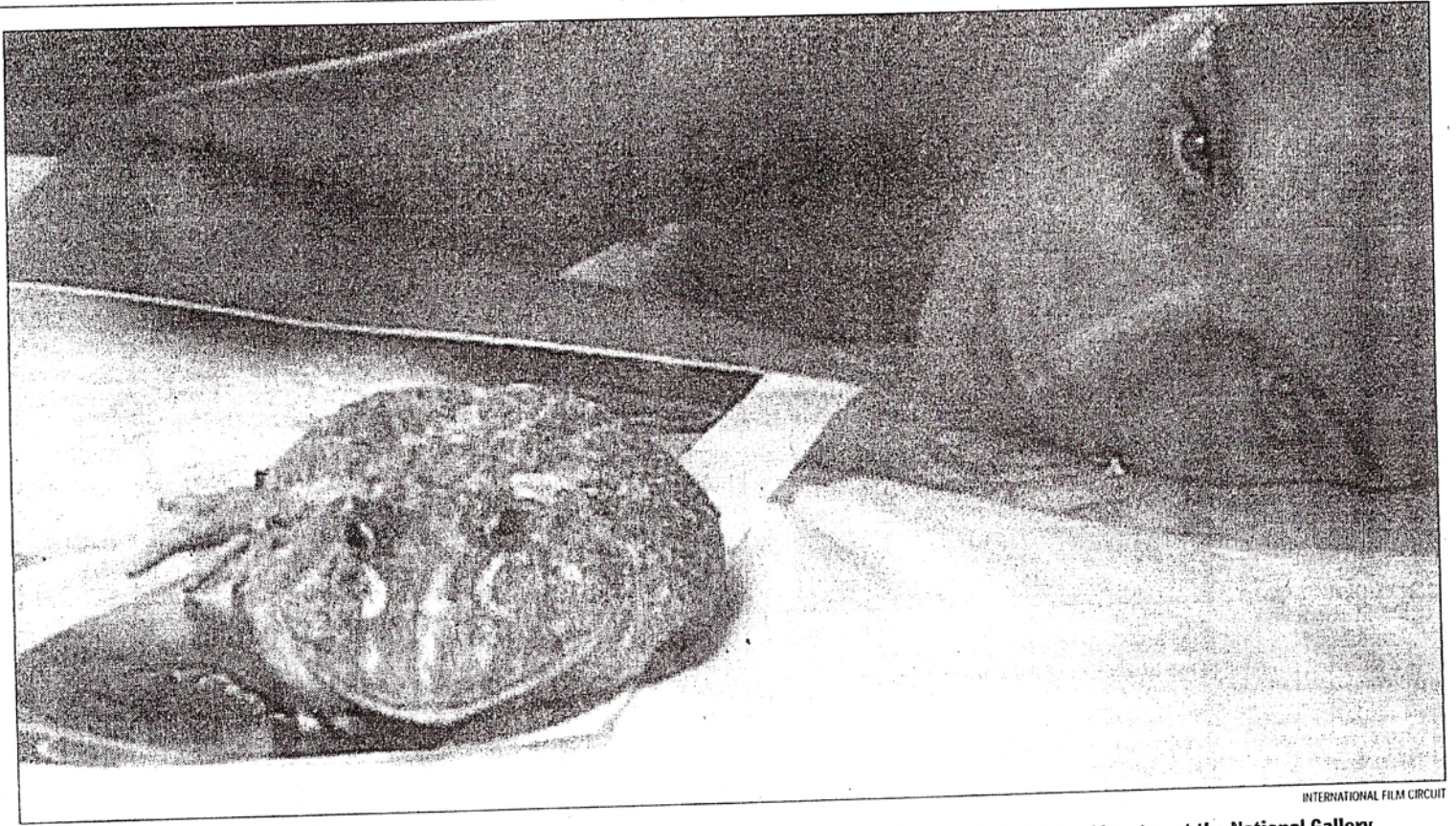


The Washington Post

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10, 2007

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INTERNATIONAL FILM CIRCUIT

The strangeness of being human: Claudine Spiteri in "The Garden of Earthly Delights," one of four films by Lech Majewski on tap at the National Gallery.

Four Films, One Singular Talent: Majewski Is the Surreal McCoy

By PHILIP KENNICOTT
Washington Post Staff Writer

Surrealism is pretty well debased these days.

Lincoln and a beaver are shilling for a big pharmaceutical company, selling sleeping pills and warning an insomniac nation, "Your dreams miss you." A dizzy aesthetic of non sequiturs and absurdist narrative intrusions has filtered throughout pop culture, to the extent that to get any real frisson from the surreal you need to detox all the bad magic realism out of your system, and spend some time rigorously devoted to the naturalistic and prosaically real stuff of straightforward storytelling. Our dreams don't miss us; rather, we need to learn to miss our dreams.

The thrill of the four movies by Polish director Lech Majewski that will be screened at the National Gallery this weekend and next — a small but intense mini-retrospective — is the degree to which they show the old power lurking in the surreal. Trees and grass grow inside a well-ordered bourgeois apartment; two lovers in Venice make the haunting details of a Hieronymus Bosch painting real in an erotic game of love and death; a

See MAJEWSKI, C6, Col. 1

A Surrealist Filmmaker With a Dream Job

MAJEWSKI, *From C1*

small band of simple miners offer up a virgin sacrifice to a death ray from Saturn.

This is not the self-indulgent hermeticism of too much contemporary video art, nor is it the joke, bizarre weirdness of cheap sitcoms. Majewski, born in 1953, is a major discovery, a brilliant filmmaker whose haunting aesthetic is formed of much deeper stuff, processed through a lively mind and idiosyncratic imagination, chastened and tempered by history, and captured on screen with the rigor and perfectionism of an artist who might also carve castles out of toothpicks.

He is not well-known in this country. Majewski was involved in the origins of the film "Basquiat" (ultimately directed by Julian Schnabel) and he is also a novelist, a composer and an opera and theater director. The National Gallery series is billed as the local premiere of his work, the best of which — "The Roe's Room" (1997) and "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (2004) — are among the most powerful films made in years.

For the past millennium at least, history has been uncommonly busy in Majewski's native Poland. Fought over, subdivided, trapped between greater powers, it is a country of cultural and historical layers and uncertain borders. Although Majewski has lived in the United States for more than a quarter-century, his films feel decidedly Polish — old-world, literate and in constant argument with God. Occasionally the Polishness is explicit, as when Stalin and Hitler make absurdist cameos in "Angelus" (2000), his mystical tale of paganism in a small Silesian mining village.

More often, the national character is implicit, revealed in the director's fascination with the collision of different worlds. He explores the tension between a blood-soaked Catholicism and a personal, often folk-inflected spirituality. He indulges an obsession with the medieval, the sense that the past is just one scrape of the knife below the most recent paint on the canvas. And throughout his films, the great categories of our existence — the public and private, the personal and political, the natural world and the man-made one — are not bounded at all, but constantly dissolve into one another. "Angelus" opens with a reminder that Silesia has been a crossroads of kingdoms — and Majewski's film proves those kingdoms are not just material ones.

"Our strong point," wrote the great Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz in 1953, "would be that we are representatives of a *brutalized culture*, that is, a culture that is close to life." The paradox of those two ideas — a brutalized world, but an intensely raw and vital one — is evident in "The Knight" (1980), made before Majewski left Poland. In its allegory of a corrupted kingdom, run by a slobbering old man sitting on a scarlet throne, and the subsequent quest of a young knight to find a magical harp that will restore the country's soul, it is the most explicitly political film of the lot.

"The Knight" appeared the same year that Solidarity began the strikes that would transform Poland and eventually the world. The Polish crisis wasn't just political or pragmatic, not just about wages or representation. There was also a powerful concern with spiritual redemption, and the Polish film giant Andrzej Wajda said as much, reminding his fellow directors that while they might indict the hypocrisies of the age, their ultimate goal was "man's spiritual victory."

Whether intentionally or not, Majewski does just that, and "The Knight" begins a career in which the spiritual life is lived with a very physical intensity. Blood is omnipresent, but so too a passionate debate about whether spiritual knowledge is found by seclusion or through communion with the world, through good works or inner reform, through denial or sensuality.

"The Knight" is also the weakest of the four films, clunky and. And yet what seems, on first viewing, like the film's weakest aspect — its silence, or confusion, on the very spiritual issues it raises — turns out to be a hallmark of Majewski's filmmaking. It ends ambiguously, and one is never sure whether Majewski is deeply Catholic, repelled by religion, comfortably pagan or honestly and passionately unsure of the answers.

In "The Roe's Room," a video opera made 17



BY MATEUSZ ORSZULSKI

Lech Majewski

years later, it is clear that Majewski has a vision of a kind of paradise, or blessedness, though it is fleeting and melancholy. In the inner room of a small family apartment, roe deer graze on grass. The family touches them, they coexist, the natural and human worlds are in harmony, and one can't help but think of a similar poetic vision by W.H. Auden: "The lion grieves loped from the shade / and on our knees their muzzles laid, / and Death put down his book." Except Death doesn't put down his book for very long.

Throughout Majewski's work are small clues to his fascination with the surreal — telling paintings on the wall, a reference to Jean Cocteau (another artist who made films and wrote novels), a fascination with the sources of surrealism, including Bosch. Though mostly latent in "The Knight," it breaks out with a ravaging intensity in "The Roe's Room," as the natural world invades a comfortable apartment. Grass and trees grow, blood flows from the walls, time passes in a smooth reverie of beautiful music and imagery.

Scored for countertenor, chorus and orchestra, composed in a style that borrows from the lyrical minimalism of John Adams and perhaps Mozart, "The Roe's Room" is the most polished and mesmerizing of Majewski's films. Shot almost entirely indoors — with every frame lit and composed like a Vermeer painting — it follows the seasons of family life. A young man (Rafal Olbryhski) lives with his aging parents. He struggles at writing. He wrestles with religion. His father takes an old scythe, sharpens it and cuts the grass in the living room. The older man is at once a peasant, a proper city man, a figure of death, a figure for death. His son watches, framed in a mirror, and music seems to seep out of the cracked plaster. The surreal,

when it works, defies description. In "The Roe's Room," it works, with a sense of poetic decency underneath it and none of the coldness or superficial irony of so much video art.

In "Angelus," the surreal is more familiar, more in the black-comedy vein, more a function of worlds, religions and ideologies colliding. Based on a real-life cult of miners and painters and mystics that lived in Silesia, it follows their determined efforts to prevent the destruction of the Earth. Hitler, Stalin and the atom bomb are merely bad omens; the real fear is a bolt of destructive energy from Saturn, predicted by obscure tomes and known only to the flawed (and perhaps insane) men who can divine the secret signs. Their efforts to avert apocalypse bring them into conflict with the communist authorities, and the film demonstrates the degree to which the surreal, once proposed as a revolutionary way of seeing the world, has become for so many Eastern European filmmakers a form of reflection, and the only lens through which a tortured past makes sense.

In what may be the most important and is certainly the most moving of his films, "The Garden of Earthly Delights," the surreal goes underground. The film is placed third on the schedule (Sunday at 4:30), but it would ideally be seen last, because the hyper-stylization of "The Roe's Room," the spirituality of "The Knight" and the clash between the truly spiritual and the hope of heaven on Earth (another name for communism and also sex) in "Angelus" are all carefully embedded in this very different, more narrative work.

Again worlds collide. A scholar of Bosch (Claudine Spiteri) who is intensely interested in the material details of painting and a naval architect (Chris Nightingale) who speaks of the harmony of the universe have a short and desperately sad affair in Venice. They reenact details from Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights," which becomes an intimate game between two minds and two bodies in love. The man videotapes every detail of their time together, some of it so painfully intimate that this film puts to shame most other love stories in its honesty. At one point, the two lovers walk the streets of Venice, captured in a nervous, video-verite style, and they seem to accidentally come across a striking juxtaposition: the hammer and sickle of communism, next to a Christian painting.

Made in 2004, "The Garden of Earthly Delights" is more cosmopolitan, and more contemporary in its style. The momentary juxtaposition of two ideologies, communism and Catholicism, feels accidental, a reminder of Majewski's earlier work. But at some level, the concerns are the same: The hope for paradise, either material or spiritual, is still there, played out in an excruciatingly sad confrontation with death. Within a very philosophical framework, Majewski manages to tell an astonishingly human story. The staggering weirdness of being human — frail, material, dependent, and filled with ideas and aspirations that transcend everything — is the most surreal of all visions, and Majewski captures it.