Creative Visions: (De) Constructing “The Beautiful” in Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence*

**The Age of Innocence** (1993 USA 139 mins)

**Source:** Columbia/Tristar **Prod Co:** Columbia **Prod:** Barbara De Fina, Bruce S. Pustin, Joseph P. Reidy **Dir:** Martin Scorsese **Scr:** Jay Cocks and Martin Scorsese, from the novel by Edith Wharton **Phot:** Michael Ballhaus **Ed:** Thelma Schoonmaker **Art Dir:** Speed Hopkins **Prod Des:** Dante Ferretti **Mus:** Elmer Bernstein

**Cast:** Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, Winona Ryder, Richard E. Grant, Miriam Margolyes, Michael Gough, Claire Bloom, Alexis Smith, Norman Lloyd, Sian Phillips, Geraldine Chaplin, Mary Beth Hurt, Jonathan Pryce, Joanne Woodward (narration only)

I think that for Scorsese the whole point is the poignancy of knowing that we are now irrevocably on the far side of classical film-making. However gifted a director is today, he or she can only be a Mannerist, condemned, like the artists who followed the High Renaissance, to echo and embellish the great unselfconscious works of the past.

– Ian Christie

Upon its release, *The Age of Innocence* divided Scorsese devotees into two camps – those who regarded it as brilliant, full of “such passionate intelligence and style that one almost feels ravished by its riches”; and those who wished he’d never left the Italian-American gangster genre, regarding the film as a tedious and pointless exercise in which Scorsese was “too busy showing off the furniture.” I have always been a champion of *The Age of Innocence*, and it remains to this day one of my favourite romantic movies, and much like Visconti’s *The Leopard* (1963) or Ophuls’ *Madame de*... (1953), I feel that it is something to be admired and hopefully shared amongst friends.

Intrigued by the process of adapting literature for cinema, I decided to read Edith Wharton’s novel before revisiting the film for the purposes of writing this review. What an amazing experience! However upon watching the film again, Wharton’s adept use of language and carefully crafted insights into certain character’s motivations had beguiled me so much that I found myself yearning to return to the contemplative timeless place afforded to the spectators/readers of her book. I teetered on depression. Amazingly, his film no longer seemed as languid, clever, witty and multi-faceted as it once did, and although the bitter-sweet love story still moved me to tears during the ending, I found myself now regarding his version as less than perfect. I saw the film as lying broken before me in two distinct parts: the first seeming distinctly rushed in order to fulfil the modern-day (read commercial studio’s/EP’s) expectations of narrative exposition; while the second seemed to exist only to afford Scorsese the luxury of honing in and masterfully embellishing the remains with a wonderfully pathetic, melancholy mood.

Thinking that I had now ruined one of my favourite films (something that you always dread when you write reviews), I avoided writing for a week during which time I saw both *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), coincidentally on the same day. Although I am still trying to formulate an articulate response to *Gangs*, seeing these two films in this short space of time gave me a new way of approaching Scorsese’s work: that in his passion for reinterpreting milieus and characters’ subjectivities, he simultaneously cannot help but acknowledge the body of work made by the Master filmmakers before him (and quite rightly too). I further realised that Scorsese is, like his predecessors, a filmmaker fascinated not just by stories, but the challenge of how best to illustrate or reconstruct them by delving into experiential experiments of process, form and genre. For like the heroes he applauds in his series *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995) and *My Voyage to Italy* (2001), Scorsese’s films are interesting and resonant for me precisely because he tries to go beyond mimicry. He too is a maverick and an iconoclast – a person who, as Wharton surmises of Newland Archer in her novel, is always fearful of “the green mould of the perfunctory [...] perceptibly spreading.”

For this reason, I admire Scorsese a great deal and yet I don't know why I haven't really thought about these dimensions of his work before –
The various confabulations of Newland's eyes, or reflected in the slant of his brow, suggest that he is much more than a passive spectator, that he is himself a part of the world he observes. Consider the fact that May is the only woman in the film who is in control of her own representation. All the others are either seen through the eyes of others, or their gaze is directed elsewhere. Perhaps this is why there are so many explicit references to and uses made of photography in the film's building of May Welland's character. The camera may move to focus on an object or a scene, but it is Newland who is often shown interacting with these objects and scenes, either directly or indirectly. The camera's gaze is Newland's gaze.

The adaptation then, lies in the more surreptitious ways in which we are let in on Newland's manipulations. He renders an imaginative world that is both familiar and strange. It is as if the film is a lighthouse, guiding us through the rough waters of Newland's psyche. The camera may focus on an object or scene, but it is Newland who is often shown interacting with these objects and scenes, either directly or indirectly. The camera's gaze is Newland's gaze.

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs. (6)

— Edith Wharton

Scorsese has often stated that his ultimate reason for choosing to adapt The Age of Innocence was that he was so enthralled by Wharton's ability to blind her readers, like Newland, to the various signs of complicit manipulation around them. Some critics suggest that Scorsese's subsequent attitude towards his adaptation of Wharton's novel was "totally fetishistic" (7), a view confirmed by Scorsese himself, who in an interview revealed: "What I wanted to do as much as possible was to recreate for a viewing audience the experience I had reading the book."

Upon further reflection then, The Age of Innocence is more accurately a film about different modes of representation (or re-presentation); the love story between Newland and Countess Olenska is in actuality more akin to a comfortable melodramatic vehicle in which we are coating along, totally seduced by the various miraculous vistas that Scorsese (re)creates outside its windows.

Although various people have written in awe of these constructions before (9), what I find interesting is that most of them tend to concentrate upon the sublime or 'the beautiful' elements of the film. For it is there they argue, that the characters' desire for romance and nostalgia are best represented. However, is this not unlike Newland who prefers to engage with rare specimens of the world, much like in an art gallery or museum? Time and time again, there are signs warning us against such limited engagement with the text, so I find it curious that the concurrent, tenuous imagery utilised to show up Newland's visions almost from the beginning as fragile illusions/delusions, are so often overlooked. Just as there is a yin to every yang, so it follows that the flip-side of 'the beautiful' in a world created by Scorsese should simultaneously be composed of dread, decay and destruction.

In other words, I regard Scorsese's adaptation as masterful not just because he reveals his nostalgic side by recreating a seemingly perfect simulacra of 1870s New York, or an unusually romantic side by obsessively revising an unattainable woman, but because, like Wharton, he can simultaneously tear holes in the fabric of the wonderful story as soon as he weaves it. And this is why I find it odd that the sequences most reviewers waxed lyrical about are the most obvious, such as: the connotations of innocence and sexual awakening in the opening credit sequence in which a series of flowers swirl, unfurl and pass their prime – like ballet dancers – in perfect time to a wonderfully foreboding score by Elmer Bernstein; or the repeated painterly 'lighthouse sequence' where Newland's mind's-eye foolishly (and one has to say rather pathetically – in an old-fashioned way) measures the Countess' yearning for him by the passing of a yacht.

As mesmerising and memorable as these sequences are, there are other sequences in the film that are more memorable precisely because they are so disturbing. They rupture from the text. For instance, consider the scene where Newland first visits the Countess (significantly just after a scene with May Welland [his fiancée]). The first thing we are shown is not Newland or the Countess but the painted image of a faceless woman in white with a parasol. As the camera pulls back, we see Newland peering at the figure of this woman, as if trying to understand this strange and 'ugly' composition. The camera then pans away from this painting to another from the same School, which Newland again seemingly rejects in favour of finding more familiar 'readable,' 'knowable' objects d'art in the Countess' parlour – something he fails to do until the Countess enters the room. This first painting screams with significance. An early example of European abstract painting, it appears alarming to Newland's (and our) untrained eyes because it appears 'unfinished,' particularly when juxtaposed with all the other paintings shown previously in the film which are so vivacious and 'overworked.' Yet this image is also proffered as an ironic symbol of Newland's updating of his vision made of snow. (11)

The genius in Scorsese's adaptation then lies in the more surreptitious ways in which we are let in on Newland's manipulations. He renders an imaginative world that is both familiar and strange. It is as if the film is a lighthouse, guiding us through the rough waters of Newland's psyche. The camera may move to focus on an object or scene, but it is Newland who is often shown interacting with these objects and scenes, either directly or indirectly. The camera's gaze is Newland's gaze.

creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (11)

Such misunderstandings then quite clearly serve to warn us about Newland and the people around him. They tell us that they are nothing more than surface gazers, aesthetes who drink in other people's beauty in the vain and mistaken belief of owning it forever. The genius in Scorsese's adaptation then, lies in the more surreptitious ways in which we are let in on Newland's manipulations. He renders an imaginative world where creatures like Newland, who cannot bring themselves to speak of their real desires publicly, are forced to stoically re-purpose them into something far more enthralling, yet increasingly fleeting. Like the later image of the bowler-hatted, frock-coated men battling a gale as they cross town to the business district, once you recognise the figures that Scorsese fashions to chink away at Newland's armour, a plethora of other instances rise to the surface of your interpretation. They not only clearly speak of his subconscious feelings of dread about entering domestic life, they also relate his fear of being 'pinned down' and feminised – of being forced to abandon the freedoms and passions of an unknown and therefore un-representable life (that is, with the Countess).

Perhaps this is why there are so many explicit references to and uses made of photography in the film's building of May Welland's character. Consider the fact that May is the only woman in the film who is in control of her own representation. All the others are either seen through the various confabulations of Newland's eyes, or reflected in the décor, menus, table settings and paintings in people's homes – material...
things that speak so well of their owner's characters that they end up reducing them to stereotypes. (12) The most notable instance is when May has her wedding portrait taken at a photographic studio. Crucially this sequence appears in the film just when Newland's dreams of breaking free from conventional society are articulated to the audience, which is then shattered by May's telegram informing him of her family's decision to advance their wedding date. In the subsequent sequence, we witness Newland being jettisoned to the periphery of her image. As Newland looks on, we see his 'wife' as a series of virtual images: upside down on a mirror inside the camera's lens; corrected right-ways-up, reflected in the 'eye' of the camera's lens; then multiplied into a series of replica images in the three mirrors behind her; and finally as a stereotypical vision of Victorian formal femininity with Scorsese (as the studio photographer) posing her amongst a series of props. The shifts of vision from various aesthetic modes of representation employed by Scorsese in this sequence, thereby suggests her increasing power and Newland's lack of ability to 'read her' (to separate fantasy from the reality around him). Like the paintings that surround the characters in the film to this point, photography (and by extension the film) serves to describe, represent, narrate and therefore dominate and contain the characters of Newland and Countess Olenska. The wedding photograph then serves as a kind of trophy of May's, whereby she celebrates her victory over the Countess.

It is in these disturbing yet sublime moments of his adaptation of Wharton's novel that Scorsese most clearly demonstrates his talent and status as a great director. He inspires shifts of directorial vision away from more restrictive 'reflective' ways of re-presenting a story, to a mode of address that is much more truthful and revealing about its characters. As Lesley Stern simply surmises:

_The mise-en-scene of The Age of Innocence does not simply connote a time before the revolution of modernity, nor does it register an obsession with period detail (although it is obsessive); on the contrary, it charts the mise-en-scene and theatricalisation of obsessive desire. In fact Newland is not the only character [...] to will a world into being; the film is thick with narrative thieves and wilful desires._ (13)

And this is why I still remain a lover of this film.

Endnotes

5. For example, choosing to film _Gangs_ at Cinecittà is a distinct nod to such heroes as Federico Fellini who made many of their Italian classics there; not to mention providing a link to the cutting irony espoused in such fantastic, revisionist films about the dominance of the (American) studio system as Minnelli's _Two Weeks in Another Town_ (1962) and Godard's _Contempt_ (1963), both of which were largely shot there.
9. Two of the most notable and eloquent discussions of Scorsese's adaptation are by Murphy and Taubin.
12. The most brilliant example of this is the character of Larry Lefferts. By casting Richard E. Grant, Scorsese obliterates the need for pages of Wharton's novel by capturing one of his characteristically snobbish sneers.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Age of Innocence (1993) - IMDb. Directed by Martin Scorsese. With Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, Winona Ryder, Linda Faye Farkas. You are Young, Broke, and Beautiful. costumedramas. Michelle Pfeiffer as Countess Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence (1993). The Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes. Madame Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) in Age of Innocence. In an age of innocence. They dared to break the rules. Genres Martin Scorsese's beautifully done "The Age of Innocence" almost reaches excellence on a grand scale by having stunning performances and creating real intrigue with a story that could have been slow and dull. It is late 19th Century New York and attorney Daniel Day-Lewis is about to wed socialite Winona Ryder (Oscar-nominated). Naturally their lives of privilege and the finer things in life make them a quietly happy couple. However their lives are changed when Day-Lewis is asked to defend Ryder's cousin (Michelle Pfeiffer), a woman trying to divorce herself from an abusive In this installment of my Martin Scorsese marathon, I review his period drama The Age of Innocence, an obscure film which I believe comes with an acquired taste. Link to Scorsese playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list Don't forget to like, subscribe, and share your thoughts down below so your comments can be potentially featured in future comment shoutout videos! You can also follow me on Letterboxd: https://letterboxd.com/martinjacob49/. The Age of innocence: Directed by Martin Scorsese. Produced by Barbara De Fina. Screenplay by Jay Cocks Martin Scorsese. Based on The Age of ... Director: Martin Scorsese. In Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Edith Wharton's 1920 novel, romance between an upper-class gentleman and an ostracized lady is doomed by 19th century New York society. Shortly after his engagement to blandly genteel May Welland (Winona Ryder), Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) is reacquainted with May's scandalous cousin Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer). As the head of an esteemed family, Archer initially uses his standing to try to rehabilitate Ellen's reputation, but he finds himself increasingly drawn to her disregard for the codes of New Y