



# Raging Romantic

**Martin Scorsese teams up with Edith Wharton. It's a match made in heaven—or deepest New York. By Amy Taubin**

MARTIN SCORSESE IS NOT A DIRECTOR for hire. He makes utterly personal films with financing from the Hollywood studios. Best known for *Taxi Driver*, his explosive, night-crawling portrait of a lonely psycho-killer, and for his Italian-American trilogy (*Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas*), Scorsese, age fifty, is worshipped by an industry that once considered him way-

ward, and adored by young independent filmmakers who have made violence rather than sex their art-house hook.

Scorsese's Park Avenue offices, which house his production company, film-preservation archives, editing space and a deep-chaired screening room, were a part of the six-year deal he struck with Universal in 1991. "After twenty-five years of making

movies, I finally got a screening room. Amazing, huh?" he cackles. The soundproofed room with its plush chairs and state-of-the-art projection is where he takes refuge from office business. And it's there that, one summer day, we chatted about *The Age of Innocence*, his adaptation of Edith Wharton's early-twentieth-century novel, which is being released this month by Columbia Pictures. >

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Always a bit of a dandy, Scorsese is wearing a soft linen shirt in the palest sea-green and intricately woven cream trousers. Wharton—who wrote that she “woke to the importance of dress” when, as a small child, she walked hand in hand with her father up Fifth Avenue—would have approved. Scorsese’s voice is still street, but he no longer lives as he did when growing up in Little Italy—a fact that seems to have escaped certain members of the media who’ve gasped in snobbish amazement at the prospect of this “Goodfella” invading Wharton’s drawing rooms.

Set in the rigidly coded, upper-class society of New York in the 1870s, *The Age of Innocence* is a novel of manners, marriage and missed opportunities. The apex of its romantic triangle is Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis), an eligible bachelor with vague intellectual leanings who meets the love of his life, the enigmatic, slightly scandalous Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), just hours after proposing to her conventional cousin May Welland (Winona Ryder).

Although Scorsese’s previous films may be more visceral, they, no less than *Age of Innocence*, are shaped by the emotional drives of the characters. That’s why, he explains, they seldom go from A to B to C. Scorsese has always been interested in the way social institutions mold feelings into expression. He has an anthropologist’s eye for the rituals of daily life and a Freudian’s grasp of the dynamics of guilt, rage and repression.

Add to this the director’s eclectic explorations of film genres: *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) was an old-fashioned “women’s picture” pegged to a 1970s NOW version of feminism; *New York, New York* (1977) was a 1940s-style musical with a psyche-of-the-artist twist; and his Biblical epic, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), is the picture closest to Scorsese’s heart and soul, its imperfections an endless source of regret.

Factor in as well that Scorsese is primarily attached to New York, that irony is his modus operandi and that he sounds like a eager adolescent when he admits to liking costume pictures “a lot. I really do.” The wonder, then, is not that he chose to adapt *The Age of Inno-*

*cence* for the screen but that anyone would regard the match as less than felicitous.

Scorsese explains that his longtime collaborator, Jay Cocks, gave him the novel in 1980, saying, “When you want to do a period film, this is you.” Speculating about why it took him seven years to “understand what that book was about,” he’s at once disarmingly open and very well-guarded. Scorsese talks at a ferocious pace, circling an idea as if it were an im-

## On the set, crew members argued over whether Michelle Pfeiffer’s character was knowingly “stirring up trouble”



Daniel Day-Lewis courts scandal with Michelle Pfeiffer

age, each phrase a possible angle from which to shoot. Perhaps it had something to do with “the major change” that occurred in his social and personal relationships ten years ago when the asthma that had plagued him from childhood suddenly improved while he researched *The Last Temptation of Christ*. “I’m able to sleep

at night.... My whole life, up to that point, was about where I could use a tissue and cough up from the bronchial asthma without destroying anything in the room, or making people run out. I couldn’t sleep at night—I was always grumpy. I’m still grumpy, but, anyway, it was a major change.” Perhaps he’d also gained “a certain clarity” about himself through psychoanalysis. And then he gets to it. “For me, it has to do with the emotion of [Archer’s] relationship to Ellen and not being able to fulfill it as he *thinks* he would like to... that’s what’s so moving to me—the things that you miss in life with people, or the things you think you miss.... But you go on. You can’t sit around and say, ‘Oh my God, what have I done, I’ll never be happy.’ No, he goes on,

he has children, he has a life.... He’s a person who makes the best of the situation, based on his breeding, based on his obligation to that society. And by the end of the picture, the society has changed completely,” he concludes, relishing the irony.

Or, as Wharton wrote at the end of her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, “Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death.”

Scorsese and Wharton examine the respective cultures in which they came of age from the perspective of insiders who were always outsiders. Ambivalence is central to their styles. Aware, even as children, that they were unsuited to gender ideals prescribed for them, they each found an identity in art. Scor-

sese’s asthma exempted him from the male rites that his films both eroticize and critique; he spent his time going to the movies with his father and drawing comic strips—prototypes for the storyboards he still uses to prepare for production.

Wharton, whose nicknames included both “Pussy” and “John,” devoured her >

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father's library and began writing when she was twelve. When her first engagement was broken off, the Newport, Rhode Island, *Daily News* speculated that the cause was "an alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride."

If Scorsese is known for his brutal dissection of the codes of masculinity, Wharton, whom Henry James dubbed "The Angel of Devastation," applied her scalpel to the construction of femininity that makes women complicit in their own subjugation. In *The Age of Innocence*, however, point-of-view is focused in a single character and that character is a man. Wharton doesn't give us any direct access to Ellen or May, only to Archer's perception of them.

Scorsese, who blatantly identifies with the guiltily romantic Archer (and knows that the success of the film is predicated on the audience feeling similarly) pounces on my suggestion that Wharton's fond feelings for Archer are inscribed on every page. There's something of Wharton's father in Archer, much of her mother in May and everything of Edith in Ellen. (Thus the tribal taboo that keeps the lovers apart may have as much to do with Oedipus as etiquette.)

"I like the complexity of the characters," Scorsese says. "When one of them takes a step forward, the other steps back. It's like life." He also loves that their actions are open to interpretation. On the set, crew members got into arguments about whether Ellen was knowingly "stirring up trouble." Since Ellen's mysteriousness is what captivates Newland, Day-Lewis didn't want to hear the directions Scorsese gave to Pfeiffer. "In rehearsal, I'd take Michelle into the cloakroom and I'd talk to her and then we'd go back and I'd take Daniel into the cloakroom."

No member of Archer's society could have been more scrupulous in observing and defining its forms than Scorsese was in making *Age of Innocence*. The film was extensively researched. (Scorsese knew precisely what would be served at the numerous dinner parties Archer attended a



Minding her manners: Winona Ryder as May Welland

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year before filming began.) Experts in manners and customs of the era were present during the entire shoot.

Editing took nearly twelve months—"no longer than *GoodFellas*," Scorsese explains, irritated by the rumors that the film must be in trouble because it wasn't finished in a quarter of that. "The only pure, original element in filmmaking—what's different from any other art form—is the editing. But in the industry today, when a film is given a green light, it's predicated on a release date. So what

do you do when you have a release date? You put three editors on, the vision goes and films are more and more just marketable commodities."

What took time in the editing was simply "to do the book. To condense and still keep the spirit and the truth of the Edith Wharton thing. . . . This is a film about a society where emotions are not readily apparent or visible. There are only one or two scenes where people do get to finally say what they want and feel. So the enjoyment of shaping a scene in the editing comes from the tension between the emotion and not showing the emotion. . . . It should make people [watching] uncomfortable, the way the characters are uncomfortable in the frames."

The crucial scene in which Archer finally admits his love to Ellen, for example, took five or six days to shoot and far longer to edit. "It's a lot of fun to try to figure out—how long should he take to answer her question about May. . . . Twenty seconds? . . . Maybe we should add a few frames." Scorsese preplans the shooting of his films in exact detail, but the pacing of the scenes, the rhythm of the performances and the shape of the whole only emerge through editing.

When he was about eight years old, Scorsese saw *The Heiress*, William Wyler's film adaptation of the Henry James novel *Washington Square*. Olivia de Havilland plays the plain, aristocratic spinster who consigns herself to loneliness rather than accept the impure affections of Montgomery Clift's socially ambitious suitor.

"I was very moved by the people and especially by the last sequence, when she goes up the stairs with the lamp and he's pounding on the door outside. I'd never seen an ending like that. I have chills even talking about it now. What did these people do to each other to warrant such a thing? So I guess that's always been in my mind—a picture that has that kind of emotion, but with people who are not *Raging Bull*. It's a very different society and yet the emotion is just as real and painful and wonderful. So that would be a real test, to try to do a movie like that. And that's what this has been."

**Amy Taubin** is writing a book about *Taxi Driver* for the British Film Institute.