

The Sun

Majewski's Magic
DVDs

By GARY GIDDINS | August 12, 2008

Reading Lech Majewski's résumé can give you a headache. A prolific poet and novelist, painter, composer-librettist and director of operas, and director, writer, composer, producer, and cameraman of video and films, the 54-year-old Polish-American has released 11 movies (not including Julian Schnabel's 1996 "Basquiat," which he co-wrote and co-produced), from 1978's "Zwiastowanie" to 2007's "Glass Lips." He assembled the latter from a 33-part video installation called "Blood of the Poet," which made its debut at the 2006 retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art. Mr. Majewski has lived in America since 1981. He works here and in Europe, often financing his own projects.

Yet few here know him or his work, a situation Kino International seeks to remedy today by releasing four of his films on DVD. They are packaged individually, but if you are seduced by one, you will likely go back for more. Although Mr. Majewski prefers languorous tempos — his films sometimes play like museum exhibits, a sequence of tableaux — and repeats favorite symbols from one picture to the next (snow, bleeding Christs, grazing roes, spilled milk), the films are strikingly distinctive.

They might be viewed as high-tech gimmicks: In "Gospel According to Harry" (1992), a middle-class American family lives in the desert; "The Roe's Room" (1998) is an opera in which off-screen voices detail the imagined goings-on in a Polish apartment; in "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (2004), an abbreviated love affair, set in London and Venice and filmed by the participants, blends art history and science into a discussion of metaphysics and becomes a disquisition on cinema itself. And in "Glass Lips," a madman's memories and imaginings are rendered with visual immediacy and sound effects, but without dialogue or much music.

Mr. Majewski's films are the sort about which mainstream reviewers remark, "Not for every taste." Nor is "The Dark Knight" for every taste. The taste required here is for symbolism and allusion. Mr. Majewski's films are often entrancing, erotically charged, grotesquely violent, efficiently acted (often by amateurs, in the Robert Bresson tradition), and fastidiously staged. They intend to mesmerize, to lure viewers into a zone where the real and unreal interact not to belabor the exertions of surreality but rather the monotony of life pitched on the edge of hysteria and ornamented with a common fund of resonant symbols. By combining familiar icons and mythologies (religious or secular) with personal conceits (when a Majewski fridge door opens, snow will gust from it), he encourages viewers to find evidence of their own symbolic baggage.

In short, these movies are novel, but they ring bells of recognition and familiarity. Even the repetitive, minimalist music (composed by Mr. Majewski and his collaborator, the pianist Jozef Skrzek), fashionable though it is, and occasionally interrupted by Germanic waltzes, is sufficiently anonymous to spur connections. It's neither memorable nor intrusive, but it does the job. What is memorable, maybe indelible, is the imagery. Mr. Majewski often uses digital equipment that renders a stable but finite glow, suggesting the lighting on paintings in great museums. The result is at once distancing and inviting — don't touch, gaze.

"Gospel According to Harry" is the most readily accessible of the four films on offer from Kino. It is an absurdist comedy with a famous cast, including Viggo Mortensen and Jennifer Rubin as Wes and Karen, a childless couple living a dreary existence, with all the electronic comforts, in a desert. She vacuums the sand, but it's everywhere, including her insides, making sex painful. Her mother complains of Wes's laziness and Wes's father attempts to sell him life insurance. The American president drops by to deliver platitudes about a kinder, gentler world, while a foiled assassin is crucified nearby. The eponymous Harry is an IRS collector.

The film is divided into biblical sections, drifting between the Christian and Hebrew Bibles (Exodus, Judges, Annunciation, Kings, Crucifixion, Numbers), and some of it is funny. Much of it, though, is heavy-handed, larded with wise-guy conceits reminiscent more of the forced irreverence that was popular in the 1960s movies of Robert Downey than in the dislocations of Samuel Beckett. The best scene is the first: A black eminence strews the desert with trinkets, as dunes drift aggressively by and clouds mark the sundown like ink blots. The next morning, the trinkets have flowered into plastic-wrapped television sets. That's the level of subtlety.

"The Roe's Room" represents an astonishing advance: The symbolism is no more subtle, perhaps, but the concerns are larger, the concept more original, and the resonances of the allusions more universal and penetrating. Except for a few exterior shots at the end, the entire film is set in a modest

apartment occupied by a stamp-collecting father, a nourishing mother (milk flows from the table like a fountain), and a son (Rafal Olbrychski) who looks like a Giotto model stuck in the wrong century. The son reconfigures their existence with his imagination, turning city life into pastoral disarray.

The story is divided by the four seasons, and reflects the son's dislocation, sexual desires, religious restraints, and Oedipal conundrum. In one sequence, a beautiful naked woman comes to his bed, then breaks into the father's desk to examine his stamps — yet the son tells us this scene is his father's dream and that she is really reading evidence that "we are naked and unprotected in a dream," and the father will awake to "realize that no one belongs in dreams." As seasons pass, a tree grows through their living room floor and ceiling, leaves burst through the walls, weeds cover the ground (the father cuts them with a scythe), and two roes graze and make it their home.

When the father dies, the son is lured into a world epitomized by the girl in a window across the way, and only the mother shuffles back to the roes' room, which may now be her room. All this is conveyed without dialogue and with very little lip-synching to the operatic commentary, which is mostly quotidian ("during dinner, I noticed no one looked at me"), made sumptuous by the vocalist representing the son: Polish countertenor Artur Stefanowicz. A choir (on-screen), two sopranos, and a tenor (voiced by the actor playing the father, Mieczyslaw Czepulonis) are also interwoven, but the countertenor sustains the piece's mood and tempo. The visual style follows the rhythm of the music; most of the shots are lateral pans from right to left.

Mr. Majewski's most recent films are more powerful. In "The Garden of Earthly Delights," Claudine, an English art historian dying of throat cancer (superbly played by Claudine Spiteri), falls in love with an engineer and obsessive film recorder. Both are working on doctoral theses — she on Bosch's triptych, he on hull design in modern ships. They move to Venice, which has never been captured more comprehensively in a feature film, even if Mr. Majewski's "pen" is little more than a semi-professional camera wielded by himself and his two actors. The film begins with the man, Chris (Chris Martin), jumping into the lagoons to work off his grief, and cuts back and forth from their affair to the present, as he films himself viewing the tapes, using edits and optical tricks to make a record that is itself a testimony to the power of art over death.

Most of the talk is about metaphysics and art, and much of it is good talk, especially concerning Claudine's conviction that Bosch shows that "entry into paradise is possible here on earth" if good and evil are neutralized. To prove her point, she and Chris re-create sexual positions and symbols in the painting. Yet as her illness worsens, she lapses into a rant against modern evils, and whenever their lovemaking is interrupted, they instinctively cup their genitals as if enacting the expulsion from another garden. Still, they bravely court ecstasy, as Chris demonstrates the temporality of her body by amassing the elements from which it is made. Mr. Majewski knows his Descartes and the right questions, but he doesn't pretend to have answers; the film ends with digital static.

"Glass Lips" begins with another mythological genesis — the baby abandoned on a mountain — and cuts to an alarm clock that works backward, as does an inmate who backs out of his room past another inmate, frozen in a "Heil Hitler" posture. Nurses lower his arm, but it pops right up. There is much comedy here, sublimely judged in a film that is essentially given to pathos: The mad poet Sebastian (Patrik Czajka) ruminates and elaborates on his appalling childhood — abusive father, sexually stimulating mother.

The images are inspired and relentless in this Majewski quartet: the boy tied into an elaborate cat's cradle when the parents leave the house; the father eating dog food in his office on the 365th floor while his wife plays outside the window; a ram slaughtered in a courtyard littered with inflatable dolls and pornography; a re-enactment of Abraham and Isaac; even the rather passé closing of a rejuvenating pool. The images are so rich, the control of the material so sure that you never miss the absent dialogue; talk would be intrusive.

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