

Movie: The Mill and the Cross, 2011

After watching the movie *The Mill and the Cross*, to be frank, I felt numb and dumb; I had no words and my mouth was dry. I felt like I was one of the many characters in the film, standing still in several scenes. The mill tower stops grinding, time stops, characters cease to move and finally my own time and body stop moving. That is how I felt and still feel when I think about this movie. Why do I feel this way? There are several explanations, each of which is discussed below.

First of all, the movie itself constantly and mercilessly addresses the fundamental philosophical questions of birth, death, history, destiny, sex, religion, human frailty, suffering, happiness, sorrow, power, good and evil, theodicy, art, the universe, etc. in a disorganized way; yes, disorganized. Thus, after watching the movie, there is no way for me, a mere student at the seminary for whom all of these disorganized life questions are too weighty to understand, to have a lively discourse about the movie with myself or others. I can only remain speechless. Ironically, the arbitrary way in which the movie presents these disorganized life questions makes it a great and even elegant film. In our everyday lives, we try hard to organize or “fix up” disorganized or unorganized life problems that cannot be neatly resolved in the way we would like them to be. Again, we try hard, yet we fail. However, we never stop trying, even though we know we will fail. The movie, on the contrary, takes a disorganized and at times even chaotic approach to life’s problems. No concrete answers, interpretations, or solutions are given until the end. Those life problems will remain that way even after the movie’s credits roll. This is exactly why I couldn’t help but stay numb and dumb. The movie was plainly showing what human life is: filled with unanswerable, disorganized problems that are relentlessly rushing into our everyday existence.

Going a step further, it’s possible that the movie is criticizing our helpless attempts to master our existence. Vis-à-vis that harsh critique, most of us cannot but stay speechless because we already know that we are helpless. That fact is nakedly exposed by this movie.

Another reason that I was speechless after watching *The Mill and the Cross* was due to the movie’s highly elaborate aesthetic beauty. Doubtless, the movie brings the original art piece (“*The Way to Calvary*,” by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the great 16th-century Flemish artist) to a new “living” life. It is a *living* life because the art piece is portrayed by actors on the screen. The movie also enlivens all the original art scenes by showing a variety of human emotions, creating colorful and highly nostalgic scenes in nature, using unprecedented CGI effects to creatively blur the boundaries of reality and surrealism, and finally, revealing the spiritual, not necessarily religious, ethos and pathos that provoke the transcendental experience in the viewer, or at least in my own cognition and mind.

Furthermore, I much appreciate how the movie uses the cinematic sound impact. Indeed, there are three distinctive narratives that keep the movie going: the short conversation between Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his patron Nicholas Jonghelinck, the lively depiction of the original painting, and the unsympathetic sound impact (remember: most characters in the movie never speak). In particular, I followed all the sound impacts or simply all the sounds here and there that the movie makes from the beginning to the

end. There are, indeed, plenty of sounds in the movie that aesthetically impact each scene and of course, significantly “bang” my deep psychology: the sounds of wind, a baby breathing, kissing, whipping, a coin dropping, birds singing, a woman’s crying, the painter sketching, the grinding of a knife, the barking of dogs, a bell ringing, and so many more. I believe that all of these sounds were purposefully amplified during post-production sound editing. Why use amplification? The director probably had many reasons. Personally, however, I find that all of the amplified sounds produce aesthetic moments and movements. First, it was the aesthetic moment because the sound not only amplified the sonic wave itself, but also deepened and broadened my aesthetic understanding of what was going on in each scene of the movie. Definitely, the amplified sound provoked certain mystic, mixed feelings and emotions in my deep psychology that eventually opened me up to entirely new interpretations of each scene. It is no surprise that I want to call the combination of those feelings and interpretations the *filmic transcendental* moment, because those sonic, aesthetic impacts opened me to the unknown, mystic, and spiritual experience of the film.

Third, I felt so numb during and after the movie because, to be so frank, there is no “fun stuff” at all in the movie. From the beginning to the end, everything is serious, crude, gloomy, unsympathetic and un-empathetic. Industry-wise, there was no commercialism to be found in it. In other words, there were no consumerist tastes that I could utilize for the sake of an easy viewing of the movie. As someone who is mostly interested in the pop movie industry, this film felt like an unbearable assault from a total stranger. This is not to say that I always enjoy time-killing, popcorn movies. I simply mean that I do not usually go to so-called artistic or independent movies.

No doubt, *The Mill and the Cross* is an artistic movie that follows in the footsteps of an old, well-established painter. Here, I want to make two points. First, the movie itself was not easily enjoyable because of the reasons mentioned above. Second, even though the movie was not easy to swallow, I am still thinking about it almost a week after the initial viewing. My brain still has to interpret the movie to excavate its deep and esoteric meanings and Bruegel’s intentions regarding the original painting. In this sense, I believe, the numbness that I still feel has a positive impact on my aesthetic psychology, which makes me continuously ponder the greatness of the movie.

The three explanations above of my legitimate numbness after watching the movie indeed show the aesthetic greatness of it. Its great aesthetic aura takes my breath away and transports my consumerist cheap junk-full soul into the transcendental abyss. In addition to the three explanations, by the way, I have one more lesson that I found in the movie and want to discuss: *the everydayness of artful life*. The movie plainly reveals that the highly elaborate and deeply aesthetic piece of art by Bruegel certainly comes from his everyday routine, observation and reflection, but not from his own private, distinct imagination. In other words, the beauty of his art work is indeed intensely rooted in his and other people’s everyday life. This lesson reminds me of what Becker wants to argue for when he “[treats] art as not so very different from other kinds of work, and [treats] people defined as artists as not so very different from other kinds of workers, especially the other workers who participate in the making of art works” (xi-x). Following Becker’s thesis, I also see that in Bruegel’s art work, everyone else appearing in it participates in the making of the art, since there would be no Bruegel’s art unless there is their everyday life moments cultivated, cherished, experienced, (at times) torn down, reflected, or

sublimated eventually into aesthetic transcendence. In this sense, and only in this sense, there is no clear distinction between mundane life and transcendental beauty.

This last lesson now leads to the conclusion of this essay or the final observation of the movie. Even though the title of the original painting is “The Way to Calvary,” I don’t see any significant spiritual or religious theme found either in the painting itself or in the movie. It is as if Jesus’ own crucifixion story and its depiction in the movie is seamlessly melted into people’s everyday life. Yet, I can’t deny that I had a tremendous aesthetic, transcendental and, in particular, spiritual experience during and after the movie. That is why, I guess, the original film-turned-book’s title, which is the author’s interpretation of the art piece, is “The Mill and The Cross,” not “The Cross standing over or passing by the Mill Town.” The everyday symbol of the mill significantly goes together equally with the cross, the spiritual or religious symbol.

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