

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE – 1993

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In 1870s New York, Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) is engaged to marry May Welland (Winona Ryder). His plans are upset with the arrival from Europe of May's recently separated cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer). Olenska brings with her both the decadence of Europe with its free sexuality and modern art, and social freedom in her naive flaunting of New York society. Newland falls in love with Ellen, seeing in himself the same possibilities, but is determined to marry May because of his (and her) social position in the community. After the marriage, he settles down to a frustrated domesticity and thus lives out his life.

Any film that begins with a highly stylized performance of Charles F. Gounod's opera *Faust* sets us up for all kinds of nefarious goings on. We cannot but think of the selling of souls and redemption through love. Well, *The Age of Innocence* sells a lot of souls, but not in exchange for knowledge, rather in exchange for conformity in a society of hypocrisy. And there is little redemption in sight. Were this film made five or ten years ago, I would call it a clear and prescient condemnation of yuppie philosophy, in which social position, ritual, and show is all. Today, however, it is a little late to get on that bandwagon, which already includes everything from *Life Stinks* [1991] to *Death Becomes Her* [1992] to *Reservoir Dogs* [1992]. Yet *The Age of Innocence*, like any film directed by Martin Scorsese, deserves serious consideration in terms of how it deals with social issues and for its cinematic inventiveness. There are several aspects of this film that seem to be a departure for Scorsese (like the special effects) and yet, despite the period costume drama aspects of the film, it clearly bears his auteur stamp, placing it well within the scope of his previous films.

Special effects in *The Age of Innocence* are unlike anything Scorsese has done before. In this age of super computer special effects in almost every film, from the blatant in *Jurassic Park* [1993] to the almost frighteningly subliminal in *Line of Fire* [1993], the special effects in *The Age of Innocence* live up to the title almost more than any other aspect of the film. The effects are from cinema's age of innocence; they might be the Lumiere Brothers' of 1896 Paris. We get irises closing in on a specific piece of the frame that we should pay attention to; we get narrow spotlights focusing on people's faces for emphasis; we get a whole host of tricks that seem to have been ignored for decades. In terms of effects, this film resembles *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [1992] more than any other film of the last half-century. Both films revive, use, and celebrate antiquated techniques not only to give a visceral and cinematic feel of the era in which the stories are placed, but because the "simplicity" of these techniques is genuinely surprising and refreshing.

This harking back to a filmically more innocent time also reflects Scorsese's fascination with the history of film, photography, and painting. Not only do we see avant-garde art on the walls of Countess Olenska's house, people actually sit around in imitation of the composition of Impressionist paintings, whether sitting in their opera boxes (Daumier, Renoir and Lautrec) or having a picnic or sitting in a cafe (Monet and Seurat).

In stark contrast to the apparent simplicity of the special effects and the classically referential compositions in *The Age of Innocence* is the peripatetic camera work.

Scorsese's camera, in contrast to the wimpshness of the hero of the film, becomes a superhero. Like Superman, it leaps rows of cars in a single bound; like Spiderman, it climbs walls and hangs on ceilings. And like Baryshnikov, it spins and twirls like a dancer. This combination of apparently naive special effects and eye-popping (and often distracting) hyperactive camera work brings to *The Age of Innocence* a uniqueness that we do not expect from Martin Scorsese. These are some of the departures for the director. However, there are far more affinities with his previous work than might appear at first glance. Scorsese has always concerned himself with a rather narrow set of moral and social issues; unsurprisingly, *The Age of Innocence* deals with many, if not all of them.

It is hard to watch this movie, placed as it is in turn-of-the-century New York City, and not to think that on these very mean streets in a very few decades Travis Bickle will be driving his cab. With this hint, it is easy to see connections between *Taxi Driver* [1976] and *The Age of Innocence*. (In one striking scene, we see an old-fashioned building standing alone, desolate and forlorn, amid a rapidly changing New York City.) While these two films may seem at desperate poles of Scorsese's oeuvre, I find many remarkable similarities. At the root of both is an investigation of the conflict between a man's sexual/emotional feelings and society's dictates on how those feelings are to be correctly expressed.

Cultures, according to Scorsese's sociology, are slaves to ritual. *The Age of Innocence* represents this idea best in the dining scenes. The people of New York "then" seem to eat food little different from New York "now," they simply eat a lot more of it (thirteen courses was average for a formal dinner). Servants serve huge portions of each course in a ritual that can only be called choreographic. The focus is on the look of the food and the presentation – as everything in this society, it consists of appearances only. These ritualized dinners are simply miniatures of the larger and more frightening rituals which this society undertakes to consume others and to nourish itself on the victims' souls – the operas, the balls, the gossip, the breakfasts, the engagements, the weddings, and, of course, the extra-marital affairs.

Scorsese has always been concerned with ritual and its destructiveness to the soul: ritualized physical punishment in the form of boxing in *Raging Bull* [1980], ritualized male bonding as self-destruction in *Goodfellas* [1990], and ritualized cleansing through violence in *Taxi Driver*. Perhaps because *The Age of Innocence* is a historical costume drama, these concerns may not be immediately evident, but I feel that in many ways *The Age of Innocence* is a summary of many of the issues Scorsese has concerned himself with throughout his career: the hypocrisy of a society that sacrifices its best (*Raging Bull*, *King of Comedy* [1982], *The Last Temptation of Christ* [1988]), the results of sexual repression and frustration (*Cape Fear* [1991], *Taxi Driver*, *After Dark* [1985]), and so on. Like *Goodfellas*, Scorsese has chosen to portray in rich detail a system that one entered, ensnares, and enslaves the victim.

Dance, like food, becomes another form of metaphor in *The Age of Innocence*, and the central waltz scene begs for comparison to other, similar dance scenes (*Madam Bovary* [1949], *The King and I* [1956], and *The Magnificent Ambersons* [1942] are a few

that come to mind). The "top shot" (that is, looking down on the dancers directly from above), reminds us of its inventor – Busby Berkeley. Like Scorsese, Berkeley looks down upon dancers and sees there a clockwork, people reduced to cogs in a great, handsome, and highly entertaining machine. Berkeley would often reduce women (most often) to ciphers and transform them into non-threatening (hetero- and homo-) sexual objects that the camera, with its cleverly self-conscious movements, keeps under tight control and ever-present surveillance. While Berkeley uses this device for visual pleasure, Scorsese uses it as political comment: these couples are cogs in the machine of society. The politics of this image is further developed when the camera swoops down off the ceiling and brings us closer to the dancers. There, we see the couples twirling in their Viennese Waltz, the women with right hands lowered and heads demurely turned, limply depending on their male partners as their source of energy and direction.

Symbolism is used to embroider an elegant web about the social issues that form the core of *The Age of Innocence*. For instance, the use of color is cleverly combined with meanings hidden in the character's names for both directly symbolic significance and for ironic purpose. First the colors, then the names. All of New York and its high society are colorless – this, of course, is one of the points of the film. Stage actors and opera singers are very pale but outlined in bright colors as if they themselves were ghosts haloed with an aura of intense life, simulacra of what Newland unconsciously aspires to be. The brighter colors of old New York reside in the dreaded foreigner, Countess Ellen Olenska. She wears bright blues and red; even when she wears black or white it seems full of life and energy. This color scheme is elaborated in many ways throughout the film. For instance, the bright yellow bull's eye May hits is the same color as the roses Newland sends Ellen. This seeming irrelevancy, as I will show, becomes the psychological center of the film.

After establishing this color scheme, Scorsese combines it with the characters' names forming a delicious web irony. Let me first briefly consider each of the three major characters' names and then I will explore how each is used to offset what is going on psychologically. Madam Olenska's first name is "Ellen," a derivative of Helen which immediately brings to mind Helen of Troy – a woman whose mythical beauty began the Trojan War and "launched a thousand ships". In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen certainly initiates a war, albeit an internal one within Newland. Newland Archer may strive for a "new land," as his first name would imply, but he certainly falls short of any achievements in that direction. As for his last name, "Archer," we can confidently say that he misses the mark at almost every turn. In fact, in the last scene of the film (unlike the celestial archer, Orion, who takes his place in the heavens), Newland simply disappears. The last of this central triangle is May Welland. "May" implies spring and rebirth, which the film certainly reinforces with its opening time-lapse images of flowers bursting open. Whether May in fact experiences a rebirth is open to question. She is aware of her husband's infidelity, but this knowledge remains internal, hidden, unacted upon in any way. The film seems to lionize this act of self-effacement, and I certainly would not ascribe to a woman repressing such knowledge any sort of rebirth in the modern sense. Her last name, "Welland," can be seen in several ways. If we parse her name as "Well-land" we come back to the notion that her self-imposed repression is

healthy – a nasty little thought. However, if we look at it as "Well-and" we have images of depth in terms of a deep well and in terms of additional aspects that may not be immediately visible. This is where the color symbolism comes in to affirm or deny these interpretations.

One of the most telling scenes is the archery competition. May hits a bright yellow bull's eye. This is her only connection with a bright, primary color. It was at this point in the film that I decided that May really knew what was going on – especially when the color of the target she put an arrow (a pun on the archery work of Eros?) into was the same color as the roses sent to her cousin by her husband-to-be – but had subsumed herself to the repression demanded by the society to which she aspired. However, I was disappointed that this hint is only verified at the end of the film, after May has died, at a point where we can no longer observe her, share her secret knowledge, and see how its effects subtly materialized in her life. As a prize at the archery competition, May receives a jeweled arrow. It is May, not Newland, who is the real "archer" of the film, yet the film invokes none of the ancient archer images associated with, say, Diana the Huntress. All of May's power and all of May's knowledge stay very sadly repressed.

Acting is something I avoid commenting on because it rarely affects the psychological nature of a film (I do my best to stay away from this aspect of the Hollywood food chain). Just as we do not expect the participants in an ancient Greek myth to be handsome under their masks, so the fine points of acting ability in our contemporary mythic films are often irrelevant. However, in the case of *The Age of Innocence*, this is not the case. Daniel Day-Lewis' acting consists primarily of exhibiting his magnificent cheek bones. His expression is unsubtle, to say the least. He works his jaw muscles to signal some sort of internal agitation; he cocks his head like a 6-foot cocker spaniel not sure whether or not to pick up a bone when he is startled by some bit of gossip or knowledge that is tossed to him in the most obvious ways. For the first third of the film, I kept expecting him to say, "The situation is completely beyond my control" quoting John Malkovich's famous line in *Dangerous Liaisons* [1988] to which *The Age of Innocence* bears comparison. (Had this happened, it would have topped the self-critical pun put in the mouth of the inept Keanu Reeves in *Much Ado About Nothing* [1992], "I am a man of few words.")

While Day-Lewis' acting does not interfere terribly with the flow of the film, Winona Ryder's (in)abilities are more problematic. Until the subtle hint given us in the archery scene, described above, we are intended to see May as slightly empty-headed and not-so-slightly naive. Ryder does empty-headedness very well (a recent masterpiece of inappropriate empty-headedness is her performance for Francis Ford Coppola in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [1992]). However, in *The Age of Innocence*, she remains empty-headed throughout the film, even after the seminal archery scene. We never detect growth or, for that matter, any other changes in her character. For this reason, the revelation at the end of the film – that she knew all along what was going – comes like a bolt out of the blue. Even on second viewing, I find little evidence within her performance to support this claim. What is missing here is central to the film's success: May must be a unique

combination of complete girlishness and great depth of feeling. Without this, the balance in complexity between the male and female roles is gone. And it is primarily this lack of balance that will prevent *The Age of Innocence* from becoming the summation of Scorsese's work that it could have been.

The Age of Innocence. Direct by Martin Scorsese. Screenplay by Martin Scorsese and Jay Cocks from a novel by Edith Wharton. Photography by Michael Ballhaus. Editing by Thelma Schoonmaker. Music by Elmer Bernstein. Production design by Dante Ferretti. Costume design by Gabriella Pescucci. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, 1993.