a simple rural life, and this passion is reflected in the film in a manner that is simultaneously reminiscent of the old Heimatfilm era while also remaining steeped in the reality of everyday life. Remarking on the influence of technology on rural life in *Heimat*, Franz Birgel, a professor of German and Film Studies at Muhlenberg College argues that village life, formerly romanticized in early Heimatfilm, is depicted more realistically by Reitz in the first few episodes of *Heimat* (Birgel 2). While Reitz clearly envisions rural life as ideal, he pulls no punches in his portrayal of the degeneration of said rural ideal. For example, the idyllic rural setting shown in the early episodes of *Heimat* is quickly corrupted through the rise of the Nazis, who bring the technology of the telephone and the highway to the village. While the implementation of these new technologies bears the promise of progress, the harsh reality is that both technologies ultimately assist the Nazis in bringing death upon the village people.

Although the film hints at some of the consequences of WWII, *Heimat* does not focus on the Nazis themselves in great detail, even in the episodes set in the decade immediately preceding the war. The Nazi seizure and consolidation of power was a defining moment in German history yet, despite the undeniable significance of the Nazis, they are largely ignored by the characters in *Heimat*. This absence is shown in *Heimat* when Eduard Simon and his wife Lucy visit Berlin and Nazi celebration rallies can be seen outside their window (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 2). By having Eduard and Lucy act indifferent to the events going on in the streets, Reitz highlights the lack of seriousness many Germans and non-Germans associated with Hitler and the Nazis. Even as the Nazis become important to certain characters who use the party as a means to improve their own social status, other characters remain indifferent to the Nazi presence. This indifference is significant because many Germans saw membership with the Nazi Party as a means of raising their position in society, but, as Reitz shows, not everyone was interested in this approach. For example, after joining the Nazi party herself, Lucy tries to get Eduard to join and rise through the ranks but he is more interested in photography instead (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 3). Other characters, such as Maria Simon and her mother-in-law Katharina, also pay little attention to the increasing Nazi presence and rhetoric. Instead they concentrate on village life and raising their families. This prioritization of village life over Nazi influence emphasizes that even though Germans were constantly presented with Nazi rhetoric, not everyone was willing to accept or act on it. In drawing this comparison, Reitz shows that Germany's Nazi past is far more complex than is commonly portrayed in film.

Consequently, Nazi memory must be considered in the context of history and the lived experience of real people.

v. *Nazis and Anti-Semitism*

What is intriguing in *Heimat* is what Reitz decides to omit from his eleven-part history of Germany. Kenneth Barkin, for example, has criticized Reitz's film for its lack of scenes dealing with loans or money lenders (Barkin 1125). While it is true that Reitz rarely depicts the Jewish experience during WWII, there are a few rare instances in which he addresses the state of the Jews in Germany during the 1940s. For example, there is a loan scene in episode three when Eduard and Lucy discuss a loan they received from a Jewish Banker that, to their joy, became null and void after the Nuremberg Laws (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 3). In this scene, Reitz has Eduard astutely remark that, despite no longer owing the money to the Jewish banker, someone will always collect (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 3). This remark from Eduard alludes to the fact that Americans, once they entered Germany after WWII, assumed control of the country and its administrative practices. Thus, while Eduard and Lucy's happiness at the expense of the Jewish banker might be interpreted as flippant, or even anti-Semitic, in light of the severity of the Nuremberg Laws, the fact that Eduard offers such a prescient comment about the future domination of Germany by America hints at a much broader moral: while political vicissitudes might leave one group high, like the now debt-free Eduard and Lucy, and another group low, like the persecuted Jewish banker, these changes tend by their very nature to be impermanent. While at one moment, Germany might seem to be on the verge of winning the largest war in human history, at another moment the nation might find itself under the political domination of its wartime enemies. Viewed in light of this moral, Reitz's general omission of money lenders and his curious inclusion of a single loan scene in episode three no longer seems like a willful ignorance of the seriousness of the Jewish experience during WWII but rather a powerful statement about the dangers of assuming politics can remain static. By pointing to such political vicissitudes, Reitz implicitly condemns static ideologies and, rather than endorsing veiled anti-Semitism, he fosters sympathy for the victims of such political upturns, including both the Jews suffering under the Nazis and the Germans struggling under the Americans.

Overall, there are very few overt references to anti-Semitism in this film and the audience must glean what they can from the subtle implications of scenes like the aforementioned loan scene. The overt references that do exist, however, are memorable. The first of these scenes occurs in the fourth episode when Eduard and a group of young men run around the streets of a town near their village ha-

rassing local Jews, calling out anti-Semitic slurs, and chasing the Jews around (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 4). Eduard and his friends see no harm in this and, ultimately, do not physically harm the Jews. This scene shows that some Germans were not aware of the implications of anti-Semitic rhetoric or its effects. While on one hand, scenes like this might seem to excuse some Germans for their anti-Semitic language, on the other hand, Reitz understood the importance of depicting both the Jews and the Germans as human beings with human flaws. Another example of anti-Semitism in *Heimat* is experienced by the Nazi engineer Otto who comes to the Hunsrueck region during the building of the Autobahn. Otto was a promising young member of the Nazi Party before the war and later comes to fill a romantic void in Maria's family after her husband Paul leaves unexpectedly to America. Unfortunately, Otto has Jewish grandparents, and though he is not considered a Jew in the legal sense of the Nuremberg Laws, he is ultimately removed from the party (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 4). It is important to note that, despite his removal, Otto is brought back into the German war effort towards the end of the war as part of a bomb disposal unit. Otto's experience with the war efforts, thus, emphasizes the indiscriminate nature of the German war machine when the Nazis were in need of troops. By ignoring their own racist distinctions, the Nazis reveal the absurdity of anti-Semitism. The final example of anti-Semitism in the film comes from Alois Wiegand, who subscribes to the Nazis' rhetoric of a strong and pure German race during the war. In the episodes following the war, the rhetoric disseminated by the Nazis is gone. In one of the last episodes, however, Alois expresses anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, yelling that both Jews and Americans are bad for Germany (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 10). Subsequently, his younger family and friends remind him that times have changed and he cannot speak that way anymore. Rather than being severely reprimanded, his family instead quiets him down and moves on. Despite being only a brief scene, Alois' outburst reveals a lot about anti-Semitism in post-war Germany. For instance, in Germany throughout the post-war period, many politicians had been Hitler Youth or even former Nazis. Many of these individuals remained in their positions and their past activities were simply hushed or forgotten by the general public. Alois in the film was simply hushed by his younger family and then they all moved on. The scene with Alois in *Heimat* thus functions as Reitz's criticism of post-war politicians who had Nazi connections and were not reprimanded for their past. Although the references to anti-Semitism in *Heimat* are rare, each of these three major examples subtly criticizes Nazism without stooping to cruel demonization of the thousands of men and women who, for one reason or another, chose to align themselves with the Nazi ideology.

While each of these overt references to anti-Semitism contributes to Reitz's nuanced treatment of the Jewish experience of WWII, there remains one glaring omission in the fifteen hours of *Heimat*: The extermination of six million Jews (Barkin 1124). The Holocaust ultimately defined the history not only of the Third Reich but of Germany as a whole. The closest Reitz's film comes to directly mentioning the Holocaust comes in the form of Wilfried Wiegand, son of Alois, who became an SS officer before the war. During a party, Wilfried is caught by one of the villagers and her son telling his fellow SS officers that the Jews were "going up the chimney," alluding to the mass extermination and cremation of Jews occurring in Nazi death camps (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 7). The chimney refers to the crematoriums in the death camps where the Nazis burned the Jewish dead, launching great billows of smoke from the chimneys. The fact that this passing reference is the only mention of the Holocaust in the entire film has left many puzzled, but the reactions of the villagers to Wilfried's words are not surprising. At first, the woman appears shocked and asks Wilfried to explain who is going up the chimneys. Then, after Wilfried shuts her down and refuses to provide a clear answer, the boy asks her what exactly Wilfried meant by his comment, but again instead of receiving an answer the subject is hushed and dropped (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 7). A great deal of information about the Holocaust and the reactions of German people is communicated in this short scene through facial expression and darkly veiled. The more obvious interpretation is that this scene shows that some Germans were aware of the situation befalling the Jewish populations of Europe, but they chose to not acknowledge it. However, this exchange could also be interpreted as a criticism by Reitz of the politicians, historians, and public who failed to critically discuss the genocide during the post-war years as nothing but a shameful sin in their history. While some brave people, like the young boy, inquired after the truth and promoted meaningful dialogues, others, like Wilfried (and to some extent the mother), sought to dissuade discussion and live under a cloud of constant denial and/or apology.

III. Post-war Discussions

i. Responses to the War.

A discussion regarding the Holocaust did occur during the post-war years, as seen in the American made-for-TV series *Holocaust* (1979). The series aired on many West German TV stations and amassed a large viewership among the German population, many of whom expressed collective guilt at the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. *Holocaust* showed the extremes of the Nazi Final Solution and was intended to show Germans a representation of their tarnished

past (Alf Ludtke, 544-546). Though most viewers agreed that the Nazi period was extremely dark and the Holocaust was a horrible event, many German filmmakers felt that their history was being high-jacked by the United States. As it has been explained previously in this paper, it was characteristic of the NGC to act in response to American made film. In light of this trend, Reitz's *Heimat* can be viewed as a response to the overly simplistic depiction of the horrors of the war portrayed in *Holocaust*. Although *Holocaust* reached a large audience in Germany when it was released, Reitz saw the series as an unwarranted invasion by America into German history and memory. Reitz did not want German history being told by anyone else other than by the Germans who actually experienced it. Reitz himself said that "the difference between a scene that rings true and a scene written by commercial scriptwriters, as in *Holocaust*, is similar to that between 'experience' and 'opinion.'" (qtd. in Elsaesser 272). In Reitz's view, anyone who is not German cannot accurately express the reality of German history, especially to a German audience (Confino 195). In making *Heimat*, Reitz was thus able to offer an alternative to *Holocaust* that accounted for multiple facets of Germany's involvement in the war viewed from the perspective of a German filmmaker instead of foreign American interests.

Reitz, when discussing both German atrocities and sufferings, considers more than just one set of reactions to the war. For example, the character of Anton was placed in the Hitler Youth in the 1930s. This act was a source of pride for Anton's mother Maria and for himself, whereas his grandmother Katharina protests the placement quite vehemently (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 4). These diverse reactions to the Second World War attest to the fact that Reitz considers various perspectives of the war, ranging from those who support the Nazis (like Anton and his mother) to those who vigorously oppose them (like Katharina). However, Reitz never condemns or extolls any single group or opinion. Because he based his story on the real, lived experiences of Germans who survived WWII, his characters are all realistic, breathing portraits and not cheap, American caricatures.

ii. *Germany on the Fronts*

The complexities of the German experience of WWII are emphasized and explored through Reitz's characterization of the Western, Eastern, and Home Fronts. In the East, Anton's experience reveals the brutality endured by many German soldiers, while in the West, Ernst's time as a pilot shows a more glamorous side of war. Meanwhile, on the Home Front, everything seems to continue normally. Each Front captures something different concerning the German experience of WWII, and without all three parts, no complete picture of the war is possible.

In the fifth episode of *Heimat*, both Anton and his brother Ernst are drafted into the German forces, Anton in the Wehrmacht and Ernst in the Luftwaffe. Anton's experience in the war takes viewers to the Eastern Front. Although the region is not widely covered in Western historiography, the Eastern Front is where Germans committed their worst crimes. Anton is part of a film crew documenting events such as battles and executions. One scene in particular shows Anton and his film crew fumbling and arguing over which lens to use while Anton watches a group of people be executed at gunpoint (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 7). This scene is significant because it emphasizes the indifference of some Germans to the atrocities of the war by contrasting the detached reactions of the crew with the shock Anton feels.

Ernst, meanwhile, shows the other side of Germany's involvement in the war. Generally, soldiers on the Western Front were less exposed to atrocities and war crimes than soldiers in the East. Ernst, therefore, was not privy to the horrors of the Eastern Front and instead he is shown as a German ace proudly serving his homeland. While Reitz shows only a brief snippet of the Eastern Front, he shows absolutely nothing of the Western Front. Specifically, he does not show the air battles in which Ernst undoubtedly would have taken part. This absence is significant because following the war many Germans wanted to gloss over the atrocities committed in the East and focus on the less brutal West. While the Western Front was definitely not peaceful, it was certainly the more glamorous of the two fronts, and Reitz's direction emphasizes this aspect of the West. In fact, the only scene in which Ernst is shown flying is during a wedding ceremony in which he drops roses from his plane onto his brother's bride (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 6). The film purposely omits the Western Front and the air battles in exchange for the Eastern Front and the German Home Front. Once again, Reitz does this to highlight not only the atrocities committed by Germans, which many popular productions like *Holocaust* emphasized, but also atrocities witnessed by Germans. He does this in order to show viewers that the German experience of the war is much more complex than previously depicted on film.

In stark contrast to the violence of the Eastern and Western Fronts, Reitz's depiction of the Home Front in Schabbach is one of normalcy. The portrayal of the rural citizens of Schabbach thus depicts a way of life that endures and moves on, even as the bloodiest war in history rages around them. Reitz thus shows a humane side of Germany that persisted even amongst the cruelty and seeming-inhumanity of the Nazi atrocities. Although the war was awful, *Heimat* shows us that there was also peace among the suffering, indicating that German involvement in WWII was far more complicated than merely the dichotomy of shameful complicity ver-

sus jingoistic national pride. Reitz's representation of the Home Front gives viewers a better understanding of the complex forces which were unleashed during the war and, in particular, the realities faced by individuals living under extreme fascism (Kilborn 87). The best example of this can be seen in the proxy wedding between Anton (stationed on the Eastern Front) and his wife, who was home in Schabbach (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 6). Thus, Reitz acknowledges that, although the war affected people both at home and abroad, spaces remained for perseverance and even joy, epitomized in the union of far-off lovers in a happy marriage. Reitz contrasts the wedding scene with a scene involving the SS officer Wilfried Wiegand. When an allied plane is shot down over the village, Wilfried goes to investigate and finds the injured pilot alone in the woods. After an intense stare, Wilfried shoots the pilot without flinching. Wilfried then lies and announces that it was the pilot who shot first and attempted to run away (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 6). This scene illustrates two points. Firstly, it shows that, although the aforementioned spaces for perseverance remained, the war did indeed arrive in Schabbach and that everyone felt its effects. Secondly, it shows Reitz is not afraid to depict the brutality of the crimes committed in the war. By including these scenes in his work, both the positive and the negative, Reitz provides his audience with a holistic portrayal of German history.

iii. American Influence on German Identity

As the war comes to a close in 1945, Reitz shifts the attention of *Heimat* to the American influence on the post-war rebuilding of West Germany. The first appearance of Americans in Schabbach comes in the form of two GI's chewing bubble gum, standing outside the doors of Eduard and Lucy's house. Although this initial portrait of American influence seems innocuous enough, Reitz's portrayal of American soldiers in the subsequent episode serves as a criticism of how German citizens reacted towards American in the post-war period. Although WWII was arguably the most significant period in the history of Germany in the twentieth century, many critics have argued that Reitz actually focuses more on American influence in post-war West Germany than he does Germany during the war itself (Confino 188). This prioritization of depicting American influence instead of the actual war can be partially attributed to the reasons previously mentioned (namely that Reitz felt the need to emphasize events other than the war itself in order to contextualize the Nazi period in history). However, the fact that America was highly influential in rebuilding Germany and, arguably, most of the German population benefited from this rebuilding also helps explain why Reitz chose to focus so heavily on this aspect of post-WWII Germany.

One key element of the American influence in Germany after WWII can be seen in how the Americans are perceived, and often revered, by native Germans. Throughout *Heimat*, American soldiers are depicted occupying the finest lodgings as they oversee Schabbach. In fact, most of the town looks up to them. Eduard and Lucy, having given up their home to the American Military Police, remark to one another about how great the Americans are. They agree that the Americans are far superior to Germans, which is why Germany lost the war (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 8). In this scene, Germans are, thus, shown to blindly subscribe to the new American-backed West German government. Following the end of WWII, Germany was split into western and eastern spheres of influence. The East German government was backed and supported by the Soviet Union, while the West German government was backed by the French, the British, and especially the American allies. This support by Germans for the new largely American government was similar to how many Germans blindly supported the Nazis when they came to power in the 1930s. There are very few examples in *Heimat* of resistance to the Nazis, just acceptance; the same is shown here when the Americans enter Germany and help set up a new government. Evidently, Reitz believed that Germans did not learn anything from their past about letting others make decisions for them.

Although many of the characters in *Heimat* reinforce this position, there are a few who complicate any overly simplistic characterization of Reitz's claim that Germans did not learn much from their experience with Nazism. On one hand, Reitz presents characters who seem to learn very little from their mistakes, such as the former SS Officer Wilfried Wiegand. After the war, he was, like many Nazi and SS officials, put into re-education camps before being allowed to re-integrate into German life and society. Though we are not shown his character again, we are told that he got a job working in the government in the agricultural department establishing large cash crop¹ farms in Schabbach with modern technology. Wilfried's transition is described by Dagmar Stern as jumping "on the next bandwagon, the economic miracle." (Stern 13). Wilfried's bandwagon behaviour is a critique of the German citizens who, instead of learning from their mistakes, continued to follow blindly the new force driving their country. In addition to criticizing American influence, Reitz is, thus, condemning certain German citizens' behaviour after the war, especially in their rebuilding efforts and their willingness to relinquish control of Germany to the Allied powers.

On the other hand, there are several characters in *Heimat* who do learn from the past to some degree. For example, Wilfried's open-arm approach to American influence is contrasted with Anton's German pride after the latter returns home

to Schabbach after spending the duration of the war in a Soviet prisoner of war (POW) camp. Anton then sets up an optics manufacturing operation in the village, employing Germans and contributing to the German economy (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 8). By contributing to the rebuilding of the country, Anton finds a way to once again take pride in being German. Reitz also contrasts Anton with Anton's father, Paul Simon, who returns to Schabbach after the war having become quite wealthy doing business in America and eventually selling his company to a large corporation. Paul urges Anton to sell his company in the same manner because he believes his son is headed towards bankruptcy (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 9). Although Anton might have benefited financially by following his father's example, the act of selling would have compromised Anton as an image of German pride. Consequently, Anton refuses to sell and manages to benefit both financially and personally as an independent business owner, showing that perhaps more Germans should have refused American influence in the post-war years in order to reinstall a sense of German national pride. Anton, thus, serves as a post-war warning and promise to Germans. In a speech he gives to the citizens of Schabbach, he proclaims that they will never again be fooled by people like the Nazis (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 10). Reitz uses Anton's speech as a reminder that Germans were deceived by the Nazis and the Americans. While the Nazis' deception was based on obvious propaganda and manipulation, the Americans deceived the German populace through a genuine desire to help rebuild and restore order. Though they did rebuild and restore, Americans also brought their brand of economics and North American identity that clashed with Germany's ideals.

Another example of national pride similar to that of Anton's comes from Ernst. Ernst flew in the German air force during WWII and was shot down over France, where he spent time in a POW camp. The fact that Ernst is a pilot is significant because Germany received numerous stipulations from the Allies following the war, including a ban on flight for one hundred years. The Allies felt this ban was necessary in order to mitigate the potential threat posed by the German air force. Prior to the ban, Ernst loved flying planes, but because of Allies' conditions he had to refrain from doing so. Ernst characterized this ban on flying as one of the worst crimes the Allies could have imposed on Germany because the ban made him feel unsure of his identity as a German (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 9). Not only was flying a significant aspect of his personal identity, the freedom and dignity associated with flight informed Ernst's understanding of German identity, without which he was lost. Later, however, Ernst is allowed to fly a helicopter for his business and he feels that his sense of pride and national identity are somewhat restored. Like Anton, he becomes involved in business for the benefit of Germany.

Thus, through his depiction of Ernst, Reitz shows that German identity was just as devastated by the post-war period as its industry and economy. Reitz stops just short of absolute pessimism regarding American influence, however, since both Anton and Ernst eventually overcome the fracturing of German identity and act to reclaim some notion of German pride.

The most complicated character in regards to German identity and American influence is Herman. Herman is the child of Maria Simon and Otto, the man who filled Paul's place when Paul left for America. Herman is a significant character because many Germans in 1984 could relate to him; he was born just before the war, was raised through the war and post-war period, and struggles the most of any character to find a sense of belonging in Germany. On one hand, he rejects his older family by leaving to study music and art in the city against their wishes. On the other hand, while his new life in the city is very different from his family's traditional, rural ways, he remains restless and unsatisfied with his life (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 10). Herman serves as an example of how young Germans growing up in the post-war period questioned the narrative of their past and the choices made by the previous generation but still struggle to forge a new identity and a new sense of German pride. Germans born during the war are meant to relate to Herman in order to promote questioning of the past and to inspire hope for the future. Reitz believed that, through this combination of questioning and hopefulness, Germans could not only come to a better understanding of what their country did during the war but also how these actions affected the country in the post-war years. As always, Reitz's goal is to help Germans understand and contextualize WWII in the grand scheme of German history and culture.

In *Heimat*, hope for the future comes from Herman and his half-brother Ernst, who, despite being emotionally and spiritually lost, are able to reconcile the past and the present. Reitz suggests it is important for Germans to come to terms with their past or else said past will be ignored, as the lessons of the First World War were in Schabbach (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 10). After studying music, Herman looks into new technology such as sound boards and synthesizers. This exploration brings him into contact with Paul Simon (back from America) who acts as a father figure and helps Herman integrate new technologies and old music (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 10). This relationship between Herman and Ernst, as well as between music and technology, represents a coming together of the old German world and the new – of being comfortable enough with their past to embrace it in a new context. Reitz studied cinema and reproduced his past through *Heimat* because he was comfortable talking about the war as part of his heritage, just like Herman becomes comfortable expressing his musical heritage through modern

technology. Ernst also comes to terms with his past in the final episode of *Heimat*. This is illustrated when he picks up an old picture of Hitler that hung in his home during in the war and tosses it away unceremoniously, taking a moment only to remark on its poor quality (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 11). Ernst has no trouble looking at a picture of Hitler or remembering the things that Hitler had done. He is comfortable enough with his past that he can put it down and move forward.

iv. Authenticity and Reception

The ending of *Heimat* is perplexing, leaving audiences with a heaven-like dream sequence that has divided critics. Schabbach is dark at night and there is an eerie fog in the streets. The characters from the series, both alive and dead, can all be seen wandering the streets aimless and expressionless. The scene makes it appear that, despite all that these characters have been through, they are still lost and unable to come to terms with their tumultuous past. While the film does not explicitly state or show that this is a 'dream sequence' per se, the characters involved have all either passed away or are depicted as their younger selves, imparting an unreal quality (Reitz, *Heimat* Episode 11). In the end, the viewers are left in a state of confusion, much like the German population after WWII. Germany memory is complex and even decades after the war, Germans are still uncertain as to how to place the WWII period among their country's history.

As a member of the NGC, Reitz intended to use *Heimat* as an inspiration for Germans to reflect on their perceptions of the war. Whether or not he succeeded in getting Germans to reconsider their perspective is unclear; however, approximately twenty-five million West German citizens watched at least one episode of *Heimat* when it aired on TV and an average of nine million watched each episode (Kaes 163). Clearly, Germans were at least interested in what Reitz had to say about German history and the message of *Heimat* appealed to the majority of the German public. The genius of *Heimat*, argues Miriam Hansen, was not the film's analysis of German identity and memory of the war but rather how it was received by the general public (Hansen 3). Hansen's argument is not surprising considering film has always been powerful media in Germany for fostering real, practical action, as evidenced by the pre, interwar and post-war periods when politicians and propagandists alike used film to influence the citizenry (Anton Kaes 4). *Heimat* could easily have gone down in history as merely the latest in a long list of well-directed, thoughtful films that were largely ignored by the general population. The fact that it reached a broader audience and resulted in important dialogue attests to not only the strength of the film but also the unique geopolitical circumstances into which it was released.

Heimat was met with an extremely wide viewership not only in Germany but also in major American cities and at international festivals such as the Venice Film Festival and the Catalonia Film Festival (163). Elsaesser attributes the success of the film to Reitz's ability to combine first-person perspective (story told from the perspective of a main character) with narrational (story told from an outside perspective) methods of identification (273). This combination means that Reitz was able to find a healthy balance between the authentic, realistic story and character-driven narrative in order to display both history and memory. The film was well received in terms of both of these fronts – history and memory – spurring debate and encouraging the publication of new scholarly works on the subject of German wartime memory. Recent scholarship from German historians continues to grapple with German memory of the war and its relation to *Heimat* (Robert Moeller). This continued study attests to the fact that films like Reitz's *Heimat* spurred discussion regarding German wartime memory and that scholarly understanding of German memory of the war continues to progress. This scholarly interest also goes to show that the issue of German depictions of WWII and wartime memory still has not been resolved. Saul Friedlander argued in 1990 that “the past is too present” (98). Friedlander suggests that we may need to leave more time between us and WWII before discussing it in an effective manner. At the same time, though, there is no “right” way to determine exactly how much time is required before such a discussion German wartime memory can take place. Perhaps now is exactly the right time to tackle these difficult issues, and perhaps *Heimat* is exactly the right film with which to begin.

The critic Hagen Schulze has argued that historical events like the Third Reich and the Holocaust can be compared to, and related to, other instances in world history in terms of how they were orchestrated, how bystanders reacted to them, and how they have been remembered. Through this comparison, Schulze argues that all cases of genocide can be understood in a more contextual and critical manner (Schulze 94). One way of doing this is through film. Members of the NGC tried to paint a picture of Germany that not only showed the war but showed it from a German perspective. Reitz's *Heimat* can, thus, be considered as an attempt to retell the past without isolating or alienating the Nazi Period. Reitz accomplishes this by showing German history from 1919 to 1984 as a continuous entity. There is no doubt that the crimes committed by the Nazis are, in some respect, incomparable to other historical events, but then again all events in history are singular and unique to their particular moment. Therefore, Schulze argues, all events must be included in history (Schulze 94). This is one view as to why *Heimat* accounts for such a long time-span and engages with many aspects of German

history.

IV. Conclusion

By focusing on and romanticizing rural life in Germany, Reitz makes it clear that he believes “history can only be resurrected at the local or vernacular level” (Barkin 1124). Reitz’s stance highlights the difference between Hollywood directors trying to tell the history of Germans experiencing the war versus Germans who actually did experience the war. Reitz reconnects Germans with the Nazi past by bringing to the screen what Germans remembered of their past and how they dealt with their memories. In doing so, Reitz helped restore people’s faith in their country and their personal identity. Germans who were old enough to remember the war and felt shame in their nationality were more proud after seeing *Heimat* (Angier 34). *Heimat* fulfilled not only the aims of the NGC by reclaiming German history but also Reitz’s personal objective of giving Germans a different way to remember the war. This alternative helped free people from a collective guilt that had been imposed on them because of the Holocaust.

Film is a diverse medium that is able to deal with taboo discussion topics such as German wartime memory. However, Caryl Flinn reminds us that we should remain cautious and realize that “media representations are allegorical remnants that don’t make a smooth link to the past.” (25). Thus, even a film as steeped in reality as *Heimat* cannot do absolute justice to its topic. What makes Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat* stand out among other films of the NGC is its ability to fit the Nazi period into the wider scope of German history and to thereby address, “what it means to be German.” (Knight 72). *Heimat* accomplishes this by focusing on the lives of a rural family and their struggles to survive the changing atmosphere of the war and post-war rebuilding phase in Germany. Reitz’s examination of the post-war period suggests that understanding the process of rebuilding that took place after the war is an essential component to understanding the memory of WWII and Reitz argues that the Germans did not appropriately handle their memory of the war, resulting in the fragmented and incomplete memory/identity that continues to plague contemporary German media and scholarship.

In spite of Reitz’s best efforts, Germans and historians still have not been able to come to a clear consensus on how to address and remember the German experience of the Second World War. Though it was released in 1984, *Heimat* continues to provide an example of how to go about addressing the war and German memory. Instead of arguing over the uniqueness of the crimes in relation to other examples of fascism and genocide, focus, as Reitz saw it, should be placed on finding how this tumultuous period fits into German wartime memory. Despite

this controversial position, Reitz offered an effective opening for critical discussion. Only through critical discussion and open minds can German citizens move forward in their understanding of their past and how that past informs their identity.

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