

Unusually Gothic

Robert Sigl's *Laurin* (1987)

Marcus Stiglegger revives a lost Gothic treasure in this brief discussion of Robert Sigl's *Laurin*—a rare case of German genre film-making and the heir to FW Murnau's legacy.

Phantastic genre cinema is very rare in contemporary Germany—especially in the 1980s, the time when Italian horror reached another peak with Dario Argento's *Opera* (1985). The cliché of the German "easy comedy" ruled mainstream film production at the time, and so it appeared a kind of miracle when 27-year-old writer/director Robert Sigl was awarded the Bavarian Film Prize in 1988 for his debut feature: the Gothic horror fairytale *Laurin*.

In a sinister German city located by the sea in the 19th century, the nine-year-old girl Laurin (Dóra Szinetár) grows up, her youth overshadowed by a dark fate—her mother died in a mysterious accident—while her father is often absent for he is a sailor. But there are visions torturing her fragile soul as well. Increasingly, she is convinced that the murder of a little boy could be connected to her mother's death.

When the new teacher Von Rees (Károly Eperjes)—son to the dominant local priest—starts working in her school, her nightmare visions become more intense and concrete. Laurin's sickly boyfriend Stefan (Barnabás Tóth) and the girl herself decide to solve the mystery of the local child killings which Laurin seems to foresee in her dreams. Nearly risking their lives they uncover the teacher Van Rees as the homosexual killer. Previously Laurin's mother had witnessed one of his crimes, and accidentally died in her attempt at escape. Wearing the robe of her dead mother, Laurin succeeds in frightening the killer, who dies falling down the stairs—directly into a huge rusty nail.

Sigl's vision

Robert Sigl graduated from the film school in Munich after writing a long analysis of Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976). Immediately afterwards he managed to sell his script *Laurin* and raised the necessary money to shoot the film in Eastern Europe^[1]—"where there are places where we didn't even have to change anything—it still looked like a hundred years ago," he says. Although made with a minimum budget, Sigl manages to awake the brooding atmosphere of some of Werner Herzog's historical dramas, even preserving the magical realism of Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979).

Polanski, Herzog, Jacques Tourneur, Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick are clearly among Sigl's influences. But there are also glimpses of Dario Argento's and Lucio Fulci's gothic horror films of the 1970s (eg, *Inferno* [1980] and *The Beyond* [1981]).

Sigl highlights the psycho-thriller structure by creating an almost surreal atmosphere, using coloured lights (red, blue and green) to contrast the monochrome historical settings. His fetishisation of certain details—a doll, the robe, the nail, a photo of the young girl's mother, etc—is also reminiscent of the excessive close-up style of Argento. In *Laurin*, all of these elements seem to live a life of their own. Sigl's *vision du monde* is an animistic one indeed...

Viewers of Sigl's early short film *Der Weihnachtsbaum* (*The Christmas Tree*, 1983) will also notice another familiar element here: the father/son conflict, driven by a dark and destructive homosexual desire which creates a very disturbing mood of latent violence and repression.

The relationship between father and son Von Rees in *Laurin* is characterised in precisely that way. And it also seems important that the elder Von Rees is a radical and apocalyptic Catholic priest. "I hate the Christian church and especially the Pope," says Sigl, whose other projects so far—most of them unfilmed at this point—also include elements of gothic horror, occultism, heresy and a perverse homoerotic undertone.

One can find these elements in the "Giga Shadow" episode Sigl directed for the German-Canadian television series *Lexx: The Dark Zone* (1997), while gothic horror reappears in his German made-for-TV teen slasher movie, *Schrei—denn ich werde dich töten!* (*School's Out*, 1999).[2] Unfortunately, however, fans of *Laurin*—a truly unique attempt in German gothic fiction to bring to life the worlds conceived by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and ETA Hoffmann's literature at the same time—will still need to wait for an equal output by this very rare phenomenon, Robert Sigl: a German genre filmmaker.[3]

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Footnotes

1. Editor's note: The film was shot in Holólkő and Szentendre, Hungary, and used Hungarian actors. Károly Eperjes, for example, is one of Hungary's foremost film actors and would have been used to working in German-language film from his performances in the last two parts of

István Szabó's internationally acclaimed "Central European trilogy" of the 1980s.

2. This film is available on video and DVD in the USA (Mti Home Video).

3. *Laurin* is available as a Director's Cut special edition DVD in Germany (e-m-s media), one which also features the English dubbed version of the film.