

On “The Woman in the Fifth”

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The most arresting and thought-provoking film I have seen in recent memory is “The Woman in the Fifth” (the Fifth refers to a district in Paris) with Ethan Hawke and Kristin Scott Thomas. It was released in theaters in 2011 and, at this writing, is relatively new on DVD, where I saw it a week ago. It is based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Douglas Kennedy. Its Polish-born director Pawel Pawlikowski also wrote the screenplay. A quote patched together from a review by Manohla Dargis in the June 12th, 2012 *New York Times*, along with my asides, gives a sense of the film:

The film turns on Tom Ricks, [fortyish], an American novelist [he has one novel to his credit] and professor [actually, he is a lecturer, which is a lower status position than a professor and typically a year-to-year impermanent appointment] who arrives in Paris with a suitcase in hand and his future in doubt. He’s come to settle in France, he tells an officer at the airport, and has a French wife and a daughter [Chloe, six]. This isn’t precisely true: Tom is divorced from his wife, Nathalie (Delphine Chuillot), for starters. [It seemed to me they are still married.] More important, from the fearful look in her eyes when they meet, and the uncomprehending look in his—even when she says, “You’re not normal”—his desire to settle seems chimerical. Minutes later, police sirens are wailing and he’s racing down the street. He doesn’t run long and instead falls asleep on a bus and most of his belongings are stolen. About all he has left when he wakes is his passport and a toy giraffe meant for his daughter. He ends up in a part of Paris far from the touristic center, a marginal stretch of block buildings and derelict streets. There, at a cafe where Arabic music wafts out of the speakers and darker-complexioned men sip drinks, he talks his way into a squalid room for rent despite having no money. At first Tom’s movements are limited because he’s broke (and broken) and wants to stay near his daughter. Forbidden from contacting her by a court order, he watches her play in a park, sleeps in his room, and writes [a letter to Chloe] in the cafe. [He writes the letter throughout the film and pages pile up.] He’s hemmed in by circumstances and by cramped spaces that feel like manifestations of his being. Mr.

Hawke, hunched, almost caved in, makes the character's isolation palpable. Meanwhile, Mr. Pawlikowski expresses this alienation visually, as at a party where, surrounded by strangers, Tom talks to a woman he sees only as a literal blur. Then a different woman pierces that haze like a vision. She's Margit (Kristin Scott Thomas), [fiftyish, elegant, attractive], an enigma with an "exotic" accent (and a flat in the Fifth) who slinks up to Tom [actually, he follows her and stands next to her in another room], lights a cigarette, and announces that she was her husband's translator and muse. Muse? Is she for real, or a delusion?

As the film proceeds, there are criminal dealings by the owner of the hotel, Tom's affairs with Margit and a young Polish waitress, a murder, an arrest and imprisonment, and a kidnapping. Or are there? Some of what happens appears to be Tom's imaginings.

"The Woman in the Fifth" brings to mind the existential angst of Michelangelo Antonioni's film "The Passenger," the sudden cuts to scenes of nature in Terrence Malick's "The Thin Red Line," and the blurring of reality and fantasy in Mary Herron's "American Psycho." The screenplay, direction, cinematography, editing, and acting performances are top rank. I highly recommend that you check out the film. Which is not to say I have confidence that you will like it as much as I did. The experience and meaning of any work of art is a function of an exchange between what the artist created and what the viewer, or consumer, of the art brings to it. While I feel quite certain that "Woman in the Fifth" is a superior film, my enthusiastic and continued attention to it—I've seen it twice and thought about it all week--may well largely be due to the fact that it suits my taste in film and relates to where I am in my life.

If you decide to see "The Woman in the Fifth," I suggest you stop reading at the end of this paragraph and read the rest of this thought after you've seen it because it is a spoiler. I want to share my take on the film and to do that I need to talk about the plot. Beyond that, I think it's best to go to films cold, as it were, absent an interpretive lens provided by someone, me in this case. With reviews of a film I might want to see, I only glance quickly at the first sentence of the last paragraph of the review, which usually gives an indication of what the reviewer thinks of the film's merits. It's after I see a film I like that I read reviews and criticism to deepen my experience and understanding, which I have done with this film.

Now to how I see the “The Woman in the Fifth, offered with the understanding that there are undoubtedly a number of defensible ways to make sense of this mature and nuanced work.

After I saw the film, I read Kennedy’s book. Pawlikowski’s screenplay is altogether different, and better, than the book. To understand this film, or any film, go by what happens on the screen—don’t make inferences from source material. Repeatedly in the descriptions and criticism of “The Woman in the Fifth,” I read that Ricks goes to Paris to reconcile with his wife and daughter. That’s in the book. In the film he goes there to re-connect with his daughter, that’s it. There’s no indication that he has any business to work out with his wife; he barely looks at her. The book emphasizes Ricks’ (he has another name in the book) scandalous past, an affair with a student for which he lost his university job, and analyses of the film have picked up on that and attribute the personal baggage he obviously brings with him to Paris to it. In the film, however, Tom’s hurt and isolation is much more pervasive and profound, fundamental, than to have been caused by any single incident in his past, or even the trauma of a broken marriage and estrangement from his child. The film never tells us what Tom did or what was done to him, and I didn’t need to be informed of that. What I needed to see, and what Ethan Hawke so brilliantly portrayed, is this human being as he was in this circumstance.

As I perceive it, the through-line—the central strand of the film—is a damaged, personally compromised man who tries to be with his daughter in spite of the efforts of her mother to prevent it from happening. That said, “Woman in the Fifth” isn’t just about a visitation or custody battle (Tom sees attorneys with the idea of winning custody of Chloe)—a lot of other things go on, and this time in Paris is the occasion for Tom to make a basic choice about the direction his life will take from here forward.

“The Woman in the Fifth” deals with Tom’s issues and their resolution metaphorically. Some major examples:

- Both he and Chloe wear glasses with obviously thick lenses. This represents their affinity; they see the world in the same way.

- Tom’s dispute with another occupant in the hotel and its ultimate conclusion, which I won’t go into here other than to say that it is violent, can be interpreted in a couple ways. It could stand for Tom breaking from his polite, reasonable, let’s-talk-it-through

persona in the face of unfairness and cruelty toward him and his acquiescence to abuse. In Norse mythology, Fenris is an unchained, savage wolf; Tom on this occasion may have become Fenris. Or perhaps what we see is the Fenris that has always been there in Tom beneath the placid surface and which has manifested in times past, including with his wife.

•The relationship with Margit, which it is safe to say exists only in Tom's mind, represents a kind of connection with a woman he has never had in real life. Margit is intensely attentive and devoted to him. She is there for him. She washes his hair. She passionately makes love with him. She respects and believes in him as a man and as a novelist. Tom disparages his novel, perhaps mirroring his wife's disinterest or low opinion of both the book and him. Margit tells him that she has read his book and that it reflects exceptional talent and that he has a fine future as a writer, and that she wants to be with him and support his work. "I believe in you," she tells him.

In her *Times* review, Ms. Dargis notes that a sense of dread in "The Woman in the Fifth" builds but never resolves. "It doesn't have the kind of payoff that details who did what and why," she writes. She isn't alone in this opinion. An example, a customer review on Netflix that all sixty readers who responded to it found helpful says, "I kept waiting for it all to fall into place and make sense, but walked out at the end shaking my head."

"The Woman in the Fifth" did resolve, it did fall in place, for me in the last fifteen minutes of the film:

Tom acknowledges his illness and its consequences. "I'm not well," he says. "I destroy everything I touch."

He enters his wife's house when no one is there and finds Margit in Chloe's room sitting on her bed. He gazes at Margit for what seems like a long time. "You aren't real," he says to her.

"I am real," she replies. "I exist as much as you exist. This is the closest you'll ever come to love in your life."

Fantasy is a reality of sorts, a personal, inner, experienced reality. Fantasy exists. Margit exists as long as Tom wills her to exist.

"I'm never coming back here," Tom says. No more attempts to deal with this situation as it is and in his state of being. As much as he loves Chloe and wants to be with her, no more efforts to make it work with her.

A cut to an owl looking directly at us that fills the screen. Wisdom? The primacy of nature over our hopes and intentions?

“Tom, we belong together,” Margit says. “Stay with me. Indefinitely.” I’m not going to go into the details here, but Margit gets it across that Tom being with her will ensure that Chloe is safe and well.

Tom in a voice-over reads the last portion of the letter to his daughter he has been writing throughout the film: “Don’t be upset if we never meet again, Chloe. The good part of me will be beside you every day, and we’ll always see the world with the same eyes. Love, Dad.”

Tom walks down a Paris street, alone, always alone, and drops the letter in a trash container. He takes a couple of steps, and then goes back and retrieves it from the container. He tears off the bottom of its last page and puts the rest of it back in the trash. He puts the part he tore off in an envelope addressed to his daughter. We see that it is just the closing, “Love, Dad.” He drops the envelope into a mailbox.

Tom knocks at the door of Margit’s room in the Fifth (in reality it’s empty). We see him in a full-face close-up and it is clear that for him this is not a time for joy or celebration but rather for an anguished conciliation to the best way of playing the cards he holds in the game of life that is on his table. The screen dissolves to completely white, and after a pause, the credits begin to roll.

The ending of “The Woman in the Fifth” reminds me of another film that touched me deeply, “Sideways,” released in 2004. “Sideways” too ended with the protagonist, Miles, also a writer in mid-life, knocking on the door of a woman. In this case, it is a real woman named Maya. Miles is choosing the reality of a life with Maya after living for years in the fantasy of a successful writing career and the restoration of a failed marriage. In “The Woman in the Fifth” it is the opposite. Tom is choosing fantasy, Margit and all she represents and a measure of inner peace, over the reality of an unhealthy relationship with his daughter and continued personal turmoil. Whether Miles and Tom are right in the choices they make—external reality and engagement in Miles’ case, internal reality and withdrawal in Tom’s—are questions these two superb films raise, and not only about these two fictional characters but about ourselves.

