Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 21
Issue 1 *April 2017*

Article 27

April 2017

The Innocents (Les Innocentes)

Joshua Canzona
Georgetown University, jsc99@georgetown.edu

The Innocents (Les Innocentes)

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Innocents (Les Innocentes)* (2016), directed by Anne Fontaine.

Keywords

Roman Catholicism, Nuns, Second World War, Poland

Anne Fontaine's *The Innocents* focuses on a Polish Benedictine convent in December 1945, just after the end of the Second World War. The film has moments reminiscent of the quiet observation of cloistered life present in Philip Gröning's *Into Great Silence* (2005) or *No Greater Love* (2009), Michael Whyte's study of Carmelite sisters in London. But the moments of beauty and joy found during choir or the recreation hour are short lived. They are punctuated by the screams of a suffering sister, interrupted by menacing soldiers at the gate. Fontaine manages to show her audience just enough of the rhythm of religious life to better understand why the nuns are so eager to preserve it. In a memorable scene, several sisters pause to pray the angelus at the designated time even though they are assisting two women in labor. The women giving birth pray as well.

Early in the film it is revealed that seven of the nuns are pregnant after being repeatedly raped by Soviet soldiers; they "burst into our convent, an indescribable nightmare." When one of the nuns develops potentially deadly complications during labor, Sister Maria (Agata Buzek) leaves the convent without permission in search of help from a nearby mission of the French Red Cross. It is here that Maria first encounters Mathilde Beaulieu (Lou de Laâge), a young doctor who is initially reluctant to visit the convent but later risks her life and career to care for the women there. Every journey taken across the war-torn landscape surrounding the convent is a powerful visual portrayal of the separation between secular and religious space. The order of the convent is sharply contrasted with the chaos taking place outside, seen in both the shattered remnants of a bombed-out city and in the alcohol-soaked parties hosted by the surviving inhabitants. In a terrifying scene, Mathilde is stopped while leaving the convent at night and nearly raped by a group of soldiers. The world outside is a place of monsters while the convent is the would-be domain of calm and safety, except its walls cannot stave off intrusion. When the

Mother Abbess (Agata Kulesza) expresses doubts about letting Mathilde treat the nuns, she is reminded, "Scandal and disorder were already here."

Mathilde is independent and skeptical, a scientist; her worldview and way of life are markedly different from that of the nuns she helps and befriends. The individual personalities of the sisters come out as some do not mind medical care while others resist treatment for fear of violating their vows of chastity. An exasperated Mathilde remarks, "Can't we set God aside while I examine them?" The answer, in response is of course, "You don't set God aside." In a longer conversation concerning faith and doubt, Maria alludes to the dark night of the soul, the spiritual dryness sometimes experienced by those in religious life. She tells Mathilde, "You know, faith. At first, you're like a child holding your father's hand, feeling safe. Then a time comes – and I think it always comes – when your father lets go. You're lost, alone in the dark." Later in the film, a scene of physical intimacy between Mathilde and a colleague transitions to one of a nun kissing Christ's feet on a crucifix. But here too the separation between Mathilde and the nuns is made ambiguous when a conversation leads Maria to reveal that she had sought and enjoyed male attention before entering the convent. Fontaine is adept at establishing religious and secular categories and then blurring their boundaries immediately afterward.

Along with faith, providence is a major theme throughout the film. "We're in the hands of providence," announces the Mother Abbess. But this is an unknowable fate. In a conversation about whether God willed horrors upon the convent, the abbess again says, "We cannot know what God wants." Even Samuel (Vincent Macaigne), Mathilde's colleague in medicine and skepticism, appeals to the consolation of fate, "You did what you had to do. The rest is destiny." But charting one's relationship with fate is a precarious undertaking in this film and the greatest on-screen villainy is characterized, in part, by an excess of fatalism. And so we come to another

important and perhaps balancing theme in the film: a sense of purpose. Mathilde finds a renewed sense of purpose in helping her new friends. Some of the nuns struggle with their vocation before ultimately reaffirming their commitment to the religious life. Upon having a child, one remarks, "I found an answer to the question tormenting me. I am a mother." Concerning her decision to leave the convent, one of the novices tells Mathilde, "I want to forget all that. I want to live," with a cigarette hanging coolly out of her mouth like James Dean. But the last word goes to Maria who writes to Mathilde, "I know, even if it makes you laugh, that God sent you."

The Innocents ends with its plot elements neatly wrapped. But these events are less important than the transformation of its characters. Characters, we should note, who are drawn from an almost entirely female cast offering a profound meditation on matters of faith and trauma, love and purpose, from the perspective of women. This is a film about boundaries and separations but also about the power of trust and friendship to reveal new possibilities even in times of great suffering. This project owes its success – and it is successful – to the richness of its visuals, the deeply reflective approach of its director and the brilliance of its acting.