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Of Art, Codes, and Transcoding

Revisiting Intersemiotic Conversations in *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton (1920) and Martin Scorsese (1993)

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Abstract

This essay explores the inscription of codes and intersemiotics in Wharton's The Age of Innocence and its 1993 adaptation by Martin Scorsese, and analyzes the effects derived from them. It begins by showing how the sense of ironical distance that prevails in the first chapters of the novel is redefined in the film, especially in the brilliant title sequence and opening scene that set a different tone, more likely to trigger identification with the characters and produce emotion, instead of under-scoring convention. Apart from the opera motif, other intersemiotic connections that function differently in the book and its adaptation deserve to be examined. Thus the essay studies how pictorial quotations abound in the film, more than in Wharton's novel, especially works by James Tissot that convey a sense of ambiguity, while other paintings are related to the transcoding of violence and mystery. It then discusses the subversive emphasis on frames and framing and the reference to tableau vivant, before dwelling on facets of textual and filmic reflexivity.

Keywords

adaptation, intersemiotics, reflexivity, Martin Scorsese, Edith Wharton

Critics have often commented on the layering of representational systems in Edith Wharton's work, and *The Age of Innocence* is a case in point, with its numerous references to paintings, the opera, and the theater. According to Brigitte Peucker, "it is this that makes adapting her work to film cinematically challenging" (1996, 20). Yet, though Wharton disliked the cinema, as Scott Marshall reminds us, "several of Wharton's most popular novels were filmed during her lifetime, including *The Age of Innocence* (twice, first as a silent movie, then as a sound film" (15).¹ Released much later, Martin Scorsese's

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1993 adaptation has been praised as particularly convincing and hailed as an aesthetic success, a feast for the eye, owing not only to the talent of its actors, but to its blend of pictorial and cinematic quotations and its sheer virtuosity.

A story of initiation and impossible love set in the New York of the 1870s, the novel is also the last major work in Wharton's oeuvre. Newland Archer, a member of a wealthy elite, is engaged to flawless May Welland when he meets her cousin Ellen Olenska, recently returned from Europe after an unhappy marriage. Under the influence of this rejuvenating presence, he gradually comes to view his world in more critical terms. They fall in love, but he gives up that passion out of a sense of duty and remains the prisoner of a cruel world ruled by protocol, which Wharton brilliantly dissects. Now, when comparing the novel and the film, which is Scorsese's first period film, critic Roger Ebert is impressed by "how accurately the screenplay (by Jay Cocks and Scorsese) reflects the book" and insists on Scorsese's two great strengths in adapting it, the visual transposition ("Working with the masterful cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, he shows a society encrusted by its possessions") and the "complete command of tone" (Ebert). Similarly, most critics have responded to the film's lush pictorial quality.

The image in the text is usually an event of the text, as Liliane Louvel claims (141), and it is worth examining how Scorsese deals with that phenomenon. Far from merely contributing to verisimilitude and mimesis, the dialogue between the arts plays a complex semantic and aesthetic role. Thus, this essay aims to explore the inscription of codes and intersemiotics in Wharton's novel and its adaptation by Martin Scorsese, and analyze the effects derived from them, bearing in mind that contemporary theories of adaptation have long moved away from the notion of fidelity, focusing instead on a dynamics of transposition. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "the adapted text . . . is not something to be reproduced, but rather something to be interpreted and recreated" (84). Thus Scorsese appropriates this "reservoir of instructions" (84) and plays with the various potentials of different semiotic systems. By focusing primarily on the first chapters of the book and the first scenes in the film, I will attempt to show how these intersemiotic networks are variously introduced, and how the sense of distance that prevails in the beginning of the novel is redefined in the film. The study of specific passages will later lead to a discussion of the role of painting in the film and the contaminating effect of images and frames, while reflexivity comes to the foreground. Needless to say, throughout these pages I will inevitably take part in the dense critical conversation that these works have elicited.

Openings and Opera, Delayed Irony and Distances

In particular, it is worth examining how the title sequence and opening scene partly erase the ironical tension of the text and set a different tone, more likely to trigger identification with the characters and produce emotion, instead of underscoring the role of conventions. This is achieved through the choice of different images, music, and the delayed introduction of voice-over. In Scorsese's film the voice-over (delivered by Joanne Woodward) is supposed to make up for the fact that, with the "showing mode" (as Hutcheon puts it), we cannot "get at the interior of the characters' minds . . . ; they must visibly, physically embody their responses for the camera to record or they must talk about their reactions" (25). However, notably, this voice-over is first heard when the camera shows Mrs. Beaufort leaving her opera box (Scorsese 00:07).² Only then does the film emphatically introduce the theme of predetermined behavior: "It invariably happened as everything happened in those days, in the same way. As usual, Mrs. Julius Beaufort appeared . . . just before the jewel song . . . and again as usual rose at the end of the third act."

While film admittedly has "the diegetic flexibility and the temporal dimension that painting lacks" (Peucker 2007, 24), the literary work is more capable of inscribing iterative rhythm. In that respect, comparing the two openings yields interesting results, as Wharton's insistence on conventions in the first pages has no equivalent in the film. Anne Ullmo, among others, has pointed out how Wharton foregrounds codes and resorts to frequent iterative structures, denouncing unquestioned rituals, with such adverbs as "invariably" or "generally" (24–29). This is replaced by an eloquent repetitive structure in the sumptuous title sequence created by Elaine and Saul Bass that has inspired many commentators. While Gounod's overture is playing, the screen first shows neat lines of calligraphy in blue, purple, then pink ink, which draws attention to the text as origin and the film as an adaptation. The camera soon introduces a flower theme with time-lapse photography of budding tulips that open out and are repeatedly replaced by others, all seemingly veiled by lace in a series of metaphorical layers. Owing to the impact of this sequence whose authors are identified in the credits, it is worth quoting Saul Bass's explanation of their concept and technique at some length:

One layer is of lush time-lapse blossoming flowers evoking the romanticism of the Victorian period. Each starts as a closed bud and slowly and inexorably explodes to fill the screen. The continuous series of long

dissolves from flower to flower creates a sensuous overlay to the notion of Victorian innocence. The first flowers blossom slowly, sedately. As the dissolves progress, the tempo increases, resolving into an intense compressed montage of flower openings. To achieve this we optically double and triple-framed already highly overcranked footage and framed the flowers very tightly. The superimposed lace patterns are another layer. When the flowers are closed, the lace is barely perceptible. But when the flowers open and fill the screen, the lace textures are fully revealed and become the filter through which we view the flowers. Another layer was the patterns of nineteenth-century calligraphy to augment the Victorian character and suggest the film's literary origin in Wharton's novel! (qtd. in Kirkham)

This impressive layering of signs aims to convey a sense of mystery and sensuality, blurring the reference to innocence with ambiguous erotic images that provide an implicit link to the motif of virginity and defloration in *Faust's* duet.

Significantly, when the story begins, Scorsese does not deal with the opera motif in any parodic way, allowing us instead to enjoy more of Gounod's music and to pay less attention to artifice and the reality of acting. When Marguerite's hand picks one of the yellow chrysanthemums (which replace the daisies), it extends the already introduced flower motif, later continued with the gardenia in Archer's buttonhole; but perhaps just as significant is the fact that the film leaves out the satirical description of the flowers in the expensive stage set—"acknowledged to be very beautiful" (Wharton 5). Indeed, the novel draws our attention to the "woolly green moss" in the middle distance, and the shrubs "shaped like orange-trees but studded with large pink and red roses":

Gigantic pansies, considerably larger than the roses, and closely resembling the floral penwipers made by female parishioners for fashionable clergymen, sprang from the moss beneath the rose-trees; and here and there a daisy grafted on a rose-branch flowered with a luxuriance prophetic of Mr. Luther Burbank's far-off prodigies. (5)

Combining gentle social satire (in a tone reminiscent of Jane Austen) and an ironic emphasis on hybridity, the description of this setting seems to celebrate artifice and reflexivity, from the oblique reference to (sermon-)writing with the floral penwipers to Burbank's experiments in plant breeding. Everything points to a cultural construct, and the narrator of this novel published in 1920 casually establishes her aesthetic and chronological distance from the protagonists.

No such jarring note is to be found in the film, but the close-up on the soprano cast in the role of Marguerite, showing her heavy stage makeup (meant to be seen from a distance), denounces illusion very early. In that respect, one might be tempted to think that the film deliberately shows artifice as such, even if briefly, which might lead us to consider that its images represent deception but do not perform it (having more to do with revelation and exposure). Yet, this would be a mistake, as two examples will show: Wharton's chapter 13 starts at Wallack's theater and identifies the melodramatic play *The Shaughraun* that is being performed (Wharton 72); the parting scene and its protagonists are then unambiguously described in terms of acting and reception. On the contrary, Scorsese plays with an overlapping soundtrack and offers no transition: immediately after a close-up on burning logs and Olenska's pensive expression, the film allows us to hear two voices, then see the tormented face of the heroine, before realizing she is an actress playing a tragic scene. Likewise, Archer's fantasy in the old Patroon's house at Skuyterclyff (Wharton 84) reminds us of the power and immediacy of pictures as opposed to words: the reader knows that Archer, waiting for something to happen, "*imagine[s]* [Olenska], almost hear[s] her, stealing up behind him to throw her light arms about his neck" (Wharton 84, my emphasis), whereas the viewer is briefly deceived, then disappointed as the illusion is dismissed.

Moreover, right from the opera scene, Scorsese displaces the conventional image of blonde innocence instead of undermining it. The choice of dark-haired, brown-eyed Winona Ryder to play the role of May Welland makes the character look less like a stereotype, and does not allow the implicit comparison between the young woman and Christine Nilsson as Marguerite, thus downplaying the motif of innocence as art and careful construction which Wharton brilliantly explored. One remembers that, in the novel, the above-quoted description of the pansies is framed by two images of "innocent" girls dressed in white and surrounded by flowers, one sitting in an opera box, the other singing on that stage. The text shifts from May's "*fair braids,*" her bouquet of lilies of the valley, and "eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers," to Madame Nilsson's white cashmere and "*yellow braids carefully disposed on each side of her muslin chemisette,*" her "listen[ing] with downcast eyes" and "affect[ing] a guileless incomprehension" (Wharton 5, my emphasis). Unbeknownst to Archer, May like Nilsson is probably a good performer. In the realm of make-believe, it will take some time for Archer to realize that "all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product" (Wharton 30) and to feel "oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured" (Wharton 30).

His fiancée may “not even guess what it’s all about,” (Wharton 5), as Archer thinks during the seduction scene in *Faust*, but she will turn out to be more manipulative than he expected, which these early images intimate. By the time an obviously distressed Archer attends a second performance of the opera in chapter 32 (190–93), an occasion when May symbolically wears her wedding dress again, it is too late, and he will finally understand that his life has been subject to powers that he cannot control.

As Hutcheon puts it, “verbal irony presents a particular challenge for adaptation to performance media . . . when used in the showing mode” (71). The voice-over, on which Scorsese heavily relies, compensates for it, and it has often been remarked that the director and his scriptwriter appropriated a large part of Wharton’s dialogues and narrator’s comments, scattering the latter among several characters. One could even argue that, later, Scorsese reshuffles the cards when he paradoxically has Lawrence Lefferts, the embodiment of norms, ironically comment on the New Yorkers’ mechanical response to the melodramatic *Shaughraun*: “It’s fascinating. Every season, the same play, the same scenes, the same effect on the audience” (Scorsese 00:45).

This transformation matters since, in the early pages, Wharton’s narrator clearly dissociates herself from the protagonist, presented as a dilettante who never questions society’s conventions: “What was or was not ‘the thing’ played a part as important in Newland Archer’s New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago” (Wharton 4). She subtly tells of his limited self-consciousness, with comments such as “If he had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he *sometimes nearly* did) he would have found . . .” (Wharton 6, my emphasis). Yet we find ourselves both observing Archer and looking through his aesthete’s eyes. We scan the opera boxes with him, we think what he thinks about members of the audience, and feel what he feels. Much of the dynamics of the crisis relies on this tension which decreases as the plot unravels, as indeed Olenska’s influence reduces this distance between narrator and focalizer, gradually allowing us to judge *with* him, not cast judgment *on* him.

Instead of dwelling on that semantic distance, the film moves on. Thanks to the clever editing and fluid camera motions, a series of close-ups shows the circulation of opera glasses and characters looking at others. What prevails is a network of embedded gazes, suggesting a powerful metafilmic dynamics. In his exchange with Ebert, Scorsese explains the complex techniques used for the short point-of-view sequence when we share Lefferts’s vision of the audience and the Welland box: “We did stop-frame photography, exposing one frame at

a time and printing each frame three times and then dissolving between each three frames. It looks sort of like what you see when you look through an opera glass, but with heightened attention. He scans the audience and then backs up and stops on her. With all the different experimenting we did, that took almost a year to get right” (Ebert).

In such an elaborate network, it comes as no surprise that Scorsese should blend pictorial quotations with filmic ones. Technical wizardry combines with film quotations, both in the opera sequence with the allusions to Luchino Visconti’s *Senso* (a story of doomed love and betrayal, that starts at La Fenice) and in the ball scene which calls to mind the long sequence at the end of *The Leopard*. To some extent, this obvious demonstration of memory and virtuosity may be said to replace the insistence on linguistic and aesthetic mediation in Wharton’s first chapter, best illustrated by this humorous explanation: “an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences” (Wharton 4).³

Apart from that opera motif, other intersemiotic connections seem to function differently and call for different responses in the book and the film, as comparisons based on other passages and scenes allow us to appreciate.

A Writer’s Eye and a Very “Painterly” Film

In an interview with Gavin Smith, Scorsese insists on the importance of the paintings that contribute to the effect of verisimilitude, and on the messages they convey to their viewers: “if you keep looking at the painting, you notice more things and it tells a story, it tells a way of life” (qtd. in Brunette 218). In keeping with this perspective, pictorial quotations abound in the film, more so than in the novel, and deserve all the more attention as the characters sometimes seem to merge with them. As the director revealed to Jim Leach, in the ball sequence they even replicated a painting by Whistler and one by Sargent and “literally placed figures from the paintings in the compositions as the camera just went by them” (Leach), setting an example for tableaux vivants.⁴

Predictably, this intersemiotic dynamic starts with the Beaufort ball episode, but the film postpones the introduction of the controversial nude referred to by Wharton. Instead, Archer examines Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *The Duel after the Masquerade* (1857–59), which strikes an ominous note, with its dramatic image of a mortally wounded Pierrot in a wintry landscape at

dawn (perhaps displacing Wharton's theatrical image of Olenska "crouching among the festive ripples of her dress like a stricken masquerader" during Archer's third visit; Wharton 105). Perhaps the elegant protagonists of *The Age of Innocence* wear their own form of fatal disguise. Forewarned is forearmed, all the more so as, interestingly, this academic painting is part of a set of two, as it replicates an earlier composition (1857) with a few variations; the strategy associates circulation and duplication justified by financial logic, since, additionally, Gérôme often took up or copied some of his paintings to facilitate their reproduction (thanks to which they became quite famous), while the original remained in private collections. Needless to say, the ambiguous question of value adds to the reflection on society connected with Beaufort.

Wharton briefly evokes the painting hanging in the Beauforts' *bouton-d'or* drawing room, "'Love Victorious,' the much-discussed nude of Bouguereau" (Wharton 15), a deceptive designation that plays a trick on us by mixing references.⁵ Instead, Scorsese's camera and narrator draw our attention to a more conventional nude of by the pompier artist, titled *The Return of Spring*, to be seen by passing through the crimson drawing room, and the camera pans over it from bottom to top. Yet, whether male or female, the impact of that sort of nude painting is modified in Scorsese's film as the director, who commissioned two hundred copies of works by period artists to create a more convincing backdrop, treats us to a whole gallery of other paintings. In particular, it is worth examining how he inserts several works by the French James Tissot, a Paris society painter who moved to London, where he was famous for his accurate representation of fashionable life and his interest in visual details and ornaments.

James Tissot and Modern Ambiguity

It is a well-known fact that the Tissots served as references for lifestyle themes in *The Age of Innocence*, notably in the refined ball scene.⁶ This intermedial display involves a complex layering, since the film does not only evince the influence of Tissot's art, but uses these paintings as comments or contrasting devices, superimposing levels of irony. An initial blatant example of this strategy comes when the camera shows us his 1873 *Too Early* while the voice-over comments upon Julius Beaufort's late arrival at his own ball. The painting represents an elderly father surrounded by his three daughters in an almost empty

ballroom (the hostess is still busy with the musicians, and a few individuals on the right side seem to be watching and making fun of these awkward guests). Placing empty space at the center of the canvas, Tissot paints the discomfort experienced by these early guests, but also suggests a sense of incommunicability. This image in the background cannot but enhance the ease displayed by Beaufort, underlined by the voice-over: “Julius Beaufort’s secret was the way he carried things off” (Scorsese 00:12:49), which could also be said of the director who thus flaunts his control over layered semiotic systems.

A different, yet just as complex, network can be admired when Tissot’s *Hush!*, also entitled *The Concert*, is seen in the background while Lawrence Lefferts, the “foremost authority on ‘form’ in New York” (Wharton 6), speaks with a woman, and couples are waltzing around the room. The painting shows a musician about to play the violin at an elegant party, and her audience is gathered on the left side. In this carefully constructed scene, the camera circles around Lefferts whose voice we do not hear (00:11:30), and visual reflexivity is clearly at stake with the combination of Tissot’s painting (on the right) and the guests’ reflections in the mirror (on the left), highlighting the rule of duplication. Offering images of images on the verge of metalepsis, the sequence blurs the difference between the real characters and the represented or reflected ones, while laying bare the device of film, “a composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression” (Stam 61).

If the opera scene underscores the prevalence of boxes, in all senses of the word, some paintings by Tissot used in the same ball sequence also convey resemblance, suggesting uniformity in an ironic *mise en abyme*. Thus, at the Beauforts’, the camera pans over the two paintings by Tissot framing the vista to the next room, *The Woman of Ambition* (1883) and *The Ball* (1880), that evince the same structure and might actually be confused one with the other.⁷ Indeed, both paintings represent a fashionable young woman arriving at a party or ball, on the arm of an elderly gentleman. In one case, the dress and fan are pink, in the other they are yellow, but the woman’s features, the interplay of curves, the crowded room in the background and palm leaves on the right look much the same. It may help to remember that Tissot is actually known to have reproduced and recycled his own images, a policy that proved highly profitable (Aitken), and to some extent here the visual echo reflects the problematization of origin and originality. In the film the strategy that consists in quoting two relatively similar paintings adds to the critique by implying a possible loss of visual identity and reinforcing the sense of a cultural and social conditioning.

The oscillation and destabilization produced by this intermedial exploration can also be observed when other types of paintings enter the frame, conveying less conventional perceptions.

Translating Underlying Forces: Violence and Mystery

Scorsese is famous for his gangster films set in New York, often including raw violence, such as *Mean Streets*, or staging urban nightmares, such as *Taxi Driver*. His choice to adapt *The Age of Innocence* therefore came as a surprise for his fans, but the director, like many film critics, has insisted on the underlying violence of the society represented by Wharton, “the brutality beneath the manners” (Ebert), thus establishing continuity with the rest of his work. Whereas Archer belatedly becomes aware of “the old New York way of taking life ‘without effusion of blood’” (Wharton 201), the sustained emotional violence is expressed and exploited to full effect in Scorsese’s film, in which the moving image seems to assert its authority. In that respect, reviewer Mark Zoller Seitz, who evokes “soul murders,” comments on “the camera darting behind and around the hero as if laying out the scene of an impending crime.”

Pictorial quotation may operate in the same way, contributing to the narrative of Archer’s evolution. Moving up Mrs. Mingott’s stairs during Mrs. Archer’s visit, the camera briefly shows us various landscapes, but it lingers on two particular paintings, the peaceful representation of a museum room and a violent, dramatic picture. Our attention is first drawn to the former work, owing to the camera motion that seems to take us inside the painting. Based on a historical event, the latter work, John Vanderlyn’s *Death of Jane McCrea*, shows two Indians attacking a white woman, ready to scalp her, while the voice-over tells us that “two of New York’s best families would finally and momentarily be joined” (Scorsese 00:17), which allows Paula Anca Farca to conclude that “the painting links May and Newland’s marriage to violence” (49). Ellen Olenska may be the symbolic victim in that scene, even if Archer later comes to consider his own position as that of “a prisoner in the center of an armed camp” (Wharton 201; Scorsese 01:48:06).

Wharton, like Scorsese, also refers to several art forms to express the sense of emptiness or mystery that the protagonist experiences when confronted with the singularity of woman. Thanks to focalization, the narrator of Wharton’s novel allows us to share Archer’s perception and evolution, which the film’s voice-over and camera angles transpose, but neither work takes us inside

Olenska's or May's mind, relating the feminine element to mystery, expressed through images of initiation or inscrutable opacity. Thus, when Archer pays a first visit to Ellen Olenska, the camera shows us several paintings which he can observe at leisure before his hostess returns. Mystery prevails more explicitly than in the text, which makes fun of its focalizer's conceit and tells of his feeling of disorientation:

Newland Archer prided himself on his knowledge of Italian art. His boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books . . . He talked easily of Botticelli, and spoke of Fra Angelico with a faint condescension. But these pictures bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) when he travelled in Italy; and perhaps, also, his powers of observation were impaired by the oddness of finding himself in this strange empty house, where apparently no one expected him. (Wharton 44–45)

The film does not quite exploit this lesson in humility or the feeling of discomfort that gives way to curiosity, as the departure from the conventional is suggested by the choice of paintings. Before focusing on an Orientalist landscape that seems to stretch horizontally from left to right, the camera zooms in and lingers on the featureless face of a woman sitting with a parasol in *Woman Outdoors* by Italian painter Giovanni Fattori (1866). Coming directly after a close-up on May, “the handsomest woman in the room” at the van der Luydens’ party, this less academic, more modern painting by a leader of the Macchiaioli group, invites us to consider (the) woman as an enigma to be deciphered, or perhaps to use the blank space as a screen of projection.

This visual thematizing of the hermeneutic code is later continued and reinforced, during Archer’s third visit to Ellen Olenska’s house in chapter 18, with the introduction of Fernand Khnopff’s *Caresse of the Sphinx* (1898) hanging above the fireplace. Even if we never get to admire the whole picture, we realize that the combination is eloquent, all the more so as Belgian symbolism aimed at rendering the mystery of the world as embodied by woman. In sharp contrast with the naturalist style of Tissot’s works, this icon of symbolism suggests subtle, mysterious interaction, with Oedipus leaning against the sphinx represented as a tender seductress with a leopard body (Scorsese 00:59:27). As Florelle Guillaume puts it, “the painting cultivates ambiguity and is loaded with undecipherable symbols. It seems to materialize a persistent dream, the keys of which seem within our reach, but escape us in the end. The enigma will remain

deliciously insoluble” (qtd. in *Fernand Khnopff* 26).⁸ Yet, Scorsese refrains from showing us the whole painting, thus further problematizing identity and teasing us with unfulfilled promises. Instead, fragments of the work (mostly the bottom part and various details) can be seen several times during the increasingly intimate dialogue which leads Archer to confess his love to Olenska and plead with her. Bearing that pictorial context in mind, one may disagree with Paula Anca Farca, who reads the image in more dramatic, and perhaps too literal, terms: on the one hand she sees the leopard-woman as a tiger and argues that “[May’s] victory is rendered through the tiger symbolism” and, on the other hand, she points out “the physical incompatibility between the two lovers because of their affiliation to different species” (Farca 54). This interpretation sounds reductive since Farca chooses to ignore the ambiguous use of the Oedipus motif (an androgynous figure here) and underestimates the appeal of the silent hermetic work. Yet, if Khnopff seemingly expects Oedipus to choose between sensuous pleasure and the power of self-control, Ellen Olenska herself also embodies that painful sacrifice, telling Archer “I can’t love you unless I give you up” (Scorsese 01:05). Brilliantly performed, the scene also offers itself as another picture to be admired: the emotional exchange leads to a dramatic embrace, which the camera frames frontally like a sculpture or painting, as the characters kneeling on the floor hold tight to each other, silent, sharing a sorrowful awareness—a silent proximity more poignant than the tension expressed in Wharton’s lines, where Olenska holds Archer “at a distance with something inscrutably aloof in her look and attitude” (108). One paradoxical effect of the scene may then be that the characters seem more alive and real when rendered immobile . . .

Interestingly, we later follow a detached Archer into Mrs. Mingott’s summer house in Newport where a maid appears in front of another evocative, enigmatic painting, Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s *Expectations* (Scorsese 01:12). Though painted in Victorian neoclassical style, this picture of a woman looking away to a coastal landscape or an uncertain future stimulates our curiosity, with its striking empty white background and its atmosphere of loneliness and silence. One could argue that it announces the reunion with Olenska, providing a preview of the later scene at the beach.

As regards May, a different sort of uncertainty prevails, allowing the trap to close on Archer in the end. Wharton intertwines references to painting and sculpture, in a period when Giorgio de Chirico fills his works with empty-eyed statues (Ullmo 36). Hence the often-commented-upon association between May and sculpture in the novel (Wharton 88; see also Ullmo 36–37), which is not quite born out by Ryder’s appearance in the film. Yet the “Diana” motif

remains (Wharton 42, 128, 183), related to May's innocent inscrutability and literalized by her actual skill as an archer—though it does not function in the same way. In the scene that takes place in the old orange-garden in St. Augustine, the motif is introduced obliquely by juxtaposition rather than assimilation. Winona Ryder's brown hair and dark eyes preclude the play on light described by Wharton in the novel ("her blown hair glittered like silver wire; and her eyes too looked lighter, almost pale in their youthful limpidity"; Wharton 88) that helps introduce the "vacant serenity of a young marble athlete" (88). Instead, while Archer is trying to reassure May, the scene shows him standing in front of a statue representing a half-naked feminine figure which he cannot see. When the camera moves back, we discover the entire statue (equipped with something like a quiver) that may be identified with a Diana figure. Like May, the virgin goddess of hunting has been watching him the whole time. Ammons has commented on Wharton's taking "selected virtues of the American girl . . . and linking them to a forever virginal goddess of death" (Ammons 438). As to the protagonist, he will later ponder his wife's "representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess" (Wharton 115).

Like Wharton, Scorsese allows images to circulate from one medium to another, framing the characters and sometimes crossing the line between the real and representation.

Intersemiotic Conversation as Contamination

As Roland Barthes has pointed out, painting is a "model" for mimetic fiction and "every literary description is a view," which particularly shows in the use of such frames as windows, hence his assimilation of realism to a "pasticheur" (55). Predictably both Wharton and Scorsese experiment with such effects by relentlessly encoding frames.

Indeed, the images that adorn the walls of rich houses do not only provide a convincing backdrop, but produce a strong framing effect, pointing to the duality of the gaze. To a large extent, paintings and objects help define the protagonists and convey their often-concealed feelings. Scorsese even supplements the opulent pictorial intertext by frequently dwelling on beautifully framed images of objects, which prompts Brian Eggert to argue that "Scorsese's camera cleverly spends more time on objects than on his characters' faces." In keeping with this emphasis on material details, which most critics have mentioned, the film

seems to create a metonymic model of representation, from the flowers to the jewels and precious watches, the rows of white gloves at the Beauforts' house, the cufflinks, and so forth. One significant example is the particular attention paid to food, which is artistically arranged on elegant plates and dishes like carefully composed artifacts, while the dinner guests are filmed from above, becoming parts of a lush semiotic system. Thus, Peucker has commented on the way the camera's remarkable mobility "forms a pronounced contrast to the relative immobility of the characters as when, for instance, they are seated at table in shots that almost suggest tableaux vivants" (1996, 21).

Wharton has Ned Winsett define Archer in pictorial terms as "The Portrait of a Gentleman" (79) in a playful allusion to Henry James, and she recurrently plays with such images, as when the narrator takes up the reference contained in the title and describes Mrs. Archer and her daughter "with long noses, sweet smiles and a kind of drooping distinction like that in certain Reynolds portraits" (23). Yet the film does not insist on this intertext; instead we see the two distinguished ladies in their dining room, the walls of which are decorated with family portraits. This conformism inspires Paula Anca Farca, who analyzes the impact of such images in Lacanian terms and contends that "the solemn portraits hung in majestic rooms operate as Jacques Lacan's Other, an entity that watches over the characters to make sure they conform to its self-perpetuating rules" (41). Placing the emphasis on the Other as "the origin of the symbolic order, language, and law that particularize each subject," the critic argues that "Scorsese's use of paintings demonstrates that their performances, meant to ensure them a more comfortable place in society, are for the Other," which interestingly leads her to assert that May herself, relying on the order of society to reach her goal, "becomes a painting" (41). Farca aptly underlines this direct connection between the paintings and the characters as when the camera focuses on a majestic portrait of Regina Beaufort (whose social status is uncertain) in a white dress, before moving down to the woman herself wearing a black dress, in an intriguing echo to Wharton's image of a woman who "throne[s]," "dressed like an idol" (Wharton 14). Even if one does not totally subscribe to this theoretical perspective, one may accept the idea of "the self-reflexive qualities of the gaze (that) place viewers under scrutiny as well" (Farca 43), which also indirectly applies to us. In any case, and quite fittingly, Scorsese shows several empty picture frames leaning on the bare walls of Olenska's house (00:40) when Archer contends that she "will never be like everybody else" and she explains to him that what she has to gain from causing a scandal is her freedom (Wharton 71).

This emphasis on frames may explain why, in Scorsese's adaptation of the scene at the van der Luydens' from the beginning of chapter 7, one is not struck by the sense of eerie similarity between the portrait and its model, or by the resemblance between husband and wife, but by the symmetry of the composition. Indeed, Mrs. van der Luyden wears a different dress and looks more lively than we might have expected when reading Wharton's text, which spares no effort to convey continuity and create a reifying effect:

Mrs. van der Luyden's portrait by Huntington (in black velvet and Venetian point) faced that of her lovely ancestress. It was generally considered "as fine as a Cabanel" and, though twenty years had elapsed since its execution, was still "a perfect likeness." Indeed the Mrs. van der Luyden who sat beneath it . . . might have been the twin sister of the fair and still youngish woman drooping against a gilt armchair before a green rep curtain. Mrs. van der Luyden still wore black velvet and Venetian point . . . Her fair hair, which had faded without turning gray, was still parted in flat overlapping points . . . (Wharton 34)

Typographically framed in the space of one paragraph, the intertwined portrait of the lady and description of the work of art allow Wharton to play with the superimposition of codes and to blur the difference between subject and object, model and picture. Continuity and similarity are emphasized through lexical repetition (black velvet, Venetian point) and the insistent recurrence of the adverb "still." The tradition of the literary portrait is subtly subverted, all the more so as, rather than an ekphrasis, the text produces a static, almost still-life, effect. As to the viewers, they are also framed when the portrait by Huntington is defined in intersemiotic terms, compared to a Cabanel. Presented between quotation marks, the aesthetic judgments refer to a convention or doxa, the voice of society's opinion, that the text thus objectifies—as it did in chapter 1 when unexpectedly praising the audience rather than the opera performance, "what the daily press had already learned to describe as 'an exceptionally brilliant audience'" (Wharton 3).

The film does not directly explore this intertextual dimension, nor does it exploit the mock-gothic potential of the woman's image as perceived by Archer, "rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death" (Wharton 34).⁹ Mediation and quotationality are replaced by a conspicuous structuring of the frame. Starting with a close-up on the venerable

couple, the camera slowly zooms out, gradually revealing the disproportion between the large portrait and its model and the perfect symmetry of a frame-like structure (Scorsese 00:23:50): the larger painting is framed by smaller ones; from the vases on the tables, to the crystal candelabras, the position of the seated visitors, and the red window curtains, everything contributes to the effect of imprisonment.

Fittingly, Scorsese resorts to a different strategy to individualize the visit to old Mrs. Mingott. Although one can see a portrait of the lady with a small dog, while she is stroking several Pomeranians on her lap, she seems to live in a different visual universe. One could argue that her independent spirit shows in the way she has surrounded herself with portraits of dogs in the English and French tradition, instead of portraits of her ancestors, a comic discrepancy which the camera insists upon as it pans over the room.

Can one escape the frame(s)? Or does intermedial art need to show bodies becoming pictures? Contrary to what we might expect, the outdoor scenes we discover as the plot unravels still contain pictorial quotations, some of which can be identified. Thus, during the archery contest at Newport, in which May triumphs, the film allows us to appreciate her graphic posture (Scorsese 01:10) like a quotation of *The Fair Toxophilites* (1872) by William Powell Frith, a contemporary of Tissot.¹⁰ As to the frame with Olenska sitting with a white parasol near the river, it bears a strong resemblance to paintings by impressionists or by Georges Seurat. In other words, the film reactivates and transcodes the intermedial model of tableaux vivants, to which Peucker has devoted much attention.

Edith Wharton's interest in tableaux vivants has often been discussed, with frequent reference to the episode in *The House of Mirth* when Lily Bart takes part in such a show that dramatizes the tension between truth and performance. Peucker has commented on "the taste for tableaux vivants as the embodiment of painting by human actors" (2007, 24) and it can be argued that several scenes in *The Age of Innocence* implicitly borrow from this hybrid genre, even if more obliquely, a strategy taken up in Scorsese's film.

Thus Archer's second visit to Olenska allows Wharton's narrator to share with us his perception of the scene like a picture (66–67) as he discovers Julius Beaufort looking down on Olenska sitting on a sofa: "The banker stood leaning against the mantelshelf . . . A table banked with flowers formed a screen behind [the chimney], and against the orchids and azaleas . . . , Madame Olenska sat half-reclined, her head propped on a hand and her wide sleeve leaving the arm bare to the elbow" (66). Not only can this scene in the drawing room, which

freezes the characters in a static pose, be admired like a carefully composed picture, evoking Orientalist paintings of the time, but the details of the lady's clothes are also interpreted in intersemiotic terms by the focalizer. Indeed, the latter responds to the erotic vision of Olenska "attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and on the front with glossy black fur," and remembers seeing a similar portrait "by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the Salon, in which the lady wore one of these bold sheath-like robes with her chin nestling in fur. . . . the effect was undeniably pleasing." (67). According to Ullmo, Wharton was inspired by Whistler's *Red and Black: The Fan* (Ullmo 65), rather than Duran, but what matters is that the film shows a less provocative Olenska, wearing a red dress with black trimmings while the motif of innocence seems to be revisited. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff pointed out, the ironical title of the novel is derived from the painting of the same name by Joshua Reynolds, showing a little girl in a white dress, sitting with her hands clasped to her chest (Wolff 312). Scorsese seems to be teasing us when he places a painting in similar sentimental style in Olenska's drawing room, this time showing two children playing with a little dog (00:30:52), but this variation on the eponymous portrait may also call to mind Olenska's reminiscing about childhood games with Archer during the opera sequence.

Peucker has brilliantly analyzed the scene in Newport (Wharton 131–32; Scorsese 01:13), in which Archer watches Ellen Olenska like a statue, from a distance, wondering if she will turn round (Peucker 1996, 20–21). Olenska stands motionless by the bay, with her back to him, while a single sailboat crosses the frame from right to left on a scintillating sea. Peucker shows both that Scorsese compresses Wharton's text, stylizing the scene, and that he takes up one of Murnau's famous frames from *Nosferatu*, itself inspired by paintings by Caspar David Friedrich, adding to that frame an allusion to Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*. She thus comments on "the introduction of movement—and therefore narrative, story—into the stasis of painting" (Peucker 1996, 20), and demonstrates how Olenska "is enacting a tableau vivant" and "is multiply encoded as a figure of art" (21)

Not all the scenes are as elaborate and the film sometimes carries out a more ascetic transformation. Thus, Scorsese cleverly transposes the narrative of the Archers' conventional journey to Europe, halfway through the plot, by abruptly substituting paintings representing London and Paris for the expected film scenes. While we hear that "they traveled to the usual places," the experience of sightseeing is paradoxically illustrated by painted cityscapes and street scenes. The static images contaminate the "movie," as a metaphor of Archer's

disillusion under May's chilling, normalizing influence, the better to show the potential of the medium.

Transcoding Reflexivity

Though the structure of Wharton's novel seems to owe no debt to the cinema, evincing no use of multiple points of view, fragmentation, or discontinuity, such linearity does not preclude textual reflexivity, which is transposed into the intense visual reflexivity that prevails in several key moments of the film. Archer is a reader and Wharton emphasizes the conventions of language, actually using this system as a metaphor for a world governed by unspoken laws. No wonder Scorsese has the voice-over take up the narrator's comment on the artificial nature of signs: "They all lived in a hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said, or done, or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (Wharton 29; Scorsese 00:23:24). Playing along this logic of distrust, the film recycles much of the narrator's text in the voice-over, and it seems intent on showing language at work, whether written or spoken, from the already-evoked title sequence, which starts with lines of text in blue, purple, then pink ink, to the close-up on the "user unknown" tag at the Metropolitan Museum, or to scenes that take on a strange theatrical quality. Thus Scorsese has his actresses read their letters aloud to the camera, whether it be Pfeiffer in a snowy landscape (0:48:04) or Ryder reading her telegram against a background of flowers (01:05).

Artifice also comes to the foreground in the fading to red, yellow, or white, that may reflect fluctuations in the character's mood, and are part of the camera work deemed "flashy" by Peucker (2007, 24). Thus, after Olenska has been snubbed by New York society, the camera shows her sullen expression and fades to red (00:23:40) when she turns her head and looks straight at us, before a close-up on Archer's face. Later it fades to yellow after Olenska has received the yellow roses sent by Archer (00:34).

Reflexivity rules when Scorsese seems to flaunt the mobility of the camera, using quick cuts and dissolves—the better to confront us with flat, static effects in the above-quoted sequence, which problematizes "sightseeing." The camera actually fades to white on a Paris vista (01:10), transporting us without notice to a Newport scene. Thus, while, in the middle of the Modernist period, Wharton looked backward to the 1870s in a classically written novel interweaving nostalgia and satire, Scorsese and his collaborators combine modern technical

devices and techniques that belong to the past of cinema. The conspicuous iris-shot that draws attention to May's engagement ring hints back to the early days of filmmaking. Similar self-referential effects are produced by circling characters in brightness while darkening what surrounds them, like Archer and Olenska during the Shaughraun performance (00:45:50) in order to set off the emotion they feel and expose Day-Lewis and Pfeiffer as actors who are being filmed.

When linked with intermedial exploration, visual reflexivity involves recognition and engages the viewer in constant renegotiation. A case in point is our encounter with the *Gallery of the Louvre* by Samuel Morse (1831–33)¹¹ among the paintings on the stairs of Mrs. Mingott's house. The American artist shows us a profusion of pictures within the picture and inscribes both an embedded gaze and a *mise en abyme* by placing visitors copying said pictures (i.e., producing more images) in the foreground. The camera repeatedly cuts and zooms in on the painting, seemingly trying to draw us into it and showing an improbable juxtaposition of masterpieces (including Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Murillo's *Young Beggar*). Now, this reference to a museum makes sense in the early part of the film, but it is reactivated near the end when Archer actually visits the Louvre (Wharton 214–15; Scorsese 02:01), becoming himself part of the picture. Yet, Scorsese once more plays with the semantic contrast between image and soundtrack, as Archer muses in front of an energetic allegorical painting by Rubens,¹² while the voice-over sums up his calm feelings about Olenska: “Whenever he had thought of Ellen Olenska, it had been abstracted, serene, like an imaginary loved woman of book or picture. She had become the complete vision of all he had missed.” The choice of the Rubens is of course particularly judicious, concerned as it is with manufacturing authenticity. In the novel, Archer seems to come to life “before an effulgent Titian” (Wharton 215), which prompts him to say, “But I’m only fifty-seven—” before considering at least the possibility of “a quiet harvest of friendship” (215). As we know, he renounces even that, in both film and novel, and the narrator explains that “the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other” (217). In the small Paris square, the window observed from the street, with sunlight reflected on it, serves as the last screen on which flashes of memory merge with a transformed scene: it takes us back to the Newport lighthouse episode, which now belongs to Archer's memory and ours—with a twist, as he visualizes Olenska turning round to look at him and us, remobilizing the *tableau vivant*. Like Archer who thus contemplates an alternative version of his story, Scorsese both assimilates and transforms

Wharton's universe, creating a new work without erasing the power of a tragic romance.

These remarks based on key moments do not aim to exhaust the complex dialogue between text and images of all sorts in the works under consideration, but to highlight some ways in which intertextual pleasure is produced in the adaptation of intersemiotics. As Hutcheon reminds us, "the appeal of adaptation for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (115), and she points to "the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure . . . of understanding the interplay between works, of opening up a text's possible meanings to intertextual echoing" (117). No doubt, such pleasure is deeply felt by the viewer of Scorsese's film who remembers the subtlety of Wharton's novel.

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Notes

1. The first, silent, adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* has been lost, and this essay will not discuss Philip Moeller's 1934 adaptation which, as Bethany Wood pointed out, has drawn much less critical attention than Scorsese's. For an analysis of that film, see Wood's essay in the *Edith Wharton Review*. Scott Marshall even notes that "Wharton realized substantial income from the sales of these works to film companies, but she apparently never viewed any of them, nor is there evidence that she expressed the slightest interest in seeing them" (15). He also remarks that the earliest mention of cinema in Wharton's fiction is to be found in her 1917 novel *Summer*.

2. In this essay, individual moments in Scorsese's film will be referred to in terms of hours and minutes (HH:MM). Exact times in seconds will be mentioned only when relevant (HH:MM:SS).

3. Of course, one could also argue in more general terms, like Linda Hutcheon, that any film adaptation actually results from a whole series of mediations: "the finished film [is] the studio's adaptation of the editor's adaptation of the director's adaptation of the actors' adaptation of the screenwriter's adaptation of a novel that might itself be an adaptation of narrative or generic conventions" (83).

4. See below for a more detailed discussion of that genre.

5. The Norton Edition provides a useful footnote to which I am indebted. It signals that this title actually designates a painting by Caravaggio “featuring a naked Cupid,” a picture of male rather than female nudity that “would have been considered somewhat risqué by New York society” (Wharton 15n2), whereas Bouguereau was famous for his voluptuous female nudes, some of which were owned by financiers such as William Astor and August Belmont. The end of the note is worth quoting as it underlines the duplicity of Wharton’s text: “An expert in art history, Wharton, by joining historical fact to an art historical reference, makes a joke more than a mistake. While ‘Love Victorious’ could refer to an unknown painting of Venus by Bouguereau, the allusion gains meaning by using the actual title of a painting by Caravaggio featuring a nude male archer.”

6. For further elaboration on several of the ideas discussed here, see *James Tissot: L’Ambigu moderne* (Aitken et al.), the catalog of a recent Tissot exhibition, “James Tissot: Fashion and Faith,” that was hosted by the San Francisco Fine Arts Museum from 12 October 2019 to 9 February 2020, and by Paris Musée d’Orsay, from 20 March to 19 July 2020, under the title “James Tissot: L’Ambigu moderne” (Modern ambiguity). It was curated in San Francisco by Melissa E. Buron and in Paris by Marine Kisiel, Paul Perrin, and Cyrille Sciamia, with the collaboration of Lionel Britten, Marie-Liesse Boquien, and Philippe Mariot. The title chosen for the exhibition in France may sound more relevant to the present research. Nonetheless, it is also worth knowing that Tissot devoted the last part of his career to religious illustration and that his images have provided a foundation for many contemporary films involving biblical scenes (including Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*).

7. It actually resulted in the confusion made by a French viewer according to whom Scorsese uses *three* paintings by Tissot as “references for his elegant, refined ball scene.” “En 1993, Martin Scorsese donne comme références à sa scène de bal, élégante et raffinée dans *Le Temps de l’innocence*, trois tableaux de James Tissot, *Trop tôt*, *Silence!* et *L’Ambitieuse*” (“James Tissot”).

8. My translation. “Le tableau cultive l’ambiguïté et se charge de symboles indéchiffrables. Des caresses semblent matérialiser un rêve persistant dont les clés paraissent à portée de main, pour finalement nous échapper. Lénigme restera délicieusement insoluble.”

9. It is to be noted that the film erases part of the excess expressed in the textual portraits of such influential figures. Witness Mrs. Mingott, played by the energetic Miriam Margolyes, who, though apparently fat and decorously seated, does not evince the same “immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city” and does not look like “something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon” (Wharton 18).

10. This circulation of images continued with the choice of Frith’s painting for the cover of the 1996 Penguin Classics edition of *The Age of Innocence* with an introduction by Cynthia Wolff.

11. Samuel Morse is better known today for his inventions of the telegraph and the Morse code, but he began his career as a painter, and this large painting was meant for the education of his countrymen.

12. Titled *Apotheosis of Henry IV and the Proclamation of the Regency of Marie de Medici*, this 1624 painting was part of a cycle commissioned by the queen. It shows both the deification of *Henri IV* after his assassination by Ravaillac (on 14 May 1610) on the left, and, on the right, the queen’s accession to power. Rubens thus builds a narrative that functions as a persuasive piece of propaganda, transforming the violence of murder and subsequent political crisis into an allegory of triumph and an assertion of political legitimacy. As for Scorsese,

one is struck by the contextual relevance of his replacing the radiance of the unidentified Titian evoked by Wharton with a scene of allegorized violence and mythology that was said to “manufacture authenticity” in the context of a power conflict (Robin).

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