



CAT PEOPLE AND THE UNEASINESS OF BESTIALITY: A REVIEW OF REVIEWS

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Just as this post was initially meant to be a short review of the film itself, Paul Schrader's *Cat People* (1982) was initially meant to be a remake of a well-known 40s film with the same title. The result was not quite the expected. It was launched as an erotic, almost softcorish horror story with the tagline "An erotic fantasy about the animal in us all," much to its critical detriment. Schrader's own declarations contributed to the sexually transgressive marketing image, but I wonder if he was just aware of the film's flaws and trying to divert the attention from them. As it runs out, a quick review of its film reviews proved an interesting exercise to scratch the surface of the uneasiness that bestiality-related themes seems to provoke.

The plot starts off with the reunion of siblings Irena (Nastassja Kinski) and Paul (Malcolm McDowell), separated since childhood after the tragic death of their lion tamer parents. Although they share a few memories related to the circus environment they grew in, they don't really know each other and Paul's enigmatic, creepy attitudes don't really help Irena feel at ease. His incestuous sexual advances don't help either. Exploring the city—a New Orleans that provides a proper backdrop, hinting mysticism and southern gothic moods—she finds herself drawn to the local zoo and its manager, Oliver Yates (John Heard). Irena discovers that she and her brother are descendants of a bloodline of were-cats who transform into black leopards upon intense, instinctive acts—such as sexual intercourse. To transform back to human form, they have to kill a prey. The girl is still a virgin and is reluctant to let herself go, sensing that it might unleash a part of herself she can't control. She and the viewers discover that Paul—despite his apparently quiet life as an Evangelical minister—has been killing prostitutes all along to quench his desires; because of it, he gets caught in form of cat and killed. Meanwhile, Irena and Oliver's romantic relationship develops: she manages to have sex with him and escape upon transformation, but she eventually decides to live her life in cat form to avoid the risk of killing him. The film is characterized by



occasional gore, violence, and sex sequences, as well as some great performances by Kinski and McDowell.

I've found myself in disagreement with those scholars and critics who basically found it a "bad remake" of Tourneur's original film. *Cat People* (1942) is characterized by some great horror noir moods, a rather interesting theme related to immigrant otherness, and an Old World monster waft. Its cat people originate in a Balkan past and Irena is, indeed, a Serbian-born woman living in New York. Nonetheless, the psychoanalytical bits amount to a hodgepodge that seems to justify the need to repress the protagonist's nature and the outrageous instincts it might unleash. She is a female foreign other that her husband and his cheerful lover find themselves fending off. When the relatively dull fellow married her, she was pretty and innocuous, her belief in Serbian folktales almost quirky cute... if only he had known. Condescending in his "understanding" of her preoccupations, the apparent absurdity of her fears comes to a point he realizes that maybe he doesn't even "know what love is." Irena is represented as an unstable, repressed wacko that even turns out to be an actual monster (gasp!). He is the cheater and yet he is the one who feels cheated. His cheating is not even turbid enough by noir standards, whereas Irena's suggested animalistic struggle seems to serve as metaphor for all sorts of anguish. Anyway, her becoming-animal is not an option and she dies because of it. Despite its historical value—and some scholars solidly gushing over it—I can't help finding Tourneur's *Cat People* vaguely disappointing and, frankly, kind of boring. The sequel *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) is a child-centered ghost story with actually no cat people in it.

Considering Shrader's *Cat People* (1982) a remake expecting it to be more of the same—and judging it on such a premise—seems rather delusional, and in some cases even betrays a fanboying attitude towards Tourneur's work.

The 80s version is a quite different film, with a quite different narrative and just a few overt references to the original horror noir. The mythohistorical origins of its cat people are fantastically extravagant. There is no Old World folktale basis but rather a timelessly primitive fantasy place, characterized by a vaguely alien windswept desert and a vibrant palette. Between the visuals and David Bowie's humming (it is definitely worth mentioning the atmospheric score by Giorgio Moroder), one might even overlook the fundamental premise of the whole thing. There is no legendary superstition nor mysterious folk magic process here: cat people originated in human-animal sex and that's that. The animalistic aspects of sexuality seem to be, indeed, what most of the film's detractors have judged and considered preposterous—albeit without really examining them—neglecting a few very human elements intrinsic to the power dynamics represented.

If some critics cautiously avoided the topic, others have interpreted Paul's incestuous advances as the proof of his animalistic derangement. The sequences depicting



such intents, though, describe quite realistically common dynamics of domestic abuse: Paul is manipulative, and the underlying discourse is based on evident guilt-inducing patterns and fabrication. He tells Irena that the very nature of cat people is incestuous and thus she must have sex with him to stop his killing sprees. Aside from the emotional blackmailing, his version oddly clashes with the fact that Irena accidentally bumps into another cat woman at a bar, suggesting that many more cat people exist out there and they are not all siblings. Irena will never have the chance to access a different source of information on the topic and eventually comes to a solution—living permanently as a cat—that she assumes as the only one possible. In general, Paul’s characterization is based on a clear overlap of different acceptations within the semantic field of bestiality: he acts like an animal, he embodies human-animal sex, he is evidently brutal, and thus depraved. Nonetheless, his depravity is constructed by means of behaviors whose human, guileful nature is evident—and even he is aware of it.

Irena’s relationship with Oliver is also problematic in a rather human sense. He might be obsessed with her because of her animalistic allure, but the dynamics in most sequences they share suggest something else. When she tries to break up with him to avoid the risk of transforming and inadvertently killing him, he grabs her and aggressively holding her against her will he refuses the rejection. Part of such an apparently desperate-romantic demonstration is the declaration that she must not leave him because he “loves her and wants to take care of her.” No critic forgets to mention—and, to various extents, judge—the bondage-like sequence in which Oliver ties Irena to the bed and has sex with her to allow her transformation while hindering her beastly attack. Nonetheless, most analyses seem to take for granted—or at least imply—that the woman is responsible for the man’s obsession and, consequently, his spiraling to the point of acceding to such a deviation. She asked for it, after all, and he does it for love. His repeated obsessive dominant behaviors seem to go unnoticed under the notion that he’s been seduced by this one cat seducer; too bad his colleague Alice (Annette O’Toole) points out she’s seen him this “obsessed” times before.

What is most erotic in Shrader’s take on cat people doesn’t quite lie in the fact that we see naked breasts two or three times and some male buttocks throughout the film. Rather, there is a pervasive sense of eroticism and seduction played mostly by Kinski in apparently non-erotic, naive sequences in which she seems to be more or less unwittingly seducing Oliver. One is led to wonder if what the spectator sees is a transposition of reality, or rather Oliver’s gaze on Irena while he dishes out sexual innuendos she can’t even pick up, as her side of seduction is not quite an overtly sexual one. Kinski’s Irena seems to embody a Baudrillardian femininity and its seduction as “an alternative to sex and power” (Baudrillard 1979, 7), often ludic and playful, while Oliver plays the power play of masculinity. He is, in fact, the creator and maintainer of rules: as zoologist and zoo manager, he “knows” the boundaries “animals” should be kept



within, marks them, and maintains them. More than the result of animalistically induced attraction, his obsession with Irena is characterized by an abusive dominance pattern. He gets upset when she is not compliant and, frankly, he seems pretty pleased when she is eventually locked up under his control and he can pet her at his will.

On the other hand, Irena's path to the decision to embrace her becoming-animal is, definitely, a Baudrillardian seductive escalation of violence and grace, which exhausts itself in abandoning her human form for good, possibly to avoid death. The sequence in which she experiences the night in a natural environment—exploring her animal perceptions to the point of transforming—is actually a pretty good addition to the narrative navigating through her increasing closeness to her cat nature. Many critics find the nudity in the movie gratuitous and bordering softporn, and I can't but wonder if they wished Irena to have an actually sensual, bodily feel of the outdoors while wearing a jacket, pants, and boots. Through this sequence the film also demonstrates that she can avoid killing humans to transform back, suggesting the idea that her choice to live permanently in her cat form is, indeed, a consciously willful choice.

The dismissive misjudgment of the film's actual dynamics is, perhaps, revealing of a problematic approach to the notion itself of animalistic behavior and the animality intrinsic to the human. Haraway might have assumed that in scientific culture the boundaries between human and animal have been long breached, substituted by the cyborg notion and myth (1991), but have they truly in our everyday disposition? One might argue that, rather, *we like to think* we have breached them, digested them, and moved on to less "basic," more "contemporary" boundaries. The uneasiness in representation—and even more in expressing commentaries on it—is telling, though. To be fair, in *Cat People* such representation is not quite transgressive nor particularly crude, and yet the original film is praised in comparison for being more subtle and "less sexual." Animalistic sex poses a further issue, evidently, and it is curious that many reviews dismiss the film's quality as unnecessarily quasi pornographic, nudity ridden, or overly erotic—as if those were per se demeaning features—rather than addressing the actual themes underlying. The viewer might be distracted by the score and the captivating scenario, thus obliviously neglect the detail, but critics too seem to purposely circumvent the topic of the origins of the cat people. Picking apart the film as they have done, even just for the sake of congruity one might question the simplistic description of it. But human-animal sex and its processes are more easily obliterated than discussed—although it is quite possible to discuss them, as Milligan shows among others.

If we are willful to take the film in a metaphorical way and consider it as an allegory "about the animal in us all," things are equally problematic. The disregard for Paul's and Oliver's human behaviors is questionable and, in a way, comparable with the debate raised by the *50 Shades of Grey* saga on the misrepresentation of BDSM. In that



case, a narrative based on abusive dynamics is disguised under a romanticized BDSM cloak, using a rather misinformed take on the topic to justify toxic behaviors that have nothing to do with BDSM practices. In the case of *Cat People*, both the representation and the interpretation of abuse as justified by bestiality are rather troubling. Paul's deranged actions have been interpreted as the proof that his animalistic side is out of control, as the character himself seems to aptly believe in order to justify his behaviors. Oliver's abusive behaviors are disguised under a romantic coating and—both by the film diegesis and the reviews—justified by the fact that the cat woman seduced him. His obsession and controlling tendencies are rarely noticed and, even then, mistaken for yet another BDSM metaphor (see Kuersten) or confined to the theme of Irena's submission to patriarchal structures (see Rohrer Paige). On her part, Irena embodies a positive, relatively non-intimidating animalistic human and yet she ends up caged for the sake of her lover. Her becoming-animal and sensorial discovery of her nature—whose description had some interesting potential—get lost in the underlying notion that human order has to be restored and the animal reconducted within boundaries.

Once the animal is caged Oliver can go back to mistreating Alice, the colleague with whom he seems to have been in some sort of romantic relationship. In fact, the couple's dynamics would open another parenthesis on abusive, dominant behaviors, this time disguised under the trite cloak "sweet girl next door in love with superordinate man who fell for the hottie but then came back." Caged the seducer for further obsession play, he sure did come back for the triangle, constituting the most ambivalent and beastly—albeit so totally human—character in Schrader's *Cat People*.

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