

Theologically Reflecting on Art

By Matthew Vaughan (August 2007)

Part 1: Babette's Feast

If you have not watched **Babette's Feast**, then I recommend just skipping on to Part Two of this post and coming back to Part One once you have watched it.

The film is a theological feast, but one we must be taught how to eat: “Art can’t be swallowed whole. It takes a fork and a knife. You have to chew on it” (Overstreet, allusion to 84, 82). This is my feeble attempt at helping us all chew on this wonderful movie. Look at it as more of a guide to helping ask better questions of the film than an explanation of the theology of it. I realize that this post series is significantly longer than some of the others I have posted in the past. My recommendation is to address it in stages. While the movie might not sound overly exciting, it is incredibly theologically rich. I highly recommend, and I guarantee you will not be disappointed. Also, this post is meant to be a continuation of my previous post *Art and All Things Spiritual*. So check it out and join in the discussion.

Here is a brief synopsis of **Babette's Feast**: It is a 103 minute Danish film by Gabriel Axel—it is the film version of Isak Dinesen's short story under the same title. Set in a mid 1800s coastland in Denmark, it deals with the arrival of a Babette, a French civil war refugee to a small religious community. After serving them faithfully for 14 years, she gives them something they have never experienced before — a gourmet French feast.

Naturally, it is best to reflect on this movie while eating! So grab a snack, a friend, and take a peak into the fantastic world that is **Babette's Feast**. Let's start by asking some preliminary discussion questions:

1. What/Who is the movie about? Who are the main characters and what is their relationship with one another? What happens in the story? What is the climax of the movie?
2. Describe the spirituality of the group. What are their values and their fears? Compare and contrast the sisters with the rest of the group.
3. What about the song they keep singing? How do they sing it? Why is it presented in the way that it is? Why do they keep singing over and over again about Jerusalem?
4. What is going on in the community before the feast? After? In other words, what did this feast do to change the characters of the movie?
5. What happens in the meal scene? (Describe it as much as you can.) Who is present? How many are there? What is the sequence of events? Who talks and what do they say?
6. Why does the general get the climax speech? What is the point of this speech? (See my interpretation below.)
7. How is the meal scene a moment of grace for this small Puritan community? Is it an appropriate metaphor for grace? Why or why not?
8. What is the theological significance of this being about a meal? Let's think about this whole biblical phenomenon of food and eating. Meals have played a major role in the spiritual lives of the people of God. Why is that?
9. Let's talk about Babette for just a minute. What is her history? Where did she come from? Describe in as few words possible the process of her life as portrayed in the movie.
10. Now focus on the general's description of Babette. What is it that he says about her?
11. *Cailles en Sarcophage... Café Anglais...* What do those things mean?
12. Compare and contrast this community with the Corinthian church.
13. What biblical passages come to your mind as you reflect on this movie? Better yet, what specific passages were referenced either directly or indirectly in the dialogue?

14. What is spirituality as presented by Axel in this movie? What is the goal he is wanting to show us?

What I would like to do is to direct the reader to the bibliography presented in Part Two of this series. I offer some reflections on the movie here, but only about issues that are not mentioned by the authors referenced there. It is not my intention to steal their ideas or discuss the same things in different words. Just read their stuff!

I would like to conclude by talking about the speech that Lorens gives at the table. While an integral part of the movie (arguably the climax), I have seen very little discussion on it—especially with regards to how it relates to the rest of the film.

I include a transcription here:

Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness believes he must make choices in this life. He trembles at the risks he takes. We do know fear. But no. Our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when your eyes are opened. And we come to realize that mercy is infinite. We need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude. Mercy imposes no conditions. And, lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth are met together. And righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.

The first thing we notice about it is its placement in the scene. We are struck immediately by its seemingly random nature. Had we not been exposed to the history of his life by the narrator, the speech would have had a different ring to it (as it would have to the people at the table). So why does he make this speech? It is obviously a result of his own inner spiritual dialogue, so why make a speech? Because what he says here is universally applicable. It is just as true of them all as it is of him...whether they know it or not.

And to whom does he speak? A group of ignorant and legalistic peasants. The very people who make up that shameful group that Jesus calls “the least of these.” But even they are worthy of the most profound dialogue in the movie. I like that. I like it a lot. And not only are they worthy of hearing it, they are worthy of living it. The townspeople live what he is saying in that they receive both the piety and the forgiveness they have always lived for. The sisters in that they receive the loves they both rejected, and the satisfaction that they have served their people. And the general himself in that he lived the life he always thought he wanted, and yet he did not lose himself in the process.

Notice also that he never gets the satisfaction for which he is seeking. He does not become convinced that he made the right decisions. Instead, he simply realizes that it does not matter. He finally sees that

Mercy is infinite and nothing is lost by the ruin of human choice.

This does not mean that choice is irrelevant. It is not saying that nothing matters. It is saying that mercy is just that much bigger. Mercy wins the day.

Perhaps Qoheleth (the writer of Ecclesiastes) would have grown a great deal from watching this movie. Is all vanity? I think Lorens would say “no”—as would I.

And it is not like mercy was ever not there. It just takes us coming to the point when we can see it. And what is it that brings him to this conclusion? The meshing of the spiritual with the physical. I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the whole Cartesian idea of spirituality vs. physicality (as expressed so beautifully by the villagers who feel a deep need to focus on the “higher things” instead of the carnal food and drink that will soon be served to them). And the more I think about it, the more I realize that

It is when spirituality and physicality are met that God can be present.

Perhaps that is why Babette’s love of food can be described as not showing distinction between the two.

Thoughts?

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Part 2: Jesus and Movies

Now, let's ask the question of the hour: Why are we doing this? Why are we having this talk about a movie? To answer, I would first say that this is not simply a discussion about a movie. To see it as such is to miss the point. We are communally engaging in a "feast" of theologically rich art. We are reflecting on a shared experience. We should view it as nothing less. That is the beauty of art. It doesn't objectively tell you what you need to know. It presents a particular idea to you and allows you the responsibility and privilege of interpreting it. And as with any art, it is much better to engage in communal reflection than individual reflection. (Why is it that we keep coming back to that point over and over and over again when dealing with Christianity?)

And this is a very biblical idea. From the very first verse in the Bible we see God's people expressing themselves artistically—with poetry, prose, and narrative. While there are some books passages that are much more literarily mature than others, all of the Bible is fantastic literature.

One of the most dangerous things Christians can do is to neglect to see the Bible as art.

But the Bible also presents us with many models of theological education. The most important of which, in my humble opinion, is that of Jesus. And how did he teach more often than not? That's right...through parables.

Let's think about what a parable is: it is a story that is presenting a reality about which we are encouraged to reflect—drawing a deeper understanding than we might from, say, a law code or someone else's mail. There is rarely one single point. In fact, there is rarely even one angle from which to view them. That is the beauty of this art form: it allows us to engage on a deeper level than basically any other teaching method. Modern Christian educators would perhaps call them "Case Studies" of sorts. No wonder Jesus used this method!

So would it be so incredibly heretical if I proposed in this essay that movies can be modern parables? Many are not nearly as theologically rich as, say, *Babette's Feast*, but there are so many movies out there that can be used in many of the same ways we use Jesus' parables (see the list below).

So by producing and engaging theologically rich art, we are actually following the teaching model of Jesus much more appropriately than if we were to give a lecture on a certain theological theme, for example. And this is equally true of deep theological thinkers and people who are ignorant of theology. It is a simple solution: allow an art form with which people are comfortable to become the seed of theological discussion. Then go from there.

If people are uncomfortable or unable to adequately discuss the Bible alone, or if they need another conversation partner in an already deep spirituality...use art.

Here's a real life "for example": A faculty member at the graduate school I attend recently expressed some concern about his teenage son's spiritual quest. His son attends a public school and is exposed to people from different (or no) faith traditions all day long. This man's concern was how to approach the topic of "Jesus vs. Everyone Else" with his son in a way that would encourage honest and sincere questioning. So the suggestion was made that he should read the book *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel with his son. This novel tells the story of a boy who actually practices Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity simultaneously. It is a perfect conversation starter for the kinds of conversations that he wanted to have with his son. Granted, that book has not been made into a movie (yet! — I heard a superb rumor that M. Night Shyamalan may be buying the rights to it!), but you can see where I am going with the illustration. Why should we not do the same with certain movies?

There is no other art form with which modern people, especially young people, are more comfortable than that of film.

It is much easier to get people to talk about a movie than it is for them to talk about Ephesians. It just is. Why not embrace that?

Overstreet says:

...film is uniquely qualified to explore spirituality. More than any other art, it mirrors our experience in time and space. Reflecting our world back to us, it gives us the opportunity to explore and revisit moments. Offering imaginative visions of alternative worlds, it helps us glimpse aspects of our own that

we might otherwise have missed. Slowly, we begin to discover the universal in the particular, the timeless in the temporal, the miraculous in the mundane. (77)

Wright adds,

Cinematic art can focus our attention on reality so as to call up meaning from its inner depth.

Next time you are reading a parable, think of Jesus and the gospel writer as artists instead of rabbis or a religious teachers. What is going on in a parable? Jesus is presenting us with an idea, a situation, in order for us to wrestle with it. A parable is inviting us to engage, to think through something — and often from many different points of view.

And following that, next time you are watching a movie, think of the filmmakers as teachers. What are they showing you? What are they trying to tell you? How can the story that they are telling be used for engaging the world around us? Would this movie be a good conversation piece with some of your non-Christian friends? Did it teach you something about God that you didn't know? If so, what?

May God bless us in the reading of his Word, and the watching of our movies!

What do you, the faithful and much appreciated few who have read all of this, have to say about this last little rambling of mine?

I leave you with this from Overstreet:

If dining at the table of movies becomes my primary focus, I am forgetting the purpose of the meal. It is served to give me strength so that I can return to my life stronger, healthier and closer to being whole. (94)

Recommended Viewing (A Few Movies with Some Theological Substance):

Amadeus, Any movie telling the story of the Exodus and of the Passion (a fun exercise would be to watch them all in a relatively short period of time and to compare and contrast them), Babettes' Feast, Baraka, Chronicles of Narnia, Crash*, Dead Man Walking*, Les Miserables, Magnolia*, Meet Joe Black, Million Dollar Baby, Ordet, The Green Mile, The Matrix*, To Kill a Mockingbird, Schindler's List*, Se7en*, What Dreams May Come, ?

Recommended Reading:

Steven D. Greydanus' Review of Babettes' Feast:

<http://decentfilms.com/sections/reviews/babettesfeast.html>

My Blog: mateov.wordpress.com—"Art and All Things Spiritual"

Overstreet, Jeffrey. *Through a Screen Darkly: Looking Closer at Beauty, Truth, and Evil in Movies*. Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007. Specifically chapter 3, pp. 69-102.

Overstreet's blog and movie reviews: www.lookingcloser.com

An Essay-Level Review of Babettes' Feast by Wendy Wright:

www.unomaha.edu/jrf/BabetteWW.htm

Yancey, Philip. *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. Specifically chapter 2, pp. 19-29.

* = I'd leave the kids at someone else's house. There is either sexuality, violence, or language in these films that might be a problem for some.