

Frugal Film-Making¹, Parables, an Insatiable Moon, and Story-telling



In the final couple of months of 2009 I had the privilege of spending three-days on the Auckland film set of *The Insatiable Moon*, a micro-budget example of frugal film-making² which tells a unique and fictional³ New Zealand story.

In the reflection that follows I'd like to reflect on storytelling, by means of *The Insatiable Moon*, and an understanding of movies as potential parables. I also want to reflect on some ways in which film importantly and needfully underlines the truth articulated by French Pastor and Theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) when he wrote, " Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God; without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self."

I want us to appreciate that engaging with stories, through the medium of film, offers a significant means of nourishing and stimulating our growth in God; firstly through what we discover about ourselves; secondly by what we experience of God; and thirdly, by the ways in which we, as a consequence, respond to others and our world.

Before we continue, I would want to add that, taking the centrality of God-Becoming-Flesh & Blood (John 1: 14) seriously, means that we would want to affirm the value and importance of images (Jesus as the *image* of the invisible God), and film in particular as a medium of *revelation*. "There is *more* than the material or visible." And, additionally, it is "the camera's gaze [that] *trains* our eye to see differently, so that eventually we can see the world...as a site of revelation." We are trained in a "discipleship of the eye".⁴

The Insatiable Moon

"In a mad world, only the mad are sane."⁵

The Insatiable Moon had its beginnings as an urban New Zealand story told by Screenwriter and New Zealand Producer, Mike Riddell.⁶ It tells the story of Arthur, a complex character, psychiatric patient, and "miracle worker" who believes himself to be the "Second Son of God." It is "a story of magic and meaning, of love and longing, of sanity and insanity, and of an impossible dream which might just be true."⁷

Importantly too, it attempts to tell the truth about our world, not least in its brokenness. I think of it as a subversive *parable* of "strange neighbors and risky care"⁸ (cf. Matthew 18: 21-35; Luke 10: 25-37, and Luke 14:7-14).

The significance of a number of important themes struck me in several very moving scenes (112 through 116) that I had the powerful experience of watching being acted and filmed.

The scenes center on a heated and animated meeting of Ponsonby residents debating the future of a local boarding house.

Arthur has entered the hall and is pacing, agitated at the front of the gathering. A fragile, delicate and evocative little bird's nest and eggs lies on the floor in front of him as he addresses his audience:

*"... Who's mad here? I'll tell you what madness is! Buying things that dull the pain in your life. Sticking poison in your face to make you look young. Being so smart you don't need God anymore. Building boxes to hide yourself away in. Trusting in your wallet instead of your heart..."*⁹

As I was writing an early draft, while on holiday, I'd just finished a book about contentment.¹⁰ In it, the authors quoted a proverb that went something along the lines that God wanted to hide wisdom so that none could indiscriminately find it, and so God 'hid' wisdom in innocent children¹¹ and fools. I was struck by the thought that there's something of the "fool" in Arthur, who thinks he's "the second son of God". Yet, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the so-called court "fool" is not as foolish as one might believe. In fact, the fool is actually a central actor in the play because it is he who sees what's *really* happening and it is "he [who] continually prods the king with the truth, trying to burst his bubble of unreality."

Arthur will likely do something very similar to *The Insatiable Moon's* eventual audience as he (and his fellow actors) help bring to the surface the untruths we tell ourselves, our projections and our inflations. They will expose illusion and invite the possibilities of a richer, more contented, and transformative way of living in our own skin and of being of service in God's world.



If a fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.¹²

Movies as Parables

"If I could have said it in words, I would have. Then I wouldn't have needed to make the picture."¹³

You may have noticed that I've used the term *parable* a couple of times to talk *The Insatiable Moon*? Why "parable"?

Brad Young writes that “the reality of God is revealed in the *word-pictures* of a parable. Jesus and the rabbis of old taught about God by using concrete illustrations that *reach the heart* through the imagination...”¹⁴ One of the ways I assess the value or otherwise of a film is to reflect on whether it moved me at an emotional level. Did it reach me at the level of heart?

For St. Augustine the affective center of the human person *is the heart*.¹⁵ The heart is the source of our emotions and our feelings, and it is primarily to the heart, through the imagination, that a good film seeks to engage and move us. It is in the heart that Spirit and Word are at work. It is through a fully engaged imagination that God is able to mould the clay of our hearts.

“If the root of art is storytelling, then the taproots are longings. Longings for such things as truth, beauty, romance, adventure. We long to find the true north that will guide us through this life and into the next...”¹⁶

Reel Formation

When we watch a film attentively, we participate in a form of contemplation that allows us to experience the imagination fully engaged in creating. We are not accustomed to thinking about it this way, *but it is prayer*¹⁷

That’s an important point, in being attentive to, and in allowing ourselves to both deeply engage with and be engaged *by* a film, we are actually participating in a form of contemplation and prayer.

So, to close this all to brief reflection, I want to offer some suggestions as to practical ways that we can allow the story-telling medium of film to be a part of our formation:

- Ask questions of the story. For example, in *The Insatiable Moon* how might we recognise something of what it means to be authentically human? What is this story telling us about what it means to be genuine and caring communities, and what it might mean for communities, neighborhoods, and individuals within them, to extend compassion and risky care for the “other”, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized?
- The attentive viewer will hopefully not escape an awareness that “*our own world will always be there, lurking in the background*”¹⁸ And so, we bring our own lives, experiences and cultural contexts to the story, listening and feeling for the ways that we might be invited to respond, to reconnect with God’s story, with our own stories, and to grow. This is one way we can make use of the gaps and “white spaces” that Mike Riddell mentions in his brief interview elsewhere in this issue.
- By paying attention to what’s happening to you as you enter into the story and as you reflect on it at its end. Think of this suggestion as a cinematic variation on the practice of *Lectio Divina*. It is the practice of watching a film with God:¹⁹
 1. Firstly, we ask for God’s graces as we open ourselves to the story.
 2. Secondly, we listen for the ways in which God might be speaking to us (“What moves you the most?” “Why?” “What

feelings arise in you?”²⁰ “Where do they take you?” “How are your values and priorities affirmed or challenged?” “What hopes and fears emerge?” “What new things are you discovering about yourself?” etc).

3. Thirdly, we receive what we discern as God’s speaking to us (“What scenes, characters, images, conversations etc had a particular resonance for us?” “Why is there a resonance?” “What invitation(s) do they extend to you?”).
4. Fourthly, we pray our discerning.
5. Fifthly, we sit with what we have discerned as God’s speaking to us. We listen for its invitations.
6. Sixthly, we *enact* God’s speaking and *respond* to God’s inviting (“In what ways do you feel invited to live, act, or respond differently?” “What in your contexts do you feel need transforming, and what part can you play in that process?” “Where is God at work in your context?”).

- I mentioned *discernment* in points 4 & 5 above. In Ignatian terms I have in mind our learning to recognize and name what we experience; to be able to identify our feelings in terms of their being “consolations” and/or “desolations”. Put simply, desolations have the effect of moving us away from God and others, while consolations help carry us closer to God and others. Journaling these states of consolation and desolation, including what aroused them and where those feelings are leading allows us to more deeply know ourselves and to recognize God’s voice and invitations to live our lives more focused and animated by love of God, love of self, and the love of others.
- Enrich your experience by becoming more media literate – learn the language of media and *how* to watch a film.²¹
- Talk with someone you trust (e.g. your spiritual director or a friend) about your experiences of watching particular films, and of their affects on you. Listen for patterns and common themes. What types of films (genre etc) most move and stir you to reflection? What types of films most engage your emotions? What types of films *pull* you toward others, or toward greater wholeness and a deeper more life-giving relational life? What types of films, scenes and/or themes most support your desire to become more fully human, alive, contented, and free? What types of genres, or specific films, provide some sense of healing to the hurting places in your life? Which affirm and challenge you, and how? What types of films most contribute to your growing sense of self, perception, awareness, insight, and life-wisdom?

And *how* to pull all of these themes and practices together? I’d recommend the practice of journaling. As we engage films and the practices listed above, journaling can enable us to take seriously our responses, our discernment of God’s movements in our lives, the possible *fruit*²², and invitations that that *movement* and activity extends to us. Journaling enables us to record our experiences, but equally importantly, perhaps more so, the actual act of writing is, for many people, a therapeutic practice in its own right.

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- ¹ Tom Burstyn introduced me to this term in his little paper *The Frugal Filmmaker: Zen and the Art of Film Making – Tom Burstyn’s 5-Step Program for Poverty Filmmaking*. Tom was the very gifted Director of Photography for *The Insatiable Moon* and he and his wife filmed and produced the wonderful documentary story of a NZ family called *This Way of Life* – see <http://thiswayoflifemovie.com/>. A subversive intent of “frugal film-making” is the recovery of well-made, character & story-driven films. Sir Peter Jackson acknowledged in an interview published January 2010 that “more attention” is being “spent on the technical aspects” of a film to the detriment of the story. “I think we’ve dropped the ball a little bit on stories for the sake of the amazing toys that we’ve played with.”
- ² Filming began on November 16th 2009 and wrapped on Friday 18th December 2009.
- ³ Though fictional the story draws on Mike’s experiences, while the Pastor of Ponsonby Baptist church, of the *real* Arthur who lived on the streets on Ponsonby. A photograph of Arthur shows a remarkable likeness to a bearded Rawiri Paratene who plays Arthur in the screen adaptation.
- ⁴ I’m grateful to Jaime Smith, in particular, for making this point clear. For a more detailed summary, see his essay “Faith in the Flesh in *American Beauty*: Christian Reflections on Film” in his collection of essays published as *The Devil Reads Derrida* (2009).
- ⁵ Mike Riddell told me that for many years, this quote, from the movie (chapter 7) *Ran* (1985) by renowned Japanese Film Director Akira Kurosawa, was the strapline for *The Insatiable Moon*. Interestingly, in *Ran*, Kurosawa’s re-telling (in a Japanese context) of *King Lear*. The insightful comment is made by the “fool”.
- ⁶ Mike’s novel *The Insatiable Moon* is set primarily in Ponsonby, a suburb close to the city centre of Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city. It was originally published in 1997.
- ⁷ From pre-filming promotional material – source, Mike Riddell.
- ⁸ To lift a description used by Biblical Scholar Sylvia Keesmaat in a completely different context.
- ⁹ One thought that came to mind was a sentence by the late John O’Donohue in a chapter titled: *Prisons We Choose to Live In*. He writes “...On the outside a person may seem contented and free, but their inner landscape may be a secret prison.” From his *Eternal Echoes* (1998).
- ¹⁰ *Contentment: A Way to True Happiness* by Robert A Johnson & Jerry M. Ruhl (2000).
- ¹¹ And cartoonists like Australian Michael Leunig.
- ¹² William Blake, quoted in *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* by David Whyte (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994), p. 145.
- ¹³ Akira Kurosawa.
- ¹⁴ Think of the parable the prophet Nathan tells King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-15a, especially v. 5 (Notice its affect on David and his wholehearted response – “Then David’s *anger* was greatly kindled...”(v. 5)).
- ¹⁵ Interview with James K A. Smith.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in *Lessons from Reel Life: Movies, Meaning and Myth-Making* by Michael Frost & Robert Banks, p. iii.
- ¹⁷ *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (2004) by John Pungente SJ & Monty Williams SJ.
- ¹⁸ Sylvia Keesmaat.
- ¹⁹ A play on the title of a book by David Foster OSB, *Reading With God: Lectio Divina* (2005).
- ²⁰ Here’s a few that emerged for me as I watched the filming of scenes 112-116: fear, awe, stillness, excitement, conviction, guilt, and hope. Incidentally, as I watched the scene I couldn’t but help think of Jesus’ condemnation of the pharisees and scribes in Mark12:38-40; Luke 11:37-54; and Matthew 23: 1-39).
- ²¹ Pungente and Williams’ book, mentioned above, is valuable resource. I’ve drawn from page 23 to talk about discernment above, while pages 26-28 give a helpful overview of the key concepts of media literacy. I highly recommend it.
- ²² Cf. Matthew 3:8; 7:16-17; 12:33; Romans 7:4b; Galatians 5:22; Colossians 1:10.

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