

“Unholy and Not Innocent” A Romance (October 1988, p. 24); review of *The Holy Innocents* by Gilbert Adair

One quarter of the way through Gilbert Adair’s first work of fiction, I began to feel as if *The Holy Innocents* was a rejected screenplay hastily turned into a book.

First, the main characters, who are Guillaume, his twin sister Danielle and Matthew, an American film student. One day the three cinephiles arrive at the Cinémathèque Française to find its gates closed and to learn that the curator has been dismissed. While the twins’ parents are out of the city, Matthew moves into their home; he and the teenagers form a sexual triangle of incest, rape and domination. Unconcerned that Danielle and Guillaume are lovers, Matthew joins them after a slight hesitation, moving from voyeur (watching Guillaume masturbate in front of a portrait of Gene Tierney) to participant when the twins force him to make love to Danielle. After a token struggle Matthew surrenders to the experience, gradually becoming submissive to his friends’ wishes and desires (and fulfilling his secret desires), which extend to Guillaume raping him and, together with Danielle, smearing Matthew’s chest with excrement.

Parisians deprived of such *ménages à trois* are meanwhile rioting in the streets, although the lucky three are unaware of this. Living in a private world created by films rather than experience, Guillaume, Danielle and Matthew parrot movie lines and situations to one another (I feel there should be an index of films cited, or at least footnotes to the settings and dialogue), play in the bathtub, and scoff cat food to ease their hunger. The idyll is broken when a rock shatters a window, letting the May revolts in. They hurriedly dress in the cleanest clothes available and for a few hours immerse themselves in the stream of history, emerging ideologically purer but none the cleaner. Guillaume saves a girl from the police and is beaten for his efforts. Matthew, attempting to save him, grabs a revolutionary banner, mounts a barricade, shouts an appropriate slogan, and is shot, expiring in the twins’ arms. The epilogue takes place a few months after Matthew’s death, with brother and sister sitting in their re-opened cinema, still crying over his death.

Such are the character and such is the plot. Since Adair has provided little of either, the reader might expect him to capture the charged atmosphere of 1968 Paris. There is no atmosphere, only location shots of the Louvre, Normandy and assorted Parisian streets. This peremptory treatment extends to the characters too: every one gets a closeup that shows his features but never explores them. There’s no need for exploration, as Adair provides exact interpretations of everyone’s actions that leave little mystery for the reader. His handling of the twins’ relationship reveals another aspect of his inability to portray credible characters. The publishers call this book a ‘study’ of incest. The closest Adair approaches a ‘study’ is when Matthew asks Danielle what would happen if her parents found out about her and her brother, to which her only response (three times on one page) is ‘It must not happen.’