

arts and humanities

Heimat – an indefinable concept that gathers three nations

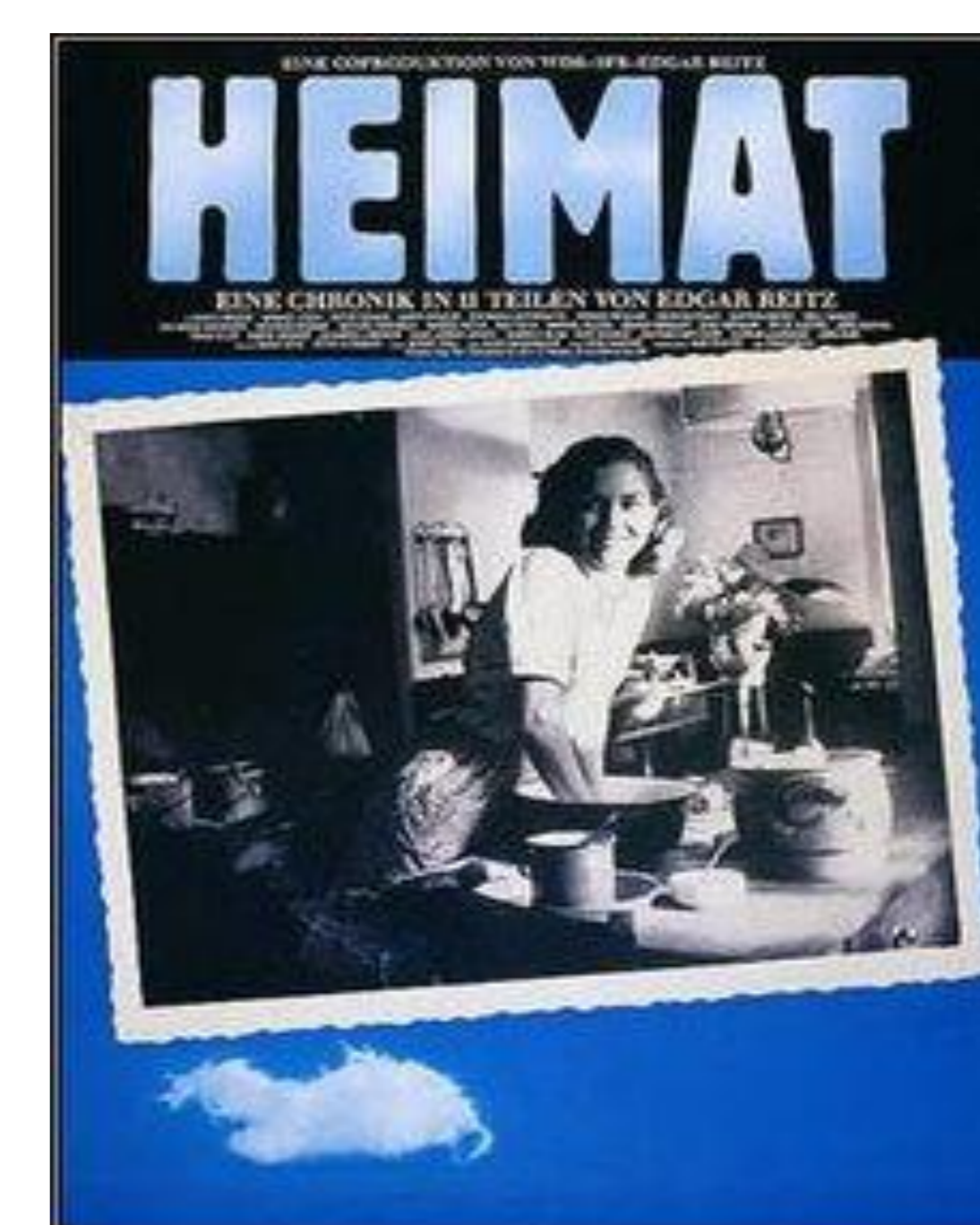
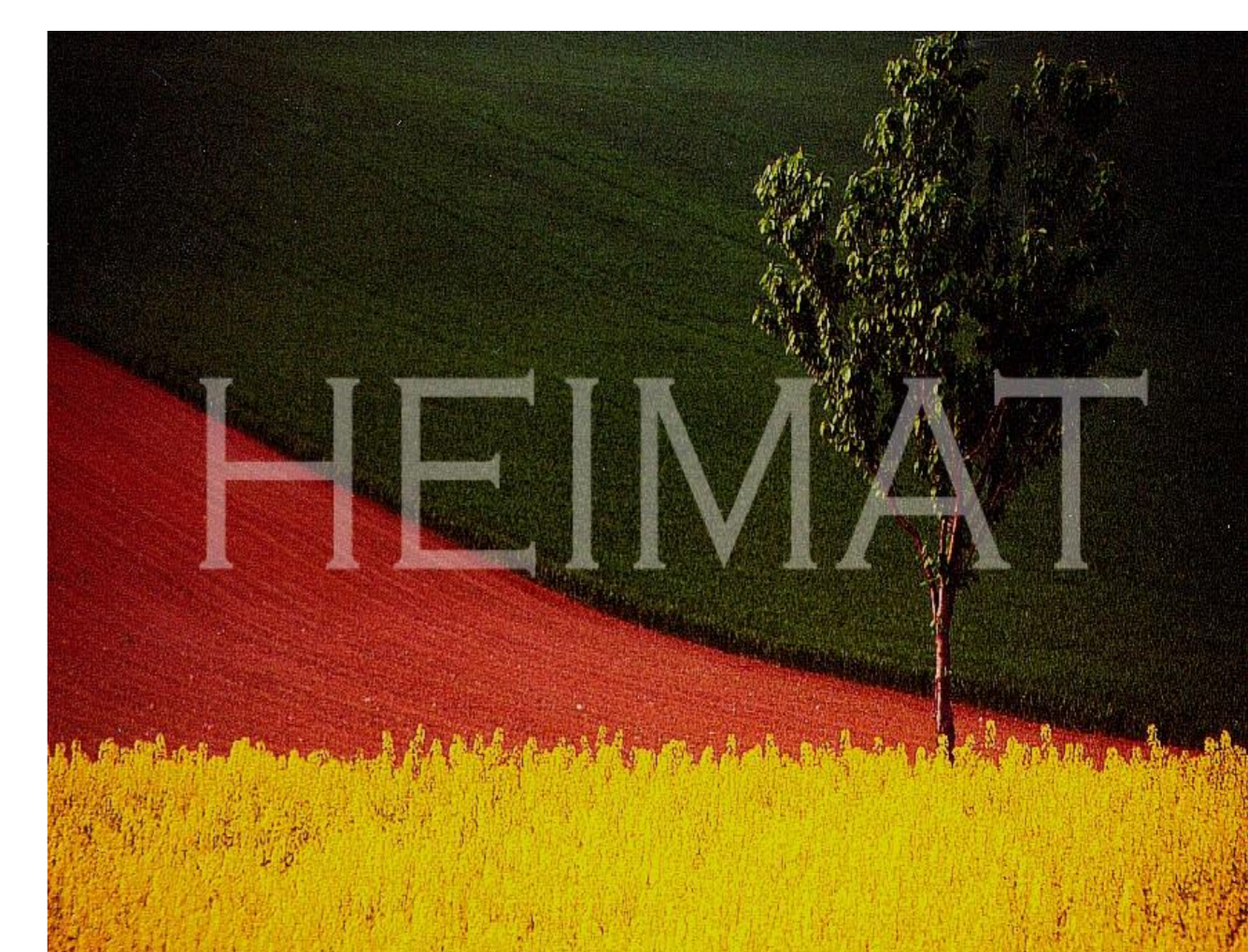
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Abstract

Heimat (German) is an untranslatable word, a concept that may be difficult to understand, as it may be everything that is related to one's love or affection for one's country, city, place of birth. *Heimat* is a feeling of belonging and also one of longing. You feel you belong to something or somewhere, but there is surely more to it than just belonging - the *Heimat* cuddles you, it reassures you. To discuss *Heimat* always implies the search for a definition of this concept and it seems that it is precisely that definition what one can never find. This is a brief attempt to characterize the concept, by explaining its origin and evolution.

Heimat is a quintessential concept of German speaking countries, i. e. Germany, Austria and Switzerland. To discuss *Heimat* always implies a search for a definition of this concept and it is precisely a definition that is hard to find. However deeply we may consult the related literature, one always ends up with a “not only”, with a “maybe” or a “probably”; in short, we face approaches and contributions to define or describe the indefinable. The fact that the word *Heimat* has no literal translation into other languages, although it has correspondents in some Slavonic languages, gives it a unique character, characteristic of peoples united, for example, by a native tongue. In fact, millions of Germans, Austrians and Swiss share this love and attachment to their homeland and describe it in numerous ways. Friedrike Eigler (2012) claims that *Heimat* is a rich set of cultural and ideological connotations that combine notions of belonging and identity with affective attachment to a specific place or region. Hermann Bausinger (1980) asks if *Heimat* and identity are one or if they are two issues linked with each other and comes to the conclusion that *Heimat* is the basis for national identity, if not its essence. According to him, the only difference is that *Heimat* can be located and confined in a place, whereas identity is a question of interior structure, which constitutes, in his opinion, a new development of the concept. The term comes from Teutonic *Heima*, which establishes a relation with the German word *Heim* (home), and is quite close to the English word *homeland*. It denoted the traditional space and place of a clan, society or individual. However, centuries of migrations have imbued *Heimat* with ambivalent notions. According to Celia Applegate (1990), translations barely penetrate the meaning of the word, which has provided an emotional and ideological common ground for a variety of associations and individuals devoted to the cause of local preservation. *Heimat* may be claimed to ground an abstract nationalism and it is often also associated with the idea of reconciling our modern industrial and urban world with rural landscapes, customs and traditions. More prosaically, one should infer from the statements of German and Austrian citizens, when asked about this issue, that *Heimat* is a feeling of something that protects you, a reassuring ‘secret garden’, where soul and body may rest (*Der Spiegel*, 2012). The concept of *Heimat* has been used throughout the centuries either politically, socially, anthropologically, ethnographically or philosophically by well known philosophers such as Nietzsche, Habermas, Freud, Giddens, or Heidegger. In the Third Reich there has been a political appropriation of the concept. National Socialists attached great importance to the ‘place’, the territory, as it was at the heart of their utopian political project. But in this project, *Heimat*, region and Empire, did not constitute separate realms for political interventions, they were rather constantly imagined, constructed and re-moulded. Another interesting aspect concerning this concept is how the film industry grabbed the theme in various films (*Heimatfilme*) where the rural settings, the simplistic morality and the triumph of good over evil dominated the tone. One of the best known cinematographic approaches to *Heimat* is “Heimat” by Edgar Reitz. It is the title of a series of films, episodes, which depict life in Germany between 1900 and 2000 through the eyes of a family from the Rheiland. Both personal and domestic life are set against views of social and political events, covering a century of ideological, social and historical changes. Some consider this series a parody of the above mentioned *Heimatfilme*, highly en vogue in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Today, *Heimat* is currently used as a banner for nationalisms and independence, mainly in small regions like the Tyrol. Finally, we cannot forget to mention the importance of *Heimat* in German-speaking literature. Examples of authors that dedicated some of their most important works to this idea were Schiller, Hölderlin, Heine, Rilke, Thomas Mann and, more recently, Bernhard Schlink. Peter Blickle (2002) considers that all the above mentioned writers dealt with our topic from a perspective of fundamental innocence and pastoral circumstances. One last word goes to the Wasteland-like T.S. Eliot poem by the American Quincy R. Lehr, “Heimat”, published in 2014, where the author wanders through history and the world, as if the latter were everyman's *Heimat*, which ought to be protected from war, political conflicts and attacks to the environment.



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