

MOVING IMAGE AT THE DGA

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH TERENCE DAVIES

Friday, December 15, 2000, 7:00 p.m.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Sony Pictures Classics, 2000, 135 mins. 35mm print courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. Directed by Terence Davies. Produced by Olivia Stewart. Written by Davies, based on the novel by Edith Wharton. Photographed by Remi Adefarasin. Edited by Michael Parker. Music by Adrian Johnston. Production design by Don Taylor. Principal cast: Gillian Anderson (as Lily Bart), Dan Aykroyd (Gus Trenor), Eric Stoltz (Lawrence Selden), Anthony LaPaglia (Sim Rosedale), and Laura Linney (Bertha Dorset).

The House of Mirth

Excerpt from "Beauty's Slow Fade" by Philip Horne, *Sight and Sound*, October 2000:

In this *House of Mirth*, Davies has a sympathetic heroine, and he repeatedly brings us touchingly close to Gillian Anderson as Lily Bart, often veiled or turning aside or with her face partly shaded. The actress' long training in the evocation of paranoia (as well, perhaps, as the troubled past she has revealed in interviews) has proved the perfect preparation for the increasingly crushing weight of anxiety she has to convey here, as Lily's plans crumble and her friends successively betray her. It would be worth going to this film alone for the tense, hesitant, even sometimes stirringly erotic encounters between Lily and her equally self-divided, non-committal lover Selden, not rich himself, and fatally put off by her gold-digging. In one profoundly memorable scene they have broken away at night from a grand house party to the magical seclusion of an ornamental garden bench in a recess surrounded by Chinese lanterns. Bergman warns that film often can't translate "the intangible dimension, which is the heart of a literary work," but here Davies daringly draws us into the ache of sexual and emotional attraction these self-thwarting lovers' sudden proximity brings to life, filming the whole scene in one long, dreamlike tracking shot which gradually steals right up to them as they irresistibly kiss, but which painfully withdraws as they realize the impossibility of realizing their love in this society. Wharton, dropping her ruthlessly satirical attitude for a moment, has a wonderfully light touch in this scene (the kiss is just "their lips touched" and immediately "She drew back"); but for us to be really moved by the failure of their relationship we need more than she gives us. Davies knows we have to feel the value of what is lost, and in this risky scene of intimate approach, snatched communion then agonized withdrawal he encapsulates the emotional arc of the whole story.

There is another kiss earlier in the film, in a scene where one could say Davies is giving a heart to the story that Wharton's original lacks. At a country-house party near New York, Selden

and Lily, obeying what Wharton calls “an indwelling voice in each,” have broken away from other pressures into a dreamy summer afternoon and sit side by side in the shade of a tree. Wharton beautifully evokes the powerful attraction of the moment even as the words of her two lovers express their mutual distrust and fear of commitment (Selden’s sense of Lily’s determination to marry rich, Lily’s sense of Selden as probably just flirting). “All the exquisite influences of the hour trembled in their veins, and drew them to each other as the loosened leaves were drawn to the earth.” But whereas Wharton ends this scene of frustrated near-intimacy with Lily cagily asking, “Were you serious?” and Selden’s reply “Why not? You see, I took no risks in being so,” Davies has an inspiration. They say this, then instead of departing, they kiss (in a tender close-up)—with the smoke of Selden’s perpetual cigarette drifting wistfully across the frame. There is music for this scene, exceptionally, but baroque strings—aptly for these characters still profoundly constrained by their society—not, as one might have expected, the full romantic orchestra. Still in keeping with the Whartonian world, that is, though inflecting the Whartonian action.

Terence Davies Biography, from press kit for *The House of Mirth*:

Born in Liverpool in 1945, Terence Davies was the youngest of seven children.

In 1973, he went to Coventry Drama School where he completed his first autobiographical screenplay, *Children*, in the same year. He ultimately received a grant from the British Film Institute to make the film in 1976. Davies attended the National Film School where he began work on his second film, *Madonna and Child* (1980), which won the Gold Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival, the Critics’ Prize at Oberhausen and the Bronze Statuette at Cork. The final film of the trilogy was *Death and Transfiguration* (1983). The three 16mm films, shown together as *The Terence Davies Trilogy*, achieved international critical acclaim, winning prizes at the Locarno (1984) and Cadiz (1985) Film Festivals.

Davies’ next film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, also an intensely personal work drawing on Davies’ memories of his family and incorporating events from his own life, won the International Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988, along with 17 other international prizes including the Golden Leopard (Locarno), the Critics’ Prize (Toronto), Best Film (Leeds), Best Film (Valladolid), Best English Language Film (British Critics’ Circle), and Best Foreign Film (Los Angeles Film Critics).

Davies followed this with *The Long Day Closes* (1992) which was again inspired by his childhood memories. The film was selected for competition in Cannes and was awarded Best Picture at Valladolid as well as receiving the Evening Standard Award for Best Screenplay in Britain.

In 1995, Davies directed *The Neon Bible* starring Gena Rowlands which he adapted from John Kennedy Toole’s novel. The film garnered great critical acclaim and was also selected for competition in Cannes.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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