Not exactly a nourishing meal

Bread and Tulips, directed by Silvio Soldini

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Bread and Tulips, directed by Silvio Soldini, written by Soldini and Doriana Leondeff

The Italian film *Bread and Tulips* follows a middle-aged, middle-class housewife's semiconscious escape from her mundane and somewhat oppressive existence. Left behind by her husband on a trip to Pompeii, Rosalba (Licia Maglietta) arranges, and continuously postpones, her return to her family. She finally arrives in Venice, a city she has always wanted to see. Once there, Rosalba learns how to trust her newly found impulsiveness. She rediscovers her childhood love for playing the accordion. She meets new people and slowly creates a new life for herself: a love interest in the mysterious Nordic waiter Fernando (Bruno Ganz); a trusted friend in the new-age masseuse Grazia; and an employer in Fermo, the grumpy but well-meaning owner of a florist shop.

Mimmo, Rosalba's husband, is a small businessman, sells toilets, and is distinctly allergic to romance or passion. When Rosalba leaves, he becomes worried and irate. He struggles to deal with his jaded youngest son and is disappointed that his mistress refuses to fulfill Rosalba's domestic duties. Mimmo decides to hire Costantino as a detective to find Rosalba and bring her home. All this unfolds pleasantly, avoiding dramatic tones. The viewer is encouraged to hope that Rosalba will stay in Venice, that flaky Grazia and clumsy Costantino will get together, and this promptly happens in a predictable happy ending.

Bread and Tulips has won several Italian and international awards. The film is enjoyable and has definite merits that must be recognized. A tone of cheerful and pleasant humor pervades many of the scenes. The acting is quite good, particularly Maglietta and Bruno Ganz, who is already known internationally for his acting in Wenders' *Wings of Desire* and *The American Friend*. The film takes a delicate and patient approach toward its characters. There is nothing glamorous or grating in their development. These are not extraordinary people, or shallow "types" to be merely used or vilified. The viewer will care for them with all their quirky fragility. Because of this, there is something genuine and refreshing about *Bread and Tulips*.

The film also expresses a definite Italian trait: to know how to enjoy simple sensory pleasures, to experience life without paralyzing anxieties and dysfunctions. It expresses that elusive, yet important "art of living" remarked upon by many of the famous foreigners visiting Italy. Bakunin, the famous anarchist, wrote that in Italy, "one may live and breathe humanly." At its best, when delivered in appropriate dosage, there is a worthwhile, liberating moment in this: a desire, and to some degree a capacity to escape the relentless regimentation and the ugly artificialities of modern life. Fermo reminds Rosalba that "beautiful things take time" and that "one must learn how to wait," as she prepares a bouquet of flowers.

If indulged for too long, however, this tendency reveals itself as a sticky romanticism—a guilty pleasure that can provides temporary satisfaction, but remains an artistic as well as political dead end. This is the problem that condemns *Bread and Tulips* to remain an enjoyable, but severely limited and ultimately even wrongheaded film.

In this sense, *Bread and Tulips* reminds one of *Mediterraneo*, another internationally successful Italian film. Dedicated to "all those who are escaping" and characterized by an effortless pacifism and a series of refusals (to submit to discipline, to fight World War II, to return home), *Mediterraneo* is only superficially appealing. It revels in attractive but all-too comfortable

utopian pockets found at the margins of great events and great struggles.

Similarly, *Bread and Tulips* happily skims the surface of Italian social reality and fails to confront it in any way. In Italy, as elsewhere in Western Europe, this is the age of "flexibility," when the relative certainties of the post-World War II social regime—the "rigid" expectations of having a job, a home, a life—are being swept by legislative fiat into the maelstrom of unfettered market forces. Keeping this context in mind, there is just too much "flexibility" in this film. Rosalba, nearly penniless as she arrives in Venice, finds a new job, a new home and a new life with ease. Costantino, unemployed and with some expertise in plumbing, is hired instead as private detective on account of his extensive reading of detective novels. At the end, all the characters we are supposed to care about seem to find a meaningful and comfortable life dancing and singing in the streets of Venice.

The movie also addresses questions of familial relations in Italy in a similar fashion. The chauvinism of Rosalba's husband is cheeky and even endearing. The "mammismo"—a typically Italian phenomenon—trapping Costantino, a 30-something man, in the clutches of a controlling mother will manage to extort a chuckle and no more from the viewer. Even Fernando's attempted suicide is a remarkably casual and lighthearted affair.

If we were to more forcefully interrogate this approach, it would reveal itself politically as an anarchism of the here and now: vaguely "oppositional," but only in order to look for and find too easily an oasis from contemporary conditions; celebratory of genuine social relations, but selfish and narrow in struggling for them only in a small circle of friends. It's probably no accident that the figure that comes closest to serving as philosophical guide in the narrative is Fermo, the anarchist shop owner.

Commenting on his latest project *Burning in the Wind*,an adaptation of Agata Kristof's difficult novel *Yesterday*, director Silvio Soldini remarked that he could not bear to retain the novel's "punitive" ending, and instead steered the story toward a safe and happy landing. In this interview, Soldini spoke passionately of the necessity to "avoid at all cost the neo-realist trap." It's not clear if one should read this as a cavalier dismissal of that monumental legacy of Italian cinema that gave us films such as *Open City* and *The Bicycle Thief*. Any comparison of this sort could only embarrass Soldini.

Perhaps his was a warning against a more generic tendency toward a dull and passive "realism," but this is hardly the most pervasive flaw afflicting contemporary cinema. It is clear, however, that for now Soldini speaks from the cramped, if nicely decorated quarters of a different and far more common trap: that of an complacent celebration of "life," and "spontaneity" in dark times. As an artist Soldini has talent, and the world he puts on film has its charms. Without insisting on "realism" in a strict sense, we wish he would find a way into, rather than away from the pressing social questions of our age.