

# The Mill and the Cross: the splash, the forsaken cry

Lech. J. Majewski's tableau is a pious meditation on Christianity's and humanity's Passion

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**PINAMAR – Masterly witnessing** the process of construction of Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel's *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), Polish director Lech. J. Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross* is a stunningly beautiful if lacerating canvas portraying both Christ's crucifixion and Bruegel's homeland brutalization by Spanish occupiers. Not unlike Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross* is both painting and museum immersion through unorthodox filmmaking. While *Russian Ark*, with its awe-inspiring one-long-shot sojourn of the Russian State Hermitage Museum, instilled in viewers an awe-inspiring realization of the hidden beauties of the Creation, *The Mill and the Cross*, though equally stunning, is pungently agonizing in its depiction of the persecution of Flemish peasants by Spanish invaders.

The opening credits of *The Mill and the Cross*, resembling 1960s typewritten cardboards set against sepia-toned backgrounds, lay the foundations for what's to come: a throwback to the heyday of art house cinema, when film connoisseurs, guided by their knowledge and sensitivity rather than Hollywood's grinding-machine marketing strategies, went through the sanctified ritual of standing in line outside movie theatres, ecstatically palating the latest *chef d'oeuvre*, and finally discussing it at length over endless rounds of *cortados*, in the case of Porteño cinephiles.

The same sense of expectancy, transported to the 21st century's shifting paradigms, ought to be created by Majewski's one-of-a-kind reconstruction of a master-painter's process of intellectual and artistic musings before sketching and actually setting brush to canvass to produce what's arguably an unparalleled, if not always properly interpreted, depiction of human cruelty and tragedy amid insensitivity to ruthless, unaccountable acts of oppression.



Rutger Hauer in a scene from *The Miller and The Cross*.

## A poetic inspiration?

In projecting and putting together *The Mill and the Cross*, director Lech Majewski was seemingly inspired by W.H. Auden's 1938 poem *Musée des Beaux Arts*, which hinges around the existential theme of divine intent as opposed to humankind's unavoidable submission to the designs of the Gods. For illustration purposes, below is Auden's poem, a paean to divine desiderata and the frailty of human volition:

### Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood

As director Majewski succinctly explains through the words of Bruegel himself, his own version of the *Our Lord's Way of the Cross* substitutes Spanish inquisitors and Flemish Protestants in Flanders for Romans persecuting the Jews. In *The Procession to Calvary* failing to perceive Jesus Christ carrying the Cross is oftentimes missed as the result of Bruegel's conviction that subsidiary acts in the foreground may and indeed do foreground smaller though more rele-

vant issues. With several hundred characters in this massive tableau, Bruegel – and today, director Majewski – remind us bluntly, to the point, that summarily extraordinary events may unfold against the background of ordinary happenings.

Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's

fast and going about the day's chores. In another household, a portentous peasant and his equally corpulent, indolent wife wake up to another joyous morning of farm work.

In Majewski's vision of lives filled with quietude and absent-minded peace, things never rush off to a fast-paced rhythm. Indeed, rather than action, the breathtaking camerawork and enthralling music follow these foursome's idyllic journey through evergreen val-

leys. Once the young lovers and the peasant couple unwind for a sitting for an unseen painter, all Hell breaks loose in the shape of divine intervention and malediction.

Inadvertently at first but then with the power of ruthless revelation, it dawns on viewers that this is just the prologue to infernal chaos and carnage, with a crowd of townsfolk observing the tragedy unfold before their mellow eyes and sheepish gaze.

Towering above the proceedings is *The Miller*, scanning it all in divine and yet obscene, omniscient fashion. Leaning against the imposing turret's balustrade, *The Miller*, both in Bruegel's painting and in Majewski's film, bears testimony to the cruelty of humankind and the impotence they paradoxically seem to relish. As cosmic perception of the cruellest facets of human nature purportedly driven by divine intention, Bruegel painted an all-encompassing, pungent scenario that bespoke his disillusionment, followed by abstract representation, with the "natural" order of things. Deep inside, he knew it to be as false and hypocritical as the feudal lords mastering over their subjects, just like the ferociously zealous Roman Catholic hierarchy did over obediently oppressed believers.

Director Majewski punctiliously examines Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary* and its distressfully painful portrait of humanity's endless voyage through Hell on Earth. In deconstructing and then putting together his arrestingly beautiful and excruciatingly painful exegesis, Majewski seals his reputation as one of the world's finest filmmakers ever.

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Bruegel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Production Notes

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

*The Mill and the Cross (El Molino y la cruz)*. Sweden/Poland, 2011. In English and Spanish. Written by: Michael Francis Gibson, Majewski, inspired by the book by Gibson. Directed by: by Lech Majewski. With: Rutger Hauer, Charlotte Rampling, Michael York, Joanna Litwin, Dorota Lis, Bartosz Capowicz, Marian Makula, Sylwia Szczerba. An Angelus Silesius and Polish Film Institute production in association with Telewizja Polska, Bokomotiv Filmproduktion, Odeon Studio, Silesia Film, 24 Media, Supra Film, Arkana Studio and Piramida Film. Running time: 92 minutes.

## Filmmaker Cameron plans 8-km ocean dive

**WASHINGTON – A calm James Cameron** has broken his own record with the world's deepest solo submarine dive, plunging 8.2 kilometres in the Pacific Ocean near Papua New Guinea, the filmmaker said Thursday.

Still, he is not satisfied. Later this month he says he plans to descend to the deepest place on Earth.

Cameron is aiming to plunge to the bottom of Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench of the Pacific Ocean, 321 kilometres southwest of Guam. It is 11 kilometres deep. Humans have been there only once before when a two-man US Navy team went for just 20 minutes in 1960.

The *Avatar* and *Titanic* filmmaker said he was not frightened when he dove nearly that far in a practice

run Wednesday that lasted 3.5 hours on the bottom.

"Certainly not nervous or scared during the dive," Cameron told AP in a ship-to-shore phone interview. "You tend to be a little apprehensive ahead of the dive about what could go wrong. When you are actually on the dive you have to trust the engineering was done right."

Later, he acknowledged that the bone-crushing pressure at five miles

and seven miles deep "is in the back of your mind."

Cameron is using a one-man, 12-ton lime green submarine that he helped design called DEEPSEA CHALLENGER. He is partnering with the National Geographic Society, where he is an explorer-in-residence.

"The deep trenches are the last unexplored frontier on our planet, with scientific riches enough to fill

a hundred years of exploration," Cameron said in an earlier statement.

Cameron, who has been an oceanography enthusiast since childhood, has made 72 deep-sea submersible dives, including 33 to the Titanic, the subject of his 1997 blockbuster. A 3-D version of *Titanic* comes out April 4, timed to the 100th anniversary of the ship's sinking.