

Chapter One

How a Camel Made a Grown Man Cry

The show was delightful. No, no. It was brilliant. No, no, no, no. There is no word to describe its perfection, so I am forced to make one up. And I'm going to do so right now: Scrumtrilescent!

Will Ferrell as film expert James Lipton on *Saturday Night Live*

A Forgotten Language

A camel is standing alone in the middle of the Gobi Desert, wind whipping back her golden mane. And she is singing.

I'm not kidding. I'm looking at her.

The cinema is dark and I'm squinting at the pale pages of the notebook in my hand. Then I look up into the vibrant screen and stare at this beautiful redhead—this camel singing somewhere in Mongolia at dusk—and my vision blurs through tears.

No, this isn't a goggle-eyed, knobby-kneed Disney camel. This is a living, breathing camel standing in the lavender dusk of the shifting dunes, staring into the distance and singing.

The moviegoers in Seattle's Guild 45th cinema are breathless with what they're seeing. Some of us who have ventured into air-conditioned darkness—the local film press, the publicist, and the “line people” who picked up giveaway tickets and waited outside on the sidewalk for an hour—are experiencing what we always hope to find, never quite expect, and will remember for years to come.

That *thing*.

Evening is like recess in my high-tech, highly-caffeinated hometown. Everyone runs out to play, chasing their own particular passions, escaping the daily demands and drudgery. Weary from our work, we scatter in search of conversation, concerts, poetry slams, karaoke, baseball, beer, exercise, night classes. Students hunker down at Zoka Coffee Roasters, studying textbooks and sucking caffeine, peering over their

PowerBooks and scanning the faces of others while they ponder pick-up lines. Gamblers hurry northward into the neon of Aurora Avenue's casinos, where other stops promise cheap cigarettes and *girls! girls! girls!*

When the evening is over, they'll return to the confines of the next day, some poorer, some weaker, and some a little wiser. A few will be richer, stronger, and maybe even wiser. So much depends on the nature of their escape.

Tonight, I'm pursuing my own after-hours discipline. I'm in a chair in a darkened theatre watching a documentary called *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, wincing every time the person in front of me rocks her chair back against my bruised knees. Sticky seat cushions, talkative teens, annoying big screen commercials—it's all worth enduring for those occasional moments of revelation. It's like waiting through a season of disappointing baseball just to be there at that magic moment when the angle of the pitch and the timing of the swing meet with a crack that will echo in your memory for days. And yet, unlike a home run, this occasion on the big screen doesn't merely change the score. It changes you.

* * *

It's 1987. I'm 17 years old and on my second date . . . sort of.

Her name is Melissa, and she's spirited, funny and pretty. I'm thrilled that she has agreed to go with me to a new film called *Dances with Wolves*, because I hear it's three hours long. That's three hours in a darkened theatre with Melissa. *Melissa*, who doesn't really seem drawn to me *in that way*, but who is a lot of fun and who's happy to flirt with me so long as I don't respond to her with any earnest romantic intentions.

Sweaty-palmed, hoping that the evening might mark a change, I settle in for the long three hours.

During the course of the movie, Melissa will take at least three breaks, probably because she's rather small and has consumed a jumbo Diet Coke. But while she's gone, I remain riveted, caught up, transported through time and space. I'm not thinking about my chances with Melissa anymore. I'm thinking about the chances of that poor soldier, John Dunbar, against those natives—the mean ones, not the good ones.

By this time in my early high school experience, my understanding of Native Americans had been shaped by Disney movies, cartoons and family-friendly television dramas. That is to say, I'd believed in a caricature of scalp-hunting savages in face paint and headdresses. To see John Dunbar discover companionship and care amongst

softhearted, nature-loving Sioux challenges my perspective. This version of the Old West is more complicated and it makes me uncomfortable. I thrill to the chases and bask in the panoramic landscapes captured by Dean Semler's cinematography. I laugh at the budding friendship between man and wolf. But contrary to my usual moviegoing experience, I suddenly don't know what to expect or where the story will take me.

Then the moment comes—one I still don't completely understand. Dunbar sits in a tent with a Sioux chieftain. Between them sits an agitated woman. Her wardrobe is like the chief's, but her features are more like Dunbar's. This is *Stands With a Fist*. When she was still a child, her white parents were butchered by Pawnee attackers and she was taken into the care of the more compassionate Sioux. Uprooted from the language of her family, she grew up as a Sioux, adapting to their language and locking the horrible truth about her family into a vault deep in her memory.

Now, here in the tent, as she encounters a white man for the first time in ages, her brow furrows. Terror flashes in her eyes. Under orders to translate for Dunbar, she struggles to find the right words, turning them over as if they are strange keys. When they snap into place, she trembles and begins to speak. That box of nightmares opens.

I'm frightened. Paralyzed. I don't know what's happening to me. There's a lump rising in my throat, and I feel I might choke. So I sit there covering my mouth with my hand, hoping Melissa won't notice that tears are spilling down over my fingers.

It remains *the scene* that draws me back to Costner's over-long epic, even as an adult, after I've come to view *Dances with Wolves* as a rather sentimental work. It's a scene that no one else really cares much about, but it somehow tapped into the core of my emotions. It still devastates me.

I'm still not sure why that scene affects me so intensely. It is not the climax of the film. It's not even intended to be a tear-jerking scene.

Perhaps it has something to do with my personal interest in helping people understand each other through art. I started journaling about my love of cinema and music when I was 14, and I'm still striving to capture the mysteries of movies in words. Perhaps it's because *Stands With a Fist* is being set free from the identity she has assumed out of necessity. As she wraps her tongue around this forgotten language, she is pried kicking and screaming away from what she knows, dragged back through a river of pain, and at last returns to walk again in the world from which she came—a homeland she's only now remembering.

I've always had this sense that there is another language I once knew, a joy that was mine before I was born. When I get a glimpse of that glory through art, I can feel

the memory of it pressing against the back of my mind, and the longing for that peace and resolution wells up inside me. I can't quite grasp it. I can't speak my native language. Not yet . . . but I'm learning.

If I do the difficult thing and pull myself away from art that is merely entertaining and start searching for those currents of truth that reside within beauty and mystery, I will be drawn off the path of familiarity and comfort. The reality of God is not bound to a particular earthly language, country or style. His spirit can speak through anything. But He is far more likely to be encountered in those things that are excellent rather than shoddy, particular rather than general, authentic rather than derivative. I will find myself investigating art and expression that never played for audiences in this country—art that waits overlooked on the shelves full of foreign and independent films at the video store. And I will be changed, concerned with cares and disciplines that make no sense to Hollywood movie publicists.

It could be a lonely road. But it's a road that leads farther up, farther in, to greater majesty and more transforming truth.

First Steps into a Larger World

Like a pillar of cloud or fire, sometimes a movie offers us mysteries that draw us out of the captivity of our own perspective.

Growing up in a Christian home in Portland, Oregon, I lived in fear of the world of *sinners* beyond the walls of my sanitized religious subculture. My family showed up at a Baptist church on Sunday morning and socialized in a Christian community. My younger brother and I attended Christian schools from kindergarten through college. Word around the Sunday School room convinced me that I lived in a place like Rivendell in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, where all was beautiful and good, while everything "out there" was like Mordor. I came to believe that I was safe around believers but endangered by the worldly.

In our church community, the artwork of pop culture was treated with grave suspicion. Only rare exceptions such as cute and innocuous children's stories, *Sesame Street* and the Disney cartoons were beyond reproach. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was the first movie I saw projected on a big screen, and it planted the seeds of curiosity about cinema in my mind. But commercial fiction, the Weekly Top 40 on Z100 FM in Portland, the blockbuster movies of the week and all other secular stuff was considered

dangerous because it showed all kinds of behavior that could lead people into temptation. After I accidentally stumbled into a friend's basement bedroom and glimpsed posters for the rock band KISS on the walls, I had nightmares and became convinced that boy was going to hell.

The homes my family visited were full of Christian books—usually the same volumes we had on our own shelves. So it was that I became fascinated with the larger world of literature through the neighborhood public library. The library contained books that didn't talk about Jesus but whispered about other perspectives, cultures and experiences. Most of the time, those stories were more interesting. They explored different subjects, and sometimes they didn't end the way I wanted or expected.

Advertisements in the newspaper for that forbidden world of movies—those “worldly” stories—intrigued me as well. I remember being troubled and fascinated by Marlon Brando's fearsome expression on the original newspaper advertisements for *Apocalypse Now*. And when something called *Star Wars* showed up on the page, my imagination grew extremely restless.

One afternoon in my grandparents' living room, Uncle Paul announced to the family that he was going to go see George Lucas's special-effects sensation. When he said that he wanted to take along his seven-year-old nephew, I braced myself to hear my parents refuse. They had heard rumors that the movie was scary and violent, and in retrospect, I completely understand their concerns. But then from his La-Z-Boy chair in the corner, my grandfather, who rarely spoke, stunned the whole family by announcing that he too wanted to see what all of the fuss was about. And he promised that he'd keep an eye on me. That tipped the scale in my favor.

At the Hollywood Theater in Portland, Oregon, in 1977, I took my first steps into a larger world. And I would never think of going back.

* * *

The next important step in my moviegoing journey took place a few years later when I watched Hugh Hudson's film *Chariots of Fire*.

Should the Olympic hopeful Eric Liddell compromise his Christian convictions and run a race on the Sabbath in order to pursue a gold medal? Would God be so unfair as to punish him for pursuing his dream?

I worried about these issues. Sunday School, Christian education and family devotion hour had taught me the inflexibility of the Ten Commandments. “Remember

the Sabbath.” The appeals of Liddell’s missionary sister made sense in my practical, Protestant world. Why should he waste his time competing in worldly races when he could be on the mission field, saving souls by preaching the gospel? Despite the fact that most of the men in my church went home from Sunday services to watch the afternoon’s NFL match-ups, no one had ever mentioned that you could serve God by running laps.

Then Eric’s father looked him in the eye and spoke words that shattered so many of my assumptions about a good life: “You can glorify God by peeling a potato if you peel it to perfection.”

Excellence. By doing something well, I could please the Lord. I remembered Mr. Liddell’s words when I stepped out on to the basketball court in high school. I could glorify God if I followed Coach Remsburg’s instructions for making a perfect free throw. And when I studied for Mr. Zimmerman’s algebra tests, I could glorify God by learning to solve complex equations perfectly. In fact, I could glorify God when I was running, singing in Mr. Barber’s championship concert choir, raking up the wet autumn leaves from the apple and cherry trees in the backyard, writing stories or making films. When we give others something excellent, we reflect the standards of heaven. We make others curious. When they get curious, they’re open to discovering things they would not otherwise understand. Such discoveries provoke growth and a particular joy.

“When I run, I feel His pleasure,” said Eric Liddell.

When the three o’clock buzzer droned in the school’s hallway, I hurried home and shut myself in my room to write stories of my own, stories I’d considered only guilty pleasures until I saw the glory of God reflected in Eric Liddell’s ecstatic smile as he ran pell-mell, head thrown back, wind buffeting his white shirt marked number 451 and broke the tape at the Olympics. He honored God’s law. He refused to run on Sunday. But he did run, and those swift strides spoke of glory in a way that a Sunday School lesson could not.

* * *

A film called *Amadeus* took me a step further. The popcorn thrills of *Star Wars* and the gospel message of *Chariots of Fire* had won acceptance in my community. They were fun and portrayed good guys and bad guys in easy-to-recognize forms.

But director Milos Forman and screenwriter Peter Schaffer showed me that excellence—no matter where it comes from—can reveal a greater picture of the truth. I

learned that God sometimes uses very naughty people to lift our spirits through art. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, that scoundrel of a composer, played with such memorable vigor by Tom Hulce, informed me that art by any artist, even the most reckless, could contain glimpses of the sublime.

I soon found that I could even learn something from the films of Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino or that troublemaker Oliver Stone. I could gain insight by watching films from other countries, from pagan cultures where the characters didn't speak English.

Why did this surprise me? The psalms, the staple of my daily devotion time, had been composed by David, who as a king would murder, betray and fornicate, then write the psalms out of deep, heart-tugging confession. This deeply flawed individual was called a man after God's own heart.

Perhaps the wisdom of Sunday School and the wisdom of worldly art were not so separate after all.

Moved in Mysterious Ways

Maybe you're thinking back on very different films: *Citizen Kane*. *Schindler's List*. *Bruce Almighty*. *Amelie*. *It's a Wonderful Life*. *Manon of the Spring*. *Braveheart*. *The Passion of the Christ*. *March of the Penguins*. *Crash*. *Babel*. Transforming moments at the movies will differ substantially from person to person.

I once polled a group of 80 adult moviegoers about the films that had most inspired them and those that had most upset them. Several titles, including *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Apocalypse Now*, earned multiple mentions in both categories.

In a *Mars Hill Review* interview, the brilliant novelist Chaim Potok said that art is "a relational experience. Art happens somewhere along a relational arc, between what you are and the object of creation."¹ The things that move you will depend, in part, on your own experiences as well as the artist's own history and personality. Generations to come who watch *United 93* will feel very differently from those who lived in New York during the attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center. Most of us cannot imagine what *Saving Private Ryan* feels like to veterans of World War II, or what *The Queen* feels like to Londoners who took flowers to the gates of Kensington Palace after Princess Diana died. *The Passion of the Christ* was a different experience for Catholics than it was

for Protestants and different for Christians than for Muslims. *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Da Vinci Code* have received almost every response imaginable, from the highest praise to the most mean-spirited condemnation.

As a Christian trying to find his footing in a complicated world, *Chariots of Fire* resonated with me. It probably said something different to agnostics or professional athletes. Even the artist cannot guess what his or her art might reveal.

After all, by arranging elements of plot and aesthetics, we create something dynamic. Madeleine L'Engle describes the creative process as collaborating with God. In reflecting the way life works, we present a complex experience from which different people can draw differing—but not necessarily contradictory—interpretations. In sharing our different views, we can test our interpretations for weaknesses and piece together fuller revelations.

Does this mean that there is no such thing as a good or bad movie and that everything is relative? Certainly not. A double cheeseburger could do some good for a starving man, so it's not worthless, but let's not confuse it with a healthy meal. It's difficult to train ourselves to consider a film's quality: how it makes us feel, its flavor and what it all means. Taste is important, but so are the ingredients, their proportions, their preparation, the arrangement and presentation of the plates, and whether or not the meal is nourishing. Excellence matters.

These days, as a film critic, I am learning that a film succeeds when it makes me forget that I have a pen in one hand and a legal pad in the other. I long for those moments when I'm swept up in revelation, oblivious to all else.

Back in 2004 in Beverly Hills, I joined a few journalists to talk with the accomplished actor Michael Caine. After Caine regaled us with amusing anecdotes about working with Robert Duvall on the set of *Secondhand Lions*, one of the reporters spoke up. He asked if there was something that the actor wished moviegoers and film critics would learn to understand about movies, something we just don't get. Caine thought for a moment, furrowed his brow, made a tent of his fingers, and then said with great confidence, "If you are sitting there watching the film and thinking to yourself, *That is Michael Caine giving a great performance*, then *I have failed!* My job as an actor is to make you forget you're watching Michael Caine. You should be absorbed in the character and the story."

That is a mark of filmmaking excellence. The work carries us up out of our critical faculties and sweeps us to a galaxy far, far away . . . or to a desert in Mongolia where a camel is singing at the sunset. It is something distinct to movies. We are

presented with flickers of light preserved, one moment after another, motion and change reflected in a way that cannot happen in a painting, in writing, in music.

In that state of childlike attention, we are vulnerable to shocks both pleasant and discomfoting, both instructive and damaging. We are open to revelations that change us. Receiving our attention, the artist bears some responsibility to behave with integrity, to serve the work and craft it with excellence, but even he may not anticipate what his arrangement of light and shadow will reveal. It's possible we will glimpse the glow of glory, truth that cannot be reduced to a simple paraphrase, glimmering through the screen darkly.

* * *

Moviegoers buy their tickets for all kinds of reasons. Some just want to turn off their brains and be entertained. Others pursue any new work by particular actors or directors—Julia Roberts, Juliette Binoche, Robin Williams, Robert De Niro, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee. Some invest themselves in the study of film, discussing the differing effects of a Robert Altman tracking shot; the long, slow, meditative scenes of Yasujiro Ozu; or the way that the Dardenne brothers aggressively pursue their characters with handheld cameras. Some just want an excuse to sit and whisper quietly to their dates in the dark.

But most of us have some sort of expectation when we spend that money. We expect laughs, chills, jolts or tear-jerking drama. More often than not, we get just enough of what we anticipated to go home happy. A few days or weeks later, we move on to the next big blockbuster.

Occasionally, we get *more* than what we came for, and we're impressed. We might even talk about it for more than five minutes on the way home. In the morning, we tell our coworkers, "Don't miss that film! It was hilarious! We laughed until our faces hurt. Awesome!"

I often catch myself saying, "It really *moved* me."

Moved? As in from point A to point B? Do I mean that I'm in a different place now than I was before seeing the movie? Am I seeing the world from a new vantage point?

Normally, no, I don't mean that. Usually, I'm just saying that I *felt* something. I was drawn out of my routine and experienced a strong emotion, something out of the ordinary. There's that moment when the curtain pulls back, the music swells, the

camera zooms in on the hero's eyes, and I share her epiphany. Even when those revelations are terrifying—"He's not just looking for ghosts! Oh man . . . he *is* a ghost! He's been a ghost all along!"—on some level, I know that I'm safe in my seat. And I thrill with the vicarious experience.

But sometimes, yes. Sometimes, I *am* moved from point A to point B. I *want* to be moved, to glean more from moviegoing. I don't want to waste time with disposable box office sensations. I want to be challenged and nourished. I try to listen to those who have a passion for movies from around the world. While I occasionally run into something unpleasant when I follow their recommendations, I'm bound to make discoveries that make me glad I listened. The more I explore, the more I learn about navigating the dangers of moviegoing.

It's been my preoccupation for decades to experience those moments when an artist, intentionally or unwittingly, pulls back the veil of the everyday and gives us a glimpse of a wilder world than we had previously known. It has led me to discover the rewards of Disney, *Die Hard*, David Lynch and the Dardenne brothers. I've gone sightseeing to exotic corners of international cinema under the guidance of Poland's Krzysztof Kieslowski, France's Robert Bresson, Austria's Michael Haneke, Russia's Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Zvyagintsev, China's Edward Yang and Zhang Yimou, America's David Gordon Green and Terrence Malick, and beyond.

I've found redemptive insights and moments of piercing brilliance in places that I'd been told were off-limits to conscientious moviegoers. Like *Stands With a Fist*, I have a strange compulsion to sit down between Christian culture and secular society, trying to help them understand each other—and, ultimately, God—better through a shared experience of art. The more I apply myself to this, the more I realize that this compulsion grows from having learned that my own assumptions were wrong and my view too narrow. Now I want to understand more and apprehend beauty wherever I can find it.

And I can tell you, beauty will mess with you if you let it.

* * *

As my friend Jason Bortz watched a film about Africa, a little African girl came into the scene and happened to glance into the camera. Jason suddenly felt as if he'd been struck by lightning, because the girl's big brown eyes, radiant with joy, blazed out from her

desperate circumstances, and he *recognized* them. *Those are my daughter's eyes*, he said to himself. *That may as well be my daughter.*

What Jason meant was that a connection had been made—across continents—to tell him that he could no longer sit still knowing about his “daughter’s” need. He was compelled to leave his family for a few weeks to go, to serve, to learn more and to face the enormity of the need.

When some people encounter glory, they do the strangest things. They build an ark. They write stacks of psalms in gratitude. They go up against Pharaoh and all of his minions. Jason Bortz never recovered. He soon touched the same ground he had seen in the film and made a documentary about the contagious joy of Africans who live in nightmarish circumstances and the ways in which we can help them. Intent on blessing them, Jason finds himself awakening to new joys. The world is incrementally changed.

If you thought it might happen to you, would you hand over 10 bucks for the possibility?

Revelation Where You Least Expect It

The search for those deeply transformative moments at the movies is a costly discipline. It requires investments of time, money and ego.

If you take up this pursuit, you’ll find yourself less and less satisfied with most of the titles listed in the box office top 10. Frequently, popular movies have been assembled from standard parts by a committee, designed to appease what are often rather base appetites, and packaged to meet audience expectations. In search of authentic expressions and compelling visions devoid of advertising and calculated entertainment, you’ll find yourself more likely to venture off to those out-of-the-way theaters to see films most of the viewing public hasn’t even heard about. While they rush out to see *The Wedding Crashers* or its inevitable sequel, you might find yourself riding on a train through Tokyo with a lonely, troubled young woman in a film called *Café Lumière*. You may even end up seeing it alone.

Am I asking you to become a snob? Great *Naked Gun* . . . no! I’ll fess up: I *enjoyed* Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* (that confession alone could lose me my film critic’s license). When I watched Will Ferrell hurl crass insults at his coworkers in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, I laughed until I was sore. I’m much more likely to pop Tom Hanks’ forgotten comedy *The ‘Burbs* into the DVD player than I am to watch him in

Saving Private Ryan, *Philadelphia*, *Cast Away* or (heaven forbid) *The Terminal*. Given a choice between *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* and *The Sea Inside*, I'm as likely to join Johnny Depp as I am Javier Bardem.

I love movies—all kinds of movies. I love them the way others love baseball, classical music, wine or great literature. I want to understand the subtleties of Claire Denis' French imports like *L'Intrus*, but I don't want to miss *Ocean's Thirteen*. I try to resist the pull that turns so many cinephiles into snobs. I want to watch movies with my nephews and nieces and be pleasant company. If a professional baseball fan cannot attend a community softball game without scoffing at the amateurs on the field, he has a problem. The symphony maestro shouldn't blush at singing along with Alanis Morissette on his car stereo.

C. S. Lewis once said, "When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of being childish, and the desire to be very grown up." Madeleine L'Engle insists that her age is not an isolated chronological statistic, but only the most recent addition of a year to her life: "I am also four, and twelve, and fifteen, and twenty-three, and thirty-one, and forty-five and . . . and . . . and . . ." There is genuine joy to be shared in simpler, or more popular, experiences. And revelation happens there too, on occasion.

I once read an e-mail from a moviegoer who claimed he dedicated his life to God because of something he saw in *Herbie the Love Bug*. Another arrived from a woman who experienced a transforming realization during the Julia Roberts and Richard Gere throwaway called *Runaway Bride*. My friend Dick Staub has written a whole book on insights to be found in the *Star Wars* series. Staub, who teaches a class called "The Culturally Savvy Christian" at Seattle Pacific University, invited students to share the movies that shook them up, and he was moved by the testimony of a woman whose life was changed by watching the forgotten Val Kilmer action film called *The Saint*. I rest my case.

That doesn't mean these films were examples of superlative filmmaking. Not even close. So what does it mean when predictable mediocre work changes lives? Does it mean that excellence doesn't matter? No, it simply means that art reflects life, and when we meditate on life, we might see something in a new way—and that might awaken us to possibilities, problems, hope, doubt, salvation or sin. As a wise arts patron once said, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

* * *

For example, I was relatively unmoved by Zach Braff's debut feature *Garden State*, yet the film is a favorite for a whole generation of moviegoers who relate to the plight of the protagonist. It's a well-crafted film—Braff drew winning performances from his cast and performed some creative camerawork. However, it's the problem facing the young seeker that resonates most with young audiences.

Here's the premise: Andrew has been dosed with prescription drugs well into adulthood to numb the pain of his childhood. Through the influence of a nosy, courageous girlfriend, he learns that a life of buffering pain through medication has hindered his growth. In fact, it has paralyzed him. Andrew realizes that he will grow up only if he chooses to move through the pain instead of around it. In the culminating scenes, he has a face-off with his father that is all about his demand for pain and his rejection of a life lived in denial.

Those who have grown up wrestling with these issues may find themselves powerfully moved by the truth of Braff's film. I can see the merit in the story, but my experiences do not make that subject particularly compelling to me. When I watched *Garden State*, I became more concerned with some of its structural faults and the fact that the final confrontation occurs abruptly, taking place between Andrew and a character that has not been developed very well over the course of the film. It didn't resonate with me.

On the other hand, director Michel Gondry's visionary film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which explored similar issues, has become one of my favorites. Charlie Kaufman's screenplay gave us a sci-fi parable about two lonely souls, Joel and Clementine, who had memories deleted from their brains to excise the wounds of their breakup. As a result, they became developmentally disabled—by eliminating the scars of their rocky relationship, they ensured that they would never again enjoy lasting romance or a healthy marriage. The film offers powerful insights about the challenge of true love by showing us two individuals who cannot meet that challenge.

This is a story that speaks powerfully to me. I have watched so many friends' marriages collapse due to the loss of the initial thrill and the reality of dealing with one another's differences on a daily basis. When I asked Kaufman about what led him to make such an unusually honest film about the difficulties of love, he said, "It's important to me, when I'm doing this stuff, to be truthful. Truthful, in a sense that it's truthful to me . . . because that's all I can do. If I feel like I'm doing something honest, then I feel like I'm not putting garbage into the world. It's my experience, and therefore

it has some veracity. This is a true moment as I've understood it . . . and then I try to translate it into a scene."

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind troubles many viewers, and it should. Joel and Clementine treat each other with deplorable, R-rated selfishness and cruelty. But the critics writing for *Christianity Today* voted Kaufman and Gondry's work the best film of 2004 for its creativity, intensity and meaningful exploration of romantic love. It is, after all, one of the few recent love stories to affirm that true love is sustained beyond the first flush of infatuation by a spirit of trust, longsuffering and forgiveness.

That is one of the ways in which art enlightens us. It reflects our mistakes, our flaws and our pain back to us so that we must acknowledge them and find hope to move beyond them. Poetry, wrote Robert Frost, "is a way of remembering what it would impoverish us to forget." At its best, cinema becomes that kind of poetry. We hear the language we have forgotten luring us back to wisdom. In Ecclesiastes 3, we read that eternity is written in our hearts. Art helps us learn to read.

Visions That Hurt, Visions That Heal

As *Stands With a Fist* discovered in *Dances with Wolves*, being truly *moved* can be a painful thing. When we realize or remember something that tells us our view has been too narrow, we suddenly prefer to stay put. Who wants to be reminded that he is incomplete, misguided, weak or in need of help and healing? Just as we may feel pain when looking at a troubling X-ray, we can find some of the big screen's diagnoses discomfoting.

In Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies*, Brenda Blethyn plays a worrywart named Cynthia who is invited to a café to meet a stranger. She has no idea what this invitation is about, but when the stranger explains, we watch as Cynthia slowly, reluctantly, realizes that this unfamiliar face is the face of the daughter she abandoned years earlier. It's as if Cynthia has deleted some files from her own memories and this stranger has come along to restore them. Cynthia almost disintegrates in front of our eyes. Her sins have found her out.

It is here that Leigh's mastery as a filmmaker makes a difference. Some directors would zoom in on Cynthia's tears to exaggerate her emotions and force us to feel something. Leigh's camera does not flinch. It stays put, letting us observe as if we are sitting across the table from Cynthia. He does not make any cuts. He just lets the film

roll. This increases the realism and authenticity, sharpening the pain of the moment. It feels less *manufactured*, more *natural*. Many of us cry with her. We know how hard it is to face the consequences of our own foolishness. Even the most painful situations can, in the hands of an artist, reveal a sort of magnificence. We cry not just for Cynthia's grief but also because of the excellence with which it is portrayed.

Watching *Secrets and Lies*, I did not for a moment think, *Amazing. This scene is filmed uncut. There isn't any music. There are no special effects!* No, those thoughts came later as I sought to understand *how* it was that Leigh's work affected me so intensely. I'm accustomed to directors who can't communicate effectively and try to enhance their shoddy workmanship with overbearing effects: a bombastic soundtrack or camera tricks. They deliver their points with blunt instruments, hammering the audience in order to get a reaction.

Not Leigh. He captures life in a way that is distinct to the art of filmmaking: He delivers us into a particular passage of time—full of movement, shifting light, pauses and dialogue. That particularity is not meant to merely suggest life but to represent it in all of its temporal complexity. We can revisit those moments again and again, searching for significance in what seems incidental. Some filmmakers do this and reveal very little. The ferocity of Leigh's gaze can take us into the heart of the matter. By paying attention to every detail and allowing his actors some measure of spontaneity, he creates a lifelike scene. Through this verisimilitude, he gives us an opportunity to discover meaning in a reality very like our own.

We sit there and suffer, unable to find the will to put more popcorn into our mouths. We want this rift between two people to be healed so that we too can be at peace.

* * *

Speaking of suffering in front of a movie screen, I can't remember many scenes that made me more uncomfortable than watching that poor Mongolian camel give birth.

She, too, wept. Just as Cynthia of *Secrets and Lies* did not want to accept that she owed a great debt to the stranger next to her, that four-legged female in *The Story of the Weeping Camel* did not want to accept the responsibility of mothering that shaky-legged, bawling baby that had caused her so much pain during pregnancy.

The Story of the Weeping Camel documents for us, in graphic footage, the rather messy birth of this baby camel. The mother walks around in agony, her offspring only

half-sprung from her bleeding hindquarters. No wonder the mother wants nothing to do with the baby once he's born! He's left to cry and stagger after her, even though she kicks him and leaves him to starve in the sand.

But then, something remarkable happens. The worried Mongolian nomads, distressed that they cannot convince these two hairy beasts to reconcile, send their oldest son (his name, believe it or not, is Dude) into town to summon an unlikely source of help—a music teacher from the local school. The dutiful musician travels back to this remote, old world settlement and unsheathes an instrument that looks something like a cello.

The animals' caretakers strap the instrument up against the mother camel's neck, and the wind moves across the strings so that they hum quietly. The camel's ears swivel back. The ethereal tones have her attention. She listens.

Then the musician takes back his instrument and draws his bow across the strings. It's a slow and haunting tune. The grandparents, the parents, the children—three generations—gather in reverence to observe.

The mother camel stands in rapt attention, concentrating. And then it happens . . . a marvelous and mysterious event. She begins to weep. Her baby approaches her. Instead of lashing out with her hooves, as she has done so many times before, she stands still and the baby begins to suckle. The suspense seems to dissolve into the desert air, carried away on the strains of the song. When the performance is over, the rift between mother and child has been healed. In the next scene, the mother stands there staring into the sun, vocalizing in a way that sounds as though she's continuing the song. The baby bleats along with her. It's an astonishing sight.

In Scripture, when a man encounters the glory of God—whether it's in a blinding light, a burning bush, a pillar of cloud, a dream, or a talking donkey—that man is changed. Sometimes he goes back to his friends with his face shining.

Like the weeping camel, I felt my own weary, distracted, broken soul touched, encouraged and transformed by observing those windswept dunes and that multi-generational family, dusty animal and concert in the Gobi Desert. Just as exposure to the mystery of the musician's song somehow healed what was broken in the camel's heart, so this mysterious story penetrated my own heart and restored my spirit. I walked out of that theater with my heart humming.

I can describe it best by borrowing some words from an artist and music-lover named Jessica Poundstone, who came back from a Bill Frisell concert recently and wrote, "Sometimes music is like one of those programs you run on your computer to

optimize your hard drive: it heals a million little broken things you didn't even know needed attention."

God repairs us through creation and through art. This has something to do with why the camel sings.

Note

1. Michael J. Cusick, "Giving Shape to Turmoil: A Conversation with Chaim Potok," *Mars Hill Review*, Winter/Spring 1997. <http://www.lasierra.edu/~ballen/potok/Potok.interviews.MHR.html> (accessed November 2006).