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## Serviam – I Will Serve

Serviam - ich will dienen



EPO-Film

### VERDICT: A twisted sister at an all-girl Catholic school pushes her fanatical faith to dangerous extremes in Ruth Mader's stylish, gripping psycho-horror thriller.

Stephen Dalton

August 12th, 2022

A psychological horror film animated by thorny questions about the clash between religious and secular values, *Serviam - I Will Serve* has been a long-gestating passion project for Austrian writer-director Ruth Mader, who drew on her own experiences as a Catholic schoolgirl for elements of the narrative. World premiering in competition at both the Locarno and Sarajevo film festivals, this superior Euro-thriller is composed with a crisp, stylish, eye-pleasing aesthetic and an emotionally chilly, morally ambivalent tone reminiscent of the director's sometime mentor, Michael Haneke.

*Serviam* marks a rare return to full-length dramatic features by Mader, who first earned international attention with her Cannes-platformed debut *Struggle* (2003), but who has mostly made shorts and documentaries since. This modern-day passion play moves in mysterious ways, occasionally marred by off-key narrative shifts, but still a highly atmospheric and superbly crafted work overall. With its genre-friendly trappings and taut suspense plot, it also has solid potential to finally boost Mader's reputation beyond the art-house fringes.

The film's claustrophobic, stylishly shot location is a private all-girls Catholic school in Austria, sometime in the 1980s, though the indistinct setting is only opaquely readable from background clues, notably the period fashions and fleetingly glimpsed cars. Behind their well-drilled surface performance of beatific love-thy-neighbour sweetness, the school's pre-teen students are typical mean girls, mostly dumped there by their wealthy but disinterested parents. Bullying is rife, with entitled rich kids like the disaffected Sabine (Leona Lindinger) ganging up against poor outsiders like Armo (Anna Elisabeth Berger,). Even the unnamed, ferociously devout young sister who runs the school's boarding wing (Maria Dragus) joins in with these cruel power games. "Don't act up," she warns the vulnerable Armo, "you are merely tolerated here."

A magnetic presence on screen, Dragus gives a chillingly calm performance, hinting at the kind of deep-grained evil that only comes with indestructible conviction in your own goodness. With an intense religious faith bordering on fanaticism, this twisted sister appears to view herself as a last line of defence against the rising tide of atheism that forms an ever-present phantom menace in *Serviam*. In one intense scene, an angry father arrives to remove his daughter from the school, attacking the nun's devotion to a dying cause in withering terms. "Your whole world will be torn apart like cobwebs," he sneers. "You are afraid of love."

But the sister's secret weapon is indoctrination, doing what she clearly sees as God's work by filling her impressionable young students with fear and self-loathing. Her feverish version of service is couched in the language of ecstatic love and eternal salvation, but in practice it shades into psychological and even physical abuse. In the case of her favorite student Martha (Sophia Gómez-Schreiber), it involves a clandestine regime of painful penitence that leads to life-threatening injury, which the innocent girl takes to be a stigmata, a sign of approval sent down by God himself. Realising she has pushed Martha too far, the sister panics and engineers a cover-up that involves lying to children, parents and fellow teachers. This deception has tragic repercussions for another student, pushing the culprit to even more desperate extremes.

Mader's pulse-racing finale, a tense cat-and-mouse showdown in an eerily deserted school, draws knowingly on the jumpy visual grammar of horror cinema. But *Serviam* ultimately sidesteps genre expectations for a lesson in redemption, a tonal twist that elevates the film from outwardly anti-religious thriller to more ambiguous affirmation of Christian values like humility and mercy. After the steady crescendo of tension that the film has delivered before this point, payed with teasing hints of psychotic mania and diabolical malice, this prosaic spiced-off feels a little deflating. Echoing the Catholic church's long history of smoothing over child abuse, Mader also seems all too keen to forgive some pretty serious sins here.

But besides a few minor wobbles, *Serviam* is generally gripping, intelligent and beautifully composed. Like all Mader's films, it has been meticulously story-boarded, rigorously choreographed, and art-designed to precision, with striking use of symmetrical tableaux and imposing architectural spaces. Adding an extra layer of autobiographical resonance, the location is actually the real private Catholic school that the director herself attended, which she and her team transform into a chilly modernist penitentiary of glass and metal, cell-like sleeping quarters and mysterious forbidden zones. There are distant echoes of the cursed dance academy in Dario Argento's *Suspria* (1977) here, but also hints of the politically charged way in which Antonioni or Kubrick framed contemporary buildings, teasing out the latent menace in their chilly geometry.

One of the boldest stylistic choices in *Serviam* is its use of childlike animations as chapter divides, using apocalyptic imagery from the Book of Revelation including the sacrificial Lamb of God, the pale horse associated with death, and a hovering alien monster with hundreds of eyes. Aside from confirming The Bible as the original source of so much horror movie imagery, these dream-like sequences emphasise Mader's interest in giving her parable-like story a genuinely mystical, spiritual dimension, particularly when viewed through the innocent eyes of its young protagonists. Production design, costumes, sound design and music are all strong elements too, with Manfred Plessl's thunderously dramatic score counterpointed by more ruminative classical pieces, including Schubert's plaintive *Piano Trio in E Flat*, as previously delployed to memorable effect in Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975).

Venue: Sarajevo Film Festival (Competition)

Cast: Maria Dragus, Leona Lindinger, Anna Elisabeth Berger, Sophia Gómez-Schreiber, Petra Morzé

Director: Ruth Mader

Screenplay: Ruth Mader, Martin Leidenfrost

Cinematography: Christine A. Maier

Editing: Niki Mossböck

Producers: Dieter Pochlatko, Jakob Pochlatko, Ruth Mader

Production design: Renate Martin, Andreas Donhauser, Donmartin Supersets

Sound design: Nils Kirchhoff

Music: Manfred Plessl

Costumes: Tanja Hausner

Animation: Alexander Dworsky, Beniamin Urbanek

Production companies: Epo-Film (Austria), Ruth Mader Filmproduktion (Austria)

World sales: Playtime

In German, Spanish

106 minutes

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