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Review of The Innocents

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The Innocents
(Fox Home Entertainment, 9.6.2005)

The Innocents is by far the best of the many film and television adaptations of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Wonderfully acted and directed, it is one of the most satisfying film treatments of an important work of literature as well as an outstanding psychological horror movie.

In Victorian England, Miss Giddens (Deborah Kerr) is seeking a position as governess following the death of her father. She is hired by a wealthy gentleman (Michael Redgrave) to care for his orphaned niece and nephew with the understanding that he not be bothered with any problems. After arriving at the uncle's remote country estate, Miss Giddens becomes enchanted by Flora (Pamela Franklin) but is caught off guard when Miles (Martin Stephens) is expelled from his school under mysterious circumstances. The governess then begins seeing what she takes to be Miss Jessel (Clytie Jessop), her predecessor, and Peter Quint (Peter Wyngarde), the uncle's valet. The only problems are that both are dead and that no one else sees them.

The Innocents, with a screenplay by William Archibald and Truman Capote and "additional scenes and dialogue" by John Mortimer, is mostly faithful to its source. The controversy over the novel is whether Miss Giddens is a good person trying to protect the children from the ghosts or a neurotic who creates the ghosts out of her insecurities. The governess is the narrator of the novel, but the film cannot duplicate this point of view and, in showing the ghosts, becomes a tad more literal.

Nevertheless, it is still easy to interpret her actions as resulting from a psychological flaw. Her clergyman father has just died, thrusting her out into the cold world the first time. She is sexually attracted to the uncle and wants to impress him. She transposes this sexuality to little Miles so that he acts and talks like an adult. Director Jack Clayton and cinematographer Freddie Francis reinforce this interpretation with frequent shots of towers, tall trees, and other phallic symbols, as well as windows, mirrors, and staircases, all having sexual overtones in Freudian psychology. Clayton has the soundtrack go silent just before Miss Giddens imagines she sees Quint for the first time to hint at a breakdown in her psyche.

One of the many striking shots has the camera follow Miss Giddens down a hallway as she seemingly glides in the air like a spirit. A dissolve from a shot of Flora to one of Miss Giddens and the housekeeper (Megs Jenkins) is held briefly to suggest the girl is trapped between the instability of one and the commonsense of the other. Francis, perhaps the greatest British black-and-white cinematographer, uses shadows wonderfully to increase tension and employs filters to darken the edges of many shots to suggest the forces of evil are closing in on our heroine. Despite a few shots that seem a bit soft and fuzzy,

Francis's brilliant Cinemascope work is captured in this transfer. The disc is doublesided to offer both widescreen and fullscreen options.

Kerr captures the governess's ambiguous nature with slight movements of her head and eyes. Franklin, one of the best child stars ever, and Stephens ably convey the children's odd blend of innocence and creepiness. Stephens gives a memorable performance in *Village of the Damned* the year before *The Innocents*, and Franklin went on to specialize in horror before disappearing from films after 1976. Francis, alas, abandoned cinematography for a long period while he directed low-budget horror movies.

Of the many other versions of *The Turn of the Screw*, the best is probably Antoni Aloy's *Presence of Mind*, set in Spain and starring Sadie Frost, Lauren Bacall, and Harvey Keitel. Aloy makes the sexual content more explicit but remains true to the source's ambiguities. And Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* is deeply indebted to James.—Michael Adams