

RECOLLECTION

In his essay, *The Philosophy of Toys*, Baudelaire poses the question of whether a child simply acts upon a toy, or whether the toy can also act on the child. Is it possible that toys can extract things from us, make us do or say things, maybe even teach us something about ourselves?

Alice Anderson is an artist who likes to play with dolls. She dresses and undresses them, makes up stories about them, films them, photographs them and gives them names. She also likes to play with people, putting them in costume, telling them what to say, making them act out little dramas. But while the dolls are animated by her activities — we see them looking into the distance, contemplating, brooding — the people often appear unnervingly de-animated, puppet-like, going through the motions of human exchange.

In her film, *Recollection*, Anderson tells the story of a little girl who can see a ghost. No matter how much she protests, her mother refuses to believe her.

‘Darling, you know perfectly well that ghosts don’t exist,’ she says, before giving a preposterously un-child-friendly, pseudo-scientific explanation for the apparition.

We, however, know for a fact that the ghost is real, because the story is told from her point of view. Without the ghost there would be nothing for us to watch. The one whose existence we can’t be too sure of is the mother. Is the ghost making her up?

To make the ontological premise of the film even more ambiguous, the spectre, it transpires, is the little girl herself, coexisting with her in the present as an old woman.

In her attempt to prove the reality of this mysterious figure, the girl commits a crime that sets a circular chain of events in motion, creating a *mise en abyme* in which she is infinitely doomed to murder her future self.

Dolls appear in the film, propped up in the nursery, their inscrutable stares echoing those of their strangely vacant human co-stars. The most disturbing of these figures is perhaps the mother, with her eerily glazed expression. At first glance this 'deadness' looks something like bad acting. Why can't she put a bit more expression into it? Can't she make it a bit more 'realistic'?

But this is, of course, the point. Like the plastic doll who plays the central role in Anderson's *The Idiot of Evenville*, the characters seem to have the story imposed on them from the outside, to be going along with events without fully being a part of them, as if they are being directed by some external force — which, of course, they are. Anderson is very careful to ensure that her actors don't show any emotion, asking them for a very precise type of performance — to transform themselves into wax dolls or automata. The characters' failure to embody the narrative convincingly becomes part of the story's tragedy. We watch them struggle to inhabit their own lives, to take up bearable positions in relation to the signifying chain.

If a ghost is a soul without a body, and a doll is a body without a soul, in Anderson's film a human being appears to be something like a haunted doll — a temporarily animated piece of flesh trying desperately to integrate the animate and inanimate components of being. In this case, to call the acting wooden would be a compliment. If 'woodenness' suggests a kind of material inertia, something not quite brought to life, this is precisely the quality that Anderson's work aims to bring out.

Which isn't to say that it is entirely morbid. Quite the opposite, in fact. Anderson seems to play happily in this zone between the dead and the living, inventing games, pictures, stories, bringing to mind Rilke's description of childhood play in his essay on Lotte Pritzel's dolls. He says: 'We mixed in the doll, as if in a test-tube, everything we were experiencing and could not recognise. We watched it change colour there and come to the boil. That is, we invented this too. The doll was so utterly devoid of imagination that what we imagined for it was inexhaustible.' Far from being demoralising, the lifelessness that Anderson pinpoints provides an opening for ingenuity and playfulness. As any child will tell you, there are always plenty of things to do with dolls.

While much of Anderson's work is unnerving, it is also always lively, even joyful. Whether she is dressing up in her mother's clothes and telling herself off, painting on pot plants or playing with Barbies in the bath, she works with a huge amount of energy, constantly, incessantly, pulling things out of nowhere. She describes her work as a necessity, something that simply has to be done.

Alice Anderson likes to play with us. Sometimes without asking. To watch *Recollection* is to become a character in the drama. If the story hinges on the question of who sees what — and who can be seen by whom — the spectator is positioned in the network of glances: the little girl seeing the ghost, being seen by her mother — who may or may not be lying about what she can see — and the ghost, who seems to address us, as if she knows we're watching too.

So what sort of role are we given? Are we put in the Godlike position of the all-seeing eye? The ones whose privileged point of view gives us access to the truth? Or are we more ghostly than the ghost, lurking on the periphery of the scene, witnessing everything but unable to make contact? When the mother tells the child, 'Stop your play-acting. Do you think this is a movie?' it's perhaps her way of saying that we don't exist, we are just another flicker of activity in the girl's right temporal lobe. Like Alice in the Red King's dream, we might think we're real, but as soon as the movie stops believing in us — bang! — out we go like a candle.

Luckily for us, the mother is a master of disingenuity. Having disavowed the existence of the ghost she tells her daughter: 'Nothing's impossible, but you'll have to prove it, my dear.' It comes across as a challenge, suggesting that if the child can rustle up something a little more empirical than her persistent whining, the mother will gladly accept her story. And it's this demand for substantiation that causes everything to go wrong. At the very next opportunity the child grabs a gun and blasts the 'ghost' in the stomach. The mother, far from being amazed by the sudden appearance of a dead body, is only concerned with keeping the crime a secret, as if she knew all along that the old lady was real. 'What kind of game is this?' she asks when she sees the child pick up the gun.

It's a very good question. Because not only does the mother seem to know that the old woman is a living being, the actress playing the mother seems to know that we are living beings — out there somewhere on the other side of the screen — that she is acting in a movie to be watched by people who will suspend their disbelief as much or as little as they are individually inclined to do. She knows as well as we do that this is all just a game.

But what sort of game exactly? Who's setting the rules? How will we know when it's over? And is it possible to win? Are we simply there to spectate ghoulishly?

Or are we being invited to join in, to make things up, to interpret? What's the link between the chalk horse and the rocking horse?

What are the strange metal objects on the floor? Is the crime a metaphor? And if so, for what? What exactly are we watching?

There's plenty for us to play with here, we just have to follow the clues. Anderson's film is a puzzle that is likely to teach us something about ourselves. Like a doll that, by its very muteness, causes us to speak, her work acts on us, challenging us to invent something of our own.

Anouchka Grose