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The Mill and the Cross (2011)

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Abstract

This is a film review of The Mill and the Cross (2011).
Polish-American director Lech Majewski’s *The Mill and the Cross* opens with a painterly re-enactment, or re-embodiment, of Pieter Bruegel’s masterpiece *The Way to Calvary*. In the opening sequence, actors don the robes and dresses of principal characters in the painting. Majewski, himself a painter, spent three years adding three dimensional figures and CGI animations, integrating these seamlessly into a constructed narrative. These animations, for once, are not used for the sake of crude verisimilitude but to painterly effect, reverently accenting a canvas deeply symbolic in its implications. The central mystery of the work, as we are informed later, is the placement and treatment of its subject, the suffering Christ, laboring under the cross he carries on his way to Calvary. The figure is surprisingly small, lost in a crowd of soldiers and distracted citizenry, while the whole tableau is framed by mourning Mother Mary and ministering saints in the foreground, a mysterious mill on a high cliff to the rear, and Calvary itself, nearly lost in the distance in the upper right-hand corner of the work.

The film is inspired by the fascinating book of the same title by Michael Francis Gibson, an art historian and collaborator on the script, yet sets off in a direction of its own to tell the stories of several characters, beginning and ending with the key elements of the painting itself. Early on we see a series of seemingly disconnected scenes and incidents that unfold without dialogue, just as Bruegel
draws us into his painting by assembling a variety of figures and incidents, the connection between which is at first obscure. Woodcutters fell trees in a near-silent forest; a loving peasant couple awakens in their bed to kiss and embrace; a somber miller awakens his corpulent, sour-faced wife with a shove. The mill they inhabit, furthermore, is no ordinary mill, but one that extends vertiginously upwards through the rock-face of a cliff. Here the documentary and the fantastic meet, as the mill turns out to be the one depicted in the painting. Later we see the miller, a tiny figure in the painting, in medium close-up as he grimly and dispassionately surveys the action that transpires below.

The mill, we are soon told, is one important key to the meaning of the painting. According to Bruegel, who is portrayed in the film with humoristic gravitas by Rutger Hauer, the miller takes the place of God, who in earlier, more traditional paintings is portrayed as parting the clouds and glowering disapprovingly on events below. In the absence of God, the mill-wheel grinds out the fates of human beings. The mill is said to have cosmic and mythic dimensions as a sort of axis mundi – its treatment in film and book apparently influenced by the remarkable study by Giorgio de Santillana, *Hamlet’s Mill*. In one incident, a young man is strapped to a wheel erected on a pole, and exposed, gruesomely, to scavenging crows. The unjust execution of a man on a wheel not only echoes the mill-wheel, but also the depiction of Calvary in the corner of the painting, which
is ringed by a group of peasants waiting anxiously for the execution. Both echo
the larger formal structure in which Christ is placed at the centre among the
symbolic elements within the frame. The action of the mill, too, Majewski has
stated in an interview, reproduces the remorseless grinding down of Christ during
the crucifixion. The crowd below ignores the suffering Christ, as Bruegel points
out to his burgher friend and patron, its attention drawn by the struggle of the
disciple Simon with the soldiers, who are forcing him to help carry the cross. As
Bruegel grimly comments: “Whether it be the death of the Saviour, or the fall of
Icarus … these world-changing events go unnoticed by the crowd.”

Director Majewski translates with admirable economy, not to mention
visual power and artistic courage, the central dilemmas and mysteries of The Way
of Calvary with a skillful blend of incident and visual tableau. Some will claim
that realistic characters or a coherent narrative is lacking but this is to miss the
point entirely. The film ushers us into the imagined world of the painting itself,
which cannot be absorbed in a single glance. This is perhaps why the filmmaker
concludes with a haunting reverse zoom into the Munich museum where the
painting hangs, open and yet concealed to our gaze.