

‘Teaching *Innocence*’ (2004, Lucile Hadzihalilovic)

Davina Quinlivan

The screen is black for about ten seconds. Then, strange rumblings. The noise bounces around the walls of the seminar room and is slightly distorted by the speakers resting on the floor. After a few minutes, the noise becomes recognisable, like vision adjusting, a sharpening of the senses. Then, the film unfolds itself, slowly, steadily inviting us into its underworld of passages, waterfalls and tunnels before a little girl is posited in a room inside a coffin, living and breathing in a room full of other prepubescent girls. We are all listening attentively, waiting for the girl to speak. Attentiveness, indeed, is all that matters here. ‘Attentive sensation’, I think I call it. Most of all, time has slowed down, we might even be holding our breaths a little. As the coffin lid slides opens, we seem to breathe out and then, all of sudden, the little girl’s story begins. Most of us have become very still in our seats. I move from the front of the class to the back, listening to the sound of the film and the sound of the classroom, an odd entanglement of quietness.

When the editors of this Special Issue very kindly invited me to contribute this piece I immediately thought about *Innocence* because it has led to some of the most fascinating teaching experiences in my career. Writing about teaching film is also an interesting prospect: how to describe the rhythms of watching, thinking, re-viewing? In every teaching scenario there is a loose strategy, an agenda, but we are also encountering the film afresh together and the class becomes structured by that, too. I always begin by introducing the ideas central to the class and the film itself. We think about the themes of the body in film, gender and girlhood, temporality and the elements in film and then I introduce the filmmaker, her relationship with Gaspar Noe as his wife and fellow filmmaker (I think this is important because they both use the same cinematographer). We follow screenings with a seminar of around an hour in which we tentatively explore the film in relation to the set reading and further questions in the context of the module it’s been part of such as Cinema and Spectatorship or Gender and Sexuality, it’s even appeared as part of a recent class on Cinemuseology and cinema as natural history.

I have been writing about *Innocence* and teaching it for almost ten years. Broadly, Hadzihalilovic’s film is an adaptation of the Frank Wedekind novella *Mine-Haha or On the Corporeal Education of Young Girls* (1903) which tells the coming of age story of a group of girls at a mysterious boarding school. *Innocence* explores the sensuality of being a girl, of dreaming and desiring through rich, sensuous imagery and visceral moments which engender an acute sense of physicality and sensual becoming. It is at once a gothic fairy tale and surreal piece of French art cinema. There is very little dialogue except for exchanges between the girls and their teachers (one of which is a young Marion Cotillard). Invariably, I teach *Innocence* through a framework of embodied film theory such as the work of Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks and Jennifer Barker in order to open up questions about phenomenology and film, gender and spectatorship and, to some extent, ethics and representation. I have written about *Innocence* in relation to its symbolic use of butterfly motifs and the use of movement, from scenes of walking and dancing, to the rivers flowing at the film’s outset (1). Importantly, I always think about the sound in *Innocence*, and its eliciting of a kind of haptic hearing or sonic sensation. We have the volume up high when we watch this film.

When I first started teaching *Innocence* not many of my students had seen the film so its mystery and aura of abstract beauty was doubly enhanced. Often, a few students shuffle in their seats, impatient because of its slowness, its resistance to classical narrative or general lack of dialogue. We read Sobchack’s piece ‘Waking Life’ on *Innocence* and adjust ourselves to a new kind of vision: film experience as embodied gesture (2). We think about the lush green forest at the heart of the film and

the twigs beneath the girl's feet as they cross a moonlit path, ticking grandfather clocks and doors the colour of a stag beetle.

I usually begin with asking questions about the role of physicality in the film – how is movement important, how is gesture used, are sounds static or constantly in flux, how are the senses involved in our perception of the film. We pause one scene in which the girls are filmed at play in the forest, twirling ribbons, hula hooping and spinning around, and we think about the use of framing and saturated colours which seem to glow and vibrate. I trace my hands over the image and point to the arrangement of the girls on screen, the grass and the red ribbons in the girls' hair. The soundtrack is composed of xylophone-like, musical box harmonies which chime as I talk. Then, I draw attention to the vibrating particles of water at the film's close and opening in order to remind students of the materiality of lived experience, the texture of water and the sensation of movement which is juxtaposed with the physicality of ballet or walking in the film; I might ask questions about the way film represents the elements and the use of microscopic imagery elsewhere in film history.

Textual analysis is very important to me and I ask my students to think about film language in detail, and with precision, so we start to explore *Innocence* on a formal level, discussing camerawork, film processing techniques and editing. We look at how one sequence was framed in Cinemascope but photographed in Super-16 then colours digitally enhanced in order to reinforce their painterly style and magical aura. Here, we watch the schoolgirls in a vivid, green forest, playing with hula hoops, twirling ribbons and playing - the director describes this as a kind of 'pinning of butterflies inside a box' or, rather, inside the frame of the film. Similarly oneiric in style and subject matter, we compare *Innocence* with films like *The Company of Wolves*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* or within the context of other cinemas of the body (cinema du corps) such as the work of Claire Denis or Marina de Van). We discuss the ethics of watching these girls on screen and their elusiveness within the film: are they vulnerable subjects or fetishized objects? It can be difficult to navigate such questions and the students often find this film troubling because of its very subject matter: prepubescence and its undercurrent of emerging sexual desire. There are dark moments in the film, too, which unsettle and disturb such as when we view a cloaked figure watching the girls from afar, in a theatre box, as they perform ballet for him. Students often find this moment very uncomfortable because we so feel protective towards the girls and it presents them as utterly vulnerable; I know this scene is there to prompt deep unease and remind us of the politics which cut across the axis of the film: the critique of the objectification of the girl in film and how to represent her subjecthood (I think Jane Campion has done a brilliant job of advancing these questions further with both her recent TV series *Top of the Lake* and *China Girl*). I allow time to be attentive to all of this and we work through the problems of the film as well as its masterful invocation of sensation. Teaching this film has taught me about the particularization of sensation, certainly, the ways each branch or chime of a grandfather clock sometimes remind me of smells, sometimes the grain of wood or the sound of wet leaves. Students enjoy the natural environs in the film, as if they are installation pieces or video art, sometimes they notice little noises such as the electric lamps which hum or the flapping of bird wings; female students remember otherwise long forgotten sense memories such as the way a hula hoop once felt around their waists or the tightening sensation of hair being plaited.

End Notes

(1) "Material Hauntings: The Kinaesthesia of Sound in *Innocence* (Hadžihalilović, 2004)", *Studies in French Cinema*, 9:3 (2009); "The French Female Butterfly Collector: Hadžihalilović, Denis and de Van and the *cinéma du corps*", *Studies in European Cinema* Special Issue on French Women Filmmakers (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2013); *Filming The Body in Crisis: Hope, Healing and 21st Century Aesthetics* (Palgrave, 2015).

- (2) See Vivian Sobchack, 'Waking Life: Vivian Sobchack on the Experience of *Innocence*' in *Film Comment*, 41, pp. 46-49 (November/December 2005).

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