

Innocence: Can a septuagenarian woman embrace forbidden love without consequences?

We all know Nicole. She was married to Tom. Better still, she did every Australian proud and won the Academy Award for her most unglamorous role to date (visualize that keenly discussed prosthetic nose), brilliantly portraying Virginia Wolf in *The Hours*. I say unglamorous, because fresh from the front pages of Vanity Fair (or was it Vogue or Elle, or all three?) in her Moulin Rouge ensemble, few would dispute the assertion that Nicole is the most star-studded actress to come out of Australia. And because of her celebrity status, and let's not forget her stellar acting talent, she's pretty much box office gold these days, particularly after she embraced Oscar.

When Hollywood producers cast an actress like Nicole in the leading role, they're shooting high in the industry's moneymaking game; when an unknown and unconventional beauty is cast as the protagonist, chances are the film was produced independently, on a tight budget, for the art house cinemas. When a septuagenarian woman—and we're not talking the likes of the well-known and bankable Shirley Maclaine—is cast as the central character it's down right brave, even for an independently produced film. In today's youth-driven aesthetic where young, sexy, and artificial glamour sell, some in the industry would say that a film along the lines of *Innocence* (written and produced by Australian, Paul Cox), which depicts the winter year of an older woman's life as she reawakens to love via a rekindled affair from her youth, spells financial disaster.

A character in Sam Shepard's play *True West* makes a rather sanctimonious distinction between movies and films when he suggests that Hollywood makes movies, not films, and that the latter are made by "highbrow artists and foreigners." I rather like this shrewd, albeit smug comment; it validates my perception of filmmaker Paul Cox, who has made a successful business of veering from the box office glamour trap of *movie* making. Cox is all about creating independent *film*. Film that candidly and bravely portrays human fragility; that explores the more challenging aspects of human relationships, ordinary, true, and very unglamorous experiences, such as loneliness, vulnerability, lost love and love found, betrayal, and marriages that fall apart because those involved are human—a reality that even Nicole (and Tom) could not escape.

The aforementioned themes are a Paul Cox trademark and where dollar-driven industry cynics might balk at that kind of movie reality, Cox's humanness speaks volumes to audiences and movie / film reviewers. His *Lonely Hearts* was named best film at the 1982 Australian Film Awards and Outstanding Film of the Year at the London Film Festival. Peter, the lead character is an eccentric, unappealing, 50 year-old man in search of a mate. He meets one through a dating agency. The ensuing courtship is excruciating to watch because of the couples naiveté in the dating game. In the final analysis, *Lonely Hearts* is celebratory because its message is loud and clear: even the loneliest of hearts can find true love.

Based on Cox's own painful experience, *My First Wife* (1984) compassionately depicts the breakdown of a man deserted by his spouse. Even though it was considered one of

his most “uncomfortable films,” presumably because of its honest account of a man’s pain and loss, and also because it was clearly a catharsis thus purging himself of antagonism surrounding the end of his own marriage, it won both best director and best screenplay at the Australian Film Awards.

A Woman's Tale (1991) was considered Cox’s best with reviewer, Roger Ebert, suggesting that it was the finest film screened in the U.S. that year. Australia’s Sheila Morris—playing the 80 year-old protagonist, Martha—won the Australian Academy Award for her portrayal of an old woman facing death alone with indomitable will, courage, and wit. Ms. Morris was aware that she was dying during filming of *A Woman's Tale*, a profoundly brave and courageous last act, confirming the adage “life imitates art.” In this regard, *A Woman's Tale* is the definitive Paul Cox film.

Innocence, (2001) Cox’s most recent film and the focus of this paper, is a confronting yet gentle tale of love lost and found again. The screenplay purportedly made its way to Hollywood and was under consideration by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. But true to his cinematic style, Cox filmed with two of Australia’s esteemed veteran, but less internationally known actors, Julia Blake (Claire) and Bud Tingwell (Andreas).

Septuagenarian Claire is the quintessential central character in a classic Cox film. Claire is a fragile spirit brimming with humanity while struggling upstream, with resignation, against the circumstances of her life, namely her passionless marriage—she and her husband, Jack, have not made love in over 2 decades. Their union is a matter of mutual

acceptance and companionship, versus an emotionally and physically vital partnership. But then something happens: Claire, no longer content with watching her life pass by, seizes a sudden opportunity to embrace a passionate but illicit affair with Andreas, the returned love of her youth.

It is extraordinary behavior for a woman Claire's age, precisely because women of our mothers' generation did not feel they had the right to make self-determined choices in love, and in life. "I thought happiness was living through other people," says Claire. Conforming to the societal norm of being other-defined was (and often still is) a reality for women, the subsequent feeling is one of not feeling at liberty to live life to the full extent of one's soul's desire. Being other-defined is also a self-imposed perception; my mother is a case in point. A few years older than Claire, she died not long ago angry at my father, a man 11 years her senior, whom she believed she had given away her life caring for, and divinely irritated at herself for doing so. I say, "divinely irritated" because on her deathbed she came to the ghastly realization that she had, in fact, contributed to her compromised position as sacrificial wife. By automatically buying into the paradigm of her generation—and the generations of women before her—that the needs of the husband and the family come first, and playing that out in her role as supremely selfless caregiver, she had not been a victim, a belief she'd always held, but rather, an active participant. Her bittersweet awakening was not enough to turn her deteriorating health about; it was too late. Death unfortunately, was in the end her only means of personal liberation.

Similarly, Claire in a conciliatory position as wife-mother and all-giving carer, would rather put her husband's and grown son's needs ahead of her own happiness: "It's not realistic to pick up the threads," she writes Andreas, who has contacted her via mail, expressing his interest in courting her again after a 45 year absence. "We're really too old to ruin our lives and hurt the people who love us. I once loved you very much, but we can't start that again," she continues, as if genuine love at any age, in particular, their age, is nothing but utter folly.

This submission to her marriage and family sadly reminds me of a comment my mother conveniently held as her personal mantra, particularly when she felt powerless in the face of the enormous frustration she experienced in her life with my father. She would say, "Such is a woman's lot," as though this were reason enough not to act on her desire to pursue the life unlived, a life that I suspect would have more truly mirrored her authentic self, rather than the dutiful and loving wife she believed she had to shape herself into to accommodate the needs and expectations of my father. Claire, on the other hand, with gentle and loving persuasion from Andreas, does choose the road less traveled.

One could argue that Claire yields to Andreas in the same way she has acquiesced to her marriage, husband and son, with a sense of compliance to the needs of the men in her life. However, her decision to enter into an affair with Andreas comes at a moment of awakening where it is as if she stands on a precipice looking back at the choices she has made, and at that very moment decides to run from them. In so doing, Claire boldly defies convention and the stifling rules that have kept her in place and unhappy.

Apropos this paper, nineteenth century American author, Kate Chopin, wrote a novel with a title and theme that parallels Claire's story. In *The Awakening*, protagonist Edna is alerted to her own needs and self-defined desires only to have that personal victory denied by her suitor, Robert, who wishes to contain her within the culturally defined confines of a traditional marriage.

This idea of marriage as a means of controlling a woman's freedom to self-express in life and love carries forward into Claire's story when she attempts to tell her husband Jack about her affair. Jack thinks it's a joke and storms out of the house yelling over his shoulder, "this is absurd." His denial of the state of their passionless marriage, and his wife's frustration with him is so extreme that he calls their son, David, a practicing psychiatrist and asks him to speak to Claire, "she's obviously depressed or something," he says, certain that his wife is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Of course Jack fails to see that it is not a nervous breakdown, but a revitalizing breakthrough that Claire is experiencing; understandably, this well-cared-for husband fears the pending change in the status quo.

Likewise, as my mother declined my father remained in a fog of denial about the state of mum's health. He was very aware that she was fragile, ailing, and thus unable to maintain her same routine about the house. She could no longer prepare their meals, bake, clean, and entertain; she could barely muster the energy to get out of bed, let alone care for my father in the manner in which he had become accustomed. Upon hearing that I was flying home to help out, dad telephoned me and said, "Good on you, maybe you'll

be able to get your mother back on track.” Underlying this comment I knew was an urgent plea based on his fear that their lives were irrevocably changing, a fact that unfortunately, he was not ready to face.

Calling upon David for help, perhaps Jack imagines his son will either verbalize or prescribe a curative that will dull-down Claire’s awakening and return her to Jack restored, in a square box with the lid tightly sealed, as the socially conventional, loyal mother-wife that he knows and wants. David does speak with his mother which causes Claire to comment that she “feels like a 16 year-old who is being watched,” which in essence is true, because in a reversal of roles David chides her in the manner of a parent with, “Mum, you’re nearly 70.” Translated, I suspect that comment means any number of things from, “Mum, are you nuts!” To, “But what about Dad?” Sadly, not at any point does psychiatrist David respond to his mother with compassion, or understanding. He chooses to ignore that her decision to be with Andreas is an expression of her longing to be touched, loved tenderly, and to tenderly love in return. Even when Claire tells David that she and his father have not made love in 20 years, not since Jack had an extramarital affair, David still responds as his father’s co-conspirator and brushes off Claire’s comment with, “Yes but that was 20 years ago, what about now?”

At that juncture it is extremely difficult, as the film viewer, to take in the glaring double standard that David’s comment represents, because it not only discounts his mother’s pain and suffering over Jack’s past infidelity, it also discounts Claire’s right to exercise control over her own life, however aged that life is, by choosing love and the path of

personal happiness. Instead, David's intention in discounting the past and focusing on the present is apparently for the purpose of manipulating his mother back into the marital box by making her feel guilty. One can only surmise that both father and son are enormously fearful of Claire's latent power to take charge of and turn her life around and in so doing turn their lives around also, and in a direction that evidently they are not willing to go. In response to David's comment, Claire says, "Don't judge me, life is brutal sometimes. It isn't always possible to resist, to obey the rules and deny the things that really matter."

Like David, my training is in psychology and analysis, however, while my mother was dying, I chose not to go between my parents acting as their emissary. I offered mum solace as she struggled to come to terms with the choices she had made, and I comforted dad as he struggled with the enormous changes facing him. My sister, on the other hand, upset with the way my mother periodically lashed out at my father, openly chastised mum, suggesting she be gentler with dad. Unlike Claire's response to David, mum's retort to my sister's intervention was not graceful. Angry at how brutal she apparently felt life to be, and clearly feed-up with obeying "the rules" mum let rip: "You, and everyone else, want me to get better just so I'll go on looking after your father."

In an essay titled, *The Story of an Hour*, Kate Chopin writes of circumstances between a wife and husband, the gist of which parallel this paper. Her main character, Louise Mallard, is in a precarious condition due to a weak heart. Upon hearing news of her husband's death in a train accident, she grieves intensely in the moment, but then quickly

entertains thoughts of her freedom from the “powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature.” This idea of imposing one’s will upon another to the degree that the other is compromised, is analogous to Claire’s experience with Jack, and then her son, David. Husband and son want Claire to remain shut down so that she will continue to conform to the roles they conveniently use to define her, and which she has used to define herself, but which she is now choosing to emancipate herself from not as an act of willfulness, but in an act of free will.

In David’s defense, he is not just his father’s messenger and abettor; he is equally concerned about the needs of his mother. When he confronts Jack about his relationship with Claire, asking him when last they made love, Jack responds that at his age he “has other things to worry about.” Considering his mother, David responds, “What about her age?” Acting out the maxim “the best defense is offense,” Jack storms off grumpily responding, “She has a heart condition.”

What is the result of putting a lid on another’s passion, stifling their life force? At the symbolic level it is equivalent to death. Now that metaphoric lid could be put in place by an external force such as Jack imposing his will on Claire, “You’re my wife, you’ll bloody well stay here,” he yells when Claire makes noises about leaving him for Andreas. Or Claire can put it on her Self by bending to Jack’s will, which she did for most of their marriage. I saw this dynamic play out in my parent’s relationship. I in turn learned well and took the dance into my own marriage, until I realized that everything I understood as

an authentic expression of my Self would indeed die if I let that externally and subsequently self-imposed lid stifle my passion indefinitely.

In the ultimate act of dominion, Louise Mallard, like my mother, chose literal death as her means of personal liberation. “Chose” is a challenging concept here, because Louise Mallard had a heart condition, her health was precarious; stress could trigger her demise, and it did. Upon discovering that her husband had not died, but had actually survived the train crash, she dropped dead. “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.” But before she dies we learn something quite different: “She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome... Free, free, free, body and soul free, she kept whispering.” We understand that she did not drop dead of “the joy that kills,” at that precipitous moment, when she realized her soul’s desire had been entirely dashed and that her only alternative was to return to what was, she opted instead to be completely emancipated, by the shock that kills.

My mother did not die of a heart condition she had pancreatic cancer. It’s not as though anyone would deliberately choose a disease like that to see out her final days, mum certainly did not make a conscious choice to end her life via cancer; she was terribly distressed to learn that she was dying from the inside out. Yet the onset of pancreatic cancer was a sign of grave dis-ease on the inside, the result, I think, of unwittingly

allowing her life force to be slowly snuffed out. And whether it was dad's expectations which sealed her fate, or mum's unconscious participation—as she so sadly admitted to me at the end—in the final analysis my parents danced their dance the only way they knew how, and it was merely a matter of time before mum's inner lifelessness manifested as literal death.

Edna, in *The Awakening* also chooses death, but in a far more conscious act of will: she drowns herself. She chose not to live if life meant being in the societal cage in which the men about her wanted her to be confined. Having been denied by her father, husband, and then her suitor, Robert, the right to be what she wanted, an independent, self-defined woman, she saw no answer other than to refuse men's ownership of her. In so doing, she chose to own herself through suicide.

But what of Claire? We've discovered she has a heart condition like Louise Mallard, and Cox tends to have us stay with the big issues, the existential issues: life, love, or lack thereof, and death. Well, David's chat with his mother has triggered something insidious, Claire's guilt. In the very beginning, Claire alluded to feeling a sense of responsibility to her family, not wanting to "hurt the people who love us," but as her affair with Andreas progresses, she suffers the accompanying smorgasbord of conflicting emotions one might expect of a septuagenarian woman who flagrantly defies the roles which have defined her life. One moment she is wholly satisfied in the love she and Andreas feel for one another, the next she is torn, blaming him, and chiding him for not realizing and respecting how complicated her life is as a still-married woman. At this point in the plot

she is staying with Andreas, but still returning to the home she shares with her husband. Fights ensue, and Jack yells at Claire for “ruining his life!” Jack’s invective, though steeped in suffering, causes Claire to swiftly return to Andreas where she spills her angst-ridden torment: “If they’d never met again,” she says, “everything would have come to its natural conclusion.”

Claire’s guilt is great and omnipresent, to the extent that it corrupts and violates the innocence of her rekindled affair with Andreas. The natural conclusion for Claire then is that she knows her time has come. “My heart has had quite enough,” says Claire, “I’ve caused such hurt and now I need to blossom again.” And so she has a heart attack and dies, not because her death is a convenient screen solution to a love story made complicated, but because Claire seeks release from the burden of having made a self-determined choice—one that she never really felt at liberty to pursue. The ramification is heart-breaking guilt. Her death, as Claire explains in the film’s final voice-over symbolizes her “need to blossom again,” and though her sudden demise seems premature and therefore sad, we would rather see her flourish than suffer.

As I sat by mother’s bed the day before she died, I spoke candidly to her, trusting that she could hear me despite her unconscious state. I asked her to forgive dad and then to forgive herself, and in so doing release them both from the karmic dance they’d been navigating for 48 years. “Because lord knows you don’t want to come back and have to do this all over again. And now go mum,” I said, “I know that’s what you want, what you’ve wanted for a long time, so let go and be free.”

Death as a metaphor for freedom is one way that Cox, a cinematic metaphysician, investigates the mystery of the human experience as a nexus of our longing for some sort of stability against uncertainty, a respite from fear, release from suffering. Best of all though, Cox proves in *Innocence* that the realizations and distresses of ordinary, everyday life can be transported to a wonderful and poignant experience by the art of film.