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## Stations of the Cross (Kreuzweg)

### **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Stations of the Cross (Kreuzweg)* (2014) directed by Dietrich Brüggeman.

Dietrich Brüggeman's *Stations of the Cross* (or known by its original German title, *Kreuzweg*) is an unflinching, unnerving portrait of Christian fundamentalism in its most dire embodiment. The film follows the life of fourteen year old Maria, who is raised and instructed in a strict, almost fanatical Catholic environment. She is told repeatedly by her mother and by religious authorities that the ways of the world are sinful and any participation in such corrupt frivolities, like secular music, dancing, and fashion, will prevent her from entering Heaven. Following these warnings, she undergoes a series of severe abstentions from worldly imports, such as friendship and even medicine. By doing so, she hopes to achieve a level of martyrdom, similarly to how Jesus suffered on his way to his own cross. Such sacrifice on her part, she is convinced, will heal her autistic and silent baby brother.

The story is told through fourteen stand-still shots, each beginning with a title of one of the fourteen traditional Stations of the Cross that depict Jesus Christ on the day of his crucifixion. There is a parallel drawn between the events of Maria's story and those of Jesus' pending crucifixion in each segment, and even though this correlation sometimes feels forced, the overarching themes of religious martyrdom and suffering help strengthen the comparison. Of course this quest for martyrdom is fortified by a kind of spiritual warfare mentality, one too often found in contemporary religious systems, where believers are asked to fight and, if necessary, to die for their faith at all costs. As the priest of this radical church explains to the children early in the film, "...warriors for Christ, that's what you'll become at Confirmation; warriors for Christ." Fueled by a dualistic theology that serves to defeat the evil secular world, the father continues, "We meet dozens of temptations each day and each time it is a small battle between God and his adversary, Satan. We are warriors in that battle." This type of militaristic teaching spawns an active, martyrdom-seeking mentality in Maria, and she proceeds to live out her faith in this fashion.

In doing so, Brüggeman implicitly raises several questions about the nature of pedagogical religious education. Rigid atheists like Richard Dawkins have long contended that the indoctrinating of any religious system into young children is a form of child abuse, and while this film does not take up a position so severe, it does naturally raise important questions about the role of religious indoctrination in childhood development.

Without wanting to give too much of the story away, suffice it to say that the film is what many critics would call a ‘tough watch.’ I personally found the film difficult to sit through not because it is of poor quality, but because the content is so disturbing. There is no question that Maria is both emotionally and psychologically abused, the system of that abuse often stemming from ill-conceived religious doctrine. Watching the ramifications of that theological strain play out on screen - progressively worsening until it at last becomes a matter of life and death - leaves little room for emotional neutrality on the part of the viewer. Such engagement should be credited in large part to the excellent acting of the young actress, Lea van Acken. Acken’s portrayal of Maria requires her to be captivating, since the film’s style leaves little room for emotional editorial manipulation, and thankfully Acken is up to the task. In all of her scenes, she superbly, yet subtly, demonstrates the distress and conflict that rages within the young teenager’s mind and soul.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this film, however, is the way in which the story is told. Each of the fourteen segments consists of one scene and one take. Each shot is simply constructed and yet is still complex and rich in depth, allowing an overwhelming sense of realism to permeate into the viewer. Of course, this formal, realistic style contributes to the aforementioned difficulty in watching this film. The lack of shot-to-shot editing forces the audience to witness many of these very uncomfortable situations and dialogues unfold before them.

What is of particular interest in this film is the camera movement and how it adds to the storyline. The camera is stationary for the vast majority of time, never moving, never tilting or panning. Such a fixated portrait of each scene highlights the unchanging rigidity of the doctrine contained within the film itself. Yet there are three times, by this viewer's count, when the camera is freed from its static posture. All of these movements are quite noticeable and force us as audience members to question the motives of Brüggeman in maneuvering the camera at these particular times. What significance do these movements hold? Is there an underlying reason tied directly to the story and its religious themes, or are these shifts simply the product of cinematographic necessity? It would appear that while the first movement might fall into the latter reasoning, the last two camera movements (one of which also closes out the film) clearly do not operate from any sense of diegetic necessity. The break in formalism is clearly meant to symbolize an attempt to escape from the rigid doctrine that dominates so much of the film, making *Stations of the Cross* one of the more recent, successful works in which film style corresponds directly to the religious convictions presented within the story.

If there is to be a critique of this film, it is perhaps to be found in its sometimes one-dimensional portrayal of the religious fundamentalist attitude. Some critics have argued the radical stances of the characters almost seem deliberately ludicrous, as if Brüggeman is staging an emotional straw-man in some ways. Maria's conservative and abusive mother (Franziska Weisz) is written as such; she functions as a one-beat character, void of any other real, discernible characteristics while her strictness and anger operate in a vacuum of sorts. This very well might be a valid cinematic critique, but it would serve folks well to remember that the film's portrayal of fundamentalism and militaristic Christianity is not far removed from real-life scenarios, as have been well noted in documentaries such as the critically acclaimed *Jesus Camp* (2007). The

fictional characters and circumstances of *Stations of the Cross* are not that distant from real-life examples which exist in many of the current evangelical streams.