

*Bruder Schwester* (*Brother Sister*, Germany 2010, Maria Mohr, 90 min.)

What's in a relationship? And what is the nature of kinship? Is it a pure matter of social or even biological bonds, or a connection way beyond that, reaching further, into the realms of spirituality? Maria Mohr's films draw close (autobiographical as well as experimental) circles around these questions. Accordingly, she reduces her titles to the quintessential line in focus – *Cousin Cousine* in her first known (short) film from 2005, and now *Bruder Schwester* (*Brother Sister*), her first feature length documentary.

After a wonderfully intimate, personal introductory reflection upon Super 8-images of her brother Matthias who died at the age of 23 and yet had something mysteriously deep and mature about him, it soon becomes clear that the notion of brother- & sisterhood – in this film as well as in Maria Mohr's life – is severely challenged by another family member, aunt Ingrid, who entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus when she was just 19. Her opting for a life in the hands of God was once accompanied by her brother, Maria's father, who was going to become a priest, but then quit, because he couldn't live up to celibacy. Yet Ingrid's sisterly love is dedicated to another "brother", Rafael Arnaiz Baron (1911-1938), a fairly well known 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic, whose writings she has translated, whose relics collected, whose canonization supported (successfully, by the way, and the film actually documents the – moderated – soccer-game-like-atmosphere in Rome's St. Peter), and whose volcanic love for Jesus she admires more than anything in this world (and the other, too).

What is so intriguing about *Bruder Schwester* is not only Mohr's courage to tackle the religious, the existential, and the self in an empathic and honest, yet non-sentimental way, but also her fine intertwining of the striking parallels between Matthias, the earthly, and Rafael, the heavenly brother – both died young, suffering from a deadly illness, both were deeply anchored in belief, both preferred silence to the spoken word and enjoyed the withdrawal from society (Rafael as a trappist monk, Matthias as a feather collecting lone wolf). The plot structure resembles more a kind of rhizomatic than a structuralist model, allowing the film to work on a documentary level as much as on an experimental, introspective one. And that is exactly why visually stunning scenes like the ghostly appearance of some mask-like faces of Carmelite nuns behind the bars of the Avila monastery are contrasted by a joyous everyday sandwich lunch hour of other nuns – together they depict the broad spectre of a spirituality that touches upon higher things and at the same time becomes something completely (sometimes frighteningly) normal. Common. Nearly self evident. For the viewer, Maria and Ingrid's journey towards the inner world of their "brothers" turns into a trip to the "heart of lightness". A trip, however, that includes the chance to return home – an earthly home, a family home –, be it real, be it imaginary. In the end, Maria's hands finally caress her brother's face. A gesture as simple as this. What a gesture! "Saints are no beasts", says Ingrid, alluding to the fact that brother Rafael's favourite role in theatre was Don Juan ...

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