

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

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Late Edition

Today, clouds and sun, spotty showers or thunderstorms, warm, high 86. Tonight, partly cloudy, low 66. Tomorrow, cooler, showers, high 86. Weather map appears on Page A

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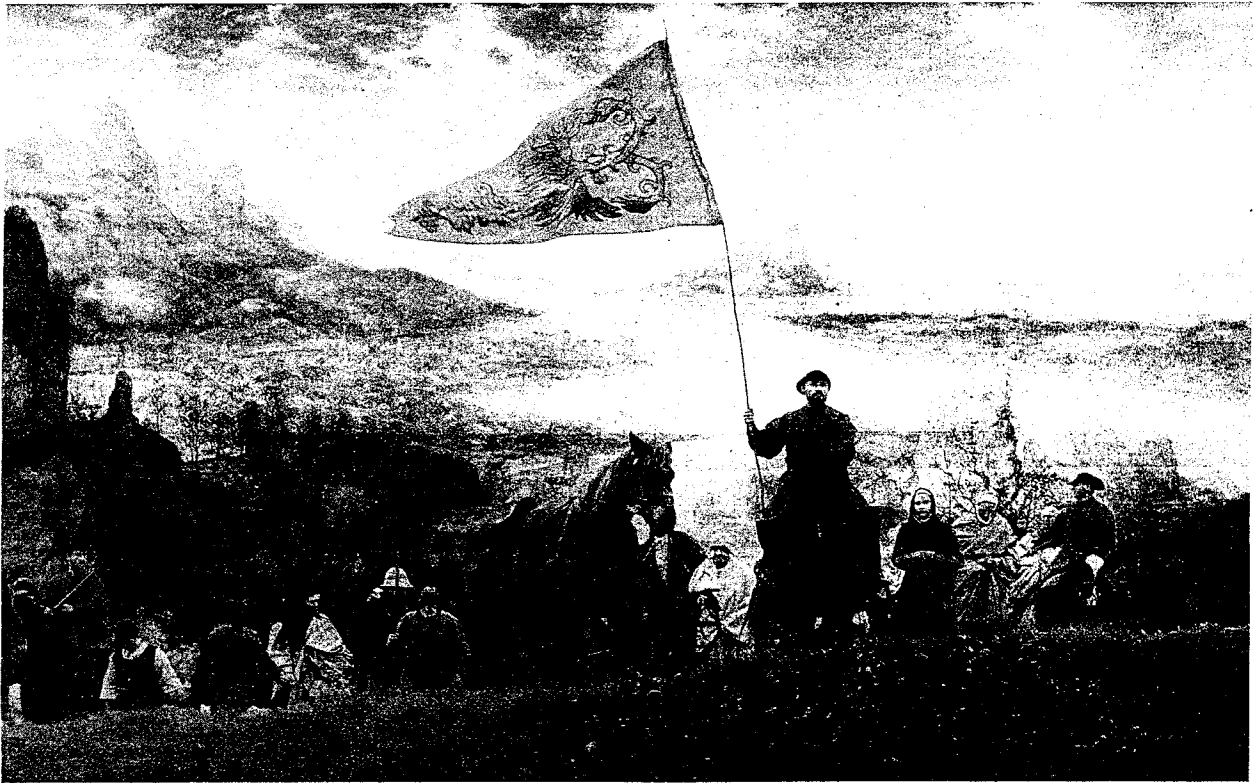
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THE Arts

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KINO LORBER INC.

A scene in "The Mill & the Cross," a film in which Lech Majewski restages Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1564 masterpiece, "The Way to Calvary."

Creating a Cinematic Picture of a Flemish Masterpiece

Even before the opening credits run, "The Mill & the Cross" casts a transfixing spell, as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the great 16th-century Flemish artist, chats

DANIEL M. GOLD

FILM REVIEW

with his patron Nicholas Jonghelinck while he sketches studies for a large work he is preparing. Then the camera pulls back, blending scores of actors and animals with computer-generated effects, painted backdrops and location shots to restage Bruegel's 1564 masterpiece, "The Way to Calvary."

Directed by the Polish filmmaker and video artist Lech Majewski, "The Mill & the Cross" has ambitions as sweeping as the vast canvas that Bruegel fills. In this lush and hypnotic examination of a painter's work and the times in which he lived, Mr.

Majewski presents an extended contemplation of the creative process itself.

As social commentary, Bruegel's depictions of life in Flanders were meticulously detailed. As a sly subversive, he had a gift for telling a hidden story to those who knew how to look for it.

In "Calvary" he shifted the Crucifixion to his own age; it isn't Roman soldiers marching Jesus to Golgotha, it is red-jacketed Spanish militiamen, then occupying the Low Countries and waging a brutal repression of the Protestant Reformation. But it's not easy to find Jesus staggering beneath the crucifix he carries in the teeming crowds in the landscape; surrounding the procession are hundreds of local characters, most unaware of the world-shaking event about to occur.

Adapted from a book by the art critic Michael Francis Gibson,

The Mill & the Cross

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Lech Majewski; written by Michael Francis Gibson and Mr. Majewski, based on the book by Mr. Gibson; directors of photography, Mr. Majewski and Adam Sikora; edited by Eliot Ems and Norbert Rudzik; music by Mr. Majewski and Jozef Skrzek; production design by Katarzyna Sobanska and Marcel Slawinski; costumes by Dorota Roquepio; released by Kino Lorber. At Film Forum, 208 West Houston Street, west of the Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Running time: 1 hour 31 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Rutger Hauer (Pieter Bruegel), Charlotte Rampling (Mary) and Michael York (Nicholas Jonghelinck).

who wrote the screenplay with Mr. Majewski, the film does not offer much plot. In its stead, it portrays — for the most part wordlessly — the daily lives and

often harshly casual deaths in and around 16th-century Antwerp, episodes that often wind up in Bruegel's panorama.

Peddlers sell their wares; musicians play crude instruments; woodsmen chop down trees. A young couple take their calf to market, only for the man to be set upon by soldiers, then strapped to a wheel and raised to the top of a stake, where crows gather to pick out his eyes. Observing it all dispassionately is the miller, whose windmill and granary are atop a natural stone tower, a stand-in for God "grinding out the bread of life and destiny," as Bruegel (Rutger Hauer) says to Jonghelinck (Michael York).

Mr. Majewski does not spend much time developing his characters; Mr. Hauer and Mr. York, along with Charlotte Rampling as Bruegel's Virgin Mary, are archetypes, and the only dialogue of

note is when Bruegel spells out his symbolism, or when Jonghelinck, a wealthy burgher, bemoans the "foreign mercenaries" patrolling the streets.

It isn't the artist, it's the art that's the star here, and Mr. Majewski lavishes sophisticated, enchanting detail on its re-creation. He's painting cinematically, shooting in Europe and New Zealand for the right locations and applying several layers of technology: blue screen, backdrops, digital footage.

At the film's end we see the painting, some of its mysteries revealed, hanging next to Bruegel's equally masterly "Tower of Babel" in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; we are also left to savor an inspiring, alluring meditation about imagery and storytelling, the common coin of history, religion and art.