

MEDIA

A tale of loss, grief and isolation

Lech Majewski's "Field of Dogs" demands an understanding of theology and Polish cultural history, but is visually engrossing

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Much of the mainstream cinema world is concerned with the mythical inundation of the earth in Darren Aronofsky's biblical epic "Noah", seen as much as a symbol of contemporary climate change concerns as with the wrath of God of old. But at the point where art meets cinema, very real flooding (in Poland in 2010) forms part of the backdrop to Lech Majewski's "Field of Dogs", receiving its premiere at the National Gallery in London on 24 May, as part of the [Kinoteka Polish film festival](#).

Majewski is an artist, poet and writer, who wrote the story that formed the basis for Julian Schnabel's biopic of Jean-Michel Basquiat. His last film as director was "The Mill and the Cross", which took Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Way to Calvary* to reflect on the Spanish occupation of Flanders, the nature of spiritual belief and sacrifice and the perception of historical events.

Survivor's guilt

"Field of Dogs", while having a contemporary setting in his native country, is no less a think-piece that examines loss, grieving and isolation against the backdrop of a number of devastating events that beset Poland in 2010, with observations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* woven through the story of a young man struggling to cope with having survived a car crash that took the lives of his true love and of his best friend.

Adam (Michal Taterak) is a poet and academic who, after the tragedy, has taken a dead-end job in a supermarket, but loses it after leaving his checkout to go and sleep in a crate in the store's warehouse. He sleeps a lot: on a pew in a cathedral, in a car by the side of the road, or on the sofa at his aunt's (Elzbieta Okupska) apartment.

She seems to be the only person who cares for Adam, leaving him long messages on his answering machine, or cajoling and consoling him with lectures on Seneca and Heidegger, to try and give him hope for the future, or at least come to terms with the existentialist crisis that envelops him ("...generalisations Auntie. I can't listen to it"). He speaks to a priest in the confessional about his difficulty with praying, asking for guidance as he thinks he is just talking to himself. If God could be explained, says the priest, he would cease to exist.

Adam's face is scarred from the crash, but the greatest scarring is internal, as is realised in his dreams. While "The Mill and the Cross" drew



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its most striking imagery from Bruegel's painting, here the scenes with the greatest impact are drawn from Adam's dreams. He imagines an angel, a recurring presence, putting a protective wing over the corpse of a dead woman, who may be his lost lover, in the cathedral. He talks with his father in the supermarket, who then proceeds to dig up the floor with a plough and oxen. Also in the supermarket, in his dreams, he talks with his best friend, asking him why the crash couldn't be avoided.

Abandon all hope

At other times he lies awake, surfing news channels, seeing reports on the flooding that killed at least 25 people in May 2010, and the plane crash that took the life of the president, the former president, the head of the army and 93 others. When he sees a young woman in a bikini hosting a

mindless quiz show, he dreams of an unconsummated affair.

At the end, in another visually lush scene, he and his lost lover literally ascend, perhaps to heaven, but then take an underground boat, seemingly to the underworld, while again a voice reads Dante, apparently confirming their destination with the famous line "abandon all hope ye who enter here".

"Field of Dogs" is by turn demanding and mesmeric, laden with symbolism that at some times is easy to read and at others demands a greater understanding of theology and of Polish cultural history than many viewers may possess. But it is never less than visually engrossing. Majewski is director, cinematographer, writer and editor, making this a far more personal statement than the collaborative nature of film often allows.

That it is having its premiere in

the UK is perhaps a riposte to the response to "The Mill and the Cross". Majewski told *Sight and Sound* magazine that every country in Europe had bought that film for distribution apart from the UK, despite the presence of Rutger Hauer, Michael York and Charlotte Rampling, and dialogue in English. It may not be fielding such immediately recognisable names but, European releases notwithstanding, "Field of Dogs" should have a wider audience outside of special screenings and the festival circuit. It is hoped that a UK distributor will take it on and give it the greater exposure that it deserves.

• "Field of Dogs" is at the National Gallery, London, on 24 May. For more details, visit: www.nationalgallery.org.uk and www.kinoteka.org.uk

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From the symbolic to the surreal: Majewski (left) brings oxen into a supermarket in a scene drawn from his dreams

