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The Mill & The Cross Film Critique

Both film critiques I read about “The Mill & the Cross” praised the movie as capturing the overall intentions and essence of both Peter Bruegel the Elder’s intentions for *The Way to Calvary* and of the painting itself. Daniel Gold of the New York Times and Steven Greydanus of Christianity Today share the view as film critics that “The Mill & the Cross” achieved the high goals intended by the filmmakers, whereas I disagree in some areas.

Daniel Gold writes, “Mr. Majewski does not spend much time developing his characters” and then continues on to say, “It isn’t the artist, it’s the art that’s the star here.” While I agree essentially with what Mr. Gold is saying, the art should be the focus of the film and the director succeeded in that objective, I think the film would actually benefit from a little more character development. Not only would it enhance the audience’s emotional ties to the characters that end up being executed before Jesus by the Spanish, but also in my opinion it would make the film a lot easier to follow. There are a few parts in the movie such as when the peasant man is calmly sitting on a hill with his wife one minute and then chased and beaten by the Spanish Inquisition the next minute. I understand the artistic concept behind this, it shows how common it was for the average person to be sought out and killed for having any Protestant ties, but I think as a viewer I would have reacted differently to his death if I had known anything about him instead of just being disgusted by the torturous way he was killed. Even the slightest bit more character development would have been helpful in discerning between Bruegel’s wife and Mary. It may have been intentional for the two to seem interchangeable but I couldn’t help but find it odd that Bruegel never really interacts with his wife, and it was odd that Mrs. Bruegel never seemed to give any affection or attention to any of her sons other than her youngest one. However neither the Christianity Today review nor the New York Times made any note of this confusion or lack

of interaction so its entirely possible I either misinterpreted it or read too much in to the characters.

I found it interesting that Greydanus of Christianity Today made no mention of the gory torture scenes through out the film, only calling it “immersive” in the every day life of those who Breugel painted. Gold of the New York Times only came to mention one of these scenes, explaining how the peasant man was raised on a stake and “crows gather[ed] to pick out his eyes”, but he does not really give any commentary on this. Whereas I found scenes such as this incredibly difficult to stomach, much less watch. Clearly Majewski made his decisions to include scenes like this for a reason, it does help explain one of the main points of the original painting, that even divine events such as the Crucifixion of Christ can go unnoticed when the general population is already numb to the commonality of religion persecutions and executions, but I just don’t agree with how graphic it was portrayed. As a person who is naturally very squeamish I found myself looking away from the screen or down at my lap during much of the movie to avoid seeing the blood or dying characters. I appreciate the artistic message of these scenes but I just think there might have been a different way to get across the same idea that was more viewer-friendly.

In all I agree with both critics that this movie was very masterfully made to correspond with the masterpiece it pays homage to. Overall there was a very clear story and purpose to the film that was creatively present without an actual plotline needing to be set in motion. The film was very authentic feeling and it gave a new and unique perspective into the lives of every day people during the Renaissance, and in Antwerp, no less which was a very prominent city at the time, yet hardly acknowledged or known by the average person today. The slow pace of the movie was also a little enchanting as it mimicked the slow pace of life at the time, which is something that cannot be voiced in the actual painting *The Way to Calvary*.