

TITLE

What Children See: Dorthe Scheffmann's *The Beach* (1995)

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ABSTRACT

This film focuses on an unexpected reaction to a traumatic revelation, witnessed by a child. However, the final image of the boy resists reduction to its significance for an adult spectator. Instead, the boy's unreadable expression returns us to the position of a child faced with a bewildering grown-up world.

KEY WORDS

the child

childhood

patriarchy

the gaze

Karen Lury

Emma Wilson

The languid pleasure of a hot day at the beach is shattered when a woman, Anne (Elizabeth Hawthorne), reveals her husband's violence – 'David hits me' – to her friend, Margie (Donogh Rees). Margie's confrontation with and ensuing assault on David (Bruce Hopkins), is witnessed by Simon (Charlie Baird), Anne and David's son, whose gaze at his mother following this episode fills the final image of the film. As such, the film clearly foregrounds issues of women's resistance to male violence, as Margie's swift verbal and physical reprisal following the revelation contrasts with, and perhaps critiques, Anne's apparent passivity. However, this is further complicated by the question of Simon's relationship to the scene.

At one level, as the director Dorthe Scheffmann suggests, 'this child is truly a victim' (Scheffmann quoted in Raskin, 1996). Certainly, Simon is subjected to an abusive family structure that is outside of his control and the impact of this environment

on his adult male self is uncertain. And yet, the film's final image of Simon gazing back at his mother (Shot 54) extends our reading of the figure of the child as representing both the loss of an innocent past as well as a possible, imagined, future. Instead, my suggestion is that this long take invites us to attend to the singular experience of the child as it exceeds its symbolic value for the adult.

As Karen Lury summarises in her discussion of the child in film, there is 'the sense that the child and childhood, and indeed children themselves, occupy a situation in which they are 'other': other to the supposedly rational, civilised, 'grown up' human animal that is the adult' (Lury, 2010: 1). This state of alterity extends to our perception of the child's situation in space and time. Henry Jenkins, for instance, draws on spatial terminology to describe how our cultural investment in ideas of childhood innocence 'presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political' (Jenkins quoted in Wilson, 2005: 330). Vivian Sobchack, on the other hand, considers the curious temporal configuration in which images of childhood exist, where the figure of the child as signifying a possible future masks a yearning for an impossible past: 'The infant and child as sign evoke nostalgia. What seems a looking forward toward the possibilities of the future is a longing backward toward the promise once possessed by the past' (Sobchack, 2015: 176). This resonates with a reading of the final image as underlining the moment of Simon's loss of childhood innocence and exposure to adult experiences, where the issue of his potential resistance to, or reproduction of, the inequalities that structure those experiences is pressing.

Indeed, according to Sobchack, the image of the male child in cinema is particularly implicated in the reproduction of patriarchal social relations. Sobchack argues that though once considered identical, a very significant effect of second wave feminism is that paternity and patriarchy are now perceived as different. Whereas

patriarchy is ‘a political and economic power structure’, paternity ‘is a personal and subjective relation’ (184). The challenge is how to reconcile these realms, for ‘If the child is figured as powerful at the expense of the father, then patriarchy is threatened; if father is figured as powerful at the expense of his child, then paternity is threatened’ (184). In this instance, David’s position as father is particularly problematic as he moves from the paternal (playing happily with his son) to the patriarchal (with the revelation of his violence towards Anne and his verbal abuse of Margie), only to be literally and figuratively emasculated by Margie’s kick to the groin.

Having Simon witness his father’s emasculation by Margie encapsulates the film’s concern with the problem of successful subject positioning within the family unit in a situation where the father is ‘too’ aggressive and the mother is ‘too’ passive. This concern is apparent in what Richard Raskin calls Scheffmann’s ‘picture of gender specific styles of interaction’ (Raskin, 1996) in the film, whereby the little girls whispering to each other (Shot 12) is an innocent version of the adult female exchange (Shots 16-26), while David plays cricket with Simon and ‘the boys’ (Shots 3-10). Interestingly, however, this is set against the representation of Margie’s husband Jeff (Richard Evans), who, in looking after ‘the girls’ (Shot 13), takes on a more typically maternal role, while Margie’s verbal and physical aggression towards David is more usually associated with male characters on screen. However, Margie and Jeff’s play on stereotypical gender roles still operates within a binary structure. What is of interest here is the way in which the final image of the child exceeds its insertion into a symbolic system that either reproduces or resists existing gender positions, and opens us onto the child’s own experiences and sensations.

The film’s final image of Simon gazing back at his mother suggests the possibility of attending to the child’s experience in a way that is not limited to ‘what

the figure of the child means to adults' (Wilson, 2005: 331). Emma Wilson argues in favour of a kind of filmmaking that seeks 'to open up the representation of children, strategically denying the distinct division between adults and children, provoking a seizure of emotive response, where adults suddenly *feel* like children' (331). In other words, instead of approaching images of children in cinema in terms of what they might signify to an adult spectator, these images return us to the intensities, inconsistencies and vulnerabilities we experienced as children. Arguably, in this film, it is the lingering take and fundamental uncertainty as to the 'meaning' of the boy's gaze in the final image that opens up this opportunity for the spectator.

While Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' (1975) as profoundly implicated in patriarchal power structures has become axiomatic in film studies, the idea of the child's gaze often invites associations with an Edenic, pre-sexual visual economy, marked by untainted curiosity and wonder. As Eric Tribunella notes:

while the authority of the gaze might denote or require the privileged status of the one who looks, associations between the child and innocence or nature and the sacralization of the child have conspired to construct the child's gaze as somehow special or even magical, hence the notion of seeing "through the eyes of the child" (Tribunella quoted in Salvi, 2012: 250).

Here, the boy's gaze as witness to a violent adult world appears suspended between childhood and adulthood, poised to participate in a gendered visual economy itself embedded in gendered structures of power. In addition, his association with nature (that is, the sea), could be read as reinforcing the nature/culture dichotomy that informs much of the representational frameworks within which images of the child and childhood circulate. However, from another perspective, the difficulty in determining what the boy is thinking as he gazes back at his mother, set against the fluid, constantly changing sea, resists integration into a binary system of signification and returns us to the

‘intensity and intermittence, the variety and variation’ (Wilson, 2005: 340) of a child’s emotions and experiences.

The impact of the scene (and, indeed, of the boy’s more general exposure to a violent family dynamic) on his adult self is, of course, crucial. As Scheffmann puts it, he is ‘being deeply influenced in how he turns into a young man and how he behaves as a man’ (Scheffmann quoted in Raskin, 1996). Certainly, from a psychoanalytic point of view, childhood experiences are central in determining the adult outcome as it were, with the child’s relationships to its parents being key in this development. However, as well as raising the issue of its impact on Simon as a man, this scene makes us vulnerable to how the child might experience it in the moment.

According to Lury, ‘The unreadable face of the child is [...] often interpreted [...] to fit the political and emotional agenda of the interested adult critic’ (109). However, by ending with a static, lingering shot of Simon’s enigmatic expression, this film confronts us with ‘the lack of mastery’ that Wilson argues characterises the attempt to attend to the emotional, cultural and political position of children in certain kinds of contemporary filmmaking (330). Wilson argues that the emotive response elicited by such films can bridge the distance between adulthood and childhood for the spectator, and that ‘The adult, overwhelmed by experience, by emotions [...], in the very experience of being overwhelmed involuntarily returns to the child’s state of helplessness (motor, emotional or political)’ (330).

In short, the sensation of being a child, with the intensity and vulnerability that might entail, is reactivated and infuses our adult response. In this sense, Scheffmann’s answer to Raskin’s question as to whether this shot was in all versions of the script – ‘Always. We’d come back to that face.’ – (Raskin, 1996) is apposite, for in its duration and indeterminacy, this image resists total interpretation from an adult perspective and,

in so doing, returns us to the position of the child confronted with a bewildering grown-up world.

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