

On The Woman in the Fifth (2)

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Fine works of art lend themselves to multiple encounters and interpretations. With each re-viewing, re-reading, whatever the medium, come new experiences and meanings. That has been true for me with the superb film "The Woman in the Fifth," which I first saw in January of 2013 and wrote a thought about in this site. I watched it again this week (early July, 2014) and saw it very differently and, I'd like to think, more clearly. It was top-of-the-line last year and it was top-of-the-line this year, but it was different this year. In large part, I believe the difference came from the fact that I am different this year from last. A point I've made several times in this site is that art is an exchange between a particular work of art and a particular person in a particular place and at a particular time. What comes out of that exchange for the person engaging the work of art is a function of all of those elements.

"The Woman in the Fifth" is based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Douglas Kennedy. Its Polish-born director, Pawel Pawlikowski, also wrote the screenplay. It stars Ethan Hawke as a divorced fortyish American novelist and university lecturer who travels to Paris to be with his six-year-old-daughter from whom he has been estranged. For the plot details, as well as to make sense of this re-interpretation—or better, more definitive interpretation—read the 2013 site thought now.

Watching the film this time, it hit me that, no, Ricks didn't murder anyone, nor he kidnap his daughter, both of which I thought he might well have done the first viewing. Simply, he is too damaged, too passive, too ineffectual, too damaged and diminished personally by life to make anything happen on that scale, and even if he were able to manage it, he is too decent to engage in negative, immoral acts of that sort. Also this time, the shots of nature that re-occur throughout the film took on new meaning for me.

A few days ago, I wrote a brief review of the film for its Amazon site:

For those who have seen the film: The shots of nature represent the retreat/escape into unreality. Ricks and his daughter played fantasy games and tended to remove

themselves from reality. They were both somewhat cut off from the real world by vision issues. The owner of the rooming house killed the tenant. So Ricks didn't do that. The daughter's disappearance was her retreat from reality for a while. So Ricks didn't kidnap her. Ricks was not enough of an actor in life to make anything happen like killings and kidnappings. He only had the power to write things down, fantasize, and stay or go. Plus he was too decent a person to do intentionally anything obviously immoral if he could manage it. Essentially, Ricks wrote a book and wrote his daughter; fancied Margit, who didn't exist except in his mind; and left his daughter, and then, as it were, went to Margit and what she represented, an inner, imagined, life, which he concluded was preferable to his unfulfilling and hurt-filled outer, real world, existence.

Try re-encountering a work of art that meant a great deal to you in the past. Note how it has changed. Of course, it didn't change, you did. Spending time thinking through what the change in your perspective tells you about yourself and how you are different now very likely will be time well spent.