

THE MILL AND THE CROSS is – as Lech Majewski himself admits – his most complex work. Starting from a painting by Pieter Bruegel, the director of „Angelus” and „Garden of Earthly Delights” creates multilayered cinematic tour de force. The film’s postproduction, undertaken by specialists from Studio Odeon, is an enormous challenge confronting a great artistic vision with the world of technology. Magda Lebecka talks to the director and the team engaged in this process.

Magda Lebecka: “Garden of Earthly Delights” was a journey in film through Hieronimus Bosch’s work; “The Mill and the Cross” is an attempt to penetrate the world of Pieter Bruegel’s painting. It would seem from the chronology of your films that Bruegel, a generation younger and inspired by the art of the master from Hertogenbosch, appeared among your interests later.

Lech Majewski: I have several permanent fascinations, and one of these has always been the creator of “The Seasons”. 30 years ago, while preparing for a staging of “Oedipus Rex” for Teatr Studio it was through Bruegel that I read Sophocles.

At the heart of each of your previous films or performances has lain a primary vision, around which you’ve built a web of associations and ideas. How was it this time?

Lech Majewski: When the art historian, Michael Gibson, saw my “Angelus” in Paris, he thought it a “Bruegelesque work”, and he gave me his phenomenal analysis of the Bruegel’s painting “The Way to Calvary” to read. I swallowed his book entitled “The Mill and the Cross” up whole. Under Bruegel’s peasant guise (his contemporaries called him Pieter the Weird, a “comical fool”) there hid a thinker – the greatest one among the painters. While Bosch was a visionary and a prophet, Bruegel was a philosopher and careful observer. I’d risk the analogy that the differences between them were the same as those as between Fellini and Buñuel. When Gibson gave me that book, he was hoping I’d agree to make a documentary based on it, and he’d already gathered some funding for that. I told him I don’t make documentaries, but I could make a feature film. “How? Based on a philosophical essay? A plot from art history?” He couldn’t take it in...

It was a challenge. All that remained was to find some formula, the right key. Then that primary vision appeared – I saw people in a vast meadow, in a mountainous landscape. Nobody was moving, and the camera flew gently – closing in on them.

States of suspended animation like that are a trademark of your art.

Lech Majewski: Like in “Angelus”, when the folk entertainment is haunted by angels and everyone freezes in mid-dance. Ephemeral immobility – for me that’s when the most happens. But of course this picture had already been captured by Bruegel, and for the film we needed to create pre- and post-history of that moment. Reach it and leave it... How did we reach it? From over 500 characters immortalised by the Flemish genius we extracted a few and fictionalised their lives on this particular day. That’s how the structure came about.

You can read Bruegel’s painting like a book dense with symbolic content. Literally read it – from left to right, since his painting, too, develops in that direction; that’s the movement of the characters on the canvas, in accordance with the direction our culture uses for reading and for measuring time.

Going from the left – it starts with a green, leafy tree and a town full of people working, an oasis of life. Moving to the right we see that the land grows barren. The area of the town is replaced by the area of Golgotha and in place of households there appear gallows and a wheel impaled on a pole, with dead bodies laid out on it. On the right the composition closes with a stake with a black raven and the wheel

awaiting its corpse. The tale leads from life to death; from birth and plenty to decrepitude and cinders. But behind that stark pole on the right edge there is a young tree growing, thus negating death. It initiates a new cycle of life. And then, moving vertically and diagonally between the rock, the merchant buying bread and the sails of the windmill, some significant reference points appear: the thistle motif, which symbolises the suffering of the Lord in the Christian culture, and the rocks mirroring the figures of the Holy Family. The viewer's eye can stop anywhere, turn back and form connections between intriguing details. The associations form in the same second. What's on the canvas is bundled together, merged, simultaneous, but in the cinema we tell stories in linear time.

Did such a reading of "The Way to Calvary" influence the type of narration of the film?

Lech Majewski: Not directly. But since I started making movies I've been consistently aiming for contemplation of the image. (I've heard opinions that this idea is "anti-film", as if the chop-and-slice editing was today's obligatory dogma.) So this certainly does contribute to a concern for the composition of the shot. And to include in it, besides the main theme, a background action that corresponds to it, either confirming or denying it. That's how the polyphony of life is expressed. As philosophers say: truth is what is mutually exclusive, and physicists add that a good theory must contain its antithesis. That's also the case with the art of the philosopher Bruegel – he confronts greatness with smallness, ridiculousness with tragedy. He shows Christ falling under the cross, but without emanating cruelty à la Mel Gibson in "Passion of the Christ", and fish eyes lodged in the firmament. Near the tormented Saviour there's a funny little man who's stolen someone else's cap. People are minding their own business, engaged in everyday, mundane activities. What's happening beside them at the same moment is unnoticeable.

How did you find the key to this work where a painterly vision meets advanced technology.

Lech Majewski: I didn't want to produce a tautological illustration of Bruegel. Trying to enliven the painting by adding an element of movement to a canvas everyone knows would lead nowhere. So I'm trying to create a paraphrase of Bruegel's aesthetic, variations on a theme. By understanding the mechanisms that he himself applied, to translate his vision into a specific cinematic language with the help of the technology available today. The aptness of these choices was confirmed by a conversation with the 3D specialists. I happened to be in New Zealand for a series of lectures and retrospectives, and while I was there I presented a 15 minute trailer for "The Mill and the Cross". What made the greatest impression on the professionals (some of them had worked on special effects in "Lord of the Rings") was the fact that for the first time they'd seen technology in film being harnessed to the aesthetic of an old master. Nobody had ever done that before on such a scale and in such a long narrative form. Computer graphic artists with artistic skills usually use their own strokes to draw a kind of comic-book or trompe-l'oeil reality, and in this film we do indeed enter completely new territory. It's not easy, as everyone involved in the postproduction realises. None of us has any tricks worked out, and in ordinary advertising or genre films such as sci-fi these are pre-defined and known.

We are in a room at the ODEON studio. Three computer screens show very similar versions of a movingly beautiful shot – a part close-up of the old master in a copper and gold robe, against a background of a cross merging into the landscape. A moment ago I witnessed this image being created. We worked for half an hour along with a computer graphic artist on the volume and the degree of transparency and whiteness of the cloud of fog around the feet of some characters in the background. What are the components that make up this shot?

Lech Majewski: The elderly man in the foreground was filmed in the Katowice studio against a bluebox (we couldn't use greenbox, since green is so dominant in Bruegel's compositions). I filmed that couple of soldiers beside the cross in the middle ground in the Katowice "Alps", which are the slagheaps left from pits and open cast mines where "Angelus" was made. The third field on the right is a fragment of real scenery from the Olsztyn area. Further back, with the rock protruding from the left, is a landscape from

Bruegel's "Escape to Egypt". After that stretches the sky, which is a combination of his painting and New Zealand cloud formations.

Your approach is like Peter Bruegel's own –he added layers of Alpine rocks and glowing views of southern Italy to his native Flemish landscapes. Are you often surprised by the effects of your work?

Lech Majewski: With such a long process I have to be. When I think about how determinedly we searched the Jura Mountains chain at the beginning to find the particular rock that the mill was to stand on... That was one of the harder parts. As a result of the location scouting we did find the right place. We even came up with the idea of raising that rock and building a working windmill on it. A team of highlanders was brought in, specialists in complex constructions, and after a detailed analysis they decided that any reasonably strong gust of wind, not to mention storm, could prove to be deadly for the extras positioned around the foot of the rock. Any plank falling from that height would mean trouble. And what's more, even the rock itself – an outcrop in an open space – wouldn't withstand the pressure of the wind and would need securing with straps, which would need to be camouflaged with paint. And suddenly it turned out that the cost of this venture would reach two million zlotys! So building a windmill was out. But even assuming I had the money to construct a whole mountain range it still wouldn't live up to our expectations. I realised that if I used a wide lens the rock would be the width of a finger, and with slightly narrower optics it would be out of focus.

Apart from that, a computer wizard made a precise analysis of the "Way to Calvary" and calculated that in Bruegel's painting there's not one perspective - there's seven.

It became clear that we weren't going to film a general backdrop – there's no point in space from where the whole scene could be captured in the way I imagined it... A slight bird's-eye view with the real rock in the background. The crowd of people in groups simply couldn't be fitted in, because there's seven of these points! So this vision has to be sewn together from several layers, the way Bruegel sewed it from several sketches. Then I understood I had to think of the final effect. In practice this meant starting to build it on the basis of a series of bluescreen elements. Then later the technical limitations became apparent too.

And so, step by step we came closer to solutions which allowed us to make my vision work.

The windmill on the rock was generated by computer.

Lech Majewski: The budget we have for "The Mill and the Cross" is like that for a contemporary story, while we're making a film which, as the production manager from London calculated, should cost £19m by September 30th. But even though we've only got a fraction of that amount available, the film we're making looks quite epic and unique. That's the biggest miracle!

This time you worked with a storyboard. Was it necessary to draw up the scenes in this case?

Lech Majewski: The storyboard was a useful trampoline towards further actions. To achieve what you see on the screen we had to go through a lot of intermediate stages.

Finding visual equivalents to supplement the entirety of the picture was difficult, but I had good professionals to help in creating this project. I wanted to invite those that I had already had working contact with. I like being surrounded by people I know.

In one shot I recognised the actor who played Walter Goj (the mad inventor from "Angelus") playing the miller. And more significantly, after a break you're working again with cameraman Adam Sikora, with whom you collaborated on the visual side of "The Roes' Room", "Wojaczek" and "Angelus".

Lech Majewski: The photography will be signed by both of us – me and Adam. He is a master at building light, especially in natural interiors. With his excellent command of light he gave this space the feel of Dutch chambers. But after the filming finished he's had nothing more to do with the film. His participation is important, especially in the interior sequences, but that's only part of what will be seen on the screen. I, on the other hand, am responsible for composing all the pictures, for the concept, the idea,

the aesthetic whole. And now for the postproduction phase. I've already spent an extra year building each frame from the additional elements.

The second director, Dorota Lis, who has an excellent feel for detail and faces, helped me a lot in casting the actors and extras. She spent a long time looking through portraits from old paintings and managed to find a lot of characteristic Bruegelesque types.

The costume designer, Dorota Roqueplo, had to put in a lot of effort, since all the costumes are hand-sewn and specially dyed. (I couldn't believe it when I saw in a close-up of an expensive German production about a woman pope that the character's clothing had been sewn by machine! I can't understand why the producers didn't want to immerse themselves in the feel of the era, which was documented so reliably in the art of that time).

We did a lot of rehearsing for our film. The camera and technical tryouts alone lasted nine months. We started with the costumes. First of all, we gathered large amounts of different types of fabrics and filmed them, checking how they shimmered, broke, the arrangement of light on them, how they behave in interiors and exteriors. Then we experimented with keying the colours – which are suitable for blueboxing, and which need to be filmed on a greenscreen. We also pondered for a long time with Norbert Rudzik, who supervises the technical side and is also co-editor...

...and previously worked on "Glass Lips"...

Lech Majewski: ...on the possibility of giving the pictures a texture that would make them appear to have been painted by brush. In the end, though, I conceded that it would look artificial, that that way we would be heading too far in the direction of animation, literally "doing painting". I felt that such a measure would be playing dehumanising games with form, and I'd lose the man through it.

As you can see, it's large scale manufacturing – the most laborious project in my life.

A project which, both mentally and technically, had to be prepared with mathematical precision at every stage. Whereabouts in all this does the feeling of creative freedom fit in, the room for improvisation?

Lech Majewski: Everywhere! That's the best of both worlds. On the one hand you're trying to do something with the material, and on the other it responds with "no, not that way, that's a mistake!" You hear negation more often than confirmation. And sometimes as a reward you're seized with joy that you've managed to achieve an interesting effect. You either communicate with the material, or you want to impose your will on it, bend it in line with your expectations. Doing that requires arrogance and vast amounts of money. We didn't have either of those, so we were left with patient experimentation. That goes for every level – the choice of fabrics, costumes, people and faces, the way of moving, gestures, the scope of words used. It transpired that during the work there was a constant reduction in the spoken word.

I was wondering whether, after the silent "Glass Lips", you'd move on to heavy dialogue.

Lech Majewski: The image here is so charged and eloquent that filling it with speech would be dangerous. Of course, it would be unnatural if the characters didn't speak, there are a couple of internal monologues, for example, but mainly there's a specific atmosphere of concentration and silence. Except for the children, who are like an untamed storm of energy – screaming, kicking and rolling around on the ground.

Have you got an idea yet of the sound and concept for the soundtrack? Will you be using your own music again this time?

Lech Majewski: I already am, since I've composed a certain "peasant" theme. It's still too early for any specific talks with other composers.

As for the concept for the sound, I know it has to be very specific, demanding a lot of work. But we can't make a start on that until the picture is ready. We've been putting it together for a year now, with still no end in sight. It's kind of frustrating for me, because we're into the third year of work on the film...

But it's a very specific film. What's the biggest problem for you at the postproduction stage?

Lech Majewski: The time required for computer calculations.

More people and jobs involved in this work?

Lech Majewski: Up to several hundred people work on a big studio film.

So when will this stage reach its happy end?

Lech Majewski: Everyone asks me that... In November in Paris we were talking about April 22nd as the date for the premiere in the Louvre. They'll have to wait, unfortunately, that can't be done.

You've always said that finishing a book or film you free it from your control, allowing it to live its own, unpredictable life. And you're very often surprised by its reception.

Lech Majewski: Maybe more so in the case of this film than with the previous ones, because it's a universal theme. In "Angelus" we're dealing with a specific Silesian story, "Wojaczek" also has a local provenance, but Bruegel belongs to the world's artistic heritage. It's a very broad based patrimony.

Another of the film's pluses, making it more attractive, are the stars who I know were enthusiastic about accepting roles in "The Mill and the Cross": Charlotte Rampling – Marji, Michael York – the Antwerp merchant Nicolas Jonghelinck, and Rutger Hauer – Pieter Bruegel himself.

Lech Majewski: Rutger, even though filming had long since finished, was so "energised" that for a long time he didn't want to leave Poland. I'm very satisfied with the results, particularly since I could see their joy at taking part in my film.