

When nice guys are dangerous

## Two recent buzzy, twisty thrillers put gender dynamics at the center of the drama.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#)

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Willa Fitzgerald (left) in *Strange Darling* and Sophie Thatcher (right) in *Companion* (VVS Films & Warner Bros. Pictures)

“Do you have any idea the kind of risks a woman like me takes every time she agrees to have a little fun,” the Lady (Willa Fitzgerald) says to her date as they sip beers and make out in his pickup truck outside a motel that holds the promise of where the night might lead.

“I’ve never thought about it that way,” her date (Kyle Gallner) says a little bashfully.

“Of course you haven’t; you’re not a woman,” she shoots back. “The real issue is safety—it’s life or death. So I’m going to have to ask you a question: Are you a serial killer?”

So begins the wild, darkly comic, very bloody *Strange Darling* (directed by JT Mollner). Or rather, this is the chronological beginning of the story. The movie itself is told in six chapters, signaled with title cards, and opens with chapter 3. Moving backward and forward in time, each chapter revises our understanding of what is happening: more than once, things are not as they seem.

The Lady isn’t wrong in her diagnosis of the dangers that wait for women who are brazen enough to pursue sex with strangers or express desires that veer too far from male-centered expectations. Most of our slasher films are morality tales about what happens to these women. Serial killer stories, more generally, depend on the idea that some men have a virtually unstoppable drive to rape, mutilate, and kill women. There is little women can do to protect themselves from this danger if every man they meet might hide a monster under a nice guy veneer.

*Strange Darling* plays into these expectations but also joins a long line of films that use the tropes of horror to scramble our ideas about gender, desire, and power. It is a hard movie to discuss without plot spoilers, and all its pleasure lies in the surprise of its twists and reversals. So it is best to go in with as little advanced knowledge as possible. There is a wild, chaotic energy to the film that reminded me of 1990s indie filmmaking or the shocking bravura of early Quentin Tarantino. (It has the body count and fascination with bloody spectacle of a Tarantino movie, too). Even with these throwback vibes, it feels remarkably fresh, maybe even optimistic about the gender dynamics it is hell-bent on exploding.

My sense of optimism might have been heightened in comparison with another buzzy, twisty thriller that makes gender dynamics the center of its drama.

*Companion* (directed by Drew Hancock) starts with a classic thriller setup: a young couple, Josh (Jack Quaid) and Iris (Sophie Thatcher), meet up with some of Josh’s friends for a weekend getaway. One look at the secluded mansion deep in the mountains and we know it’s only a matter of time until the secrets or the blood spill.

In this case, it’s both. The biggest secret is the one Josh has been keeping from Iris: She’s not the sweet, slightly sappy human woman she believes herself to be. She’s

an AI companion, customized to make Josh happy (“I hate the term ‘fuck bot,’” Josh says. “You’re an emotional support robot who also. . .”). Josh only tells Iris the truth of her existence because he’s hacked her mainframe for violent purposes. Now that the blood is flowing and the body count is growing, he feels the need to come clean.

Josh’s big reveal to Iris isn’t meant to come as a surprise to the viewer. The trailer gives the premise away, and there are many earlier hints that Iris isn’t exactly human, from small details like the way she makes Josh thank the AI that drives his car (as though sensing kindred programming?) to the way the other humans interact with her like she has no interests or personality of her own. But what really gives it away is the sentimental speech she makes at dinner, recounting the (entirely fictional) story of how she first met Josh and how she just knows her purpose in life is to stay with him forever and make him happy. She sounds brainwashed. Or programmed.

*Companion* is partially an AI parable, akin to other robot-awakening stories in which humans are outsmarted by the machines they treated like tools (or worse) when those machines come to full consciousness and self-actualization. Many of these stories (*The Stepford Wives*, *Ex Machina*, and *Her* come to mind) stage this human-AI conflict along gendered lines. Human men turn to robots because they are not able or willing to find love with human women. In many of these stories, including *Companion*, this is largely because the men believe they are owed a kind of devotion and subservience that women who have wills and desires of their own are unable to provide. In the end, Iris’s robot nature is secondary to her growing awareness that Josh’s happiness depends on keeping her inferior and controllable. The parable is about not the danger of AI but the danger of resentful men who pass themselves off as nice guys.

*Companion* ends on a more empowering note for women, even if that woman is a robot, than *Strange Darling*, in which ideas about women’s empowerment are very pronounced but not very palatable. But *Companion* is far bleaker about the dangers women face in a world of gendered expectations. Josh is not a serial killer; he’s just a sad, bitter man who assumes he deserves better than the perfectly average life he’s living. It turns out, this is a lot scarier and deadlier for the women who cross his path.