Robert Schneider’s Novel *Schlafes Bruder* in the Light of its Screen Version by Joseph Vilsmaier

The range of Austrian authors, who – reflecting the “backward orientation”\(^1\) of the aesthetic discourse of the post-war era in combination with “hypocritical harmony”\(^2\) – portray the “homeland as a distorted and destroyed marginal phenomenon”\(^3\) includes names such as Hermann Broch, Hans Lebert, and Thomas Bernhard as well as Elfriede Jelinek and Christoph Ransmayr. Robert Schneider’s *Schlafes Bruder* (1992) with its depiction of the cut-off mountain village Eschberg belongs to this category, as it is, again, not comfort and support that the homeland provides, but despair. Within this context of the “negative homeland” or “rural” novel, this essay offers a comparative analysis of *Schlafes Bruder* and its 1995 film adaptation by Joseph Vilsmaier with the latter focusing on the village life and its internal logic dominated by intrigues, envy, incest, and jealousy.\(^4\) All these characteristic features are subsequently contrasted with the genius and otherness of Johannes Elias Alder, whose downfall nevertheless seems inevitable.\(^5\) An evaluation of the aesthetic potential of both film and literary text concludes this analysis by way of exploring the “differences with other (con-)texts”\(^6\).

Robert Schneider, born in Bregenz in 1961, grew up in Vorarlberg. In Vienna, he studied music, art history, and the theatre. With the help of an American private scholarship, the *Abraham Woursell Award*, he was able to write *Schlafes Bruder*, his first novel, which came out in 1992 and forms the first part of the so-called *Rheintalische Trilogie*, completed with *Die Luftgängerin* and *Die Unberührten*. The number of publishers refusing the initial script had reached twenty-three when finally Reclam in Leipzig decided in favour of publication.

---

2.“verlogene Idyllik”. Ibid. P. 160.
3.“Heimat als entstellte, zerstörte Randerscheinung”. Ibid.
4*Brother of Sleep* was released in Germany on 5th October 1995. It won, for example, the 1996 “Bavarian Film Award” for “Best Production”, the 1996 “Film Strip in Gold” from the German Film Awards, and was nominated for the 1996 Golden Globe in the category of “Best Foreign Language Film”.
The book was an immediate success, with translations into two-dozen languages. The edition used here is the twenty-seventh dating 2003. *Schlafes Bruder* tells the story of the “failure” (201) called Johannes Elias Alder, his cursed love for his cousin Elsbeth, and his genial musical talent. The music theme features in the book title already when a reference to Bach is made, whose cantata “Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen” (BWV 56 [5]) is quoted in the actual novel (173):

```
Come, O death, of sleep the brother,
Come and lead me hence now forth;
Loosen now my small bark’s rudder,
Bring thou me secure to port!
Others may desire to shun thee,
Thou canst all the more delight me;
For through thee I’ll come inside
To the fairest Jesus-child. 
```

This, as well as the setting, hardly disguised as Schneider’s homeland, has triggered attempts to classify the book as an “artist’s and a rural novel”. Proof of this could indeed be the dialect used. At the same time, this linguistic variation in combination with dated (and dating) German and expressions rooted in vulgarised Latin fosters the illusion of a time warp back into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century respectively.

However, it remains an open question if and how such an attempt at classification clarifies in how far the novel simply repeats characteristics of that genre or whether it has something new on offer. In this respect, it is helpful to turn to a hint that Schneider has given when speaking of *Schlafes Bruder* as a “negative genius novel” the reason being that the artist is rendered incapable

---

7 Further down in the body of the text, references to the novel will be given in brackets.
8 The translation was carried out by Z. P. Ambrose (see http://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach/BWV56.html).
10 See, for example, expressions like “sekkant” (16), “Alfanzerei” (18), “schrenzen” (23 and passim), “Speuz” (23 and passim), “stüpfen” (25), “Gob” (42) and “angewurzt” (49).
11 “Widum” (24), “itzo” and “item” (26), “schuhne” for: to roam (34). One “hebt sich davon” (40), “wiegt” the door (14 and passim) and “steht von einem Vorhaben ab” (193).