

An abstract painting of a face, rendered in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's 'Olympia' or similar expressionist portraits. The face is composed of various colors: a large, expressive eye in shades of brown and grey, a large, vibrant red nose, and lips in shades of red and orange. The background is a mix of warm, earthy tones like yellow, orange, and brown, with some cooler blue and green areas. The overall effect is one of intense emotion and artistic expression.

# ARTnews

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## Big-Screen Bruegel

"Modern art pushes you away," says the Polish filmmaker and multimedia artist **Lech Majewski**. "With the Old Masters, you had to get right up next to the painting to follow what was going on. Those paintings created a whole universe that invited the viewer in."

Getting up close to a painting is exactly what Majewski does in his new film, *The Mill and the Cross*, which takes its inspiration from **Michael Francis Gibson's** book of the same name, a reading of **Pieter Bruegel's** 1564 *The Way to Calvary*. (Gibson, who has written for *ARTnews*, also collaborated with Majewski on the film's screenplay.) Bruegel's painting vividly depicts the social whirl that surrounds Christ's impending crucifixion, placing the event in what was for the painter the present day.

Majewski's film is a far cry from such melodramatic movie renderings of artists and their lives as *Lust for Life* or *Moulin Rouge*. Rather than telling the story through the framework of an artist's personal trials and tribulations, Majewski focuses on how Bruegel made the painting, showing the artist sketching, discussing his work, and scouting locations. We also see many of the characters whom Bruegel painted as they get caught up in both the drama of the crucifixion and the stark realities of life under the Spanish Inquisition.

"I want the viewer to live inside the painting," Majewski says about his film, adding that he wants us to meet the



Lech Majewski (above, center) directs Rutger Hauer (left) and Michael York in *The Mill and the Cross*. A scene in the film (below) re-creates Pieter Bruegel's *The Way to Calvary*.



people in the picture "as they are painted." Aiding him is a stellar group of actors. Bruegel is portrayed by **Rutger Hauer**; **Nicholas Jonghelink**, an art collector and patron of Bruegel's, is played by **Michael York**; and **Charlotte Rampling** is an arresting Virgin Mary.

To translate what Gibson calls "Bruegel's cinema" to the modern-day big screen, the director employed a wide range of technical devices. First off, several backdrops duplicating the background of Bruegel's work were painted on canvas by Majewski and his assistants. The film's actors were

then shot in front of a blue screen so that their images could be digitally placed before the painted backdrops. In addition, scenes were filmed at locations in Poland, the Czech Republic, and New Zealand that had been chosen for their resemblance to the landscape in *The Way to Calvary*.

The film's other outdoor locations were often as intricately pieced together as the re-creations of the scene in *The Way to Calvary*. "We would search environments for individual pieces to make a landscape from," Majewski says. He would then assemble those pieces into the image

we see on-screen. "This kind of technology," he notes, referring to the rapidly declining costs of digital production, "used to be available only to people who were making films like *The Lord of the Rings*."

The director has put together a lavishly illustrated book, released by the Polish publishing house BOSZ, that serves as a companion piece to the new film.

*The Mill and the Cross* was recently screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; there are plans to show it at the Louvre, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, where *The Way to Calvary* is installed. Majewski is shopping the film around to various festivals and is hoping for a U.S. commercial release.

*The Mill and the Cross* does not mark the first time that painting has figured prominently in a Majewski film. A co-writer of **Julian Schnabel's** 1996 film *Basquiat*, Majewski also directed 2004's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which tells the story of an art scholar obsessed with **Bosch's** painting.

Next on his plate is a project that is far from Bruegel's world. Working once again with Rutger Hauer—who will play the legendary counter-culture musician **Moondog**—Majewski will soon start shooting *Stoneman*, a film taking place in another environment marked by social conflict and chaotic masses of humanity: New York City during the summer 2003 blackout. —**Steve Barnes**