

Mike Riddell on Film and Story-Telling



(L to R) Rawiri Paratene, Mike Riddell, Rosemary Riddell and Ian Mune – International Premiere. Photo credit: JJ. Fromont

So why is cinema such a needful storytelling medium? Paul Fromont asked Mike Riddell, novelist, screenwriter, and New Zealand producer of the movie *The Insatiable Moon*ⁱ, three questions about story-telling through the medium of film.ⁱⁱ

What is it about the medium of film that excites you about using it to tell stories?

“Although very specialised, film is at heart a story-telling medium. In its theatrical form in which an audience sits in darkness before a big screen, film has enormous power to transport people into a different realm. For a couple of hours they live out a new experience in a medium, which is compelling and potentially life-changing. The power of the image is enormous, and so much can be conveyed without the use of words. Film is, as one of the visual arts, able to hook into the rich vein of symbolism and mythology, which runs through human history. Like many others, I have been moved by film in ways that have altered my perception of life...Movies are, literally, a dream factory. They allow the construction of an alternate reality into which the audience is invited.”

What facets of story-telling does film enable you bring to the fore that you weren't able to do through the original medium of a novel?

“Fiction is a completely different medium than that of screenwriting. In a novel you completely control that which you are creating, down to giving readers access to the thoughts passing through a characters head. In that sense you are more explicitly guiding reactions to your story. Filmmaking is different in a number of respects. It contains much more of what we might term *epistemic space* – in other words, gaps in which the audience is invited to bring their

own experiences into the story. This is symbolised in a screenplay by all the white space on the page. The script of *The Insatiable Moon* consists of some 21000 words compared to the novel, which has around 72000 words. And with film, it's in that white space that the magic happens (or doesn't)."

Mike, we talked – by way of allusion – about Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the importance of the so-called "fool", but I'm wondering: how do you see the relationship between "story-telling" and "myth"? Indeed, is there even a relationship...?

The Insatiable Moon is a myth – hopefully an engaging one.

There's an intimate link between storytelling and mythology. After all, in essence myths are stories, which we tell ourselves to make sense of the existence we inhabit. I suspect it is not too outrageous to suggest that without myths humanity would not be able to sustain consciousness. This is not an argument for religion or superstition over against a more empirical and scientific approach to reality – in fact science itself is the contemporary myth, which allows the human race to face the future with some sense of cohesion. No myth is complete or absolute. All cultures develop a range of myths, which help to bind the culture into a whole, and to mediate shared experience. There's an unfortunate double meaning of the word 'myth' – sometimes it is used to mean untrue. In fact all myths, and all stories, are true – in that they express some truth. The most important myths express great truths, which are incapable of being representing in any other form than that of stories, rituals or symbols.

It's interesting that Stephen Spielberg's production company is called *DreamWorks*. Film is a medium for shared dreaming. Joseph Campbell, whose original work was in comparative religions, was one of those with great insight into the relationship between film and mythology. His friendship with George Lucas provided a cross-pollination of ideas, which is evident for all to see in the *Star Wars* films, which have such a strong mythic undercurrent. It is the participation in myth which makes filmmaking such a powerful force, and why it is possible to come out of a film feeling that one's perception has been changed by the experience.

It's a poor screenwriter who doesn't become familiar with myth and symbolism, and understand how images, symbols and subtext interrelate to produce stirrings in the unconscious of the audience. What goes on below the surface is arguably the most important part of any film. *The Insatiable Moon* delves into the relationship between some ancient Western mythology (for example: the wounded redeemer, the wise fool) and Maori mythology (the creation myth, the prophet). Much of this is in the deep undercurrents, and

many viewers would be completely unaware of it. Our task at the moment is to preserve the mythological stirrings of a very simple story.

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- i The film internationally premiered to a 700-seat sell-out Auckland audience in July 2010. Due for general release around New Zealand from October 7th 2010. It's London Premiere is scheduled for 11th October @ 7:30pm. The venue is *Cineworld* Haymarket, London.
 - ii January 2010.

For more on the movie visit <http://www.theinsatiablemoon.com/>