Making sense of *Kumiko*, or, How not to find treasure

The cinematic recovery of a perennial literary-Christian theme

Scott Cowdell

Today’s widespread abandonment of literary culture means that fewer educated Westerners experience the profound exposure of human reality that great literature provides. The black and white morality of popular fiction does not hold up the same mirror to reality. Likewise, the dwindling away of traditional ecclesial Christianity into the sublimity, without representation of a morally earnest though entirely secular life, entails the further diminishment of our prophetic resources.

So where can today’s public find the mirror held up to its condition that was once more widely available? Of course good novels and short stories are still being written, and the old ones are coming out in ever trendier editions, but, in terms of uptake, the cinema and its proxies Foxtel and Netflix are beating serious reading hands down. High-quality resources are still available at art galleries and the theatre, though in our age of social media distractedness, sporting saturation, the unreality of reality television, and the indefinitely-prolonged adolescence of gaming culture, the cinema and the download will increasingly provide whatever access we have to the deeper truths of our human condition.

Scott Cowdell is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra, also Canon Theologian of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn.
Despite a 3D deluge of plot-less and character-less commercial product full of CGI effects and empty of insight, high art remains widely available from the cinema and its proxies. Hence the baton of great literature is passing de facto to film in our time, as does the prophetic insight that might once have been expected from Christian pulpits. As an example of this handing on of the baton, the following reflections are offered on a recent film that was widely misunderstood and misinterpreted, but which takes us on an uncomfortable journey to the heart of modern life. With great literature now largely lost to our public conversation, and the gospel silent in so much Christian preaching, films like this have an important role to play.

The near-universal failure to understand this film more than superficially, however, points to the perspective that has been lost, along with the literary culture that carried it: “For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them” (Matthew 13: 15, KJV). Hence, as Christian commentary on literature has been a modern constant, so now must Christian film criticism be regarded as a missional imperative.

What follows is a contribution in this vein: as a sign of the baton being handed on from literature to film, as a corrective to the lost capacity for self-understanding that such films can address, and as an encouragement to the prophetic task of Christian film reviewing—lest modern audiences fail to catch on, as so many did in this case. I bring one further conviction to this undertaking, and that concerns the prophetic power of René Girard and his mimetic theory. Girard’s project of understanding began with great modern literature of the nineteenth century, and must now continue in the exploration and explication of quality cinema.¹

**Kumiko: The Treasure Hunter**

In 2014 Australian cinemas screened this Japanese-American film, about which no reviewer seemed to have a clue. Cervantes, Rousseau and Dostoyevsky hold the key, however, and René Girard can open the door. Still, the reviewers liked Kumiko. She is an unprepossessing Tokyo “office lady”, but she dreams an impossible dream. They see her as unloved and put upon, until she hatches a grand scheme that spells wonder and freedom, even if it is audacious and risky. So Kumiko is something of a heroine for
film reviewers—quirky, as they say, but plucky and funny. In fact, she is a Don Quixote for our times.

Yet this is the typically superficial reading that we would associate with modern romantic individualism, of the “follow your star” school. Cervantes knew better the travail of Don Quixote’s madness. The Don’s grandiose delusions were inspired by Amadis of Gaul, the hero of his favourite medieval knightly romances. This, however, was not celebrated as a mark of greatness by the Don’s creator—the great contemporary of Shakespeare. Cervantes offers instead a cautionary tale, in which the Don came to his senses at the end, recognised his folly for what it was, and faced death in his right mind. It was only a 1972 musical version, The Man of La Mancha, which made a hero of the old buffoon and glorified his obsessions. And so it is with Kumiko, in the hands of reviewers. To paraphrase Erasmus: in the kingdom of the blind, Mr Magoo is king.

Kumiko is a lonely outsider. At 29, so her boss tells her, Kumiko should be married with a family, making way for younger women to find work in the firm. Her girlish co-workers giggle and chatter over a new set of permed eyelashes in the lunchroom while Kumiko stands off to the side, preparing the boss’s tea, or makes crestfallen subway journeys with his dry cleaning. Her mother’s exasperated phone calls to Kumiko’s tiny flat always descend into recriminations over no boyfriend, no proposal and no prospects for Kumiko. Her only companion is Bunzo, a caged rabbit. Money is obviously very tight. A chance meeting with an old college acquaintance and her daughter only serves to highlight Kumiko’s isolation. Increasingly frustrated, Kumiko takes to spitting surreptitiously in the boss’s tea until, at the end of her tether, she dumps his dry-cleaned suits in the rubbish.

Surely what we have here is an emerging tale of girl power. The patriarchal high-handedness of her boss, the stifling conventional expectations of her mother and the unthinking conformity of her cohort all cry out for Kumiko to take the road less travelled. Hooray for Kumiko’s small acts of resistance, and for her resolve to seize the reins of her life! Yet is this right? Yes, the co-workers are ditsy, the boss is patronizing, mother is a bit of a dragon, and the external circumstances of life are limited. Yet, in light of what happens next, I am inclined to look again. I suggest that Kumiko is not a victim of circumstances who aspires to something noble and liberating. Rather, she has turned her back on real life and sets about destroying herself. The genuine treasure that Kumiko might have found in the midst
of her small slice of the world is squandered, while the fake treasure that inspires her grand adventure ends up costing her life.

Kumiko is a solitary walker. The ultimate romantic individualist—to the point of sociopathy, according to one scholar—was Rousseau. His *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is meant to suggest personal intensity and specialness, whereas the Girardian scholar Jeremiah Alberg shows how dubious Rousseau’s authenticity actually is, and how prey he is to rivalrous self-definition and being scandalized. On one of her walks Kumiko finds an old video cassette of the 1996 Coen brothers film, *Fargo*, with opening credits that depict it as a true story. In a wintry Minnesota landscape the Steve Buscemi character, Carl Showalter, buries a case of stolen money below a fence line, marking the spot for later retrieval. Kumiko takes this scene to be an actual pointer to real treasure. With a page torn from a public library atlas, a traced drawing of the location from her television screen, her unsuspecting boss’s corporate credit card, no luggage, and very little English, Kumiko makes a beeline for the wintry wilderness of Northern Minnesota. Her only delay involved offloading Bunzo. He failed to scamper off as expected when she thoughtlessly sought to release him in a Tokyo park, so instead she abandoned him to his fate on a subway train. Bunzo knew where his realistic prospects lay, unlike his owner.

Kumiko proves as unstoppable as the Terminator in her quest. By bus, hitchhiking, and taxi, by skipping out on bills, and flaunting the kindness of various rural Minnesotans, Kumiko ventures deep into “the land of ten thousand lakes” wrapped in a bed quilt stolen from a motel. Her red parka is a vivid sign of Kumiko’s incongruous passage through the plain expanse of life. Eventually delusion and exposure get the better of Kumiko and it seems likely that she has perished in a blizzard. As if to highlight her folly, we are given a fantasy ending in which Kumiko awakes in a snow drift to find the treasure just as depicted in *Fargo*. And there is Bunzo, too, waiting in the snow. She gathers him to her breast, and strikes out with her treasure into a new future. Ah, the power of dreams...

Yet if we pause for a moment and look back at Kumiko’s journey, we notice some incongruities. Kumiko is actually cared for by her boss, who seems willing to put up with her lacklustre performance at work and keep her on. A new girl seems kind and a potential ally. Her mother encourages Kumiko with an invitation to move back home so she can save some money. An offer of friendship is rebuffed by Kumiko, who flees the café where
Making sense of *Kumiko*, or, How not to find treasure

has met that old acquaintance and her little daughter—the prospect of marriage and family life is clearly repellant to Kumiko. In Minnesota, she is met with kind forbearance by a lady who shelters her, a motel clerk who is patient with her, a decent policeman who tries to help her, and a taxi driver who takes her far into the frozen North. All are either abandoned or robbed by Kumiko.

In each case genuine human care is extended, but steadfastly resisted. Kumiko will use people but not connect with them. Except at one point, which I think is very telling. In a thrift store the policeman is buying her a puffy jacket and snow boots to face the cold. She leans forward to kiss him on the mouth, and he draws back. He is a married man with children, he says, and is only trying to help her. She replies inaccurately that he had said he was going to help her *find the treasure*. And only with that understanding can Kumiko venture an intimate connection, once it has been validated by the policeman (so she assumed) embracing her dream of finding the treasure. Hence the only man for Kumiko is a co-dependent—someone prepared to support her delusional self-project. When the policeman declares plainly, though not unkindly, that Kumiko’s treasure is fake, she shrieks in denial and runs out of the store. Kumiko is always running, walking, searching, but in the wrong direction.

Dostoyevsky became a great student of human nature, according to René Girard, having offloaded his early delusions and posture of affront. He recognised the combination of fawning and sulking, aspiring and resenting, whereby our desires are awakened and repelled by the desires of fascinating others. This “novelistic conversion” is advanced by Girard as the necessary condition for all great writing. Cervantes and Shakespeare on the cusp of modernity, along with Tocqueville, Proust and Dostoyevsky at its flowering, reveal to Girard the converted imagination that allows a profound portrayal of the human condition.

In *Notes From the Underground*, *Devils* (otherwise known as *The Possessed*) and *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky reveals for Girard the bitter, hard done by, resentful turn against life that is actively embraced by the anti-hero. The underground man, obsessed with slights and ambitions, cannot accept the pure love of the prostitute Liza that might have healed him. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Grand Inquisitor stands for a world that prefers its illusions to the offer of genuine life and liberty. Stepan Verkhovensky, on the other hand, turns to the Gospels at the end of *Devils*.
and dies in touch with reality for the first time, while through Sonya’s love and forgiveness the redemption that ultimately comes from Christ is made available to that botched Prometheus, Raskolnikov. Girard came later to see Nietzsche as powerfully in touch with the vision he found in Dostoyevsky, though in grasping the nature of Christian hope Nietzsche resisted it with all his might—rather like Mephistopheles in *Paradise Lost*. It is this “resurrection from the underground” (the title of Girard’s book on Dostoyevsky) that Kumiko is offered again and again, but she refuses it.

The choice of what Girard calls “underground psychology” or “ontological sickness” is a preference for the unyielding, the unwelcoming, the ugly and contemptuous, the contrary and the self-destructive. As Girard puts it, it is forever “mistaking walls for doors”. Hence it is masochistic in a deep and dangerous rather than a superficial and theatrical way. Its path is invariably downward, ending in ice and death. Ask yourself: what do Scott of the Antarctic, Captain Ahab, Kumiko, the latest American school shooter, or the disaffected Melbourne or Sydney teenager committing “suicide by cop” at home or blowing themselves up in the Middle East have in common? Such courting of damnation as if it were redemption ultimately confirms our identity and worth at the point of our effective self-immolation, according to Girard.

In a world where such self-destructive desire is widely celebrated and embraced, when ordinariness and convention are the worst possible fates, and when a tolerable contentment lying close to hand must be resisted at all costs, Kumiko offers a salutary warning. Instead of a quiet life of modest relationships in Tokyo, perhaps involving a husband and a child, with a mother who is not that bad, and with a few friends at work, Kumiko consummates her delusional dream by freezing to death in the Minnesota wilderness.

In sum, Kumiko was seeking an illusory treasure when the treasure she might have had—like the rest of us—is at her fingertips. Instead of the simple desires mediated to her by real if not very exciting people in Tokyo, likewise in little islands of warmth on offer in Minnesota, it was the demented avarice of Carl Showalter—splendidly and mockingly portrayed by Steve Buscemi in *Fargo*—that became the freely chosen model of Kumiko’s desire. And it killed her. FIN.
Endnotes


