

The Mill and the Cross/Lech Majewski

By [judithmyers](#) | [May 7, 2012 - 3:12 pm](#) |

*With **The Mill and the Cross**, Polish media artist **Lech Majewski** has directed one of the most stunning—and original—movies in the history of cinema. Five years before completing the film, which is based on an art critic's analysis of a painting by Bruegel, Majewski was honored with a major retrospective at MoMA, entitled Lech Majewski: Conjuring the Moving Image. •**Availability:** On DVD from Kino Lorber; Netflix• To link to the trailer and the American Cinematographer article explaining the postproduction process, click here: www.themillandthecross.com• All images courtesy Kino Lorber, Inc.•*



Director Lech Majewski

DT: You started your life as a painter and a poet. You also write novels, compose music, and direct plays. What does film offer you that the other arts don't?

LM: It allows you to create visions in motion; you're entering this world where things can actually move about and around, and you can be immersed in it and you can physically suck somebody into it.

DT: You said that's what the Old Masters do...they set a place for you to inhabit.

LM: Yes, but I am inhabiting their space in a kinetic way: I travel through their spaces. When I spend time watching paintings, it's always a journey into that world, so in a way it's very filmic. Your eyes travel inside, and then you use a little bit of imagination. There are things that are hidden from you, and you have to make up a story.



The Mill and the Cross

DT: You seem to create meaning from juxtaposition rather than narrative—juxtaposition of interior and exterior, foreground and background, animals and humans.

LM: The aesthetic of art is contrast. One thing always enhances the other by sheer juxtaposition. As far as stories are concerned, I'd rather not go for linear stories that are motoric and predictable. I'd rather go for the deeper kind of many-layered stories, or meanings of stories. I'd rather ponder on a small situation and dig deep into it. I'll take a situation that is a chamberlike piece...like a singular painting...and dig deeper into it. I'll ask, What is behind it? The hero of my previous movie was a boy in a hospital after a nervous breakdown. He's basically sitting but his brain is going on, his imagination is going on, and he recalls images from the past and mythologizes them, projecting things onto people that visit him, like his father. His mind is incredibly active, and that's what I prefer. The more you run about like in those cops and robber stories and all those superheroes, it's killing the brain and contemplation and thinking. It's just sheer movement that is escape from being. Escape from contemplating. Escape from thinking. They're doing, doing, and doing to

death. And at the same time I wonder, How come people pay a lot just to escape themselves? People don't like spending time with themselves. They don't want to face themselves. So they pay for whatever....for drugs, for action cinema, for TV...they do anything...read idiotic articles or something just not to think, not to be with themselves. That's the effort of today. The topic of escape. And at the same time people are willing to suspend their belief in anything—you take any run-of-the-mill film and actors jump from the tenth floor and land on the roof of a train and nothing happens to them...the knees and the ankles don't hurt...it's only the beginning, because then they have to jump through the window inside the train and rescue twenty-seven people and then kiss the most beautiful girl and then jump onto another car and hang onto a window-washer and then they have to lie under the car and hit the street and somehow they roll to the side and then they get up and they're fine. That's what people buy. How come?

DT: Is it any worse than—

LM: People even vote for Schwarzenegger believing he's going to rescue the State of California. They believe the Terminator will end California's debt—he'll just shoot it. People need this superhuman. We need all those Schwarzeneggers and the belief we place in them because they compensate for our helplessness. They can set things straight. But when I'm watching a play or a movie I feel this is not my life, because my life doesn't go into plot points and resolutions and reasons and what have you. Things happen and they trot along, and it's one ball hits the other and the other, and sometimes it's cause and effect, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's kind of a no reason effect, a kind of paradoxical connection.

DT: You don't think that if you look deep inside there's always a cause and effect?

LM: That's wishful thinking because we're afraid that there is no cause and effect. Yes, many things can be explained that way. Like many things can be explained with Newtonian physics. But then you look into other dimensions and you have to forgo Newton. You have a different set of rules. So what I am saying is that watching these perfect stories gets me alienated from my own experience of life. I believe there's a different story, like a Tarkovsky movie, which doesn't have a plot point, it's kind of a sustained contemplation, which is sheer poetry for me. You know, when you read a good poem it doesn't touch just your logic, you have a deeper sense of being.

DT: That reminds me of Sebald, the German writer.

LM: I think the most important thing in our experience of life is this sort of immanent mystery of it. And we try to look at the world as if it doesn't have that mystery. We like clean-cut solutions and explanations. And that really is the business of storytelling. I think that this mystery is good. One shouldn't shy away from it. Whenever you scratch deeper at anything—science knows this quite well—you suddenly are facing the darkness. This cloud that if oblique or opaque you cannot go through it; you don't know how to go through. Yet I don't think it's a fatal effect. I think it's something exciting, really. Because we are surrounded and submerged in this thing. If only just to get closer to that essence: that's my films. People tell me that they sometimes have some kind of hypnotic effect on them.



Rutger Hauer as Bruegel in *The Mill and the Cross*

DT: But you also say that films need a mechanism of interest that can pull in the audience. Something that's natural in the psychology of human beings, like curiosity in a crime story, or a sense of justice in Westerns, or the desire to spy.

LM: In *The Mill and the Cross* I had this mechanism of people peeking over the shoulder of an artist who's creating a painting. Because there's always a little crowd over the shoulder of a painter, watching how things come together. This is the essential position I wanted to place the audience in for *The Mill and the Cross*. I thought we should really peek over the shoulder

of Bruegel and listen to him musing about what he means by doing this or that or why he's being such an extreme realist and creating a completely surreal landscape, or why he suddenly has in the Low Countries a protruding rock that shoots straight into the air that's crowned with this windmill, which wouldn't make the slightest sense in the realistic world of Bruegel because you know the miller would die of hunger because there's no way to transfer anything up or down this thing.

DT: You talk a lot about Bruegel's perspective—that he's combining seven different perspectives in the one painting. You created the same effect with the blue screens and the stitching and all the technical stuff that you did. Do you think that contributes to the sense of mystery and ineffability of things?

LM: Yes, of course. That's particularly what he's doing with our eyes. But it's a trickery that brings us closer to our own kind of vision, because our vision is not the camera's vision. Our eyes are first of all stereoscopic and not a single eye unless you are a Cyclops or you have one eye taken out. Or you're Moshe Dayan. Other than that you have two pyramids inside, two cones coming out of your head; that's your vision. And what happens is that the eye is very much alive, it blinks, it moves, it sweeps the space, it checks out the focal points deeper and closer to you, and it sort of builds up in your brain a safety space. Basically, our eyes work as a sentinel, a guardian of what we see. Only when something really unusual or dramatic happens is our memory activated to the extent that we remember. And we tend to remember things like that for a long time. But other than that it's like a snake sliding, using its protruding tongue to check out the space around him, or a snail with its horns, just checking the space. That's what our eyes are doing. We don't see the space in that static, singular one-eyed vision of the lens. It's dead matter, the lens. Whereas our eye is very active, and it combines perspective as it looks and watches space. So what I found is that Bruegel in essence was doing the same. He was summarizing vision, which enabled him to put five hundred characters in a display that was like a *teatrum*, so you could feel the different groups and all the different happenings and have it all in focus. Also the Northern painters, the painters from Flanders, tend to build a space around a singular axis, so they were like bending the space around a singular axis.



The Mill and the Cross

DT: Like the cobweb?

LM: Yes, but also like a three-dimensional cobweb. If you take the axis of a rock, you will see that there is a circular movement around a rock in Bruegel's painting. And what I love about this rock is that it's from Holy Scriptures. There are some texts saying that when Moses took the Jews and they wandered in the desert there was this petra, this neumatic petra going with them. *Neumatic petra* means 'airy rock,' a rock that is hollow, but at the same time, when Moses strikes the rock, water comes from it. It's a beautiful, poetic image of a rock that can travel over the desert. It's straight from a surreal painting. And in this Bruegel painting you have a rock, and suddenly I noticed there are two windows in this rock. I instantly saw the shafts of light coming through those windows and I imagined the hollowness of that rock, so it's an abode, a kind of a dome, I don't know, a temple. And I found a connection with this neumatic petra.

DT: When you went to Paris to meet with Michael Gibson (the art critic who wrote *The Mill and the Cross*, the book upon which Majewski based his eponymous film), did you already have the idea of a feature film in your head?

LM: Yes, pretty much so. I saw this central scene when the mill freezes, when everything freezes, except I was sure that I would do it in a traditional way—find a landscape and position people in that landscape. But I did a test and it showed that this was completely wrong because it didn't look at all like Bruegel's world or Bruegel's space. So it was back to the drawing board. I got a very good preproduction from the Kunsthistorisches Museum and I painted over all the characters so I could see the landscape on its own, and that's when we discovered the seven different perspectives, with junctions between those perspectives obliterated smartly by these groups of people.

DT: Oh, my God. That's fascinating.



Michael York as Bruegel's patron.

LM: Yeah. So you know, dealing with Bruegel and standing in his shadow the last four years I was discovering step by step the greatness of this man and the way he was capable of producing this universe that encompasses not only religious themes but his historic time and the prosecution and persecution of his people. He even put himself and his collector inside that painting...you have everything. It's really a compendium, which is what amazes me in the artists of yesteryears. They managed to build up a complete compendium of their own

times. And that's what is missing from today's art. We only get bits and smithereens and irony. And ridicule. And stuff like that. And it's all plastic Andy Warhol washout.

DT: Is that what you're trying to do in your films?

LM: Well, it's sort of difficult to do it today, but yes, I would like to try to attempt that. But you know, it's not an easy thing. I was thinking about today's times; why is it so difficult to capture the essence of it?

DT: And?

LM: I don't know. The jury is still out.

DT: Do you think that maybe it's because we know too much?

LM: I think we are ashamed of ourselves. We are ashamed of these times. We are helpless. We cannot cover the entirety of it. We are stranded. People find their own small niches, and if they get recognizable...somebody paints squares or paints women with splashes and whatever and gets recognized for that...he sticks to that and keeps it going because it sells. You have to find your niche and quickly become the slave of it because the market accepts you as such. The last artist who was trying to look for solutions, different solutions, almost all his life was Picasso. And he took an axe and chopped up the forms of the yesteryears.

DT: You talk about Bruegel being a great philosopher in the sense that he always hides the main subject. For instance, in the *Fall of Icarus* he doesn't depict the fall—you just see his foot sticking out. I get the feeling that you're trying to do the same thing...that you're hiding the main subject.

LM: Yes, very much so, yes. These are times when it's Twitter, poster, you have to hit everybody over the head with a baseball bat of a message. I shy away from that because you cannot force-feed people. You cannot beat them up with a message, so to say. I myself like to discover things. I like the effort that it requires to get to know something. I respect that effort and I think it's a natural payment for growing up, for moving up in a certain spiritual level. So I like to search, I like to go on my own and dig in. Therefore I am not putting my

message up front and I'm not trying to be as clear as I can. It's very hard to talk about it in a short conversation, but there is a beauty in the hidden. We suspect horror from the hidden, but I suspect that it's more beauty than horror.

DT: I once heard you say, "The impossible is always exciting."

LM: Absolutely. That's actually what Gibson said when I suggested that we use his book as a basis for the screenplay of a feature film. And he said that's crazy, that's impossible, and then a few minutes later he said, "But the impossible is a matter for gentlemen."



Landscape in The Mill and the Cross

DT: Let's talk about *Mill and the Cross*. Describe finding the landscape.

LM: I shot the majority in Poland. In Silesia, there is this region called Jura, where white rocks protrude from the ground. Calcium rocks. This landscape was very much like Bruegel's landscape. Bruegel's landscape was a surreal landscape, but we have this surreal landscape here in Poland. Some of the other things I shot in the Czech Republic and in Austria. In New Zealand I mainly shot the cloud formation that hangs above the southern island. The Maori call it "The Island of the Long Cloud" because it has this enormous kind of cloud like a dough, which is kneaded all the time from the winds on both sides of the island. It looks like this transparent marble above your head, so you pull out your chair and just sit

down and watch this endless spectacle. It's unbelievably beautiful, and it has rivulets and meandering sort of injections of clouds into the clouds. We managed to catch some of it, and then I mixed it: eight-tenths New Zealand clouds and two-tenths Bruegel clouds mixed together, traveling across the screen. In order to have the Bruegel static clouds move, I had to extend the painting of those clouds, so I spent some time painting the extension of the clouds so we could hook up the New Zealand with the Bruegel clouds and they could travel together.

DT: Can you talk more about the process of creating the visuals?

LM: If I can suggest something, the *American Cinematographer*, June issue, is a very good in-depth article that covers the nitty-gritty of it. It's on my website, lechmajewski.com. Basically it was like spacing the space into different layers and then connecting and layering those layers in such a way that they will produce a composition that looks akin to or inspired by a Bruegel canvas. In order to achieve that we had to shoot separate depths of field separately and then cut out certain things and join together and mix the real landscape with the Bruegel landscape and the real clouds with the Bruegel clouds. Various objects that were used in the movie, like the rocks, the windmill, and the spiderweb, had to be created entirely in the three-dimensional postproduction effects house so we could go around that rock and beyond this rock and look behind it. It was like tremendoushow shall I put it...monastery work. I felt like an abbot in a monastery with these young guys, computer graphics monks, sitting and doing the illuminations in the early texts. A full house. It felt like we were in the middle ages using twenty-first-century technology. And it required tremendous dedication from these people, because you know how a computer can eat your time. And if you need to really dissect every image, every shot, into these various levels and layers, it can take forever. I mean, these people are giving up their girlfriends and living like these celibate monks, just going home to sleep. Some of them slept in front of their computers or on the floor. It was unbelievable. I never expected young people to have this kind of dedication, but then, entering Bruegel's world was enriching them and showing them the greatness of this man, who was doing it on his own, a single man creating this masterpiece. That was like a wonderful experience, and they were paying their respect to Bruegel, I guess.

DT: And to you.

LM: And they got hooked up on that world. Because usually they do commercials and stuff and zinging and zooming and zapping things and suddenly it wasn't zooming and zapping and zinging, it was just deeper and deeper into a staticity which is not staticity; it has a lot of movement in it. It's this painter's glance...a normal person looks at apples on the table and a carafe of wine and he says OK, the apples need to be eaten, the wine has to be drunk, and that's it. But when you get a painter, he starts to look at things and the connections between the colors and shapes and how they correspond with each other and how they augment their shapes instead of going with it or against it or how the waves of light are hitting it. It becomes a beauty in itself, as documented by endless still lifes that hang in museums. But

that looking deeper into something that is supposedly static—it's even called still life. In other languages it's *naturmort*, dead nature. But it's not dead, it's so much alive, but you need a painter's glance to look at it.



The Mill and the Cross

DT: Well, you're a painter.

LM: I did start as a painter. Right now I'm what I would call a video artist and photographer ...well, a media artist, because I do sculptures and paintings and what have you, I have exhibitions. I created various video art pieces that were presented at the Louvre in February and March, and right now (November 2011) they are part of the Bienale in Venice.

DT: You like to show people waking up. You really concentrate on that moment of transition between sleep and wakefulness.

LM: It's the border. It's the passport control. It's the gateway between two worlds. I like that.

DT: How was raising money for *The Mill and the Cross*?

LM: We did it for a relatively very low amount of money because a number of postproduction houses stepped in knowing this would be a showcase for their work. But when my Swedish coproducer hired an English production manager to measure the two and a half years in postproduction and the shooting and the one year of preproduction, the English guy said that if we were doing it in England it would cost twenty-three million pounds. That was the figure, but obviously we did it for much less than that. But again, those postproduction houses did it for the sake of being showcased.

DT: Well, they certainly are.

LM: They know I'm a visual artist. I can angle a lot out of them because they know the film will be appearing in some important museum or what have you. So therefore I have an easier life with that.

DT: You composed the music for the film also. Can you talk about that process?

LM: For me, the soundtrack of the movie is the concrete music of all the real effects that we recorded, plus the engine of the mill and stuff like that. I love those sounds because I think they're very dramatic. Even the storm, when it thunders—this is for me the music, the concrete music of every day. But the music as such was basically two themes. One is the peasant theme, which I composed when I was doing *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Germany. I dressed Puck and all these peasant characters in Bruegel costumes. One of them had a tuba, and he played the tune that everybody dances in the end. So I used my theater piece and transported it over a ten-year period into *The Mill and the Cross* because again Bruegel was the subject. And I devised a dance in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, so I repeated it in *Mill and the Cross*, looking at how people danced in the old paintings. And there is this art theme that I composed just for this movie. I worked with Justin, this instrumentalist friend of mine, who plays these things I compose.

DT: It's beautiful. In the credits, I noticed that you had a language expert?

LM: I did. The most amazing thing is that I discovered that close to where we were shooting, there was a village populated by very old people who are descendants of the Flemish, from the times of Bruegel.

DT: Unbelievable.

LM: Yeah. At that time Poland had a king who was very open to other religions. A lot of Jews from Spain found a haven in Poland, and so did the persecuted Protestants from Flanders. The village's name is Wilamowice, from Wila Magietz—the prince of the Low Countries. What is amazing about these people is that they speak a fossilized Flemish language, so they actually sound like the contemporaries of Bruegel. Experts of fossilized languages are coming to this village and recording these people. I learned about them from an article, and I said to myself, What a coincidence! I'm just eighty kilometers from that place. So we descended there with all these sound people and we recorded their singing and their talks and this is what you hear in the background. And the funny thing is that when I was showing this movie at the Rotterdam Film Festival, the director of the museum in Amsterdam was absolutely in a state of shock that he could hear this forgotten language.

DT: Are you happy with the film?

LM: Let me put it this way. We managed to shovel this movie along with technology that was growing at the same time. We used a camera when it was just introduced into the business, letting us do many things. We were being helped by a number of plug-ins and very technological new things that were just popping up as we went along. It was a happy coincidence that the technology was having this bent forward at the same time that we were trying to crack this hidden construction, this hidden code of Bruegel. So yes, when I attempted initially to visualize the movie I didn't envision that it would be that rich. But you know, you never know with a film. Then, once you've done it, it's done.

DT: You started the production process with an entirely different image of what you were going to do, so there must have been a lot of improvisation as you went along.

LM: It's always like that. You have to keep your eyes open and your ears pricked because things happen at the same time and you have to see what works, what doesn't work. But at the same time I had a vision that I wanted to be in the universe of Bruegel. Our work was about nearing that vision. It wasn't groping about. There was one goal. We wanted to do the movie in the aesthetics of Bruegel.

DT: So it was more problem solving.

LM: And that was a lot of improvisation and a lot of happy coincidences that we managed to find.

DT: Did the kids you were working with come up with a lot of the solutions, or did you? How did that work? Did you say, “I need this” and they would say, “Oh, we have the tools to do that”?

LM: It worked the other way around. I would say, “This isn’t good,” and they would come up with different solutions until I felt we were getting closer.

DT: So you identified the problem and they solved it.

LM: I was dissatisfied with other solutions, and they were providing me with better and better solutions. Then they learned my language and I learned their language and we were able to communicate much faster, but at first I rejected a number of solutions which I felt were not right.

DT: About the screenplay: You had this idea of this one central scene when everything stopped, but how did you develop it from there?

LM: I had a pretty clear graphic design of the screenplay. A Polish poet once said a good poem is a poem you can draw. I believe this also goes for a screenplay. With a good screenplay you can draw its structure. For me the central axis of the film, like the rock in the painting, was when time stops and you have everybody on the canvas. And it’s what Mircea Eliade calls vertical time. The holy time. The chyon. The special time, when everything suspends. And that was for me the central axis. I knew that on the left side we’re going to have the obvious: day starts with the dawn, and it develops until it leads us to this central situation. On the right side you have the descent, the fall, so to say, of the day, so if the central axis is stretching, then it starts on the left and ends on the right. Then you will also have two victims. On the left we will have a man whom I call wheelified—on the wheel—and on the right hand we will have a man crucified. Two geometric signs, so to say. And on the left we have an anonymous victim and on the right we have a synonymous victim. So that

was the structure in my head, and then we developed a dozen or so characters and decided to follow them on and off just to have them. There is this drama of the wife of the man who is wheelified, and the mother of the man who is crucified. Obviously the crucified is reminiscent of the passion. There are elements that are recognizable from the passion figure, yet the costume states clearly that this is not Jesus Christ, this is one of the Flemish characters who for some reason was sentenced to this incredible torture.



Charlotte Rampling as the mother in *The Mill and the Cross*

DT: You made the very interesting decision of giving voices to only three characters—Bruegel, his patron, and the mother of the person who was crucified, whether it was Jesus or this Flemish person. What went into that decision?

LM: In the whole movie there is no specific relation that this is Jesus. This is for me a Flemish person. But the manner in which the torture is inflicted on him is obviously like the passion. And it was the irony, the tragic irony of these people who were torturing people in the name of the man who was tortured.

DT: But why did you decided not to use dialogue?

LM: The first idea I had for the film is that no character will move throughout the film. I wanted to have this film with all these people suspended in mid-movement. So they're physical...you see the sweat coming down their forehead, you see the tears, you see that they are breathing, but nobody really moves, this kind of a suspended time. And in the initial idea I was imagining that I would travel with the camera, moving among the characters and eavesdropping on their inner thoughts. Kind of overhearing their thoughts.

DT: But then you moved on from there.

LM: Yeah. Gibson wrote all these monologues, but ultimately I rejected most of them. Also the actors really started to work on the text, like Rutger Hauer, who got almost twelve pages of monologue. He sort of munched on it and chewed it up and spit it out and threw it up and ultimately it boiled down to three pages that he actually made his own. I trusted the way he minimalized that; in the process we both were just cutting and cutting and minimalizing the amount of information. So that was the process we had in shooting, and I also cut out some of these things in the editing. I was trying to keep as few words as possible.

DT: Did you work the same way with Michael York and Charlotte Rampling?

LM: Pretty much, yes. The speeches were longer but then they were cut down, and written words were replaced by others....you know, it's a normal process, you work on the text. It has to flow.

DT: Out of the five hundred figures in the painting, how did you choose the twelve?

LM: We wanted to make a cross-section of society, to have representatives of all the major groups of people who appear in the painting. So there has to be a close-up of the soldiers, there has to be the victims and their families, there has to be the older couple. There are certain spheres in Bruegel that sort of pop out of the rest. There's plenty of children in the painting, always playing.

DT: And the figure of the miller.

LM: Yeah, the mover and shaker. Primo mover

DT: The one who provides sustenance.

LM: Absolutely. He turns the wheels...the cogwheels of the universe.

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Thanks to Adam Walker, Film Forum, for arranging this interview.

Responses to *The Mill and the Cross/Lech Majewski*

1.  *Helen Altieri* says:

[June 2, 2012 at 5:00 pm](#)

My mind is reeling and my heart is racing.
Thanks to Lech Majewski and DT – the Paris Review of the Digital Age – for this generous, gorgeous, mind blowing interview.

[Reply](#)

-  *judithmyers* says:

[June 9, 2012 at 4:39 pm](#)

Helen–Thanks for the comment. “Generous” is the perfect word for describing Mr. Majewski. “Mind blowing” as well. Best, JGM

[Reply](#)

2.  *Philip McCaffrey* says:

[June 5, 2012 at 9:05 pm](#)

If “painting is silent poetry,” then this interview is painting that speaks.
Congratulations DT!

[Reply](#)

-  *judithmyers* says:

[June 9, 2012 at 4:34 pm](#)

Philip–Thanks for the comment. I feel incredibly lucky to have interviewed Mr. Majewski. Both his firsthand experience with artmaking and his eloquence when talking about it are gifts to us all. Best, JGM

[Reply](#)