

WASHINGTON POST

The Mill and the Cross



Critic Rating:

Art of suffering in 16th century

By Stephanie Merry

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Those needing a crash course in the art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder should look no further than the insightful poetry of W.H. Auden, whose "Musee des Beaux Arts" extols the artist's profound and expansive approach to suffering. When a great disaster occurs - the fall of Icarus, for example - no one else on the canvas can be bothered to notice; they're all too busy going about their daily routines.

Writer-director Lech Majewski captures the same sentiment in "The Mill and the Cross," which turns Bruegel's 1564 painting "The Way to Calvary" into a live-action experience. In the film, the painter (played with brooding intensity by Rutger Hauer) conceptualizes the painting, taking inspiration from the sad state of affairs in his home of Flanders, where the terror of the Spanish Inquisition looms over the region like a thunderhead.

The movie opens with an imagined re-creation of the detailed painting, in which Bruegel takes on the role of set designer, moving people and clothing around to suit his painterly needs. The work is a riot of activity that includes a child wading through a stream, a group of mourning women, men on horseback and, amid the motley visual din, Jesus buckling under the weight of the cross on his way to be crucified at Calvary. The men accompanying Christ would have been familiar to Bruegel's friends and neighbors - they sport the red tunics of the Spanish militia.

From there, Majewski and co-writer Michael Francis Gibson enliven a handful of the more than 500 figures from the painting, as well as Bruegel and his friend Nicholaes Jonghelinck (Michael York). Life for these people is hazardous, but, just as Auden noted, the ugliness is merely one component of the big picture. Just when the viewer starts to feel at ease thanks to the idiosyncratic sights of dancing minstrels, townspeople on stilts or a placid calf standing in a basket, the Spaniards swoop in and beat

a man to death, before placing his body atop a massive pole, the "tree of death" which features prominently in the foreground of Bruegel's work.

The story moves slowly. Revelations unfold at an unhurried pace, just as they might when standing in front of a painting, and the movie is nearly devoid of dialogue. While sounds are pervasive - clogs clomping up wooden steps or the breeze blowing through the sheets of a windmill's blades - words are few and far between.

It's a novel experience, which is sustained by the way the movie was created. While CGI is so often used to make imagined scenes look like real life, Majewski uses technology to make real life look fake. Many shots consist of layers that include animation, live acting and a massive two-dimensional replica of Bruegel's painting, so that the artist often appears to be wandering through his own work of art.

Majewski's film is a captivating exercise that will interest fans of art, not to mention arthouse cinema. But the movie's lasting impression is about more than novelty. It's a portrait of suffering and subjugation that urges viewers to stop what they're doing and take notice of the world around them.