



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 17
Issue 2 October 2013

Article 15

10-2-2013

Museum Hours

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Recommended Citation

Goodman, Daniel Ross (2013) "Museum Hours," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 15.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss2/15>

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Museum Hours

Abstract

This is a film review of *Museum Hours* (2013), directed by Jem Cohen.

Keywords

Pieter Bruegel, Jem Cohen, Joseph Soloveitchik, Judith Plaskow

Author Notes

Daniel Ross Goodman, J.D., is a rabbinical fellow at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, where he is the editor of *Milin Havivin*, an annual journal devoted to studies in Torah, society and the rabbinate. He is also a faculty member at The Institute of American and Talmudic Law in New York. His articles on religion and the arts have appeared in *The Weekly Standard*, *Moment Magazine*, and *Bright Lights Film Journal*.

In a quiet section of the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome—a lesser-known Roman art museum in comparison to the Vatican, but nonetheless one which should not be overlooked—hang four small Pieter Bruegel paintings. They are closely grouped together, and can be easily missed; each one is only slightly larger than the size of a typical laptop screen, and they are four of the most exquisite, stunningly detailed man-made creations one will ever see. If the import of the anthropo-theological doctrine of *imago Dei* [*tselem Elokim* (in Hebrew)] is substantive—that is, if human beings possess some of the capacities of God—Bruegel’s paintings are among the best pieces of evidence attainable that testify to the claim that human beings possess a scintilla of the creative capacities of the Creator of the universe.

A veritable Bruegel bonanza is evident in contemporary independent film; in the niche, rarified world of artistic cinema, two films about the same artist within two years of each other could legitimately constitute such a craze. 2011’s awesome (“awesome” used in the genuine sense of the term) *The Mill and the Cross*, from director Lech Majewski, used the *mise en scene* of Bruegel’s “The Way to Calvary” (1564) as the film’s *point de repère*. It not only used the painting’s backstory as the source for the film’s narrative, but also essentially attempted to submerge audiences into the world of the painting itself.

That over two hours were required to tell the story of only one Bruegel painting is indicative of the complexity of his paintings; each one contains a Dickens novel. Anyone who has gazed intently upon a Pieter Bruegel painting in a museum knows that it is terribly easy to lose oneself in the painting; the Flemish master’s complex, intricate, extraordinarily detailed artworks appear to contain entire worlds. Just as early cinema

studies recognized the proto-cinematic qualities of Dickens's narrative technique—jump-cuts, the skillful interweaving of multiple storylines, and a large cast of colorful characters are merely some of the prominent “cinematic” features of Dickens's novels—it appears as if filmmakers are at last stumbling upon the proto-cinematic qualities of Bruegel's paintings.

In *Museum Hours*, director Jem Cohen does not frame an entire film around a single Bruegel painting; instead, Bruegel's paintings are the muses that inspire the film's story. Cohen focuses upon an Austrian museum guard Johann (wonderfully underplayed by Bobby Sommer) and his love of art—especially his affection for Bruegel—and his brief encounter with a Canadian woman, Anne (played by the singer Mary Margaret O'Hara). They meet in Vienna's storied Kunsthistorisches Art Museum, where Johann introduces Anne to the work of Bruegel and acquaints her with the rest of the museum. Over the course of their platonic relationship (Johann is gay), they visit some of the city's other tourist attractions, and Johann helps Anne cope with the emotional burden of being the sole family member tasked with caring for a hospitalized cousin.

The kind of chance encounters with which Bruegel's paintings are suffused—the same sort of encounters one finds in Dickens's novels and in real life—lend the film's motivic notes a tenor of providential euphony. Bruegel's paintings also thematically overlay the film's illustration of the random events—such as Johann's and Anne's serendipitous encounter—and the physical paraphernalia that constitute the ephemera of the mundane. *Museum Hours* uses the filmic medium to articulate that such objects and events are precious enough, and sufficiently intricate, to comprise an eternal work of art, just as Bruegel used the artistic medium to express this same sentiment. In this regard,

Bruegel's paintings and Cohen's film adumbrate the perennial existential concern of religion: how we lend meaning and significance to our lives. Religion often does so by ritual; in religions with conceptions of heavenly reward and punishment, each action, according to such creeds, will be requited with appropriate compensation in an afterlife. Such notions serve to eternalize the ephemeral by construing each action as cosmically consequential. For other religionists, everyday life is imbued with sanctity when the structuring myths of religion are imposed upon existence. Art imparts meaning to the mundane by transforming simple street-scenes into eternal works of art: seemingly anodyne occurrences—spilt milk, frolicking children, gossipers, haggling vendors—were transfigured into brilliant visual fabliaux by Bruegel hundreds of years ago, and can still be seen by viewers today.

Bruegel's art and Cohen's film both manage to evade the predicament of artistic detachment.¹ Bruegel's artistic life and artistic creations were intimately bound up with those around him; far from depicting flawless creatures frolicking in Arcadian vistas, Bruegel's paintings showcase a bouquet garni of seemingly unheroic images from everyday life that constitute the heroism of the *homme moyen sensuel*. Cohen's film imitates Bruegel's art in its similar evocation of empathy for ordinary human beings: just as Bruegel chose to paint poor peasants rather than aristocrats, wealthy merchants, or mythical beings, Cohen's unglamorous film is so devoid of movie-star luminosity that it even deploys a nonprofessional actor (Sommer) in its leading male role. Both *Museum Hours* and its artistic muse visually convey the transcendent value of individuals—including underappreciated museum guards—as beings who are *imago Dei*, and who thus deserve artistic focus in accordance with their status as beings created in God's image.

The film itself is slow, lyrical, and melancholic; its deliberate pace conjures a *mono no aware* sensibility (defined by Roger Ebert as the receptivity to the “bittersweet transience of all things”²) that is rarely felt outside of Japanese cinema. Its weakness, however, lies in this same meandering tempo from which it gleans some of its uniqueness. Its desultory sections beg for just a soupçon of judicious editing (some of O’Hara’s singing seemed gratuitous), yet not too much, for among its strengths is its Bruegelesque, halakhic-esque attention to the sundry details recorded by Cohen’s roving camera—from lost mittens, discarded shopping bags, and an assortment of tchotchkes strewn across the Viennese streets to its score-less soundtrack that implicitly encourages viewers to refine their visual acuity and concentrate on each individual’s facial expressions, behavior, and body language (one shot contains perhaps the most accurate visual description of how a museum can trigger adolescent boredom).

Yet, despite its meandering pace, like a painter taking her time to observe her work from a distance before returning to it, and like a digressive preacher’s sermon that somehow winds its way back to its message—like a plane that languidly hovers over its final destination before its pilot finally guides it in for a landing—Cohen’s film eventually proceeds toward a tranquil consummation. *Museum Hours*’ purpose, though, is not the deliverance of a message, but to decant the sensation that “it is not anything transcendent that creates holiness but rather the visible reality”³ of life in all its details. Much as Bruegel’s paintings transformed the overlooked detritus of everyday life into eternal works of art by integrating them into his paintings as *objets trouvés*, and analogous to religion’s ability to transform mundane ephemera into sacred ritual objects, Cohen’s film illuminates the preciousness of the ordinary. Just as Bruegel’s art was

overlooked in his own time, *Museum Hours* and *The Mill and the Cross*—in spite of each work’s current status as a *succès d'estime*—did not garner wide attention upon their initial releases. But, as those who later discovered Bruegel’s magnificent artworks as resplendent artistic masterpieces that contained secret messages (as does the Book of Daniel, according to biblical scholars) and hidden meanings⁴ and concomitantly evoke the infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of every human being, the hidden cinematic gems of *Museum Hours* and *The Mill and the Cross* may eventually be uncovered as filmic treasures that do not “wink at us from ‘beyond’ like” stars that sparkle “in the distant heavens,” but are entities which appear to us “in our actual, very real lives.”⁵

¹ Artistic detachment has its religious corollary in the detachment from concrete reality that certain modes of religiosity can engender; cf. Hartman, David, with Charlie Buckholtz. 2011. *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting & Rethinking Jewish Tradition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights), 132-157, and Plaskow, Judith. 1990. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row), 62-70.

² Ebert, Roger. 2011. “An Autumn Afternoon,” Accessed Sept. 13, 2013.
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-an-autumn-afternoon-1962>

³ Soloveitchik, Joseph. 1983. *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), p. 21

⁴ Dekker, Jeroen J.H. 1996. “A Republic of Educators: Educational Messages in Seventeenth-Century Dutch genre painting.” *History of Education Quarterly*. 155-182; Gibson, Walter S. 2006. *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 10.

⁵ Soloveitchik, p. 36.

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