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"The world is so complicated, who'd want to see it?"

The House of Mirth, directed by Terence Davies, based on the novel by Edith Wharton Little Cheung, written and directed by Fruit Chan

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These are two thoroughly admirable films, in my opinion.

Terence Davies has directed a brilliant adaptation of American novelist Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905. It is the story of a young woman who is insufficiently attuned to her own self-interest to abide strictly by society's rules and is ground to pieces as a result.

Lily Bart, wonderfully played by Gillian Anderson, has limited means and depends on the generosity of a dreadful, narrow-minded aunt for her survival. The young woman squanders opportunities to marry for money, because she dares to give some consideration to the state of her own heart, and builds up debt in various ways, including by gambling at cards. Through no fault of her own, she incurs the wrath of those who are in a position to do her great harm. Excluded from society, essentially cut out of her aunt's will, Lily descends the social ladder. “I have joined the working classes,” she explains to one of her old acquaintances. Having been raised in genteel society, she is nowise prepared for this sort of existence. Before long she faces the prospect of mental and physical disintegration.

Lily is no paragon of virtue. She loves luxury and would do a great deal to get it. She's a bit lazy. She has only a limited sense of self; until she faces annihilation, she largely adheres to the prevailing notion that a woman's chief purpose is to be a lovely object. She would happily fit into society, but circumstances and her own character make it impossible. Her “failings” expose her to destruction. What can be said for a social order that destroys a human being for being true to even a small portion of her inner self? Wharton wrote about her own novel: “A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals.”

The book seems to fall very generally into that category of works, produced from the middle of the nineteenth century onward (although one might include Charlotte Brontë's writing too), that considered the fate of individual women who came up against official morality and philistinism, books such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* and *Effi Briest*. For their lack of moralizing, as well as their social critique and their compassion, I prefer *Effi Briest* and *The House of Mirth*.

Davies has chosen to embrace, unashamedly and successfully, the emotionalism and tragedy of the piece. He paints a corrupt and remorseless social universe. The work is a devastating indictment. There is something inexorable about Lily's fate. From the first moment at which she indulges in her own feelings, she is a lost soul. In the end, she can only tell her would-be lover, Lawrence Selden, who has also left her in the lurch: “I have tried hard, but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person.... Now I am on the rubbish heap.” Few moments in recent films have affected me more.

The sympathy for human difficulty that Davies exhibits in *The House of Mirth* is remarkable and all too rare in cinema. Even the inadequacies of some of the performances hardly matter. The sincerity and depth of emotional detail are what count. Davies feels things strongly and has the artistic sensibility necessary to transform that into images. His loyalty to the text is not that of a literalist, but he makes every effort to find ways of representing its spirit.

Davies' treatment of the transition from Book One to Book Two, for example, is extraordinarily evocative. Lily feels the ground slipping away under her feet and has accepted an invitation, which will prove her undoing, to cruise the Mediterranean on a friend's yacht. We see a house—Lily's aunt's—about to be abandoned for the summer, the furniture covered with sheets, mummified. Tradition and conventional habits weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. The camera dips into a flowing stream, glittering in the sunshine. There's music throughout. The camera re-emerges, so to speak, in the Mediterranean, also aglow.

The sequence manages to convey simultaneously a series of thoughts and feelings, perhaps contradictory ones: the awfulness of Lily's position; the essential beauty of life and nature; the passage of time, with its inherently tragic aspect; bottomless desire, which can never find satisfaction.

There are other touches. Davies takes even his villains seriously. Sim Rosedale (Anthony LaPaglia), apparently meant to represent the ambitious and somewhat shady *nouveau riche* Jew, ends up almost a sympathetic figure. And the director knows something about history too. He adds a fleeting reference, in the form of an agitator addressing a street rally, to the Russian Revolution of 1905.

It is entirely proper that such a major work, with its unsparing criticisms, should provoke a response from within the establishment. Stephen Holden in the *New York Times* calls the film “funereally gloomy,” and generally criticizes it for failing to find much fun either in the world portrayed in Wharton's novel or, by implication, present-day social life. “The English director's vision of New York City in 1905,” the *Times* critic writes, “is infinitely bleaker and more sterile, of course, than the glittering Versace and Gucci-clad present. The characters are too constricted by a punishing puritanical code of behavior to have much fun; hardly a smile is cracked throughout the film's glum 140 minutes.” Leaving aside the fact that this

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description is false, that there is a good deal of wit and humor in the film, Holden is responding, with unerring instinct, to a work that is potentially damaging to the status quo. He speaks for those who are amusing themselves under the present conditions, those for whom life has never been better. To such people a work like this is indeed entirely incomprehensible.

Holden compares Davies' film unfavorably to Martin Scorsese's adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, which "did a much better job of evoking a warm tribal solidarity and comfort." Davies was generous enough at a press conference in Toronto to pay tribute to Scorsese's work, but, in reality, his film is incomparably superior. Scorsese, with a far larger budget, trained his camera largely on food, clothing and decor, and managed in the process to miss three-quarters of Wharton's irony and savagery in a flat and ultimately disappointing work. Davies shot the film in Glasgow, in locales bearing only a passing resemblance to the New York of the turn of the century, but concentrated on the emotional and social truth of the work.

In person Davies speaks with great intensity. At his Toronto press conference, the filmmaker praised his performers for their understanding of the text and their "elegance." He went on: "You can't make an adaptation of a novel that is inherently modern anyway *more modern*, it would just be silly. I mean, what is the book about? The book is about what you look like and how much money you've got. What's modern culture about?—how much money you have and what you look like."

I asked Davies if it had been his intention to make such a deeply and rarely subversive work. He replied: "The template is always the original material, which is the novel. And the novel is savage. I mean, these people are some of the cruelest you have ever come across. If there is a subversion going on, it's from the Edith Wharton. And so one simply tries to be true to that and the tone. But also, there are times when you have to alter it slightly. There are two separate characters in the film, for instance: Gertie Farish and Grace Stepney. Separate, they're not interesting; together, they are, because Gertie loves Lawrence. And in the book, Grace doesn't. So if they're together it makes them infinitely more powerful.

"Because here is someone [Grace Stepney in the film] being so cruel through Christian rectitude and Christian charity which have no love in them. But it's sexual jealousy, which cannot be admitted. That's incredibly powerful; it's incredibly modern. We've all been in a position where we've loved someone who has not loved us. Or we love someone and we don't know what their feelings for us are. That's the worst possible position to be in. Now, you could say: 'Do you love me or do you not?' Those days you couldn't. Even now, even if you love someone and you're not sure of their feelings, it's very hard to say: 'I love you, do you love me?' It's incredibly hard.

"But the savagery is in the text. And because it's this wonderful era of wonderful manners and this pattern of civilization. And these people would knife you as soon as look at you. And you wouldn't know until after they'd done it. That's what's so astounding about it."

Laura Linney (*The Truman Show*), who plays Bertha Dorset, one of the women who does Lily in, responded to the intensity of Davies' answers: "This is the passion that you get on a daily basis working with Terence."

Davies: "It's called overacting."

Linney: "No, it's called passion."

Later in the press conference, actor Eric Stoltz (Lawrence Selden) returned to this theme. "I have to say on behalf of all the actors in the film, none of us have ever quite worked with anyone like Terence. He lived with the book for 15 years, so, when I came in to read a part, he acted out all the parts. And when we got on the set, he acted out all the parts. And I truly believe that Terence was every role in the film.... He was so passionately involved in the making of it that we all felt that we had to live up to his imagination, which is boundless—how he pictured us in the roles. It was a challenge. A curious way to work. We were a lot of surly American actors, we're pretty much used to doing whatever we want. And he wouldn't stand for that. It was a great experience."

Replying to another question, Davies discussed his approach.

"The text tells you everything and you try to keep in mind its tone, which is important, and the look, and the feel of it. But it's got to be cinema as well. Certain exigencies happen simply because you have no money. For one sequence we needed an Episcopal church. We shot in Scotland, they don't have Episcopal churches in Scotland. We can't build one, we haven't got the money. So what is the easiest way to tell you about a wedding. What do all weddings have in common? They have photographs. Well, in those days the image in a camera was upside down. So you see them upside down ... 'I now pronounce you man and wife,' and they're the right way up. It's witty, it's succinct. And it's cheap.

"What's much more interesting is when the actors are doing things to which you sometimes have to respond: 'No direction today, just do it.' And that changes things more than you can imagine. They'll look or they'll use a hand gesture or they'll half do something, or forget something, and that's just magic. You can't direct that—no one can. So that changes it...

"You get into a room like the one we had [in the scene] where Lily is pursued by Gus Trenor and Sim Rosedale. It wasn't written like that. Suddenly we had to shoot it there. What do I do? And I thought: well, I've got to use this gallery, because the gallery makes it look conspiratorial. And I said: 'Will you give me a half an hour?' And they gave me half an hour and I came up with the shots that you see in the film. It's things like that that you do on the spur of the moment, or you say 'All we can afford to dress is this vector, nothing else.' But we need this room completely full. So it changes like that. It changes more in the editing. Because then, where do you cut? Do you cut before she drops her eyes and before the doors open or vice versa. Both of those things mean different things and that's when you begin to discover the subtext—that's where the subtext really emerges. That's when the film begins to sing, if indeed it does sing.

"So it's a long, constant organic process—it doesn't stop just with the script. That's only the blueprint. That's the starting point. But that's got to be right, as right as you can get it. And then, if you know what you want, you get onto the set and suddenly they move in a certain way and you think: that's much better. Instead of it being a three-shot, it's got to be two, or it's got to be one. You have to keep at it all the time. You've got to look between the lines of the text. They might do something: 'Keep that in. Keep that in.' So you're looking all the time, it's constantly changing, which is what it should do. Where it stops is once you cut it and it goes in front of an audience and there nothing you can do then—it's too late. It's just too late."

Linney commented on the relative "open-endedness" of Davies' script for *The House of Mirth*: "The great thing about a script like this is that it doesn't explain—I find that in a lot of movies you have actors explaining things. And to me explaining is not acting. Explaining is explaining. And there's nothing you can do when you're explaining something. You can explain something one way or another; there are not many forces going on within you at the same time. So we had a script with a great deal left out, but it's actually what's there on the page. For an actor, it's a good sign. The script, through hint, through research, sort of fills in what else should be happening. And then of course the other actor that you're working with does most of that for you as well as the atmosphere in the play—to say

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nothing of the direction. But it's much more ... it's almost more natural to do. It's easier for me to play parts like this, to play parts that are more human in a way, then the more succinct, on-the-nose pieces, which I think a lot of people are accustomed to."

I asked Davies about the emotionalism of the piece and its quality of grand opera.

He replied: "My template were things like [Max Ophuls'] *Letter to an Unknown Woman*, which is a kind of opera. And a marvelous, marvelous film made from actually not a very good novella. You know you read it now, you think: how could he have done such wonderful things with that novella? So there's that. But there were some other references too. Like Marilyn Monroe walking down the platform in the steam in [Billy Wilder's] *Some Like It Hot* **.** And that's there too. I know she does not have a bustle but it's there. And that kind of melodrama I grew up with—[Douglas Sirk's] *All that Heaven Allows*, [Henry King's] *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*. I saw those when I was 10 and 11. And of course, they sort of imprint themselves on you. And they come out refracted, but it's part of it."

I asked whether he felt a good many contemporary films were lacking emotional depth.

"A lot of them are perhaps. Things that I can't explain, like violence or swearing. I don't like violence because my father was violent. I had enough of that when I was a kid. And when they swear all the time, it's just monotonous. I don't think it takes any talent to write 'fuck' all the time, quite frankly. But these films are popular.

"The problem with a lot of adaptations of period pieces is that they're played as if they're modern. And the women can't play them like that because they weren't modern. If you're in Jane Austen you can't play her as if you're in the 1990s. You should be playing those women as 1815 because that's what they were. And it's idiotic to play them any other way. And in a way makes them much more parochial and much less interesting. But I don't know, perhaps I'm old-fashioned. I look back to an era where things like that, even schlocky things like *All That Heaven Allows*, were at least well crafted. And I like all that, but that's part of it too."

Little Cheung (Xilu Xiang), written and directed by Fruit Chan, is another film about which I have only good things to say.

Chan was born in Canton, China, in 1959 and moved to Hong Kong with his family at the age of 10. He attended the Hong Kong Film Centre and has assisted a number of other directors on their films. His own features include *Finale in Blood* (1991), *Made in Hong Kong* (1996), *The Longest Summer* (1998) and *Durian Durian* (2000).

A little boy in Hong Kong, in the months leading up to the reunification with China in 1997. His father runs a restaurant. They have enough money to employ a Filipino maid. His grandmother is one of his best friends. She was a performer in the old days. Little Cheung, who delivers take-out orders from the restaurant, meets up with Fan, a mainland girl living illegally in Hong Kong with her family. She's in more desperate economic straits.

The film, like some of the best east Asian works, has a wealth of detail. It obsessively recreates a physical and mental world. A single street in a single neighborhood in Hong Kong. One local critic suggested the film captures the city "in all its nakedness and cruelty." Gangsters, brothels, lower middle class desperation, poverty. Little Cheung pisses in the drinks he delivers to obnoxious customers.

Everybody is struggling. But, the film's narration suggests, "everything's done for money. Money is a dream. Everyone has a racket, a scheme." Even the kids.

Little Cheung loves his grandmother. And he loves Armi, the Filipino maid, with whom he has more contact than he does his own parents, who are busy night and day at the restaurant. The filmmaker nearly takes a page out of Douglas Sirk's book. Sirk, in *Imitation of Life*, changed the focus of his film from the travails of a career-minded actress to the much sadder story of her black maid. *Little Cheung* takes a right turn at least temporarily and considers Armi's fate. When she leaves, Little Cheung is inconsolable. Later we see her at an evangelical Christian revival, that "heart of a heartless world."

The murky issue of China and Hong Kong arises. Fan, whose family has fled the mainland for economic reasons, is an ardent little nationalist. She dreams of the day when Hong Kong will "be ours." Meanwhile she receives harsh treatment, along with other families, at the hands of Hong Kong officials. In a chilling scene, reminiscent of the deportation of the Jews by the Nazis, undocumented children are called by name to the front of their classrooms and dragged out of school, hands raised above their heads, on their way back to China. The film implies that both regimes are rotten and inhuman.

"The world is so complicated, who'd want to see it?" somebody asks at one point. The filmmaker, for one. He shows us things that are complicated, and painful, but quite beautiful too. Little Cheung's father punishes him for looking for his long-lost brother, who's disappeared into Hong Kong's underworld, and for giving cakes to Fan, so she won't go hungry. The boy takes off and hides from his family. His mother tells her husband reasonably enough, "If you beat them, they run away."

When Little Cheung's father catches up with him, he stands the boy on a stone pillar in the street and pulls his pants down. The humiliation is complete. Little Cheung responds by singing at the top of his voice: "My heart is broken ... My luck ran out ... Only God knows my true pain."

In the end, Fan is deported and, through a mix-up, Little Cheung chases after the wrong vehicle. She thinks he's abandoned her. "That was the end of our friendship." Her face as we see her sitting in the police van is unforgettable. I loved this film too.

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