According to Jacques Attali, introducing a discussion of Brueghel, “who wishes to signify that everything remains possible,” “A great musical work is always a model of amorous relations, a model of relations with the other, of eternally recommenceable exaltation and appeasement, an exceptional figure of represented or repeated sexual relations.” Discuss some of the “exceptional figures,” perhaps in some of the senses brought out by Adrian Martin, in *The Mill and the Cross*. In what ways could it be understood as musical? Would any of our other films benefit from a figural-musical interpretation?

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Medium Fluidity: Observations on Lech Majewski and Pieter Bruegel

When considering various forms of art, whether films, paintings, theatrical performances, or even novels, it’s important to understand the singularities that exist within the different formats. It’s also crucial to understand not only each piece across its given spectrum, but to correlate and find comparisons among the various mediums. In his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali writes: “A great musical work is always a model of amorous relations….” In such cases, applying this theory to another art form such as film can lead the way to the development of other correspondences, as the relations between characters and their movements speak between each other and can provide the audience with a relation to the ease and fluidity of ambient sounds within live theatrical performances. In his 2011 film, *The Mill and the Cross*, Lech Majewski creates a concept of hierarchal structure where the character’s relationships and creation of ambient noise dictate the interaction between the transitions and movement. In the essay, “Last Day Every Day,” by Adrian Martin, the author proposes that figures found within the cinema form metaphorical relationships between each other, which in return propel the flow and movement on screen. This is apparent in Majewski’s film, as he takes his own interpretation of Peter Bruegel’s painting, “The Procession to Calvary,” and bends its malleable cinematic form to incorporate elements of figural-musical representation.
The film itself is set in Flanders, Belgium 1564 during the Spanish occupation and follows the events of and leading up to the crucifixion of Christ. Even though *The Mill and the Cross* is presented in a cinematic format, it truly is a painting which comes to life and extends invisibly to other forms of art, specifically theatre. The pacing of the film seems to speak to its own rhythm and could perhaps be correlated to a fresh painting in the beginning, with the end becoming the part where the painting’s oil begins to dry. Each scene explains the story of certain characters found within Bruegel’s painting. The most obvious of all the characters is the Miller. In the beginning of his day, he starts the mill which produces grain (metaphorically, the life source) for the people who inhabit the land. In such case, one could say that the Miller acts as God. His mill is perched high upon a rock plateau, overlooking the fields and the distant hillside. During the scene of the mill starting its daily routine, there’s an emphasis on the soundscape of the mill itself, which even though there is a lack of dialogue, the ambience of the mill cracking and creaking carries towards the movements of other characters and progressive movement in the film. When the mill is stopped at the end during Jesus’ crucifixion, the people of the land freeze in their place, halting the interactions between the characters and presumably the flow of the natural audio.

The scene concerning the mother and her children is propelled by the movement of the mill. While the children stay busy arguing, playing, and fighting with each other, the mother maintains the household and eventually places bread on the table. During this scene, the children are the audio force, driving the actions of themselves and their mother, where they become near silent once the food arrives. It’s a curious and cheerful tone which is created. The children can be seen as innocent, or as God’s children, as their actions are not harmful like the actions of the Spaniards, who are heard coming in the distance with rumble of their horse’s hooves and
clanking armor. The Spanish can be represented as the priests and Romans who sent Christ to his death. This paves way to the motion of the man, who they tie up to a wheel and raise it towards the sky, symbolizing what is to be the tree of death. In later events, the wife stands before the tree and watches her husband’s limp body have its eyes plucked out by crows.

“As any of you who have ever translated a complex literary work will know, translation involves a sometimes difficult and always fascinating play of identification with the text and distance from it, mastery over it and an almost constant loss of grip on it. But in some primal sense, there has to be something you don’t understand in that text to keep you in there translating it, chasing it, truth on the march” (Last Day pg. 6). This quote from Adrian Martin exemplifies the importance in the metalanguage of the film, specifically being its motion or “march”. The driving force of the film is the ambient sounds find within each character’s developing scenes and forwarding towards their relationships with each other. The film comes to a full circle where Jesus cinematically becomes the focal point, just as he is in Bruegel’s painting. This is where the visions of Majewski and the development of the characters are drawn together. It’s at this point that the mill stops and the life on screen transitions from the cinema back towards the original painting. It becomes a representative duplicate of the painting in terms of character position.

In terms of figural-musical interpretation, The Mill and the Cross holds the atmospheric elements of which a theatrical performance also retains. The painting becomes Lech Majewski’s playground for interpretation with music, dialogue, and tone. Though it is not shot in a standard Hollywood format, it seems to follow the conventions of a story being told through ambient noise which becomes the figural force and invisibly drives the character’s motions. The movement of the camera and fluidity of the editing compare to live performances motioned on a stage, where the sound and dialogue can help carry over to the next scene, such as narrative-
styled voiceover found within the film. Even the backdrop at times is painted and constructed, just as one would be on a theatre set. The film holds the ability to transition in and out of the various formats of art through its use of vibrant and ambient audio style, which isn’t easily found amongst the films previously screened.
Works Cited