

I Am Love

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue



It is evident from the lush opening credits, which recall the stylish script of postwar European cinema or the 1950s American melodramas of Douglas Sirk, that the Italian film *I Am Love* is going to have plenty of “sweep.” What we can’t surmise from the first half hour—which includes both a gorgeous montage of Milan in winter and the meticulous planning of an extravagant dinner party in an ornate villa—is just how deep this family drama will dig, revealing secrets buried for decades.

The tale revolves around the wealthy Recchi clan, a family that made its fortune in textiles and continues to thrive in a global marketplace. But change is in the air. The family’s patriarch, Edoardo (legendary Italian actor Gabriele Ferzetti), is about to retire and pass the crown to his loyal son, Tancredi (Pippo Delbono). But just to show that he is still in charge, Edoardo shocks everyone by stipulating that the company will be co-run by his grandson, Edoardo Jr. (Flavio Parenti), a relative novice who is clearly not prepared—or eager—for such a weighty assignment.

Despite the family-heavy opening, the key player in the story is its only non-Italian. Emma (the great Tilda Swinton) is Tancredi’s wife, the mother of their three children and a silent presence in the massive home. She is Russian by birth, and her Italian is tinged with a thick Russian accent. At six feet tall with shocking red hair, she stands out like a bowl of borscht at a pizza parlor. It’s clear that despite her many years as a member of the family, she is an outsider, an interloper, a foreigner who will never

truly be accepted. And those who don't conform to the family's expectations are ruthlessly punished, fueling conflicts that eat away at the familial core. Emma's daughter, Elisabetta (Alba Rohrwacher), is castigated for abandoning painting (very Italian) to pursue photography. Edoardo Jr. is mocked for wanting to open a restaurant (too middle class) with his too-common friend.

The complex beauty of *I Am Love*, which is directed and coscripted by Luca Guadagnino and photographed by Yorick Le Saux, stems from how we come to understand the history of the Recchi family even as we watch it self-destruct. It's like gazing at a painting that has been thrown into a fireplace and waiting to see where the first flame will burn through the canvas.

It comes as no surprise that it is Emma who combusts. Not with anger or resentment but with passion, as she takes on a younger lover whose warmth and sense of nature are the exact opposite of the cold, orderly life she endures in the Recchi mansion.

But *I Am Love* is more than a melodramatic eye-dabber about a woman who embraces the love and emotion missing from her life. Emma's clandestine affair is merely the starting gun for a far more complex tale of corruption and betrayal. It brings up difficult questions about her various relationships—not only with her handsome sons, understanding daughter and cold-blooded husband but also with her sympathetic housekeeper (Maria Paiato) and her tough-as-nails mother-in-law (Marisa Berenson). It also touches on questions of nationalism and morality, as we wonder just how many blind eyes and payoffs it took to keep the house of Recchi thriving over the years. It is here that the tale most resembles a Greek tragedy, with cosmic justice meted out for past sins.

I Am Love has been compared to such Italian family sagas as *1900* and *The Leopard*. These comparisons are apt, but to suggest that the film is simply an homage to a style and era long gone is to shortchange its ambitions and accomplishments. Emma Recchi may be a love-starved wife, but she also represents change, surrender and everything foreign that an intolerant family or country is unwilling to accept. We may find ourselves cheering for her to scale the wall and escape her prison, but we somehow know that beyond the wall are many more barriers for her to overcome.