

## Epilogue

In his 2011 movie *The Mill and the Cross*, director Lech Majewski enters the worlds of Pieter Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary* and sixteenth-century Antwerp.<sup>1</sup> As Bruegel sketches his composition, glimpses of the painting can be seen from the windows of his house, and houses of other figures featured in the panel, including Simon of Cyrene and anonymous marketgoers. Nicolaes Jonghelinck (Michael York), standing in front of *The Tower of Babel* and *Hunters in the Snow*—placed in his urban house at Kipdorp rather than Ter Beken—observes Spanish soldiers leading heretics and Christ through the streets of Antwerp before they reach the site of their execution outside the city walls. The religious persecution of the Netherlandish subjects of Philip II is parallel to the Passion of Christ; conversely, one could say that the Passion of Christ is in fact part of religious persecution of heretics in the Netherlands. Following Jonghelinck's wishes, Bruegel's *Procession to Calvary* expresses the horrors he observes in his native land, which, in his words, are being carried out by "foreign mercenaries in their red tunics." Jonghelinck's religious and sociopolitical agenda in Majewski's vision is much more explicit than historical records allow us to conclude, but he certainly voices an opinion of many of his contemporaries when he says: "I believe, and many others in this magnificent city [Antwerp] also believe, that good men of all confessions can come together in peace and good understanding." The film's Bruegel (Rutger Hauer) is less vocal in his discontent with the Spanish government, and focuses on designing a composition that "will tell many stories. It should be large enough to hold everything. Everything, all the people." Eventually, satisfied with his design, Bruegel tells Jonghelinck, "Now the stage is set" (figure 36). But the film does not end here. It continues to show the events of the Passion of Christ and life in Antwerp. Majewski enters the stage set by Bruegel and fills it with his interpretation of historical events, depicting people's reactions to the world around them and their understanding of contemporary paintings.

*The Mill and the Cross* enacts precisely the experience Bruegel wished his viewers to have: to activate his works in their imagination and share their opinions in a learned convivial conversation. As have scholars before me, I have observed in this book that we will never fully know how the banquets of the Antwerp elite looked, nor what exactly those viewers said about the paintings on the walls of their residences. To be sure, a number of examined sources—Erasmus's colloquia, Neo-Latin convivial treatises, architectural tracts, letters,

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1 Lech Majewski, dir., *Młyn i krzyż* (*The Mill and the Cross*), Angelus Silesius, 2011.



FIGURE 36 Lech Majewski, *The Mill and the Cross*, Angelus Silesius, 2011  
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probate inventories, *tafelspelen*—provide information that allows us to reconstruct many aspects of those sixteenth-century feasts. And, of course, we have the pictures themselves, which spark a desire for discussion as much in us as they did in their Renaissance viewers.<sup>2</sup> But the more we immerse ourselves in the study of *convivia*, the more curious we become about their atmosphere, participants' emotions, and ritualistic efficacy. What kind of spiritual experience did they offer? How did they balance the sacred with the mundane? Did they truly provide opportunities for inner transformation, in addition to social and intellectual benefits?

Perhaps the best answer to these questions can be found not in Renaissance sources, but once again in modern cinema. The 1987 film *Babette's Feast*, based on a short story by Karen Blixen, culminates in a scene of a lavish banquet celebrated by a conservative congregation in honor of its deceased pastor (figure 37).<sup>3</sup> As the dinner progresses, we observe the slow inner transformation of the guests, who were initially hostile toward the very idea of the extravagant dinner and, in many cases, toward each other. During the meal the lifelong quarrels, grudges, and resentments are forgotten, and the congregation leaves

<sup>2</sup> Porras, *Pieter Bruegel's Historical Imagination*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Axel, dir., *Babettes gæstebud* (*Babette's Feast*), Panorama Film A/S, Nordisk Film, and Danish Film Institute, 1987.