

The Age Of Innocence

Director Martin Scorsese is inextricably linked by his fans with the raw, perfervid street life of New York in his signature films like *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, and his early *Mean Streets*, whose title could stand for much of his work. Aware of this project from Edith Wharton's 1920 novel of late Victorianism, *The Age of Innocence*, these same fans might have wondered out loud: what would drive the guy who gave us Robert DeNiro's demented taxi driver, Travis Bickle, to this kind of tale, all subtlety, nuance, and indirection?

The heartening news is that Scorsese has, indeed, pulled it off: he has given us a rich and convincing rendition of his beloved city, but this time circa 1870. That is the period of Wharton's story, densely rendered in Scorsese and co-writer Jay Cocks's adept screenplay, wherein we observe the excruciatingly correct, upper-class life of Manhattan's elite. It is a world of lavish balls, hand-delivered messages on silver trays, tails at dinner, strict observances of society's codes--a claustrophobia of class.

Imbued with this world--but fastidiously critical of it--is Newland Archer (Daniel Day Lewis), a promising lawyer from one of the "good" families who is smugly engaged to the lovely May Welland (Winona Ryder) of a family just as "good." Into their lives comes May's cousin Ellen, the countess Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), back from a failed marriage in Europe and looking to find a place in New York society. Newland's good intentions towards Ellen, a smoky presence beside his demure May, turn from sympathy to intrigue to passion as their family connections throw them together. Ellen is something new. In Newland's world, where "everything is labeled, but everybody is not," she avoids all labels and promises him freedom, a freedom she herself openly espouses. In comparison with Ellen, he now finds his fiancée exhibiting an "inexpressive girlishness." May is lilies of the valley; Ellen is yellow roses.

The three dance around each other as the scenes lovingly flit from the opera box to snow-glazed Long Island to wintering in St. Augustine, until Newland, unable to cross convention, marries his intended and accepts his fate. Ellen continues to possess him, however, and he contrives ways to meet her and to see that she stays in America, approachable, able to remind him of a thwarted passion. Meanwhile, his wife becomes a "curtain dropped in front of an emptiness." The final nail in the coffin of his unwanted domesticity is May's tender announcement of her pregnancy, knowledge of which drives Ellen back to Europe. An occasion of familial joy is strangled in Newland's gritted teeth.

Wharton's novel is all implacable conventions, stifled feelings and checked emotions, and Scorsese finds their visual equivalents in the entire texture and look of the film. There are occasional outdoor scenes, but the overwhelming flavor is of the overstuffed Victorian room, of layers of brocade and carpet, of high and tight collars. This is a world made familiar to many movie-goers through "Masterpiece Theater" and the films of the Merchant-Ivory team, especially their films of Henry James and E.M. Forster novels. This is a comfortable comparison, but one should look closer; Mr. Scorsese's work is denser, more baroque.

He is aided immensely by cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, who is able to use a waltzing camera that portrays both the lilt of a ball and the endless circles of an unexamined life. He revives one of the movie's oldest devices--the iris-in--to bring us into intimate contact with the characters. His lens seeks out telling artifacts of Victoriana: fowl displayed on a plate, the slicing of an after-dinner cigar, a silk dress's train sliding out a door. Such details replicate, as Millicent Bell has written of Wharton's prose, "a splendid achievement of satiric archaeology."

Certainly Mr. Ballhaus's most spectacular close-up is the halting, lingering shot of Newland's unbuttoning and peeling off of Ellen's glove to get at her prized flesh. In a "PG" film, with zero raunch, no nasty words, and skin only from the neck up, this scene, using delicately overlapping shots, carries an overpowering eroticism. Accompanied by Elmer Bernstein's yearning strings, this may be the sexiest scene of the year!

The production is a joy to behold. Designed by Dante Ferretti and costumed by Giuseppe Pescucci, it displays a tapestry of wonderful settings. In one shot (which appears to be a model) of Times Square, the look of Victorian New York is impeccable. In another, an isolated town house offers a splendid vision of a pre-skyscraper Manhattan. The film is one to luxuriate in; one could go back a second time just to study the decor and the dresses. So as to catch, for example, the differences in the slightly more "bohemian" furnishings of Ellen's house compared to those of the more upright families. *The Age of Innocence* is done with tremendous taste, taste at the service of the tale.

Daniel Day Lewis's performance will remind some of his Cecil in *A Room With a View*, just as contained but not as prudish. He must, as needs be, staunch emotion and evidence it through eye and mouth and set-of-head, and he does this very effectively. Michelle Pfeiffer carries off the intriguing, unconventional Ellen; one understands how Newland is captured by her. One quibble might be that--from a life spent in Europe--her Countess could show a more continental mien. Winona Ryder, an actress I find endlessly interesting in contemporary roles, has seen her range diminished in two recent costume dramas, this one following *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. In both, she is prim and pretty but, perforce, limited in outlook and dimension, and, thus, in interest. Behind the three principals is a considerable array of acting talent, both English and American, but their presence is peripheral, not singular. The film's occasional narration, carrying the authorial voice of Wharton, is nicely done by Joanne Woodward and adds a nice ironic distance to the narrative.

Yet one still asks, what brought tough Marty Scorsese to the filigree and flair of *The Age of Innocence*? Other than simply the attraction of a classic American story well-told, it could have appealed to this director because of its relation to the individual in confinement. His New York stories typically concern figures constrained by class, caste, or circumstance who desperately (usually, not successfully) try to break out by the most explosive means: Travis Bickle blowing away a batch of hoods, Jake LaMotta bludgeoning his rivals--even Christ in the *Last Temptation* finding the ultimate release. In *The Age of Innocence*, we are in a far more refined world but one just as confining. Here, Scorsese's challenge is to forego the release, the explosion. He understands that the conventions are so profound as to preclude an outburst. In carrying it off, this very contemporary American filmmaker shows he can move in another time, and this most explosive of our directors shows the power that can come with total control of his filmic resources.

(September 1993)