



SCREEN FISH

Valley of the Gods: At the Feet of Power

August 11, 2020 by Steve Norton [Leave a Comment](#)



It can be easy for us to think so highly of ourselves that we ought.

In this latest film from acclaimed director Lech Majewski, *Valley of the Gods* explores the nature of power vs. poverty through three separate yet intrinsically-linked narratives. Grappling with his recent divorce, John Ecas (Josh Hartnett) is a struggling writer who is searching for peace. After meeting a homeless man on the street, Ecas is unaware that the man is actually Wes Taurus (John Malkovich), the wealthiest man in the world. Taurus has been posing as a homeless man in order to feel connected to the world around and invites Ecas to write his biography. As the world only trillionaire Taurus is a recluse from society yet is determined to mine on the sacred lands of the Navajo for uranium, upsetting the people of the community.



Beautifully shot by Majewski and Pawel Tybora, *Gods* is often an overwhelming visual treat. Featuring vast desert landscapes and daunting palacial rooms, the film's images force the viewer to feel small, as if they are pawns to some otherworldly game of chess. Intentionally linking Taurus' mansion to *Citizen Kane's* Xanadu, there is a cinematic opulence to this trillionaire's estate unlike anything we've seen onscreen in ages. From tennis courts that resemble the Sistine Chapel to operas performed standing in an enormous fountain, every shot within its walls speaks to the incredible power (and loneliness) of vast wealth and creates a gut-wrenching fear towards its enigmatic owner.

Meanwhile, this life of remarkable luxury is held in direct contrast to the awe-inspiring natural world of the Navajo community. Although just as daunting as cool isolation of Taurus' world, the dry heat of the desert carries an intensely spiritual warmth to the landscapes and carry a deep connection to those that hold them in reverence. As a result, the nervousness that one feels in these scenes is not for a man who lives in a castle but rather for the mysterious power of nature that is rarely taken seriously by outsiders.



By juxtaposing these two diametrically opposed spaces, Majewski puts his emphasis on the emptiness of wealth. In *Gods*, Majewski understands that that which is deeply spiritual trumps financial fortune, not only in importance but also in power (an idea which comes to literal fruition at the film's finale). However, what's most interesting about the film is Malkovich's Taurus (Isn't Malkovich almost always the most interesting part of anything he's in?), who seems to recognize that he's missing something and looks to feel alive.

Unlike the Navajo who may live in poverty yet maintain their souls, Taurus' life remains empty. As the world's richest man, he literally controls everyone and everything at his disposal yet he remains spiritually poor. Disguised as a homeless man, Taurus honours the poor and the impoverished and moves around the city below in plain sight, yearning for the simplicity of life that has been lost. Though he lives his life like a secluded god in the heavens, he literally descends from on high in order to feel connected to the world around him. Despite his vast fortune, his wealth has become a prison for him and he longs to be set free.



By recognizing the power of the healthy soul and the value of the impoverished in the face of corporate wealth, there are times when Majewski's film borders on the profound. Though the story can be difficult to follow because of his staggered and non-traditional use of narrative devices, *Valley of the Gods* does come together through its thematic and visual beauty. Engulfing the viewer with the sheer magnitude of their surroundings, Majewski shifts their perspective away from themselves and towards something greater.

Because, to him, recognizing that there is something greater helps remind us that we are something less.

