EVIL, EVIL, WHERE'S THE EVIL?

A theological review of "THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY: An Epic Comedy of Absurd Proportions" Jamie Uys (S.African; d.'96)--Irene Films (CBS video, '80)--after "absurd," add "Slapstick."

Consequences of **mislocating** (misidentifying) evil

THE STORY: For 5,000 years, life hadn't changed for the placid Bushmen of the Kalahari until, flying over them, the pilot of a small plane jettisoned an empty Coke bottle. In a reversal of the deus-ex-machina theme of ancient classical drama, the "gift" from heaven resulted in chaos, not the resolution of chaos into divine order. The shaman-protagonist, Xi, diagnoses the chaos as derivative from the Coke bottle as evil, & sets out on a long journey--in which he encounters a variety of white folks--to "throw the evil thing off the world's edge." The denouement (Fr., "untying")? He does it. The end.

THE MORAL? Don't rush to it! My college ornithology prof. said (on our first 5am bird-walk), "Don't try to name the birds, first enjoy them. After you have named them, you will be tempted to conclude that you have done with them." (By course-end, I'd seen-&-named 66 varieties.)

So not too fast on announcing the "meaning" of a story/drama/film. Remember what many a painter has replied when asked what a painting means: "If I could say in words, I wouldn't have had to paint it."

After you've finished this Thinksheet, what will *you* say the movie "means"?

1 CBS's video of the film violates, in the interest of commerce, the esthetic principle enunciated above. A potential buyer/renter of videos looks them over with the control question "What's this one about?" I'm half sympathetic: the buyer/renter needs a clue. You pass a church & see that next Sunday the preacher will be preaching about, on.... But a sermon-title is only a clue, to "clue in" the listeners. The problem: the prospective/actual listener may take the clue &, like a dog seizing the ball in a children's game, run off with it, stopping the game.

2 The literary genre is the prodigy/consequences tale ("prodigy" in its original Lat. sense: "omen," "monster"). A cache of **gold** is found in, & taken from, the Rhine; & there's all hell to pay till it's returned (Wagner's "Ring" cycle). A **ring** is found to exude curses, & the troubles continue till the ring is thrown into a certtain volcano (J.R.R.Tolkien's "Middle Earth" ["Hobbit"] series). A **bottle** tumbles out of the sky, &.... The tale's form is constant; there's some variation in content; but the meaning as sense-making about evil is quite different. In Wagner, the evil is in stealing the gold from the Rhinemaidens; in Tolkien, the evil is in the ring; in "The Gods Must Be Crazy," the evil is thought to be in the bottle but (we plainly perceive) is rather in the Bushmen's hearts as they, who formerly had "all things in common" (Ac.2.44), contended for possession of this supernatural singularity (in contrast to the next vs. in Ac.2).

3 Or are we to see contention for the scarce not as evil but as natural? No, fighting over an empty Coke bottle is not natural--as fighting over water, food, & mates would be. But--in Jamie Uys' tale, as in Rousseau's "noble savage"--the Bushmen in a state of nature (pre-bottle) were noncontentious: the locus of evil is not nature but (as in Freud's "discontents") in civilization with its unnecessaries (Coke=civilization, & Coke is unnecessary). In the Golden Age Past paradigm, even studying nature is unnecessary (our white protagonist, who's responsible for the film's extensive slapstick, is working on a PhD in one particular ingredient in elephant dung--a spoof on myopic specialization).

4 In describing what for him is the essence of drama, Robt.Redford says "we find out where the heart is" when we watch "how human beings face power-situations." From mis-facing power, mis-claiming ownership, mis-worshiping, the heart is "desperately wicked" (Jer.17.9 KJV; REB, "desperately sick"; Gn.8.21 KJV ["the imagination of man's heart is evil"]; M.7.23 KJV ["all these evil things come from within"--TEV: "from inside a person"]). The Bible's realism nails the myth of primitive (& childhood!) innocence. The Bible asks us, in all our struggles of owning-to "own up" ("It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer"). Public ownership becomes conscious only when private property emerges conjoint with individual consciousness, which Communism threatened by communizing property.

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5 Let's call this movie a Pigmy Parable of Possession (& not miss Roger Ebert's wry comment) "for kids who haven't given up on life." A light-footed morality play, with laughs aplenty. Given money, Bushman Xi throws it away as something not worth possessing. An animal slyly possessed the bottle, & Xi went in search of it not to possess it but to depossess it (the movie's last words being "He must find the evil thing & get rid of it"). Revolutionary terrorists drive madly in & out of the jungle while the missionary, teacher, scientist, & journalist pursue their civilized endeavors--each possessed by the desire to possess some specific intangible. The intangible Xi is pursuing is the **restoration** of peace to his community, so the desire to share will cease being subverted by the desire to own (which, the film says, leads to anger, jealousy, violence [e.g., one child bopping another over the head with the Coke bottle]).

At the end opposite from this radical fictional simplification of ownership problems lies the present situation in historic Palestine. Was ever any land-claiming/counterclaiming this complicated before now? Palestinians say the Israelis are "occupying" West Bank land that was PLO before 1967, but not so: it was a part of Jordan. As for holding onto the settlements, some Israelis say it's their historic right (in biblical promise) & others that it's a prize of the '67 war. The underlying claim of both the PLO & Israel is to the whole of Palestine, undivided into two states. No resolution in sight. Only one Coke bottle for two contenders.

6 While the film spoofs almost everything, primitive & civilized, in sight, not so Christianity, which comes off as wholly positive. The white missionary (acted by the filmmaker himself) among S.African blacks (not the Bushmen) is an admirable figure; & the hymn-singing of the black villagers is as splendid in skill as it is high in spirit. The mood (without mention of these texts) is "I will fear no evil" (Ps.23), "Deliver us from evil" (the Lord's Prayer), & "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps.24). But Jamie Uys could not use a Christianized black for his story....

....so he searched for three months to find a civilization-untouched Bushman clan--for maximum realism (Xi's real Bush-name is "N!pau" [the "!" representing a click]): the clan was not *acting* amazement at the Coke bottle! One reviewer said the director's aims included to present "a microcosm of the bushmen's world." We see the movement from cooperation (playing with the bottle) to competition (a holder refusing to share the bottle) to unsuccessful repression (Xi's burying the bottle, which is soon dug up). But while the bottle, icon of materialism, was a major shock to the community, the social fabric was not torn. Xi, the lead male, impounded the bottle & announced his plan for the **restoration** of peace, the reestablishment of the social order: he will go find the edge of the world, & throw off the evil bottle (as Christ "bore our sins on the tree"). A tale of cynicism (if anything can be misunderstood, it will be) is transformed into a tale of hope (if anything must be overcome, it will be). Archianthropologists (explorers of the earliest humanity) speak of "in illud tempore" (Lat. "in that [earliest] time"). Well, in Jaime Uys' story of wonder, delight, trouble, & triumph of the human spirit, we can easily imagine ourselves catching a glimpse of the beginnings (& might find it profitable to let this story & Gn.3 look each other over).

7 Is the film Luddite? No, technology is not rejected. But in ways not always subtle it's presented as of ambiguous value. The Land Rover gets you everywhere, but it has no brakes (oh, perfect metaphor for hubris). Just think of the slapstick potential of no brakes! Driver & passengers go crazy over no brakes! (A reviewer: "a movie that looks at us from the other side and shows us just how crazy we are.) I don't know what further crazinesses surface in the film's sequels--"The Gods Must Be Crazy II" and "The Gods Must Love Coke"--but be sure: plenty.

8 What's the difference between trying to solve a **problem** & trying to (re-)solve a **puzzle**? That Bushmen clan puzzled over (was puzzled by) the Coke bottle. If they'd hung it in a tree & treated it as a sacred object, it would have continued as a Puzzle Message from Heaven (as the prelslamic meteorite in Mecca's Ka'aba is treated by all Muslims). What comes from heaven could bring out the best in us (e.g., the Incarnation). But when it is handled, owned, counterclaimed, it brings out the worst in us: the puzzle becomes a problem. "I don't want to talk about it" is a frequent laugh-line in the movie. But we need to talk about puzzles & problems, & sort them out for the good of our souls & societies.