

# A Step into Bruegel's World

Reviewed by Susan Welsh



## The Mill and the Cross

2011, 92 minutes, in English  
 Director: Lech Majewski;  
 screenplay: Michael Francis Gibson,  
 Lech Majewski (based on a book of the  
 same name by Gibson)  
 Extras on the DVD: "Lech Majewski:

The World According to Bruegel" (45 minutes, in Polish) and "Lech Majewski Interview" (15 minutes, in English)  
 Available in DVD and Blu-ray at Netflix and other rental outlets; list price \$29.95

Is this reenactment of Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting "The Way to Calvary" (1564) a *Slav-Film*? The director is Polish; the assistant directors and production staff are Polish; hundreds of bit parts are played by Poles; it is filmed mostly in Poland; the cows, geese, horses, and chickens are all Polish. But while most of the film is unspoken, the only three speaking parts are in English.

Director Lech Majewski describes how he made his acquaintance with Bruegel as a young boy, taking the train from Poland's "gloomy Katowice" to visit his uncle in Venice. He had a 10-hour layover in Vienna, where he would visit the Kunsthistorisches Museum; his favorite was the Bruegel Room. That was the beginning of a life-long fascination with the Flemish master, from whom he felt he had so much to learn. "I've often said we should talk to the dead," he says. "They often have more to say than the living." This painting of the occupation of Flanders by the Spanish Hapsburgs was "the world I wanted to re-create."

What, if anything, does 16th-century Flanders have to do with Poland? First and most obviously, the painting speaks to the heart of anyone whose country has been ground under the boot of an imperial occupying power—like Poland throughout most of its history. This makes the film both "Slavic" and universal. But the Poland-Flanders connection is also surprisingly direct: Majewski discovered the small village of Wilamowice in Poland, 80 km from where he and his crew were shooting, populated by "very old people who are descendants of the Flemish from the times of Bruegel" (interview with "DirectorTalk," May 7, 2012). The village takes its name from *Wila Magiget*, "the Prince of the Low Countries." Its residents "speak a fossilized Flemish language, so they actually sound like the contemporaries of Bruegel.... So we descended there with all these sound people and we recorded their singing and their talking, and this is what you hear in the background," Majewski explains.

Using some [amazing techniques](#) that involve what

Majewski calls "electronic alchemy," the film literally brings Bruegel's work of art to life, as the 500 souls in the painting make their ways through both real and virtual sets and landscapes, going about their daily lives—from scenes of everyday banality or simple pleasures to eruptions of unspeakable barbarism.



The painting is a shockingly ironic representation of the Spanish occupation, in which the tortures and murders inflicted upon the local population by the Spanish soldiers with their distinctive red tunics merge with the crucifixion of Christ by those same soldiers. That is the totality of the plot. It is the Church itself, the Spanish Inquisition, that crucifies the Savior; a couple of priests bring a small crucifix to the prison for each of the two thieves to kiss, before they too are led along the Via Dolorosa to die on either side of Jesus.

Our guide to the world of Bruegel's painting is none other than the painter himself (Dutch actor Rudiger Hauer). He takes us along as he shows his patron, Nicholaes Jonghelinck (Michael York), what he is trying to do, the two of them strolling among the actors who play the parts of all the people depicted on Bruegel's vast canvas. (While Hauer makes a convincing Bruegel, York plays his role with puerile didacticism—"Oh, my gosh, look how they're killing people!"—on the director's specific instruction that he not show emotion. I can't imagine why.) As the hour of Christ's crucifixion draws near, the agonized internal monologues of Mary the Mother of Jesus (Charlotte Rampling) bear witness to the events unfolding, atrocities which she cannot understand. She also brings out a Promethean motif that comes partly from the Gospels (Luke 12:49) and partly from the screenplay writers' imaginations: Her son, she says, "plucked all the torches of fate ... and swung them laughingly to earth." " 'I have come to cast fire on the earth,' he told

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the people. ‘It’s in our power to grasp the fire of fate in our own hands.’” Certainly no such image is suggested in the painting itself.

The painting’s second irony, as the film’s “Bruegel” tells us, is that you can scarcely find Christ amidst the throng of villagers, children, soldiers, horses, and dogs—even though He is at the very center of the large painting, stumbling under the weight of the cross. Soldiers try to drag Simon over to help bear the load, but Simon’s wife gets into a tussle with them, attracting the attention of nearby rubber-neckers, who ignore Jesus to gawk at this little side-show.

“Bruegel” comments that throughout history, “All these world-changing events go quite unnoticed by the crowd.”

The painting’s third overwhelming irony is represented by the strange windmill, perched precariously atop a rock that juts high above the landscape. Majewski interprets the mill in theological terms, as the *primo movens*, the symbol of what moves the world. With its cross-shaped sails, he says, it is actually a church, dominating from on high the mortal realm below. “Bruegel” calls its owner “the great Miller of heaven, grinding the bread of life and destiny.”

But is that what the real Bruegel, the one without quotation marks, thought? Of course, he didn’t write down his thoughts; he painted them. But the interpretation presented by our film is not the only one possible. Another student of Bruegel and his time, **Karel Vereycken**, contends that the miller was seen by the artist and his contemporaries as the archetype of the thief, the usurer, the speculator, the seducer. A Flemish proverb sums it up: “A hundred bakers, a hundred millers, a hundred tailors: three hundred thieves.” Bruegel’s engraving “Gluttony” shows a mill as the head of a glutton, into whose insatiable maw the peasants are tossing their sacks of grain (see illustration below).

Vereycken also criticizes the film’s fatalistic conclusion, in which the mill keeps on turning, the Hapsburgs keep on looting, pillaging, and torturing, and—as if nothing has happened—the townsfolk keep dancing in a “circle of death” (like that which onlookers had formed to watch the spectacle of the crucifixion). Yet Bruegel was an engaged citizen who was in close contact with Europe’s Erasmian humanists; his associates would begin the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain in 1572, three years after the painter’s death. It is absurd, Vereycken writes, to think he would have consigned himself to be merely a



scribe, recording the horrors of his epoch rather than seeking to change them.

### ‘A Digital Tapestry’

The technical and artistic execution of *The Mill and the Cross* is a marvel, but I mention here only a few striking features. The painting itself is not done in the usual Renaissance vanishing-point perspective, but has *seven* different perspectives. Every shot in the movie is multilayered, Majewski explains in an interview on the DVD. It took the computer eight days to render *just one shot*, and the whole business of integrating the material digitally was a labor of nine months, “weaving an enormous digital tapestry.” The skies over Poland and the Czech Republic were persistently sunny while the outdoor scenes were being shot, but Bruegel’s skies are varied, shifting, sometimes ominous, threatening. So the crew “imported” shots of the sky from New Zealand, where Majewski happened to be attending a conference.

Then, there are the casting and the costumes. Many of the “extra” characters look like they were cut and pasted right out of a Bruegel painting. This was due partly to casting that sought out exactly the right faces, and partly to the costumes. Costume designer Dorota Roqueplo explains in one of the DVD interviews that the colors used for clothing in Bruegel’s time simply do not exist in modern dyes, so they mixed their own dyes, with the result that the extras’ costumes sport the same brilliant hues as in the painting.

The idea was to stitch together different elements—some of them created entirely by computer, such as “Bruegel’s” spider web—so that the composition would look “akin to or inspired by a Bruegel canvas” (Majewski interview to “DirectorTalk”). Majewski quipped that he felt like an abbot in a monastery “with these young guys, computer graphics monks, sitting and doing the illuminations in the early texts...”

Indeed, while the film may not communicate exactly what Pieter Bruegel the Elder had in mind, it is a wonderful way to step into the artist’s world and try to see things through his eyes. Noting the absence of what one might call a plot, Majewski told “DirectorTalk” that he himself is not much interested in “linear stories.” “I’d rather ponder on a small situation and dig deep into it.” The reader/viewer is encouraged to do the same.

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