

Source: *Le Monde*

A lesson in balance in the dark

A teacher using controversial methods disrupts a clinic for the visually impaired in Lisbon.

In a Lisbon clinic for the visually impaired, patients of various ages and nationalities live together and learn to overcome their disability. Their routine is shattered by the arrival of a new teacher, Ian, who proposes a method as revolutionary as it is controversial: he claims to have freed himself from his white cane, without which the residents are incapable of taking two steps, and guides himself only using the sound of his steps and finger-snapping.

Half-fascinated, half-suspicious, they play the game without being totally convinced of his sincerity. Ian forges a special rapport with Eva, an adult resident, who seems to have lost the taste of life along with her sight.

From this singular discipline, called “echolocation”, Andrzej Jakimowski has created a film to cross genres, where the staging of the complicated master-pupil relationship and reflections on disability are borne on the winding paths of emerging love. Professional and amateur actors take part, real and fake blind people play a concert together, and the para-documentary part creates the foundations for the fictitious story.

Everything is in perfect equilibrium: the beauty of the images, without a trace of pretension in combination with an extraordinary, subtly mediated sound, whose evocative power seizes us (particularly the sound coming from Serrano, the young resident who decides to give Ian the benefit of the doubt) and at the same time soothes the lyricism of the game of seduction.

A genius or a trickster?

Teaching and ethics, honesty and revolutionary methods, risk and expertise. We can see in *Imagine* an original variant of the film *Dead Poets Society*, if only ambiguity – which is possibly its strongest suit – didn’t dominate at every level. It’s the most important trait of the protagonist Ian, whom, like his students, we’re unable to understand completely. Is he a genius or a trickster? Contrary to what we might suppose, the desire to have faith in his genius is short-lived: it’s too beautiful, it invites one to discard the cane too intensely. And a cane gives a sense of security to the same degree as it is a shameful attribute. It is a symbol of painful otherness, which even the most daring students are not certain they want to give up. Before they take a risk they test their teacher. And he submits voluntarily to run the gauntlet in the corridors, and we occasionally laugh at those tests, but their costs are justified, as they were in medieval witchcraft trials. But in this fascinating experiment it’s the soul that’s being played for.