Heimat (1938)

Alexandra Ludewig

dir. Carl Froelich; prod. Carl Froelich, Friedrich Pflughaupt; screenplay Harald Braun; photography Franz Weihmayr; music Theo Mackeben. 35mm, black/white, 98 mins. Tonfilm-Studio Carl Froelich & Co., distrib. UFA.

Melodramas were *en vogue* in the years leading up to World War II, when even newsreels blurred the lines between fact and fiction and added plenty of sentimental hooks to move audiences (Ludewig 2016, 34). At the time, UFA produced numerous cinematic feature films responding to this melodramatic turn, one of them *Heimat*. In his adaptation of Hermann Sudermann's play *Heimat* (1893), director Carl Froelich cast Zarah Leander in the role of the female protagonist Magda. Magda has experienced a meteoric rise to stardom as a singer in the United States under the pseudonym Maddalena Dall'Orto. Eight years earlier she had fled her home after an affair with the dubious bank director von Keller (played by Franz Schafheitlin), by whom she became pregnant and who then abandoned her to fend for herself in Berlin. To spare her father the shame, Magda did not return to her native village of Ilmingen but left Germany for the U.S.

At the height of her international career abroad, the celebrated singer feels largely rehabilitated and returns to her hometown for a music festival, if only out of homesickness. But »it is easier to leave than to come back,« as Magda knows. She soon faces opposition and hostility for she has become too »Americanized« in the eyes of some (Schulte-Sasse 18). Magda has turned into an American diva who now generates cultural anxieties by presenting herself as a strong female personality with an emphatically erotic appearance and a sense of sexual self-determination in small-town Germany. The song she performs, »A Woman Only Becomes Beautiful through Love,« is about female desire and sexuality.

In the provincial milieu of her birthplace, all of this initially appears out of place (Vaupel 62), and so does her extravagant appearance, her makeup, and the elegant wardrobe, which are further accentuated in the film language by the three-point lighting typical of Hollywood close-ups. She stands in stark contrast to the traditions of her homeland; her plunging necklines, figure-hugging dresses, coquetry, foreign stage name, and her cabaret songs performed with biting irony further deepen the gulf between the German province steeped in tradition and the wider world full of unknown dangers and seductions. In these moments of juxtaposition, one is likely to forget that Froelich's *Heimat* is shot in black and white, as Magda seems to radiate such colorfulness.

Magda's father, the despotic retired colonel Leopold von Schwartze (played by Heinrich George), opposes her unconditional re-admission into the local community after he learns of her extramarital motherhood—unless she marries von Keller, the biological father of her child. In fact, the banker himself is also interested in reconnecting with the now affluent artist as he is in a dire financial situation and is seeking to avert the discovery of a fraud. When Magda recognizes the base motives and dishonest traits of her former lover, who now wants to give their child up for adoption, she refuses to marry him. In a private argument between father and daughter, von Schwartze threatens that as an officer's daughter she must understand that he has given von Keller his word of honor that she would marry him, otherwise »neither of us […] will leave this room alive.« Magda's refusal results in a murder motif reminiscent of that in Lessing's drama *Emilia Galotti* (1772). However, in the moment of high drama the father faints before he can carry out the murder with which he wanted to save his dubious sense of honor. Parallel to this dramatic climax, von Keller is questioned by the police, whereupon he commits suicide. After this dramatic turn of events, nothing stands in the way of the reconciliation between father and daughter. Magda's performance of Bach's aria »Buß und Reu« during a mass in the local church becomes the vehicle to bring grandfather and granddaughter together. In a most melodramatic scene, von Schwartze is supposedly overcome by the primal force of blood ties for his granddaughter, who proudly introduces the gifted artist to him on stage as »my mummy.« The rapprochement of grandfather and granddaughter prepares the teary family reunion during which von Schwartze's authority is confirmed as head of the new extended family and Magda is accepted back into the community.

By the end of the film, all antagonisms and conflicts have been resolved not least by the power of music. As an artistic expression of both Germanness and repentance, this cathartic turn was almost universally intelligible. Magda's desires and hopes probably resonated with contemporaneous audiences, as the roles ascribed to women were changing drastically at that time in National Socialist Germany (Wiggershaus 7-9). Despite the right to vote, emancipatory tones, and propagated cosmopolitanism, many women were only featured as minor characters, as mother and housewife, after their marriage. »Being a woman means being a mother« (Groote 23). Even though Magda conveniently escapes this domestication through the death of the impostor, her career is secondary after her return to the bosom of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. »Returning home to the Reich« is her destiny. Depicted is the quintessence of home, a world with traditional laws and customs, inscribed in the rituals of its microcosm, the family (Koonz 210). Magda's decision to return to her homeland shows that ostentatiously the pull of blood and soil is stronger than the lure of American glamor. Even in the face of the provinciality and hostility in her village, Magda has to admit to herself, »This nest is my home.« Magda's reintegration is paradigmatic of other prodigal sons and daughters in German cinema at the time (most notably Luis Trenker's *Prodigal Son*, 1934) who temporarily prioritized the pursuit of individual fulfilment over family and community. But like Magda, they too can be successfully re-integrated if they repentantly admit their mistakes and submit to strong father figures and a patriarchal moral code. However, if this unification cannot be achieved peacefully, the film also sanctions violence. Threats and coercion are tolerated as legitimate means when it comes to punishing or eliminating outsiders in the German empire. The references to the proud militaristic traditions as well as references to betrayal, necessary interrogation, to standing at attention, the necessity of having to defend someone with one's blood, and life as a struggle with necessary defeat and victory, are a part of this not-so-subtle subtext.

Set in the late 19th century, the film does not attempt to modernize Sudermann's story to explicitly fit the context of the 1930s and 40s. However, the problems that were current in the small town in 1885, the conflict between the individual and society, the narrowness and restrictions of expectations in the family and home village, as well as the lure of mobility as an alternative to confinement, remain relevant in the context of the 1930s. The authority figures of society have a clear message: Militarism is good for order (Strzelcyk 129). Thus, at the Court Ball, dialogues like the following are programmatic: »Whoever wants to cultivate the ideal goods of the nation should join a warriors' club . . .«—»But not everyone is lucky enough to have been a soldier.« It's all about duty and discipline and order, because »there must be authority.« »Honor« and steps to rehabilitate a »disgraced family« to »right wrongs« are highly respected. These are all resonant militaristic, racist, and similarly ideological tones in years of increasing domestic as well as foreign political aggression and self-righteousness. Marching tunes, parades, dashing uniforms, the poor but honorable officer, trumpet calls for roll call, guards, posts, the need to report are all familiar to the audience of 1938 from their reality at the time. The nationalistic tones of the film are also highly topical, when discrimination is shown against »an American« and racist comments about people of color are made. Moreover, purist ideology is foregrounded in statements such as »Bach belongs to a German singer.« Indeed, Froelich's melodrama *Heimat* is by no means free of National Socialist propaganda and anti-Semitism—the latter in the portrayal of the failed banker—and this Nazi-conform subtext was probably the reason why the film was distributed with the rating »state-politically and artistically valuable« and decorated with prizes at the time of its appearance. The film's legacy can be gleaned from its use in Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* trilogy (women are shown crying at the movies while watching the plight of Froelich's Magda) to comment on the continuity of shared troubles and melodramatic predispositions in Germany over time (Ludewig 2011, 140).

References

Groote, Paula Siber von. 1933. *Die Frauenfrage und ihre Lösung durch den Nationalsozialismus*. Berlin: Kallmeyer.

Koonz, Claudia. 1991. *Mütter im Vaterland: Frauen im Dritten Reich*. Freiburg: Kore.

Ludewig, Alexandra. 2011. *Screening Nostalgia: 100 Years of German Heimat Film*. Bielefeld: transcript.

---. 2016. »Heimat.« In *Heimatfilm international*, edited by Jürgen Heizmann, 34-41. Stuttgart: Reclam.

Schulte-Sasse, Linda. 1996. *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Strzelczyk, Florentine. 2000. »Far Away, So Close: Carl Froelich's Heimat.« In *Cultural History through the National Socialist Lens: Essays on the Cinema of the Third Reich*, edited by Robert C. Reimer, 109-32. Rochester: Camden House.

Vaupel, Angela. 2005. *Frauen im NS-Film: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Spielfilms*. Hamburg: Dr. Kovač.

Wiggershaus, Renate, ed. 1984. *Frauen unterm Nationalsozialismus*. Wuppertal: Peter Hammer.