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THE INNOCENT

Italy/France 1976 128 minutes Color

Directed by Luchino Visconti. Production Company, Rizzoli Film (Rome)/Société Imp, Ex. Ci. (Nice)/Les Films Jacques Leitiene/Francoriz Production (Paris). Produced by Giovanni Bertolucci. Production Supervisor, Federico Tocci. Production Manager, Lucio Trentini. Assistant Directors, Albino Cocco, Giorgio Treves, & Alain Sens Cazenave. Screenplay by Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Enrico Medioli, & Luchino Visconti, based on the novel by Gabriele D'Annunzio. Photography by Pasqualino De Santis. Special Photography Effects by Goffredo Rocchetti, Gilberto Provenghi, & Luigi Esposito. Edited by Ruggero Mastroianni. Art Director, Mario Garbuglia. Assistant Art Directors, Ferdinando Giovannoni, Sefano Ortolani, & Corrado Ricercato. Music by Franco Mannino. Performed by Orchestra stabile della Gestione Autonoma dei Concerti dell' Accademia Nazionale di S. Cecilia. "Berceuse" & "Waltzes" by Chopin; "Turkish March" by Mozart; "Les jeux d'eu a la Villa d'Este" by List, performed by Franco Mannino; "Che Farò" by Cluck, performed by Benedetta Pecchioli & Franco Mannino. Costumes by Piero Tosi, Maria Fanetti, & Isolina Benzi. Sound by Mario Dallimonti. Print provided by Films, Inc. Cast: Giancarlo Giannini (Tullio Hermil), Laura Antonelli (Giuliana Hermil), Jennifer O'Neill (Countess Teresa Raffo), Rina Moreilli (Tullio's Mother), Massimo Girotti (Stefano Egano), Didier Haudepin (Federico Hermil), Marie Dubois (Princess di Fundi), Roberta Paladini (Elviretta), Claude Mann (Prince), Marc Porel (Filippo D'Arborio), Valeria Moriconi (Voice of Teresa Raffo), Philippe Hersent, Elvira Cortese, Siria Betti, Enzo Musumeci Greco, Filippo Perego, Margerita Horowitz, Riccarda Satta.



'The Innocent' Visconti's Last Fresco

by James McCourt

In October 1975, six months before his death, Luchino Visconti held a press conference on the opening day of the shooting of *The Innocent* (*L'Innocente*), his last film, in which he offered the following comments by way of introduction. (*L'Innocente* is derived from the novel of the same name by Gabriele D'Annunzio, completed in 1891, and published in the United States as *The Intruder* in 1898.)

"Why did I choose D'Annunzio? It is because he really represents an inexhaustible and ever-new source for the movies. And because there is a revival of D'Annunzio, and I think this film will do much to bring back into fashion clothes and furniture of that period. And also because D'Annunzio has a conception of life which is really up to date. We live in a time of brutality, where appearance is all-important. Since he was a young man D'Annunzio aimed to make a sensation, and for this he was ready to do everything and use every means his whim suggested to him. His idea of love was brutish and the physical aspect came first. He was deeply erotic, and what is more erotic than our time?

"*The Intruder* is a book where sensuality and eroticism play the leading roles, and the same will be for the film. Many people confuse D'Annunzio with 'Dannunzianism,' and this is undoubtedly a mistake. 'Dannunzianism' is something decadent, cheap, dreadful. Let us hope it will never again come into fashion; it would be extremely dangerous too. For it's true D'Annunzio was a dangerous man; he was tuned to Nietzsche's theory of superman, which Mussolini adopted for himself."

These offhand pronouncements, released to the press at screenings prior to *The Innocent's* immensely successful New York first run ("*Innocent* looks like 60 G"—*Variety*, 1/24/79), even allowing for the vagaries of translation which routinely twist courtly resonant Italian phrases into garbled English howlers, do not do much to gladden the hearts of Visconti lovers still mourning the passing of a giant. Who could snap back "He said *what?*" when he would not come again (nor his like)? "Oh, it's apocryphal; it *must* be apocryphal!" *Those* clothes? *That* furniture? *E matto . . . matto*. D'Annunzio up to *date*? "We live in a time . . ." Of course: the center isn't holding; society is in turmoil—flux; the middle class is on the rise; and the check is in the mail. Blame it on television, on ultrasuede, on nitrite. But what of *The Innocent*?

How may one scold the great dead? Here

Visconti's febrile detractors have been howling "wretched excess," "modiste," "frou-frou," and that standby "decadent" for two decades, since *Senso*. What on earth (yet awhile) is the maestro himself doing, flicking Gauloise ash into a yawning grave as he gathers his silken shroud about him, going on about *baignoire fauteuils* and wasp-waisted tea gowns and the scented residua of a hyperkinetic priapic toad who went berserk over Eleanora Duse and ended up crooning over the cut of Mussolini's jib? Is he telling us D'Annunzio is to be the next Hesse? No, it was all a great joke: *un scherzo fottutamente favoloso*. Visconti in an autumn garden: *il vecchio burlone. Ma sì, quell 'sprezzatura!* Well, be that as it may be . . . what is *L'Innocente* like?

The Innocent is a summation of Viscontian concerns, predilections, operations, and demonstrations. Whereas the evanescent *Conversation Piece*—an elegiac, mannerist tour-de-force meditation on the passing of the Italian Renaissance and of Idealism—was calculated to create anxiety in viewers, allowing no release, this ultimate testament is an idiosyncratic benediction, a valediction crossing "La commedia è finita" with "Ite, Missa est."

Cued by the *mise en scène*, viewers come to realize that *The Innocent* is, on the surface, the *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* Visconti often chatted about making. The child Duke of Modrone must have been well aware of the Duse, and of Bernhardt, and of their works and pomps, and he was raised in surroundings created in the epoch pictured in *The Innocent*, in that world which lasted, as Proust's did, only until 1914. He undoubtedly devoured D'Annunzio, while being informed by the clashes of taste, decorum, and social politics which resounded between the era of Verdi and Victor Emmanuel and the era of *verismo*, Gramscian socialism, and Futurism. (Details of the early Visconti years are soon to be made available to readers in *A Screen of Time*, by Monica Stirling—due out from Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich in May, 1979.)

In terms of *personaggi*, Visconti's past is as evident as handwriting. The Contessa Teresa

Raffo, as incarnated in *The Innocent* by Jennifer O'Neill (face and body) and Valeria Moriconi (voice), is distinctly a Duse type—especially with her hair streaming down as she runs down the driveway in the finale (the way Duse barreled through the dark alleyways of Venice after performing Juliet.) Massimo Girotti, the godlike proletarian wanderer of *Ossessione* (1942), has aged backward in *L'Innocente* into a weathered Olympian grandee, whose occupations include noia, fucking, and finding nothing out. Giancarlo Giannini, in the anomalous title role, looks like a blasted Alain Delon—Rocco in the sixteenth round, dressed to the nines; he has the very same eyes, only clouded and bloodshot. (Whereas Delon was the proletarian Christ, Giannini is the bourgeois anti-Christ.) Laura Antonelli is a reincarnation of Maria Schell in *White Nights* (1957). All the faces in Visconti's fresco are out of the past. Visconti has always dealt with that which is over, and nothing is so over as yesterday in the mind's eye; neither is anything more exigent for filming than the protean ego.

Sensuality and eroticism do not exactly *play* the leading roles in *The Innocent*. They furnish the text, but the text is articulated by actors and by flowers. When Jennifer O'Neill turns over in bed, and while Valeria Moriconi purrs and the subtitles declare "Tuberoses, at this time of year!" the flowers take over, in closeup. When lilacs bloom in the summer garden they swamp the screen, until Antonelli and Giannini surface in closeup (in the most perfect sequence in the film). Antonelli, later, as victim, wears "crab apple" cologne and violets in her headgear. Everywhere outdoors the blooming flowers trumpet life; everywhere indoors the cut ones mourn. The other "*innocente*" is born in winter, murdered at an open window in a time of snow. Antonelli's lover's sacrificial death occurs offscreen as a result of his exposure to a surfeit of African vegetation (too much life explodes: engorgement summons death), whereas Giannini's mock-sacramental suicide is accomplished in a barren hallway in a cold gray dawn.

The emblematic clothing performs the appropriate service. Teresa Raffo, the siren,

wears scarlet satin gowns, ribbon chokers encrusted with pearls (cultivated in disease), and a cloak collared in purple feathers. Giuliana, the wife, wears mourning purple satin in the evening and defiantly optimistic pink chiffon in the afternoon. The gossips at the *soirée musicale* all wear black. The black fencing masks on Giannini and Marc Porel (the lover D'Arborio) erase their visages and strip their bodies for classic combat—a regulated, sporting duel disguised as gentlemanly exercise. When clothing is discarded and the innocent, valiant lover appears naked before the soiled, sweated husband (in one of the two most erotic scenes in the picture, in which Porel walks out of the showers and stands for a moment in front of Giannini, who surveys him and implodes in fascination and fury), the closeup on Giannini pinions the “innocent’s” soul. The lover is the angel of denunciation.

The four principals make a spectacular cluster. Visconti touches sacred ground manipulating this quartet—reaching for and achieving the effect of a cross between the metaphysical utterance of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* and the flamboyant coloration of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. Giannini’s promotion from *dramma giocosa* to serious melodrama comes off sveltely. The depiction and portrayal of extreme states of mind, of anguish and desperation, often verges upon hilarity—as did Alida Valli’s Contessa Livia Serpieri in *Senso* (1954), the single greatest performance in the Visconti canon. Giannini’s riveting glances in *The Innocent* often seem to approach the “Curses, foiled again” look, and occasionally the English subtitles threaten to torpedo the mood, as for example in the scene in which he begs Antonelli to help him put the Jennifer O’Neill demon away, to salve his canker lust. It is in moments like these when one most wants to turn down the sound and let the mimicry proceed. But Visconti rescues moment after moment by holding the shot mercilessly, time and again. In sum, the Giannini performance is both yeomanly and brave in the extreme. (The actor apparently has a perfect sense of what he and Visconti have achieved: the evidence is in the valiant campaign he waged to have

twenty minutes of original footage, discarded by the distributors, resotred for the New York opening.)

Laura Antonelli, currently being hailed as the most beautiful young woman on the screen, recalls the goddess-madonnas of Titian, Raphael, and Tintoretto. She carries on the tradition of reddish blondes figured in Italian painting as numinous presences. Her readings are oracular, bewitching. She renders the term “passive aggressive” authentic. Her body extends beyond symmetry; it overwhelms *Luxuria*. Her eyes and her voice cooperate like text and melodic line. Her most impressive moment is her last—“*Ti odio!*” she growls, like a mortally wounded leopard. Hers is the pivotal role in *The Innocent*—the woman as sepulchre—and she is perfect in it.

Jennifer O’Neill is all glistening surface—childish, desperate, forlorn, a negative polarity crowned in *echt*-luxuriant jet-black hair. What she is given to do as a plastic manifestation she accomplishes in clear, clean unmanerred thrusts. Teresa Raffo’s final (Tosca-like) scene, carried more by Valeria Moriconi’s voice than by the face on the screen, gives O’Neill the opportunity nevertheless to exhibit her best look: that weary feminine scorn that withers men.

Marc Porel, playing Antonelli’s summer-storm lover, the writer D’Arborio (whose *chef d’oeuvre*, *La Famma*, echoes the title of D’Annunzio’s celebrated *Il Fuoco*), arrives on the screen straight off a Goya canvas, stuns viewers, and is swept away economically.

In three supporting roles, Rina Morelli, Massimo Girotti, and Didier Haudepin excel effortlessly. Morelli, a Visconti veteran, is Giannini’s mother, a sort of Italian Chekhovian, a country recluse who understands nothing but the Christian God, flowers, and the commonplace miracle of procreation; these suffice. She is bedrock perfect in the role. Girotti’s appearance is brief, serviceable, and memorable; his Count Stefano Egano is voyeuristic, wary, mildly distracted by the future, and forever between engagements. Didier Haudepin plays Giannini’s brother, the sort of man it would be better to know better than Giannini: genuinely kind, but ill-informed, the

eternal background uncle-confidant, handsome, bewildered, timid, forthright, a gentle Dostoyevskian.

In *Senso* Visconti used Bruckner's music, in *Death In Venice* (1973) Mahler's. Franco Mannino's score for *The Innocent* is a Bruckner-Mahler pastiche; its piano writing is its best feature. (Visconti's associative use of Mahler to one side, it is artistically more advanced in making motion pictures to commission a score than it is to filch one. Erich Wolfgang Korngold was much more effective for the screen than was Rachmaninoff, Bernard Herrmann much more telling than Bach.) The one derivative musical sequence that works perfectly as a "turn" in *The Innocent* is the *Che faro* interlude, in which, at a *soirée musicale*, while the alto is singing the lament of Orpheus from Gluck's *Orfeo*, Giannini comes up behind Antonelli, touches her shoulder, and, as she turns, expecting the touch to be Porel's, becomes at once her putative lover, her abductor, and her destroyer.

The suicide which ends *The Innocent* is nowhere to be found in the original, and points the finger back at *il vecchio burlone*, at the edge of his grave, yakking about fashion, evil, dangerous creators, and moral lassitude—sending up smoke screens as signals. To a romantic nihilist suicide is the grand gesture; to a Christian it is spiritual annihilation; in *The Innocent*, by Visconti, it is both an interrogation and a secular benediction; it is Pirandellian, Sartrean, Bressonian, in a single chord, an enigmatic last one.

Now that the Visconti canon is complete, and the director is comfortably situated, lounging monumentally in the company of Griffith, Ophuls, Renoir, and the rest, the serious business of tracking and cataloguing all the motifs from *Ossessione* to *L'Innocente* must commence. In 1979, of which year the picture is this one.

—*Film Comment*,
March-April 1979.