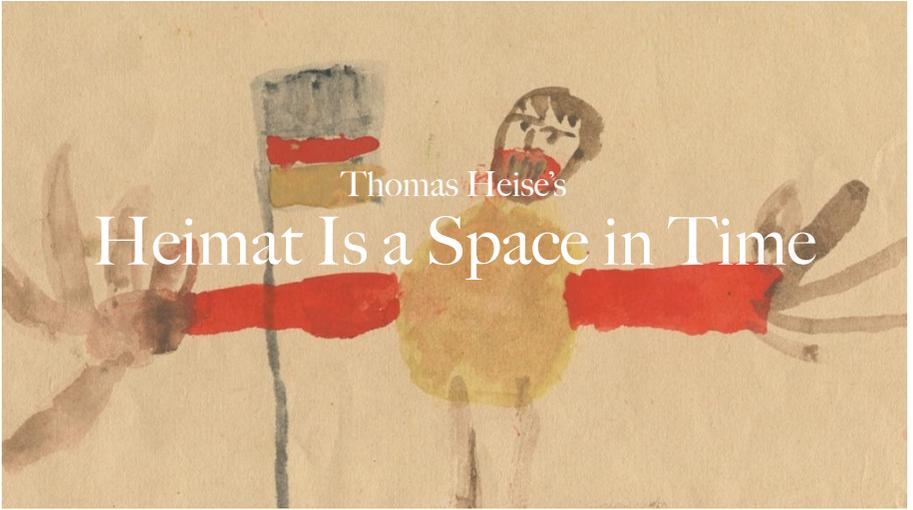


Acropolis Cinema
presents:



March 13-19, 2020 - 7:30pm - Lumiere Music Hall

ABOUT THE FILM

Thomas Heise's *Heimat is a Space in Time* is a monumental work that traces four generations of the director's family's archives, from the 19th century to the present — their intimate stories revealing the larger cultural and political events that have shaped the past hundred years of German history. The collage of documents in the film include letters and diaries that Heise reads, in voiceover, to luminous black-and-white images of various German landscapes and spaces. In this immersive work, silences reveal as much as what is said, with fragments drawing attention to what is missing. Heise's family was torn apart only to have subsequent generations coalesce and try to make sense of their remnants. *Heimat is a Space in Time* spans both world wars, economic collapse, a horrific genocide, and the rise and fall of political ideologies, and it is Heise's focus on the small details of personal experience, the subtlest shifts of light across a landscape, that make for his film's most visceral experiences. (TIFF)

218 min. | Germany/Austria | 2019

In person: Thomas Heise (March 13)

Truth and Method by Michael Sicinski

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Cinema Scope 79

“Archaeology is about Digging” is the title of an essay by Thomas Heise, included in the DVD booklet for several of his films, including the 2009 film *Material*, a key film in terms of raising Heise's profile outside of Europe. In the essay, the filmmaker describes the circumstances surrounding the making of the films included on the disc, particularly those early works made while living in the GDR prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Heise explains, the work of the documentarian under oppressive conditions entails a kind of double vision, since the scenes before him or her are seldom overt in terms of what they are revealing.

He writes, “In a dictatorship, the idea is to amass hidden stores of images and words, portraying the things that people living under the dictatorship might have actually experienced, but that could not necessarily be seen or heard. Then, when the dictatorship is no more, those images will have borne witness to it.” Since it is not always clear how society will progress (or devolve), one must be a bit of a packrat (or a mole, Heise's own metaphor), keeping a substantial archive of documents whose full meaning will only be apparent later, in a kind of historical *Nachträglichkeit*.

Heise's latest film, *Heimat Is a Space in Time*, is his longest to date. In just under four hours, Heise examines nearly 100 years of family history, pieced together from private

correspondence, official documents, audio recordings, photographs, drawings, and other sorts of historical evidence. The film is, in the fullest sense, a Foucauldian project, in that it is both archeological and genealogical. In working with this strand of artifacts, Heise provides eyewitness testimony to the workings of 20th-century German history, first under the Third Reich, and then under the Stalinist regime of the GDR. But he also delineates intensely personal relationships: between parents and children, siblings, spouses, and dear friends. The question the film presents is not just how individuals were subject to the vicissitudes of history, but also how those broader structures, insidious as they were, worked to shape the very conditions under which personal bonds could form.

In some respects, *Heimat Is a Space in Time* is the film that Heise was always leading up to. By using his own family as the rough template for a century of German history, Heise “gets personal,” but at the same time treats this material as if it were any other archive. In an interview with Clause Löser on the occasion of *Heimat*’s world premiere in the 2019 Berlinale Forum, Heise describes his method: “Essentially, I act as if everything already took place some 2,000 years ago, where no one knows anything about the broader context of the time any more. These fragments are the only thing available and can be used to make some sort of picture, although there are many, many gaps between them. And these gaps can be filled in just by thinking.”

Heise is speaking specifically about his decision not to include a sort of family-tree graphic that would help a viewer keep all of the relationships clear in his or her mind as they watched. But more than this, the quote speaks to Heise’s actual presentation of the letters and other artifacts. Aside from the inclusion of dates, there are no “footnotes,” per se. Heise trusts his viewer to understand how the events described fit within the larger framework of German political events. And in fact, the discrepancy between family and broader history generates its own forms of suspense and tragedy.

After the end of WWII, the focus of the film shifts to Heise’s parents. His father, Wolfgang, was a philosophy professor; his mother, Rosemarie, was a writer and editor who appears to have been a fairly high-ranking member of the East German Writers’ Union, based on what I could glean from events narrated in the film. As is sometimes the case with academic couples, the two lived apart for some time, and so the film contains many letters between Wolfgang and Rosi.

In time, Wolfgang ran afoul of the Communist authorities, in particular because of his unwillingness to condemn three of his colleagues who had been judged ideologically impure. He lost his associate deanship, and by all accounts was subject to harassment by the Stasi for the remainder of his life. In the only departure from his overall method of sticking to family memorabilia, Heise includes an official document discussing his father’s status as a suspected enemy of the state.

Later on in the same part of the film, we learn that Wolfgang Heise was subject to pressure by his colleagues, and the government, to sign a letter protesting an article about GDR philosophy published by an Italian journal. When he refused, he fled Berlin

for the village of Ahrenshoop, near the Baltic Sea. In an anguished letter from Rosi to Wolfgang, she acknowledges that she was forced to give his address to the members of the Philosophical Institute. “I didn’t want to give them your address,” she agonizes, while admitting “I just can’t judge what is right in this case.” Later, as the film shows us images of a demolished highway, we learn that Wolfgang still refused to sign, and in a subsequent letter, Rosi tells him she is proud of him, and knows he is frightened of the repercussions. “Come what may,” Rosi writes, “I feel thoroughly ready to stare steely into life’s tight-lipped countenance, as long as you are by my side, in whatever way possible.”

Despite having no choice, Rosi’s guilt at divulging Wolfgang’s whereabouts is palpable. But one of the overriding impressions one gets from *Heimat*, as with *Material*, is that virtually no one came away clean from life in the GDR. Admired intellectuals like Christa Wolf and Heise’s own mentor Heiner Müller have been accused of playing small roles as Stasi informers. Wolfgang Heise’s apparent ability to retain his integrity, and stay alive while doing it, is remarkable, though shifts in the state apparatus, as well as sheer luck, were clearly factors.

If there is a single moment in *Heimat Is a Space in Time* that could somehow serve as an epigram or even a thesis statement for such a sprawling film, it comes from a passage in Rosi’s diary. She writes: “I still recall passing through a pine grove, with the oblique slant of the autumnal sunbeams, when Wolfgang said we need to be clear about one thing: this State, like any State, is an instrument of domination, and its ideology, like all ideology: false consciousness. We stood still. I clearly recall asking: ‘So what should we do?’ We were silent for some time until he finally replied: ‘Remain decent.’”

Müller referred to Wolfgang Heise as “the only true philosopher of the GDR,” and his student, the dissident folk singer Wolf Biermann, sang of him as “my GDR-Voltaire.” If we look to Thomas Heise’s films as a continuation of that example, what do they tell us? Not only that we must understand broad historical events in terms of the traumatic affect and ruptures of *habitus* that they wreak on ordinary people. Especially now, with economic and political uncertainty thrusting so many into the arms of neo-fascist tribalism, Heise’s cinema provides a challenge, a working method. How do we fight against conditions under which it is no longer possible to remain decent?

Coming Soon to Acropolis

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