



Stranger With My Face's dark pleasures

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In early May I flew to Hobart in anticipation of some of the most interesting dark genre programming around, at an atmospheric film festival that's hugely supportive of women filmmakers. This was my third experience of [Stranger With My Face International Film Festival](#) now in its fifth year (not counting a hiatus in 2015). Founded in 2012 by Tasmanian filmmakers Rebecca Thomson and Briony Kidd, Stranger With My Face focuses on horror and other genre films directed by women. The one festival of its kind in Australia, it not only provides a rare opportunity to see genre cinema from a range of thought-provoking female perspectives, but also acts as an incubator for women's feature film projects through its intensive Attic Lab workshop for selected participants.

This year was notable for the presence of renowned New Zealand director Gaylene Preston as both featured filmmaker and mentor for the festival's developmental Attic Lab. One of the most striking features of the two subversive Preston thrillers included in SWMF's retrospective program—*Mr Wrong* (1984) and *Perfect Strangers* (2003)—was how resonant their commentary on sexism and gender roles remained, despite the passage of time. In a post-screening Q&A, Preston remarked on the films' implicit feminism, "All the things you see in *Mr Wrong* came from a point of rage." While there were strong films at the festival that explored themes other than misogyny, those reviewed here—bar one—contain elements of this rage. All are explorations of the perilousness of feminine archetypes: the ingénue, the 'slut,' the dead girl, the siren and the saint.



Mr Wrong

As Preston put it, “There’s a whole interrogation of ‘nice’” in *Mr Wrong*, a film about a good-natured, unworldly young woman, Meg (Heather Bolton), who buys a powder-blue Jaguar from a used-car salesman so she can drive from the city to visit her parents on weekends. Meg has a pleasant, open countenance and an Annie-like shock of red curls that suggests she hasn’t quite reached the level of urban sophistication of her city housemates. She’s softly spoken, a bit of a worrier. Despite initial reluctance to purchase the large car, she takes the wheel with a sense of optimism, underlined by the film’s jaunty opening theme. This cheerful start is disrupted on her first long drive home out of Wellington, when, drawing up for a rest break at dusk, the car silhouetted against the sea, she has a terrifying, inexplicable experience—something that’s depicted simply yet so creepily it sets us, like Meg, on edge for the rest of the journey.

Mr Wrong is gloriously multifaceted. Looked at one way, it’s a suspenseful, not particularly serious thriller, enjoyably goofy at times (as in a scene where Meg gallivants through a field in her loud jumper after romantically reconnecting with a childhood friend). From another angle, it’s artistic Gothic horror, with its vivid nocturnal cinematography and nightmarish conjuring of rain-swept roads and pale apparitions, the heroine’s face appearing half in shadow behind the wheel. What makes the film singularly compelling, however, is the constant dull murmur of sexual aggression Meg endures; something that threatens to escalate if she fails to be sufficiently ‘nice.’

The ideals of freedom and independence represented by Meg’s car and city job are undercut by the recognition that there’s no escaping harassment, be it from corporeal sexists or an increasingly malevolent vehicle. In this way, and particularly for women, Preston quite viscerally aligns *Mr Wrong*’s supernatural horror with everyday oppression. It’s telling that some contemporaneous reviewers failed to pick up on her subtext. In her introduction to the screening, academic Deb Verhoeven quoted from the *Evening Post*, which praised *Mr Wrong* as, “a fine film endowed with feminine intuition but free of feminist cant.” This, despite the cathartic Gothic finale, a repudiation of violence against women and demonstration of female solidarity powerful enough to reach beyond the grave.