

"WE ARE WHAT WE ARE" (Sundance Movie Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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Popular opinion on genre remakes tends to be that they're soulless product, meant to capitalize on a mildly recognizable title and often hampered by studio notes. Audiences, rightfully so, often ask that if they remain a constant, filmmakers could at least be granted the space to be creative and make it their own. In an age that sees more rehashes than ever, Jim Mickle's American interpretation of Jorge Michel Grau's Mexican horror film, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE could be a standard going forward.

Adhering to the loose narrative outline of a not so well-off family of ritual cannibals that lose a head of household and are quickly in dismay, Jim Mickle and Nick Damici's (STAKE LAND) script relocates to New York's Catskill Mountains and is an aesthetic departure, pulpier and thematically concerned elsewhere. Like another of Sundance's anticipated genre premieres, Chan-wook Park's STOKER, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE evokes a timeless sense of American gothic in the home and surrounding environment of the Parker family; the main difference being a severe gap in lifestyle. In home and wardrobe, the Parkers are a bit of a homely, if traditional lot. They rent land to families in trailers, but business is slow and a massive storm is rolling in on the weekend of an annual religious dinner.

In Grau's 2010 original, the action finds itself in very urban Mexico. By transferring such a story to rural America, the director comes to dangerously close to simply utilizing well-worn "backwoods cannibals." What's refreshing is that while certainly isolated to an extent, the Parkers are members of their communities. The girls interact at school, their father deals with neighbors and renters and their mother is often running household errands. This is where she finds herself in the storm, sickly and preparing for the holiday, when her health and the weather converge to kill.



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The backbone now gone, the Parkers are at a loss, with sisters Iris and Rose (a fantastic Ambyr Childers and Julia Garner, respectively) left to take charge and care of their father (Bill Sage) and young brother (Jack Gore). Whereas the patriarch was struck down in the original and a struggle to become "man of the house" painted a troubling portrait of the impoverished, the remake's focus on the loss of a mother—who prepared the custom meal—is more concerned with American tradition.

Iris and Rose are less than enthused about their ways, struggling with their place in the world, and whether to take advantage of this opportunity to break adherence to the words of their mad, 1700s ancestors. Outside of the home, the hurricane is washing remains of their many victims downstream, causing Doc Barrow (Michael Parks) concern and hope he may be able to uncover what happened to his long-disappeared daughter.

As Barrow, town police (one actively flirting with Iris) and even Kelly McGillis (playing a kindhearted neighbor) begin to interfere more and more with the Parker's affairs, a gruff, intimidating Sage grows increasingly frustrated and increasingly beholden to that which their small religion dictates. And in the essence of adhering to our country's own horror tradition, this time WE ARE WHAT WE ARE culminates in a fleshy dinner. While sufficiently red throughout, the team of Mickle and cinematographer Ryan Samul craft a gorgeous, if ominous view of the Parkers and their immediate vicinity. It's often brooding, as are the brood, so when the very final act gets underway in an operatic sequence of stunning violence, the roof feels completely torn off. WE ARE WHAT WE ARE is very much its own, enrapturing beast.

