



LITTLE ASHES – SPECTRUM FILM EVENING: January 19, 2012

On being a Psychotherapist and a Film-maker

This talk was given by Paul Morrison the director of the film Little Ashes and a member of the Spectrum Continued Professional Development Community

I used to think that I was not allowed to have two big things in my life.

Melanie Klein would have something to say about this.

Depending on the context I would minimise one or other of my two trades – in the psychotherapy world describing myself as a therapist who from time to time made films, and in the film world keeping pretty much shtum about my work as a therapist, for fear that to acknowledge it would be interpreted as meaning I was less committed to my film-making, and therefore not to be entrusted with large slabs of other peoples' money. It took a long while and a challenge from Jenner in supervision, to feel confident enough to own my two passions, and to recognise that they were indissoluble parts of myself, whichever I happen to be doing at any particular time, and even if I were to stop doing one or both.

I am a psychotherapist and a film-maker, and proud of the work I do in both, and very satisfied in the doing. As I have become increasingly open about my twin passions, rather than being critical people in both worlds seem intrigued and curious.

What's more, I notice increasingly that I am the same person in each of my roles, bringing many of the same skills and sensitivities to bear. Both jobs involve a process of exploration, of teasing out form and meaning, in order to arrive at a more satisfying and coherent shape. Both are profoundly collaborative; we undertake this journey with and in relation to others. As therapists, with our clients, colleagues, teachers and supervisors; as film-makers with our producers, writers, actors and crew.

The journey of a screenplay parallels that of a client. In small and big ways they both follow Keleman's five step structure. Our protagonist or hero/client meets what in script terms is called the 'inciting incident': the event that changes the course of their lives and presents a profound challenge. In order to meet the challenge the protagonist needs to go on a journey, up a mountain or into the underworld. They have an idea of what they want but in the course of the journey it may be revealed to them that what they want is not exactly what they need. They will make wrong steps, get lost and have to re-find their way. They learn from their mistakes and from the inevitable conflicts that they have with their antagonists, either internal or external. They enter a new world, where nothing is



certain, and confusion reigns. They discover that their old way of responding no longer works, and they have to dig deep to find new behaviours appropriate to the situation. They are on the verge of being overwhelmed by their demons, and just as it seems that all is lost and that they are doomed to die or repeat themselves eternally in living death, they discover new allies and new powers in themselves, and ultimately – we hope - triumph.

Our client/heroes undertake this journey. And we as their enablers have to undertake it too, for ourselves, in the process.

Of course our time with a client is rarely so dramatic and conclusive. But nor is the procedure of writing a screenplay. Most screenplays go through twenty-five to fifty drafts. The process of refinement in screenwriting and later in editing, where ultimately you may be making a judgement about a twenty-fifth of a second more or less, is not so different to the detailed working out that happens in therapy. We know that there is something at bottom that's clean and somehow simple and pure. But it's a challenge to find it. We need all our skills with words and hidden sub-texts, all our intuition, to uncover that clarity. To help unearth the way it's meant to be.

I come to feel in the course of writing, shooting, editing, that the film is sitting there, like my client on the chair, waiting to find itself; it has an existence outside of me, and my job as writer and director is to help it be revealed. It requires patience and application and resourcefulness; it requires me to use my eyes, and see what's there, and respond to it fully.

Then, if you are lucky, there's a small 'aha' moment: you've tried something you never tried before, and something clicks into place and feels unassailably right; your heart lifts, it's like dewdrops glistening in the morning air, it makes it all worthwhile...

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