

## “THE WOMAN” (Film Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
Friday, 14 October 2011 11:03

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Not possessing an adequate or confident knowledge of the movement, it would be unwise for me to declare THE WOMAN as feminist. However, even with a cursory grasp, it's difficult not to see the film—and much of director Lucky McKee's work, for that matter—in some sort of pro-femme light, telling heightened horror stories about the evils and dangers of stealing a lady's independence and attempting to mold her for yourself. Also, like much of McKee's work, it's seriously good.

While technically a follow-up to Andrew van den Houten's OFFSPRING, THE WOMAN (opening in select theaters today) is wholly stand-alone, and a wholly collaborative effort between the MAY filmmaker and renowned horror author Jack Ketchum, whose penchant for the grim and nasty is very much on display. The co-scripters seem well-suited to each other, with McKee's previous thematic interests meshing nicely with Ketchum's more graphic sensibilities. It can be on-the-nose and in-your-face, but its effects are most definitely hammered home, and the movie is unflinching and admirable in its juggling of heavy violence and something of an absurd tone.



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THE WOMAN sees suburban “family man” Chris Cleek (Sean Bridgers) discover the eponymous feral character (Pollyanna McIntosh) on a backyard hunting trip, and decide he needs to take it upon himself to civilize this otherwise self-sufficient and independent “creature.” At home, Chris is the picture of “civilization,” slapping his oppressed wife Belle (Angela Bettis) on a whim, cutting down daughter Peggy (Lauren Ashley Carter) and creating a small version of himself in his misogynistic and leering preteen son Brian (Zach Rand). After chaining “the Woman” up in the cellar, the Cleek family is changed by her presence and forced to confront what they’ve all been ignoring about their sad, often heartbreaking existence.

From the outset, McKee presents a borderline surreal aesthetic, with dreamlike slow motion, an overlaying and superimposing of images onto each other and genial 1950s atmosphere to truly underline the gross underbelly of a supposedly sunny life. The pleasantries, contrasted with Chris’ easy slip into malevolence, can hit darkly comic notes, eliciting uncomfortable laughter from the strange nature of it all. Still, when the Woman becomes the target of his aggression and sadism, it’s essentially a signal to straighten your back and pay attention to just how earnest the proceedings can be.

As with most films surrounded by “controversy,” THE WOMAN may not be as spell-inducing as you’ve heard. The movie doesn’t pull its punches in any way, but it isn’t relentless in its graphic visuals either. It’s the sheer wrongness of what’s happening that causes the wincing and repulsion, especially as you witness the abuse of both the Woman and Belle, positioned as parallels: one woman who is held captive quite literally and the other emotionally, with a young daughter caught in the middle who could very easily become either.

Where THE WOMAN is flawed is in scenes when its low budget shows. McKee’s stylistic flourishes shine throughout, but in more straightlaced moments, it’s clear the material and director deserved more in the way of backing—something that’s also evident in the distracting soundtrack of dreary indie fare, which never seems to blend or really latch onto the scenes all too well.

Nonetheless, THE WOMAN is a provocative horror film full of difficult, challenging performances and subject matter from a damn good director and a noted author who are out to get you talking, instead of placate their audience with something bloody and mindless. And above all, it’s a new work from a filmmaker who’s been nowhere near as prolific as his talent and smarts warrant.

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