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**THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS**

*unrated, 103 minutes*

Rickety hand-held video as a cinematic style is so shopworn that the odd modest success can be thrown out too easily. Now playing at the Pioneer, "The Garden of Earthly Delights" is one such unexpectedly disarming work. Adapted by Polish painter-poet-filmmaker Lech Majewski from his novel "Metaphysics," it's a homegrown blend of the arcane and the achingly intimate that can take some getting used to.

The plot concerns a dying young art historian and her digi-mad lover. What we see of Claudine (Claudine Spiteri) and Chris (Chris Nightingale) in their Venice wanderings comes from the latter's everpresent video camera - elegantly linked scenes of chatter, lovemaking, art-making, gondola-factory visits, and so on. As interwoven cuts to Chris fiddling with tapes show, he is actually the one shuffling through these scenes like a photo album, following his last lingering, heartbreaking associations after what we learn was Claudine's mortal illness (not, as I initially and pessimistically thought, their breakup). So a sense of melancholy underlies the joy of their plainly presented romance.

The Bosch painting - from which the movie gets its title - in all its surreal diabolical detail, inspires their philosophical and artistic peregrinations, including some sexual ones. Many of their labored, oddball art projects are shown to duplicate some matchhead-size scene from the Bosch. Yet the ordinary tone prevents any of it from sounding pretentious as does the deceptively careless footage. After Claudine's musings on mortality and Chris's loving exhibition of the chemical elements that make up the human body, the film almost resembles homemade Peter Greenaway - only with the scorn for humanity replaced by duly ragged and real love. It still felt vaguely embarrassing to watch two academics encase themselves in plastic and have sex, but the last scene, as Chris stops and rewinds footage of a doctor's bad news, got me in the gut.

- Nicolas Rapold

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