

## **Negating the Family: Ritual and Dionysos in Modernist Utopia**

Alternative orders or oppositional social formations such as gangs stand in a complex relationship of both contestation and mimicry to other, more socially mainstream or normative groupings and collectives. For example, a gang may function, and perceive itself, as a kind of alternative family, inviting us to view the gang phenomenon under the broader heading of ‘family and its discontents’; the gang, then, becomes a lens through which to view family in relation to non-family groupings, ersatz family, anti-family. Working through each of the key terms in the title, I dwell first on the relationship between the Dionysian and the utopian, and then turn to examine the gang with reference to both of these terms. I then proceed to clarify the position of the gang vis-à-vis the family (as conventionally defined by consanguinity and/or affinity), and to look at how Dionysian collectives and utopian formations have constituted themselves through a contestation or undoing of the biological family as the primary social unit. The first aim of the article, then, is to revisit the productive tension between the irrational, chaotic, and ecstatic, under the sign of the Dionysian, and the dream of a well-ordered – or differently-ordered – collective, under the heading of utopia. In a second step, the Dionysian / utopian interface is approached through variations on the concept of the gang; the gang is envisaged as a kind of Dionysian utopia, a particular instantiation of the relationship between these two terms, and as an implementation of the Dionysian unmaking, and utopian remaking, of family. The ideas crystallise around a number of examples, drawn from texts of literary modernism and cinematic reworkings of these.

Utopia needs little introduction; whether we see it as a literary genre, a secular paradise, a delusional end invoked to justify totalitarian means, a non-place, a good place, a non-because-good-place, or a good-because-non-place, utopia's basic features remain consistent (see Kumar 1987; Jacoby 1999; Gray 2007; Moylan and Baccolini 2007). It is *not* the here and now; it is directly or indirectly *critical* of the here and now; and it revolves around the question of the *collective* (Ní Dhúill 2010). It is perhaps this last aspect of utopia that is the most relevant to the present volume's concern with gangs: for the gang, too, is by definition collective, only imaginable as an alternative order of collective being that stands outside, or exempts itself from, the hegemonic order, while in turn reproducing or exacerbating within itself features of the very order it ostensibly rejects – just as utopia does.

The Dionysian, on the other hand, seems on the face of it to represent everything other than order, to be a mode of the radically disorderly, of drunkenness, frenzy, ecstasy, of the wild and the orgiastic (Henrichs 1994; Schmidt-Dengler 2001). Modernist reworkings of the Dionysian are plentiful (and as noted above, it is from within literary modernism that most of the textual examples are taken in what follows). The fascination of the modernist generation with Dionysian energies is a well-attested and well-studied aspect of European literature and culture in the decades either side of 1900. The generation of writers around the *fin de siècle*, avid readers of Friedrich Nietzsche, took their cue from the vivid account of Dionysian cults in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), as well as from the work of the classical philologist Erwin Rohde, whose 1893 study *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* furnished detail for Thomas Mann and other writers (see Pfothenhauer 1988-89; Aurnhammer and Pittrof 2002; Volz 2002). Even restricting

oneself, as I do here, to texts written in German in the early twentieth century, one finds numerous Dionysian scenes or sequences which, while often dreamlike or given the status of a dream within the narrative, function as a commentary on the rest of the text. Such scenes feature some or all the following: the release of destructive instincts and drives; indiscriminate mass copulation and other orgiastic acts, often including bestiality or violence; the breakdown of social order and the violation of taboos; the loss or temporary overthrow of language; and the threat or actuality of death, in that the Dionysian sequence may have a fatal outcome for some or many of its participants. Examples of the modernist Dionysian can be found in Alfred Kubin's *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*, 1909) and Richard Beer-Hofmann's *Der Tod Georgs* (*The Death of George*, 1900); more familiar deployments are present in Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*, 1912) and *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924). (I discuss these at greater length than is possible here in chapter 5 of my *Sex in Imagined Spaces* (2010).) Further examples from less well known texts by Frank Wedekind will be introduced below. As we shall see, the Dionysian topos allows for exploration of a rich set of issues such as the limits of individuality, the precariousness of social forms, the upwelling of primal forces, and the potential of the ecstatic collective to inaugurate both destruction and renewal.

The Dionysian scene has several functions. First, and most obviously, it represents a provocative departure from conventional sexual morality. Sex becomes utterly dissociated from codes and contexts of love, romance, exclusiveness, propriety, or family, and is staged instead as indiscriminate and anonymous. In its move from intimate coupling to the orgiastic release of an unfettered collective, the sex of the Dionysian scene could be said to have relocated from the private to the public sphere.

But this is not so much a public sphere proper as an ecstatic collective: a distinction that might be worth returning to in relation to the question of what distinguishes gangs from other sorts of groupings, but also one worth bearing in mind as we try to navigate (or ignore) the increasingly unabashed erotic menagerie of the internet and its dizzying array of ‘gang bangs’. The latter may be accounted for, in the idiom of Herbert Marcuse, as a case of repressive desublimation, or, to update via Bernard Stiegler, of the immersion of both psyche and libido in the addictive short-circuits of the mediatized milieu (Stiegler 2013); but whatever modernist fiction may or may not have anticipated about the brave new online world which now surrounds us, the nature of the modernist Dionysian provocation is twofold. First, it invokes the notion of repression; and it does so in order to complicate this notion. Its orgiastic undoing of sexual moral codes suggests that these are not immutable, thus exposing them as socially and historically situated and contingent: this is the familiar invocation of repression’s fragility, with Dionysus as the upwelling of the amoral vitality that culture uneasily and unreliably holds in check. As we know, Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach awakens from his Dionysian dream with the last of his sexual inhibitions in tatters.

But this is only part of the story. The carnival of overthrow may in fact contribute to the consolidation of that which is overthrown. The temporary suspension of the moral code makes its subsequent re-assertion more clearly felt; the power of the law, as Georges Bataille and many others before and since him have insisted, is most palpable at the moment of its infraction; the ritual release of pent-up energies is ultimately a way of containing these. This is most evident in the staged rituals of dystopian fictions, to which I return below; but it holds good, too, for the relationship

that unfolds in modernist narratives between the Dionysian scene and the order it seems to subvert. Everything we have been told about Aschenbach's rigidity and discipline – his excessive devotion to Apollo, as it were – has led us inexorably to the point where he succumbs to the pull of the Dionysian; and we can hardly read his story as one of emancipation.

So the Dionysian scene does not resolve easily into a straightforward opposition between repression and release, or law and infraction, especially when we bear in mind that the Dionysian orgy itself has a ritual character, and takes place as part of the observances of a cult. It is chaos, yes; but of an organised kind. Desirous of avoiding the anachronisms to which insufficient exposition of the Classical context – referenced here primarily via Rohde and Nietzsche – would doubtless lead, I confine my remarks here to another modernist vision of Dionysian ritual, the unfinished utopia of Frank Wedekind (1864-1918), entitled *Die große Liebe* (*The Great Love*). Wedekind worked on this project in various forms from 1892 into the early years of the twentieth century, but it was only published for the first time in 2013, almost a century after his death (Wedekind, 2013).

*The Great Love* is fragmentary and difficult to reconstruct – there is little in the way of a worked-out plot or characters, merely a succession of scenarios and notes outlining the sex-gender system of a theocratic society called 'the Old State'. Despite its fragmentary character, however, *The Great Love* deserves attention as an instance of a primitivist modernism which explores questions of sexuality in an archaic setting that seems remote from the modern urban bohemian milieu its author inhabited.

Wedekind's project of imagining an alternative sexual universe in literary form was

never completed, but its outlines can be traced from the corpus of related sketches and drafts which make up *The Great Love*, most of which date from 1906-7; the published story *Mine-Haha; or, On the Physical Education of Young Girls* (chapters one to three first published 1901, whole text first published 1903); and the unpublished prose fragment *Eden*, which dates from c.1890-1892. In the primitivist theocracy Wedekind imagines in *The Great Love*, the particular sense of ‘gang’ connected to labour – the gang as a team of deindividuated workers, a collective subordinated to the needs of a highly regulated and mechanistic system – becomes yoked to the disturbing connotation of collective sexual violence we find in the ‘gang bang’. Insofar as it draws on the utopian tradition, portraying its imagined world primarily through the staging of the Dionysian rituals in a society that has completely dispensed with the conventional marital-consanguinous family, *The Great Love* offers fertile terrain for reflection on each of the key terms of my title, and on the relationships between them.

*The Great Love* occupies a somewhat anomalous position within Wedekind’s work as a whole. Wedekind is best remembered for works that are scathingly critical of the sexual mores and family values of his historical time and cultural place. His best known plays, *Frühlings Erwachen* (*Spring Awakening*, 1891), *Erdegeist* (*Earth Spirit*, 1895), and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora’s Box*, 1902), have been described as ‘sex tragedies’ (see Wedekind 1923; Wedekind 1972). The focus of these texts is on sexual tensions in the lives of their characters and on the causes of these tensions, from repressive pedagogy to cultural taboo, from sexual jealousy to economic inequality, from the dream of the sexually insatiable female to the nightmare this dream becomes for the enervated modern male. The criticism of contemporary sexuality and sexual morality advanced in Wedekind’s work may imply a search for a

utopian alternative, but it would be misleading to suggest that *The Great Love* spells out this alternative, despite the author's own insistence that it was conceived as a 'utopian' project (Wedekind in Bohnen, 1978: 114). Its utopian dimension lies not in the provision of a *desirable* alternative or blueprint, but rather in the fact that it experiments with an alternative regulation of sex in a way that expresses a critical attitude to contemporary arrangements.

This critical attitude is particularly evident in the representation of prostitution, which is institutionalised and socially sanctioned in Wedekind's imaginary regime. But what constitutes prostitution in the 'Old State' of *The Great Love* is far from the regulated prostitution of a modern state, which would promise greater safety for sex workers while vouchsafing freedom of choice for the (mostly male) consumers of their services. Rather, the prostitution of *The Great Love* takes place in the context of a collective ritual, the aim of which is to engender a heightened state of consciousness, an apotheosis of sensual experience, in its central actor at the moment of her violation and death. One function of the Dionysian rituals *The Great Love*, and one which is shared with the other modernist Dionysian scenes mentioned earlier (in the works of Kubin, Beer-Hofmann, and Thomas Mann), is that these moments of extreme experience raise the question of the boundaries of the individual; the transgression of these boundaries under pressure; the limits and fragility of the individuation principle. Furthermore, like other modernists, Wedekind uses the representation of the Dionysian in *The Great Love* to explore altered states of consciousness and the suspension of rationality, and to test the limits of literary representation itself: if the power of language is suspended in the moment of orgiastic frenzy, how can the

written word adequately capture this process, and what perspectival and narratological problems are thereby raised?

We might see evidence of these problems in the fact that Wedekind's utopian project never made it off the plans, so to speak, and remains a collection of sketches, drafts, and fragments; authorial intention, a dubious notion at the best of times, is here virtually impossible to reconstruct. But enough remains of *The Great Love* to enable us to draw some connections to other instantiations of the Dionysian *and* the utopian from roughly the same period. Insofar as it can be said to be set anywhere, there are sufficient textual clues for us to say that *The Great Love* is set in prehistoric Ireland. Wedekind suggests remoteness from modern civilisation by situating his alternative world in a pagan Celtic context, and in doing so, he reflects an idea that was gaining currency at the *fin de siècle*: the idea that primitive societies and cultic religions enjoyed an unbroken continuity of the sensual and the sacral that is disrupted or lost in later societies. Rather than revisiting the oft-traversed terrain of ancient Greece, as many of his contemporaries were to do in their evocations of Dionysian ritual, Wedekind opted for the less familiar territory of the ancient Celtic world. This enabled him to give his fantasy a freer rein, while retaining the primitivist resonances that cast the ancient world as the other of the present. There are also striking parallels between Wedekind's spring rite in *The Great Love*, revolving around the seasonal ritual sacrifice of a young girl, and the scenario of Igor Stravinsky's 1913 ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, which had the original title *The Great Sacrifice*). Wedekind's Celtic archaisms in *The Great Love* are consistent with a modernist aesthetic which used primitive and pagan resonances to jar the reader or



viewer out of the contemporary world and to suggest that a world more vital and elemental pulsed beneath it.

The vision of a primitivist collective spoke to the sense that the truth of sex had been somehow lost through the restrictions and deformations of modern civilisation and sexual morality. It is in the areas of sex and reproduction and their social regulation that Wedekind's imagined society differs most radically from the realities of his time. A notable feature of his fantasy world, and one which connects it to the broader concerns of his oeuvre, is the dissociation of sex and reproduction from sentimental-romantic and conventional moral discourses. The world of *The Great Love* violates taboos of Wedekind's contemporary social world, providing a radically different set of norms and sexual behaviours.

Yet one does not come away from *The Great Love* with a sense that Wedekind sought here to imagine a world in which the individual subject could live out her sexuality to the full. Rather, the power of the collective, together with the imperative to conform fully with the demands of the regime, work against the possibility of individual fulfilment or sexual emancipation. If there is any emancipation at work here, it is not emancipation *of* the self, but rather emancipation *from* the self, from the isolated consciousness of the individual. We know that in Nietzsche's reading of the Dionysian frenzy, what was central was precisely the tearing asunder of the *principium individuationis*, and Rohde, the other important source for the modernist Dionysus (at least in the German context), interpreted the "frantic, whirling, headlong eddies and dance-circles that these inspired companies danced over the mountain slopes" (Rohde 1925: 257) as an attempt to expand one's being, to attain an altered

state of consciousness in which a higher order, a sense of the divine, would become accessible. If we may think of these ‘inspired companies’ as gangs of a sort, is this just a case of the gang getting high? A later reworking of these Nietzschean/Rohdean motifs, such as Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), suggests that Dionysian ritual does not *necessarily* have explosive utopian potential, but is rather readily assimilable to non-utopian genres such as the American campus novel: here, Dionysus serves as the intellectually ambitious student’s equivalent of experimentation with illegal mind-altering substances (Tartt, 1992). But might the rich seam of Dionysian motifs at the *fin de siècle* offer another way to understand the relationship between intoxication and ritual, through their shared threat or promise of loss of self?

A return to utopia might help to clarify matters, as it so often does. A recurring feature of utopian fiction that is often overlooked is the frequent presence of descriptions of ritual in the utopian society. Rituals serve both to express and cement communal bonds and shared beliefs and to lift their participants out of their individuality and into the felt unity of the group; hence the significance of ritual – often including violent ritual – within gangs, fraternities, and other such groupings. Utopian fictions often offer their readers a snapshot of the imagined society through a description of ritual or festivity. Examples range across the utopian tradition, from the early modern period to the dystopias of the twentieth century: from the Feast of the Family in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) to the ‘orgy-porgies’ in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), from the festivals and funeral rites of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) to the ‘Two Minutes’ Hate’ in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948). In all of these cases, the portrayal of group

ritual stages the collective mentality of the alternative world: patriarchal in the case of Bacon; hedonistic-consumerist in the case of Huxley; atavistic belligerence undergirding state repression in Oceania; and holistic neopagan ecofeminism in Marge Piercy's utopia.

These rituals often function as a safety valve for extraordinary or non-quotidian behaviour, setting apart a space and time in which sexual needs can be gratified or violent emotions unleashed without posing any destabilising risk to the hegemonic order – the mechanism of containment, alluded to above, and setting aside its Foucauldian elaborations, is clearly in operation. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, the 'orgy-porgies' are an important mechanism for containing sexuality through the provision of a controlled outlet. The destabilising potential of unfettered desire – here the model is clearly pre-Foucauldian – is defused in the *Brave New World* through its standardisation, the individual libido subsumed into a cultural totality that demands complete conformism. The submerging of the individual in a sense of collective purpose and belonging thus works against the individuation principle (we recall that the 'equality' and 'fraternity' of modern emancipation discourse have become 'identity' and 'community' in *Brave New World*, a moment of discursive prescience that is arguably far more resonant for today's reader than the dated futuristic details of 'decanted' babies and anthrax bombs). Like the altered state of consciousness in the Dionysian rite, the social organisation of utopia and its expression in group ritual privileges the collective over the individual. In both cases – standardised ritual and ecstatic frenzy – what Arthur Koestler once called the 'integrative' tendency is brought to the fore (Koestler 1967): the temporal and spatial limitation of the individual is mitigated, and the sense of either communal participation or unbounded

consciousness seems to challenge the individual's isolation and mortality. This is not to suggest that the collective or group identity found in these formations compromises individuality in the same way that ecstatic or altered consciousness does; there is clearly a difference between being 'outside oneself' through intoxication or spiritual frenzy, and having a group-oriented subjectivity, an enlarged sense of self through the awareness of belonging – say, to a gang. In the former case, the undoing of selfhood is temporary, and proceeds through an overthrow of behavioural norms, whereas the latter case involves an expansion of identity beyond the individual self by dint of that self's position within a collective structure. Nevertheless, when it comes to probing the utopian core of the Dionysian, what matters is the idea that the individual's sense of being an individual can be compromised and undone in ways that bring home to us the full force of collectivity's ambivalence. The Dionysian undoing of rational consciousness, like the utopian negation of existing conditions, is also a doing, an opening up to something beyond the given. And what is undone, or negated, in many of the modernist reworkings of Dionysus, is the final term of my title: family.

'Negating the Family' is, of course, paraphrased from Tristan Tzara's Dadaist proclamation of 1918, in which Dada is defined as that which embraces "every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family" (Tzara 1977: 13). But the negation of the family takes many forms. As Barry McCrea has argued, non-familial spaces – an eloquent example is Fagin's gang of thieves in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* – mark an alternative form of community shaped not by genealogical principles but by the sheer fact of physical proximity. Fagin and his gang represent the urgent reality of immediate circumstances, and McCrea shows how they come to offer an alternative kind of bond to that of the genealogical family (McCrea 2011). By

contrast with the picaresque and chaotic spaces that resist the encroachment of family ties in the realist novel of the nineteenth century, the anti-families or non-families in the utopias and dystopias of modernism are sets of relationships formed not by contingency, but by the utopian desire to eliminate contingency altogether.

The extreme experience of public ceremonial violation and death in Wedekind's *The Great Love* is but one aspect of a much larger, complex, fragmentary, and ultimately contradictory attempt on the author's part to envisage a world in which the bourgeois family is no more, or is not yet. The only part of this project to have been published during the author's lifetime – the novella *Mine-Haha: or, On the Physical Education of Young Girls* (1903), is, unlike *The Great Love*, rather subtle and understated in its approach to rewriting the social order. In *Mine-Haha*, Wedekind created a setting with significant links to the utopian tradition. These links include the motif of seclusion, the regimentation of existence, the communal rearing of children in a society in which the traditional family no longer exists, and the utopian ideal of a perfectible body. *Mine-Haha* describes a pedagogical enclave, a walled parkland inhabited only by girls. Upbringing is a communally shared task, as each older child is entrusted with the care of an infant; the abolition of the conventional family, a common feature of utopian fiction, is thus further radicalised in the segregation of children from adults. Responsibility begins early, at the age of five. In the early years of the narrator's childhood, a mixed company of boys and girls spends warm summer days bathing in the open air, all of them naked. The story's idyllic setting recalls the arcadian tradition; it is this aspect of the story which appealed to the French film director Lucile Hadzihalilovic, and which is captured with luminous intensity in her 2004 screen adaptation, *Innocence*.

The oft-remarked stasis of utopia is a notable feature of the world of *Mine-Haha*. Each year, the eldest girl in the house leaves and a new youngest girl arrives, upon which all inhabitants move up one place in the age-determined hierarchy: we return to this facet of the story below, as it forms the basis for one of Hadzihalilovic's most striking scenes. The girls' carefully structured existence may echo the cohort system of conventional education – in some respects this is a boarding-school story – but in its ritual and cyclical quality it also recalls the regimented existence common in utopian narratives since More and Campanella. The plotline of *Mine-Haha* is relatively weak, not only because we are dealing here with the fragment of the larger, unfinished *The Great Love*, but also because the story is more concerned with questions of looking and being looked, and with the creation of atmosphere, than with action and character development. The education the girls receive is dedicated to the inculcation of physical fitness and grace alongside an emotionally subdued mental conformism. The novella's idyllic setting recalls the reform movements of the early twentieth century – the girls learn gymnastics and dancing, bathe naked and spend most of the summer in the fresh air. Yet as Ortrud Gutjahr has shown, the superficial similarity between the education system of *Mine-Haha* and the priorities of contemporary — and subsequent — pedagogical reform and body culture movements dissolves on closer examination (Gutjahr, 2001). The story evokes the idea of reform, but lacks any sense of political consciousness; it suggests pedagogical progressivism, yet portrays an education system which prioritises conformity and suppresses individualism. While dance is placed at the heart of the curriculum, this is not the free, expressive modern dance of Isadora Duncan or the Dalcrozean eurhythmists, but rather a rigid series of prescribed movements; and while the body occupies a position

of central importance in the whole system, this is not the natural, unfettered body of naturism, but rather a costumed and trained body that is subject to strict discipline and corporal punishment. The focus on physicality, sensuality and grace takes on quite a sinister complexion when we realise that this is not a question of liberating the girls from corsets and Latin grammar, but of cultivating their bodies to gratify the voyeuristic desires and sexual appetites of a male public. The beauty, strength, health, and athleticism that are at the core of the education programme portrayed in *Mine-Haha* are not aimed at for their own sake as part of an ideal of individual development and flourishing, but are destined to be exhibited and consumed. The muted personal emotions — erotic attraction, competitiveness and quasi-maternal feelings of responsibility, affection and pride — are by-products of the system, recalling the subsumption of the individual into the collective that frequently occurs in utopias, from Thomas More's eponymous imaginary island (1516) through to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1934).

*Mine-Haha* may be a utopia of sorts, but (like many utopias, in fact) it is not a vision of emancipation. Because agency, choice, and self-determination are absent, the dominant attitude is one of resignation and acceptance; curiosity and rebelliousness are practically eliminated. The few instances of resistance and transgression result either in lifelong incarceration – this is the fate of the old women who serve the girls – or in elimination. These authoritarian aspects of the novella are equally present in Hadzihalilovic's film. A recurring dialogue fragment in *Innocence*, "Pourquoi?" "Parce que", summarises the defining condition of the girls' lives.

At first glance, then, *Mine-Haha* is a boarding-school story, an uneventful portrayal of the regimented lives of young girls in the pedagogical province of an idyllic parkland setting, who spend their days engaging in physical exercise, music, and dancing. Yet on closer inspection, this seemingly unremarkable scenario contains, in germ, all the ingredients of the later regime of *The Great Love*, and indeed the novella was originally conceived as the opening section of the utopian project discussed above.

*Mine Haha* may seem far from the Dadaist delight in disgust; remote from the Dionysian frenzies of Rohde, Nietzsche and the modernists who come after them; only tenuously, if at all, related to the utopian tradition and its catastrophist restaging in the great dystopias of the twentieth century. Yet in its negation of the bourgeois family; in its exposure of the ways in which the script of female sexuality is written to groom girls for sexual service; in the eerie voice it gives to an individual consciousness that has been all but subsumed by the collective of which it forms a part; and in its portrayal of a social order whose paramount commitment is to its own perpetuation, unchanged, into the future, *Mine-Haha* anticipates central features of the dystopian visions that will come to the fore in the decades that follow it.

In her 2004 film *Innocence*, closely based on *Mine-Haha*, Hadzihalilovic captures the subtly sinister proto-dystopian atmosphere of Wedekind's pedagogical idyll. In a particularly striking scene near the beginning of the film, Hadzihalilovic's very young actors portray the ritual initiation of a small girl into a non-familial, even anti-familial, all-female collective. In this collective, the individual is subordinate to, and defined solely by her position relative to, the group (see figures 1-4).

Fig. 1: The new arrival:





Fig. 2: Ribbons ritual 1:



Fig. 3: Ribbons ritual 2:



Fig 4: Ribbons ritual 3:



Throughout the several minutes of this scene, only three words are spoken – ‘Changez les rubans’ (‘Change your ribbons’). The ritual is otherwise performed in silence, until the girl in Fig. 3 rebels by throwing her shoe at the mirror – she does not wish to advance in the hierarchy from youngest to next youngest. But even this moment of disquiet is insufficient to throw sand in the well-oiled machine. The uniformity and passivity of the girls – against which even the brief flashes of mutiny we see among the younger ones (the broken mirror in Fig. 4) are powerless; the relentless focus on the body both as object of the gaze and raw material for induction into a particular culture; the stasis of fully systematized life, in which the only possible movement is upwards through a predetermined hierarchy, symbolised by the colour of ribbon worn in each girl’s hair; and the isolation of the environment, which Hadzihalilovic herself has described as a mix of paradise and prison; all of these features of the film are already present in Wedekind’s novella, and all presage the development of the modernist utopia as it begins to turn dystopian. If Wedekind had finished his utopia,

and if Hadzihalilovic had adapted the whole lot for the screen, we would see these girls move through a system that grooms them, ultimately, for Dionysian rituals and institutionalised prostitution – and indeed, this is more or less what John Irvin’s screen adaptation of the same text, *The Fine Art of Love*, set out to do in 2005, although with a slightly different emphasis and a stronger narrative, resulting in a more period-drama feel. The differences between the two directors’ readings of, and creative departures from, Wedekind’s text are already suggested in their respective titles: Hadzihalilovic’s *Innocence* foregrounds the figures of the children in the idyllic parkland setting, whereas Irvin’s *The Fine Art of Love* focusses, especially in its final scene (fig. 5), on the devastating consequences of a sexual economy that grooms girls for sexual service. Irvin’s title thus becomes comprehensible in retrospect as a mixture of irony and accusation. The close-to-kitsch setting of the girls’ country boarding school thus serves, in both films as in the novella, as the locus of a critique of the emotional costs exacted by a regime that has achieved full subordination of the individual to the collective, a subordination perfected in the fact that the regime’s inhabitants now police and discipline each other.

Fig. 5: Culmination of the ‘physical education of young girls’:



## **Conclusion.**

In considering the relationships between the Dionysian and the utopian, as these combine and interact to create spaces outside, or opposed to, the heteronormative logic of the bourgeois family, I have touched on a series of questions that might help to reframe our understanding of gangs and other marginal or self-marginalising collectives, as follows. The dynamics of exemption that characterise gangs may be clarified with reference to utopia: in some ways, a gang is a kind of utopia, in its peculiar amalgam of the anti-social and the deeply social, of refusalism and mirroring, contestation and mimicry, with respect to the social order from which it secedes but on which it continues to rely for its meaning and identity. In other ways, a gang is a kind of family, or at least displays features reminiscent of the familial. The alternative families, non-families and anti-families of the utopian tradition, particularly in their negation or rethinking of the heteroreproductive family unit, help us to think through

the relationships between gang and family, and to determine the extent to which gang and family are, while analogous, potentially also incompatible. To revisit the question posed by Barry McCrea in *In the Company of Strangers*, but to extend its reach to the anti-family utopias of modernism: Is any willed collective that is not grounded in genealogical ties potentially queer in the utopian sense, or utopian in the queer sense, insofar as it effects a negation of the family? Where the queer disrupts the heteronormative model of family rooted in marriage and consanguinity, it opens a utopian horizon of possibility, an alternative futurity not monopolised by the reproductive imperative (Edelman 2004; Ahmed 2006). The gang may constitute one of the social groupings on that utopian horizon. But its cohesiveness as a social grouping is vouchsafed less by an Apollonian commitment to rational order, than to the kinds of moments of Dionysian rapture and excess that are staged in the orgiastic frenzies and rituals of the texts discussed above.

The undoing of family in *The Great Love* enabled Frank Wedekind to pursue his preoccupation with sexuality in the absence of the norms and mores that characterised his actual historical context. The Eros worshipped in this imaginary theocracy is an Eros that is fully bound to Thanatos: the experiment of sexual ritual culminates in the fusion of sexual desire with the desire for destruction and death. This takes place publicly, through the ecstatic rituals of a collective which leaves no room for individual dissent. It may be that Wedekind's vision is so troubling – and provocative of cinematic reworkings in the twenty-first century – because it anticipates the abdication of reason by the ecstatic collective.

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### **Filmography**

*Innocence* (France: 2004) Dir. Lucile Hadzihalilovic.

*The Fine Art of Love: Mine Ha-Ha* (Italy: 2005) Dir. John Irvin.