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Screening the Beach – Probing the Past The Baltic Sea in Contemporary German Cinema

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Abstract:

Since the fall of the Wall, unification and the subsequent re-invention of the nation, filmmakers have revisited the German Heimat film / homeland film cinematic tradition with a view to placing themselves creatively in the context of its intellectual and artistic heritage. However, German directors like Ute Badura, Wolfgang Koepp, Andreas Dresen, Peter Welz and Andreas Kleinert, who, in their work and autobiographies, bring East and West together, choose an Eastern setting for their films – rather than alpine or heath-landscapes – as they ascribe symbolic value to the Baltic Region and former German territories in the East. In many instances their films culminate at the sea which stands for the rough elements of nature as experienced in numerous maritime disasters in the untamed tidal waters of Germany's limited coastline. The ocean drives home the message that the only certainty in life is change. But why did they choose the contested Eastern German territories and the Baltic Sea? Is this re-orientation and paradigm shift in the Heimat genre from the west to the east a *rapprochement* or, rather, a territorial claim? Are the shores of the Baltic Sea perhaps expressing a yearning for former German territories further east that were lost after 1945? This article will probe several interpretations of the Baltic shore as a cinematic motif.

Screening the Beach – Probing the Past

The Baltic Sea in Contemporary German Cinema

“Heimat” – Towards a Definition

Since the fall of the Wall, unification and the subsequent re-invention of the nation, filmmakers have revisited German cinematic traditions with a view to placing themselves creatively in the tradition of its intellectual and artistic heritage. One of these legacies that has served as a starting point for a new departure has been the “*Heimatfilm*” / homeland film. As a genre it is renowned for its restorative stance, as it often features dialect and the renunciation of current topicality, advocates traditional gender roles, has anti-modern overtones of rural, pastoral, often alpine, images, and expresses a longing for pre-modern times, for “the good old days” that supposedly still exist away from the urban centres. The genre has certainly experienced transformations since the crowd-pleasing Louis Trenker films (for example *Der Berg ruft*, 1937) and the glorifying depictions of Heimat as in Ernst Marischka’s *Sissi* trilogy (1950s), which provoked a series of anti-Heimat films since the “cliché-ridden, Agfa-colored images of German forests, landscapes, and customs, of happiness and security, appeared to be deceitful movie kitsch” (Kaes 1989, 15). As one of the most popular genres in the 1950s the nostalgia in the films seemed “a way to disavow the cultural rupture of 1933-45” by providing identification with references “to state of mind but also to actual places, suggesting nation while being specific to region.” (Reimer 2003, 320). The Heimat film genre of those days was mainly a vessel for the transmission of restorative cultural values to aid the German public in a positive reappraisal of their homeland. Many films therefore adopted the basic structure of Heimat genre with its plots, motifs and iconography making it anathema to social and cinematic innovators. Only in the 1980s did the genre show signs of a renewal as filmmakers utilised it for a more realistic presentation of home and homeland such as Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat* (1980-84) and *Die zweite Heimat* (1988-92), thereby fusing the *Heimatfilm* and *Problemfilm* (social problem film) genres as socially relevant concerns of changing attitudes to identity and homeland were addressed critically. Likewise, most recent releases have attempted to re-evaluate the discourse of “this traditionally reactionary genre” (Morley et al. 1995, p. 91) very successfully, as in Joseph Vilsmaier’s *Herbstmilch* (1988) and *Schlafes Bruder* (1995) or Tom Tykwer’s *Winterschläfer* (1997), reclaiming the genre, until then mainly associated with lowbrow narratives, for art house films (Palfreyman 2000, pp. 19-20).

All these adaptations and transformations, however, cannot overcome the stigmatisation of this arch-German film genre being distorted with “national chauvinism, ‘blood and soil’ ideology, and overwrought emotionalism.” (Kaes 1989, p. 15). Many Heimat films produced in the second half of the 20th century were, indeed, remakes of films from the Hitler era and aided the struggling population in Central Europe with familiar images and ideals. After all, Heimat post-1945 for Germans “signified an experience of loss, a vacuum that Germans filled with nostalgic memories.” (Kaes 1989, p. 166). Not surprisingly the Heimat film genre has therefore been a popular category, particularly in Germany and Austria, and attained its heyday in the 1950s with about 300 Heimat films made between 1950 and 1960. Although there has been a steady decline in quantity since then, the genre has survived in borrowings and adaptations as Heimat films remain a form of artistic engagement

and political argument to date. Depending on the presence or absence of issues such as “community, history, gender roles, and consumerism” (Rippey et al. 1996, p. 137), Heimat films have communicated ideological messages intertwined with economic and political agendas in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) alike. For this reason the locus of Heimat is substitutable, i.e. “the land itself is only important to the extent that it facilitates the formation of [harmonic] relationships; it becomes a space instrumentalized for the attainment of an objective located within the subject. *Where* one is able to discover a sense of belonging and security — the Lüneburg Heath, the Alps, the Black Forest — is irrelevant” as long as it depicts a pristine rural setting in contrast to a negative influence elsewhere (Rippey et al. 1996, pp. 142-3). This in turn opens the possibility for a wider understanding of Heimat.

Heimat in the East

With Germany’s unification and its continued European integration, questions of “German national and cultural identity, the contradiction between economic and military power and cultural feelings of inferiority, racial versus civil definitions of identity and otherness” (Byg 1995, p. 46) are as relevant as ever. Thus it comes as no surprise that the Heimat film genre that dominated for most of the 20th century is being revisited. Particularly post-1989, a “renaissance of *Heimatfilm*, which [...] speaks volumes about the current need for myths in our culture” seems under way (Reif 1993, p. 28). Ute Badura’s documentary *Schlesiens Wilder Westen* (2002) and Wolfgang Koepp’s *Kurische Nehrung*, but also feature films like *Klassenfahrt* by Henner Winckler and *Im Namen der Unschuld*, bridge the East West divide with a *rapprochement* and focus on the human search for meaning and a place that they can be called “home”. In doing so the films no longer turn to West-Germany’s alpine or heath-landscapes but to former German territories in the East and maritime landscapes in the north-east. The protagonists take refuge in a countryside that could not be further removed from ahistorical, mountainous, touristic scenery and folklore as seen in many traditional Heimat films. Rather they are united in their identification of new frontiers and connotations of Heimat, that brings them to landscapes outside of Germany and also, in particular, to the sea. In contrast to the traditional Heimat associations of natural, romantic idylls, the sea, as it is depicted in many films, stands for the rough elements of nature, for the ultimate border.

In the understanding of post-WWII generations, borders have acquired enormous importance. Particularly for the people of Central Europe, borders have been part of everyday reality for decades. They experienced the “Wall” and the “Iron Curtain” as physical, political and philosophical borders that inhibited the free movement and development of peoples and their ideas. Since divisions and boundaries are most dynamic at their interface, i.e. at the border zones, where paradigms intersect and where issues of meaning and connotation are continually (re)-negotiated, frontier areas became a focus in their exploration of the trope of the border. This status was applied to a city like Berlin as much as to regions like the Baltic coastline, the no-man’s land along the Iron Curtain or former German territories. Many directors of a younger generation have taken up the frontier discourse to explore national perspectives and anthropological behaviour patterns. Most of them, like Andreas Dresen (born in Gera, East Germany), Peter Welz (born in West-Berlin) and Andreas Kleinert (born in East-Berlin), as well as Ivan Fila (born in Czechoslovakia but residing in Germany since 1977), Ute Badura (whose father is

from Silesia) and Henner Winckler (born in West-Germany but filming in Poland), in their work and autobiographies, bring East and West together.

In her documentary *Schlesiens Wilder Westen* (2002), identified in its subtitle explicitly as a "Heimatfilm", Ute Badura travels to the Polish village of Kopaniec, formerly Seiferschau. Here she listens to recollections of German tourists and Polish locals concerning the most tumultuous times in their life, their expulsion. Displaced peoples from the East and West are united in their grief, sense of loss and dislocation. The locals are Polish farmers who were resettled from their ancestors' territory further East when it was given to Ukrainians and Russians at the end of WWII. From 1946 onwards, they were assigned new settlements further West on formerly German territory. In *Schlesiens Wilder Westen*, the Silesian village and its natural surrounds are shown as picture perfect postcard images. The romantic backdrop of rustic charm and pre-industrial landscapes, rural paradise and human idyll is juxtaposed with the narrative of its former and present owners. Childhood memories and the peaceful façade give way to accounts of traumatic experiences. The authentic voices, using German with colloquialisms and grammatical blunders as well as the Polish original with subtitles, seem unmediated yet manipulative as they have been edited with long shots of landscape panoramas and set to music that centres like a fugue on a theme and its counterpoint thus bringing the polyphonic voices from Germans and Poles together in their yearning for their homeland. While the Germans in the film speak fondly of "Heimat" the Poles only use the terms "here", when they speak about Kopaniec, and "there" when they refer to their lost Heimat in Eastern Poland. This underscores the uniquely German point of view of the Heimat discourse, but despite this qualitative difference, the film does not give more credence to one voice than to the other, to one history in preference to someone else's account by alternating German and Polish voices. Non-controversial in its aim, the film's camera angles and mis-en-scenes are pleasing, the voices moderate, and the message seems apolitical. Yet, ironically, the film is political in its silence on the Nazi-period and in its unwillingness to explore the historical events that led to the lamented chain-reaction of resettlements. The associatively-structured narrative, that does not use a voice-over and relies only on the self-presentation of the interviewees, shows only victims, German and Poles, who in turn look eastwards for the blame. Politicians, Ukrainians or urban war-mongers are singled out in attempts to channel critical voices away from the village that still entertains nostalgia and dreams of homecoming. These notions of Heimat are intensified by shots of rural landscapes bathed in evening light, aged post-cards and German folk music like "*Kein schöner Land...*" idealising Heimat. Critics may therefore question this re-orientation eastward and this paradigm shift in the Heimat genre from the west to the east; is it a *rapprochement* or, rather, a territorial claim? Badura's Germans could be interpreted as expressing a yearning for former German territories, just like Volker Koepp's ethnic Germans in his documentaries *Kurische Nehrung* (2001) and *Kalte Heimat* (1995) set in Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg. But the guise of the personal account, the oral history and the layperson's attempt at historiography seem to diffuse any social tension. Perceiving Heimat and frontiers now neither as simply a national phenomenon nor merely in a socio-geographical realm, a personal understanding of Heimat and frontier seems to override national frameworks.

Heimat at the Baltic Sea

It is evident in numerous cinematic releases from Germany's post-unification generation of filmmakers who chose the Baltic Region for their films, that particularly the Sea is used to problematise Heimat at the Baltic coastline, in the border region between Germany and Poland. One such cinematic example, set entirely in a Polish sea-side town, is Henner Winckler's debut *Klassenfahrt* (2002). Other examples of recent films that feature the Baltic Sea in a symbolic fashion are Peter Welz's *Burning Life* (1994), Ivan Fila's *Lea* (1996), Andreas Kleinert's *Im Namen der Unschuld* (1997), and Andreas Dresen's *Nachtgestalten* (1999). But why did all of them choose the contested Eastern coastline?

Klassenfahrt uses a school trip of pubescent year 10 teenagers to the Polish Baltic coast as a backdrop for a love story in which a Pole, Marek, who is from Warsaw and works at the seaside during his summer holiday, comes between the two German pupils, Isa and Ronny. The two rivals, Marek and Ronny, enter into a latent contest and try to out-do each other. The contest culminates in a nocturnal test of courage. The jump from a viewing platform into the Baltic Sea undertaken by Marek ends in his almost certain death. Ronny feels guilty but does not own up to his role in Marek's disappearance. While this constellation, a German responsible for the death of a Pole, could be interpreted symbolically, Winckler's hyper-realistic cinematic style acts as a corrective to any over-interpretation. Many scenes appear unpolished, the lay-actors seem fresh and untainted, the camera work is puritan and no film music or artistic editing foreground the fact that this is not a documentary but a feature film. This by contrast highlights the highly stylised character of Badura's documentary about Silesia. Winckler's directing is minimalist and his youth seem natural and therefore somehow representative. In this context it is important to note that they are anything but political or driven by any agenda other than sex and alcohol. Hearing the name of "Stettin" as the destination for a day-trip they ask themselves "where is that?" The German name of the Polish-German border town Szczecin / Stettin, now capital of the Polish Voivodeship Western Pomerania has been a *Politikum* for older generations. These young people are oblivious to the emotional baggage and historical relevance of the name as their approach to Polish youth is peer-focussed, using mainly neutral English as their common language, and focuses on music, clubs, and related recreational activities. The Baltic Sea acts as a powerful contrast to shabby hotel rooms and sleazy nightclub scenes, offering the protagonists the necessary space and privacy to reflect on their actions. The juveniles are preoccupied with defining themselves and exploring their personal borders. When Ronny sets free a bee that has flown into the hotel room and keeps buzzing against the window, he acts out of sympathy for an individual that is restrained by glass ceilings and social confines. History seems of no concern as Ronny makes known in the museum when he interrupts the educational talk about life during the Early Stone Age with his ape-dance and in the bus when he is not interested in presenting his class paper. Yet the disappearance of Marek in the Baltic Sea has unsettled him and presents a recall to reality as the film ends ambiguously with the class returning to Germany by bus. Ronny and Isa have grown after the experience of Marek's presumed death and they return from the Baltic Sea somewhat shaken and "geläutert" / purified but clearly no more politically or historically aware.

Andreas Dresen's *Nachtgestalten* (1999) can be seen as another milieu-film dealing with the harsh realities of urban life, particularly for German youth, this time set in contemporary Germany, i.e. in post-unification Berlin. In true *film noir* style¹

Dresen focuses on places of transition, such as airports, streets and train stations, where the lives of street kids, tourists and locals intersect. The locale, Berlin, rather than the characters, seems to be the subject of the film, while the coastal retreat is foregrounded in the concluding scenes in which a punk youth group with their stolen car leaves the city for the country, and drives to Germany's north-eastern border, the Baltic Sea. This is a significant change of locus considering that "space is organized symbolically [...] to offer audiences access to a site where contemporary social and ideological problems, often concerning territory and identity, achieve a positive resolution." (King 2003, pp. 132-3). In this context, images of the eastern borderland of the 1990s are as iconographic and political as alpine mountain landscapes of the 1950s "when political debates concerning territorial borders, mass migration, and new constructions of German national identity" (King 2003, p. 133) were as prevalent as in the period after the fall of the Wall. The Baltic Region saw enormous population transfers in the 1940s and 1950s. Heavily guarded, the Baltic Sea formed part of the Iron Curtain between East and West from 1961 until 1989. Now, Dresen, whose own memory of the Baltic Sea from his life in Communist Eastern Germany would have been that of an impenetrable borderland during the East-West conflict, uses it as a symbol of liberation and final insight. For him as well as other directors, the Baltic Sea has become the epitome of Heimat and frontier, the place of anti-urban as much as anti-social sentiment cured by natural landscapes which are still free of signs of civilisation.

Although a side-arm of the Atlantic Ocean, large sections of the Baltic Sea have seemed a world away from the west for most of the 20th century. Since 1945 the region has lost most of its former significance which dated back to the beginnings of European trade and communication. Frequented from ancient times, especially because of the amber found along the coast, the Baltic Sea experienced its heyday in the late Middle Ages when the Hanseatic League used it for commerce and trade.² Since then its significance has dwindled, reaching its nadir in the 20th century when it became the site of many war-time tragedies, the refugee routes and the politics of expulsion. Subsequently the realities of the Cold War transformed it into a wallflower. It formed part of the no-go zone for the average East German citizen, due to its proximity to the West and the danger of attempts to flee. In contrast to the North Sea, which was accessible to everyone in the West, the Baltic Sea has been used almost exclusively by party hard-liners of the Eastern Block as their holiday resort, while it proved to be mainly inaccessible for the average citizen under Communist and Socialist rule. In addition, heavy industrialisation of the countries bordering the Baltic in the 20th century resulted in massive environmental degradation of the sea and transformed its natural beauty into a reminder of human destruction. Hence it has symbolic value when young German filmmakers use the Baltic Sea as a show-down location in the concluding scenes of their films about contemporary Germany.

The Baltic Sea in Recent German Film & Literature

Numerous films and books from the past few years utilise the Baltic Sea as a backdrop to show people overcoming their past and all inhibitions in an attempt at "self-realisation", free from constraints. The experience of the sea in many instances enables the protagonists "to achieve a different kind of perspective and some kind of moral improvement" (Lupak 1999, p. 7) within themselves. For the youth gang from Berlin in *Nachtgestalten*, the encounter with the Baltic Sea is an experience which enables them for once to see something larger than their lives, greater than their

problems and more boundless than their despair, hurt and anger. They bring destruction to this part of the world, torch their stolen car and marvel at the sight of the flames rising into the morning sky. All this happens against the background of the rolling waves of the Baltic Sea, setting the adolescents in their minuteness against the vast sea and land masses. In the final camera angle the elevated perspective promotes the understanding of a person's insignificance against the vast sea: "[T]he sea teaches mankind to cease to be mankind. Shining, mute and immense, its snakeskin, its predator beauty poses a question and counters the humanist answer 'mankind' with laughter. From the 'beautiful immensity' mankind learns to forget the measure of mankind." (Bolz 1989, p. 164). The concluding scene in *Nachtgestalten* provides an illustration of this insight into human frailty.

The sea may also act as a catalyst for liberation and self-determination. This is evident in Ivan Fila's film *Lea*. The title heroine is a young East Slovakian who witnessed her mother's violation and death at her father's hands. Being subsequently brought up by foster parents in an atmosphere of harshness she refuses to speak. Her muteness becomes her defence against a cruel world that she can only escape through her writing poetry. She delivers those lyric treasures to a secret shrine she made in honour her mother. At the age of twenty-one she is sold to a visiting Bavarian furniture-restorer, Herbert Strehlow, and thereby loses her mother's grave and her homeland. Despite his sensitive profession, her new husband turns out to be a similarly hurt soul whose 20 years in the Foreign Legion did not heal the pain of his first wife's sudden death. Lea and Herbert live like recluses and also draw away from one another before slowly recognising the other's trauma and overcome their self-defence mechanisms. Lea starts to speak and Herbert starts to brighten. This process culminates during a seaside holiday where the dunes of the Baltic Sea become a playground for the couple. While the film had previously captured its protagonists in long portrait shots studying their sadness and emotional state in camera freezes that seemed to foreground photographic techniques, the use of quick camera moves and frequent edits give the scenes at the Baltic Sea a distinctly different aesthetic feel foregrounding change. The liminal space at the ocean becomes the backdrop of their first true courtship and the place where they finally reveal their feelings for one another. Now all constraints seem lifted as their alienation from society and self that had made them outsiders in unified Germany and led to a process of gradual self-destruction, is overcome. On the occasion of their visit to the edge of their new homeland, they discover themselves, one another and the beauty and grandness of the world. The experience of the Baltic Sea again serves as short-hand for their liberation, and heralds a new beginning in their relationship. At the coast, the alienation from self and surroundings is overcome: "The salt which is in seawater is in our blood and tears and sweat. The lungs of an infant *in utero* can be seen rhythmically breathing as it inhales and expels amniotic fluid, even as its oxygen supply comes from the mother's bloodstream via the umbilicus. Each of us has breathed warm saline for days on end and survived. The lungs themselves derive from fused pharyngeal pouches, and bronchial clefts ('gill slits') still form temporarily in all chordate embryos, including humans, reminding us that something which became *Homo* did crawl up a beach many million years ago. The satisfaction for certain people of walking back down a beach and into the sea is akin to that of a long-postponed home-coming." (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 5). For Lea and her husband this homecoming is the key to a new life. The hand-held camera work in the scenes at the Baltic Sea underscores the newfound freedom. Likewise the use of filters softening the image in a Helmut Newton-like romantic haze stresses the new quality of their relationship found at the sea.

Vanessa Jopp uses the Baltic Sea likewise as a catalyst for her East German protagonists' self-realisation in *Vergiß Amerika* (2000). Here David, the shy boy caught in a love-triangle, gains profound insight into his situation and discovers a possible solution. This mental process is aided by his extensive studies of the fauna in the dune systems, making him gaze out to sea for hours every day. As moving water has in it a fascination both lulling and imperative, it facilitates his relaxation as much as his introspection. In *Vergiß Amerika*, the time spent at the Baltic Sea therefore motivates the turning point in the film. The liminal space is important for the transition in character and narrative as David now realises that he can determine his fate to some extent. Subsequently, he builds up the courage to show his feelings for Anna, although she has been claimed by his best friend Benno. Again, the sea is the catalyst for a love-story which is ultimately resolved by Benno's death.

In other films the Baltic Sea serves as the ultimate escape, e.g. for Lisa and Anna in *Burning Life* (1994). In this road-movie set in the year 1990, prior to German unification, the female protagonists are on the run from police in an anarchistic environment. The political and social *Wende* [turning point] has led to disorientation and a state of lawlessness which they wanted to remedy by helping the underprivileged. Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, the women move north, and when they reach the sea, nothing can stop them. They drive over the cliff's edge in their Russian limousine only to repeat this action later by hijacking a helicopter in which they fly over the ocean, leaving behind Germany, their (criminal) past and problems. They did not like the old system, yet they also do not hold great hopes for the new Germany that will emerge from the chaos. The flight over the ocean is a quote from the American road-movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991), thereby fusing elements of German and American filmmaking allowing "for Hollywood pleasure without giving up its *Heimat* identity." (Haase 2003, p. 397). With its clear references to Germany's political landscape, the protagonists experience the social changes as fraught with enormous difficulties and draw attention to a land-deal responsible for the suicide of Anna's father. Thus the film deals with many issues that are paradigmatic for the sell-out of Eastern values at the time, and central to the negotiations of unification and a new German cultural identity. While *Thelma and Louise* in the American road-movie choose death as an alternative to imprisonment, Lisa and Anna opt for migration. The helicopter lifts them into the sky in an escapist fashion that, contrary to Tykwer's helicopter flight in *Heaven* (2002), will not provoke a crash landing but heralds a life in a new *Heimat*, in either Africa or Australia, following their displacement after the fall of the Wall.

For other filmmakers, the flight to the ocean likewise symbolises a point of physical as well as metaphysical departure. The edge of the continent becomes the place of life's conclusion as is evident in Andreas Kleinert's *Im Namen der Unschuld* (1997). The protagonists, a lonely mother grieving over the murder of her only daughter, and the inspector working on this case, a divorcee struggling with his profession and mission in life, seek refuge and reconciliation as they face the storm-swept waters of the Baltic Sea. They desire peace with themselves and the world around them in the shelter of a mental asylum that seems to be the only place of normality in a seemingly mad world. As the mother figure wanders the sandy shores on the island with her suitcase, precariously close to breaking waves and set against dramatic cloud formations on the horizon, the sea reflects her inner turmoil but also promises a cleansing process. Thus the Baltic coast is again a place of existential transformation, reminiscent of pain but also heralding the opportunity for healing.

In all of the above-mentioned films the Baltic Sea is a place of insight and introspection, of surrender and refuge. It is the ultimate destiny in the life-journey as it is sought in the defining moment of their lives, but not as a worldly paradise, an Eden or Safe Haven, nor as a tourist destination, but nevertheless like a Grail, a trope for personal development. This connotation of the Baltic Sea is reflected not only in recent German films but also in the writing of Baltic neighbours: "The early 1990s in the Baltic lands in general have been a time of reclaiming the past, of rediscovering what was once forbidden, of getting acquainted with foreign literature, as much as, if not more than, of experimentation with the new." (Moseley 1994, p. 14). Thus, the discovery and re-discovery of the Baltic region is a trend that can be observed in film as well as literature on all sides, however the echo that this rediscovery on the German side has provoked bears witness to underlying concerns.³

Contesting Borders?

In their depiction of the Baltic Sea setting in German film and literature, artists evoke not only images of boundless space, room for expansion, freedom and new beginnings. "To most Europeans, [...] 'the seaside' is no mere littoral, a bald geographical margin where land happens to stop. It is too closely bound up with the past" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 137). Thus filmmakers also move into troubled waters, as the Baltic Sea is associated with territorial losses in the first half of the 20th century. After the First World War and to a lesser extent after World War II, Germany lost extensive territories in the East which had previously afforded it a long coastline. This has resulted in the region being seen as a Heimat that has been lost and that now stimulates diasporic identities. Shared memories of neighbours and strangers alike recall the Baltic region as the scene of human tragedies of unimaginable proportions during the Third Reich and particularly the Holocaust. From 1940 onwards the German Nazi occupation was responsible for an era of terror on civilians, especially Jewish settlers in the Baltic states. The final solution was first experienced by the peoples in the Baltic countries as Hitler's executioners began their mass genocide there. At the time, the German occupiers were able to exploit ethnic divisions in the region as well as latent anti-Semitism resulting in their finding many willing executioners in the local population. When the Soviet Army freed the Baltic from German rule and occupied the region in their turn, many ethnic Germans fled westwards in refugee marches that again took a heavy toll on civilian life. Refugees and displaced people tried to flee on land and waterways, constantly fearing attacks from the enemy armies. Günter Grass's book *Im Krebsgang* (2002) documents this through the tragedy of the sinking of the *Gustloff*. His book is one of many recent publications breaking with a taboo, i.e. remembering the German victims of the Nazi-regime, featuring the Baltic Sea and former German territories.⁴ Therefore, this shift eastwards and to the Baltic region has multiple causes, consequences and political ramifications. The change in the Heimat concept could be seen as an unholy political message that this re-discovery may subscribe to, consciously or accidentally. This raises questions: Are moderate, intelligent and liberal writers and filmmakers from the East and West alike nurturing sentiments that are only at face-value innocent displays of scenic beauty and nostalgia? Are they preparing the ground for a broader understanding of Heimat? Is their re-discovery of the Baltic Sea and the East even, possibly, subscribing to a policy of revisionism? As their territorial reference might be seen as laying claim to the former Eastern German homeland, this raises multiple possibilities for political instrumentalisation. The

Eastern German border has shifted many times in recent history;⁵ do these films nurture the desire for yet another change?

While Europe's expansion eastwards is an economic reality and is also backed by a strategic alliance (i.e. Poland's recent admission to NATO and its EU membership), the cultural expansion as pursued by German writers and filmmakers in their Heimat images evoking connotations of a "promised land" is worth monitoring critically. Are German notions of a "European identity" and "global citizenship" blurring national boundaries in a territorial pursuit of lost homeland in the East?

History is clearly changing in the re-telling and re-casting of events from several perspectives. It thereby becomes polyphonic and fluid. While the term "revisionist" is at best associated with expellees organised in *Landsmannschaften*⁶ or, in the worst cases, with deniers of the Holocaust and neo-Nazi propaganda, the fear of acquiring such a label may have prompted historians, writers and intellectuals in Germany for some time to shy away from the Baltic Sea. Accusations and suspicions are never far away when the former Eastern German regions, as places of ethnic cleansing or tragedies inflicted on Germans, are dealt with. The issue of the lost Heimat in general, and the Nazi past in particular, guarantees that these topics are "emotionally charged and ideologically loaded" (Seliger 1987, p. 7). Recent discussions in the media of Günter Grass' novel *Im Krebsgang* (2002) or Volker Koepp's documentary *Kurische Nehrung* (2001) have been timely reminders of these issues as critics highlighted the possibility of their new Heimat concepts and understandings of history being revisionist. Both Grass and Koepp have their roots in the former ethnic German regions of what is now Poland⁷ and revisit personal memories in their works.⁸ Both have had to defend their artistic works against bitter accusations of revisionist tendencies while they were at the same time misappropriated by revisionists (cf. Schönhuber 2002a, p. 3; 2002b, p. 46). Koepp has been accused of a revanchist and tainted perspective⁹ that mythologises the "good old days" without problematising the fact that the days, which his ethnic Germans are marvelling about, refer to Nazi-Germany's heyday in the region. Consequently, some critics saw the potential audience of Koepp's film in extreme-right-wing quarters. Likewise, Koepp's interview statement, referring to the Baltic region that he depicted in his film as "not further away from Berlin than Munich",¹⁰ might be seen as a political statement rather than an innocent geographical reference. Therefore the left-wing newspaper *taz* ran several articles on his film, all denouncing it as misleading, nostalgic, emotive and politically charged.¹¹ The same could be said of Günther Ücker's nail sculptures at the Baltic Sea (2001). His installations in the dunes of his former home-town in Mecklenburg resemble impaled bed-sheets stained with blood. The claim that such art works, no matter whether they are produced in literature, film or the visual arts, foreground German suffering and support political and ideological attempts to legitimise territorial expansion is never far away. "This point of view was resumed in the post-war discussions of 'Recht auf Heimat' – the right to Heimat – and motivated the 'Landsmannschaften' [...] to demand that the Silesian, East Prussian, and Sudeten-German home territories be returned to them." (Greverus 1987, p. 10). Now, filmmakers and authors like Grass and Koepp seem to make this topic commonplace by overcoming the expulsion taboo, i.e. "Vertreibungstabu" (Kapitza 2002, p. 15). The fact that their art works have provoked fierce discussions shows that Germany is indeed undergoing a "change of mentality, transformation of the Federal Republican historical awareness or more precisely: of the historical morality" (Kapitza 2002, p. 16) that is critically monitored by German intellectuals. Koepp's continued interest in the homeland of ethnic Germans in the former eastern territories of Germany is meant as an unbiased documentation

following in his own footsteps with this sequel to his highly-acclaimed documentary *Kalte Heimat* (1995). Grass' book is likewise a sequel to the *Danziger Trilogie* for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1999. But times have changed and their works and points of view are now much less accepted than they might have been before the plea for unification became reality. The topic brings back memories of times when a retreat into the provinces not only coincided with the Germans' traditionally strong regional focus (Cf. Applegate 1990) but was also used as a means of turning one's back on the centre of power and fleeing to the periphery. This was initially "an escape from the traumas of the First World War and perceived chaos of the Weimar Republic and then as a mode of inner emigration from the Third Reich" (Boa et al. 2000, p. 9). After the Third Reich it served as a vehicle for escapism that allowed demoralised people comfort away from their immediate post-war realities. "Close to the surface was also the theme of the lost Heimat following the division of Germany and the loss of lands in the East. [...] Heimat films offered balm" (Boa et al. 2000, p. 11). Thus Heimat films were a vehicle for escapism.

Towards a Resolution

Recent approaches of German filmmakers like Dresen, Kleinert and Welz are similarly escapist in nature, yet they opt for an alternative to the traditional Heimat images and resort to the ocean as a supranational and sublime signifier for their re-invention. "The mythic images characteristic of the western and earlier German genre of mountain films from the 1920s and 1930s" (Boa et al. 2000, p. 89), which reached their zenith in Leni Riefenstahl's *Das blaue Licht* (1932), has found its present-day counterpart in the rediscovery of another sublime, the Sea. While the mountain films, despite Riefenstahl's efforts, associated the alpine region "with masculinity, heroism, and conquest" (Nenno 2003, p. 67), the sea is denoted as the female sphere (Dodd 2002, p. 9; Jones 2000; p. 136). Therefore it is a symbolism attached less to the Baltic Sea than to oceans in general. The "primordial oceans" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 2) that make up "seven-tenths of the Earth's crust" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 6) have always been "a reservoir of private imagery and public myth" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 5). Rather than subscribing to a dominant ideology, the flight to the Baltic Sea now signifies a total rejection of the prevailing ethos of the political and economic developments in contemporary Eastern Central European regions. At times their transformation to crude capitalism and their subsequent moral free fall seem to contradict the official rhetoric of them re-joining Western Europe (through their membership to the EU and NATO) as a sign of positive developments, as progress. In contrast, the desired *unio mystica* with the Baltic Sea stands for a profound regression from a world that has become alienating. In a similar way to what Reitz attempted to express with his series *Heimat*, it is felt "that an authentic German identity, and a Heimat, are only possible at the periphery, far from the official centres of power – in the provinces. Germany as a nation or a state cannot be Heimat" (Kaes 1989, p. 170). For the most recent generation of German filmmakers, Heimat means a place outside of history, removed from progress, caught in a cyclical time that seems subject only to seasons and nature. They express an existentialist homelessness that makes them take refuge in a supranational environment. "In a world that is increasingly characterised by exile, migration and diaspora, with all the consequences of unsettling and hybridisation, [...] there is no longer any place like Heimat." (Morley et al. 1995, p. 104). The search is deeply personal and could not be further removed from an aggressive political stance. Likewise, highly acclaimed,

wonderfully sensitive and historically mindful films like Dresen's *Nachtgestalten*, Fila's *Lea*, Jopp's *Vergiß Amerika* or Kleinert's *Im Namen der Unschuld* might pave the way for a more balanced view of the rapprochement of east and west, history and present, hopes and fears. They set an example of a successful merger and take the political and ideological instrumentalisation out of the aesthetic depiction of a symbolic backdrop by foregrounding the fact that the ocean in general is a popular symbol in filmmaking, whether it is the Atlantic coast or the Baltic Sea. Films like Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story* or Weingartner's *Das weiße Rauschen* bring their protagonists to Spanish and Portuguese shores. Thomas Jahn, in *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (1999), chose the North Sea for his protagonists as their ultimate goal. For Martin and Rudi it is a dream come true and the climax and closure to their lives. To see and feel the elements concludes a life's journey and leads to peace of mind and the acceptance of death, reminiscent of Freud's "oceanic feeling".¹² Freud sees this feeling as grounded in the childish desire to be one with the mother and condemns it as a distortion of reality. At the same time he acknowledges that there is a human quest and urge for a union with a figure or entity that is experienced as larger than life and as a promise to ultimately resolve all of life's irreconcilable differences. In the case of the protagonists of *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, this entity is the sea, as Martin is ready to become one with nature when he breathes in the salty air in the sands of the dune at the edge of the breaking waves. The theological dimension in this final scene is invoked not only by way of the title but also by the reference to Martin's and Rudi's mindset. The deserted coastline evokes in them a sense and appreciation of solitude away from the city and heralds the possibility of introspection and reflection. The water masses and rock formations, the cliffs and breaking waves communicate a sense of time more infinite than themselves, with the understanding that these waters have washed the shores since time immemorial. The seemingly endless spatial and temporal expansion of the ocean instils a metaphysical reflection on the landscape, thereby expanding their horizon and minds. The facial expression of Martin in the moment of his death heralds his intuitive experience of the presence of a deity, an epiphany. Experiencing the maritime landscape "away from the cities, or other man-made objects [...] is conducive to an awareness of God's presence." (Lupak 1999, p. 5). Without reference to any one God or religion this transcendental insight can be seen as pantheistic. God is everything and everything is God, as the world is "either identical with God or in some way a self-expression of his nature" (Owen 1971, p. 74). In the experience of this sublime / epiphanic moment, Rudi can transcend his status as a human (Cf. Weiskel 1976, p. 5) in a "paradoxical coexistence of assertion of control over one's surroundings and one's loss of control" (Fabricant 1985, pp. 56-7). Thus the sea is closely linked to images of loss and death. From this derives "an especial melancholy and a power to haunt. Among the sea's attributes are a capacity to conceal, the ability to stand for time and the quality of erasure." (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 131). The protagonists' desire to turn to the sea and "gaze at annihilation" may therefore be "a return to a deep, inchoate thing which has been slumbering inside them all their lives. It is death which stretches before them to the horizon: a great absolving sheet beneath which they will slip. What is there to see which makes them stare long hours? The constant flux of waters holds something that mesmerises *Homo*, though whether it speaks of human origins or of individual destiny is unclear." (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, pp. 138-9).

This is also true for Valeri Sikorski in Achim von Borrie's highly acclaimed film *England* (2000). Terminally ill after working in post-melt-down Chernobyl, Valeri wants to fulfil his dream of travelling to England before it is too late. He lands in Berlin

and stays longer than anticipated together with other immigrants from Eastern Europe. He manages to make it to Calais but is dead when he sets out for his last voyage. His friend improvises a sea burial. The last image is Valeri's body drifting in the ocean. "Death as a voyage is a common trope and the sea invites embarkation whether the dead are literally set adrift in a boat with a few possessions or sewn into a canvas [...] [b]efore life goes out with the tide" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 139). Whether Valeri makes it to England or not has become secondary as the journey fulfils the goal.

Thus, the unifying message in all these films is that the only certainty in life is change, which is especially true for Germans coming to terms with the heritage of Nazism and Socialism. For them, the backdrop of the boundless, timeless forces of nature serves as a corrective to their human plight.¹³ And while the cinema that featured the alpine refuge had at its core the message that society and the individual can live in perfect harmony as integral parts of one another,¹⁴ the ocean back-drop seems to promote a place for the individual within and outside of society and civilisation at one and the same time, as an integral part of nature. In view of the infinite sea, humans realise that they are "at best marginalia in another era's fossil record." (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, p. 73). This forces a reassessment of their world view, resulting in their abandoning their position at the centre of the universe. As they realise, "the sea hides and dissolves, [...] translating objects from the upper to the lower world" (Hamilton-Paterson 1992, 128), they have to come to terms with their own insignificance. This trend indicates a paradigm shift in the Heimat genre in some of the better film releases from Germany that are far from revisionist and close to a balanced and informed engagement with the highly political cinematic history. The title of Andreas Kleinert's film *Im Namen der Unschuld* [*In the Name of Innocence*] set on the Baltic island of Rügen is therefore programmatic. The characters are driven by innocent aspirations, not by revenge nor by a wish to conquer. The filmmakers in turn are driven by a desire to transform the genre endowing it with their re-orientation and paradigm shift from the west to the east, which is neither *rapprochement* nor territorial claim but a rejection of nationally charged spaces. The shores of the Baltic Sea are used to express a yearning for an *unio mystica* with nature rather than fulfilment of a political programme.

Endnotes:

¹ The film has a significant component of documentary footage, which can be attributed to two facts: Firstly, in preparing his latest film Dresen worked closely with organisations for the homeless to get the right feel for life on the streets. In addition, on completion of filming, Dresen painstakingly retreated the entire negative of *Nachtgestalten*, removing gloss and toning down colour to give the film a raw, unvarnished quality. The result is characters portrayed with respect and without condescension or sentimentality and a Berlin which is not to be found in the travel brochures. Yet, Dresen's film is less an exotic exploration of some interesting fringe characters, and more an examination of powerful tendencies in German (and not just German) society, probing beneath the surface of the "German miracle".

² "The days when the Hanseatic League was an agent of cross-cultural fertilization between cities around the Baltic littoral — Hamburg, Lübeck, Rostock, Danzig, Riga, Tallinn as well as Stockholm and Copenhagen — are now long gone. In the centuries since then, new currents have swept into this basin of diverse cultures in Northern Europe, currents that have tended to separate rather than unite them. Alliances have been formed and broken, political boundaries drawn and re-drawn, economic ties flourished and receded, external powers have intervened and withdrawn, to such an extent that by the late 20th century a situation has arisen, where the cultures, languages and societies of North-eastern

Europe are as diverse as ever, but they know little more about each other's identities than do complete outsiders." (Moseley 1994, p. 7).

³ The Baltic region that saw the emergence of three new states in a surge of "ethno-nationalism" in the 1980s and early 90s is itself still a developing multi-entity that has to find its place and ways of dealing with Europe as well as the Russian Federation. (A. D. Smith 1991, p. 148. See also "The return to Europe" in: G. Smith et al. 1998, pp. 108-109).

⁴ Cf. Tanja Dücker, *Himmelskörper*, Berlin: Aufbau Verlag 2003; Julia Franck, *Lagerfeuer*, Köln: DuMont 2003; Birgit Bauer, *Im Federhaus der Zeit*, München: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt 2003; Ulla Hahn, *Unscharfe Bilder*, München: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt 2003; Uwe Timm, *Am Beispiel meines Bruders*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2003; Stephan Wackwitz, *Ein unsichtbares Land*, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag 2003; Michael Zeller, *Die Reise nach Samosch*, Cadolzburg: Ars Vivendi Verlag 2003; Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit's *Das Verbrechen der Liebe in der Mitte Europas*, Berlin 2000.

⁵ At the end of World Wars I and II Germany lost territory in the East, resulting in its border moving further west each time. With the official division of Germany into West and East, the Iron Curtain caused another westward shift leaving barely a stretch of approximately seventy kilometres of coast line of the Baltic Sea for the West Germans. When the division between East and West Germany was finally overcome with the fall of the Wall in 1989 and the subsequent re-unification in 1990, the location and state of the new eastern border became a sensitive issue. Therefore the unification treaty stated clearly that Germany was to accept the loss of territories to the east as set out in the Treaties of Versailles and Potsdam and "recognise the external borders as of 1990 as definite". Too familiar was still the rhetoric of Hitler pursuing the expansion of "Lebensraum" not only to the south (which ultimately resulted in the annexation of Austria) but also persistently to the east. Similar visions of a greater German territory were re-instated with right-wing and conservative governments throughout the Cold War and more recently again by Neo-Nazi groups.

⁶ Landsmannschaften are revisionist refugee organisations. (Cf. Gatz 1989).

⁷ Günter Grass was born in Danzig, now Gdansk in Poland; Koepp in former Stettin, now Szczecin, Poland.

⁸ They are among a large group of writers and artists who lost their homeland in the first half of the 20th century and have thematised their experiences in their works. (Cf. Bastian 1995, pp. 203-217).

⁹ "One can discover revanchist traits in *Kurische Nehrung*. One can criticise the film for what it leaves out. There is a lack of depiction: of the virulent National Socialism, of the bad social conditions, of the alcoholism and unemployment in the areas of the former Soviet Union. One can therefore reject (or like) the film for what it shows or conceals. [...] The landscapes of the former East Block countries seem to provide the ideal background for the [...] yearning which fuses nature and childhood into a myth. [...] The film establishes a natural world which has remained unscathed by the culture of decadence of the West, in which honest and unspoilt people live [...]." Translated by Enid Sedgwick from the German original: "Man kann in *Kurische Nehrung* revanchistische Züge entdecken. Man kann den Film für seine Auslassungen kritisieren. Es fehlen Darstellungen: des virulenten Nationalsozialismus, der sozialen Missstände, des Alkoholismus und der Arbeitslosigkeit in den Gebieten der ehemaligen UdSSR. Man kann den Film also ablehnen (oder mögen) für das, was er zeigt oder verbirgt. [...] Die Landschaften der einstigen Ostblockländer scheinen eine ideale Folie für die [...] Sehnsucht abzugeben, die Natur und Kindheit zu einem Mythos verschmilzt. [...] Der Film errichtet eine natürliche Welt, die von der Dekadenzkultur des Westens unversehrt geblieben ist, in der aufrichtige und unverdorbenen Menschen leben [...]." (Peters 2002).

¹⁰ "Interessant ist, dass die Region immer noch nicht wirklich bekannt ist. Man muss oft einen Atlas zu Hilfe nehmen, um zu erklären, wo sich die Kurische Nehrung befindet. Dabei ist der Landstrich nicht weiter entfernt von Berlin als München." Volker Koepp quoted in the programme of the Emden Aurich Norderney International Film festival, 2002.

¹¹ „Volker Koepps *Kurische Nehrung* verklärt das Leben der Bewohner in einer historisch aufgeladenen Landschaft. [...] Die Erinnerungen der Älteren erzählen von Heimatverlust [...] Postkartenidylle.“ (Richter 2001).

¹² Freud coined the phrase "oceanic feeling" to describe an emotive response to the world. At the same time, he was extremely critical of this category: „A feeling that he [the friend] would like to call the sensation of 'Eternity', a feeling as of something unlimited, boundless, so to speak 'oceanic' [...] it is [said to be] the source of religious energy, which is seized upon by the various churches and religious systems, directed into particular channels and is certainly exhausted. Only on the basis of this oceanic feeling may one call oneself religious, even if one rejects all belief and every illusion." Translated by Enid Sedgwick from the German original: "Ein Gefühl, das er [der Freund] die Empfindung der 'Ewigkeit' nennen möchte, ein Gefühl wie von etwas Unbegrenztem, Schrankenlosem, gleichsam 'Ozeanischem' [...] es sei die Quelle der religiösen Energie, die von den

verschiedenen Kirchen und Religionssystemen gefaßt, in bestimmte Kanäle geleitet und gewiß aufgezehrt werde. Nur auf Grund dieses ozeanischen Gefühls dürfe man sich religiös heißen, auch wenn man jeden Glauben und jede Illusion ablehne." (Freud 1953, p. 91).

¹³ This is echoed in Marshall Brennan's statement that modern "environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology [...] But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into the maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish." (Brennan quoted in Morley et al. 1995, p. 86).

¹⁴ Cf. "Heimat film of the 1950s provided German audiences with a sense of security by constructing a model of Heimat in which the integration of the individual into the social hierarchy is displayed in a positive light." (Rippey et al. 1996, p. 150; cf. King 2003, pp. 131-3).

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