

Cat People as Meshwork: Animism, Déjà-viewing, and Cine-magic

Tracy Cox-Stanton

Thus when I speak of the entanglement of things I mean this literally and precisely: not a network of connections but a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement.

—Tim Ingold, “Bringing Things Back to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials”¹



Video Essay 1: “*Cat People* as Meshwork,” (2017, Tracy Cox-Stanton), <https://vimeo.com/228218423>.



Video Essay 2: “For They Are In Me,” (2019, Tracy Cox-Stanton), <https://vimeo.com/332946058>.

As many film historians have noted, the genre films produced by Val Lewton for RKO in the 1940s exceed their humble origins. Enmeshed within their schlocky horror plots are moments of poetry that incite contemplation and rhapsody. The audiovisual essays “*Cat People* as Meshwork” and “For They are in Me” engage the poetry of Lewton’s *Cat People* films (*Cat People*, 1942, and *Curse of the Cat People*, 1944), endeavoring to lay bare not only their avant-garde sensibilities, but their feminist potentials as well.

These films are especially interesting to me for the ways they imaginatively engage ancient questions about the nature of the mind, body, and soul, complicating distinctions between the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate. Furthermore, they demonstrate how these complications often play out in decidedly gendered terms. Significantly, it is male voices of patriarchal authority that attempt to tame Irena and set straight her mad metaphysics of demons, cat women, and violent rebellion. My delight in the film is largely my delight in witnessing their grand failure. In *Cat People*, the troubled (and troubling) cat woman Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon) offers this response to her psychiatrist following one of his many confident dissertations on her psychological condition: “I don’t feel you can help me. You’re very wise. You know a great deal. Yet when you speak of the soul, you mean the mind. And it is not my mind that is troubled.” The psychiatrist responds with his usual condescension, but the film proves Irena right. Irena’s mind, body, and soul are inseparably constituted through multiple narratives, affects, and objects: myths about King John and shape-shifting witches of ancient Serbia; attractions to animal sounds, temperatures, and textures; connections to objects such as paintings and sculptures. Irena’s subjectivity is inseparable from these materials.

Cat People and *Curse of the Cat People* imagine a world where, yes, a woman can transform into a panther, but more profound comminglings proliferate as well. In *Curse of the Cat People*, for example, Irena's ability to transform into a cat never even enters the plot. Instead, it is her ability to commune from beyond the grave with Oliver's young and eccentric daughter that troubles the story. Irena can't exactly be killed, and her animistic worldview lives on through an imaginative young girl. Thus, it is not really cat people that trouble these films, but what they represent: nonconformity, contagion, irrational instinct, and sensory attraction. In *Cat People*, Irena is—like cinema itself—animated not by abstract reason and logic, but by material attractions. Countering Descartes' famous "cogito," Irena might instead propose, "I attract, I am attracted, therefore I am." These attractions proliferate through *Cat People* and, in *Curse of the Cat People*, they multiply even after her death.

As works of videographic criticism, "*Cat People* as Meshwork" and "For They Are In Me" exemplify what Catherine Grant has called "déjà viewing"—using digital editing tools to explore cinematic transtextuality or intertextuality.² While some such explorations aim to trace a line of influence or a network of connections from one film to another (ultimately based in auteurist concerns), others might more freely investigate the interplay of shapes, sounds, and movements, unhindered by concerns of intentionality or human agency, giving free reign to the *mise en scène* itself. It is this second possibility that interests me, a possibility more aligned with the "meshwork" as theorized by anthropologist Tim Ingold. The "meshwork" introduces a way of seeing that traces "interwoven lines of growth and movement." Galvanized by my delight in the surrealistic—and feminist—pulls of *Cat People* and *Curse of the Cat People*, I wanted to re-edit the films in a way that traced some of these lines and unleashed their arcane undercurrents.

Echoing Lesley Stern's argument that the cinema is an "animist universe,"³ my audiovisual essays trace the films' magical transformations and encourage a few transformations of my own,

conjuring into existence films that previously existed only in my unconscious. Stern, in her essay “Once I’ve devoured your soul, we are neither animal nor human: the cinema as an animist universe,” similarly re-animates segments of disparate films, creating her own literary meshwork that interweaves a number of images and gestures. She describes and enacts a view of cinema that is “relational and embodied,” akin to Graham Harvey’s view of animism as “performative acts in which people engage with other species or with material things.”⁴ As both a concept and a poetic, cinematic animism seems to me ideally suited for videographic application.

I am not the first spectator to have “déjà-viewed” Maya Deren’s films in other films, as “Gestos do realism/Gestures of realism,” “Meshes of Lynch,” and “Mashup of the Afternoon” attest.⁵ Part of the magic of *Mesbes of the Afternoon* lies in its exquisite distillation of cinematic mise en scène. *Mesbes of the Afternoon* presents a veritable taxonomy of paradigmatic objects and gestures—knife, key, mirror, footsteps, disturbed sleep, hand to the forehead, running from threat—iconic signs that evoke cinema’s connection to the dream world and the place of women within it. Deren’s film is embedded in my unconscious and I often recognize its traces in other texts. But in creating these audiovisual essays about the *Cat People* films, *Mesbes of the Afternoon* called to me not only for its coincidences of mise en scène, but for its evocation of a feminist avant-garde. The mesh-up strategy allows Maya Deren herself to become a “sister” (“moya sestra,” indeed!) to the troubled protagonists, to enter their diegeses, exchange looks and gestures, and hasten the liberation that Lewton’s films suggest.

Almost two years after I made “*Cat People* as Meshwork” I was inspired to create the second video, “For They Are in Me,” after reading “From Hypnosis to Animals,” the recently translated excerpt from Raymond Bellour’s *Le corps du cinéma: hypnoses, émotions, animalités*.⁶ Bellour writes provocatively about the connections between animality, cinema, and hypnosis, using Lewton’s films as

key examples. Further, Bellour's work links not only hypnosis and animals, but also children, as he discusses Irena's musical leitmotif in *Cat People*, a lullaby that featured prominently in my first video. Thinking then about hypnosis, Deren's "trance film," and the prominence of childhood in *Curse of the Cat People*, I re-explored these texts in "For They Are in Me."

"*Cat People* as Meshwork" and "For They Are in Me" highlight the permeability of dominant Hollywood genre films and the avant-garde, suggesting that the wild semiotics celebrated in avant-garde film is in fact part of cinema's nature. I am reminded of the opening intertitle of the Dada film *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (Germany, 1928, Hans Richter): "[This film] shows that even objects revolt against regimentation." That film depicts a thwarted narrative, as the compulsory ritual of afternoon tea is repeatedly interrupted by edits gone rogue and props that pursue a wayward life of their own. *Cat People* and *Curse of the Cat People* likewise celebrate revolt, tapping into that archetypal core of many horror or fantasy films, allowing us to imagine other worlds, to be governed momentarily by other laws of nature, to inhabit that magical space—sometimes horrific and sometimes wondrous—where any one thing is apt to become another thing at a given moment.

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Notes

¹ Tim Ingold, “Bringing Things Back to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials,” NCRM working Paper, University of Manchester, 2010.

² Catherine Grant, “Déjà-viewing: Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies,” *Mediascape* (Fall 2018), http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html.

³ Lesley Stern, “Once I have devoured your soul we are neither human nor animal: the cinema as an animist universe,” *The Cine-Files* 10 (spring 2016), <http://www.thecine-files.com/once-ive-devoured-your-soul/>.

⁴ Stern.

⁵ Margarida Leitão, “Gestos do realismo/Gestures of realism,” <https://vimeo.com/160356609>; Lost in the Movies, “Meshes of Lynch,” <https://vimeo.com/199829632>; Ariel Avissar, “Mashup of the Afternoon,” <https://vimeo.com/304454199>.

⁶ Raymond Bellour, “From Hypnosis to Animals,” ed. and trans. Alistair Fox, *Cinema Journal* 53, no 3 (2014): 8–24; Raymond Bellour, *Le corps du cinéma: Hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: POL, 2009).