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Author(s)	Doug McKinney Doug McKinney
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THE PASSING of a major artist can be the occasion of a strange mixture of triumph and regret, when it is accompanied by the gift of a last masterpiece. Such is the case with the current release of Luchino Visconti's last film, **The Innocent.**

The great Italian director's last completed work is much more than a mere swansong epitaph. *The Innocent* is a film of grand grace and sincere command, which, had there not already been respect for the director, would be no less applauded.

The film pointedly respects its source, the 1892 novel by Gabriele D'Annunzio: it begins with a hand carefully turning the book's

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Innocent is bliss

pages, against a plush red fabric background as the opening credits appear. But it quickly transcends the limited preconception of a literary adaptation (the legendary "filmed book"), and becomes an original work. The inspiration may be D'Annunzio, but the realization is Visconti's. His direction here is of an authority encompassing every detail of each carefully chosen composition.

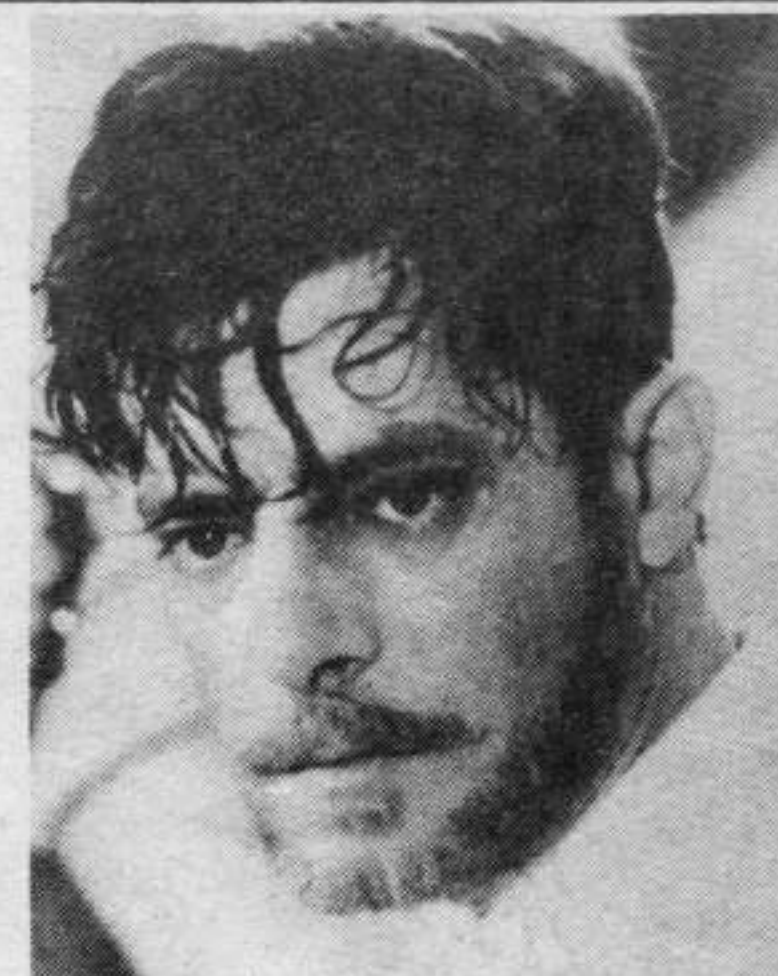
The play in this film is one of erotic betrayal and romantic sub-

mission burdened by moral constraint, and of how the consequences of moral reality make such amorous abandon intolerable. An upper-class husband, openly frustrated by an inconstant mistress, discovers that his wife's brief infidelity is unbearable. Avoiding the irony of his own partial responsibility, a reconciliation seems possible, but twists of fate force the issue with devastating results. The husband and wife are trapped by passions too great for their capacity of redemption.

The film's title becomes the definitive point of reflection. Mar-

velously, while the situation is made cruelly clear, there is an ambiguity to the direction of the spectator's sympathy; it testifies to the director's rigorous control of the delivery, while the judgment is intentionally left to the viewer.

Central to the film's success are the finely-guided performances of the initially curious cast. Giancarlo Giannini, widely known as a Wertmuller trademark, displays a greater versatility here in his portrayal of the husband. His comic expressions are gone, and the face previously employed in



Giancarlo Giannini in Visconti's *The Innocent*.

farce and black comedy now registers the depth of frustration felt by a man caught in the particular emotional conflict outside his control.

Laura Antonelli, as the wife, adds a striking physicality to a convincing range of emotional subtlety; hers is the most dangerously complex character, but her performance never lacks credibility. And yes, Visconti knew what he was doing with Jennifer O'Neill, as her portrayal of the vaguely amoral mistress is delicately turned. True, familiarity in her case will cause notice of the dubbing, but Visconti's guidance is such that those preconceptions can be left at the door.

However, the "film" has one nagging, if ultimately narrow, flaw. Nominally shot in Technicolor, the print has been processed in Eastmancolor, and the lab job is hardly serendipitous. Tints of red and green are marginally off, and it is bothersome only because the rest of the frame is so rich with a grandeur which true Technicolor would amplify. Indeed, the sumptuously detailed decor of the film is a necessary character in the play, for a large part of the moral sensibility which actively oppresses the characters is derived from the 19th century period setting.

Meanwhile, *The Innocent* is a singular festival for the student of Visconti's work. Many of the aspects of his style are rendered here in ways that make this film a last peak, rather than an afterthought, to a career. There is period naturalism without sentimentality; grand operatic splendor blessed with aristocratic grace, yet individuals are never out of focus; there is consuming emotion without histrionic exaggeration; social politics are defined in personal terms; and, there is literary control and pace, combined with intense cinematic intimacy.

The Innocent is a film to savor, like a fine, full-bodied vintage. Indeed, Visconti has signed his last film not with initials, but with a flourish.