



Innocence

Director: Lucile Hadzihalilovic
©/Presented by: Ex Nihilo
©: Bluelight L'École Ltd
©/Produced in co-production with:
UK Film Council, Les Ateliers de Baere, Gimages,
Love Streams
Produced in co-production with: Bluelight
With the participation of: Kinétique Inc., Canal+,
Cofimage 15, CNC – Centre national de la
cinématographie, Région Wallonne, Wallimage
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Film Council New Cinema Fund
International Sales: Wild Bunch
Producer: Patrick Sobelman
For Kinétique: Kazuko Mio, Seiichi Tsukada
For Les Ateliers de Baere: Sébastien Delloye
For Bluelight: Alain de la Mata, Geoff Cox
For UK Film Council: Paul Trijbets,
Emma Clarke
For Love Streams Productions: Agnès B.
For Gimages Films: Sébastien Beffa
For Wild Bunch: Vincent Maraval
Unit Production Manager: Philippe Toussaint
Production Manager: François Lamotte
Location Assistant Bonbon Lamy
1st Assistant Director: Dominique Delany
2nd Assistant Director: Caroline Tambour
Script Supervisor: Maureen Meyer
Screenplay: Lucile Hadzihalilovic
Inspired by the novella by: Frank Wedekind
Director of Photography: Benoît Debie
Colour Consultant: Giles Livesey
Steadicam Operator: Ian Rubens
Electrician: Jim How
Key Grip: Félix Touret
Digital Visual Effects: Passion Pictures
Editor: Adam Finch
Art Director: Arnaud de Moleron
Co-art Director: Pierre du Boisberranger
Costumes: Laurence Benoit
Hair: Cicci Svahn
Music: Richard Cooke
Choreography: Pedro Pauwels
Sound Recording: Pascal James
Re-recorded at: Twickenham Film Studios
Sound Re-recording: Tim Cavagin
Sound Editor: Andy Walker, Grahame Peters
Cast:
Zoé Auclair (*Iris*)
Léa Bridaroli (*Alice*)
Bérangère Haubrige (*Bianca*)
Marion Cotillard (*Mademoiselle Eva*)
Hélène de Fougerolles (*Mademoiselle Edith*)
Olga Peytavi-Muller (*Laura*)
Alisson Lalieux (*Selma*)
Ana Palomo-Diaz (*Nadja*)
Astrid Homme (*Rose*)
Joséphine Van Wambeke (*Vera*)
Johanna Surbier (*Fanny*)
Grizelle Crozet (*chosen girl*)
Corinne Marchand (*headmistress*)
Sonia Petrovna (*headmistress' assistant*)
Véronique Nordey (*bursar*)
Micheline Hadzihalilovic (*Madeleine*)
Amandine Algoet, Natacha Allard,
Angélique Belokoptyov, Dylan Comte,
Mégane Comte, Florian Decort,

Lucile Hadzihalilovic

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SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

For her debut feature Lucile Hadzihalilovic has produced a film of distinctive aesthetic quality and mystery. *Innocence* charts a year or so in the life of a ‘timeless’ boarding school for girls situated in the middle of a forest. Young girls arrive at this strange establishment closed up in coffins, and depart by underground trains that rumble darkly, unseen, throughout the film. Clad in short white uniforms, the girls have their age signalled by coloured ribbons (they range from six to 12 years old). They are taught by two wan, beautiful schoolmistresses: Marion Cotillard as Mlle Eva, the ballet teacher, and Hélène de Fougerolles’ Mlle Edith, the natural science teacher. The girls are forbidden to leave or even enquire about the outside world.

Loosely based on a short story entitled *Mine-Haha, The Corporal Education of Young Girls* by the 19th-century German author Frank Wedekind (better known for his play *Lulu*), *Innocence* treads relatively unfamiliar territory in French cinema – that of the *fantastique*. Indeed, Hadzihalilovic’s references are international: she quotes Dario Argento’s *Suspiria*, Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Victor Erice’s *The Spirit of the Beehive* as influences.

One of the film’s great achievements is its ability to mix everyday realism with the uncanny. For instance, the arrival in a coffin of the young Iris is followed by scenes showing the girls’ ordinary activities – playing, tying ribbons in their hair, swimming in the river. Strange details include night-time walks in a forest lit by street lamps and the way that the girls enter the school’s theatre through the small door of a grandfather clock. Yet the girls’ speech and concerns are ‘normal’.

When one girl, Laura, tries to escape in a boat and drowns, her coffin is burnt on a pyre in an extraordinary twilight ceremony after which life resumes as normal. Iris, our lead into the world of the school, asks questions about the odd goings-on. Why does Bianca disappear at night? What lies outside the walls of the school? But she receives no answers. We ask ourselves whether the school itself is the nether world (as the coffins would suggest), or whether the older girls will be ritually sacrificed or sold for sexual commerce as they leave the school. But the ending returns Bianca and her friends to a very ordinary ‘real world’, dispelling the viewer’s suspicions yet doing nothing to ‘explain’. As the director says, ‘the further the story progresses without giving any answers, the more the anxiety builds’.

Innocence’s narrative ambiguity is perfectly served by photography and sound. Cinemaphotographer Benoit Debie’s intense colour scheme makes the most of the mysterious forest and buildings, and the wide-screen format allows for striking compositions. Although the camera exploits sinister passages and dark corners, there are no nasty surprises. The razor-sharp use of sound, with music kept to a minimum, also contributes to the uncanny yet everyday atmosphere: the rumbling of trains, the tick-tock of ubiquitous clocks, the rustling of leaves and gushing of water are counterbalanced by dialogue delivered in deadpan by girls and adults alike.

What is this film saying about girlhood? If we are to believe the director, nothing explicit: ‘I haven’t tried to convey any particular message,’ Hadzihalilovic says.

Violette de Laet, Thelma de Swaeef,
Yasmine Dewaele, Elisa Firouzfar,
Marité Girard, André Goffin, Noémie Guns,
Juliette Hancisse, Elisabeth Hancisse,
Yasmine Iman Touati, Aurélie Jacquemin,
Laurane Jacquemin, Valentine Jonge,
Anne Keff, Frédérique Laloy, Charlotte Mahy,
Jessica Marber, Lisa Mardaga,
Marie-Eve Merckx, Clémentine Michel,
Agnès Orlandini, Lise Ottinger, Opaline Picron,
Valentine Pirlat, Sylviane Ramboux,
Ana Tchemoutova, Alysson Torfs,
Julie Vandermeulen, Celine Vandermeulen,
Ana Vitner, Paula Wicik
France-UK-Belgium 2004
122 mins
Digital

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'Just as there are no answers to the questions, there's no moral to the story either.' Indeed, the film remains blank in respect of ideology or morality. The girls exhibit both cruelty and kindness, and while Mlle Eva says darkly that 'obedience is the only path that leads to happiness', she and Mlle Edith are supportive and tender towards the girls. The school's emphasis on physicality is both liberating – hence the butterfly metaphor that runs through the film – and oppressively competitive, as pinpointed in the scene in which the headmistress visits the school to select the one lucky pupil who will escape.

Innocence has been criticised for its dubious display of girls in an abundance of pigtails, short skirts and white knickers. Yet the film is made by a young woman with obvious sympathy for the girls portrayed (who deliver performances that are wonderfully natural).

As well as *Suspiria* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Innocence* also evokes Jacqueline Audry's 1950 *Olivia* – also set in a boarding school for girls, run by two female teachers and situated in the middle of a forest. In 1950, Audry was inflecting the then dominant costume drama genre to inject feminine, not to say feminist, ideas about girls' sexuality. Hadzihalilovic uses the *fantastique* for a more ambiguous and, in some respects, retrograde take on femininity: while in *Olivia* the girls were taught literature, mathematics and languages, in *Innocence* the emphasis is on ballet and the reproductive cycle.

In the end, though, the film's ambiguity – however effective in terms of building suspense – will be its downfall for many spectators. What would be acceptable mystery in a short film begins to resemble self-indulgent whimsy in a feature of two hours' duration. Nevertheless, Hadzihalilovic is testimony to the vitality and diversity of female filmmaking in France, where more than of a third of movies are made by women (something of a world record). *Innocence* has – deservedly – garnered many prizes at several film festivals, and it makes one look forward to the director's next film.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Sight & Sound*, October 2005