Young German *Heimatfilm*: Negotiations of a Powerful Myth

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The theme of *Heimat* which can be imperfectly translated as home or homeland forms an inherent part of German filmmaking.\(^1\) In addition to its heyday in post WW II genre films and in the context of the New German Cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s, *Heimat* has virtually always been present in German audiovisual production, above all in television series. In the 2000s, *Heimat* is also back on the big screen: Conventionally narrated productions have appeared alongside deeply experimental works characterised by a careful attention to style. At the same time, overly harmonious images contrast with existential depictions of the theme. For example, the coming of age films BESTE ZEIT and BESTE GEÜND tell of friendship and longing in the Bavarian province, of leaving and staying behind, whereas the desperate protagonist in WINTERREISE can only come home in the form of *Heimat*’s very antithesis, the *Fremde*, or the foreign. BACHING treats homecoming through questions of death, guilt and belonging, while the restaurant portrayed in SOUL KITCHEN offers stability and life prospects for some Hamburgers in their early thirties. HIERNKL is the name of a lonely homestead in the foothills of the Alps where family conflicts and lifelong illusions come to the surface after the protagonist’s homecoming. Despite all the variations in narrative and aesthetic styles, these young German *Heimatfilme*\(^2\) share an eminent concern with the dynamics of leaving and return, of belonging and exclusion, of self and other.

This essay addresses the above-mentioned films as exponents of young German film in the 2000s, characterised by their branding as *Heimatfilme* in press releases, trailers, making-ofs and on DVD casings, while the discourse in film reviews, editorials and interviews with the filmmakers further entrenches the label. Yet many other contemporary German films not so labelled also deal with questions of *Heimat*, pointing to the general relevance of *Heimat* discourse in today’s Germany. In the Berlin Republic, the concept has lost the connotations of provincial, narrow-minded and suspiciously ideological attitudes (*Heimattümelei*) with which it had been so closely related since the left wing movements of the 1960s. Instead, *Heimat* is now at the heart of social life and discourse in Germany: Regional food and holidaying in the homeland are booming sectors,

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\(^1\) I thank Claire Sutherland for careful proofreading of this manuscript and for many fruitful suggestions.

\(^2\) The term refers to works created during the decade of the 2000s by comparatively young directors born around 1970, mostly graduates from film schools who were making their debut or second film and consider themselves as auteurs or filmmakers. Moreover, the attribute young (instead of new) distinguishes them from earlier cinematic *Heimat* phenomena, which were considered new on their release.
the Green Party has held a conference dedicated to the theme of *Heimat*³, in the German state of Thuringia Christian Democrats rhetorically defended their *Heimat* against so-called West German aliens during the 2009 election campaign⁴ and a successful Berlin advertising agency is named “Heimat”.⁵ As an attractive idea and a “floating signifier”⁶, *Heimat* has proved to be applicable to many, even contradictory concerns. If we assume that an awareness of continuous change has become part of everyday experience and that the globalised world in its ubiquity is accompanied by a loss of sense of belonging, by fragmentation, disorientation and homelessness, then filmic narratives of the *Heimat* can be understood as negotiating the ambiguous relationship between continuity and transformation, and channelling contemporary social concerns about the localisation of the self as an individual as well as a cultural being. This article thus sets out from the premise, supported by the school of New Historicism amongst others, that cultural texts and their contexts are characterised by complex exchanges and circulations.⁷ In this sense the reading of selected films permits insights into contemporary conceptions of place, identity, community and the current relevance of the *Heimat* myth. The contemporary cinematic wave is related to the history of this persistent and pervasive myth and located within the tradition of the *Heimatfilm*, “Germany’s only indigenous and historically most enduring genre.”⁸

**Heimat** – the German myth from a historical perspective

In individual experience and everyday life, *Heimat* denotes first of all the place where one was born, grew up, and realises a sense of self; where one lives and has family and friends. It is related to a house, a home town, a landscape, a region, a country. Accordingly, it appears to be an “inconspicuous, almost neutral term”⁹, Peter Blickle writes, and is often accepted as an unquestioned reality. In the triad of space, time and identity, *Heimat* thus refers to a clearly delimited place perceived as straightforward, as well as to a feeling of belonging, familiarity and immediacy.¹⁰ *Heimat* conceptions are linked to material places but transcend a mere geographical localisation as territoriality is always bound up with individual experiences, with self positioning within or outside a community, with identity and alterity. The uniqueness and appeal of *Heimat* perceived as a typical German phenomenon is often underlined by its supposed untranslatability – an assumption Blickle has falsified with respect to Slavic languages and Russian.¹¹

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*.
⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, 141.
Indeed, an understanding of the power of *Heimat* and its status as a persistent German myth requires a closer look at the concept’s history.

From medieval times until the late 18th century, *Heimat* denotes a property in the sense of a farmstead (*Haus und Hof*) and legal title including the right of abode (*Heimatrecht*).\(^{12}\) In the course of industrialisation, migration processes and the weakening of family ties and traditional kinship systems, this concrete dimension has gradually been replaced by more emotional associations. The flourishing *Heimat* literature and *Heimat* art of the 19th century evoke provincial and archaic communities rooted in a mythical, ahistoric time and redolent of order, protection and continuity. In the wake of Romanticism, *Heimat* comes to allude to a universal *locus amoenus*, an imaginary ideal providing a space of shelter from the threats of modernity, alienation and dislocation.\(^{13}\) In this context, *Heimat* becomes a feminised space associated with the mother’s womb and native landscapes that provides, following Doreen Massey, “stasis, nostalgia and [...] enclosed security.”\(^{14}\) Accordingly, it refers to a female ideal imagined by men.\(^{15}\) Furthermore, the religious-mythical idea of *Heimat* in heaven, a conception that is already manifest in pre-industrial times, becomes prominent through Romanticism. In the context of the mid-19th century’s rising patriotism and the creation of the German *Reich* in 1871, *Heimat* also gains a political dimension. While local communities lose both their physical isolation and their political independence, *Heimat* appears as an attempt to understand and to reshape German localities and regionalities. “Like most ‘traditions’ of dubious antiquity, the modern idea of *Heimat* originated in a period of rapid social transformation”\(^{16}\), Eric Hobsbawm states. He considers *Heimat* to fall into the category of invented traditions “establishing or symbolising social cohesion or the memberships in groups, real or artificial.”\(^{17}\) By depicting fatherland, place of birth, common language, traditions and *Volk* as unifying elements, *Heimat* is perceived as something natural, that is, it becomes a *naturalised* concept. On a political level, however, this linkage creates a new mythology about the region’s contribution to German nationhood and about a Germanness encompassing the diverse meanings of *Heimat*.\(^{18}\)

*Heimat*’s political instrumentalisation becomes obvious in the aggressive nationalism at the turn of the 20th century and especially in the National-Socialist ideology of blood and soil. Third Reich propaganda turned *Heimat* into a fighting word (*Heimatfront*) aiming to mobilise the *Volk*, or people, against domestic and outside threats. The *Bergfilm*, or mountain film, of the 1930s, *Heimattfilm*’s forerunner, combines the cult of mountain life and *völkisch*-national ideas, while

\(^{14}\) Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, Gender*, 167.
\(^{15}\) For a fruitful discussion about the gendered space of *Heimat* which originates during the 18th and above all the 19th century, see Peter Blickle’s monograph *Heimat. A Critical Theory*, especially the chapter on "Heimat and the Feminine", 81–111.
\(^{16}\) Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction", 9.
\(^{17}\) Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction", 9.
the productions released after the outbreak of WW II widely banish the reality of Nazi Germany and the war from screens and instead put emphasis on peasant life by alluding to the myth of the ordinary people.\textsuperscript{19} These productions introduce the motifs of \textit{Heimat} literature into the filmic medium and shape the images that also characterise the 1950s film genre.\textsuperscript{20} In the immediate post WW II era, the idea of \textit{Heimat} is linked to the experience of loss of more than twelve million Germans, known as \textit{Vertriebene}, who were displaced from the former eastern territories of the \textit{Reich}. Contemporary concerns with expulsion and (re-)integration become manifest in many of the more than three hundred \textit{Heimatfilme} that were produced during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{21} This is particularly true for the \textit{Vertriebenenfilme} as Johannes von Moltke shows with respect to the 1951 version of \textit{GRÜN IST DIE HEIDÊ}. Set far away from the destroyed cities in picturesque rural landscapes like the Black Forest, the Luneburg Heath or the Bavarian mountains, the \textit{Heimatfilme} made during the chancellorships of Konrad Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard present idyllic images of a primordial countryside. Nevertheless, the post war genre does deal with questions of modernisation, social change and consumerism; it “affords the positive resolution of contemporary social and ideological concerns about territory and identity.”\textsuperscript{22}

From the mid-1960s, \textit{Heimat} is widely taboo in social discourse. Bernhard Schlink attributes an “intellectual feeling of placelessness” to the post war left-wing youth in West Germany, for whom the \textit{Heimat} tended to evoke “national limitations and narrow-mindedness”\textsuperscript{23}. The New German Cinema of the 1960s and early 1970s unmask\textit{s} \textit{Heimat} as a site of bigotry and aggressive intolerance. \textit{Anti-Heimatfilme} like \textit{JAGDSZENEN AUS NIEDERBAYERN} dissect social exclusion mechanisms from a deeply critical perspective and deconstruct the myth of community and integrity associated with the concept. Many of these films are parables set in the past and calling for a coming to terms with the national socialist dictatorship. Often, the \textit{Anti-Heimatfilme} allude to America as an idealised other that stands for breadth, openness and universalism. Following on from this, a new consciousness of \textit{Heimat} originates in the context of the social movements of the late 1970s and the 1980s. In the face of post-industrial threats and alienation, the pursuit of an authentic way of life becomes revalorised.\textsuperscript{24} The term is becoming ever less taboo, and its reactionary connotations are disappearing as protecting and defending the \textit{Heimat} is seen again as an effort “to maintain community against the economic, political and cultural forces that would scatter it.”\textsuperscript{25} Correspondingly, contemporary filmic manifestations of \textit{Heimat} are dominated by authenticity-driven productions and heritage films. The monumental television series \textit{HEIMAT} broadcast in the early 1980s – a family saga which proved to be highly successful – focuses on everyday history and shifts to a subjective, depoliticised understanding of \textit{Heimat}.

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\textsuperscript{19} Manuela Fiedler, \textit{Heimat im deutschen Film}, 21 f, 34.
\textsuperscript{20} Manuela Fiedler, \textit{Heimat im deutschen Film}, 23.
\textsuperscript{21} Florentine Strzelczyk, \textit{Un-Heimliche Heimat}, 51.
\textsuperscript{22} Johannes von Moltke, \textit{No Place like Home}, 82.
\textsuperscript{23} Bernhard Schlink, \textit{Heimat als Utopie}, 15. \textit{All translations are my own.}
\textsuperscript{24} Florentine Strzelczyk, \textit{Un-Heimliche Heimat}, 49.
\textsuperscript{25} Celia Applegate, \textit{A Nation of Provincials}, 6.
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In individual experience, in social and political discourse as well as in the arts, literature and film, *Heimat* usually comes into play when real or imagined forces are seen to jeopardise it. It is then perceived as an expression of loss, distance and reflection, for “what is self-evident is only experienced at a distance.” The magic of *Heimat* does not result from its accessibility or its routine aspects, but from something unfulfilled or even something unfulfillable. It lies in hopes and desires, in childhood memories and longing for other irretrievable past times. Schlink’s conclusion that “the true feeling of Heimat is Heimweh,” or nostalgia, indicates both the concept’s utopian character and the crucial importance of time for any experience of Heimat. Ernst Bloch regarded Heimat as the very essence of his “Principle of Hope” and described its magical allure as “something that appears to all in their childhood and yet in which none have dwelt.” To sum up at this point, it can be said that *Heimat* is constituted within the dynamics of memories and projections, an invented past and visions about the future. It is related to spatial and temporal experiences, identity processes and feelings of belonging, while its dialectic nature requires some sort of alterity, however designed or imagined, against which it can be defined. As a highly polysemic term, *Heimat* always and necessarily escapes from an absolute definition beyond subjectivities and socio-historical contextualisation. By offering imaginary spaces on individual and collective levels, it can be regarded as a myth about the possibility of identity and community in the face of fragmentation, alienation and disintegration – a key issue in German audiovisual productions of the 2000s.

**Young German Heimatfilm**

German filmmaking undergoes a fundamental change by the end of the 20th century. Films made in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, with the romantic comedy (*Beziehungskomödie*) as their most emblematic exponent, are characterised by a depoliticised attitude and an absence of local particularities; Eric Rentschler speaks of a “cinema of consensus.” The shift to small-scale stories about unpretentious everyday life begins in the mid-1990s, with more and more films being made by young directors, often graduates from film schools who rely on conceptions of auteurism. Thomas Koebner asserts that this young German Film is “above all interested in an ‘ethnography of the home country’, a discovery of one’s own way of life” and observes “a rediscovery of the real, an accentuation of the focus on self and other.” In the first decade of the 21st century, many films deal with the interplay of the local and the global, questions of identity, fragmentation and disorientation while being

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28 Berhard Schlink, *Heimat als Utopie*, 32.
29 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1628.
30 Eric Rentschler, “From the New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus”.
31 Margit Fröhlich, *Der nächste Film ist immer der schwerste*.
32 Thomas Koebner, “Deutscher Film heute”, 379.
33 Thomas Koebner, “Tendenzen des europäischen Films”, 512.
strongly attached to a unique and specific setting, to meaningful rural or urban landscapes. Having moved far beyond the productions labelled as *Heimatfilme*, *Heimat* is now negotiated through multifarious, sometimes contradictory conceptions: As a construction of the past for present purposes in *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie* productions like *SONNENALLEE*, *GOOD BYE*, *LENIN* or *HERMANN* as well as in “national feel-good films”34 like *DER ROTE BARON*, *DIE GUSTLOFF* or *NORDWAND*, which by amalgamating *Heimat* and the national past present simplistic and conciliatory interpretations of German history. The multiplicity of themes surrounding *Heimat* in the 2000s also includes Berlin School films like *YELLA* or *DIE INNERE SICHERHEIT* that centre on the quest for identity and questions of belonging, while *LICHTER* and *FREMDE HAUT* tell of the impossibility of finding a new *Heimat* in the age of global migration and displacement. The young German *Heimatfilme*, which enjoy – at least partly – considerable critical and popular acclaim,35 are primarily set in rural Bavaria, including *DIE SCHEINHEILIGEN*, *DER ARCHITEKT* and the films discussed below. One exception is *SOUL KITCHEN*, set in Hamburg and a rare example of the city *Heimatfilm*. Furthermore, Eastern German provinces have become a common setting for contemporary *Heimatfilme*: In *MARIA AM WASSE*, a young man declared dead as a boy returns to his hometown to reclaim his identity while three outsiders manage to construct their own *Heimat* in *ALLE ALLE*. The subjectivity of *Heimat* which is characteristic of all these productions becomes obvious in two ways: On the one hand, the films are usually set in the director’s individual *Heimat*, as demonstrated in the ones discussed here. On the other hand, the engagement with the concept is highly diverse. This is in contrast to the former waves of *Heimatfilme*, each of which represented a rather coherent group with regard to their themes, aesthetics and impetus. The reading of selected films in this article sheds light on the affirmation and deconstruction of the *Heimat* myth and relates these two mayor tendencies evident in the young *Heimatfilm* to former manifestations of the genre.

**Home sweet home and the quest for inclusion: BESTE ZEIT, BESTE GEGEND, BACHING**

*BESTE ZEIT* and *BESTE GEGEND* are the first two films of a still unfinished trilogy by Marcus H. Rosenmüller about two girls’ friendship in the Bavarian province. Within the dynamics of leaving and staying behind, this coming of age story

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34 Georg Seeßlen, *Neue Heimat, alte Helden*, 27.

35 HIERANKL was awarded the Adolf-Grimme-Preis in Gold, the Förderpreis Deutscher Film (best director, best actress) and the Bayerische Filmpreis (best actress). WER FRÜHER STIRBT, IST LÄNGER TOT won the Deutsche Filmpreis (best director, best script, best film music), the Bayrische Filmpreis (best film, best director) and the Förderpreis Deutscher Film. SOUL KITCHEN was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival and was nominated for further prizes as the Deutsche Filmpreis and the People’s Choice Award in the European Film Awards. Close to two million filmgoers in Germany and Austria saw WER FRÜHER STIRBT, IST LÄNGER TOT, whilst half a million people had seen SOUL KITCHEN only ten days after its release and a million by February 2010, six weeks after its release.
centres on the relationship between adolescent identity and *Heimat*. The teenagers’ quest for freedom and self-determination becomes manifest in the forbidden car rides they undertake by night in order to share a beer under the starry sky, as well as in Kati’s conflicts with her father in which she insists upon taking her own decisions. Kati and Jo’s itchy feet are symbolised through the many views of the deep blue sky where planes pass by, and are concretised by Kati’s plans to spend a school year in the United States. These yearnings are embedded in the countryside of the *Dachauer Land*. Meadows, forests, agricultural areas, Kati’s parents’ farm are topoi that stand for intimacy and a feeling of security, for the great value of the girls’ friendship and their rootedness. Their hometown Tandern and its lovely surroundings are consistently shown as an autarkic place where men and nature are integrated and where family ties and friendship – the core of human community – form an idyllic geographical unity. Panoramic high angle shots emphasise the setting’s simplicity, while slow, contemplative camera shots suggest a natural linearity and continuity, thereby conveying an impression of integrity and recalling the *Heimat* images of the 1950s.

The Bavarian dialect the characters speak without exception plays a crucial role in the film: As the epitome of regional anchoring, of geographical and social attachment, it answers for the film’s authenticity. *Heimat* appears as a natural, taken for granted entity, with the *Heimatgefühl*, or feeling of *Heimat*, being entirely rooted in the here and now. In this manner, *Heimat* represents an idealised landscape, a classic *locus amoenus* suggesting that after all and despite all its peculiarities, provincial Bavaria promises something truly good, that is attachment and anchoring. It is not surprising at all that Kati already feels homesick while thinking and talking about spending a year abroad: Yearning and nostalgia, *Fernweh* and *Heimweh* are just two sides of a coin. The other against which *Heimat* is intrinsically defined remains entirely abstract in this film, an imagined space of longing. The planes and the blue sky thus serve as a non-binding surface projection, while the *Heimat* is close and real, a physically and emotionally perceivable place.

In *BESTE GEGEND*, the protagonists want to take a trip around the world after graduating from school. After crossing the Brenner Pass into Italy, however, they already decide to return because of Kati’s grandfather’s poor health. While Jo cannot wait to leave again, Kati proves to be more hesitant. Regarding the film’s gender constructions, Maria Regina Irchenhauser reveals that Jo is taking a “masculinely connoted part” and draws parallels to the figure of the woman from the city, an archetype of the 1950s genre characterised as a person with initiative. For Jo, the film’s eponymous best region cannot fulfil its promise any more. The feeling of knowing everything at home, the very familiarity turns out to be an oppressive narrowness for her. While talking about these feelings to globetrotter Lugge, who has just stopped over in his home town and is beginning a relationship with Kati, a snake passes in the foreground. Here, a parallel to “the expulsion from Paradise” which director Rosenmüller describes in an interview.

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37 Marcus H. Rosenmüller, “Vertreibung aus dem Paradies”.
is made manifest. When Jo and Lugge go for a swim in a lonely lake, the fall from grace refers less to a potential love affair between them and more to their shared desire for leaving home. While Jo becomes more and more alienated from her Heimat, Kati, to whom Irchenhauser attributes a “femininely connoted part”, appears more attached to her native region than ever. She accompanies her dying grandfather on his last journey by bringing him to the place where, as a young man, he used to meet his future and meanwhile deceased wife. When he dies sitting under an old tree and with a smile on his lips, the film leaves no doubt that he comes home forever. Kati’s hesitation to leave again is thus shown as a positively connoted persistence, a strong emotional attachment, a natural connection. In a word, it indicates Heimatverbundenheit, or a bond with the Heimat.

The delimitation of self/other, or Eigenes/Anderes, on which Heimat intrinsically relies, is not constructed through a sense of outside menace in these films, but rather through adolescent identification processes. Self and other, Heimat and Fremde are negotiated within the dynamics of social relationships and belonging on the one hand, and the quest for freedom and fulfilled longings on the other. The value of Heimat becomes manifest when Kati decides not to leave in the first film and when Jo finally does leave for South Africa in the second film: Only when its loss is at stake is Heimat perceived as such. The expulsion from Paradise marks the second film not only in terms of space but also of time, since the end of school indicates dramatic future changes. BESTE ZEIT and BESTE GESELD both evidence a deeply nostalgic conception of Heimat, emphasised by the narrative’s setting in the mid-1990s, the very last years before mobile communication has come to penetrate everyday life and definitively changed the perception of place. Like in WER FRÜHER STIRBT, IST LÄNGER TOT and RÄUBER KNEIßL, two other Heimatfilme by Rosenmüller, these coming of age films are positive portrayals of the Bavarian Heimat. By showing Heimat as something precious to be defended against the threat of modernity, the BESTE films clearly recall the post-war genre.

Images of integrity and continuity also predominate in Matthias Kiefersauer’s film BACHING. After three years of involuntary exile in Berlin, thirty-something Benedikt returns to his small Bavarian hometown of Baching, where he hopes to be able to reintegrate into the local community. But things are complicated: He was responsible for a drunk driving car accident in which a small girl died. Everyone in town is still aware of the accident, especially the girl’s grieving parents who have since separated. Benedikt’s ex-girlfriend Annette is now married to his brother Robert and has a child with him; his best friend Laura, who was in the car with him and Robert when the accident occurred, has not managed to overcome her trauma and is having casual love affairs. Kiefersauer’s film addresses Heimat through questions of guilt, atonement and forgiveness, for the protagonist is convinced that Baching is the only place where he can feel at home again. Different characters in the film cite German author and emigrant Erich Kästner; “People can be forced to leave their Heimat, but Heimat cannot be taken from people”. The idea of natural belonging and boundedness referred to in

38 Maria Regina Irchenhauser, Heimat im Spannungsfeld Globalisierung, 48.
the quote becomes even more manifest than in the BESTE films, for Benedikt’s *Heimat* is definitively without alternatives. Berlin remains just a faraway place that becomes manifest only through a car number plate and the protagonist’s desperate exclamation that “Berlin is crap and Baching is crap, too”. The German capital serves as an abstraction for everything that is alienated.

Small town Baching, in contrast, appears as a pure, internally homogeneous and authentic community that despite “high end coffee dispensers and Ben Folds [a US singer-songwriter] in the CD rack” as director Kiefersauer puts it, is not subverted by any foreign influences which could threaten its authenticity. In this context, identity is imagined in terms of an idealised wholeness and plenitude, boundedness and containment. In BACHING, Benedikt’s *Heimat* and consequently his wellbeing and happiness are not being threatened by external forces of disintegration or dissolution but by a fatal personal fault. He takes responsibility for his actions but cannot change anything. Moreover, he depends upon those community members who suffered most from his deeds – the parents who lost their child. While the mother who has found a new partner refuses any contact, the father, Bernhard, is trying sincerely to forgive him. His rapprochement to Benedikt can be seen as a coming to terms, as he longs for integrity and wholeness, too. This longing becomes obvious with his involvement in the *Heimatverein*, or local community association, where he works on local history. Thereby, the film clearly valorises Bernhard’s constancy and boundedness: He contributes to the community, cares for its roots and continuity, and even tries to overcome his personal suffering. In this way, BACHING alludes to a pre-modern conception of trust and security rooted in kinship systems, in local community and the continuity of tradition. *Heimat* here coincides with the everyday experience of being accepted as a person and integrated in a community; “*Heimat* is shared identity”, Blickle pronounces. Accordingly, it is depicted as a universal and natural form of belonging based on the occidental ideology of a binary root-tree-structure that, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, privileges territoriality and settledness over mobility and diversity.

A place of suffering: HIERANKL and WINTERREISE

Director Hans Steinbichler repeatedly describes *Heimat* as “a place of suffering.” In his debut film HIERANKL, thirty year old Lene returns to her parents’ lonesome homestead to celebrate her father Lukas’ birthday. After years of absence she begins to search for the *Heimat* of her childhood and youth, the formerly intimate places recalling past times and painful memories of the constant conflict with her mother Rosemarie. Lene shares the feeling of both being at home and being a stranger in Hierankl with Goetz, an old friend of her parents who also arrives unexpectedly. Against her mother’s will, she begins a

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39 Iris Buchheim et. al., *Ein Genre kehrt zurück.*
42 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus*.
43 Hans Steinbichler, “Heimat ist der Ort, wo es schmerzhaft sein kann.”
love affair with him. The weekend in the idyllic alpine foothills is pervaded with mistrust, conflict and secrets and ends with Rosemarie revealing that she was living a lie, for Goetz is Lene’s biological father.

By vividly showing how the protagonist is re-discovering her old Heimat – the old room where nothing seems to have changed, the tree house and the wood – and by connecting it to her feelings, yearnings and memories, the film negotiates Heimat at the intersection of subjectivity, imagination and spatiality. The film’s highly elaborated aesthetics emphasise the interdependence of concrete places and their potential, imagined counterparts, of here and there, now and then.⁴⁴ For Lene, the old Heimat is something she left behind many years ago, a place of intimacy on the one hand and of concealment and repression on the other, both heimlich, or known, and unheimlich, or uncanny. “The uncanny [...] is that which was formerly canny, that which has been known ever since. The prefix ‘un’ in this word, however, is a marker of displacement”, according to Sigmund Freud.⁴⁵ The dialectics of canny and uncanny are reflected in HIERANKL through the mise-en-scène of the rural landscapes, the contrast between sunlit panorama views and plain, obscured views of fog-shrouded mountains and are allegorised through the wood that Lene refers to as magical (Zauberwald). As an intrinsically German imaginary space that emerged in the course of Romanticism and that alludes to the narrative patterns of fairytales like “Little Red Riding Hood” or E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman”, the topos of the wood marks a highly liminal space. It is both mythical and traumatic, a place of presence and absence where phantoms of the past, recollection and its repression permeate the present and future, culminating in HIERANKL in an Oedipus-like dénouement. If we assume, following David Morley and Kevin Roberts, that “identity is a question of memory, and memories of ‘home’ in particular”,⁴⁶ then Lene’s decision to return to her native place and her insistence on coming to terms with the past can be regarded as a quest for identity as opposed to oblivion, her identity construction being situated at the junctures of heimlich and unheimlich.

By privileging close and detailed shots, the film suggests disintegration. This is already obvious in the very first shots, when the camera shows the protagonist at the Munich railway station from above, revolves around her, focuses in details, sometimes in slight slow motion, while in a voiceover she reflects on whether she should “return home to Berlin” or “see her family”. This antagonism reflects the impossibility of both an unproblematic identity and an unproblematic Heimat, the initial fragmentariness marking a sharp contrast to the totality and integrity in the BESTE films. In HIERANKL, however, the opposition to the dark, impenetrable countryside is not marked by the city as its classical anti-topos but by the railway station and the train as places of transit. Anthropologist Marc Augé has described them as “non-places” standing for the transitory and provisional.⁴⁷ In this sense, it is not the question whether Lene is at home in Berlin or in Hierankl since neither

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⁴⁴ For a discussion of the film’s heterotopian images, see my article „Heterotopien im filmischen Bild” that focuses primarily on aesthetic dimensions.
⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Das Unheimliche”, 259.
⁴⁶ David Morley and Kevin Robins, Spaces of Identity, 91.
⁴⁷ Marc Augé, Non places.
the city nor the province can offer her long-term security and happiness. As her voiceover states in the opening sequence, she lacks the two most important things in life – family and sex – while hoping to conform at least to the third one – being in motion. HIERANKL leaves no doubt that the protagonist’s existence is based upon being in motion and that she lives largely without belonging. Being in motion, as her most intrinsic characteristic, is connoted positively here: It is the chance to come to terms with the past, to reassure oneself and reassert one’s own identity through efforts that are sometimes painful and existentially disillusioning. In this manner, the film transcends the traditional binary concepts of intimate and strange, heimlich and unheimlich, self and other. Instead, identity becomes an articulation of differences. Furthermore, through the reversed Oedipus myth and the lost daughter coming home, the film undermines the gendered space of Heimat as Lene, by provoking motion and taking the initiative, comes to elude traditional gender classifications.

Steinbichler’s intimate play proves to be a strong intellectualisation of the Heimat theme. It comes up with different intertextual and cultural references and draws the family as a “distorted picture of a commune of the ’68 generation” by revealing moral failures, above all Rosemarie’s. Having fought for a coming to terms with the national past in the 1960s, Lene’s parents have been living hypocritically themselves. With her high-necked black dresses, her implied longing to die and the her repression of the past, Rosemarie recalls images of the dark Anti-Heimat drawn by directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder or Peter Fleischmann. These allusions are reinforced by the casting of Joseph Bierbichler and Barbara Sukowa, two actors who began their careers in the wake of the New German Cinema. As in WINTERREISE, which casts Bierbichler and 1970s actress-icon Hanna Schygulla, director Steinbichler establishes a critical continuity in the history of German filmmaking. Moreover, continuity in cultural terms becomes manifest with quotations from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Autumn” as well as Lukas’ repeated evocation of Goethe. According to the perception of the Bildungsbürgertum, or intellectual bourgeoisie, that originates in the mid-18th century, and also in line with the left-wing intellectual thinking of the 1960 and ’70s, Heimat is located in language, literature and culture. The linkage of Heimat and Kult nation, or cultural nation, serves as a source of identification defined against the nation state that is perceived as an abstract entity. By negotiating Heimat in terms of socio-historical past and cultural memory on the one hand and as a very subjective idea and a source of suffering on the other hand, HIERANKL demonstrates the multiplicity of Heimat in individual and cultural terms.

The references to German Romanticism become even more manifest in Steinbichler’s second feature film, WINTERREISE. Franz Schubert’s song cycle from 1827 – which set his contemporary Wilhelm Müller’s lyrics to music – serves as the film’s Leitmotiv. WINTERREISE centres on self-made man Franz Brenninger, once a successful and respectable ironware entrepreneur who nowadays suffers from anxiety and is caught in a cycle of euphoria and depression. He becomes abusive, quarrels with everyone around him, insults his grown-up children, until only his wife Martha stands by him. Faced with bankruptcy, he decides to get

48 Maria Regina Irchenhauser, Heimat im Spannungsfeld Globalisierung, 62.
involved in a dubious deal with Kenyan businessmen and loses the money intended for his wife’s eye operation. WINTERREISE is thus a parable about professional failure and the decline of German medium-sized business in the age of economic globalisation. “This sliding down is like a manic depression. The mania of the eternal upturn is followed by the slump”, states director Steinbichler, who dedicates his film to “the generation of our fathers”.49 With the loss of his lifework, Franz loses his Heimat. His world views and the values he has relied on are undermined by accelerating globalisation and a modernity represented by his children and Leyla, a young German Kurd who translates for him. Leyla, who has been aware of the fraud from the beginning, travels to Kenya with Franz in order to get his money back. The film ends with Franz recuperating even more money than he lost and sending the young woman back to Germany before shooting himself.

The nostalgic experience of loss, deep despair, restlessness and longing for salvation manifest in the romantic motif of peregrination in Schubert’s cycle is at the heart of the film’s narrative, aesthetics and music. WINTERREISE relies heavily on nature symbolism. Bavarian wintertime, depicted through the snow-covered town of Wasserburg am Inn and pale landscapes, alludes emphatically to the cold darkness and hopelessness of the protagonist’s world. “I must travel a road, from which no one ever returned”, a line from the song “The Signpost” that Franz sings by night while sitting in his car in the middle of a lonely, snow-covered country road, signals his longing for death. German wintertime and the monochrome shades of white-in-white mark an overly sharp contrast to the warm, sunlit colours in Kenya. The wide open space of the Kenyan landscape which closes the film is shown in short panoramic shots throughout the film, long before Franz arrives in Africa, and already in the first scenes of the film, when he seems to want to hang himself but finally does not. These short shots indicate Africa’s function as projection space for the desperate wanderer, as both the concrete and metaphorical destination of his restless voyage.

Franz’ racism and his aggression towards the Kenyan fraudsters when still in Germany gives way to exoticism once he has arrived in Kenya, as indicated by the mystical nature images. Here, an analogy to his behaviour towards Leyla becomes evident. While he first treats her, a stranger to him because of her multicultural roots, with racist disrespect, she finally becomes his last confidante. As much as he depends on the (formerly) Fremde’s help, he needs the geographical Fremde in order to find salvation. Kenya and Africa more generally as an archetypical topos in German literature and culture become an idealised and vague other. While the United States serve as a projection site in many Anti-Heimatfilme of the 1960 and ’70s, depicted as an utopia free from closed-mindedness and social barriers which enables individual happiness, Africa assumes this function in WINTERREISE. Depressed and broken, disillusioned with life and alienated from his home community, Franz has become a stranger in his Heimat, which no longer holds any promise of security or belonging. By killing himself in the Fremde, however, he comes home forever. This idea of an eternal Heimat recalls mythical-religious ideas as articulated in many romantic poems,

49 Hans Steinbichler, Interview from the DVD WINTERREISE.
for example in Joseph von Eichendorff’s “Moonlit Night”. For the protagonist in WINTERREISE, salvation and homecoming are only possible in (African) nature and in death.

The dirty Heimat: SOUL KITCHEN

Director Fatih Akin launched his first comedy as homage to his native Hamburg and as a “dirty Heimatfilm”\textsuperscript{50}. Indeed, SOUL KITCHEN adopts the post war genre’s essential components, gives them a contemporary urban context and exaggerates them into magical occurrences. The village community is replaced by a collection of people in their early thirties, clustered around pub owner Zino whose existence and reality – his Heimat – are threatened in several ways. He has severe financial problems, a slipped disc stops him from working, his girlfriend Nadine has moved to Shanghai, his criminal brother Illias asks him for help, and his tavern is run down. Thanks to the eccentric chef and mysterious stranger Shayn, the greasy diner becomes, bit by bit, an in-place among young Hamburger. The villain is recognisable at very first sight; Neumann is a real estate speculator who wants to buy the Soul Kitchen. After Zino, with a heavy heart, decides to follow his girlfriend to Shanghai, his brother gambles away the restaurant to this incarnation of neo-liberalism. The happy ending is excessively genre typical, too: Zinos stays in Hamburg, the relationship with the well-bred journalist Nadine, doomed to failure anyway, ends and he finds happiness with the down-to-earth physiotherapist Anna, while the classical parallel love story focuses on Illias and waitress-artist Lucia. Zinos can buy back his restaurant with a loan from Nadine, while Neumann ends up in jail. Justice is done and the village is ready for a new beginning.

The local and the social prove to be essential in SOUL KITCHEN. The taverna in the working class neighbourhood Wilhelmsburg means Heimat for Zinos. It is the place he has created, where he feels at ease with waitress Lucia, musician Lutz, criminal Illias and old boatbuilder Sokrates, a kind of village elder. The portrayal of Hamburg plays a crucial role, for director Akin is constructing an opposition between “places” and “non-places” in the sense of Augé, between uniqueness and exchangeability.\textsuperscript{51} The Soul Kitchen, the bridge to the Elbviertel that Zinos crosses again and again, the harbour and the old warehouse district (Speicherstadt) all underscore the city’s singularity. These unique urban landscapes that cannot be found anywhere else contrast with places of transit like airports and shopping centres, as well as with anonymous sites serving economic purposes like the auction house and the lawyer’s office. The top restaurant where Nadine celebrates her farewell dinner could also be found in Munich, Berlin or Tokyo, for its chilly stylishness has lost any local particularity. It marks a sharp contrast to the Soul Kitchen as a place of identification which is, as the film makes very clear, menaced by actual processes of gentrification,

\textsuperscript{50} Pressbook SOUL KITCHEN (English Version), http://www.the-match-factory.de/films/items/soul-kitchen.html (07/07/10).
\textsuperscript{51} Marc Augé, Non-places.
causing a displacement of the residents and destroying the neighbourhood’s uniqueness and diversity. Akin’s statement that he aimed to show places that will soon no longer exist reflects actual socio-economic processes. The most significant example might be the recent conflict about the traditional Gängeviertel where many artists live and work, and which the city of Hamburg finally bought back from a Dutch investor after extended protests.

The film clearly proposes a procedural and dynamic conception of *Heimat* by showing it as a place that is shaped, invented and defended by its people, who strongly identify with it. Family and community no longer result from birth, genealogy or marriage but depend upon individual decisions and efforts. Accordingly, the surrogate family provides security and assumes responsibility, while *Heimat* comes to be a multicultural microcosm open to people from abroad, uniting traditional and modern aspects and underlying continuous change. This idea is emphasised by the film’s soundtrack, the songs by Quincy Jones, Kool & the Gang or the Isley Brothers turning soul music into a multicultural *Heimat*. The sociolect spoken by the characters in Akin’s film (instead of a dialect as in Rosenmüller’s productions) indicates their strong boundedness to the community that is no longer one of origin but a voluntary one. The Hamburg *Heimat* is sometimes as rough as its sociolect and as dirty as some of the city’s grubbiest corners, but it is faithful, unique and worth fighting for. Whereas former productions by Akin like GEGEN DIE WAND or SOLINO evoke a somehow regressive conception of *Heimat* because they end with the migrants returning to their native places, Hamburg does not compete against any other place, it is simply the place to be for the characters. Shanghai remains an abstract *Fremde* never brought to screen, so that Hamburg appears as the one and only alternative, an autarkic place and, compared to the Asian megacity, almost a straightforward village.

*Soul Kitchen*’s plot and the importance of the (urban) landscape clearly refer to *Heimatfilm* classics of the post war era, yet diversity and pluralism are explicitly appreciated in Akin’s work. Cosmopolitanism, traditionally regarded as the very antithesis of *Heimat*, comes to embody the dirty *Heimat*. Even though multiculturalism is valorised in the migratory character of contemporary societies, the film never renounces conceptions of unity and wholeness typical of the *Heimat*. Since Zinos’ intended departure causes the temporary loss of the restaurant, staying put remains clearly privileged over a nomadic lifestyle. Akin shifts the classical binaries of self/other, inner/outside, *Eigenes/Fremdes* but does not suspend their logic. Here, too, *Heimat* can only be constituted through an alterity. Instead of cultural, ethnic or national otherness threatening the self, the danger comes from economic interests in a globalised world. Thus, *Heimat* serves as a fortress, a microcosm endangered by ruthless capital interests and global uniformity. The fact that the film is not set in lovely countryside but in an urban neighbourhood proves to be very apt as a result.

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52 Fatih Akin, “Ich hatte Bock zu lachen”. 
Affirmations and deconstructions

If indeed “places are no longer the clear supports of our identity” as Morley and Robins put it with reference to contemporary increases in mobility and dislocation,\(^5\) then recent filmic narratives of *Heimat* deal precisely with this ambiguous, uncertain condition. The exponents of young *Heimatfilm* highlighted in this article reveal different strategies in negotiating questions of identity and belonging: One is the image of a delimited, unique *Heimat* providing shelter and affirming the myth; the second is the problematisation of a fragmented *Heimat* that can no longer sustain integrated identities.

The search for stability and integrity that is meant to provide a coherent identity is articulated in *BESTE ZEIT, BESTE GEGEND, BACHING* and *SOUL KITCHEN*. In the sense of “exclusive localisms”\(^5\), the films create images of a delimited, distinctive and singular, sometimes idealised *Heimat*. These positive *Heimat* images partly allude to the genre films of the post war era, while Edgar Reitz’ television epos HEIMAT must be regarded as a significant precursor, too. It has paved the way for a depoliticised discussion of *Heimat* that, instead of being ideologically suspect, refers to private life and subjective experience. By rescuing it from provinciality, parochialism and the picturesque folklore often associated with the genre manifestations of the post war era and by responding to contemporary social moods, these young *Heimatfilme* distil a good, harmless *Heimatgefühl*. This is particularly obvious in Rosenmüller’s coming of age films that virtually present an essentialisation of *Heimat* by showing the girls’ hometown as an autarkic place largely free of conflicts; *Heimat* is shown as an unproblematic constellation of self, community and place. The motif of guilt, atonement and forgiveness inherent in Kiefersauer’s *BACHING* alludes to the *Vertriebenenfilme* and the post war subject of *Heimatverlust*, or loss of the *Heimat*, and (re-)integration. In the modern province, however, coming to terms with the past omits the allegorical historical dimension of the 1950s films, for guilt refers exclusively to serious individual transgressions and resulting questions about inclusion and exclusion, home and exile. *Heimat* finally becomes a process-related concept in Akin’s *SOUL KITCHEN*, where a taverna signifies home to a collection of people in multicultural Hamburg. The adoption of storylines and character traits typical of the post war genre is most evident in this film, yet its joyful, fabulous and dirty exaggeration also subverts them most. *Heimat* is shown as a threatened, valuable good whose cultural diversity, amiability and wackiness have to be defended against monetary interests. People, these affirmative *Heimatfilme* seem to exclaim, need a harbour and even in today’s globalised world, *Heimat* is still possible and generally does good. In these films’ endings, after being defended or re-embraced, *Heimat* becomes unquestioned proximity again.

These visions contrast with images of an unstable, fragmented and alienated *Heimat* in critical contemporary productions. The idealised conception of shelter and a return to a clearly defined local and social environment is basically negated, *Heimat* always being conceptualised as a place of suffering and a place

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where something is definitively lost. In this manner, Steinbichler’s films deconstruct the dichotomies and demarcations that characterise the affirmative exponents of the young *Heimattfilm*. In HIERANKL, the other is not located outside the self but lies at its very heart, as the dynamics of memory and repression, painful pasts and present-time, canny and uncanny show. In WINTERREISE, then, *Heimat* becomes the very place of alienation and fragmentation, while the Fremde offers an ultimate refuge and sheltering space. Despite the existential pain *Heimat* causes in these films, the deconstruction of harmonic *Heimat* images does not only articulate a disoriented, fragmented mood. Instead, it leaves space for a new beginning in one film and provides salvation in the other. Steinbichler’s *Heimat* conception clearly recalls the *Anti-Heimattfilm* of the 1960 and ‘70s and their auteurs, but with less political intent. His films are not fundamental criticisms of society but critical reflections on individual states of mind that are nevertheless of general social relevance. In HIERANKL and WINTERREISE, *Heimat* is meaningful both in individual and cultural terms – as an experience of loss and as a symbolic sphere with allusions to spiritual concepts rooted in German cultural history. As a matter of fact, the *Heimat* idea refers to a universal sense of nostalgia (with Greek *notos* signifying return, while *algos* stands for pain and suffering) which is already evident in the *leitmotiv* of the Odyssey. Nevertheless, it has always been regarded as an intrinsically German concept and mood and as a crucial aspect of German self-perceptions, sustained by the supposed untranslatability of the highly emotive and polysemic term.\(^55\)

The *Heimat* myth’s persistence alludes to the basic social need to continually renew communities and to revise conceptions of self and other – processes that take place above all on the level of symbolic depictions. Thus, “the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions”, Frederic Jameson argues.\(^56\) Having become the most powerful narrative medium in the course of the 20\(^{th}\) century and still defending this status at the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\) century, film serves as an outstanding vehicle to negotiate multifarious *Heimat* conceptions. From a Social Anthropological perspective, the *Heimat* genre can hence be understood as a continuous updating and reworking of the myth that still proves to be relevant by addressing fundamental social concerns.\(^57\) SOUL KITCHEN, the dirty inversion of the post war genre, may be the most striking example of the *Heimat* myth’s flexibility and adaptability to contemporary hopes, yearnings and anxieties. However, not only the young *Heimattfilme* with happy endings confirm the myth. Their critical counterparts do so, too, since the very moment of its collapse inherently bears the utopian vision of an ideal *Heimat* to be realised somewhere, some day.


\(^{57}\) Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 20.
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