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BRUEGEL
THE MILL & THE CROSS

THE BOOK & THE FILM

In 2005 the writer and art critic Michael Francis Gibson saw Lech Majewski's "Angelus" in a cinema in Paris. Fascinated by the director's painterly vision he gave him a copy of his book "The Mill and the Cross," an analysis of Pieter Bruegel's painting "The Way to Calvary." Majewski, whose creative journey began with painting and poetry, admired the depth of Gibson's insight into Bruegel's picture and this led quite naturally to the idea of writing a screenplay together.

But how can one make a feature film based on an analysis of a single painting? Which characters deserved to be picked out of a crowd numbering over five hundred? And how could a visual equivalent of the Flemish master's work be created?

For Lech Majewski this challenge was not an entirely new one as he had already based several of his films on paintings and painters. It was he who wrote the original screenplay for "Basquiat" and found Julian Schnabel to direct it; his film "Garden of Earthly Delights" with Bosch's famous painting as a background was hailed by "Sight & Sound" as a masterpiece; his unique videoart pieces were displayed at the MoMA in New York and the Venice Biennale.

So, together with Michael F. Gibson, Lech Majewski took up this challenge, which involved three years of work on the motion picture that required patience and imagination as well as the use of new CG technology and 3D effects: Three years spent weaving an enormous digital tapestry composed of layer upon layer of perspective, atmospheric phenomena and people. Rutger Hauer assumed the role of Bruegel; a prominent Antwerp banker who collected his paintings was played by Michael York – and Mary by Charlotte Rampling.

Michael Francis Gibson

THE MILL & THE CROSS

Pieter Bruegel's "Way to Calvary"



INTRODUCTION – MULTA PINXIT

Standing in front of a painting is rather like meeting a living person. The impression the work makes on you depends mainly on the relationship you establish with it, and only incidentally on the information everyone seems so eager to impart.

This encourages me to make the following suggestion: Perhaps you shouldn't read this book just yet.

Why not look at the pictures first.

Get acquainted with them.

Step into their world without preconception.

If you look carefully, you will discover Christ somewhere in the middle of the crowd, carrying the Cross on which he will shortly be crucified.

How long will it take you to find him? The question is not as pointless as it may seem, since it suggests Bruegel took considerable pains to conceal his central figure. Why? This is something we shall discover in due course.

The painting dates from 1564. This much you may want to know. What little we know about Bruegel and his life holds in a few printed pages and a couple of entries found in sundry archives. Among the latter is the inscription of young Bruegel among the free-masters of Saint Luke's Guild in Antwerp

in 1551, and another one made, twelve years later, in the register of weddings of the church of Notre Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels. One can still read today, under the year 1563: *Peeter Brugell/solmt/ Maryken Cocks* – “Pieter Bruegel solemnized (his union with) Maryken Coeck,” daughter of the painter and engraver Pieter Coeck van Aelst (Bruegel's master), and of his wife Mayken Verhulst, also a painter (See appendix: “Bruegel or Brueghel”). Bruegel had been apprenticed to Pieter Coeck before leaving for Italy.¹ Fortunately for us, a number of writers, about this time, started taking an interest in the lives of painters: Vasari in Italy and Van Mander in the Netherlands had begun assembling biographical data, the latter for his *Schilder-Boeck* or “Book of Painters,” which was only published in 1604, the year of the author's death.

His period, like our own, was a time of great perplexity, seared by bitter conflicts of convictions. And though the Church of Bruegel's day – rent from top to bottom, like the Temple veil in the hour Christ died – confronted an anguished world with the disturbing riddle of the vacant shrine, none of the more pressing questions people were actually asking



themselves managed to leave a trace in the art of the day. The Protestant Churches disapproved of images while the Catholic Church favored a forceful, affirmative rhetoric conceived to stir the heart and win the mind. In this context Bruegel's paintings are unique in that they present one with one man's entirely personal assessment.

Abraham Ortels said as much. He was the painter's oldest and closest friend from the Antwerp days, but also the greatest geographer, cosmographer and map-maker of his age. In 1573, four years after Bruegel's untimely death, Ortels, in tears (*lugens*) we are told, delivered his eulogy in Latin: "Pieter Bruegel," he declared, "painted many things that cannot be painted" (*multa pinxit quae pingi non possunt*).... "In all his work there is always more matter for reflection than there is painting" (*In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur*).

I quote him here only to encourage you to give your thoughts the freest possible rein. For no matter how far you wander, you will always find the artist at your side, observing you with his characteristic, quizzical gaze, and anticipating your next move with silent amusement. This is the way he kept me company all the while I was writing this book.

Take all the time you need. An hour, a month – a year if necessary. Then, once you have studied the painting at leisure, come back to the text and, if you feel so inclined, we can go over the same road together, like two people strolling through the woods and reminiscing about a friend.



THE SKIES

In “The Way to Calvary,” the skies set the mood, as the sound track does in movies, but in Bruegel’s cinema, everything unfolds at once. It is up to the viewer to break up the narrative by going over the painting from left to right as though it were text on a printed page. And since this is the usual direction of reading in our part of the world, whatever stands to the left of the picture must already be drifting into the past.

The golden sunlight too, comes pouring in from there. It bathes the town in its tender, hazy glow. The air on that side is still moist and the shadows uncertain, while those cast by people making their way across the plain appear fairly long. So the sun is still low in the heavens, and the crowd is hurrying to attend some early morning event. Teased by gusts of spring wind, the horses are frisky.

While the skies set the tone, the vegetation frames the event: the long branch of an oak tree uncurls its fresh, delicately serrated leaves and sways its curve across the milky blueness that still enfolds the town.

On the far right stands another tree, as unbending as dogma. Leafless, too. Only a rag, attached to the wheel, flutters in the wind. Cocking its head, a crow studies it with some misgivings. He probably found

better fare up there the day before. To the left then, everything is still alive.² The green tree above the town is a living one. But to the right, we see nothing but mourning and death. Death too has its tree. And people are hurrying from one to the other as though they were flocking to a celebration.

