

Emotional Violence from the Page to the Screen: Moral Abuse and Psychological Manipulation in *The Age of Innocence* from Edith Wharton to Martin Scorsese

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Abstract. Martin Scorsese declared that *The Age of Innocence* is the most violent film he ever made. This contribution aims to examine Scorsese's representation of emotional violence on screen as opposed to Wharton's illustration of psychological and emotional abuse in the novel. The essay aims to explore violence in *The Age of Innocence*, represented both in the novel and in the film as a subtle and crucial theme, so as to examine how Scorsese's adaptation contrasts with Wharton's narrative. As such, this interpretation aims to prove how *The Age of Innocence* stands apart, because of its significance in Scorsese's career, and how both novel and film go way beyond the conventions of romance by illustrating female emancipation through an exquisite display of moral abuse and psychological manipulation, which Scorsese re-elaborates on screen through a devastating sense of moral frustration. Charting parallels between the novel and the film, the analysis will show how Scorsese re-elaborates a non-graphic form of violence, earlier outlined in the novel by Wharton, through a devastating visual tension. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to offer a reinterpretation of Wharton's novel through Scorsese's film adaptation.

Keywords: adaptation, violence, moral abuse, Scorsese, Wharton.

Emocinis smurtas romane ir ekrane: moralinė prievarta ir psichologinė manipuliacija Edith'os Wharton ir Martino Scorsese *Nekaltybės amžiuje*

Santrauka. Straipsnyje analizuojamas emocinis smurtas amerikiečių režisieriaus Martino Scorsese sukurtoje Edith'os Wharton romano *Nekaltybės amžius* kinematografinėje adaptacijoje. Šioje kinematografinio teksto interpretacijoje siekiama atskleisti, kaip *Nekaltybės amžius* išsiskiria dėl savo reikšmės Scorsese kūryboje, ir kaip tiek romanas, tiek filmas peržengia žodinio pasakojimo ribas, dėmesį sutelkdami į moralės ir afekto kodus. Vizualizuodamas moterų emancipaciją per moralinio piktnaudžiavimo ir psichologinių manipuliacijų prizmę, Scorsese permąsto XIX a. amerikiečių visuomenės vertybes ir jų pėdsaką postmodernybėje. Brėžiant paraleles tarp romano ir filmo, siekiama atskleisti, kaip Scorsese sukurta vizualinė įtampa perinterpretuoja emocinio smurto formas, aprašytas Wharton romane. **Reikšminiai žodžiai:** adaptacija, smurtas, moralinė prievarta, Scorsese, Wharton.

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Introduction

Those who love Martin Scorsese's bloody and furious classics would be surprised that he declared his adaptation of Edith Wharton's masterpiece, *The Age of Innocence* (Scorsese, 1993), to be the most violent film in his repertoire. If we think of Scorsese's career and of movies such as *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980), *Gangster of New York* (Scorsese, 2002) and *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), just to mention a few, this statement is indeed perplexing. When *The Age of Innocence* was released in 1993, the audience was surprised Scorsese chose to make a film so distant from the violence and machismo that characterized his previous films. However, if read deeply, Wharton's narrative has a lot in common with Scorsese's work. Although the central theme of the novel is undoubtedly passionate and unhappy love, set within the restrictive social codes of New York society in the 1870s, there is a less obvious but, in my opinion, more evident trope: violence.

However, we do not refer to a visual and bloody manifestation of cruelty, but rather to a form of emotional and psychological brutality. To anticipate, my argument aims to show Wharton's depiction of emotional violence by demonstrating how Scorsese was able to reconstruct it not so much in graphic terms but rather in gestures, expressions, and within a suggestive tension that reproduces Wharton's narrative strategy by describing a form of violence and emotional clash in psychological terms.

To frame the argument, let us first consider the structure of the plot. The story essentially hinges on a romantic triangle. Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis), an eligible New York attorney from a distinguished upper-class family, is getting married to his fiancée May Welland (Winona Ryder), a demure lovely young lady belonging to the social elite. The seemingly perfect relationship between May and Newland is suddenly disrupted by the arrival of May's disgraced cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), who has returned to the United States after her unhappy marriage to a Polish count. The arrival of Ellen, who is seeking a divorce from her abusive husband, upsets not only the constricting expectations of New York high society but also Newland who develops a deep passion for the countess and falls in love with her. This "passion", in the novel as in the film, remains unrealizable. The romance is never fully consummated, except with glances, gestures or words, and with fleeting, passionate, and painful kisses that represent some of the moments of highest tension in the story.

Indeed, the most thrilling aspect of the plot lies in what is considered the unexpected turn of Wharton's narration, when May—who discovered Newland's growing attachment to Ellen—decides to reveal her pregnancy but only after she has already told her cousin who left New York once and for all. This scene, in the novel as in the film, changes not only the sequence of the narrative, but becomes the most dramatic moment and the highest emotional climax in *The Age of Innocence*. When Newland finally decides to announce to May that he is leaving her to follow Ellen in Europe, May responds with a polite but firm "I'm afraid you can't, dear" (Wharton 2019, 284), and in a sophisticated and extremely elegant way she delivers the final coup de grace when she calmly reveals she suspected their love affair but lied to Ellen to separate them.

This scene represents not only a turning point in the plot, but also the revelation of May's character, who up to that point embodied naïveté and female innocence, but now turns into an almost grotesque figure capable of exposing a strength of personality that imposes on everyone. The revelation of May as a character who is in some ways brutal in her ability to control the situation takes the shape of psychological and emotional abuse or rather a manipulation that becomes a means of oppression to bind Newland and Ellen to her will. Although they both try to renounce their love to preserve May's purity, May taunts the two by revealing herself in this scene and demonstrating how their behaviour was a farce to the point she cunningly managed to extinguish their hopes of a life together.

On screen, Scorsese reconstructs the scene almost with the tension of a thriller when the murderer is revealed to the audience. Roger Ebert has best defined the potential of this sequence, claiming that "In Scorsese's hands, the scene makes you hold your breath [...] Yet the truth is shared without being acknowledged" (2009, 136). The sequence begins with Newland's hopeful look illuminated by the fireplace as he is about to reveal his choice to May. Yet, as the crackling of the fire records long pauses of silence, the initial formality of the scene is followed by an intensely dramatic moment. May, who is initially sitting in front of Newland, gets up and goes toward him in an extremely threatening way—as if her posture wants to impose her personality—and after a sequence of broken shots, we find her kneeling at his feet looming over Newland as if she has just inflicted the finishing damage. What is left on the scene is Newland's gaze of disappointment and the realization that the woman he thought was naive and benevolent has a moral strength he eventually lacks. In his analysis, Geoffrey O'Brien observes that the effect of this moment in the film is like "the revelation of a hidden personality in a horror movie"¹. The cruelty of this sequence is depicted by Scorsese with a dramaticism that contains a tension and an emotional charge as much extraordinary as it is restrained. Scorsese explained the importance of this scene as follows:

When May gets up and says to Newland that she's afraid the doctors won't let her go, you know he's finished. I figured out that as she gets up from the chair, we should do it in three cuts, three separate close-ups, because I thought he'd never forget that moment for the rest of his life. He'd played back many times. When she gets up...we should play it back like a memory. It's a medium shot, then a shot of her coming into the frame, and then a third one, so that she almost grows in stature...There was something about the way her dress moved, like a flower opening, or something growing...This was the key scene that made me want to make this picture (Scorsese in Christie and Thompson 2003, 193-194).

The care with which Scorsese filmed this sequence honours Wharton's novel in one of her "most manipulative narrative passages" (Boswell 2007, 129). By assuming this scene warrants a reading of the novel that goes way beyond the portrayal of costumes and traditions of the suffocatingly-respectable New York elite, I consider this moment—as others in

¹ O'Brien, Geoffrey. The Age of Innocence: Savage Civility. The Criterion Collection. *Essays*, 13 March 2018. Available at: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5460-the-age-of-innocence-savage-civility>. Accessed: 10 February, 2022.

the narrative—an evident expression of a form of emotional and psychological violence. In effect, if we consider that the story deals with a romantic conflict between two women who are competing for the same man, we can eventually assume that every struggle inevitably entails a form of violence, in this case, propelled by New York's cruel and severe social rigidities. However, before delving again into Scorsese's representation of brutality in the film as in Wharton's novel, allow me to briefly elucidate the question of violence related to the female figure. Although any reference to violence would implicitly point in the direction of a physical manifestation, here we will refer to sentimental and emotional violence, that is to say, a combination of acts, words, or moral abuses, used as means of coercion and oppression where the victim considers himself or herself powerless and submissive to the situation.

Violence, Intimacy, and the Vulnerability of the Subject from Novel to Film

In this respect, the concept of violence needs further clarification. Violence, emotional and therefore exercised through complex psychological control, has often served as a useful device for redefining gender identity by reconfiguring male and female as traditional stereotypes. However, defining what is meant by violence is often problematic, with a tendency to link the term to different phenomena. In its rather broad conception, the question of violence from a psychological perspective has been extensively theorized by Carl Jung. The Jungian understanding of the roots of violence is based upon the idea that it comes from repressed sentiments such as guilt, possessiveness, or inadequacy, so that psychological cruelty is produced by feelings of frustration (Belliger 2001, 17). Capturing these dynamics, scholars such as Hannah Arendt observed how violence is often related to a number of relevant but distinct attributes. As she implies, in its broad definition, violence is “a distinct form of power, force, or strength” (Arendt 1970, 3)². Drawing from Jung's theory, Erich Neumann rounded out the idea that in the woman's psychological development there is a destructive force always accompanied by a strong and violent emotional component. Through this logic, Neumann suggested that female cruelty splits the identity of the woman into two opposing epitomes forcing her to exercise violence through an unconscious and subjective mechanism (Neumann 2015, 168)³. In this sense, in opposition to the figure of the maternal and protective woman there is an aggressive female capable of imposing herself with destructive femininity. By definition, the violence exerted by the female figure overturns the stereotype of the fragile woman for the sake of an emancipated/powerful female, a dichotomy Wharton perfectly illustrates in the evolution of May's character, as I will discuss afterwards.

² Hannah Arendt has been considered one of the foremost theorists of the twentieth century to frame the role of violence in public life. However, in her seminal work *On Violence*, Arendt wrestles with the question of political violence.

³ Even though Neumann does not primarily speak of violence, his consideration of female aggressiveness thus splits the woman in two prototypes, the mother who nurtures and protects is opposed to the aggressive woman represented by mythological figures such as Kali and Medea.

To further explore the concept, scholars such as Laura Tanner adopt intimacy as an alternative term to define a form of violence that stems from an imposition of force that exploits the vulnerability of another subject. As she contends, violence as emotional intimacy originates primarily out of the desire of one human being to inflict pain upon another, taking advantage from the vulnerability that results from such violation (Tanner 1994, ix). In this sense, emotional violence is based upon a combination of consciousness and emotion that imply sentimental violation rather than physical suffering. For Tanner, the dynamics of emotional violence are highly dependent on “a violator who appropriates the victim’s subjectivity as an extension of his own power, turning the force of consciousness against a victim for whom sentience becomes pain, consciousness no more than an agonizing awareness of the inability to escape” (1994, 3). Indeed, this interpretation reflects both Wharton and Scorsese’s illustration of emotional violence in May’s revelation of her cunning decision to separate Newland and Ellen. Simply put, if we follow Tanner’s perspective, emotional violence as that form of sentimental and psychological discomfort, can be defined as an assault on subjectivity in which the victim is violated and repressed by the violator’s force. Seen from this perspective, emotional violence takes the shape of a form of “empowerment” produced by the violator who forcefully imposes his will on the fragile victim.

However, the screening of violence in movies has taken diverging approaches and it is an object of recurrent examination. In what is often considered as one of the first compelling analyses of violence in films, Stephen Prince underscores how “violence is an inescapable and ubiquitous characteristic of contemporary cinema” (2000, 1). Focusing specifically on the figure of the violent woman on screen, Hilary Neroni has outlined the increasing development of the violent woman as a recurrent motif in films. As Neroni maintains, “Violent women actually disrupt the structure of filmic narratives, call into question our conception of masculinity and femininity and reveal the limits of a failure of ideology” (2005, ix-x). In this respect also, the image of the violent woman excites the audience since it overturns the ideological structures that regulate our perception of gender roles. Aligning with this interpretation, in his analysis of intimacy and violence, David Greven remarks how the visual representation of sentimental violence on screen arises from a perpetual ambivalence regarding a constant desire to injure and at the same time repair the loved object (2017, 12). In his view, such violence exercised by female characters culminates in what can be defined as a sexual hegemony that sees the woman as the character who not only generates violence, but at the same time seeks to be loved by the victim on whom she has inflicted cruelty.

Yet, Neroni further explains that “female violence, especially on film, has a seemingly non-verbal, non-narrative quality to it” (2005, 2). However, if violent scenes on screen often occur through rapid montage sequences, as we shall see, Scorsese slows down his camera, choosing instead a form of violence which corresponds to Neroni’s reasoning, at the same time prolonging a display of violence that comes from the choice of arresting the narrative in long sequences through slow-motion, as the viewer perceives the tension that lies beneath long medium shots alternated with quick and meticulous close-ups on

detail. As I will further explain, Scorsese's camera focuses on gestures, objects or dramatic glances, producing a form of violence in the scenes between Newland and Ellen, charged with an emotional tension that derives from slow sequences as Scorsese's camera zooms in on sensually imaginative expressions.

To confirm this filmic choice, Stephen Prince noted that since the 1990s, some films have shown an interest in anti-aggressive behaviors as representations of a form of violence that distances from physical force, opting instead for a softer image of pain (2000, 20), a choice Scorsese adopted specifically in *The Age of Innocence*. As Prince remarks, "What the audience sees is the villain's routine punishment at the end of the film that has a weaker significance but still functions as an aggressive media content" (2000, 21). If we draw from the assumption that viewers form affinities with characters on screen by linking their behavior to real-life experiences (Prince 2000, 22), we understand how the victim's sufferings enable the development of emotional pain as a consequence of the audience's sentimental compassion. Of importance, in this regard, is also the fact that the viewer may perceive scenes that lack bloody expressions of sufferings, rather perceiving the victim's anguish as a major constituent of emotional violence.

In this sense, I largely draw from these theorizations to examine Scorsese's depiction of violence in *The Age of Innocence*. Overall, however, recent criticism has observed how the violent woman on screen is often embedded in a sense of antagonism, which is indeed the case in *The Age of Innocence*. From an in-depth reading of novel and film, it would be tempting to say that the symbolism of Nuemann's destructive femininity finds its manifestation throughout the narrative. It is against the background of the aforementioned theorizations that I propose to consider the question of psychological and emotional violence as a prominent theme both in Wharton's novel and in Scorsese's film, despite their different representations. In terms of the dialogic factors discussed above, in the novel May proves to be extremely calculating and capable of exercising her female authority even though from the very beginning her character is positively presented in opposition to the figure of Ellen Olenska, so that we witness a crescendo toward May's manipulative behaviour. Wharton makes this difference visible by the character's association with concrete motifs; May receives lilies of the valley, a symbol of purity, and Ellen roses as a reference to passion. Scorsese's layering of this visual perception intensifies with the film's opening when the voice of a soprano frames the screen with a close shot on white daisies.

Furthermore, the distinction between the two female characters at the centre of the novel, which Wharton mostly highlights through visual associations, is well represented by Scorsese, who highlights both characters as the camera pushes in and rapidly lingers on the flowers⁴ associated with May and Ellen respectively, playing on the contrast of colours, recurrently described by Wharton. From the opening sequence, we immediately understand that one is the antithesis of the other. Scorsese sets the two women as visual opposites through their costumes, which highlight their characteristics as framed by Wharton. May

⁴ It is no coincidence that the film's opening credits show the image of flowers unfolding. The opening credits have been designed by Saul and Elaine Bass, authors of famous openings such as those of Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *Vertigo*.

is mostly dressed in creamy and virginal white, whereas Ellen wears velvet, blue, black lace, and garish costumes⁵. In view of this opening, while the camera focuses on Ryder and Pfeiffer, pulling the viewer into their performances, one can immediately notice how Scorsese's *Age of Innocence* is staged as character-driven rather than plot-driven.

However, to buttress these claims it is first necessary to consider the evolution of May as a literary character. The figure of May Welland, the beautiful virginal fiancé of Newland Archer and a product of New York's beau monde, has been the subject of one of the most debated critical dilemmas of Wharton's novel. Critics have been torn between considering May as a symbol of the social class to which she belongs, an emblem of "helpless humanity" (Fracasso 1991, 43), or on the contrary, "a woman of considerable strength, and a tenacity of purpose which shows that she is more than the clinging, helpless, woman so much cherished as the New York's aristocrats' ideal" (McDowell 1976, 99). With reference to Scorsese's adaptation, Roger Ebert asserted that "At first, it seems that little May is an unwitting bystander and victim but Winona Ryder gradually reveals the depths of her character's intelligence" (2009, 135). Indeed, as the story unfolds, May's manipulative behaviour grows, becoming far more oppressive. Once she suspects Newland's feelings for Ellen, she intentionally moves up her wedding date, and she even exploits the stroke her mother suffers to postpone Newland's departure. Newland, unaware of his fiancée's calculating choices (he sees her as the embodiment of goodness and innocence), accepts May's decisions without reservation. In this sense, Margaret B. McDowell observes that "His egocentric temperament, which limits his imagination, prevents him from seeing May as a woman instead of a stereotype. He underestimates her intelligence and the extent of her worldly knowledge" (McDowell 1976, 98). Undoubtedly, as the plot unravels, May grows into an increasingly oppressive figure and Newland in the end becomes imprisoned in her canny determination. "He felt like a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp" (Wharton 2019, 279), as it is stressed both by Wharton's narrator and the film's voice over.

To a certain extent, it is Newland who represents the innocence of the title, as May manages to take control and make him the victim of the whole affair. Scorsese renders this passage well in the film in the tone of the voice-over which chronicles Archer's life with a monotonous solemnity almost as if telling a story already written by a funereal novelist (Lasagna 1998). Furthermore, Newland's innocence is also confirmed by his misinterpretation of both Ellen and May. To the eyes of the naive protagonist, these women are archetypes of different femininities: innocence and purity vs freedom and passion. However, May proves to be intelligently manipulative and Ellen essentially passive in her inability to change the circumstances, thus being unable to favour her union with Newland.

As such, beyond providing the image of a character that undermines the stereotype of the fragile woman for the revelation instead of a destructive femininity, *The Age of Innocence* illustrates a narrative escalation toward a canny emotional violence against an unattainable passion. That is, by and large, the reason why we can consider sentimental cruelty and moral abuse as subtle and prominent motifs both in the novel and in the

⁵ The film won an Oscar for best costume design and was nominated for five Academy Awards.

film. In my view, Scorsese's depiction of emotional violence goes way beyond the mere representation of May as violator and symbol of damaging femininity. Throughout the film, Scorsese understands that beneath codes, manners and sophisticated rigour, there is a displacement of desire, an ephemeral emotional nuance that needs to be filmed with care. Therefore, my concern for how Scorsese illustrates the novel's subtle interest in psychological abuse and moral cruelty leads to a further consideration.

Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*: Violence as Visual Tension and Psychological Abuse

Academic scholarship suggests that the question of violence in Scorsese's films is rather problematic. As John McAteer's recent critical study demonstrates, Scorsese's filmmaking versatility addresses violence in different ways. For instance, in films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Shutter Island* Scorsese deals with violence but it is "much less graphic than typical horror movies (in terms of screen-gore) and less violent than most superhero action movies (in terms of on-screen violent acts or even in the number of deaths)" (McAteer 2019, 71). Regarding this, we might recall *Shutter Island*'s famous sequence when Warden (Ted Levine) says to Teddy (Leonardo DiCaprio) that God loves violence. However, here Scorsese presents brief moments of visible violence by focusing instead, as this scene demonstrates, on allusions to the very meaning of the term or on brief gruesome sequences where violence becomes very unrealistic. However, in films such as *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990), Scorsese hinges on a combination of brutality and humour which, in McAteer's words, "makes violence seem starker" (2019, 76). In *The Departed* and *Gangster of New York*, for instance, violence takes another value as it becomes more visible and frequent—the shots focus on blood lying on the snow, a body falling from a roof, shootings and stabbings highlighting the characters' moral emptiness.

Yet, in Scorsese's filmic universe, his movies convey the instrumentalization of violence through the construction of the tragedy. If we consider that tragedy per se presumes a story about suffering, we might also assume that Scorsese shows the vulnerability of good people and the tragic consequences that frame their sufferings⁶. As McAteer explains, "Viewing a tragedy an audience feels pity for the suffering hero but they also feel fear of a recognition of uncontrollability of the forces in human life that have brought the sufferings of its victims" (2019, 78). To a certain extent this also applies to *The Age of Innocence*. Taking into account Scorsese's multi-filmic interest in violence, it is evident how *The Age of Innocence* is a film that drastically differs from the main line of Scorsese's production, not only because he deals with a costume drama that departs from the traditional settings of his repertoire, but above all, because it stages a more cruel and unquestionably more complex violence difficult to visually represent.

⁶ For more on the interpretation of Scorsese's movies in relation to the Greek tragedy see McAteer (2019).

If, as shown, the trope of psychological violence can be included among other evident themes in *The Age of Innocence*, Scorsese's depiction of a form of violence distant from the graphic brutality to which he was usually accustomed, was indeed not an easy task. In this case, the adaptation of such a high work of literature was not simple to accomplish. Drawing from the fact that, as Debora Knight suggests, "Narrative fiction filmmaking is a very distinct sort of practice" (2007, 93), Scorsese's adaptation of Wharton's novel, despite its superficial differences, "is very much thematically consistent with many of his other films" (Knight 2007, 96), at least in the construction of the setting. In her analysis, Debora Knight further notes that "In *The Age of Innocence*, as elsewhere in Scorsese's oeuvre, the central character's thoughts, hopes and actions, are scrutinized by a surrounding social group whose values are dominant values and whose decisions will inexorably win out, whatever the central characteristics might themselves hope for" (2007, 97). In effect, the codified society in which *The Age of Innocence* is set might recall Scorsese's conventionalized social rituals in movies such as *The Aviator* (Scorsese, 2004) and *Goodfellas*. Moreover, the film focuses on conflict, another typical element in common with most of Scorsese's films. More striking, however, is that "like many of Scorsese's works, *The Age of Innocence* is about the abuse of power" (Wernbald 2011, 164), two persistent themes in his production.

There is, however, an essential trait that makes *The Age of Innocence* unique among Scorsese's films, and that is the symbolic value given to the meticulous filming of details that represent characters and their habits, as well as the social class in which Wharton set the story. His cinematic expertise in this film extends way beyond a portrayal of costumes and manners of the Gilded Age. By using a particular kind of camera strategy, such as slow motion and the cutting on action, Scorsese develops a world of arbitrary signs and, like Wharton, unravels the semiotics of New York society on screen. From the very beginning, Scorsese's camera slows down on objects, paintings, flowers, silverware. As Nyce observes, "A basic technique in the film has the camera lingering over a social ritual where the narrator speaks" (2004, 133), reconstructing the authentic period atmosphere of Wharton's New York⁷. Attention to detail enriches the scene as the camera moves independently, so that Scorsese shifts the focus from art through food to furniture, to capture the essence of Wharton's portrayal of nineteenth-century society⁸. *The Age of Innocence* is indeed "filmed with elegance" (Ebert 2009, 133) and with his restless camera, Scorsese pauses on the minutiae of life, from the angle of a glance to the subtle inflection of a phrase. Tension among characters is conveyed by Scorsese's choice to use pauses of silence, slowing down sequences to demarcate characters' emotions and their intimacy.

From the very first shot, Scorsese makes clear the film is obsessed with visual oppositions; between paintings and characters and even between expressive realism and a theatrical and rather dramatic form of acting that suggests how New York society is based

⁷ Also provided by Dante Ferretti's exquisite production design.

⁸ Scorsese's faithfulness to the novel is also conveyed by means of the voice-over (Joanne Woodward), which faithfully reads Wharton's passages from the novel. In a 2018 interview, Scorsese said the novel is so well written that he decided the writing had to go hand in hand with the visual.

on a cultural and social performance. Scorsese's camera follows characters into the rooms but then, in most scenes, focuses on paintings predominantly exposed behind characters. Undoubtedly, art recalls the relationship between spectator and artifact, but through this visual insistence on works of art, Scorsese seems to suggest that people and paintings have the same role as objects to be exhibited, possessed, and manipulated⁹. Returning to the theme of violence, unsurprisingly in one of the first scenes, when May and Newland visit Ms. Mingott to tell her about their engagement, Scorsese's camera focuses—among other paintings—on John Vanderlyn's brutal depiction of a pioneer woman scalped by a native. By underlining the importance of art, Scorsese suggests how it contains the real meaning of the film, which has to do with social performance and the transfiguration of the story, that is to say, how much this world is made of rigor and etiquette, but responds to a violent logic.

At a crucial moment in the story, in a passage directly taken from Wharton's novel, Scorsese's voice-over narrator, Joanne Woodward, abruptly asserts that "They all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world. The real thing was never said or done, or even thought..." (Scorsese 01:54:06). It is in this statement that we find the key passage for understanding Scorsese's construction of emotional violence. Sentiments such as love and jealousy are undoubtedly what fuels the story, but they are revealed in silence, in a physical and emotional distance that Scorsese recurrently highlights in the scenes between Newland and Ellen. Throughout the film, Scorsese develops a cinematic distance between them that is visible as well as imaginative. In most scenes, Scorsese places characters at the extremes of the shot, to the point that Newland and Ellen find themselves in the same sequence, but always at a distance that is visually concrete. At the Beauforts' ball, they sit next to each other, leaving a visible space between them, much like in the scenes in Ellen's apartment, where she often lies down on the sofa while Newland is framed at the far end of the camera standing by the fireplace. What Scorsese does with the moral cruelty exerted by May is to transfer it to the audience through imaginative distance, gestures and glances, managing to convey the drama of a love that is never fulfilled and remains permanently distant. The characters' insurmountable separation recurs with insistence in several other scenes, in which Scorsese visually illustrates the exquisite pain that lies beneath this tormented and inaccessible love in a world based on strict rules of decorum¹⁰.

Emblematic is the scene in which Archer observes Ellen from afar, on the edge of a shimmering sea. He promises he will follow her only if she turns around and after a few shots that show a light of hope in his eyes, Newland sadly leaves after Ellen stands motionless staring at the horizon without ever turning around, as if prefiguring their fatal destiny. Arguably, another devastating moment occurs when Newland prostrates himself at Ellen's feet and after a chaste shoe kiss—as if to indicate the impossibility of materializing the passion other than in a brief, tearful and poignant kiss—the sequence culminates in a

⁹ The title refers to Joshua Reynolds' "The Age of Innocence" (1785). The painting inspired Wharton for the novel's title.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, Scorsese makes a cameo in the film, playing the role of the photographer at May and Newland's wedding, documenting the triumph and expectations of New York's high society.

strange, almost unnatural embrace (she sits hugging Newland from the shoulders while he lays on the ground resting his head on her lap). In this way, Scorsese's visual strategy represents the frustration of an emotional distance between the two, further complicated by the rigid rules of Victorian repression. The erotic and unpleasant separation between Day-Lewis and Pfeiffer's characters comes to a climax in the final scene when Newland, now a widower, surveys Ellen's apartment from a bench in Paris. Scorsese's camera lingers on Newland's hopeful eyes turned towards an open window and when the glass, moved by the wind, reflects sunlight, a smile appears on Newland's face, as he hopes to see her again. But when the window is closed by a servant, he decides to walk away with a disconsolate gait. In this way, Scorsese leaves the audience with a sense of frustration provided by his depiction of the legacy of May's emotional violence, which makes the love at the centre of the story far more tormented.

Arguably, in adapting Wharton's novel, Scorsese dissociates himself from violence in physical terms, approaching instead a form of cruelty much more difficult to represent, the brutality of emotions. On this point, Geoffrey O'Brien suggests that "Scorsese's *Age of Innocence* builds up a devastating sense of oppressive social power, an atmosphere of underlying dread and suspicion sustained not by physical violence but by rigorously enforced techniques of exclusion and exile" (2018). In this sense, pain and erotic violence reach their peak in those scenes where Scorsese employs slow motion and close-shots as filmic techniques to focus on body language as a form of emotional pain. This is evident in the carriage scene in Scorsese's choice of close-ups, shifting his camera onto Archer's hand as he unbuttons Ellen's glove. The rhythm of this filmic technique, present throughout the movie, develops a sensually imaginative form of sentimental violence staged as an erotic and painful fantasy.

As such, in my view, Scorsese's aim was to display emotion and manipulation as forms of emotional violence projected both on the characters and the audience. Undoubtedly, part of his representation of emotional disorder is tackled with great delicacy and shored up by the intense acting performances of Michelle Pfeiffer and Daniel Day-Lewis (part of the film's merit goes to the choice of assembling a remarkable cast). Their emotional tension and magnetic attraction produced by looks and gestures, in which Scorsese reproduces the sense of a destructive visual tension, generates a form of psychological abuse catalysed by May as a destructive force and the cause of moral cruelty that Scorsese represents through melodramatic scenes of expressive intensity and exquisite emotional frustration.

Just as fascinating, is Scorsese's employment of a sense of illusion that propels the emotional violence, which is sumptuous and painfully orchestrated and affects the characters as much as the viewer. Paradoxically, throughout the entire film, the characters' discomfort becomes that of the audience by virtue of Scorsese's choice to make Ellen and Newland's relationship invisible and leave instead space for imagination. It is in this sense that the impossibility of real contact ends up in moments of extreme erotic tension (except for two fleeting kisses and a physical contact mostly displayed on objects such as a glove or a shoe). Through this sophisticated emotional repression, we witness the explosive force of Scorsese's visually affecting brutality. The choice of using freeze frame, slow motion

and close-ups on body language and facial expressions, alternated with pauses of silence punctuated only by background noise, such as the crackling of the fireplace, develops and increases a visually stimulating form of emotional violence.

In the novel, too, we are provided with numerous opportunities to access the presence of affecting cruelty that is worthy of comparison to that of Scorsese when Wharton's narrator declares: "It was the old New York of taking life 'without effusion of blood': the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes' except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them" (Wharton 2019, 279). Indeed, *The Age of Innocence* is not a violent film in Scorsese's traditional representations of cruelty, but it tells of an evidently complicated violence of communication, the harshness of sentiments suffocated by that psychological torture machine also known as respectability (Lasagna 1998). The instrument of suffering that exerts psychological abuse is illustrated in two ways: for Wharton, through the evolution of May's character as representative of a world of oppressive rules of decorum, and for Scorsese, in the visual choice of using freeze frame, body language and slow motion, to place the focus on the imagination and emotional distance that is depicted in an extremely disconcerting way.

In an interview with Roger Ebert Scorsese said that:

It was the spirit of it—the spirit of the exquisite romantic pain. The idea that the mere touching of a woman's hand would suffice. The idea that seeing her across the room would keep him alive for another year. What has always struck my head is the brutality of the manners. People hide what they mean [...] New York society was so cold-blooded (Scorsese in Ebert 2009, 138)

In Scorsese's adaptation, it is absence, ingenuity and imagery that give way to a form of brutal intensity that affects Newland and Ellen as much as the audience. Ebert observes how to a certain extent "The story Scorsese tells is brutal and bloody, the story of a man's passion crushed, his heart defeated" (2009, 168). Adopting a filming technique in which the camera is never static but rather insinuates into glances, dialogue and details, produces a concrete form of emotional disturbance. Through this strategy, Scorsese makes us feel compassion for Ellen and Newland who, as Ebert observed, are often regarded as awkward outsiders (2009, 169).

Conclusion

If my analysis thus far has explained how both Wharton and Scorsese highlight, even though differently, the image of a psychological violence of emotions, it would be easy to argue that *The Age of Innocence*, the novel as much as its filmic adaptation, features the development of that emotional cruelty which recalls the concept of "soul-murder". The term, originally coined by the playwright Henrik Ibsen, defines a form of psychological violence that passes through the deprivation of freedom so that the victims become prisoners of circumstances. In his wide-ranging study of the psychological development

of soul-murders, Leonard Schengold has explained that “The capacity to destroy a soul hinges entirely on having another human being in one’s power” (1989, 19)¹¹. This dynamic is closely aligned to both the novel and the film. In the novel, Wharton stages the evolution of a woman who passes from pure innocence and virginal purity to becoming an oppressive and destructive figure, and in his own way, Scorsese uses visual distance and emotional pain as strategies of hurting and thus affecting helpless characters and their potential love. Such statements suggest that it is a form of love denial that becomes an instrument of sentimental violence for Scorsese, just as for Wharton it is a polite form of destruction wielded by May and New York society that becomes the setting for a poignant manipulation.

As this essay has attempted to offer a reinterpretation of Wharton’s narrative through an unexplored theme such as violence (often underestimated among the novel’s main tropes), her story, which is a faithful and in some ways romantic portrayal of unattainable love, eventually conceals a narrative process that stages female violence through emotional abuse. Besides the concern for social rules and etiquette, Wharton exhibits an interest not only in the evolution of May’s character but also in the repositioning of the woman from a stereotypical image, ensconced in naivety, to the representation of what can be defined as a destructive female archetype. Faithfully elaborating on the novel’s main themes, Scorsese exploits Wharton’s narrative tension by focusing on a form of violence far removed from the traditional graphic approach to which the term lends itself, and it is artfully constructed through the filmic choice of directing a movie in which slow motion and close-ups punctuate the narrative. In my view, Scorsese deserves credit for capturing the essence of the novel by depicting the violence of the repressed sentiments of the leisure class, which inevitably manifests itself through emotional sensibility and a romantic loss deliberately balanced between repressed sentiments and passionate imagination.

In terms of the film’s ethics, Scorsese’s adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* can be considered a large-scale cinematographic model for representing emotional violence on screen through a filmic strategy that recalls Wharton’s brutally-affecting image of sentimental cruelty. In this way, moral pain widens and deepens along Scorsese’s depiction, through the subtlety of his camera, of an extremely powerful, excruciating form of violence inherent in the representation of love as romantic loss. The unrealized feelings that Scorsese condenses into scenes made up of glances, imagination, and devastating ostracism, make this film—highly underrated as it is—the quintessential model and masterpiece of frustrating emotional cruelty on screen.

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¹¹ I wish not to delve further into this discussion since the question of soul-murder, from a psychological perspective, is often associated with child abuse. For a preliminary discussion on this see Schengold (1989).

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