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CULTURE REVIEW

Adoration

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Few people anywhere know of coasts like these, except perhaps for brief holidays, or in travellers' tales like dreams.

Doris Lessing, 'The Grandmothers' (2003)

There's a selfie of me, my partner and my best friend taken on the beach at Seal Rocks on my 50th birthday in September 2019. My hair is cropped into a bleached, greying mullet—cut by the drummer in Newcastle riot girl band Bitchcraft. I notice my yellow front tooth, thin wrinkled face, then get past unsightly specifics and experience looking at myself more like a study in texture. I'm windswept in waffle weave: a real-gone peri-menopausal surfer girl. Eila, my partner, peeks over one shoulder like an androgynous, silver-blue haired Tin Tin, and Christen, her head wrapped in a scarf, rests her chin on my other shoulder, her skin glowing from the elements. On Facebook I caption the photo 'Adoration' as, to me, Eila may as well be an Antipodean Robin Wright and Christen, with her fine-boned body that I know so well from decades watching her swim, is basically Naomi Watts.

Adoration is a 2013 film by French director Anne Fontaine, partly filmed at Seal Rocks and adapted from the eponymous Doris Lessing novella in her collection *The Grandmothers*. Neither Christen nor Eila are grandmothers yet, but both are mothers. In *Adoration*, Robin Wright and Naomi Watts play two friends, Roz and Lil, who have grown up together and raised sons in adjoining seafront houses with gobsmacking views of the ocean. At Sundance, the film screened under the title *Two Mothers*—the focus of the film (and the novella) is the relationship between the women and their respective sexual relationships with the other's son that begin when the boys are in their late teens. While the film shares its coastal *mise-en-scène* with a plethora of Australian surf flicks, the plot remains an awkward one to incorporate. It doesn't seem as out of place, however, in the *oeuvre* of French female directors: think Agnes Varda's *Kung Fu Master!* (1988) in which a middle-aged housewife (played by ex-60s 'It Girl' Jane Birkin) falls for her daughter's 14-year-old friend Julien.

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On some level, *Adoration* is also about female ageing and follows the quasi-incestuous romances beyond initial sun-kissed limerence through to both women becoming (Dorian Gray-like) grandmothers in bikinis. At one point in the novella (and film) when the mothers try to call things off, Roz states: ‘Cheer up. We are going to become respectable ladies, yes, your disreputable mothers are going to become pillars of virtue. We shall be perfect mothers-in-law, and then we shall become wonderful grandmothers to your children’.¹ This time span, and the overt acknowledgement by the women of their age, arguably sets it apart from the more familiar older male, younger lover trope and, through the film’s questionably feminist lens, it’s the older women who remain desirable, more so than the boys’ younger wives (who pack up in disgust with their children in tow when the affairs are ultimately revealed). While it seems that the allure will last for life, rather than a paean to ageless female beauty, the novella especially suggests the narcissistic elitism of ‘sleek and shining people, as they are who know how to use the sun’.² It’s as if the relationship between the women and the boys is alchemical—with the ocean, sun and sand it becomes impenetrable.

If there’s a queer reading of *Adoration* it’s probably that Roz and Lil, despite joking ‘we’re not lezzos are we?’ have a bond which renders other adult men redundant. As Jemima Bucknell writes in her review of the film: ‘Sons of course are privileged, as they exist in their mother’s reflections, “did we do that?” asks Ros, marveling at Ian and Tom’s physiques, “they’re like Gods” she replies’.³ It’s Claytons incest and rather than a Garden of Eden morality tale, the film has more of a mythical feel. It’s Oedipal, yes, but focalised through female desire: I’d argue that the women are more like the gods who produce sons as lovers. As Bucknell suggests, each son understandably inherits their mother’s love for the other mother, and in turn the sons become surrogates for Roz and Lil, closing a figure-eight circuit of desire. Fathers are by the by: one conveniently dies, the other (Ben Mendelsohn) moves to Sydney (where he meets another woman with kids and they have a new baby—that’s how divorced men age in this scenario).

Although set on the European coast, ‘The Grandmothers’ was based on a true story told to Doris Lessing, something that happened in Australia (hence the setting for the film version where the beauty of the Australian coast and concomitant lifestyle is taken to a cultish extreme, with no mention made of the Worimi people). The film’s setting is, to use a cliché, a central character and while the beaches are wild and unpopulated, the coastal township is relatively cosmopolitan: replete with incongruous contemporary art galleries (filmed at Shelly Beach on the NSW Central Coast). In the novella, a young British waitress who initially fetishises the family while working at a coastal resort has her illusions shattered by the revelation scene, which in today’s terms could be considered akin to going behind the surface of Instagram influencers. In my selfie on social media it’s our granular, deterritorialised faces, unlike the bodies of the three women in Raphael’s *The Three Graces*, that represent ‘naked’ female joy. All three of us are white like the cast of *Adoration*, though growing up in Wagga in inland NSW I was far from a ‘surf rat’, internalizing the surfie girl mythology mainly through teen surf movies like *High Tide* and *Puberty Blues*. Christen did grow up on Sydney’s North Shore and, she’ll hate me mentioning it, once acted in a soap opera called *Breakers* set on Bondi Beach, though she’s now very Inner West. Eila’s from Bathurst. Most people I talk to say that they escaped into literature as an adolescent, or into film, because it was imaginative respite from their boring suburban lives. It’s never been like that for me, I’ve always felt that we each live our local iterative versions of what we read, listen to and watch. That’s why to me Eila is Roz and Christen is Lil, which I guess makes me both teenage sons.

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2. Doris Lessing, 'The Grandmothers', *The Grandmothers: Four Short Novels*, Harper Collins, United Kingdom, 2003, p. 4.

3. Jemima Bucknell, 'Adoration finds a mother's love lacking', *The Essential*, <http://www.theessential.com.au/reviews/film/2013/adoration>