

# Way, Truth, and Life in Art

BY MARY M. ANDERSON

*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6:9–13

WE ENTER THE FLEMISH MASTER-piece—Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Way to Calvary* (1564)—through its foreground, at a midway point along its bottom edge. Our eyes are cinematically led into its composition by two pairs of dressers carrying fine clothes. Their movements align to the camera’s as it slowly pans to reveal the mise-en-scène of the painting’s lower right quadrant. Three women and a man are being clothed in sixteenth-century garb, costumed in accordance with the roles each will play in a familiar pageant—*familiar* in the paradoxical sense of being both common and intimate. Immersed in the salving, metronomic pulse of the film’s hypnotic score, we see these four persons, silently, passively, donning their requisite habits—the dress, attitude, and stance in which each will be rendered in time and immortalized by the artist’s hand.

In Lech Majewski’s film, *The Mill & the Cross*, Calvary is a choreography of human relation. A woman—we will come to know her as Mary of Magdala—rises as the dressers approach. Young, fair-haired, and wearing a petticoat, she lifts her arms to receive the dresser’s bustle—a distant gesture reminiscent of the *orans* posture—and its cord is tied around her slim waist. To her left a young man—John, the beloved disciple—is being dressed in a tan tunic and gray cape. His feet are bare, we notice, as he adjusts his stance. He will soon take up his position at the right side of Mary (Charlotte Ramping), the mother of Jesus, now clothed in a garment of lilac rose. We watch as her face, framed by the wimple’s white folds, and her body, turned inward with grief, are draped in a long veil of pale blue. As the camera moves toward her sister—Mary of Clopas—two male voices punctuate the scene and score.

“So, so this could be a group of saints returning from the past to mourn the present fate of Flanders.”

“Yes. And when the painting’s done, you may have it, if you wish.”

Pieter Bruegel (Rutger Hauer), who has been sketching behind a rock, strides onto this stage of his own creation, accompanied by his patron, Nicholaes Jonghelinck (Michael York). Pausing by the figure of Mary, Jesus’ mother, he sketches a moment, lowers his portfolio to the ground, and walks the periphery. Like a sculptor adjusting her material to her eye, Bruegel bends to reconfigure the ruby folds encircling the Magdalene’s form. The camera zooms out, situating the painter and his private corner of Calvary within the painting entire. Our characters, we discover, inhabit a liminal landscape located at the borders of life and art—part theater, part painting, part computer-generated and geographical earth. Art’s truth and our belief depend upon these hybrid origins. In *The Mill & the Cross*, vision, technology, and painstaking craft combine to translate fragments of Poland, New Zealand, and Austria, blue-screen compositing, 3-D imaging, and a hand-painted backdrop, into a Christological aesthetics. Within the arc and anachronism of a twenty-first-cum-sixteenth-century work of art, the Word pitches its tent among us.

The film’s balletic prelude—the first two and a half minutes described above—is both liturgical and oxymoronic; it realizes in time and visual form the rhetorical incongruity of *still life* and *tableau vivant*. Simply described as “a painting come to life,”<sup>1</sup> *The Mill & the Cross* is, more precisely, a film that comes to life, and contemplates it, through a painting. With meditative grace and homiletic insight, the film visually confesses Christ, in the heart of humanity and in the historical course of time. Set within the crucible of sixteenth-century life in Flanders under the Spanish occupation of King Philip II, the film bears witness to Christ *in medias res*, hidden within the outward and visible surfaces of

## FILM

*The Mill & the Cross*,  
Angelus Silesius,  
Polish Film Institute,  
and Kino Lorber, Inc.,  
91 minutes.

1. See, for example, Tom Long’s *Detroit News* review: [www.detroitnews.com/article/20120119/ENT02/201190329](http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20120119/ENT02/201190329).

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2. Cf. Psalm 103:9 (NRSV); and Emmanuel Levinas, philosopher and Talmudic commentator: "With the appearance of the human... there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other"; "The Paradox of Morality," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (Routledge, 1988), 172. Also, "One comes not into the world, but into question," in "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Blackwell, 1997), 81.

Flemish life. Majewski attends this interiority and its appearance—life's exigencies and frivolities, sensibilities and injustices—with sacramental care. Word and witness, we see, dwell in the film and flesh of quotidian life: the diapering of a child; the stitching of a shroud; the blessing and cutting of bread. Minstrels pipe, geese squabble, thresholds are washed, children play. Despite its five-hundred-year distance, this foreign terrain is familiar, ever so common, and infinitely intimate.

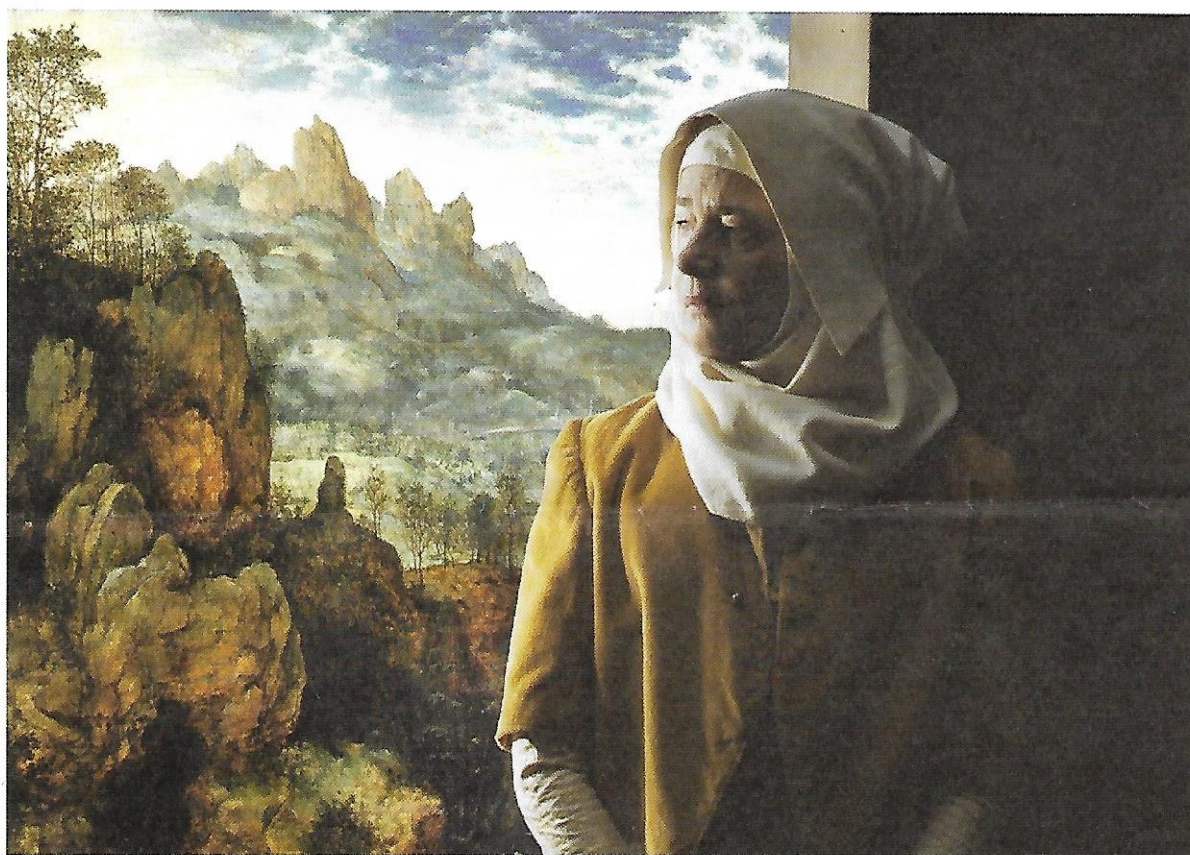
"My painting will have to tell many stories," Majewski's Bruegel confides. "It should be large enough to hold everything. Everything. All the people, there must be a hundred of them." For centuries, European painting had depicted Calvary as the site of three crucifixions, Jesus of Nazareth hanging between two thieves. In 1564 Pieter Bruegel paints instead a Calvary whose way and truth illumines the horizon of the Cross, and the ethical priority it constitutes for a truly human life. In this sense Bruegel's *Calvary*, which gives visual priority to the mother, the Marys, and John, symbolically spills over the crest of these

archetypal and familial relations to depict Jesus and his cross enfleshed within the intricacies and anonymity of a common life, a peopled landscape teeming with beauty and strife. Majewski's film reiterates this Bruegelian view, offering a eucharistic vision of Christ as the daily bread of life: "Below the grindstone of events," the artist states, "our Savior is being ground like grain, mercilessly."

*The Mill & the Cross* cinematically unfolds this Christic vision, evoking a parallel between the artist's process and the biblical act of creation, each yielding a world of infinite relation. "I will work," Bruegel tells us, "like the spider I saw this morning, building its web." The contours of this web—merciful and merciless—visibly emerge before our eyes, accusing us in both the Psalmic and Levinasian sense.<sup>2</sup> One early sequence remains etched in my mind. It is dark. As dawn approaches, two torches, rounding the base of the mill's towering crag, become two lumberjacks in a forest listening for sap, in a tree that will be chosen, scored with a cross, and felled. The sign of the cross that marks this tree

THE WAY TO CALVARY, 1564, PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY





for death repeats, visibly and invisibly, in cinematic time: as a Franciscan friar—who assists the red-coated mercenaries of the Spanish Inquisition—blesses himself; as a cartwheel is rolled along the forest path; as a work horse is hitched to a cart; as a priest, anachronistically, holds a crucifix before the faces of the two thieves. Each action—like the ancient, wooden cogs rotating in the bowels of the mill—heralds the way to Calvary. Before we see Jesus or witness his Passion, Christ is crucified as a tree falls in the forest, as a woman is buried alive, as a young man is brutally torn from life, tied to the cartwheel and hoisted atop the tree to die a heretic's death. "I've seen it all," Jonghelinck cries, and, through Majewski's art, we see it too. In each crime against humanity we see the origin of the Cross before it became a sign, a religious ornament, a political weapon, a warrant for violence, a license for death.

IN THIS WAY, THROUGH A CLOSE, CINEMATIC reading of Bruegel's *Way to Calvary*, Majewski and his collaborator, art historian Michael Francis Gibson,<sup>3</sup> have

created a work that incorporates a truth of art, its *raison d'être*, exposing what is on offer when we step in front of a canvas or into a theater. Through art's mimetic and iterative distance—its alterity, its otherness—we come to life, are brought to it, in order to contemplate it as our own. *The Mill & the Cross* privileges this ethical imperative in vision, daring to express an infinitely intimate reality—"Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4)—at the heart of our lives. We all are Simon called to help carry our neighbor's cross, all Judas counting our silver, all Jesus gently washing the feet of friends. With Mary, Jesus' mother, we all bend in sorrow saying, "I don't understand." Lech Majewski's film reminds us—beautifully, subliminally, and yet uncompromisingly—that Christ dies a heretic's death under the daily inquisition of our fear and our blinding failure to love. In its art we experience a truly aesthetic *parousia* that resurrects our capacity to see that our hands all share in a common bowl of water and our bodies all are—in mercy broken—from a common loaf of bread.

*Pray then in this way.* ■

3. Michael Francis Gibson, *The Mill and the Cross: Peter Bruegel's 'Way to Calvary'*, trans. from the original French by the author (Sylvio Acatos, 2000).