

A filmmaker who takes people seriously

David Walsh reviews *The Dreamlife of Angels* (*La vie rêvée des anges*)

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The Dreamlife of Angels (*La vie rêvée des anges*), directed by Erick Zonca, written by Zonca and Roger Bohbot

This film, whose title might be better translated as "Life Dreamed of by Angels," is an honest film from France. It tells the story of two young women in the northern city of Lille who are thrown together by circumstances, become close and then lose each other.

Isabelle, or Isa, wanders into town in mid-winter, with a bedroll on her back, looking for a friend. When she can't find him, she sells handmade cards on the street and in bars. This leads to a job in a textile factory, which leads to Marie. Marie is staying in the apartment of a woman and her daughter who have been hospitalized after a serious auto accident. In fact, the mother has died. Isa moves in with her, and stays on even after she loses her job. She also becomes attached to the comatose girl in the hospital, who apparently has no other visitors. Marie, aggressive, seething and generally at odds with those around her, becomes attached to men who don't treat her well. She hooks up with a wealthy young club owner, Chriss, who has other girlfriends as well. She grows desperate for this man, and things are bound to end badly.

The Dreamlife of Angels is the first feature film directed by Erick Zonca, born in Orléans in 1956. The film and its two leading performers, Élodie Bouchez (Isa) and Natacha Régnier (Marie), have received a good deal of international recognition, including a prize at Cannes.

Much of this is deserved. The filmmaker takes the lives and circumstances of his characters quite seriously and doesn't seem primarily concerned, unlike most contemporary French directors, with impressing the spectator in one way or another. (French filmmakers

are more attuned to world cinema than, for example, their American or British counterparts and hence have a better idea what visual and thematic elements a serious film might contain; most have no more idea than their counterparts at this point, however, of actually how to create such a work.)

I take this to be a film about the dreams and illusions of working class people, and not a film, as most critics suggest, about what happens when a man comes between two women. Someone asks, "Is it love or class that counts?" A good question.

Both of the young women are at loose ends, in a chilly, hostile world. They have no home and low-paying or humiliating jobs. Isa responds by vicariously taking on the life of the injured, unconscious girl. She begins to read and later to make entries in the girl's diary. Marie first tells her, "You're torturing yourself, and you dream a lot," and later, "You just care about dead bodies." Isa lives largely in her head and seems susceptible to religion and other fantasies. Are we intended to approve of her behavior in the face of Marie's self-destructiveness? Perhaps, but she seems lost too.

Marie, it seems, has not had much affection in her life. She doesn't get along with her father, who disapproves of her, or her mother, whom she sees as a victim. Everything she angrily and rebelliously claims not to want, she, in fact, wants: money, nice clothes, a rich lover. After she starts seeing Chriss and dumps her old boyfriend, she begins to change her attitude toward Isa. The latter asks, "Is it his contempt rubbing off?" When this "spoiled rich kid," as Marie herself describes him, treats her badly, she tells Isa: "Leave me alone!... I've been humiliated before." She wears a perpetual half-smirk, half-grimace, like someone who expects to get

hit.

Marie and Isa are both imagining some kind of life, but it's not much of one. When Isa is about to move on, after the pair have had a series of fights, she leaves a note for Marie: "I wish you the life you want, the one you're dreaming of, each day, each second." In the end, Isa is back at a factory, assembling electronic components, with a bunch of other women, all dreaming.

There are dreams and there are dreams. Those that demand changes in the world to be satisfied and those that are simply the internalized expression of media and other forms of manipulation. If this film is to be believed, even humanity's dream-life has been impoverished

But still Zonca is patient and kind to his characters, as every artist should be, as well as critical. He treats them as pure and precious beings, who deserve better.

Nonetheless, I think there are elements of the filmmaking that detract from the potential power of the story. There is something contrived about Marie's evolution, and a little schematic. It's not entirely clear why she should be so stuck on this wealthy guy. One feels very early on that she is being groomed for disaster by the filmmaker. Her tragedy is weakened because we sense too strongly that the director wants us to feel something, without his ever having quite provided the dramatic basis for it.

The weakness of her development is exacerbated by another tendency. Zonca uses a handheld camera and indulges in a certain (perhaps fashionable) stylistic looseness that does not seem in keeping with a tragic, deterministic narrative. A severity is lacking.

This is bound up with a more general problem. France has a large and substantive film output. Works are made about a variety of subjects, on an equal variety of themes. No social, sexual or psychological problem is taboo. There is only one thing filmmakers are not permitted to do: generalize. Everything must be particular, provisional, qualified. Everyone has his or her story. It gets a little tedious.

Even Zonca, who seems to have his head on his shoulders, is obviously nervous about being seen to draw general conclusions. He wants to say something concrete, something definite, and then places artistic obstacles in his own path.

The difficulty today in the French cinema is that often

those who pursue a more severe aestheticism have little to say and those who have some real ideas and feelings tend to lack the confidence to pursue things through artistically to the end.



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