



PREVIEW

Earwig

+ Q&A with director Lucile Hadžihalilović

There is no straight story coming any time soon from David Lynch's closest filmmaking heir, Lucile Hadžihalilović. Her new film – her first in English – is an adaptation of *Earwig*, a novella by the British artist and author Brian Catling. Paul Hilton (*Lady Macbeth*) plays the title character, a middle-aged World War I veteran, named for his extraordinary hearing, who is responsible for the care of a ten-year-old girl. Here comes the rabbit hole: every day Earwig must make and replace her teeth, which are made of ice.

It was the image of these teeth that made Hadžihalilović want to adapt the book when she first read it: 'Teeth are linked to vitality but here are combined with the fragility of the ice that melts; it's a stunning combination. The mystery and the ambiguity of the characters and of the events also fascinated me. As with every piece of art that you don't fully "get", it stays in your mind.'

Having just one main setting – Earwig's apartment – proved helpful for shooting under Covid restrictions. (The film was due to shoot in April 2020 but production only started in November.) A huge house in central Brussels served as both set and production base. Hadžihalilović describes the apartment on film as 'a kind of maze, with interior stairways and many doors. [The location] already possessed an atmosphere of secrets and loneliness, and the faded charm I was looking for.' One challenge was that in the book the apartment's shutters always remain closed. So to stay true to the book's eeriness, Hadžihalilović only used natural or in-source lights.

After *Innocence* (2004), a gothic horror set in a boarding school, and *Evolution* (2015), about a young boy undergoing strange medical tests, what made her again return to a dark fable about children? 'The fairytale form is very well suited to telling coming-of-age stories. They are deeply linked to the unconscious, and maybe children are still more connected with these forces – at least this is what I imagine. [Fairytale] allow me to be more easily poetical and metaphorical and to express underlying or hidden motives in a freer, more direct way.'

However, this time, she explains, the protagonist is an adult: 'It's as if I was adopting the reverse angle from my previous films, and this was also very appealing. *Earwig* is not so much a coming-of-age story – although there is an element of that in the film – but an awareness of something that has been repressed: the story of a haunting and, perhaps, of deliverance.'

Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, April 2021

The title of Brian Catling's 2019 novel *Earwig* is also the nickname of the protagonist Aalbert Scellinc, earned for his acutely sensitive powers of hearing. You would never know this from Lucile Hadžihalilović's film version, even if its opening shot does show the main character's ear. Albert (Paul Hilton) is also now missing an 'a' from his forename, lost in translation. For in Hadžihalilović and Geoff Cox's adaptation, much of the novel's detail has been pared away, including its very specific location (Liège) and final destination (Paris), here reduced to a more vaguely Continental 1950s setting. In the film, the only clear reference for the title is an actual earwig with which Albert's young ward Mia

(Romane Hemelaers) is seen playing at night in her bedroom, much as she builds fortresses for a fly with the scraps of newspaper that are her only toys.

Earwigs and other insects seem to be a metaphor in this impenetrable Kafkaesque fable of humans caught in a metamorphic life cycle that they – and we – never fully understand. Like the young girls in Hadžihalilović's *Innocence* (2004) and the young boys in her *Evolution* (2015), Mia is being prepared for a rite of passage that is presented in the irrational idioms of surrealism. It is a process which her servile 'keeper' and (possible) father Albert may have himself undergone, even if he now seems to remember it barely, if at all.

The shuttered house they share is drab and sparsely furnished, with the dim, sickly yellow of its lamps the film's dominant colour. Both Albert and Mia separately seek refuge from this jaundiced, hermetic monochrome by losing themselves either in the kaleidoscopic iridescence of a crystal glass, or in a painting of a large building. A flashback reveals that this painting was also in Albert's boyhood home, while a reproduction decorates the apartment of barmaid Celeste (Romola Garai), with whom Albert will form a strange bond, born of violence and loss. Meanwhile, the building depicted – a building which, in one way or another, links these three characters' fates – will be the location of the film's climax (and may also be the orphanage on whose steps Albert was left as a baby, much as Albert will leave Mia there).

Albert has been hired to observe Mia, feed her, and regularly fit her with icy false teeth fashioned from her own saliva, which he collects in phials and freezes in moulds. Beyond these ministrations, the dour, haunted man remains aloof from his charge, hardly talking to her, but he is shaken from his strange, affectless routine by a phone call informing him that he must bring the girl in 13 days, and before then 'teach her how to behave outside'. As she readies to leave her cocooned existence, Mia begins to transform: she acquires a new red coat and shoes, and a new desire to leave the house; she begins to hum the tune that was the signature of Albert's late wife Marie (Anastasia Robin); she starts bleeding from her mouth (an absurdist analogue of menarche); and her temporary ice teeth are replaced with permanent glass implants. At the same time Celeste, recovering from a horrific bloody injury to her own mouth, is groomed by wealthy, opportunistic benefactor Laurence (Alex Lawther).

'We've met before, I'm sure of it,' says the stranger (Peter Van den Begin) who approaches Albert in the bar where Celeste works. This line, and the stranger's insights into Albert's identity and history, evoke the Mystery Man from David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), with its similar themes of parallel lives and psychogenic fugue. Earlier in the film (although chronologically later), Mia falls headfirst into a lake on her first ever outing from the house and nearly drowns, her bright red coat recalling the drowned daughter in Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), which similarly follows a father driven by loss towards a dark destiny. These allusions are as close to a map as the viewer will get in a film whose only narrative coordinates are tentative maybes and obscure, even contradictory suggestions, and whose obfuscation is perhaps best encapsulated by a train journey near the end, where a passing landscape and terminus are rendered nearly invisible by night and fog. *Earwig* keeps its secrets, which is what will ensure that its enigmatic visions burrow their way into the darker crevices of the viewer's consciousness.

Anton Bitel, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2022

EARWIG

Directed by: Lucile Hadžihalilović

©: Anti-Worlds, Petit Film, FraKas Productions,
British Film Institute, Channel Four Television Corporation
an Anti-Worlds, Petit Film film

in co-production with: FraKas Productions

with the support of the: Film and Audiovisual Centre of Wallonia
Brussels Federation, The Tax Shelter of the Belgian Federal Government,
Casa Kafka

Casa Kafka Pictures empowered by: Belfius *with the participation of the:*
Brussels-Capital Region

in association with: Cofinova 16, Cofinova 17

developed with the support of: Arte/Cofinova,
Cofinova Développement 14

Developed with the support of: Arte/Cofinova,

Cofinova Développement 14, Angoa

in association with: Cofinova 16, Cofinova 17

with the participation of the: Film and Audiovisual Centre of Wallonia
Brussels Federation, The Tax Shelter of the Belgian Federal Government,
Casa Kafka

Casa Kafka Pictures empowered by: Belfius

with the participation of: screen.brussels

Developed in association with: Film4

Made with the support of: BFI

Presented by: BFI, Film4

International Sales: Wild Bunch

Executive Producers: Julia Oh, Daniel Battsek,

Ollie Madden, Lizzie Francke

Producers: Andy Starke, Jean de Forets, Amélie Jacquis

Line Producer: Serge Catoire

Location Manager: Damien Hamon

Continuity Supervisor: Marie Chaduc

Casting Directors: Sebastiàn Moradiellos, Nanw Rowlands, Rose Denis,
Christophe Hermans, Angele Bardoux

Screenplay: Geoff Cox, Lucile Hadžihalilović

Based on Earwig a novel written by: B. Catling

Director of Photography: Jonathan Ricquebourg

Steadicam Operators: Olivier Merckx, Manu Alberts, Jo Vermaercke

VFX by: MILK

Editor: Adam Finch

Production Designer: Julia Irribarria

Set Designer: Émilie Nélis-Culot

Set Decorator: Jeanne Fonsny

Graphic Designer: Amandine Grafe

Costume Designer: Jackyie Fauconnier

Make-up and Hair Designer: Anne Moralis

Music: Augustin Viard

Sound Designer: Ken Yasumoto

Sound Re-recording Mixer: Benoît Biral

Sound Mixer: Bruno Schweisguth

Stunt Co-ordinator: Olivier Bisback

Thanks: Gaspar Noé

Cast

Paul Hilton (*Albert*)

Alex Lawther (*Laurence*)

Romane Hemelaers (*Mia*)

Romola Garai (*Celeste*)

Peter Van den Begin (*stranger*)

Anastasia Robin (*Marie*)

Michael Pas (*dentist*)

Marie Bos (*receptionist*)

Isabelle de Hertogh (*concierge*)

UK-France-Belgium 2021©

114 mins

Courtesy of Anti-Worlds Releasing

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Restoration Preview:

Dr. Who and the Daleks + Q&A

Sun 19 Jun 11:30

Restoration Preview:

Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.

Sun 19 Jun 14:30

Experimenta Presents: Premiere: Wayfinder + Q&A with director

Larry Achiampong

Tue 21 Jun 18:15

Burning an Illusion + intro by actor Cassie McFarlane

Mon 27 Jun 18:00

Preview: The Afterlight + Q&A with director Charlie Shackleton

Wed 29 Jun 18:20

NEW & RE-RELEASES

Vampyr

Continues from Fri 20 May

Get Carter

Continues from Fri 27 May

Benediction

From Fri 3 Jun

Pickpocket

From Fri 3 Jun

All My Friends Hate Me

From Fri 10 Jun

Bergman Island

From Fri 10 Jun

Swan Song

From Fri 10 Jun

Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin)

From Fri 24 Jun (Q&A with Wim Wenders on

Sat 25 Jun 15:00)

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780