
Vampires and Oil Spills

Patti Fraser

A thousand stories have come into the world in this place. In the ten years since the *Summer Visions Film Institute for Youth* came into being. Located in Templeton Secondary in Vancouver's Eastside, the institute was founded in response to the need of many of the local youth who had no work and no place to go in the hot summer months. For the past ten summers of my life, I have walked five city blocks from my home to Templeton Secondary's media studio. In the mornings of early summer even the eastside of Vancouver is green with summer hope. Open and waiting.

I had come to think of my work at the film institute as that of a midwife. Preparing a place for that which will come to be, challenging the young filmmakers to be patient, helping to ensure that the environment where they worked could support all of the new voices that arrived each summer.

With the exception of the Institute's fundraisers and administrators, the other colleagues at the film institute are youth themselves. They come here to work every summer, most of them from this neighbourhood, once participants in the program themselves. They now work as youth instructors, media producers, and mentors in a program of media production that offers eighty-five percent of its program participants full scholarships in order to attend. We try to make

it possible for everyone to come. Every summer a hundred and fifty youth come through these doors, and thirty films will be produced. Over the years we have received national recognition for the work we have done in the Institute. Every summer I'm asked to come back. To come back to help in the act of listening and refining the stories or treatments for their films. As we work together a community of practice forms and the ones that take the risk to show up, begin to have a place to be that is safe for the summer.

Our unspoken ethic is no one is turned away. On only one occasion was someone asked to leave. It is a difficult place to be. The world in all its complexity shows up with no screening program, no exclusion. The only requirement, a desire to tell a story and to produce a film in collaboration with others.

Every year, challenging the initial offer of the stories, we try to not make it easy to replicate some plot from the current season's blockbuster. Every year we seek to find ways to open up the possibilities to return through their stories to their right to play, to be seen, to express their unique inquiry into the condition of their lives, to create something new, to listen for what is trying to speak through them to us.

Every year, as a way of hearing what is in the room, we brainstorm story ideas. Every year, preoccupations unique to each summer emerge such as reversals in time, the nature of dream and reality, suicide, to name a few.

This year it was all about oil spills and vampires.

July 5

In the airless cavern of the studio, the door opens with a hint of sunlit air and closes as another blurry eyed, feeling-out-of-place, young person enters for the first time.

With every opening and closing of the door, there's a rising sense of claustrophobia and the pressing feeling, more strongly felt this year, that I'm sacrificing too much of my life to be here.

Here, in the overheated, getting hotter every summer, noisy chaos, I'm losing too much of my time instead of spending it in an imagined garden, in the cool waters of an imagined lake, looking at quiet star-filled nights, imagining myself so far away from the airless chaos of the studio.

July 6

"Please come back."

"We can't do this without you."

This year's administration's lament sounds like every other year's administration's lament.

And I give in.

But in the midst of all the striving and in the passing of time

I'm becoming unrecognizable.

Known only to the few returning young media producers from "the old days."

Now even they are young adults, who used to be scruffy kids from around the block, these familiars seem distant, preoccupied with finding a place and an identity for themselves in the world as young people. We aren't sharing the same sense of endeavour we had in the years before.

Every beginning can feel somewhat like this.

But this year something has changed. And with it a larger feeling of unease.

July 7

We start by welcoming a circle of sixty strangers and, after screening some films that were made in the past programs, we start the difficult work of coming up with a treatment or story idea.

"I wanna make a film about a guy who finds his girlfriend cheating on him, he kills her..."

how about a robot girlfriend who gets dumped in a dumpster by the guy's real girlfriend....I wanna make a film about zombies...where everyone dies...

There's vampires and, it's the end of the world and we are the only people left...a giant release of some kind of virus that can't be stopped.

Thousands of stories.... I've heard the beginning of thousands of stories in this way. I talk about the falseness and boredom of the medium shot.

A forgery of balance.

Not close enough or far away.

"Our lives...the lives we live. It's not like that."

This year, irked and impatient with the ideas

I *want to tell* them something instead of just listening.

I want to tell them.

"By this time, by the time you are sitting here in front of me,

I know you have already learned to climb the fence.
And you know exactly what spot on Hastings Street is not watched at night.
You can already slip over it and make your own way into Playland.”
I want to tell them.
We are here because we want some place for you to be in summertime
safe.
A place to be
Away from the street
Away from your sleeping friends
in basement rooms
while the last summer sparrows
unseen
make nests under the stairs just outside the door
in a place that is still summer young with summer hope.
Away from your tiny apocalypses.
Someplace safe
from *these stories*
you keep pitching over and over again.

July 8

Feeling like the most responsible one in the room I’m still asking *them* to wait...
wait for the story with a hope that it’s not a done deal.
Not already foreclosed and mortgaged off.
But this year, for the first time, I can’t tell if anyone is listening or tuned to their
entirely own preoccupations and their own emergencies.
And I keep pitching them the idea
that *creating* stories that come from ourselves and what we know or what we wish
to be or understand or imagine can be antidotes to confusion and bewilderment.
They can help us to find a home, I say, for a while, out of the wilderness.
But I’m not so sure any more. This year seems different.

July 12

It is hotter this year than ever. There have been weather warnings about heat
stroke. We have to adjust the production schedule, try to figure out locations
where the heat isn’t at its worst, a difficult task in a place surrounded by highways

and large urban transportation corridors, where we need to take buses or walk to locations carrying all the gear. The scripts aren't ready anyway. This year there is an atmosphere of *persistent* unexamined violence to the stories.

I'm getting nowhere with my attempts to ask them through the stories, *what is it*, what is it that you want to *tell* us. What is the trouble?

What *is* it?

"...I wanna make a film about a super anti-hero with powers who comes into the highschool and offs the principal...what about a film about someone who commits suicide in front of her friends...about a business man who steps into a square on the sidewalk and a sniper shoots him dead."

This year it's you....

You...are the trouble.

And your stories.

The stories you want to recreate again and again are making me sick.

And I always thought you were the ones we were supposed to keep safe.

But you have already left this place called safe you live somewhere else.

Where are you?

And where is that which can't be colonized, taken over,
by the empire of worst nightmares?

Ever.

In the past these preoccupations existed, but this year it's *me*—I'm getting infected by the epidemic, can't see / feel out/ a way to see/ show a subtle path of reconsideration, a deepening, a reversal in the fortunes and the form of the characters—

I'm trying not to foreclose on them.

Where are the possibilities for the other outcomes?

Why aren't you listening?

Where are you going?

July 16

A mother, no longer a mother, called this morning.

She left a message

The mother, now child poor,

told us of an overdose of something that found you in Playland.

This year

The story has taken us all away.

It's true.
We could not keep you safe.

July 17

Now you are my small apocalypse.
Now
this is a story is about a place that has lost its light,
about a wilderness of the worst imaginings,
of anger at the contemptible permission we have given our young
especially those who don't live in safe houses
who aren't taken on holidays to other places
where in its stead we have allowed the worst imaginings of strangers to
entertain them—we have *let* them,
all of us let them,
sit in front row seats
where they watch stories told by strangers
about degradation and despair,
of violence and the loss of human dignity.
These are *their* bedtime stories.

July 18

To keep you safe.
That is why I came here in the first place.
You are my last summer time hope now gone.

July 19

Now what do we do?
How do we think through with the rest of your long lost crew
the end of your movie?
When only the image of you as an adolescent vampire remains
holding in his hand a message.
While reports from the Gulf keep telling us the spill
keeps spilling and cannot be contained.
I can't keep it together any more, can't find the way.
We are making each other cry.
Now a hand or two,
Now a touch.

July 20

I'm giving up being the most responsible one in the room.
Together your crew decides to play rewind, to go back,
we begin the painful look
at what is really there,
what has been shot,
what remains of the image of vampire you.
We start again.
Start to make a story again
with what is left.

August 2

They knew what to do
with this image of you.
Vampire,
you become our bright hope.
In vampire time in the dark airless studio in the absence of light
you are a shadow of light on the screen
and something is *realized* together.

In the passion of a loss, an unexpected event
of mutual understanding is experienced.
And conscientia between,
knowing with, we con/spire
breathe with, breathe together new stories about vampire you.
And they see you,
the onliness of you, as something now terribly valuable,
and in the passion of their seeing they determine through the story and the film
they do not want
you to suffer
the insult of oblivion.
Despite the desire of many for this to be not so.
A fellowship of story makers/ film makers
the young strangers who are no longer strangers
in the immediacy of grief,
your film crew/your story makers
won't let you suffer
the insult of

oblivion.

They want you to be seen and heard,
to be here as a passion in their hearts.

The bad bedtime stories can't do *this*.

They can't replace this passion.

Because this passion has never been experienced before.

It is new.

It is born new.

And this story, the new one about vampire you, can't be high jacked can't be
turned into the bad bedtime story because

It looks and feels like where it comes from—it is the result of the labour of their
experience.

Born from the passion of not wanting you to suffer

The insult of oblivion.

And I, as the story mentor, am thinking anew today.

I'm thinking like a homeopath,

thinking about what's contained in this medicine,

where the smallest degree of poison can become the greatest of remedies.

August 31

My summer time hope is tougher now and it no longer expects green pastures
and cool lakes to swim in.

Vampires and blood sucking corpses, killers, girl child porn stars, can *be seen*,
as the work of light and shadow.

Measuring the degree of poison becomes my work now.

With the great hope you will come close enough to hold out your tongues for the
light in our hands

because you may know better than us

just what will be the right amount of poison to protect some or maybe all of your
own unique selves from

the epidemic in Playland.

Today it's the re/imagining of vampires, killings, and all
here in the

play of light and shadow

in the safety of the studio

within its four airless walls.

And next year,
I will come back again.
But not carrying an *idea* of safety with me.
I will seek out the worst stories possible
and with you make an archive
of play in light and shadow.
In the hope that these tough ones will keep coming
looking for medicine.
So we can seek together our remedies
recreating, if you insist, the worst nightmares,
under my protest
and with whatever help I can give.
Seeking to see in one another a common and not so common world.
And above all else
to not suffer the insult of oblivion.

And if we're lucky
you'll keep coming back,
safe
for now,
with the bright light and the bright hope that only comes when we create something anew.

Postscript: I have come to think of wisdom, not as a form of knowledge which we can possess, but in the ways that the philosopher Bugbee (1999) understands:

Wisdom may be better conceived as giving us the strength and courage to be equal to our situation than as knowledge giving us command of it. To the extent that human well-being and capacity for acting well ultimately turn upon understanding. (p. 65)

REFERENCE

- Bugbee, H. (1999). *The inward morning: A philosophical exploration in journal form*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.