The Tourist, an artist on vacation from serious work

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The Tourist is the latest film from German director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. His previous film, *The Lives of Others*, about the persecution of artists by Stasi secret police in the former Stalinist East Germany, was highly acclaimed, winning the 2007 Academy Award for best foreign language film. Since that time, the director has moved to Los Angeles and, perhaps ominously, begun a career in Hollywood. His new film is a remake of the 2005 French thriller *Anthony Zimmer* (directed by Jérôme Salle).

Elise (Angelina Jolie) is a mysterious, elegantly dressed woman under police surveillance in Paris. As she waits in a cafe for the arrival of her lover, international fugitive Alexander Pearce, a note arrives from him warning her of the police presence. She is instructed to board a train, find a man of Alexander's general physical description and make the authorities believe he is Pearce.

As she boards the specified train, still pursued by police, she chooses Frank (Johnny Depp) a math teacher from Wisconsin, to be her decoy. Frank is tired of being ordinary and "down to earth" and is immediately attracted to Elise. Depp is amusing as the awkward and awestruck Frank. When Elise appears before him at one point in an evening gown, he tells her: "You look ravenous!" "Do you mean ravishing?" she suggests. "I do!" A running gag in which Frank speaks Spanish to everyone he meets in Italy is also entertaining.

Unexpectedly, a gangster from whom the real Alexander has stolen a large sum of money has also been following Elise in the hopes of finding the thief. After she abandons the apparently unfortunate Frank to meet Alexander, the gangster's henchmen go after Frank, believing he is their man. Chaos ensues, as Frank struggles to avoid capture and to win over Elise, having fallen in love with her during the course of their adventure.

The Tourist is, at best, light entertainment. Von Donnersmarck has taken a working vacation, so to speak, in which he and his crew find themselves in glamorous locales such as Paris or Venice, operating with material that is insubstantial and easily digestible, and has been chosen precisely for that reason.

Asked by *Nymag.com* why he picked *The Tourist* as his follow-up project to *The Lives of Others*, von Donnersmarck replied, "I had just finished writing a screenplay for a dark, dramatic thriller, and when I heard about *The Tourist*, I thought, 'Maybe I'll do this one first.' There was a very specific time frame we needed to do it—eleven months—and I thought it would do me and viewers good to do something light and not something very heavy. Of course, now I am going to go back and do something heavy."

Perhaps more tellingly, the director was recently asked about the ongoing persecution of WikiLeaks' Julian Assange by *Speakeasy*, a blog hosted on the web site of the *Wall Street Journal*. He commented, "How high is the probability that [Assange] will have committed sexual crimes at the exact same time that everybody wants him for other things? There's a movie right there—but to get away from that kind of thinking was exactly why I made *The Tourist*."

Isn't this the opposite of what is needed at present? When events demand seriousness from artists, a more thorough understanding of the world and social

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processes, a *growth* in critical thinking, we have instead a film made on the basis of avoiding those questions, a film made "to get away from that kind of thinking." As one might be able to predict, the results are rather poor.

The Tourist is self-consciously styled to remind one of classic Hollywood films. It evokes in particular, although superficially, the work of Alfred Hitchcock. It borrows one of the latter's favorite themes—worked out famously, for example, in *North By Northwest*—that of the innocent "wrong man" caught up in a web of intrigue, often the machinations of rival governments or other powerful agencies.

But where Hitchcock and other directors of genre films, such as John Ford or Howard Hawks, went beyond the limitations of their genres—the Western, the crime thriller, the romantic comedy—turning them into something more serious, and frequently into meaningful works, the makers of *The Tourist* have adopted those limitations as a means of retreating from significant problems into simpler territory.

It becomes clearer and clearer that without a foundation in real life, considered in all its richness and complexity, deeply moving or convincing drama (or for that matter, comedy) is virtually impossible to pull off. *The Tourist* is no exception. The filmmakers even appear unsure of just what kind of movie they are creating. This results in a curiously uneven tone throughout.

Depp certainly appears to think the work is a farce and turns in a comedic performance that provides whatever lively moments the film contains, while Jolie plays it straight. The relationship between their two characters is unconvincing for the most part. It's as though the filmmakers have said, "Of course he would fall in love with her, after all, she's Angelina Jolie!"

Underscoring *The Tourist*'s lack of seriousness, it concludes with one of those all-too-frequent at present surprise endings in which the entire premise of the film is jettisoned, along with the viewer's investment in the characters and the events played out before him or her. Such a light-minded "twist," which screenwriters apparently think clever, has the effect of retroactively and dramatically changing one's view of the entire film, generally for the worse. The viewer, whose feelings have been toyed with, ends up simply feeling cheated.

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