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The French review.

Volume: 83 Issue: c
Month/Year: Dec 2009
Pages: 38-49

Article Author:

Article Title: Tim Palmer; "Contemporary French Feminine Cinema and Lucile Hadzihalicovic's Innocence,"

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Contemporary Feminine French Cinema and Lucile Hadzihalilovic's *Innocence*

by Tim Palmer

Many have noted the resurgence of French cinema in the early years of the twenty-first century. In 2006, a breakthrough year, domestic attendance of French films surpassed American imports by nearly a million paying customers. While 2007 was more subdued, the first half of 2008 saw another boom, with ten percent French box office growth supplied largely by *Astérix aux jeux olympiques* (2008) and the unexpected supremacy of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008), now France's all-time most popular local production. Matching the buoyancy of the marketplace, moreover, has been the engagement of critical respondents, whose appraisals collectively outline another key to French cinema's recent success—its diversity. Recent studies of new French film have identified, for example: a large-scale commercial acuity evident in France's transnational approaches to mainstream filmmaking (Michael, Vanderschelden); the explicit and stylistically exacting form of French art cinema known as the *cinéma du corps* (Palmer "Style", "Under Your Skin"); new statements of political commitment within more didactic French output (O'Shaughnessy); the industrial reorganization and transmedia funding models adopted in the country's production sectors (Parchy, Creton, Buchbaum); the return of late-twentieth-century French formats such as *bauleine* cinema and traditional popular genres (Tarr; Waldron and Vanderschelden); and even a tendency to blend high and low film forms to create a textually playful, idiosyncratic pop-art (Palmer).

The purpose of this essay is to explore another catalytic tendency in recent French cinema, at home and abroad. This is an equally significant if less studied source, derived from two factors: (1) the minority yet galvanizing work of France's women filmmakers, in tandem with (2) the practices of France's dynamic first-time filmmaking population, often using unconventional and less classifiable approaches to very intimate texts about childhood, burgeoning sexuality, and unorthodox gender and family relations. From the outset here, Françoise Audé, Carrie Tarr, and Brigitte Rollet provide useful inroads, especially in their overarching claim that the 1980s and 1990s saw the beginnings of a larger-scale women's cinema in France. Looking ahead, Emma Wilson's claims are crucial, too: not only that "Women directors are set to cut to the quick in French cinema," (Wilson "Etat présent" 223) but also that to understand these new cinematic materials "scholars must move beyond auteurist and more thematic and genre-based approaches" (220). Taking this cue, I will argue that it is stylistic experimentation, textual polyvalence, and a braving cine-literacy informed by the sophisticated pedagogy of French film schools which define this vein of cinema. My case study to consider this template, its influence both on- and off-screen, is *innocence* (2004), the feature debut of Lucile Hadzihalilovic and a discursively representative text.

In the first place, Hadzihalilovic—born in Lyon, France but raised in Morocco—was profoundly shaped by the French film school system, especially its most prestigious institution, la Fémis (l'Ecole nationale supérieure des métiers de l'image et du son). Hadzihalilovic graduated in 1986, as la Fémis replaced IHEC (l'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques) as the official elite state school, directly supervised by the Ministère de la Culture, with great competition for places (around 1200–1500 applicants for 36 annual openings). Ambitious, state-funded, hiring active and acclaimed filmmakers like Jean Paul Civeyrac as its instructors, la Fémis is a leading example of how France continues to devote artistic and logistical resources to subsidize its national cinema, and its most talented prospects. Indeed, while much discussion focuses on the high profile means by which the French state intervenes to safeguard its cinema—its policies of trade regulation, its support of annual grant programs and production investment tax write-offs, its constant monitoring of television and film economies—less attention is given to France's institutional commitment to a cutting edge film education, encouraging new generations of students-turned-filmmakers. Hadzihalilovic is just one success story, a product of this protectionist program.

In real terms, training at la Fémis derives from a series of sub-disciplines: direction, screenwriting, cinematography, sound, editing, production design, set design, to which were added scriptreading/editing (since 1992), a masterclass in European co-production (2002), and distribution/exhibition (2003). For the first year students receive instruction across all these related areas, then gravitate to a stated field of interest, which they study through analytical seminars, practical exercises, group projects, and a grueling final project (their *travail de fin d'études*). Besides its pedagogy the school provides extracurricular assets, with close links to the BIFi (le Bibliothèque du film, France's national film library), the Cinémathèque française, and other state academies for animation, design, and fine arts. In sum, la Fémis describes its program as nothing less than "a complete technical, artistic, and cultural education in the field of cinema and the audio-visual" (la Fémis n. pag.). As confirmed by Marina de Van, la Fémis graduate and now well known actress and
director, the school’s ideology encourages its students to conceive of their studies as not simply practical and technological, but rather as “intensive artistic research” (Palmer n. pag.).

The impact of la Fémis and its graduates is considerable and rising but barely figures in the secondary literature about French film today. René Prédal, conversely, labels an entire generation of younger French filmmakers as “the children of la Fémis,” a professional tribe (of more than 700 craftspersons) embodying highly progressive traits. These qualities include a familiarity with film history that verges on cinéphilia (a habit instilled by the school’s library of more than two thousand films, as well as a curriculum which integrates critical skills with production); a stylistic ambition and rigor; and an approach to filmmaking that adopts, in Prédal’s words, “terms of intimacy and spirituality...the feminine and the feminist, from a cinema conjugated in the feminine with superb portraits of women” (37). Besides these traits, Fémis emphasizes entrepreneurialism and self-promotion. First, the school has its graduates screen their final shorts before an audience of its distinguished alumni (Emmanuelle Bercot, Sophie Fillières, Noémie Lvovsky, Léa Tissoir, amongst others). This annual event facilitates networking, as does the school’s promotion of internationalism via exchange programs with schools in countries as far afield as America, Canada, Thailand, Germany, and the Philippines. Another productive culmination of la Fémis is its long-term record of placing its graduates on artistic or debutant panels at leading film festivals, such as Cannes. Most recently, this happened with Céline Sciamma’s Water Lilies (La Naissance des puebres, 2007), which screened within Cannes’s Un Certain Regard subfestival before going on to win the Prix Louis Delluc for best debut film.

Many of these contexts, all related to la Fémis, informed the nascent career of Hadzihalilovic. After her graduation with the short film La Premi ère Mort de Nono (1987), she formed a long-term collaboration with Gaspar Noé, editing his Carne (1991) and its sequel I Stand Alone (Seul contre tous, 1998), producing the latter, and, together setting up in 1991 a production company, Les Cinémas de la Zone. In 1996, with Noé as cinematographer, Hadzihalilovic wrote, produced, edited, and directed another short, La Bouche de Jean-Pierre, funded by Canal+, which played at the 1997 Cannes film festival. Sciamma and several others were then selected for other festivals including Avignon, Clermont-Ferrand, Montréal, and Toronto. Described by its filmmaker as an homage to Roman Polanski’s Repulsion (1965) and The Tenant (1976), the short film is “an ordinary, everyday story, rather gloomy and pessimistic, told through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl” (Finci, n. pag.). The girl, Mimi (Sandra Sommartino) is sent to live in a claustrophobic HLM apartment after her mother tries to commit suicide, where she is often compelled and horrified by her aunt’s sexual interactions. Child abuse is implicit, parental neglect more explicit, and the film ends with Mimi taking sleeping pills to copy her mother.

FEMININE CINEMA AND HADZIHALILOVIC’S INNOCENCE

Turning to Hadzihalilovic’s innocence, released in 2004, we can see how it exemplifies a pivotal segment of France’s contemporary cinema, as a seemingly bold and widely traveled debut feature, made by a female graduate of a French film school, received with acclaim and some lingering notoriety. In summer 2007, to take a recent reference point, when more than a dozen first-time women directors released features in Paris, the French critic Stéphane Lamome was moved to declare that, “Forty years ago, you could count the number of female cinéastes on the fingers of one hand. Today there’s a whole new generation of women directors seizing celluloid” (78). As made famous by its 1960s nouvelle vague, France indeed remains a country whose cinema is invigorated by debutants. According to CNC figures, from 2000 to 2007 French first-timers produced an average of 59 films per year, 37% of France’s domestic production. (Slightly over a third of these debutants were supported by the CNC’s mance sur recettes grant; their attrition rate is high but to the CNC’s evident pleasure apparently falling, with nearly half of France’s first-timers now successfully making a follow-up.) As a female director, Hadzihalilovic is also a success story for France, where women make up a growing part of its filmmaking population. From no representation at all in the early 1950s, and single digit percentages through to the 1980s, the proportion of women directors (boosted by active recruitment among schools like la Fémis, which now boasts gender parity in its director track) has risen to the last two decades to approach and occasionally exceed thirty percent of active personnel. As Ginette Vincendeau argues, “Hadzihalilovic is testimony to the vitality and diversity of female filmmaking in France, where more than a third of movies are made by women (something of a world record)” (68).

Two other recent events underline this revitalization of women’s cinema in France, as well as its professional and cultural resonance. First, in January 2007, Agnès Varda was commissioned by the French government to design a multi-media art installation commemorating les justes, those citizens responsible for sheltering Jews during the Holocaust, an event staged and televised live at the Panthéon mausoleum, hosted by Jacques Chirac himself. Varda’s creation, Les Justes, comprising more than 300 photos as well as four short films, culminated her already groundbreaking career as the world’s leading woman filmmaker and a particular role model for female cinéastes in France. As Kelley Conway observes, “One can scarcely imagine a more forthright expression of approval for Agnès Varda and her work from the realm of official culture” (16). In addition to Varda’s canonization, a high profile endorsement of women’s film was the announcement of the 2007 French César nominations, another kind of national artistic self-diagnosis, on 24 January 2008. For the category of Best First Film Cesars, in an extraordinary sweep all five debutant nominees were women: Anne le Ny for Ceux qui restent, Lola Doillon for Et toi, t’es sur qui, Sciamma for Water
film begins with the arrival of a new recruit, Iris (Zoé Audclaire; a non-professional like the majority of the cast), and ends with a group of graduates arriving, unnerved but energized, into an apparently contemporary outside world. Much of the film centers on Iris and the two older housemates with whom she forms attachments: Alice (Léa Bridaroli), who becomes disillusioned and escapes over an exterior wall, never to be mentioned again; and Bianca (Bérangère Haubruge), part of the graduating group whom in the film’s final shot we see playing in a city fountain, meeting for the first time on-screen a boy of her own age.

Befitting this polyvalent text, the international reception of Innocence was ambivalent but conflicted. Most critics dwell on Hadzihalilovic’s blend of citations, among a wide spectrum of media with mixed cultural status, high and low. There is the film’s expressionist source novella, Mine-Haha, or The Corporeal Education of Young Girls (1888), by German writer Frank Wedekind (more famous for his Pandora’s Box [1904] play); as well as international cinema texts, such as Jacqueline Audry’s Olivia (1950), Peter Weir’s Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), Victor Erice’s Spirit of the Beehive (1973), and Dario Argento’s Suspiria (1977); the work of photographers Sally Mann (who attracted lasting controversy for exhibiting nude stills of pre-pubescent children, including her own offspring) and Bernad Faucon (known for inserting child mannequins into images of natural idiys); as well as classical painters, from Belgian Léon Frédéric to Franco-American Mary Cassatt. Beyond the pronounced intertextuality, however, there is little consensus about the unity of Innocence at all—except a consistent defense of its director against charges of encouraging pedophilia (Wilson, “Miniature Lives” 173). Vincendeau locates the film’s neutrality in its “ability to mix everyday realism with the uncanny—the arrival in a coffin of young Iris is followed by scenes showing the girls’ ordinary activities—playing, tying ribbons in their hair, swimming in the river” (68). Vincent Ostrìa echoes the idea of obscure, blurred categories, noting the film’s “very abstract gothicism where horror and the fantastic are barely suggested, no more” (“Jupette” 20). More polemical critics, such as Isabelle Regnier, propose a purely allegorical reading of a textually “suffocating atmosphere” that critiques patriarchy while offering a “relatively sterile equivocation” (26). But most respondents side with Arnaud Schwartz’s open-ended perspective: “It’s a first film, free and strange, sometimes disturbing, which evades right away any efforts to label it” (23).

Innocence’s narrative is indeed pervaded with ambivalence and ambiguity; its narration is restricted and elusive, without a fixed editorial position. Loosely built around the activities of school days, the film shifts repeatedly to sequences of elemental natural splendor, either in standalone segments without people present, or else in measured tracking movements that absent the frame from the children, as if simply wandering away from humanity. In this way the film consolidates its innocent
For ten seconds there is no image at all, before credits appear in flickering gothic typeface, under which we hear faint pulses of industrial reverberation. A slow fade-up brings a medium close-up of a coffin with a star-shaped grill mesh, apparently in transit in an underground railway. The credits continue over black, while the distant roars of unplaced noise, louder now, echo again. The first extended use of the imagetrack comes with Innocence's bravura opening set-piece. These are two long takes, interrupted by the film's title card, of unplaced, barely readable organic debris: the camera initially situated in pure abstraction, with shallow focus blurring the movement into a cloudy, dim, dank mass. Circular outlines gradually become visible as bubbles; there are swirling waves of darker algae green and flashes of sallow white; the camera's velocity and position are unclear. All the while the cavernous booming continues, as if uninterrupted from far-off machinery to organic immersion. The second shot is more representationally readable as underwater photography; our vantage point nears the surface from some depth. Successively, next, the film cuts through a series of natural tableaux (the surface of a babbling stream and the white noise of water, trees, birdsong, clearings in a wood) and only gradually, almost reluctantly, moves to areas of habitation (underground tunnels, a passageway, dim hallways, a children's classroom with tinny gramophone music, then a room in which we see the earlier coffin resting on the floor). It takes six-and-a-half minutes before the first human character enters, frame right, in the form of a young, bootless pair of legs. Nearly eight minutes pass without dialogue, and Innocence remains at times arresting silent. (Its concluding segment, equally ambitious, also consists of eight minutes with no conversation.)

This opening is stylistically assertive yet absorbing, close to abstraction, echoing the work of other French debutant women filmmakers. (Siegried Alnoy's She's One of Us [Elle est des nôtres, 2003] is equally evasive, fading up to blurred images of hillside, a woman's face, and a distant walking form, set to disintegrated and unplaced clicking sounds). It also cites quite directly, in conception and content, the lyricism of avant-garde pioneer Stan Brakhage, most closely Mulholland (1963), which consists of thousands of frames of organic detritus, moth parts, twigs and leaves, edited together into a rush of perceptual data. As a declarative opening for Innocence, fundamental to the film's title, the passage situates Hadziilhalovic by way of Brakhage's famous tract, "Metaphors on Vision," which envisioned film as a means to recapture an infant's idealized, pre-social vision: graphic texture and materiality rather than defined objects organized in space. As Brakhage theorizes, "Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unpredicted by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through the adventure of perception" (12). Echoing this principle, Hadziilhalovic has declared of her work, in addition to her very confrontational cinéma du corps creations with Noé, that "we both like the
experience of film to work visually, sonically, physically, rather than through words” (Romney 36).

Systematically, to be sure, Hadzihalilovic foregrounds style itself, her formal exercises compelling for *Innocence*’s viewers, but also a means to broaden her cinematic palette, drawing upon sources from both mainstream and art house cultures, configured in enigmatic, even contradictory ways. Born of a minimalist or documentary impulse, Hadzihalilovic and her cinematographer, Benoît Debie, shot *Innocence* in Super 16 using no artificial lights or three-point set-ups except the tiny lamps seen on screen. At the opposite end of the cultural spectrum, however, Hadzihalilovic exactly followed the popularist methods of Jean-Pierre Jeunet—notoriously his colorized, sanitized, remixed Paris in *Amélie* (2001)—by using digital post-production to heat up and oversaturate color hues, particularly verdant greens and burgundy reds. The results are strikingly autumnal, bold yet subdued, with a level of visual gloom associated with the collaborations of Claire Denis and her celebrated DP Agnès Godard. This stylized aesthetic, moreover, occurs in a cinema scope frame; the film favors static compositions, longer shots and longer takes—a distanced, formalist staging of the film’s peculiar di- egosis that blends unstated horror with popular children’s fiction. Here, Hadzihalilovic notes her use of enduringly popular English schools literature, especially the Malory Towers novels of Enid Blyton (Romney 36). Also proximate is the long-lasting *Madeline* series by Ludwig Bemelmans, set in a French boarding school, and similarly concerned with rituals and repetition. *Innocence*’s cyclical structure, its school-bound narrative of the fantastic and the everyday, also, inevitably, recalls the Harry Potter franchise, as well as a slew of recent French hits from the same milieu, such as the Virginie Ledoyen vehicle *Saint Ange* (2004), and the hugely successful *The Choristers* (*Les Choristes*, 2004). Added to this, of course, is the resonance of contemporary French horror cinema and the *cinéma du corps*, as well as a temporal and aesthetic design that mirrors the Hollywood A film *The Village* (2004).

*Innocence*, as we have seen, embodies a vanguard of debutant cinema made by women, profoundly cine-literate, indebted to France’s varied walks of cinematic life. In Wilson’s assessment, Hadzihalilovic should be hailed for her “revelatory first film, *Innocence* intrudes on our images of childhood, renewing them, opening us to the sensory perceptions of children, their bodily impressions as they encounter themselves with others in strange new incarnations” (“Miniature Lives” 181). In equal measure, *Innocence* gives a concerted textual response to David MacDougall, whose *The Corporeal Image* concludes a general poverty of representation about children and non-adult subjectivity. MacDougall’s summary, in fact, provides another rationale for Hadzihalilovic’s achievements: “If any overriding reason exists for filming children, it is to rediscover their complexity—to give them the respect due to persons living in themselves rather than our conceptions of them, and to put ourselves in a better position to learn from them” (67). In this, *Innocence* fully conveys the intensity of its title, through the meticulous freshness and diversity of its cinematic methods, its stunning maturity, the productive ambiguities of the responses it evokes, and, most impressively of all, the qualities of *le jeune cinéma français* that it ably represents.

Corollary to this, *Innocence* shows the professional opportunities for debutant French women filmmakers, especially those alert to the prospects of international distribution and exhibition. In recent years, this type of cinema has become a staple selection of the expanding range of middle level film festivals, such as Amsterdam, Boston, Chicago, Moscow, San Sebastián, Los Angeles, and London, many of which feature sub-panels or prizes devoted to first-time directors. Hadzihalilovic and her film especially profited in this regard. During *Innocence*’s festival run during 2005, she won Best New Director at San Sebastián, the Bronze Horse best film award at Stockholm (where Debie won Best Cinematographer), and the HPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) prize at Istanbul. Such institutional recognition subsequently gave Hadzihalilovic privileged access to the prestigious North American market. *Innocence* was chosen for the 2006–07 and 2007–08 *Tournées Festival*, a package of films made available via $180,000 worth of competitive grants to American schools and universities by the French American Cultural Exchange (FACE), partnered with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the US, the CNC and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As an official *Tournées* choice, *Innocence* was offered to local, grass roots French film festivals organized by schoolteachers and university instructors, promoted as a culturally appropriate product for subsidized export from France—an artwork not completely removed from the multiplex, but nonetheless challenging, albeit more palatable for Francophone audiences than radical art house fare. In this category, Hadzihalilovic joins colleagues including Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, Julie Lopes-Curval, and Bléone Faucher—all of whom are now at work on second or third features. The resurgence of French cinema, with its invigorating prospects for women filmmakers, continues.

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Notes

*Were* *Innocence* offers a sly autobiographical self-reference, typical of debutant French women's cinema, as in films like Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi’s *It’s Easier for a Camel* (*Il est plus facile pour un chameau…*, 2003) and Malwenn Le Besco’s *Pardonnez-moi* (2006). For the girls’ housekeeper and cook, Madeleine, one of the elderly captives, is played by Hadzihalilovic’s own mother, Micheline.

Hadzihalilovic, like her partner Noé, to whom *Innocence* is dedicated, is minutely attentive to the layering, timbre, and overall impact of sound design on the audience. Her term
for the process is lo enoble: “We use the English word to describe those sheets of deep sound” (Bronny 30).

In this context emerges another transnational facet of French cinema, its use of English culture and literary heritage. Leading examples include François Ozon’s use of English writer Elizabeth Taylor’s source novel for Angel (2007), and, more famously, Pascale Ferrier’s adaptation of the second version of D.H. Lawrence’s book for Lady Chatterley (2006).

Works Cited


