

NINE LIVES: A HISTORY OF CAT WOMEN, SUBVERSIVE FEMININITY,
AND TRANSGRESSIVE ARCHETYPES IN FILM

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The intention of this thesis is to identify and analyze the cat woman archetype as a contemporary extension of the transgressive witch archetype, which rampantly appears over the course of cinema history, working as a signifier of a patriarchal society's fear of autonomous and subversive women. The character of Catwoman is the ultimate representation for this archetype on grounds of her visibility, longevity, and ability to return again and again. More importantly, Catwoman and her sisterhood of cat women work against male creators as a means of female empowerment through trickery. Within this thesis, key films of varying genres are drawn from throughout cinema history and analyzed in order to demonstrate the intertextual network of characters that make up the cat woman archetype, and the importance of the Catwoman character in her many forms.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO CATWOMAN AND THE CAT WOMAN ARCHETYPE

Cats are cool, unattached, unreliable... cats are hard to understand, they are erratic, as women are... You need to keep women at arm's length. We don't want anyone to take over our souls, and women have a habit of doing that.

Bob Kane, co-creator of Catwoman

Since her first appearance in the Spring 1940 issue of Detective Comic's *Batman*, Catwoman has captured the curiosity of audiences, quickly becoming an unexpected fan favorite and expanding her role in the American superhero mythos. She has returned to television and cinema in multiple iterations, with more on screen appearances than Wonder Woman, the only other female character with comic book origins to enjoy such decade-spanning longevity. Unlike the heroic Amazonian, however, Catwoman is an antiheroine. While occasionally a do-gooder, Catwoman is more often a villain than a savior, but her moral ambiguity is the key to her individuality. According to Tim Hanley, "female superheroes are generally held to the prevailing standards of what a woman should be... [but] Catwoman is not beholden to these standards" (viii). She is, "because of her felonious history, an outsider" (Hanley viii). Decades of detractors have deemed the self-proclaimed "Princess of Plunder" exploitatively hyper-sexualized, greedy, and violent. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Fredric Wertham's infamous critique of the "unwholesome" state of comic books in 1954, Catwoman was one of few characters to be chastised by name when Wertham called her indecent and "vicious" (qtd. Hanley 32). Yet, in contrast to her decidedly non-ambiguous peers, Catwoman's unique, shifty brand of autonomy remains a source of fascination for many, and her popularity continues-- particularly amongst female audiences. Why this enduring appeal? Perhaps it is because Catwoman is not such an outsider after all.

In this thesis, I posit that Catwoman is an important figure by attaching her to the cat woman archetype, a section of transgressive female characters portrayed as cat-like. I identify this archetype as an extension of the witch archetype, and I argue that as such she rampantly appears over the course of cinema history, working as a signifier of a patriarchal society's fear of autonomous and subversive women. I assert that the character of Catwoman is the ultimate representation for this subtype on grounds of her visibility, longevity, and tendency to return again and again. More importantly, I argue in this thesis that Catwoman, and her sisterhood of cat women, work against male creators as a means of female empowerment. This empowerment is accomplished in two ways: first, Catwoman displays moments of slippage within her narratives, and a sense of autonomy to which female audiences can connect with. Second, Catwoman's othering and her cycle of resurrection in the media undermines male authorship by exposing the vulnerabilities at the core of the patriarchy, and alerts female viewers (and all who are *othered*) to their own potential for disruptiveness. Like the witch, Catwoman has been scapegoated, conceptualized by men in order to assuage their own anxieties for social unrest. Rather than guaranteeing the domestication of unruly women, these male authors inadvertently grant female characters a platform and space to exhibit their transgressiveness, thus drawing attention to and fueling the power of women.

In order to make my argument, I analyze, in close reading, many of Catwoman's onscreen iterations, as well as many of those by her fellow cinematic cat women. With a focus on the characters' moments of slippage from patriarchal authorship, I demonstrate how these cat women offer negotiated feminist readings. I also give historical context to the eras in which the cat woman (re)appears and detail the ways in which these texts interact to build the mythos of Catwoman. I interpret this archetype as threatening, and therefore powerful, based on the aspects

of these characters that are oft repeated as subversive tools: rage, sexuality, and willfulness, and I analyze how these tools are used by the cat women to undermine their authors and the social tensions that prompted their creation by establishing resonance with a female audience.

For the purpose of this thesis, I restrict my analysis to portrayals of Catwoman in live action television shows and films, with occasional allusions to comic books where appropriate. This study is primarily concerned with the cinema and culture of the United States, but relevant Japanese film and culture is also included. As I intend to demonstrate the cinematic cat woman mythos, the films and television texts I have chosen to include in this study have been selected based on their prominent featuring of a cat woman character, which I consider to be a subversive woman who is heavily associated with-- or *associates* with-- onscreen felines, and demonstrates transgressive, threatening behavior. This survey of cat women and how they relate is not meant to be all-encompassing, though I attempt to make it as complete as possible. While I consider Catwoman to be a microcosm of the cat women/witch archetype, and she remains front and center in this work, inclusion of these other cat women texts is necessary and concurrent with scholar Terrie Waddell's view regarding the importance of studying cultural mythology and historical influence in order to deconstruct and find meaning in media messages, as I now discuss.

Context and Theory

Catwoman is part of a larger network of subversive female characters-- she represents the archetypal cat woman: an amalgamation of transgressive, sexual, and sinister females such as the witch, the femme fatale, and the mythical trickster. A ubiquitous figure, the shifty cat woman has been largely produced by patriarchal storytellers in an effort to vilify woman's autonomy. This linkage between the female and the feline and its dark connotations has persisted in folklore and

the art of the Western world well into the present day, where it is now particularly visible in the cinematic medium. Scholar Robin Wood observes that “the association of women with cats runs right through and beyond Hollywood cinema, cutting across periods and genres from *Bringing Up Baby* to *Alien*” (68). Despite this popularity and longevity of the cat woman in film, scholarship on the matter remains bewilderingly slim. In her book *Cultural Expressions of Evil and Wickedness: Wrath, Sex, Crime*, Terrie Waddell observes the link between feline and female (the “feline morph” or Cat/Woman) in the media, remarking that the cat is widely read as a signifier of sinister, unpredictable female sexuality, and that this signifier is used again and again as a means to express male anxieties. She argues that semiotic analysis alone is limiting and urges audiences not to ignore the “a-temporal nature of myth, clashing political doctrines and religious traditions that continue to inform our print and screen fictions,” stating that media recreates elements of our real and imagined history in order to form our postmodern aesthetic (90).

The patriarchal logic that locates Catwoman’s antiheroine alignment is the same that contributes to the archetype of The Witch, a subtype of the cat woman, and arguably the most common embodiment of female power in Western narratives. Conceived as a scapegoat for men’s fear of female agency, the Witch has a lengthy history of appearing when society’s need to manage hysteria reaches critical mass, and independently-minded, sexually cognizant women are cast in the role of supernatural evil-doer, the cause of society’s ills. Waddell ties the contemporary representation of sexually threatening, feline women to the Western world’s history of using the witch, specifically her bestial connection with cats, to encourage the oppression of women. During the First Dynasty in Egypt (2920–2770 BCE), the leopard-headed female deity Mafdet appeared, followed by the goddess Bastet, a lioness warrior and god of

fertility who enjoyed a long reign in popularity from as early as the Second Dynasty (2890 BCE) to the end of the first millennium BCE. During the Hellenistic period, Bastet melded with Greco-Roman myth to form Isis, and elements of her cult were fused with goddesses Diana and Artemis. Following the rise of Christianity in 5th century CE, the temple cults of these goddesses faded away, but they left copious remnants of their existence in the form of art. The association of women with cats quickly became a dark one in the Middle Ages, when Catholicism usurped Pagan traditions as a tool of conversion but considered female-centered cults as offensive to the patriarchal, monotheistic church. Texts from this period show the beginning of concerns about female collectives, which the church imagined to be admirers of Diana, the goddess who propelled such sisterhoods to perform nocturnal devil-worship and other evil activities. Diana's association with Isis and Bastet therefore suggested a link between cats and Satan (Waddell 84, 85). The first mass witch trials of 1397-1406 further solidified the cat as the primary familiar of the sorceress, generating the concept of devil-worshipping women who had a tendency to not only keep cats but also take their form. This period also associated cats and women with sexual deviancy, prompting wild speculation about extreme female sexual perversion, including bestial orgies and the theft or violent mutilation of male genitalia (Waddell 87). Even in contemporary media, these (albeit modernized) archetypes are used to depict women's willfulness as devilish and unpredictable.

Waddell writes that the obsession of 13th-17th century demonologists with the concept of such a "demonic" and "dangerous" female willfulness demonstrated man's religious fear and sexual repression. The patriarchal order of the Catholic church ensured that women, restricted from positions of leadership and political/public life, were confined to domestic spaces, where they were "largely defined, accused and condemned by men with whom they had little contact"

(85). Male anxieties prompted the patriarchy to imbue the figure of woman “with fantastical powers to incapacitate ‘man’ and his god-given domination over beasts - *the others*, with whom women came to be associated” (85-86). Waddell goes on to say:

The synonymous nature of death and sexual allurement attached to cat/women is largely rooted in the delirium surrounding the imagined practices of witches. The ancient worship of cats and the ongoing domestic relationships that were maintained between cats and their owners, was ruptured and debased as Christian doctrine took hold of Europe. Any allusions to female power and autonomy were therefore brutally undermined. It seems odd that remnants of this irrational behaviour still filter through popular culture today. Although the independent nature of the cat as a species... gives rise to personified versions of the cat as duplicitous and menacing, it is difficult to deny that much of Western history and the subsequent mythologies fostered by certain sweeps of faith, continues to inspire current interpretations of the cat-as-woman. (91)

Consider the chaotic Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) and her essentially psychic connection with her pet leopard in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), the sexually demanding Maggie “The Cat” (Elizabeth Taylor) in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), or the iconic gold-digging Holly Golightly and her pet Cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961). In TV’s *Bewitched* (1964-1972), *Tabitha* (1977-1972), *Sabrina: The Teenage Witch* (1996–2003), and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-present), powerful witches disguise themselves to fit into suburban settings while consorting with feline familiars. In *Cat Women of the Moon* (1953) alien cat women threaten the entire universe, while in *Alien* (1979) Ridley (Sigourney Weaver) and her cat Jonesy survive an alien attack that wipes out their human male comrades. Indeed, the cat woman and man’s fear of her is everywhere. Comic book giant Bob Kane was certainly inspired by his personal fear of women, whom he referred to as “soul-stealing” when he conceptualized the character of Catwoman in 1940 (Hanley 10). In order to bring readers a sexually forward, deviant woman that recalled the witch, the Batman franchise produced an antiheroine who exhibited all of the characteristics that “good girls” were cautioned against performing. By achieving the spot light as a transgressive woman, Catwoman revealed not only a deep-rooted

distrust of women in her male creators, she acted out their worst fears by piquing the sexual interest of Batman, and even occasionally caused the hero's corruption (Hanley 13). By following this "erratic and unreliable" character, readers can enjoy and become invested in a display of female autonomy.

The fears of men like Bob Kane are exposed by the adamant vilification of women, resulting in a cycle wherein the patriarchy unintentionally increases woman rather than minimizes her. In her chapter "Contexts for the Consideration of the Transgressive Antitype," Katharine Kittredge writes of transgressive women:

The scorn heaped upon these individuals served to mask the truer response of fear. Lying just beneath the smug misogyny that allowed the transgressive woman to be caricatured, humiliated, executed, or left to die in the streets, there remained a strong element of masculine uneasiness with the strengths that come with being a female and (perhaps) a feminine satisfaction with the disruption of the patriarchal status quo. (15-16)

The cat woman is a perfect example of this process. Just as the patriarchy interprets feline traits to be naturally treacherous in order to disassociate from the empowering ancient tradition of cat goddesses, the culture also casts transgressive woman as evil in order to stifle her autonomy; however, each act of repression ultimately enhances and brings recognition to the simmering potency what is repressed. Though the cat woman is in reality "merely" in possession of complexity and an interest in independence, these intolerable elements are packaged as a powerful evil, capable of destruction.

The analysis in this thesis is made possible largely by the models for archetypal deconstruction in the media, formulated by several theorists. The first is Jane Caputi, who presents in her book *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* an approach to gender that consists of recognizing the patriarchal distortions of mythic female figures that have influenced contemporary reception. By considering the reaction to female

power that prompted this inversion, what has been lost from ancient female tradition may be reclaimed by a form of gynocentrism that Caputi calls Goddess/Monster Myth. Drawing from the work of radical feminist Mary Daly, Caputi writes that a patriarchal society, a form of what she calls “a master consciousness,” splits the integrity of being, releasing destructive power: “‘Otherness,’ the basis of oppression, is created when the self is split, and what is disowned, feared, and denied in the self is projected onto another being or group The ‘other’ is the stigmatized and warred against” (14). In other words, a patriarchal society rejects the complexity of dualism, and in order to make sense of the world, qualities are divided into positive and negative concepts. The patriarchal champions men, and therefore separates women from them, othering the female. Echoing Waddell’s thoughts on Catholicism’s removal of women from the public sphere, where male authority was then tasked with defining and condemning that which it had no contact with, Caputi perceives the patriarchal rewriting and demonizing of female centric myth throughout history and urges further analysis. Caputi encourages feminist critics to understand that “myths are always involved in an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation,” and writes:

Feminist interpretations are ones that first of all refuse to worship the gods of Power, Pridge, Possession, Dominance, Quantity, Control et al, they reclaim, represent, and representiate traditions that are friendly to the monstrous, the female, the body, the beast, the dark, and the undercurrent and are prone to an identification with those who are constituted as little, common, queer, and otherwise “other.” (20)

Caputi instructs viewers to “look in the background” for keys to this othering, not in desperation to place power where there is none, but in an attempt to find the myth that restores duality and dynamism, a reclamation that can only help restore social balance.

Caputi admits that some aspects of gynocentrism may be considered essentialist, but her arguments are nevertheless still valuable tools for “excavating” the cat woman. Catwoman and

her archetype's true meaning can be ascertained by looking at the background for a dynamic that has been split, resulting in her othering and vilification, by means of archetypal oppression. By understanding why the cat woman has been deemed threateningly complex, we have the potential to reclaim her and take steps towards a more balanced way of understanding gender and animality. With that said, a more grounded approach is required to complement Caputi's Goddess/Monster model.

Lori Landay's book *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* presents the archetype of the trickster, another mythic figure in female form. Landay identifies female tricksters as characters who exhibit autonomous ambitions that mark them as unruly while using covert power to their advantage. The female trickster contains a dualistic nature which she uses to negotiate the constraints placed upon her gender by alternating her use of agonistic and hedonic power. Complementing Caputi's vision of patriarchal attempts to split duality through othering, Landay writes that "because public discourses about femininity are riddled with contradictions, most revolving around polarized notions of "good" and "bad" women, the double is one way to achieve complexity in representations" (10). Landay argues:

Because the social practice of femininity is a form of trickery, tricksters in cultural texts resonate with and expose a fundamental tenet of the relation of the sexes in American culture: the only way for women to survive, given their subordinate position and limited opportunities for exercising overt power is to use the covert power of female trickery. (12)

In Landay's view, female tricksters like cat women are not necessarily feminist heroes, but they do represent a threat to social stability with their individualistic pursuit of autonomy.

In this thesis, I apply Caputi's suggestion to look to "the background" of the male-authored cat woman, and her often enthusiastic reception by female audiences, to interpret the meaning behind her longevity. Landay's model for evaluating how such characters represent the

dilemmas of modern women seeking autonomy and power is also applied to illustrate how these archetypes historically “negotiate and demonstrate the constraints and tensions placed upon their sex” (13).

Robin Wood’s seminal “An Introduction to the Horror Film” is also invaluable to the study of the cat woman. Wood considers monsters in classical horror to represent the “return of the repressed,” or desires that do not meet the social norm. According to Freud and Gad Horowitz, these desires are bound to re-emerge as an object of horror, and “normality is threatened by the monster” (14). Wood states that female sexuality/creativity is subject to “particularly severe repression,” due to “the attribution to the female of passivity, her preparation for her subordinate and dependent role in our culture,” and argues that women are denied “drives culturally associated with masculinity: activeness, aggression, self-assertion, organizational power, creativity itself” (9). Wood includes Irena of *Cat People* (1942), one of Catwoman’s vital cinematic predecessors, in a category of repressed threats made monstrous, though he does not expound more than noting that she is the rare female monster (18). As I argue in Chapter 3, the representation of cat women in horror film manifests female sexuality and society’s disastrous mishandling or incapability to understand it, but Wood’s theory is useful even when considered beyond the boundaries of the genre. As I have argued, the cat woman archetype resurfaces with regularity in response to patriarchal fear, and that fear, as Waddell contends, is the product of sexual and social repression.

Secondary Theory and Other Resources

I have already established Waddell’s perspective as a cornerstone of this thesis as it pertains to the witch, and I continue to use her theory as well as those of other scholars to supplement this connection, but it is also important to consider the archetypal femme fatale’s

relevance to the cat woman's formation. In "Cherchez la Femme: The Evolution of the Femme Fatale" David Crewe writes that his subject is "defined, first and foremost, by her sexuality: she is alluring and enrapturing... enriched with an ambiguity, an unknowability, a sense of impossible distance," going on to remark that she is also "duplicitous, deceptive, dishonest" (17), traits which also describe the alluring cat woman. However, while Crewe and other critics stress that the femme fatale is generally revealed to be purely villainous by film's end, the cat woman walks a fine line of ambiguity. Crewe also stresses that "while [the femme fatale] might lead the male protagonist to ruin, she follows him to her doom – death or imprisonment, generally – shortly thereafter" (18). This is also where the cat woman diverges somewhat; while the witch of noir is typically doomed, the cat woman, while she may suffer punishment, has some small consolation in a resurrective power (as I discuss in length in Chapter 4).

Still, a mythos of sorts is shared by the two overlapping archetypes, as it is with the witch. All three figures represent male anxieties, with the film noir femme fatale as perhaps the most blatant-- her prevalence in the 1940s is largely regarded as a consequence of post-war gender tensions. In keeping with Caputi's outline of the patriarchal determination to sever complicated dualities, Crewe also observes that film noir "tends to exemplify the Madonna/whore dichotomy, drawing forth the femme fatale from the ruptured fault lines dividing these very male representations of women." (18) Janey Place situates the femme fatale within mythology that has long separated the transgressive from the nurturer. However, Place writes that "myth not only expresses dominant ideologies, it is also responsive to the repressed needs of the culture. It gives voice to the unacceptable archetypes..." (48). Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan argues for the archetype's potential to expose "essential contradictions between the dominant male discourse and the subordinate (repressed) discourse of women in patriarchy" and

posits that transgressive women can be revealed to be “victims of male strategies” (87). With this potential in mind, I continue to apply the ideas put forward by the above mentioned scholars in this thesis, along with others such as Katherine Farrimond, Naomi Segal, and Mary Ann Doane, who concludes a chapter of her *Femmes Fatale* with a sentiment reflected throughout this thesis: “[the femme fatale] is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism. Nevertheless, the representation-- like any representation-- is not totally under the control of its producers, and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own” (2-3).

While this thesis is primarily film criticism, it is also interdisciplinary, as my research reflects. As I draw from several time periods and genres to make my arguments, this thesis necessitates both historicist and feminist perspectives, as well as attention to literary and comic book-related resources. For my purposes, horror genre theory contains the most useful historical framework with which to discuss cultural fear, as seen with the work of Robin Wood, so I reinforce my arguments using Sady Doyle’s *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, among others. Many important articles on the seminal cat woman film (and vital cornerstone of this thesis) *Cat People* are also vital to this study, specifically (but not limited to) the scholarship of Linda Rohrer Paige and Karen Hollinger. Of particular interest and worthy of study beyond my subject is Michael E. Crandol’s “Beauty is the Beast: Suzuki Sumiko and Prewar Japanese Horror Cinema,” without which this thesis would be missing the crucial acknowledgment of the *bakeneko* subgenre, proof that the cinematic cat woman exists beyond the Western world. The history of DC’s Catwoman herself and the study of superheroes is heavily incorporated in the forthcoming chapters, much of which has been drawn from the excellent *The Many Lives of Catwoman: The Felonious History of a Feline Fatale* by Tim Hanley, in addition to interdisciplinary analysis on the character by Shannon Austin, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley,

Genevieve Valentine, and many others. Some literary theory, particularly in regards to the treatment of subversive female characters, is integral to my argument, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* and Naomi Segal's survey of femicide and male absolution as depicted in print and onscreen.

Notes on Terminology

At times in this thesis, I must make the distinction between Catwoman, the DC character who generally appears in Batman narratives, and the archetype which she represents. I refer to the former as Catwoman, and the general archetype as the cat woman (or cat women).

Throughout this thesis I rely heavily on the term "other" or "othered" to describe those who are viewed as "less than" and marginalized according to patriarchal norms. This usage is in harmony with Caputi's description, as well as Wood's "Return of the Repressed," which states that "the other" has many representations, chief among them "quite simply, other people" (9). Wood writes that bourgeois ideology cannot accept the Other and therefore reject it or force it into assimilation, "converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself... it functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned" (9). Woman is considered by Wood to be a version of the Other with "particular significance" in patriarchal society, and he remarks that the "dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male-created and male-controlled" (10).

In the following chapters I use the term "moments of slippage" to make my arguments. This term indicates periods in which characters exhibit key behavior that indicates what I have determined to be a breakage (or slip) from their patriarchal authorship. These moments of grief

and triumph speak to the truth of women's oppression or empowerment, providing a negotiated reading of a typically male-authored, male-dominated text, and support Landay's argument that female trickery, while perhaps not unproblematically feminist, can be illuminative of gender tensions. This also relates to Caputi's aforementioned instruction in *Goddesses and Monsters* to "look to the background" (the details, history, and reception) of female archetypes in order to more fully understand their true meaning.

Chapter Outline

In the following chapters I investigate the cat woman's subversive activity, or the "background" that Caputi speaks of, via close readings of her various iterations, addressing what I view to be the three primary qualities of the archetype that most unsettle the patriarchal world. In Chapter 2, I focus on the cat woman in comedy and consider the threatening power of women's laughter generated by female rage and resistance. This laughter is a gift inherent to the female trickster who finds security in humor and villainy, but rare to female film characters in general. Aside from recognizing the work of Waddell, Caputi, Landay, and Wood, in Chapter 1 I draw on Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen's "Social Signals and Antisocial Essences: The Function of Evil Laughter in Popular Culture" to demonstrate how the cat woman possesses the "antisocial" trait of laughter. I then employ Kathleen Rowe's *Unruly Women* to analyze the power of female laughter in the films *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *Bell Book and Candle* (1958), *That Darn Cat* (1965), and *War of the Roses* (1989), concluding with a study in the early screen iterations of the Catwoman character, whom I argue best represents this subversive power in *Batman: The Series*. In this section, I also draw upon theories about the meaning of women's laughter by Tania Modleski, Helene Croxious, and Mary Ann Doane.

In Chapter 3, I investigate the threat of female sexuality and duality in the horror genre,

utilizing Linda Rohrer Paige's article "The Transformation of Woman: The 'Curse' of the Cat Woman in Val Lewton / Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People*, Its Sequel, and Remake" to expand the literary work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Here, I argue that the cat woman displays and manages duality via her power of transformation. For this argument, I also apply Robin Wood's "Return of the Repressed" as I interpret the cinematic tales of transformative cat women in the horror films *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *Cat People* (1942), *Cat Girl* (1957), *Kuroneko* (1968) and the remake *Cat People* (1982) before a close reading of Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992).

Finally, in Chapter 4, I use Naomi Segal's "The Femme Fatale: A Literary and Cultural Version of Femicide," along with Wood's previously mentioned work, to argue that willfulness and autonomy is the cat woman's greatest threat. Denoted by her ability to resurrect herself, this willfulness, which ultimately represents woman's survival, prompts patriarchal dread of domination and inadvertently ensures the cat woman's return. I cross genres and decades to examine a number of films including *The Blue Bird* (1940), *Tomb of Ligeia* (1968), and *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), concluding once again with an analysis of Catwoman herself, the microcosm of the archetype, by briefly revisiting *Batman: The Series*, and finally turning to *Catwoman* (2004) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

By performing this archetypal excavation, I intend to prove that there is much more to Catwoman, and the characters that have influenced her evolution, than meets the eye. As I have explained, this study begins within the surprisingly empowering genre of comedy, where the birth of Catwoman-- and her empowering subversive laughter-- takes place.

CHAPTER 2

THE CAT WOMAN'S LAUGHTER: FEMALE RAGE IN THE COMEDY GENRE

It may be a simple observation that men in power dread the social and political erosion of being laughed at, however, the subversive power of women's laughter should not be taken for granted. In this chapter, I argue that Catwoman, and the archetype she represents, poses a threat to the patriarchy via her weaponization of female laughter. I analyze a selection of appearances by the cat woman from different decades, and with attention to historical context, in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *Bell Book and Candle* (1958), *That Darn Cat!* (1965), and *The War of the Roses* (1989). In keeping with Terrie Waddell's point that the historical ubiquity of the witch/feline morph is a token of male hysteria, this selection and format highlights the archetype's pervasiveness, as well as her evolution and versatility, as a recurring and key signifier of patriarchal fear. I demonstrate how cat women dispense jokes rather than embody punchlines, thus renegotiating common theories about women in relation to patriarchal comedy. While the cinematic cat woman is ubiquitous, I have chosen these films for their specific examples of the morally ambiguous cat woman at play within a genre which leaves room for feminist subversion.

Using the work of Kathleen Rowe, I point to the moments of slippage and the generic structure in which cat women undermine their patriarchal obligation as objects of fun by performing acts of unruliness; they parody and mock restrictive gender roles while also daring to laugh at men's expense. By linking these instances throughout the passage of time, and drawing on Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen's work on the significance of villainous laughter, I also show how this character slippage reveals a shift from subversive glee to vengeful rage, where the maniacal, antisocial laughter of a villainess masks the mirthful wrath of the oppressed other.

This historically intertextual analysis leads to Catwoman. At the conclusion of this

chapter, I assess Catwoman's first onscreen iterations and moments of slippage, as portrayed by Julie Newmar and Eartha Kitt on the *Batman* (1966-1968) television series, with some consideration to her reception. Finally, I argue that Catwoman's morally ambiguous sense of play-- the patriarchal threat made manifest in her laughter-- and her uniquely continuous intertextuality best exemplifies the subversive power of the cat woman. This helps prove my overall thesis that positions Catwoman as the pinnacle of her archetype: a subversively feminist figure.

Theory

In his study on the meaning of villainous laughter, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen writes:

If unmediated laughter is primarily a sign of positive social experience, then the mediated evil laugh of the fictional villain—a character type that opposes sociality or, at the very least, is wholly unconcerned with it—might be seen to constitute a functional inversion. Although protagonists and their confreres laugh for prosocial purposes, evil laughter betrays the villain's essential evil in its suggestion of obscene gratification. (1218)

While exploring the forms and function of evil laughter, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen notes how in fiction “the evil laugh positions the villain as an enemy of the moral order and licenses the audience's unmitigated censure” (1215), but he also admits that further investigation into the “highly intuitive” subject of villainy may challenge audiences to consider how “evil is individually constructed, socially produced, and collectively interpreted—and not the immutable animus signaled by evil laughter” (1230). These thoughts are relevant to my study on the cat woman, an archetype who complicates simple villainy with her moral ambiguity (present in her moments of slippage) and with her laughter, which I argue is one of her subversive threats to a restrictive system.

Tania Modleski stresses the prospect of female laughter as a means of subversion, drawing upon Helene Croxious's analysis of a parable in which warrior Sun Tse orders a group

of laughing women to cease their merriment on pain of decapitation. Croxious contends that women are permitted to live, or “keep their heads” on “condition that they lose them-- lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons” (42-43). Modleski writes that the threat of man’s fear of castration by women by female laughter is mirrored and responded to via the risk of decapitation; the silencing of weaponized laughter. Modleski also examines Mary Ann Doane’s argument that humor at woman’s expense is “not readable by the female spectator-- it can give her pleasure only in masochism” (“Film and the Masquerade” 80). Modleski disagrees, and argues that women, understanding the risk of decapitation, “get” the joke full well, perhaps to a deeper extent than the joke-teller, and that their reaction may be not of masochism, but of anger (27). This angry laughter may doom them to silence, or, as Kathleen Rowe posits, the rage of the oppressed may find an outlet in the comedy genre.

While (inadvertently) performing the excavation of female archetypes that Jane Caputi recommends, Rowe draws on the mythical, laughing figure of Medusa (as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's reading of the carnivalesque as transgressive) to support her argument for the power of “female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place” (3). Rowe christens female figures who make laughing spectacles of themselves as “unruly women,” and writes that, similar to the female trickster who uses her trickery to illuminate gender tensions (according to Lori Landay), the unruly woman leverages her larger-than-life persona to draw attention to the cultural constructs that shape and dictate women’s behavior. Rowe also expands on Modleski’s viewpoint on women’s laughter as a response of anger, writing “a woman can simultaneously identify with the victim of a sexist joke and apprehend her victimization; she may “get” the joke and get angry” (7). She goes on to say that once women can “recognize that they have been set up as butts of what might be seen as a

monstrous joke, they respond not with masochism or with transvestite identification with their oppressors, but with action, anger, and jokes of their own..." (7). Rowe argues that structures for expressing women's anger exist "in the genres of laughter" where women can "be willing to offend and to be offensive" (8, 10). Thus, for my first examples of the unruly cat woman archetype, I turn my analysis to the comedy genre.

Bringing Up Baby (1938)

The threat that screwball Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) poses to the hapless David (Cary Grant) in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) reflects the gender tensions of the Great Depression, particularly the fear of "a 'feminization' of American society" (McElvaine 340). The status of breadwinner, so closely associated with masculinity, was a destabilizing loss for many men who were sent reeling for sources not just of income but of identity. In such an unpredictable environment, the presence of an independent, adaptable woman with a penchant for chaos like Susan is a threat to male superiority, and her boldness to laugh at male insecurity is an outright horror. Susan wreaks havoc wherever she goes and, like a witch, magics her way out of any jam in which she finds herself-- even jail is no obstacle for the unruly Susan.



Figure 1: Susan watches Baby "play" with David. Source: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) Directed by Howard Hawks, RKO Radio Pictures.

Her familiar is the equally playful young leopard Baby, whom she uses to bully David into submission, though David fears both woman and beast in equal measure (Figure1).

Susan laughs openly at David constantly over the course of their story, but there are a few moments of slippage that draw particular attention to her laughter. After a long day of sabotage, Susan sits behind the wheel of her car, alerting viewers to her position of control, while David, resisting, complains about the indignities he's suffered from the sidewalk. He tries to sever his association with Susan, warning her that "there are limits to what a man can bear! And besides that, tomorrow afternoon I'm going to get married." Susan briefly pauses in disbelief as she processes David's plans, then, interpreting them as a joke, unleashes an exaggerated laugh, following up with a genuine "What for?" Here, her laugh is low and theatrical, unlike the other frothy laughter that she produces throughout the rest of the film, and her two-word follow up is taunting. It mocks David's presumptuousness in the making of his plans against Susan's wishes, his futile attempt to be rid of her, and even the institution of marriage. Hinting that David has no concept of just how far past his "limit" he is about to be taken, her laughter suits what Kjeldgaard-Christiansen describes as the evil laugh of a villain "that opposes sociality or, at the very least, is wholly unconcerned with it," betraying an "essential evil in its suggestion of obscene gratification" and used to "callously assert... dominance" (1218). This obscene gratification is followed by a close-up of Susan who "watches, smiles, shifts her eyes from side to side, nods her head affirmatively, then leans back out of the light," a clear indication that the screenwriters and director Howard Hawks are intent on showcasing Susan's villainy, or "deliberate trickiness" as she "concocts a plan" (Landay 126).

In two other scenes, Susan's offensive laughter compels David to comment. While the duo make their way through a forest, hunting for the escaped Baby, David tumbles down a steep

hill and collapses at the bottom, giving Susan a hysterical fit of giggles. “Don’t laugh,” David tells her, trying to retain his dignity, but she “can’t help it.” Her doubling over causes her to fall down the hill as well, but even this fall is to her advantage, as it causes her to catch David’s head in her butterfly net (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Susan laughs at David after catching him in her net following a tumble. Source: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) Directed by Howard Hawks, RKO Radio Pictures.

Instead of adopting a spirit of humility after her fall, Susan continues to laugh at both David and her own situation, as David casts withering stares from beneath her trap. Too slippery to be made into a joke at her own expense, Susan models Rowe’s unruly woman who makes a spectacle of herself with purpose, resists masochism, and presents the adaptability that Depression-era men regarded with an uneasy mix of admiration and fear. In another instance, David searches to find garments after Susan has stolen his own, but the only menswear he can procure is what appears to be a fox hunting outfit. Susan can’t repress a chortle at David in the costume, to which an irate David mutters “Go on and laugh. I know it looks ridiculous.” (Figure 3) Indeed, David in masculine sporting attire does look ridiculous, and his admission indicates that his journey to the feared land of “feminization” is underway. This is proven seconds later when he tries

unsuccessfully to make his feet fit into a pair of riding boots. Pointedly, while the sight of David in riding breeches sends Susan howling, his earlier appearance in a woman's frilly bathrobe, one of the funniest (and most famous) scenes of the film, leaves Susan completely nonplussed.



Figure 3: Susan laughs at David's new outfit. Source: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) Directed by Howard Hawks, RKO Radio Pictures.

Andrew Britton writes that *Baby* is a “comedy of male castration and humiliation” that is never felt as such, as “David’s humiliation takes on a positive meaning, the humiliation constitutes the condition in which David can... learn to have fun” (182). In a age that looked forward to change and hoped everything would “be all right” as Susan says, screwball comedy favored the “flexibility” that women exhibited during a dark period, but also often restricted them to the “utopian” domestic sphere required by romantic comedy (Landay 25, 103). But, as Rowe contends, *Bringing Up Baby* and the romantic screwball comedies of this era helped “realize the potential of the woman on top” (119). The ferocity of Susan was hopeful enough-- and funny enough-- that the character’s feline “selfishness,” and total domination of David, was safe to laugh at.

Bell Book and Candle (1958)

It wasn’t long before the modicum of admiration for woman’s adaptability that had allowed for Susan’s victory would turn sour. As Betty Friedan famously claims in *The Feminine*

Mystique, “fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother” (11-12). The repression of both sexes would reach a boiling point in the next decade, but just on that precipice rests *Bell Book and Candle* (1958) and its antiheroine Gil (Kim Novak). A modern, sensual witch, Gil is self-employed, dubious about marriage, and prefers the company of her familiar cat, Pyewacket. According to the rules of witchcraft, a witch is incapable of love, but Gil’s sexual interest is nevertheless piqued by her upstairs neighbor Shep (James Stewart), and her boredom prompts her to cast a love spell on him. While her initial trajectory is much like Susan’s, Gil’s disruptive power is too much of a threat for social order. Eventually, Gil falls for Shep, and her romantic feelings put an end to her trickery; she becomes a literally powerless mortal in order to submit to Shep and matrimony. But as Caputi and Landay assert, what lies beyond the text, in the background, are acts of subversion that reveal the female power behind patriarchal trappings.

The emotions of women and their signifiers are a motif of the film, used often to separate the intolerable duality of witch and mortal, with witches functioning as other and mortals as mainstream. Gil’s Aunt Queenie (Elsa Lanchester) is also a witch, and delighted to exist on society’s margins, as she tells Gil: “I sit in the subway sometimes, or on buses or at the movies. I look at the people next to me, and I think, what would you say if I told you I was a witch? I know they’d never believe it. And I’d giggle and giggle to myself.” Gil, who prides herself on her ability to be “discreet” with her witchcraft in public, chides her aunt: “well, you have to stop giggling *here*.” A sophisticated femme fatale, Gil is not prone to laughing as openly as her aunt, but in Gil’s significant moments of slippage, her laughter at the presumptuousness of men is telling. In one scene, Sydney Redlitch (Ernie Kovacs), a self-proclaimed “expert” on the secret subculture of witches, brags to Shep and Gil that he has a talent for identifying witches who

masquerade as “normal” people. “If one came in here right now, I’d know ‘em in a minute,” Sydney boasts to Gil as she smirks back at him. “I wonder,” she says, “I suppose there’s lots of them around.” She chuckles softly at her own joke, savoring the secret that only she is privy to, while the men in the room carry on, never realizing that they have been made into Gil’s punchline.

The scene in which she casts her love spell has similar beats to Susan’s villainous display of laughter in the car scene of *Bringing Up Baby*. When Gil makes a coy overture to Shep, the flustered man announces (like David) that he’s planning to marry his girlfriend the next day. Gil falls silent and turns over this newsflash, a smirk appearing on her face as Shep nervously prattles on about his plans. Once he finally winds down, a delayed chuckle escapes from Gil’s pursed lips before she turns abruptly to beckon Pyewacket. The performative politeness of her laugh suggests a relief of tension for Shep after his rambling (though her disinterest in the details of his story extends that tension regardless), as well as a haughty mockery that disregards Shep’s pointless plans. As Susan acquires Baby to carry out her own concocted scheme, Gil summons Pyewacket, who comes to aid Gil in the immediate deployment of the love spell and the total disruption of Shep’s life (Figure 4). Jackie Byars describes Gil’s depiction in this scene, in which Novak visually blends with Pyewacket, as the expression of woman’s “otherness, her primitiveness, and her unconstrained aggression” (214). Byars observes: “the screen reveals half of Gillian’s face over that of the cat, her face lit from below by a light that becomes cooler, making her look paler and less “natural”-- less “human,” more “other”-worldly” (214-215). This observation of the witch at work suits Rowe’s suggestion that the unruly woman performs as carnivalesque in order to draw attention to restrictive social norms which are, in this case, an othering imposed on female sexuality and aggression.



Figure 4: Gil performs witchcraft using Pyewacket. Source: *Bell Book and Candle* (1959) Directed by Richard Quine, Columbia Pictures.



Figure 5: Gil discovers she is mortal. Source: *Bell Book and Candle* (1959) Directed by Richard Quine, Columbia Pictures.

In another moment of slippage late in the film, Gil responds to Shep's abandonment by summoning Pyewacket again to wreak revenge, but this time the cat fights her and escapes. Gil buries her head in her hands, only to find tears (Figure 5). Upon examining Gil, Queenie exclaims that her niece's "real tears" are a sign that she has fallen in love and become mortal. "That's why Pyewacket ran away," she says, "you've lost your powers." When Queenie asks Gil if love is "wonderful," Gil responds "Oh, no. Oh, Auntie, it's awful." While likely intended to

comment on the dramatic pangs of romance, Gil's delivery of these lines is sincerely mournful and reads much like a woman grieving the loss of her independence. Though she is reunited with Shep and succeeds in her goal of seducing him, her countenance at their reunion is sadness rather than joy. While a witch may giggle, apparently a betrothed mortal woman is entitled only to tears.

Steffen Hantke regards the finale of *Bell Book and Candle* with suspicion, remarking that "the "humdrum" life of bourgeois normality... the prospect of perpetual stasis within a very narrowly circumscribed social space" is greatly contrasted by the liveliness of the carnivalesque witch subculture Gil leaves behind (459). After affirming Gil's visible "anger" that she "cannot have things both ways" as a witch and a mortal (Byars 216), Jackie Byars also offers an oppositional reading of the film's ostensibly happy ending, confirming Gil's unruly performance, acts of trickery, and her moments of slippage as subversively illuminative of the oppressive culture faced by 1950s women. Byars writes:

Shep says, toward the end, "Has it been real all along?" Is it possible that she has been a real woman all along? That, enticed by the different, the normal, she decided at some level-- conscious or unconscious-- to change? Or does this lead to an even more disturbing reading-- that we all decide that the rewards of conforming to dominant expectations outweigh those of independence and personal powers? (216)

As the woman's liberation movement emerged and brought on the rise of second wave feminism in the 1960's, the cat women that follow Gil repeat and add variation to her narrative. Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) exchanges her power of laughter for tears when she is coupled with Paul (George Preppard), and she also loses her familiar Cat. However, hope that her spirit is not yet defeated returns in the film's last moments as Cat is reclaimed before the lovers' final embrace. TV's *Bewitched* (1964–1972), heavily inspired by *Bell Book and Candle*, functions almost as a continuance of Gil and Shep's union if

Gil were to retain her powers. In it, Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery) tries to perform the role of a good housewife and abstain from using her witchy abilities, at her mortal husband Derrin's (Dick York/Dick Sargent) request. Inevitably, each episode leads to her "slipping" and giggling-- sometimes along with her anti-mortal mother Endora (Agnes Morehead)-- like Gil and Queenie, at her inside joke of power, which Derrin never quite stops being afraid of.

That Darn Cat! (1965)

That Darn Cat! (1965) repeats the pattern established by the cat woman in comedy, with a youthful twist. With her parents on holiday, young Patti (Hayley Mills) and her boyfriend Canoe (Tom Howell) do not behave like lustful teenagers in her family's empty house, but instead enact a preview of their probable future. Canoe pokes through the mail, munches on a sandwich, and drops crumbs in front of the TV, while Patti dutifully tidies up. In a moment of slippage, she pauses to hint at her restlessness: "This is just a wild idea, but has it ever occurred to you there's more to life than surfing and eating?" Genuinely flummoxed, Canoe wonders what more there could possibly be, and Patti drops the issue. Around this time, Patti's familiar DC, a tomcat who fulfills the exciting fantasy of choice and freedom that Patti envies, arrives at home. Ron DePeter also identifies Patti's ruminations as "a subversive moment" and argues that her question sounds like "proposition to consummate the relationship... while [Canoe] is oblivious to her sensual desire" (172). In fact, DePeter argues for a subversive read on the entirety of Mills's performance, contending that the actress and her character essentially turn the film into a "sex farce with hints of feminism," pushing against the faux innocence imposed by Disney-fied child stardom, while safely protected by the reassurance that "nothing sexual could ever be happening with Hayley Mills." (174)

After DC brings home evidence pertaining to a victim of kidnapping, Patti leaps at the

chance to end her ennui, and the foxy, flustered FBI Agent Kelso (Dean Jones) stands in as Patti's object of pursuit. DePeter describes Patti's lightly predatory behavior toward Kelso as a sexual persona evocative of Kim Novak (172), and there is something reminiscent of Gil in Patti's youthful adaptation of sexual aggression. Kelso shares Shep's debilitating allergy to cats, which is here, as it is in *Bell Book and Candle*, conflated with the fear of assertive female sexuality, which Patti knowingly uses to mock Kelso's panic. As Patti insists that Kelso commence his FBI surveillance of the neighborhood from the bedroom of Patti's house, she physically corners the agent by drawing progressively nearer to him with DC in her arms and a smug expression on her face. Literally backed into a corner, Kelso's fluster at DC's sneeze-inducing presence is easily doubled as the agent's ill-ease with ingenue Patti's nearness (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Patti taunts Agent Kelso with DC. Source: *That Darn Cat!* (1959) Directed by Robert Stevenson. Buena Vista, 1965.

For much of *That Darn Cat!* Kelso is disgruntled by the prospect of trailing a feline, and other members of the FBI mock his operation until Kelso warns his cohorts that the kidnapped victim is still in danger, chiding “a woman’s life is at stake.” Later, in hopes that the cat will lead

the FBI to the kidnapped victim, Kelso tries to cajole DC into going outside by gesturing and reassuring the feline with utterances of “nice kitty-cat, good ole kitty-cat.” “You can save the hypocrisy,” Patti laughs dryly, “he knows you don’t like him.” In this moment of slippage, Patti’s humorous acknowledgement of Kelso’s condescension is perhaps more confrontational than Gil’s private joke, but the two cat women share a covert commentary on society’s underestimation of their powers. The initial disrespect for DC displayed by Kelso, the FBI, and the criminals mirrors similar disregard for Patti’s youth, which Patti uses to her advantage as she dons a carnivalesque performance of disguises to keep the FBI on the case-- and Kelso in her bedroom.

In the end, Patti meets the same fate as Gil, insomuch as the film re-establishes that her place is in the house; Kelso is paired off with Patti’s prim older sister, and Patti and Canoe are reunited on her front porch-- with Patti even offering to make her boyfriend a sandwich. But Patti has established a Susan-esque adaptability that has humbled Canoe, and he admits that he feels, “like, miserable.” Patti laughs openly and, with a tone of warmth that tempers her condescension, she asserts her dominance. “You do? Why, that’s marvelous! You’re really beginning to mature.” Patti has succeeded in her plan to encourage Canoe’s maturation, which smacks a bit of Susan’s “feminization” of David, and her mocking laughter at Canoe’s professed misery is not unlike the antisocial cackle that betokens villainy. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen writes that when villains manage to trounce heroism or otherwise “consummate a dastardly plan,” they may “howl and shriek with incriminating laughter,” denoting “the villain’s actus reus, or “guilty act” (1221). This guilty act supplies “sufficient conditions for the imposition of moral punishment: an agent did something illicit on purpose,” which exposes the “obscene gratification” that the agent receives from this act. (1222) If a union with Canoe represents moral

order, Patti's "obscene gratification" also exposes her purposeful, unruly opposition to such order, and highlights the trickery that women must resort to in order to achieve dominance, or even some semblance of equality in their domestic arrangement.

The War of the Roses (1989)

Fifty years after *Bringing Up Baby*, the dread of woman asserting her dominance is actualized in *The War of the Roses* (1989), a black comedy centered on Barbara (Kathleen Turner), her husband Oliver (Michael Douglas), and the outrageous divorce that leads to their demise. While widely observed to be a macabre cautionary tale in which husband and wife are regarded as equally distasteful and culpable, some critics have noted that *War of the Roses* suggests "the female of the species is deadlier than the male" (Donner). Indeed, it is Barbara, accompanied by her pet cat Kitty Kitty, who instigates the divorce, the one who refuses to give up the house that turns into a battlefield, the first to escalate the fight to physical harm, and the one to compromise the structure of the chandelier that sends both she and Oliver to their deaths. Even more damning is the fact that, while Oliver clings to the marriage, Barbara does not love her husband, and realizes she never has. Barbara's unleashed nastiness, and even her violence within the structure of dark comedy, mark her as the unruly woman-- larger-than-life, Barbara "gets" the sexist joke and she gets angry.

A moment of slippage comes after Barbara has endured one of many dinners that have demanded her support of Oliver's attempts to impress his colleagues. That night in bed, Barbara angrily tells Oliver that she did not enjoy herself over dinner, and that Oliver's laugh, which he used throughout the event, is irritatingly phony. When Oliver insists that his laugh is genuine, Barbara mimics his falseness with performative guffaw (Figure 7). Refusing to stop, she uses his own privilege to mock him, making him into the butt of the joke, while also using the excuse of

the joke to laugh openly-- and angrily. Oliver finally admits that he “forced it a little” and hopes that “they didn’t notice what a jerk I am,” to which Barbara coldly responds “they never seem to,” proclaiming Barbara’s ability to “get” the joke-- perhaps better than anyone else-- and return it with mocking laughter.



Figure 7: Barbara makes fun of Oliver’s laugh. Source: *War of the Roses* (1989) Directed by Danny DeVito. 20th Century Fox.

Barbara and Oliver’s story is an effective illustration of this thesis’s main argument. Reflecting the gender tensions of the 1980s, Oliver idealizes Barbara, chiefly for her vibrant sexuality, but only so long as she behaves herself and keeps to the domestic sphere. Any action of Barbara’s that hints at her autonomy, such as placing a star on a Christmas tree, is discouraged by her husband. Oliver’s profound insecurity is inflamed when Barbara exhibits restlessness after 17+ years as a housewife, and he belittles her dream of starting a catering business, using her business contract to smash a pesky fly, and whining “you sold liver to our friends!” Critic Sheila Benson observes that “the beauty” of *War of the Roses* is that it aligns the viewer with Barbara, building “slowly to Barbara’s breaking point, allowing us to wince along with her at Oliver’s every patronizing act.” His condescension propels Barbara to go forward with her plan, which is truly when the Roses begin to battle, and every attempt from Oliver to put Barbara back in her

place only makes her more threatening.

In the scene directly following Barbara's declaration of her independent aspirations, Oliver antagonizes his wife as she works in the kitchen. As he paces the room, he roughly swipes at Kitty, sending the feline flying from her bar stool perch to the floor. For Barbara's crimes of seeking fulfillment beyond her husband, the cat woman is metaphorically struck down from her pedestal, but, as we see Kitty's tail rise up moments later in the background, we know she's landed on her feet. In another kitchen scene, Barbara uses comedy to express her dissatisfaction with Oliver and her growing sense of control by using liver pate to taunt her husband's dog, Bennie, the film's symbol of Oliver's dim-witted masculinity. As she prepares the pate, Barbara pauses to offer scraps to Bennie, cruelly pretending to throw the meat across the room for the dog to collect, only to reward the pate to Kitty Kitty (Figure 8). The cat licks her chops and Barbara coos; both woman and cat revel in their little joke, a small act of rebellion that sends Bennie whining to Oliver for comfort.



Figure 8: Barbara taunts Oliver's dog by feeding pate to Kitty Kitty. Source: *War of the Roses* (1989) Directed by Danny DeVito. 20th Century Fox.

In *War of the Roses*, play between Kitty Kitty and Bennie results in Kitty's untimely

death by car tire as Oliver accidentally-- but unremorsefully-- backs over the distracted feline. As with Pyewacket, the loss of Kitty symbolizes the crushing of woman's autonomy by idealized patriarchal domesticity, but Barbara resists the tears that the "awfulness of love" brings to Gil. Instead, her rage is channeled through the product that she hopes will set her free. In an attempt at reconciliation, Oliver requests a meal of pate, and Barbara makes yet another dark joke at man's expense. As Oliver takes a bite, Barbara delivers a staggering punchline: "woof." Her meaning, which Oliver immediately grasps, is that his beloved dog is what's for dinner. Oliver has carelessly denied her freedom, so Barbara will purposefully destroy Oliver's as well, and with her domestic skills, no less!

Later, as the Roses swing from the chandelier and contemplate their impending death, Oliver waxes poetic about his undying love, which Barbara sees clearly as artifice, just as she did with his phony laugh. Oliver presumptuously prompts her, "through all this, you loved me too, didn't you?" Barbara doesn't reply, but when the ring of a telephone interrupts the tension, Barbara mutters "would you get that, Oliver?" and chuckles at her joke, which again mocks her husband for his impotence-- obviously he can hardly reach the phone without killing himself, an outcome which Barbara would prefer. While the rebellious cat woman's fate is sealed, here the man is also trapped, and like the emasculated Canoe in *That Darn Cat*, he is ultimately dominated by the cat woman. The chandelier eventually plummets to the floor, and, in his final moments, Oliver rests his hand on his wife's shoulder. What follows is best described in the film's script:

BARBARA opens her eyes, and, slowly, with great effort, places her hand atop Jonathan's. A moment. Then, with her last breath, with her last vestige of strength, she **THROWS HIS HAND OFF HER SHOULDER.**

Now she smiles. Her eyes close. (Leeson 130)

On the director's DVD commentary, Devito provides an insightful tidbit about the reception of

Barbara's final act: "I've talked to some men who think he pulled his hand away. It's the strangest thing."

Catwoman in *Batman* (1966-1969)

Encapsulating the shift from Susan's gleeful control to Barbara's vengeance, while operating between the two extremes, is Catwoman, who makes her first onscreen appearance on the television series *Batman* in 1966. Typically, each episode of *Batman* concludes with the announcer recommending that viewers "tune in next week, same bat time, same bat channel." However, each time Catwoman is featured in the series, she seizes command even of the show's stinger, which is now altered to "same cat time, same cat channel." The only recurring female antagonist of the series, Catwoman's individuality has the effect of a hostile takeover. While always intended as a villain, the unrepentant Catwoman is a strong deviant female contrast for the square Batman (Adam West) and his sidekick Robin (Burt Ward), and audiences responded with surprising fondness for the character. Her unusual position as regular and beloved TV villainess and the show's campy, comedic tone granted her a platform for transgressiveness as she embodied the fears of men while mocking them, and patriarchal ideals, at the same time.

In the episode "Cat and the Fiddle" Catwoman (Julie Newmar) details her plan to fry Batman and Robin on a rooftop. While the duo fight against their restraints, Catwoman grins. "Look at it this way," she says, "you will have starred in a new show-- *Bat on a Hot Tin Roof!*" (Figure 9) As she explodes in a yowling display of laughter, Batman remains deadpan and mutters "That's not a bit funny." By making her joke at Batman's expense and reworking a cat-themed title, Catwoman places Batman in the position of woman. When he, like David under Susan's butterfly net, resists the joke, Catwoman says "you never did have a sense of humor." Here in the late 1960's, the threat of feminization is overshadowed by the greater danger of

domination and woman's abandonment of the domestic sphere, hinted at throughout Catwoman's many appearances on the series.



Figure 9: Catwoman yowls with laughter. Source: *Batman: The Series*, Episode “Cat and the Fiddle” (1966) Directed by Don Weis, 20th Century Fox Television.

Like all villains, Catwoman often sets her sights on taking over the world, but many of her plotlines are concerned with gender and thus her mockery of it. In “That Darn Catwoman/ Scat! Darn Catwoman” she uses a potion to gain control over much of the male population. When the Boy Wonder has been dosed, Robin surveys Batman with amusement and asks Catwoman “who’s the character in the ridiculous costume?” A chuffed Catwoman can barely contain her giggles, and squeals “that’s Batman!” His failure to assert authority underscored by Catwoman’s giddiness, a deeply hurt Batman breaks the fourth wall to commiserate with his audience: “What a dastardly development this is.” Later, when the pair commence in a foot chase, Catwoman exhibits a moment of slippage as she cackles, in the style of a classic villain, “You’ll never catch me alive!” In an almost exceedingly extensive scene, she runs free along a rooftop, laughing heartily the entire time, but she’s stopped when she reaches the edge. The glee

of her freedom dissipated, Catwoman is crestfallen. “Anything's better than facing prison again,” she says.

Julie Newmar's Catwoman is forever torn between her sexual attraction for Batman and her life of independence, echoing the dilemma of *Bell Book and Candle*. Her villainy, like Gil's witchiness, comes with power that Catwoman is unwilling to surrender, and this incompatibility with the status quo bars her from being a suitable mate. Batman's interest and leniency toward Catwoman (on the basis of her sex and attractiveness) made manifest the worst-case scenario: that patriarchal softness for unruly women would lead to female freedom, a phenomenon that society believed was at work in the 1960's as the Woman's Liberation Movement began. In “The Purr-fect Crime/Better Luck Next Time” (1966), Catwoman presents Batman with two doors, explaining that she is waiting behind one entrance, but a “Batman-eating Bengal tiger” is behind the other. Of course, Batman has the misfortune of opening the wrong door, releasing the hungry tiger. Catwoman's game reflects the cultural unease with female power and trickery that may have contributed to her very conceptualization as a television character in the first place; the duality of liberated women who offer both the allure of sex and the threat of death or castration, and the patriarchal frustration that arises from trying to tell the difference. If her laughter is any indication, causing this dilemma brings Catwoman great joy. Later, when she prepares to kill the captured Robin, the Boy Wonder makes an insult he would be unlikely to heave at a male villain: “Catwoman, you're not a nice person.” The villainess's only response to this is a giggle fit; like Rowe's grotesque Medusa, she embraces the potential to offend and be offensive.

Eartha Kitt replaced Newmar for the third and final season of *Batman*, and she marks her first appearance as the villainess with a booming laugh. Due to the censor's ban on interracial relationships, the casting of the mixed-race actress put an end to the femme fatale's flirtations

with the white male hero (Hanley 54-55). While the racist limitations placed upon Kitt are infuriating, being unencumbered by Batman's affections affords this new Catwoman a refreshing new form of agency, and she becomes a more formidable foe. When Newmar's coy Catwoman plays housewife to Batman before making an attempt on his life, she pokes fun at hollow domesticity, but when Kitt's aggressive Catwoman invades domestic spaces (such as in "Joke's on Catwoman"), she smashes them-- sometimes simply because she enjoys destruction. Newmar's devious laugh, like her long silky hairstyle, is luxurious, while Kitt, with her cat ears resting atop her partial up-do like a crown, laughs with a righteous glee.



Figure 10: Catwoman laughs and struts. Source: *Batman: The Series*, Episode "Catwoman's Dressed to Kill" (1967) Directed by Sam Strangis, 20th Century Fox Television.

Cackling defiant in the light of day, Kitt's Catwoman announces her presence to a posh Gotham awards luncheon in the episode "Catwoman's Dressed to Kill" (1967). In an entertaining moment of slippage, she then lists her monikers "the queen of criminals, the princess of plunder, yours un-truly," and adopts a cocky swagger (Figure 10). She visibly prides herself not only in being bad, but because she is *the best* at being bad. She accepts society's condemnation of her, and does it one better by taking pleasure in her supreme deviancy. The outlandish camp and humor of Newmar and Kitt's unruly performances is girded by anger, but

its fullness of expression evolves from one to the other, just as this difference can be traced from *Bringing up Baby*'s Susan to Barbara in *War of the Roses*.

In "The Funny Feline Felonies/The Joker's on Catwoman" (1968) Catwoman's delight in dominating the men around her is on full display as she partners up with The Joker (Cesar Romero). In terms of optics, Hanley's observation about the Catwoman/Joker dynamic is worth noting: Romero's Joker, at the lofty height of 6' 3", is perhaps the largest character on *Batman*, and, due to the whiteface that made up his signature costume, technically the "whitest man on the show," is here dominated by a petite black woman. Joker, the show's most popular villain with the most appearances, is here made into a joke himself, reduced to "little more than a glorified henchman" for Catwoman to order about (54). With Joker trailing behind her, Catwoman enacts a fittingly destructive final outing as she cackles at her abilities to bully patriarchal authority in a variety of spaces. When she trashes the mansion of music mogul Mr. Groovy (Dick Kallman), she laughs with particular ferocity as her henchmen disrobe and humiliate the millionaire. Catwoman's frenetic glee here recalls Kjeldgaard-Christiansen's summation: "villains often laugh with a crazed ferocity that suggests derangement," that can "help construct an implicit moral order" by demonstrating an irrationality and thereby "invalidating that character's ideological perspective" (1228). This also recalls Terrie Waddell's observations that the mental health field has a history of treating unruly women for insanity, and conflating female criminality with the bestial in a way that harkens back to ancient witch hunts. (89) The unrestrained, "antisocial" laughter of Catwoman marks her as irrational and animalistic, and as such, she is in opposition to the patriarchal order of Batman, who is in turn implicitly validated-- yet, he continues to be subverted by Catwoman's unruly behavior.

Catwoman is caught in the act of domestic disruption by Batman, however, this only

leads to the subversion of her courtroom trial as she plants her “feminized” henchmen on the jury. When they declare her innocent, Batman’s growing suspicions about the jury are confirmed-- after all, what all-male panel could possibly presume the innocence of such a Catwoman? Batman, apparently now with the authority of a lawyer, moves for a new trial on the grounds of a prejudicial activity. Catwoman, in a striking moment of slippage that hints at her resistance to sexist and racist legal process, calls out “You don’t know how prejudicial, Batman!” A fight breaks out and the courtroom is then also destroyed, like most of the episode’s setpieces, in a mockery of justice. Here, Catwoman concludes her adventures in this cycle by disrupting both the public and private spheres, like Barbara, who dares to destroy her home and business in an effort to subvert patriarchal grip.

In her performance, Kitt utilizes the racist limitations imposed upon her by embracing Catwoman’s full force of power. The actress named Catwoman as her favorite character she had ever played, insisting that “I didn’t even have to think about her, I just did it” (Flora). When asked if she ever felt nervous replacing Newmar in the role, Kitt confidently responded “no! Why should I? The role was always mine to begin with” (Povich). As Kitt herself experienced racism, sexism, and political exile in the US due to her outspoken activism during the Vietnam War, the actress related to the role of “selfish” feline criminal as a fellow outsider whose personal autonomy and desires were a poor fit for polite society. Her comfort in the role is apparent, as it was in a different but nevertheless equally joyful way with Newmar, who said “It was so wonderful... because you could be so nasty and mean. And in the 1960s, women could never be mean, bad, and nasty. It was so satisfying. I can’t tell you how satisfying it was” (Hanley 41). The “nasty and mean” laughter of cat woman, though protected somewhat by the liminal constructs of comedy (Rowe 8), codes her as irrational, deranged, and villainous-- the

antisocial opposition to a controlled, supposedly prosocial patriarchal order. But this villainy unleashes her power of unruliness which, when coupled with moments of slippage, enables the cat woman to reveal the reason for her antisociality: her repression at the behest of man's fear.

The mark of fear vilifies Susan, whose flexibility threatens to "feminize" David, and stems to Gil, for her resistance to the domestic status quo, to Patti, for her youthful independence, to Barbara, for her rejection of her husband's control. In between, Catwoman encapsulates and interacts with this strand of her archetype, embracing the traits of her predecessors and influencing those to follow. Her "mean," performance manifests Rowe's model for the grotesque, unruly woman who is unafraid to "offend and be offensive." Her laughter responds to the "monstrous joke" with anger, revealing women's comprehension of patriarchal oppressions, as suggested by Modleski, while also working with Landay's argument to illuminate gender tensions. Catwoman's longevity and popularity, which I discuss further in the context of her iconic film appearances in the next chapter, suggests that female spectators shared her sense of satisfaction in this very female nastiness.

CHAPTER 3

THE CAT WOMAN'S TRANSFORMATION: SEXUALITY IN THE HORROR GENRE

In this chapter, I argue that one of the cat woman's threats to the patriarchy is her sexuality, made manifest in her ability to transform. I posit that the cat woman's transformation, a strong recurring element in many of her narratives, represents her duality, which is an object of patriarchal horror. By transforming from woman to beast, she expresses her inherent and autonomous sexual desire, and thus her monstrosity, and also attempts to manage and manipulate the desires of men. I argue that the patriarchal othering of the transforming cat woman, both within the texts and in the authoring of the texts, reveals male hysteria and the repression of female sexuality, as well as generates sympathy for the cat woman's plight through her moments of slippage. This analysis focuses on the archetype in the horror genre, beginning with the transforming feline women found in *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *Cat People* (1942), *Cat Girl* (1957), *Kuroneko* (1968) and the remake *Cat People* (1982), before concluding with *Batman Returns* (1992). With attention to historical context and female reception, I analyze the duality and sexuality expressed within these texts, and examine how these and other elements constitute the feline-female transformation. By tracing these texts chronologically, I also consider how the witch and the femme fatale contribute to the transforming cat woman's evolution from piteous to self-aware, culminating with Catwoman herself, who I argue represents the arc of her archetype.

Theory

In her explanation of the value of deconstructing archetypes, Jane Caputi writes that historically, when patriarchal rule has overtaken female centric or egalitarian culture, the necessity for men to assert their dominance above others in myth creates a split between the

sexes, resulting in the othering of the female. This split is not restricted to gender; according to Caputi, patriarchal myth requires the separation of all traits, thus restricting a diverse and complex society by othering threatening traits, just as woman is othered. Caputi asserts that in a patriarchal system, “femaleness, animality, sexuality, nature, death, and darkness are increasingly seen as something abject, chaotic, ‘dirty,’ to be feared and controlled if not eradicated” (317). Human duality is unacceptable because the implication of such complexity is a lack, or imbalance, in the system.

Lori Landay observes that “the trickster, a mythical figure associated with duality, is often a symbol of doubleness” and stresses the importance of considering specifically female duality when considering a trickster such as the cat woman (10). She posits that, due to the fact that discourse about women is “riddled with contradictions, most revolving around polarized notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women, the creation of the double is one way to achieve complexity in representation” (Landay 10). Rather than viewing ostensibly opposing traits as contradictory, Landay argues that “female weakness and female power are two streams of feeling” with a female trickster, such as Catwoman, at the “nexus” (192). As mentioned previously in this thesis, Landay argues that the performance of female duality emphasizes the constraints and tensions placed upon women, such as the oppressive expectation of socially acceptable femininity.

These tensions are visible in the witch archetype, whose bestial qualities must be rooted out and annihilated, chief among them her sexuality. “The synonymous nature of death and sexual allurement attached to cat/women is largely rooted in the delirium surrounding the imagined practices of witches” (Waddell 85). Waddell observes that the “witch- hunting period associated cats and women with the extremes of sexual indulgence and perversion” (87), and that some authorities during this period contended that “witch-cats could steal penises,” illuminating

a quite literal fear of castration and “yet another means of marking out women as threats to the established order” (87). This can also be plainly seen in the femme fatale, who is “defined, first and foremost, by her sexuality” and enriched by “an unknowability...an impossible distance” (Crewe 17). She represents the separation of mythically “evil” female sexuality from chaste and nurturing femininity in accordance to the “repressed needs of the culture” (Place 48). David Crewe writes that film noir “tends to exemplify the Madonna/whore dichotomy, drawing forth the femme fatale from the ruptured fault lines dividing these very male representations of women,” observing that the genre contrasts the “good” girl and the “bad” one by “representing both archetypes; it should come as no surprise that the latter is invariably more interesting” (18). While the cat woman archetype is also framed as villainous, primarily on grounds of her overt sexuality, she subversively confronts the taboo of female desire by shifting between aspects of her dual nature of moralistic, well-intentioned “good girl” and sexually transgressive “bad girl,” and makes herself into an antiheroine. Indeed, Landay argues that one of the female trickster’s greatest cultural contributions is how she moves between opposing traits, demonstrating her ability to use her own complexity as a means of disruption (13).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s explain that “the nineteenth-century woman who refused to be an “angel in the house”-- characterized by her traditionally passive and nurturing roles as mother, wife, daughter, or mistress-- must necessarily be the Angel's opposite, a monster, sprite, or a witch-- a demon” (Gilbert). Scholar Linda Rohrer Paige builds on Gilbert and Gubar’s work, and identifies women who are capable of transformation as one such monster, and thus a source of fear for men. Paige claims the cat woman in particular possesses this power, marked by “her inability to accept the status quo” (292). Paige asserts linking the cat woman’s

skills of transformation with her relationship to the “patriarchal voices which demand her conformity,” exposes the archetype as a “rebel of the patriarchy,” one of the monsters in contrast to the angels (293). The scholar’s argument is echoed and elaborated on in this chapter:

[The cat woman’s] transformation itself represents her greatest rebellion, for though she attempts to function in passive and traditionally acceptable roles, her inner nature refuses patriarchal constraints. Not just the cat woman’s sexuality seems repressed; her soul, too, seems constricted. In yearning for a “normal” life, she betrays her inhibitions and fear of rebellion, and in demanding her obeisance, patriarchy reveals its own fear of her. By negating her stories or by undermining her mental abilities, patriarchal authorities attempt to quell the cat woman’s rebellious spirit. (292)

This illustration is provided in its purest form in the horror genre, where female sexuality, like all other forms of “deviant” sexuality, is certainly, literally demonized. As Robin Wood argues, overtly sexual female characters are often vilified, made monstrous, and are punished by narrative’s end for their harm to humanity, allowing for the social norms to then be restored (9-10). Yet, as the genre functions largely on building tension to generate terror, monstrous women in horror have the potential to reveal and explore gender-related tensions and taboos. Like the femme fatale who is typically served death, the cat woman is often punished, but as with the comedy genre, here the cat woman archetype is again granted moments of slippage that hint at the real power that lurks in the background, which I discuss in depth in this chapter. Wood remarks that “few horror films have entirely unsympathetic monsters, in many, the monster is clearly the emotional centre, and much more human than the cardboard representatives of normality,” as viewers, while appalled by the monster, also “gleefully identify” with her (15). In this chapter, I affirm Wood’s assertion by arguing that the cat woman in particular is often a sympathetic creature in horror; men are frequently shown to be the direct cause of the pain (or curse) that triggers her monstrous transformation. In this chapter, I analyze how decades of cat women, and Catwoman especially, relate to the femme fatale and function as sympathetic

monsters in the horror film by refusing to be angels in the house, according to Gilbert and Gubar's model. By expanding on Caputi, Landay, and Paige's arguments, I argue that the cat woman's monstrous rebellion is accomplished by her transformation-- an act that exposes patriarchy and illuminates complex female duality.

Island of Lost Souls (1932)

The science fiction horror *Island of Lost Souls* (1932) contains the pivotal character of Lota (Kathleen Burke), a woman revealed to be a panther, made human by the evil Dr. Moreau (Charles Laughton). The scientist considers Lota to be his greatest creation in comparison to his collection of beast-men, and watches her with great interest as her love for the shipwrecked Edward (Richard Arlen) helps her transcend her animalistic nature. Moreau hopes that Edward will procreate with Lota, and indeed the sailor finds the panther-woman alluring enough to forget that he is an engaged man. Though Edward is at first unaware of Lota's bestial origin, it is her wildness and simplicity that attracts him, and she distracts the hero from his plans to escape the island with her childlike inquisitiveness and her active, physical closeness and appearance. Her angular features, bright eyes, and exaggerated feline make-up are striking, and her wild, bushy black hair and tropical two-piece costume emphasize Lota's allure while also indicating her otherness as a woman, a foreigner, and an animal. When Edward succumbs to her charms and kisses her, Lota's claws emerge, and the man recoils. Horrified, Edward gives voice to the fretful patriarchy by crying to Moreau that giving life to the panther-woman is the scientist's most egregious crime of all: "Those creatures out there in the jungle are horrible enough, but to have created something as tragic as that girl! An animal with a woman's emotions... I could have overlooked those others, but not now." This echoes sentiments often expressed about female monsters, such as by Dr. Frankenstein himself, who worries that the female monster "might

become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness” (Shelley 126). This remark prompts scholar Erin Kelly to notice that the only time “she” is specifically mentioned is “to speculate that she might be more monstrous than her male companion” (222). It is unclear what Edward finds most despicable about Lota-- is it simply her animality, or is it that Edward feels tricked into an attraction to her? The latter may be the most factual. As Moreau reveals his plan for Lota to procreate, Edward loses all composure and strikes the scientist to the ground, he is aghast by the concept of sharing a family with such an unfit woman. His dalliance with Lota would not only separate Edward from a culture of good taste, it would guarantee the success of Moreau’s evil counter-culture.

Lota was used prominently in the marketing of *Island of Lost Souls*, and even this advertising highlighted the doubling of her character; she was promoted as “panther woman-- throbbing to the hot flush of love,” both terrifying and desirable (Berenstein 160). In the early 1930s, a decade still reeling from the wild flappers of the roaring 1920’s, such curiosity and disgust was to be expected. According to Film historian David J. Skal, Philip Wylie, the screenwriter of *Island of Lost Souls*, was an “out and out misogynist” who often lambasted American women and modern motherhood in his novels, and offers, in this film, “an incredible literal giving up on the possibility of women” (*The Curious Case of Dr. Moreau*). Certainly, the film depicts Lota as deviant, her sexuality is not only manipulative but frightening and literally animalistic; she poses a threat to Edward’s morality, humanity, his relationship, and his life. Despite this reality, Lota emerges as the most sympathetic character, who suffers greatly at her creator’s hand, displaying “heroism and humanity” (O’Brien 418). When Moreau is incensed by Lota’s display of claws, “that stubborn beast flesh,” he beats her, and when he notices her tears, a sign of humanity, he makes plans to torture her, saying that he will “burn out all the animal in

her!” Of course, this scenario is greatly reminiscent of the plight of the transgressive witch, abused and often burnt to death during trials of witchcraft and beyond.

Lota can never be the angel in the house that the men in her life wish her to be, and the pain of her difference is plainly displayed in her moments of slippage, such as the one that follows the appearance of her claws. Here, Lota gazes into a mirror and extends her fingers, peering at the return of her panther traits, then looks at her own face (Figure 11). She exhales sharply, and for the first time, her eyes water. While she cannot explain her depression, she is wise enough to recognize that her inescapable otherness is linked to man’s rejection and abuse. Later, her pain is further exacerbated by the introduction of Edward’s fiancée (Leila Hyams), who arrives on the island with a rescue party. Conservatively dressed in white and easily unsettled by the natives, she provides a sharp contrast to the scantily clad, feral Lota-- she is the angel in the house to Lota’s “rebel to the patriarchy.” In another moment of slippage, Lota secretly observes the other woman, and looks down at her own body in despair, once again making a direct distinction between her natural transgressiveness and acceptable womanhood.



Figure 11: Lota regards her panther claws. Source: *Island of Lost Souls* (1932) Directed by Erle C. Kenton, Paramount Pictures.

For her disruption of the hero's narrative, Lota's death is predestined, as it is with the femme fatale. However, looking to the background, as Caputi recommends, yields the cat woman's subversiveness. Edward's chaste relationship with his buttoned-up fiancée is not unlike David's engagement at the start of *Bringing Up Baby*, and for both protagonists the emergence of a cat woman signals the return of the repressed. Lota embodies Edward's unfulfilled sexual desires, as well as reveals his fear of woman's duality. Her transformation from beast to woman, and the start of her transformation back into panther, complicates Edward's own sense of his sexuality and magnifies the cat woman's ability to shift between dualities and manipulate men.

The villain is also undermined by Lota's duality of woman and animal. His plot to use Lota to produce hybrid offspring, thus completing his experiment and furthering his own oppressive society, is frustrated by the cat woman's shift between her two forms. Despite being conceived as a cohort of the villain, Lota protects the hero. Her bestial side emerges in response to her desire, indicating that Moreau's control over her has failed, while her humanity helps put an end to Moreau's cruelty altogether. Unfortunately for Lota, the film culminates with her fight to the death with an ape-man in an effort to ensure the safety of her love interest; Edward escapes with his fiancée, and order is restored. Her outcome is unfortunate, but the fact that *Island of Lost Souls* depicts Lota's end as tragic reinforces the cat woman's impact on the narrative as demonstrative of the impossible expectations placed upon women. Unjust punishment awaits those who dare to desire and cannot, or will not, be regulated as angels in the house.

Cat People (1942)

Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) tells the story of Irena (Simone Simon), a Serbian woman in the US who is descendant from (and part of) a breed of cat people, and her fear that sexual arousal will trigger her transformation into a bloodthirsty panther. Irena's husband Oliver

(Kent Smith) does not take her fears seriously, Alice (Jane Randolph), the “other woman,” talks down to her and dismisses her worries (while flirting with Oliver). Meanwhile, psychiatrist Dr. Judd (Tom Conway) is far more harmful than helpful, isolating Irena beyond her already established otherness. This narrative complemented the rising social distrust of women and female sexuality during the 1940’s, a decade that responded to women in the workforce by popularizing the duplicitous femme fatale. However, in contrast to film noir, *Cat People’s* dangerous woman is a sympathetic monster. Producer Val Lewton and director Jacques Tourneur did not necessarily intend to foreground *Cat People* with gender concerns, but as immigrants themselves, the pair was certainly preoccupied with otherness, and Irena is treated with a surprising sensitivity (Newman 12, 21). Irena’s Serbian heritage is often implied to be her true source of difference by other characters, such as Oliver, who refers to himself as a “plain ole Americano,” but Irena is also caught between modernity and antiquity, sanity and insanity, sexual expression and frigidity. “Instead of complementarity of worlds,” Irena experiences a “collision... What was originally a coherent alternation is now presented as mutually exclusive alternatives. It is Irena's strength and downfall that she cannot choose between them” (Wilcox).

While there are convincing arguments for Irena’s possible lesbianism (Newman 32), the film generally suggests that the cat woman is not repulsed, but frightened by her own passion for her husband. Following her wedding, Irena locks herself in her bedroom and speaks to Oliver through a door, separating the cat woman’s reality from her new husband’s world (Wilcox). This moment of slippage also exhibits Irena’s longing-- she crouches beside the door and gazes up at the phallic door knob, obviously wishing to “open the door” to both sex and normalcy, but too afraid of what this literal and metaphorical emeshing will cause. She-- quite correctly-- understands that Oliver is unprepared for her unleashed sexuality, despite the fact that he desires

it, and should he survive it, he may reject her out of fear. At the same time, Irena is bound by contract to consummate the marriage. Her dilemma demonstrates Landay's observation about the contradictions that flood discourse around polarized "good" and "bad" women, necessitating the creation of a "double" to achieve complexity.



Figure 12: Irena separates herself from Oliver. Source: *Cat People* (1942) Directed by Jaques Tourner, RKO Radio Pictures Inc.

Irena as woman, foreigner, and cat person, is the repressed other that Robin Wood speaks of, the "surplus of sexual energy" that must be hidden in a monogamist, family-focused society and is therefore destined to resurface (9). In the opening scene of *Cat People*, Oliver alerts Irena to a park sign meant to discourage littering: "Let no one say, and say to your shame, that all was beauty here, until you came." This warning from the powers that be is shown to Irena just before she begins a relationship with Oliver, cautioning her that shameful otherness will be seen as not only incompatible in this environment, but destructive to the peace and "beauty" of a well-ordered system. Irena's threat to male centric bliss is later confirmed by Oliver's complaints to Alice, stating that before Irena, his uncomplicated life was "never unhappy." He goes on to lament that he is nevertheless "drawn to Irena, her warmth..." going on to list how physically

alluring he finds her. Oliver's obliviousness to his privilege and emotional limitations, coupled with a lust for Irena, ensures the cat woman's pain upon being sexually desirable but never understood. That Oliver refuses to stop himself from seeking comfort and uncomplicated intimacy with Alice once again presents the impossible demands of man's desire for both an "appropriate" woman and a sexual one, unable to abide both qualities in combined form. Alice is a modern "angel" who also has feelings for Oliver, yet avoids making him unhappy with her own demands or desires, and seems content to remain safely asexual, a "perfect and unthreatening mate" (Doane, *Desire* 52) Irena's otherness confirms that she cannot fit this mold. She expresses as much in a sad moment of slippage by saying: "I envy every woman I see on the street... They're happy. They make their husbands happy. They lead normal, happy lives."



Figure 13: Oliver uses a T-square as a cross to repel Irena. Source: *Cat People* (1942) Directed by Jaques Touerner, RKO Radio Pictures Inc.

However, in a significant departure from Lota's narrative of victimhood, Irena's transformation into panther does not occur as a result of sexual expression, but of rage upon perceiving Oliver's preference for Alice. After one such transformation, her panther double finds Oliver and Alice at their workplace. Oliver wards her off by selecting a nearby drafting tool, a T-

square shaped like a cross, and orders her to “leave us in peace in the name of God!” (Figure 13) That Irena is halted and driven away by Oliver’s cross suggests that the panther is a God-fearing thing of evil (the cat people in Irena’s folk tale are described as Satan-worshippers, driven out by an upright Christian King John). The symbol of the cross may be an acknowledgement of the church’s patriarchal system, but Oliver’s cross is not a real cross at all, it is an architect’s tool, literally a means by which men design society.

The cat woman’s ire is again raised when Dr. Judd attempts to sexually assault Irena, resulting in the doctor’s shocked witness of Irena’s transformation at last. Via an earlier dream sequence, Irena has equated Dr. Judd with Saint John, the king who slayed her ancestral cat people with a phallic blade. Dr. Judd’s psychoanalysis has further repressed the panther woman and denied the legitimacy of her concerns, and he plans to have her institutionalized –caged-- forever. While Judd manages to wound her with his sword (preposterously concealed in his cane), Irena’s transformation is victorious, and the reincarnation of Saint John’s modern warfare against women is vanquished by Irena’s slaughtering of Judd, as well as her demonstration of the power he once denied existed (Hollinger 42). After these incidents, Irena “chooses death” as she “cannot dedicate herself to fulfilling man's desires, at the denial of her own instincts, death seems preferable to life in patriarchy's cage" (Paige 294). The film closes with an excerpt from a John Donne poem, emphasizing the inevitable outcome for the evils of shifting duality: “But black sin hath betrayed to endless night/My world, both parts, and both parts must die.” Karen Hollinger offers an empowering view of Irena’s death:

Irena punishes herself for a sexual nature that she has come to see as evil. This self-induced punishment, however, does not diminish the power of her sexual difference, and Tourneur's film remains a strong statement of female power in difference, which is controlled only by the woman's internalization of patriarchal standards. (42)

In her moments of slippage, Irena is a deeply sympathetic figure, and her longing to be “normal”

is used to connect with women suffering similar feelings of otherness in response to their own desire and duality. Her power of transformation demonstrates her threat to man; were she not powerful in the first place, her death would not be required.

Cat Girl (1957)

It is the same for Lenora (Barbara Shelley) in *Cat Girl* (1957), a British thinly veiled remake of *Cat People*. The wife of a shamelessly unfaithful husband, and the victim of an unwanted family curse, the heroine of this reimagining is also sympathetic, but Lenora's eventual embrace of her sexual desires make her even more overtly challenging to the status quo. The film also relates back to *Island of Souls* by portraying Lenora's curse as natural, but also explicitly man-made. Lenora's curse is a family legacy, one that is passed to her from her sinister uncle Edmond (Ernest Milton) in a scene that plays as uncomfortably, nonconsensually sexual (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Uncle Edmond forces the family curse on Lenora. Source: *Cat Girl* (1952) Directed by Alfred Shaughnessy, American International Pictures.

Edmond forces Lenora into his office and frightens his niece by telling her that the curse he carries “must pass from my blood to yours” and that “there will be two of you as there are two of me.” He explains the family's werecat curse, a magic that creates in them the “intellect of a man, the cunning and bloodlust of these... creatures,” implying that man's rationale combined with

woman's sexuality is a fearsome creature indeed. He then reveals to her the caged jaguar that she is to become bonded with-- the nature of Lenora's condition is that she transforms into a werecat, but also that she has control of her own fully feline creature as well, further asserting the concept of her duality.

Uncle Edmond forces Lenora to pet the jaguar, urging her to "touch it with your hand and feel it is live, savage!" (Figure 15) In closing, he warns her that she must not bear children, declaring that "our lines must die out." This command echoes the "eugenic sentiments of the period which decried the indiscriminate breeding of mental inferiors and criminal personalities" (Craig 182). Like Dr. Moreau with Lota, Lenora's male creator intends her to be a sexual being, but demands control over her, which functions as a metatextual comment on the cat woman's male authorship. For this, Lenora commits her first act as a cat woman by commanding her jaguar to kill Edmond, and later her unfaithful husband.



Figure 15: Lenora's leopard. Source: *Cat Girl* (1952) Directed by Alfred Shaughnessy, American International Pictures.

Though initially worried for her mental health after these events, Lenora begins to take delight in her new powers as she grows attracted to Brian (Robert Ayres), a married psychiatrist who vows to treat her. Brian is dismissive of Lenora's abilities, declaring that she only sees her hands turn to claws because she "wanted to," implying that the cat woman brings pain upon

herself. Lenora turns this pain into pleasure; in wake of her trauma at the hands of her uncle, she ceases to attempt to please men and seeks only to suit herself, fully embracing her transformative powers as a werecat, and glowing with newfound confidence in her sexuality and ability to manipulate. She now purrs her words seductively, dresses in black leather, and flirts with Brian. This transformation poses the utmost danger to domesticity, and she plots to kill Brian's wife so she can have the man to herself and satisfy her sexual desire. In *Cat People*, Irena despairs that she has unwittingly killed Oliver's gift to her, a pet canary in its birdcage, symbolic of her danger to Oliver's plans for a tidy, contained marriage. In *Cat Girl*, Lenora also kills a bird, but in her case it is an unapologetic murder of a family pet in the presence of Brian's wife-- a fully cognizant threat to the couple's happy home (Figure 16). It is a delightfully subversive performance that invites viewers to enjoy such rebellion to patriarchal repression; Lenora is the monstrous "fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us" (Wood 15).

Rob Craig posits:

[Lenora/Cat Girl] is considered a bad, evil, dangerous thing, as her existence and freedom threatens society-- specifically, established phallo-centric culture... yet the "message within the message"-- that being the inevitability and/or advantage of bursting one's patriarchal shackles to forge an independent creature-- can be seen by anyone caring to look. (182)



Figure 16: Lenora intentionally kills a pet bird. Source: *Cat Girl* (1952) Directed by Alfred Shaughnessy, American International Pictures.

Kuroneko (1969)

The threat of the cat woman's transformation is not restricted to the Western world, nor its religions. Her prominence in Japanese film reaches back to the 1930s, when the greatest Japanese movie star of that time, Suzuki Sumito, helped popularize the *bakeneko*. This subgenre of horror revolves around a woman done wrong in another life who returns, seeking revenge on men, as a ghost or demon with the tendency to turn into a cat (Crandol 17). Based in folklore and Kabuki, these transforming female ghost-cats often seduce while in their beguiling human form, and then turn bestial, highlighting the cycle of man requiring the othering of woman, who must then transform to reconcile her duality and unleash a more devastating threat to man than he had first feared.

A *bakeneko* film with particular influence on Western cinema is *Kuroneko* (1969). In its opening scene, the humble rural home of Yone (Nobuko Otowa) and her daughter-in-law Shinge (Kiwako Taichi) is intruded upon by traveling samurai, who torture, rape, and murder both women. As they depart, the soldiers set the home ablaze, but, from beyond the cinders, a black cat appears. The cat wails and nibbles at the corpses of the women, and they wake up, resurrected (Figure 17). After pledging her soul in exchange for the destruction of all samurai, Shinge takes on feline traits, which she uses to seduce the samurai to her bed. Here, in a satisfying moment of slippage, her rage emerges violently as she bites into the neck of one of her murderers, morphing from a pleasing femme fatale into a cat-creature, and killing with her phallic teeth and claws-- she is now the one who penetrates and kills. In these sequences, Shinge and her victims are shot in close up, as they were in the film's first scenes of rape and murder, showing how the tables have turned. But, after the death of a number of samurai, patriarchal rule recognizes the threat to its system, and sends samurai Gintoki (Kichiemon Nakamura)-- who

happens to be the husband of Shinge-- to wipe out the cat women. Upon seeing her husband, Shinge defies her promise to the underworld and resists transformation for a few nights of bliss. For this, her soul is destroyed, but Yone, Shinge's fellow cat woman, finishes their task by killing her own son.



Figure 17: Cat performs resurrection. Source: *Kuroneko* (1968) Directed by Kaneto Shindo, Toho.

Fashioned as an anti-war film, *Kuroneko*'s tragedy of gender oppression may be accidental, but the results are powerful and resound in many films to follow, as I soon discuss. Director Kaneto Shindô once remarked of his film that his "sympathies rest with the peasant mother," which scholar Thomas Prasch presents as proof of the filmmaker's stance regarding Japanese war politics and perhaps the Vietnam War (230). However, the intention of male authorship is again misdirected by the cat woman's subversive power, and despite her violence, she is afforded the greatest sympathy when one looks to the background. The dualities of Yone and Shinge are greatly layered; they are both women and beast, dead and undead, sexual and maternal. Even in death they are hunted by the samurai and subject to the underworld, like Irena, they are trapped between two worlds, unable to spare or be spared by the one man they love. However, these cat women use their powers of transformation to take their greatest source of oppression down with them, and are successful in their attempt to kill all the samurai in the land. In her final act, Yone utilizes her power of transformation to subsume the angel in the house,

changing from maternal to cat-creature.



Figure 18: Yone in tears with a severed arm. Source: *Kuroneko* (1968) Directed by Kaneto Shindo, Toho.



Figure 19: Gintoki returned to his mother and wife's hut before death. Source: *Kuroneko* (1968) Directed by Kaneto Shindo, Toho.

In *Kuroneko*'s final sequence, Yone tricks Gintoki, injures him, and transports him to the ruins of the hut in which she once lived, where now they both must die. It is also the site of Yone and Shinge's rape and murder, and likely Gintoki's place of birth. Before Yone vanishes into the night sky, she mourns her son's betrayal and the necessity for his death: still in her monstrous form, and with a severed arm (the casualty of battle) in her mouth, she sheds a glistening tear (Figure 18). It is a touching moment of slippage that frames even the frightening aspects of the

cat woman as sympathetic, the “nexus” of the “streams of power and weakness” that Landay describes. Yone leaves Gintoki in the gently falling snow (Figure 19), and her son is finally made to empathize with the pain that the women in his life once felt-- only in this slippage between darkness and light can the samurai fathom woman’s duality and power. The sound of Yone’s meowing cat is the last “word” of the film, an eerie warning of the destruction guaranteed by woman’s repression.

Cat People (1982)

Paul Schrader’s remake of *Cat People* arrived in 1982, during a time of backlash to the feminism of the previous decade, conservative nostalgia for the 1950’s, and the AIDS crisis. *Cat People* reflects this atmosphere by shifting narrative focus from psychological trauma to the mythic connotations of oppressive familial and gender roles, and concerns itself with themes of containment. In this version, Irena (Nastassja Kinski) is a naive woman (othered as an adopted foreigner) who comes into her own after accepting her family’s curse, which is also shared with her long-lost brother, Paul (Malcolm McDowell). Like Lenora’s Uncle Edmond, Paul is sick and lecherous, and his view of the family curse is forced upon Irena with the goal of sexual conquest. According to Paul, no harm results in two carriers of the curse having sex with one another, but if a carrier partakes in sex with a typical human, the carrier will transform into a panther and may be restored to human form only after committing murder. Both Paul and *Cat Girl*’s Uncle Edmond demonstrate “animalistic” sexuality as patriarchy’s luxury and yet another tool of imprisonment for the cat woman (Romney 154). Meanwhile, Oliver (John Heard), Irena’s object of affection, is a zookeeper who is sometimes called upon to capture exotic animals who venture into the city. Both male characters see female sexuality as dangerous; Paul is troubled by the idea of a cat woman with equal autonomy, unlike the prostitutes he viciously murders, and Oliver

prefers all things wild to be kept behind bars. Not unlike Lota, Irena is caught between the dictates of the two men, and uses her power of transformation to manage their expectations as well as her own passions.

Reflecting the reactionary era in which it was produced, *Cat People* is regressive and consistently objectifies Irena before concluding not with her suicide, but her capture. However, the themes of imprisonment that permeate the film suggest an empathy for Irena's predicament; shots are consistently composed around her to evoke a sense of containment, such as when Irena tours the exotic cat zoo exhibit. She stops, mesmerized by the caged panther on display, and the camera views her from behind bars (Figure 20), foreshadowing her future. This is also where Oliver first glimpses her, from inside the connected zoo enclosure, and the bars that distantly separate them accomplish the same patriarchal warning as the poetic anti-litter sign in the original film. Though Irena's eventual submission feels even more defeatist than her suicide, her fate proves how little times have changed, and how her only "choice" of managing her duality-- transformation-- will always be a punishable threat. Hollinger surmises that "Schrader's film works to represent the female as a weak, castrated figure and to reaffirm her submission to the phallic dominance of the male" (42), However, even this defeatist vision for the cat woman provides some moments of liberation.



Figure 20: Irena peers through bars at the zoo. Source: *Cat People* (1982) Directed by Paul Schrader, RKO Pictures.

During a chaste vacation to Oliver's cabin, Irena watches Oliver sleep and admires him in the dark, only to become somewhat aroused. She resists temptation, but her cat-like powers have come to life, and she exits from the cabin into the night. In a moment of slippage, she disrobes and walks nude through nature with a newfound confidence and pleasure in contrast to her previous naivete. The scene reads as somewhat leery, however, Kinski imbues the moment with a sense of wonder, as if her transformative powers have allowed her to see in a new light. Though Oliver may have inspired her feelings, here she experiences them on her own. What happens next is particularly striking: back in his cabin, Oliver awakes abruptly and turns on his lamp, only to catch a glimpse of Irena, still naked, with wild eyes and blood on her face (Figure 21). She destroys Oliver's light and screams "don't look at me!" Her shocking outburst is a defense of her private, animal sexuality, and a fitting response to the film's male gaze. What follows is a plunge into darkness, ending the scene abruptly-- "not only does the object withdraw from sight, but removes sight itself" (Romney 154). The surplus repression of Irena committed by men, narrative, and Irena herself, here previews its potential explosion.



Figure 21: Irena forbids Oliver (and the camera) to look at her. Source: *Cat People* (1982) Directed by Paul Schrader, RKO Pictures.

Later, as Irena decides to surrender her virginity to Oliver and prepares for her full transformation, she is akin to Barbara in *Cat Girl* with newfound confidence and a knowing-ness that visibly unsettles Oliver, even as he is seduced by her. As she undresses and leads him up a staircase and into the bedroom, she is once again framed with a sense of captivity as the window screens and the bars of the staircase cast shadow prisons on and around her, but she maintains a challenging gaze to Oliver and the viewer. Here she is “endowed with the power to return the look, again able to confront the camera and question her status as object,” transforming herself, if only temporarily, “from prey into aggressor” (Romney 153). It is a moment of slippage that is not afforded to the cat women of the past, and suggests an interesting reversal of the containment motif; perhaps here, Irena is peering into the trap at her victim, like Barbara reaching for the caged bird in her effort to violate ordered domesticity. In another scene, it is not psychiatry, but familial control in the form of Paul that is defeated by Irena. She stabs her brother with a shard of glass from a window that he himself has broken in an effort to assault and rape her, thus “returning his own phallic threat to him with a vengeance,” just as her predecessor once turned on and defeated Dr. Judd (Paige 298).

Viewing his film as attentive to the “mythical,” director Paul Schrader compares Irena and Oliver’s relationship to Dante Alighieri and Beatrice, in which Beatrice, after sparking the interest of men, is “placed on a pedestal.” (*Cat People: An Intimate Portrait by Paul Schrader*) This is an interesting admission from Schrader, who engaged in an affair and breakup with Kinski over the course of *Cat People*’s production, resulting in the director’s obsessive and petty behavior towards the actress. In an act of revenge, Schrader betrayed the actress’s trust by including more nude footage of Kinski in the film than she had agreed to, thus capturing her image against her will (Biskind 411). And yet, it is Kinski’s defiant performance that breaks

through the film, attaching to Irena the power that the film so clearly fears; Roger Ebert, among others, contended that the film is “held together primarily by the strength of Kinski's performance.”

This subversive undermining of male authorship is also visible in Irena's final scene of incarceration. Though the cat woman learns to embrace her newfound powers, in order for Oliver's love for her to survive (and the patriarchal world to function) she must relinquish herself to be fetishized and idealized, but never fully known. Evidently now an angel in the zoo, panther-Irena accepts food from Oliver's hand with docility. However, the film's final image is a freeze frame of Irena's daunting eyes, and a frightening, unexpected roar escapes from the beast as the screen goes black. The cat woman is contained, but her roar is the amplified echo of the mischievous Pye in *Bell Book and Candle* and the woeful cat of *Kuroneko*-- a caution against repression and a warning that the cat woman's power will resurface in dangerous ways.

Batman Returns (1992)

The struggle to manage female emotional and sexual duality continues well into 1990's cinema when Catwoman, the culmination of her archetype, steals center stage of the male-driven Batman narrative, and becomes an icon of transformation and threat to the patriarchy. *Batman Returns* (1992), bathed in darkness and the grotesque, reads as both horror and film noir, and has little for Batman (Michael Keaton) himself to do, setting the stage for Selina/Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) to become, like her predecessors, both heroine and monster of the picture. Before Selina achieves her transformation, she manifests female repression as a nervous, klutzy secretary who might as well be invisible but for her frailty. Her apartment is adorned with retrograde girliness, including a doll collection and a pink neon sign that cheerfully reads “HELLO THERE,” which contrasts Selina's own drab appearance as she flatly calls out “honey,

I'm home! Oh right, I'm not married." Her solitude is only somewhat lessened by her housecat Miss Kitty, and the voices on her answering machine: her nagging mother and a man dispassionately canceling a date. Selina embodies the female weariness of the postfeminist 1990s, a time of particularly mixed messaging and commodification, when women were told they could simply have it all, if they tried hard enough. Selina is failing to live up to the conflicting messages of femininity, falling short of the traditional womanhood that her decor mimics, and unable to keep the sexual attention of men. Yet, she is also too "soft" to establish herself within the hard-knock Gotham City. Her feebleness requires Batman's rescue from smalltime villains (after which the hero displays his indifference), and attracts verbal abuse from her ultra-corporate boss Max Schreck (Christopher Walken). Schreck instructs his fellow businessmen to "ignore" Selina, and comments that she is "not quite housebroken."



Figure 22: Pre-transformation, Selina's inner Catwoman is suggested. Source: *Batman Returns* (1992) Directed by Tim Burton, Warner Brothers.

Schreck does break Selina, inadvertently beginning her cycle of power. When he discovers her during a late-night office visit, it is just as she has come across incriminating paperwork suggesting Schreck's misdeeds. When Selina meekly challenges him, her intolerable duality first appears in a shot that casts the shadow of her eye glasses upward across her face,

foreshadowing the cat mask she is destined to wear (Figure 22), a hint which Schreck's obsession with dominance is unable to bear. "It's not like you can just kill me," she says. Schreck counters by pushing her through a window, sending her falling to her death. As her body lies in an alleyway, yowling cats nibble at her flesh in a sequence closely resembling the resurrection scene of the murdered women in *Kuroneko*. Selina, ignored for her attempts to be an angel in the house and shamed for her career aspirations, is here made abject, like all othered beings, after her single bid to challenge patriarchal status quo. But as Robin Wood surmises, all that is repressed must return, often in the form of a monster, and Selina is revived.

After her reawakening, Selina returns, zombie-like, to her apartment, and sleepwalks through her usual routine, only now her activity reveals the tired, good-girl performance that it has always been. She is soon met with a disturbing voicemail on her answer machine: a sultry marketing message promoting perfume sold in Schreck's department store, declaring that one whiff of said perfume will have the wearer's boss asking her to stay "after hours." For Selina, a meeting after hours with her boss led to her demise, and the memory of this, combined with misogynist marketing-- effectively stating that women should desire such destruction by the hands of the men in their lives-- causes Selina herself to give into her anger. At last, she refuses to serve patriarchal commodification and "announces a new isolation as she rips out the phone and answering machine" (Bernardo 18). Selina realizes that "when men are not rich gentlemen but violent power seekers, it is useless to act like a genteel little woman or an alluring sex kitten. Therefore, the targets of her fury are the trappings of girlish femininity." (Landay 215) She begins the destruction of her old self and the symbols she once clung to; decorative china, dolls, and stuffed animals are crushed and ripped, her closet of pink clothing is blackened by a can of spray paint, a dollhouse is decimated. As Selina puts together her Catwoman outfit from a rain

slicker and other recycled items, the neon sign in her apartment that once cheerily read “HELLO THERE” now declares “HELL HERE,” signaling Selina’s rejection of the repression that created her personal hell. It’s also an effective “coming-of-age” image, as the girl who once “played” at being a woman rejects child’s play and accepts the complications of adult sexuality. Failing to be the angel in the house, she becomes Paige’s “rebel to the patriarchy.”



Figure 23: “Hell Here:” Selina post transformation. Source: *Batman Returns* (1992) Directed by Tim Burton, Warner Brothers.

By rejecting patriarchal constructs and making her own, Selina has embraced her otherness and therefore her complexity, as Ryan Weldon summarizes: “Catwoman’s journey to authenticity depends on both accepting her own alterity and integrating it into a coherent self, rather than denying it in favor of less authentic but more socially acceptable alternatives” (32). Once her costume is complete, so too is Selina’s transformation into Catwoman, and she languidly purrs that she feels “so much... yummier,” as she struts in her new skin. Here Catwoman is pictured in shadow, silhouetted at a distance by the camera (Figure 23). This creates a mystique around Selina’s new persona, but it also shows a surprising restraint of the male gaze. While Irena screams at Oliver to look away from her transformed self in *Cat People*, here Catwoman is granted a semi-private moment to enjoy herself on this occasion of her

newfound independence. Though Catwoman's body is objectified at many other points in *Batman Returns*, this sequence-- and Catwoman's pleasure-- herald a major evolution for her archetype.

Like the *bakeneko* in *Kuroneko*, Catwoman commits her new life to seeking revenge not only on her murderer, but also on the society that created the necessity for her split identity. Now that "she has crossed over the line and is outside of society, she wants to destroy anything connected with the system of rules that failed her" (Landay 217), fulfilling her destiny as the return of the repressed. When she unleashes her rage on Gotham, her first stop is Schreck's store, from whence came the marketing call about the seductive perfume. In an entertaining shot, Schreck's brand logo, a cartoonish grinning cat, is overtaken by Catwoman's mischievous face-- a corporate design replaced by the real thing, the monstrous woman it has inadvertently created (Figure 24). Crudely sewn, Catwoman's mask is reminiscent of the skin of Frankenstein's Monster, another revived, man-made threat, who, like many of the transforming cat women, is bound to turn on ill-intentioned creators. Catwoman's destruction of the store, a symbol of corporate patriarchy, causes her to converge with Batman and the villainous Penguin (Danny DeVito), who, along with Schreck himself, are dumbstruck at Catwoman's presence.



Figure 24: A corporate design replaced by the real thing. Source: *Batman Returns* (1992) Directed by Tim Burton, Warner Brothers.

The fact that the men of Gotham, regardless of their moral code, are each alarmed by Catwoman's unpredictability, is reminiscent of Edward's great horror upon learning Lota's nature in *Island Of Lost Souls*. While the surrounding male monstrosities are virtually un concerning, a bestial woman is especially, unforgivably threatening. Echoing the transgressive woman's contrast to the angel in the house, Shannon Austin observes that Catwoman demonstrates "a correlation often drawn between female power and monstrosity... because traditional stereotypes depict women as passive, any deviation from this norm is viewed as a threat" (286). But of course, it is not only Catwoman's violence that is dangerous. As the culmination of her archetype's evolution, Catwoman possesses a modicum of autonomy when it comes to shape-shifting, and she has the luxury of anonymity, donning her costume when it behooves her. Lou Schumaker identifies Selina as a "model of mutability," capable of adapting, through her transformation, as the narrative shifts beneath her-- while the men of Gotham are "thickheaded and unyielding creatures" and, because of her ability to navigate around the obstacles that the three forces of patriarchy, she is the only character in the film who achieves her goal (18). In her previous life she struggled to meet the impossible demands of men, but now her disregard for cultural norms grants her the power of sexual manipulation. However, complications arise when she falls for Bruce Wayne/Batman.

As both masked avengers attempt to manage their alter egos, Selina worries that Bruce could never understand her dark side, and fears hurting him with her own desire, echoing Irena's dilemma in *Cat People*. In an insightful moment of slippage, an emotionally wrecked Catwoman rejects Batman's offer of love and his request for her to abandon her double life, telling him "I would love to live with you in your castle forever, just like a fairy tale. I just couldn't live with myself." She may long for the comfort of romance, but she recognizes its inherent "patriarchal

limitations as daunting, perhaps, as those that have previously beset her” (Orr 181). In a more severe summation, Landay contends that Catwoman “does not accept the happy-marriage to the rich man because she refuses to buttress the structure of society the way Batman does” (217). Bruce has some understanding of the cat woman’s duality, and even declares to her “we are the same.” But Bruce has always had the luxury of choosing his isolation, and he has never been othered or likewise punished for his duality, a tactic which Bruce himself attempts when Catwoman complicates Batman’s quest for order.

When the two encounter one another in their costumed form, they exchange outbursts of violence as well as innuendo, with Catwoman asserting her dominance. Shannon Austin writes that sexual dominance is a prevalent gender issue in the Batman universe, commenting that Catwoman and other female villains are “sometimes forced by men—including Batman, law enforcement, and even other villains—to use their sexuality as a kind of front or mask through which they have to fight the men who are trying to control them” (286). While Catwoman’s desire for Batman/Bruce is real, her use of sexuality is nevertheless an effective distraction for Batman, frustrating his own desire for authority. Proof of this threat is offered, as Tim Hanke surmises, in the controversy concerning the “inappropriate sexuality” in *Batman Returns* at the time of the film’s release. Hanke points out that in *Batman* (1989), which avoided the backlash heaped upon its sequel, “Vicki Vale meets Bruce and the two quickly fall in bed together, whereas Selina and Bruce [in *Batman Returns*] go on one date. No sex is had” (94). This leads Hanke to conclude that it is actually the sexual control that Catwoman asserts over Batman, and her ultimate rejection of Bruce that audiences found truly uncomfortable. A repercussion, perhaps, from the days of witch trials and hysteria over imagined penis-theft.

Catwoman’s sexuality is, like Irena and the other cat women before her, confirmed as real

and deadly. While Bruce and Selina share a few kisses, for all of their sexually charged exchanges, Batman and Catwoman never do. At one point, an incapacitated Batman notices a Christmas decoration and informs Catwoman that “mistletoe can be deadly if you eat it,” to which the femme fatale responds “A kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it.” Her statement doubles as a comment on the differing outcome for men and women’s desires-- for her, a sincere kiss would mean imprisonment, and for Batman, a kiss from Selina would mean destruction. Later Batman learns, like *Cat People*’s Oliver, that she “never lied” to him, when he witnesses Catwoman force a kiss on Schreck as she lights an explosion, resulting in the death of both parties. With Selina’s revenge on Schreck, like Irena’s victory against Dr. Judd, the symbol of female repression is destroyed, though at a high price. Before this occurs, Schreck attempts to kill her with bullets. By this point, Selina’s costume is torn and ragged and she is unmasked, but her running makeup and wild hair make for a more startling monstrous image (Figure 25). It is a compelling moment of slippage as she staggers unceasingly toward Schreck, maintaining her footing and counting down her remaining “lives” with tears in her eyes after each shot from Schreck’s pistol. “Four! Five! Still alive! Six! Seven! All good girls go to heaven!” She cracks her whip for emphasis in a chilling display of her strength of will, which is at last fulfilled.



Figure 25: Catwoman unmasked in a moment of slippage. Source: *Batman Returns* (1992) Directed by Tim Burton, Warner Brothers.

Like the witch, Catwoman is created by the patriarchy, which in turn attempts to punish her for existing. As Lenora in *Cat Girl* shows, patriarchal definitions of sexuality are forced upon the cat woman, while her acceptance of a precarious place villainizes her. Catwoman inherits this difficulty in the 90's, when the sexualized woman was even more openly objectified in the media than before; touted as a signifier of liberation in a post-feminist world, yet still engineered by male desire. This is made even more complicated by male creators, such as the screenwriters for *Batman Returns*, who attempt to make her into their vision of a sexy, "decidedly nineties feminist" with a whip, while also describing her and "female psychology" as "naturally volatile" (Resner 74). Regardless, the reception of this Catwoman was ebullient (Hanley 112). Despite the success of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), featuring the return of a more serious, less hypersexualized Catwoman, it is the 1992 iteration of the character who is greeted with the most enthusiasm, especially from female audiences, both at the time of the film's release and now. Consider the following description of a superhero-themed exhibit, curated by the Costume Institute at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008, commenting on a particularly popular item:

The black vinyl Catwoman costume worn by actress Michelle Pfeiffer in 1992's *Batman Returns*, tattered and stitched together like a bizarre ragdoll, transfixed the crowd. Women in particular were drawn to this display, as though inspired by the darker power of the Catwoman suit. The movie version of Catwoman was a luckless woman with no special powers who created a costume that transformed her into something more than human-- a lethal creature of the night. Wonder Woman was blessed with mighty abilities by the Olympian gods, but Catwoman's transformation through wardrobe served as a role model for more attainable power. (Madrid 298)

The transformation made by woman, using the fabrics of constraints laid upon her by men, speaks loudly to the struggle to piece together, or conceal, an identity, for many women. Catwoman's successful combination of relatable frustration and rage, with the mythic power afforded to the monstrous woman in horror, connects to Caputi's theory of Goddess/Monster,

and the importance of looking at the “background” of patriarchally enforced archetypes. Looking beyond the fetishization of Catwoman’s sex appeal reveals the “rebel to the patriarchy,” the power of woman’s transformation, and explains the meaning behind the fearful attempt to appropriate her.

In an ending that calls to mind the subversive triumph of the cat woman in earlier films, the close of *Batman Returns* is ambiguous, bittersweet, and suggestive of man’s inability to shed the archetypal cat woman from his narrative. As snow gently falls at Christmastime, Bruce Wayne commands his driver to halt his car. The hero chases what looks like Catwoman’s shadow to an alleyway (a location much like the setting where Catwoman was first murdered and resurrected), where he finds instead a stray cat. The combination of falling snow, the ineffectual man seeking the ghost of woman, and his despair to be greeted by animal is also reminiscent of the tragic end for Gintoki in *Kuroneko*, who is also returned to the spot where cat women once transformed (as a reminder of his failure to protect or accept them). As Bruce clutches the stray cat for comfort, he departs, and a very much alive Catwoman materializes and gazes up at the bat signal in the sky. This small but significant moment, like Oliver’s admission of Irena as both truth teller and threat in *Cat People*, the roar of the caged panther in its remake, or even the sinister yowling of Pyewacket as the streetlights go dark in *Bell Book and Candle*, all suggest the most subversive of triumphs for the transforming cat woman. The history of patriarchal constructs seems doomed to repeat itself, but, as I discuss in the next chapter, Selina’s presence assures us in no uncertain terms that there is no end to the cat woman’s power of resurrection.

CHAPTER 4

THE CAT WOMAN'S RETURN: WILLFULNESS AND AUTONOMY

In folklore, cats are granted the supernatural gift of nine lives, when in reality they are physically resilient, and particularly good at surviving falls from great heights (Diamond 586); they simply possess an extraordinarily strong will to survive. The cat woman is much the same. As I have explored in the previous chapters, the cat woman's laughter and sexuality are potent threats to the patriarchy, but undergirding these powers is her most subversive threat of all-- her strong will. In a fragile patriarchal culture, a willful woman is highly problematic to the maintenance of an imbalanced society dependent upon female oppression. Willfulness indicates lack of submission, and hints at the transgressive goal of autonomy. The cat woman's most vital quality is her drive for survival, as her moments of slippage reveal. Just as her mockery of the patriarchy is present in her unruly laughter, and her sexuality becomes a dark legend in her transformation, the cat woman's deeply rooted will to survive is mythologized by her uncanny ability to return, even from beyond the grave.

In this chapter, I argue that the cat woman's willfulness-- her bid for autonomy-- is the ultimate punishable offense in a patriarchal system, and also what compels her to return. This is achieved by a cycle of vilification which represses the cat woman, and thus inadvertently grants her the means by which she fulfills man's fears. The cat woman's performance of return is then translated as an act of immortality. Diverging from the structure of the previous chapters, I cross film genres and time periods to analyze the archetype according to her means of return, which I have separated into three categories. The first of these is the Bad Penny, the persistent cat woman who reappears continuously throughout her narrative. I use *The Blue Bird* (1940) to demonstrate this type, before returning to study Catwoman in the TV show *Batman*. The second category is

the Undead, a cat woman who returns at least once from death or near-death over the course of her story, often on a quest for vengeance. For this category, I use as my examples *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1968) and Catwoman's appearance in *Catwoman* (2004). I categorize the third type of return as Cursed Inheritance, a cat woman that best represents the never ending cycle of female power pushing back against repression over time. I argue that *Curse of the Cat People* (1944) and Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) best represent this style of return. This third category is particularly potent as it concerns the interconnectedness of cat women, however, I argue that observation of all three categories is important, as this study reveals the many ways in which the archetype is subversive. I also assert that when these categories of return are viewed in this order (and while they contain overlapping elements), an evolution visibly materializes as the archetype moves from isolationist to communally feminist. In my analysis of the films within these categories, I continue to consider and highlight the telling moments of slippage that emphasize woman's willfulness, her empowered return, as well as the struggle for survival. The films included within these categories have been selected for their strong examples of my argument, but it should be said that this pattern is repeated throughout almost every cat woman film I have examined.

As with the previous chapters, this intertextual analysis leads to the Catwoman character, who is the microcosm of these texts and overall archetypal narrative, and how the meaning of the character has changed. I again assert that Catwoman is the consummate example of her archetype, showing a willfulness in her narratives that results in her return, as well as in her overall arc over time, and how she relates to the previously established categories of return over the course of her evolution. Finally, I assert that the negotiated reception of this character suggests that audiences have a history of sympathizing and identifying with Catwoman, resulting

in Catwoman's success as a subversive character that reads as feminist.

Theory

In her book *Goddesses and Monsters*, Jane Caputi writes of “death goddesses,” mythical figures like the “unsplit mother” who represent the pre-patriarchal concept of the linkage of life and death (299). This “relational identity” is terrifying to a culture reliant on the splitting of dualities. Caputi argues that the “terrible mother” is “so horrific to masculine subjectivity as we know it because she signifies not only natural death, but also the ‘death’ of the ego and the alternative world built in its image” (300). Caputi observes that “many patriarchal creation myths (instituting a worldview as well as a world) tell of an original slaughter of a goddess/monster by a male god or hero” and that often man “becomes heroic by defeating death and attacking the despised feminine” (183, 206). If man can conquer the goddess/monster, they can conquer mortality. Of course, we know death is inevitable.

In her fascinating interdisciplinary study, Naomi Segal argues that throughout the media history of the femme fatale, alluringly transgressive women are depicted as “inviting their own murder” by failing to properly love the main male character of the text, who is then prompted to kill her. The transgressions of the femme fatale is justification for her death, and the male character is absolved of his crime of passion against her, a narrative convenience that may well contribute to rape culture. Segal notes the tendency for such narratives to be told from the murderous male character's point of view in his effort to be absolved, thus “the heroine both dies again and is revived, to be contained—in both senses—in the text” (102). While escape from this containment is tragically impossible, Segal's mention of the femme fatale's revival is interesting. Though entirely slanted by male authorship in an effort to justify femicide, the transgressive woman has a second life. Her willfulness ensures her punishment, but it also revives her. As with

the hysterical persecutors of the witch, who dealt with problematic women by attaching to them evil powers and demonic cats, the storyteller inadvertently empowers these women (in a sense), exposing the fragility and panic in male authorship.

This is also similar to Robin Wood's theory, which has been used throughout this thesis, in which Wood writes that patriarchal cultures apply "surplus repression" of elements in "the interest of alienated labor and the patriarchal family" and project the tensions and neurosis that result from this repression onto "the other" (9). Wood writes:

In a male-dominated culture, where power, money, law, social institutions are controlled by past, present and future patriarchs, woman as the Other assumes particular significance... Woman's autonomy and independence are denied; on to women men project their own innate, repressed femininity in order to disown it as inferior. (10)

What is repressed must struggle to return, and Wood argues that this phenomenon often involves the repressed/other taking form as a nightmare to social order, and a typically a happy ending signifies the "restoration of repression" (10). While both Segal and Wood explore texts in which the existence of the subversive woman is punishable by annihilation, they also call attention to pertinent focus placed upon the female threat and how such obsessions shape the text, pointing again to the cyclical relationship between patriarchy and woman. The femme fatale, the witch, the monster, and the cat woman are all archetypes made up of the repressed other, projections of fear that are seemingly eternal.

These texts indicate that for a culture preoccupied with controlling women, woman's will to survive is translated as the will to destroy. Lori Landay writes that "female tricksters represent a threat to social stability with their individualistic pursuit of satisfaction and autonomy" (29). For this, like the witch, the transgressive cat woman is bound to be persecuted, however, as Landay points out, survival for a female trickster like the cat woman offers opportunity for creativity. Building on a model by Margaret Atwood, Landay writes of Catwoman's return: "As

a survivor, Catwoman illustrates how female tricksters can be creative nonvictims.” She “refuses to participate in her own victimization and recreates herself beyond the victim/survivor dichotomy” (Landay 217). Despite patriarchy’s attempt to repress her, the cat woman avoids annihilation in her “creative nonvictimhood,” which I explore in this thesis as the cat woman’s means of subverting efforts to control her, culminating in her immortality. Again, Caputi explains that “although most patriarchal religions deny any possibility of female divinity, the oral tradition has never really stopped talking about her, even if the story is distorted by the usual stereotypes” and “even though the goddess/monster is killed off in most patriarchal stories, she is dynamically immortal” (19). By looking to the background, I surmise that the cat woman’s return makes the patriarchal nightmare true.

Finally, I argue that the cat woman archetype evolves. Sady Doyle writes:

The promise of patriarchy is that every man will exercise absolute power and control over at least one woman, and that lucky men will exercise power and control over other men as well. The evils of patriarchy are... inexhaustible. And the weakness of patriarchy... is women. If women as a whole-- not some women, or a particular privileged class of women, but all of us, en masse-- refuse to cede our sexual or personal autonomy, the whole thing falls apart. (xxvi)

The cat woman belongs to the particular “class” of transgressive woman, but as I have established in this thesis, like the witch and the femme fatale, she is a signifier for all women (and potentially many who are othered) and a patriarchal cautionary tale for the danger associated with female autonomy. In this chapter, I argue that the willful archetype shows an evolution towards this “en masse” rebellion of autonomy by her connectedness with the history and future of subversive women. As Doyle states, such a connectedness moves women collectively nearer to breaking the cycle of repression.

The Bad Penny Return in *The Blue Bird* (1940)

One way that the cat woman archetype achieves her survival is through willful acts of

persistence. I categorize this relentless cat woman, whose primary goal is autonomy, as the Bad Penny. She is an isolationist variation on the archetype, whose power may chiefly be observed in her strike against social norms and refusal to be tamed. For these sins against patriarchal culture, she is sentenced to the “death” of domestication, but her willful survival implies that what is repressed cannot remain so for long.

In the Shirley Temple film *The Blue Bird* (1940), a cat woman is instrumental to a pair of children who traverse through fantasy worlds, looking for the bluebird of happiness, before returning to discover that happiness was home all along. The film itself is a warning about willful little girls who may grow up to be transgressive women, as Mytyl (Temple), is shamed at the start of the film for her bratty complaints about her family’s poverty and her longing for rich food and nice dresses. Her father (Russell Hicks) tells her that the outbreak of war is a result of “greed, selfishness, those not content with what they have” and that “you can’t be unhappy inside yourself without making others unhappy.” Later, an apologetic but still almost existentially dissatisfied Mytyl tells her mother (Spring Byington) that she “doesn’t know why” she can’t suppress her discontent, and that she wishes she could be “like you, Mother, you’re happy all the time,” to which her mother, in her own moment of slippage, responds “well, almost all the time.” Meanwhile, Mytyl’s mischievous cat, Tylette, is tutted for her swipe at a caged bird, echoing Mytyl’s longing for finer, forbidden things.

When a fairy (Jessie Ralph) intrudes on Mytyl’s slumber and instructs her to begin her search for the blue bird, she also enlists the help of Mytyl’s young brother, Tyltyl (Johnny Russell), and the misbehaving cat Tylette, now made human (Gale Sondergaard). Tylette, disgusted by conventionality, contrasts Tylo (Eddie Collins), the loyal but stupid dog-man who also accompanies them. After her transformation, Tylette whispers to Tylo: “We’re free now. If

the children succeed, we'll have to go back to what we were, dumb slaves to man," to which Tylo counters "Man is the master!" Tylette wrinkles her face with disdain. With motivation to attain autonomy articulated, her plans to sabotage Mytyl's ultimately circular journey is deemed counter to her purpose as a pet. By representing the repressed strong will and autonomous desires of Mytyl, Tylette becomes the monstrous other, brought to life in a towering, witch-like form and conflated with sexuality for added effect. The moment Tylette is given human form, she rises with a long stretch, pausing to examine her new body not with surprise, as was the case with Tylo the dog, but with pleasure and satisfaction (Figure 26). This overt, shadowy sexuality is an unusual spectacle for a Shirley Temple movie, although shortly after *The Blue Bird's* release such performances would become a staple of the femme fatale in film noir. The Witch, whose pre-cinema development I have argued is vital to understanding her feline successor, is here also fused with the cat woman.



Figure 26: Tylette comes to life. Source: *The Blue Bird* (1940) Directed by Walter Lang. 20th Century Fox.

Like a fairy tale witch, Tylette persists in her plans to distract the children from their goals and even attempts to cause their deaths. When her betrayal is revealed, she flees through a forest in an attempt to escape her servitude to man, however, the forest is set ablaze. Of this

scene, Chaston observes that “like Dorothy's Wicked Witch, Tylette is killed... this time by fire instead of water” (15). With her bid at freedom resulting in death, a different kind of witch imagery is also evoked, relating more to the infamous witch trials in which women were burnt to death for their crimes. This is hardly coincidence, as 20th Century Fox intended for *The Blue Bird* to replicate the success of MGM’s *The Wizard of Oz*, even going so far as to select Sondergaard, the original casting choice for the Wicked Witch herself (Chaston 15). Instead, the cat woman appropriately absorbs the witch, but she is still faintly recalled in the deep black gown and vibrant streaks of green eye shadow sported by Tylette (Figure 27), who unlike her archetypal counterpart, contains the secret to resurrection.



Figure 27: Tylette’s makeup. Source: *The Blue Bird* (1940) Directed by Walter Lang. 20th Century Fox.

At the film's end Tylette returns, albeit in manageable, bestial cat form, mysteriously resurrected by the time the children return home. This reappearance, while implying that the cat woman is back in the service of man that she so detested, is a strange moment of slippage for a film so intent on punishing female dissatisfaction. When Mytyl tells of Tylette’s demise, her father gestures to the very alive feline, feasting on her breakfast. “She seems to have a terrific appetite this morning.” Mytyl concludes, “Cats do have nine lives.” While Mytyl has accepted her lot in life, Tylette is destined to carry on until her next chance for freedom arises; her very

presence in the household after her death aligns with Wood's theory of a "happy end" that involves not only the monster's failure and a return to order, but also a return to repression by virtue of restoring that order. Surplus repression must "go" somewhere, and so Tylette remains, the resentful dark side to Mytyl's newfound and seemingly unquestioning contentment, the little girl's "terrific appetite," suppressed until Mytyl grows up and reaches a critical level of surplus desire once again. In this light, Mytyl's comment that Tylette has "eight more" lives to go is somewhat haunting.

Tylette's story echoes Segal's observations on the femme fatale's cyclical murder and revival-- the unseen patriarchal storyteller speaks through Mytyl as she declares that Tylette "lost her life in the fire." Her word choice reflects the film's overall perspective on Tylette's deserved fiery death, containing, as Segal suggests, the cat woman in the text as a villainess. Tylette's revival by the film itself is what Segal identifies as the storyteller's bid for absolution, the retelling of the femme fatale's inability to "love" properly-- Tylette's rejection of servitude -- justifies her murder. Her return to cat form mirrors the silencing of murdered women contained within texts by enslaving her once more. Regardless of the method, the compunction to make monster of, murder, then resurrect and contain the cat woman for her sin of willfulness grants her a second life. Even in a narrative that regards Tylette as unambiguously bad, causing her to fail in her goal of total autonomy, the cat woman survives and the storyteller is prompted to indirectly acknowledge her power. If we are to consider the villainess as the film treats her, Tylette engages in staggeringly devious behavior, and she gets away with it. This is a common theme in the cat woman mythos, and one of the chief discoveries of looking at the archetype's background to the subversive power that lies partially obscured beneath patriarchal constructions of female treachery.

On the cusp of the film noir trend and trailing the cinematic fairy tale genre's classical period, Tylette also predates the debut of the Catwoman character in *The Batman* comic book in April 1940, three months after the release of *The Blue Bird*. In light of these touchstones, it is then curious that the film is widely forgotten. It may be less of a direct cultural influence, and more of a particularly vivid reflection of the culture that created it. As 1940 was the year that begat the modern cat woman in both narrative and defining character traits, it is stunning to consider how little has changed for women and the men who fear them.

The Bad Penny Catwoman in *Batman: The Series* (1966-1968)

More than two decades later, TV's Catwoman returned from the grave thrice, four times from imprisonment, and many more times from the foreboding option of rehabilitation at the hands of Batman. As a villain, television's Catwoman represents the resurfaced surplus repression of Gotham-- by necessity, she must persist with new plots each episode to complicate society's ordered existence. Often, the romantic and sexual tension between the villainess and the hero also threatens the structure of this order, and Catwoman is just as persistent in terms of her willfulness and autonomous goals to make any long term union unfeasible. Like Tylette, she is a bad penny, refusing to be tamed or give up her hearty appetite, yet, she simply won't go away.

The conclusion of Catwoman's (Julie Newmar) first onscreen episode finds the Dynamic Duo (Adam West and Burt Ward) confronting the villainess as she tries to escape with an ancient treasure. A seismic shift causes the ground beneath her to splinter, and she slips. Batman tries to pull her to safety, and Catwoman must choose: reaching for Batman and a "rehabilitated" life, or clinging to her goal, the treasure of liberation (Figure 28)? Catwoman refuses to relinquish her freedom, causing her to plunge to the bottom of the cave. Batman is doubtful that the crime

fighters have seen the last of her, and he soberly says to Robin, repeating Mytyl's thought at the end of *The Blue Bird*, "Cats have nine lives, you know." This suspicion is all but confirmed when a housecat appears beside the pit, meowing.



Figure 28: Catwoman clings to her treasure. Source: *Batman: The Series*. Episode "Better Luck Next Time" (1966) Directed by James Sheldon, 20th Century Fox Television.

Back at Wayne Manor, Bruce, Dick, and their manservant Alfred (Alan Napier) are interrupted by cries from the housekeeper (Madge Blake), who foists the housecat on Bruce, telling him the cat has just "stolen" the lobster she had been preparing for Bruce's dinner. Bruce smiles and winkingly comments that he's trying to "rehabilitate" it. The housekeeper retorts that the cat steals anything it can get its paws on. The hearty laughter of the men quickly turns to nervous tittering as Bruce quickly slides the cat to Alfred, who eagerly passes it to Dick (Figure 29). Even Batman is spooked by the presence of the witch's familiar, unable to separate it from the woman who has rattled him with her display of power. This is reasonable, as Catwoman would reappear in a matter of episodes. While both Catwoman and her patriarchal nemeses are locked in a cycle of repression, the fear of her return is palpable, and even her kitty conduit manages to be a source of subversion. What better way to exemplify creative non-victimhood than by feasting on Batman's lobster dinner?



Figure 29: Bruce anxiously passes the cat. Source: *Batman: The Series*. Episode “Better Luck Next Time” (1966) Directed by James Sheldon, 20th Century Fox Television.

The Undead Return in *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964)

The Undead cat woman displays a more obvious return: literal resurrection from the grave. This return is usually fueled by a desire for revenge, and this cat woman often uses violence as well as trickery to accomplish her goal of destroying at least one source of repressive patriarchy. The violent *bakeneko* cat women are a defining example of the Undead classification, such as in *Kuroneko*, as discussed in the last chapter.

A unique blend of the *bakeneko* with American cinema is *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964), which centers on woman’s autonomy as it is conflated with a ghostly cat woman, her domestic feline, and the human woman who shares her willfulness. Buried on the grounds of the dilapidated abbey where her former husband Verdon (Vincent Price) resides, Ligeia (Elizabeth Shepherd) exerts a portion of her power from beyond the grave by taking the form of a cat, who in turn terrorizes her husband Verdon (Vincent Price) and his new wife, Rowena (Elizabeth Shepherd again). But despite her naivete and her blonde hair, meant to contrast her against Ligeia’s dark and witchy appearance, Rowena is not mild, which Verdon learns upon their first

meeting. His new love rebelliously plucks Ligeia's grave flowers (which Verdon forbids) and petulantly removes Verdon's sunglasses after he explains to her that he needs them to protect his "acutely sensitive" eyes (Figure 30). Though she is drawn to the brooding hero, Rowena has little patience for his rules and even makes light of his moodiness. Rowena's own father remarks of her: "willful little bitch, ain't she? Hell to be married to, I should think. Her mother certainly was." At this, another character says that he has heard that Ligeia was also willful, implying a linkage between the three women (two of them deceased), and perhaps all women. Later, Verdon mentions that before her death Ligeia warned him "I will always be your wife... your only wife. I have willed it." This almost sacred "will" is both literal and thematic, and in Ligeia's case it is triumphant, as both Ligeia and Rowena are portrayed by the same actress.



Figure 30: Rowena unmasks Verdon, much to his dismay. Source: *Tomb of Ligeia* (1964) Directed by Roger Corman. American International Pictures.

When Verdon attempts to hypnotise Rowena for a party trick, he is dismayed to find that Ligeia has temporarily possessed his new wife, who once again reminds him about the strength of her will. In another scene, Rowena is led by Ligeia's black cat down a passageway and through a mirror, where she discovers Ligeia's body. Later, it is revealed that Ligeia, while alive, hypnotized Verdon to do her bidding, and her death sealed his fate to forever perform her tasks. However, this is information given by Verdon, who also essentially confesses to his first wife's murder. This is an interesting retelling of *Jane Eyre* (and by extension, *Rebecca*) that challenges

the male storyteller as the expert on his wife's willfulness and "deserved" death, and bares recalls Segal's murderer of the femme fatale. Though Ligeia is "defined by the unforgettable impression she left on her husband" (Marak 293), in his effort to seek absolution for her murder, Verdon only brings ruin upon himself. In a twist, rather than trapping the femme fatale within his narrative, Verdon "revives" Ligeia via his romance with Rowena, whom he initially encounters at his late wife's graveside, spawning a cyclical tale of woman's revenge. Diverging greatly from the Edgar Allen Poe story upon which it is based, *Tomb* is a fascinating film that encapsulates the return of the repressed, the unreliable nature of male authorship, and a shared sense of creative non-victimhood between women living in a violent world of men.



Figure 31: Verdon does battle with Ligeia in cat form. Source: *Tomb of Ligeia* (1964) Directed by Roger Corman. American International Pictures.

In the film's climax, Ligeia's ghost superimposes over Rowena and Verdon becomes hysterical, prompting him to murder his second wife as well. Verdon then does battle with Ligeia's cat in an effort to squash her spirit (Figure 31), and the fight results in a fallen torch setting the room ablaze. Rowena is revived, and as she flees the burning abbey, a fearsome Ligeia ensures that Verdon stays behind (Figure 32). While a very loose adaptation, *Tomb* draws this scene from the pages of Poe's *Ligeia*, during which the Verdon character describes Ligeia as "life-in-death," a perverse life-giver who robs the lady Rowena of a peaceful death, the demonic

author of what the narrator calls “this hideous drama of revivification” (qtd Henry). She represents the immortal death-goddess that exists in the background of female victimhood, and the target of men who seek to conquer their own mortality through her destruction (Caputi 183, 206). Revenge, her act of creative non-victimhood, is apparent not only in her resurrection, but in her destruction of the structure that imposes her containment.



Figure 32: Verdon tries to defeat Ligeia. Source: *Tomb of Ligeia* (1964) Directed by Roger Corman. American International Pictures.

Verdon’s abbey is heavily symbolic of the patriarchal constructs that dictate and suppress the cat woman; in the film’s opening, a priest and members of the community object to “pagan” Ligeia’s burial on such sacred grounds. Later, Rowena is oppressed by the building, feeling unable to connect with her husband so long as they dwell on the estate. While on their honeymoon, Rowena and Verdon visit Stonehenge, where Verdon waxes poetic: “In Celtic religion, Stonehenge was a temple... It was built over a thousand years ago, and do you know why it remains, Rowena? It was built with a sense of purpose... like the pyramids in Egypt or the Aztec towers in Mexico...” In a moment of slippage, Rowena surmises, “Like our abbey.” With the abbey established as an age-old cultural construct of “purpose,” aligned with religious and patriarchal order, Ligeia’s willful act of burning it to the ground harkens back to the destruction

of David's dinosaur skeleton by Susan in *Bringing Up Baby*-- the structure of patriarchy crumbled by the return of the repressed.



Figure 33: Ligeia takes Verdon with her to the afterlife. Source: *Tomb of Ligeia* (1964) Directed by Roger Corman. American International Pictures.

This strange series of events, seemingly orchestrated by Ligeia's spirit in cat form, arranges a finale that rewards both cat women. Ligeia takes Verdon with her to the afterlife (Figure 33), and Rowena escapes the abbey-- and her marriage-- and survives. Here these doubled women are mirrored once more; at the start of the film, just before Ligeia's burial on the abbey grounds, the presence of her cat prompts her corpse to open her eyes, spooking onlookers. At the end of the film, a weathered Rowena opens her eyes to peer at the burning wreckage of the abbey from her escaping carriage; the cat woman's will endures. As Katarzyna Marak correctly posits: "Ligeia transcends her demise... her will to prevail establishes her as the victor, not a victim" (295).

The Undead Catwoman in *Catwoman* (2004)

In *Catwoman* (2004), Patience Phillips (Halle Berry) is made abject and murdered by a corporate empire for her initially mousy insolence and resurrected by a hoard of cats. Afterward, she has only fragmented memories of the event, and finds herself growing curiously physically and supernaturally powerful. Her skills develop along with her newfound sense of agency and confidence, leading her to become fully Catwoman, embrace her new abilities, and recognize that her “real” power was within her all along. Essentially a reimagining of Catwoman’s narrative in *Batman Returns*, this film attempts a positive, post-feminist spin on the antiheroine’s origins with an upbeat tone and the “empowering” message that woman’s greatest source of repression is herself. This is not unusual messaging for the early 2000s, in which women in media became largely “separate from gender politics,” power structures were “invisible” and all problems could be resolved by characters learning to “get their individual act together” (Kelly and Pomerantz 4). In *Catwoman*, Patience’s “empowerment” is demonstrated by her hypersexualized costume, and accompanied by the relentless male gaze that permeates the film (Figure 34).



Figure 34: Patience’s Catwoman outfit. Source: *Catwoman* (2004) Directed by Pitof, Warner Brothers.

For this, and many other reasons, one of the first solo female super-hero movies and the first to star an actress of color became an infamous flop. And yet, despite her imprisonment within the film, Catwoman proves herself to be a creative non-victim in her moments of slippage, achieving a kind of revenge on the film itself for its containment of her with its gaze and its “murder” of her significance. As with Verdon in *Tomb of Ligeia*, *Catwoman*’s male screenwriters and director are preoccupied with Catwoman’s body, her image, as well as their own “retelling” of her previous life’s story, but Patience is doubled with Selina as Rowena is with Ligeia, and she is thus another example of the undead return.

The “background” of *Catwoman* reveals it to be an attempt at neutralizing the threat of female willfulness by masking that very quality as something Patience herself must contend with, rather than something to be exercised in earnest. Patience is told and learns to parrot the phrase “freedom is power,” which becomes as meaningless as the bland action sequences it accompanies. Like Verdon’s obsession about his late wife’s witchy power over him, this misunderstanding of “freedom” is rooted in misinterpretation of female audiences and the real fear of female autonomy, which the film seeks to control. Halle Berry’s eccentric, committed performance of Patience as literally cat-like in her quick, quirky, and predatory movements is humorous and bewildering, which subverts her hypersexualization to an extent. However, when her incompetent male authorship inadvertently mirrors and reveals itself, *Catwoman*’s cycle of willfulness and repression is made complete. Despite the film’s interest in Patience’s self improvement, *Catwoman* eventually learns that her employer, a cosmetics company on the verge of rolling out a deadly anti-aging cream, is responsible for her first death. While this is a tired, demeaning plot point for a female action film, it is interesting that Patience/Catwoman battles an industry that engineers female images through patriarchal control, and that such control threatens

to bring death to women who consume its poisonous product. Prior to her transformation, Patience works as a graphic designer for the company, unwittingly aiding in the metaphorical poisoning of her fellow woman.



Figure 35: Patience upsets her boss with a drawing. Source: *Catwoman* (2004) Directed by Pitof, Warner Brothers.

Like Ligeia in her struggle with the patriarchy, Catwoman is at first unsympathetic and distant to womankind, but as she links her own murder with the potential murder of other women, she destroys the company and the source of female oppression. The depiction of Catwoman's ultimate take-down of the industry is violent yet uninspired, but an earlier scene hints at the repressed's return in an effective, negotiably metatextual way. While still employed at the corporation, Patience is caught at work by her verbally abusive boss Mr. Hedare, who takes a sketch from her desk. It is a drawing of Hedare with devil horns (Figure 35), which enrages Hedare, and when Patience feebly apologizes, Hedare tells her that "sorry" is inadequate. In a moment of slippage, Patience addresses her boss, though she could just as easily be directing her vitriol at her authors: "I'm sorry for every second I wasted working for an untalented, unethical, egomaniac like you." This insult criticizes male control for its lack (un-talented and un-ethical), a tact often used in the othering of women, and comes after the discovery of

Patience's male caricature, a mocking challenge to controlling men and a contrast to the design of women.

For all of its flaws, *Catwoman's* greatest strength is the discovery that Patience is a part of a long line of cat women, a revelation engineered to explain her powers and the reboot of the Catwoman character (Hanley 168), but which also serves as a explanation for the re-emergence of the Catwoman character and her archetype over time. While on her quest to self-actualization, Patience is often shadowed by Midnight, an Egyptian Mau cat, who represents her repressed willfulness by lingering in the background. As Patience puzzles over Midnight and the meaning of her own powers, she scours the internet with the term "cats and women." Her brow creases with concern as the screen reads "daemon, cat cults, diabolical cats, devils, persecution of witches." Functioning as a visual companion to Caputi's model of looking to the background to find and power in myth and Terrie Waddell's instruction to ascertain meaning behind the patriarchal construction of feline/morph signifiers, Patience delves deeper. The term "cats in ancient egypt" leads her to the source of positive, powerful cat symbols; she finds "beloved Bast, mistress of happiness and bounty." From here, Patience discovers powerful cat goddesses and warriors throughout history. All of Patience's collected images are of visually powerful feline-coded women, with Midnight, the throughline of woman's power of will, reappearing alongside them.

This research leads Patience to Midnight's caretaker, Dr. Ophelia Powers (Frances Conroy), who tells Patience that the cat is one of the "messengers of Bast," the ancient goddess of the moon and sun, who represents duality in all women. Ophelia surmises that Patience has been tested and chosen by Bast, and offers even more historical evidence of the cat woman's reappearance in history. "You're not alone, child. She's saved others before you." She waxes

poetic: “Cat women are not contained by the rules of society...You are a cat woman.” When Patience balks at Ophelia’s explanation, the scholar tells her that if she accepts all of the parts of herself, she can experience the freedom of autonomy. In a metatextual touch, a picture of Michelle Pfeiffer’s iteration from *Batman Returns* is glimpsed (Figure 36), and here Catwoman’s willful return is directly linked with its history, achieving a self-reflexivity and an important step in the archetype’s evolution. This scene is the equivalent of Rowena meeting her double through a mirror, led by a cat.



Figure 36: Patience and the visual history of cat women, including 92’s Catwoman. Source: *Catwoman* (2004) Directed by Pitof, Warner Brothers.

Still, Patience represents the undead return, and as such she is primarily concerned with her own freedom rather than uniting “en masse” as Doyle suggests, to conquer patriarchal forces. As with the witch, this version of Catwoman is destined for isolation. In fact, her lonerism creates some tension for a film which focuses on self-actualization and denies structural, systemic oppression. *Catwoman* closes with Catwoman’s dedication to personal autonomy, declaring to her male love interest (Benjamin Bratt): “you live in a world that has no place for someone like me.” While her narrative does not require her death, it does require her isolation, a

price she happily pays as she slinks off into the darkness repeating Ophelia's claim that "freedom is power." Her cycle of resurrection is understood, and she has achieved survival, but Catwoman, like Rowena and Ligeia, is still split between two worlds. Her true self must stay, repressed, in the darkness. Like Tylette she is, for now, confined in a sense, but she maintains her tremendous appetite.

Cursed Inheritance Return in *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944)

The Cursed Inheritance category is the most meaningful style of return, as it fully unites a long history and projected future of the cat woman archetype, thus confirming the inevitable cycle of return after repression. It is the most self-reflexive style of return, and it demonstrates a connection of otherness between cat women. While this return may not always be as overt and confrontational as it is in the previous categories, it is the most threatening. What could be more frightening to patriarchal authorship than a collective of cat women who are as aware of their powers as they are cognizant of their oppressors?

One of the most interesting aspects of *Cat People* (1942) is the suggestion that Irena's condition is not as singular as her isolation suggests. While celebrating their nuptials at a Serbian restaurant, Irena and company encounter a cat-like woman who approaches Irena and insists, in their native tongue, that the two of them are sisters. More subtle is the remark made by the pet shop owner, an eccentric woman herself, who chats with Oliver after Irena decides to wait outside the shop. "They know when someone's not right, if you know what I mean," she says of the animals' hysteria brought on by Irena's presence. But she also comments: "Animals are ever so psychic. There are some people who just can't come in here. My dear brother's wife, for instance; she's a very nice girl, I've nothing against her, but you should just see what happens when she puts her foot inside this place." If Irena is "not right" as the shopkeeper suggests, then

the shopkeeper's sister-in-law is in the same boat. There are others like Irena in New York, and they have found a way to live where Irena has not. The curse does not die with her.

Irena makes her return as an inherited curse in the sequel *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) with a child of her own. In this sequel, Oliver and Alice worry about their daughter Amy (Ann Carter), a girl politely labeled as “different” and “delicate” by her school teacher. The girl's disinterest in playing with others and her preference for nature reminds her parents of Oliver's late wife. Oliver, now a literal patriarch, is concerned that Amy's signs of otherness at this early stage can only mean burgeoning danger for idyllic domesticity. When he learns that Amy has slapped a butterfly-murdering schoolboy, Oliver remarks that it “isn't the slap I'm worried about - - it's the reason... Amy has too many fancies -- too few friends.” He tries to prohibit Amy's fancies with bribes and even corporeal punishment, exemplifying patriarchal society's “particularly severe repression of female sexuality/creativity; the attribution to the female of passivity,” which Robin Wood pinpoints as woman's “preparation for her subordinate and dependent role in our culture” (9).

As with Shirley Temple's Mytyl in *The Blue Bird*, Amy regrets her willful resistance to social norms, and wishes for a “friend.” Despite the fact that Amy is not related to Irena by blood, the cat woman comes back to the world of the living to comfort her daughter in spirit. Her return implies that the subversive cat woman strain is not limited to direct descendants, thus confirming her immortal legacy. “Irena appears, at first in the form of shadows across the floor, and then, most distinguishably, in the form of a woman's shadow. By her identification with the rebellious Amy, the cat woman reveals their special friendship as a sort of “sisterhood” (Paige 295). Irena, a more evolved cat woman, encourages Amy's difference while also suggesting methods of adaptability for the girl's protection. By teaching creative non-victimhood, Irena

manifests Landay's assertion that "female tricksters are fantasy figures... who present tactics of resistance, self-preservation, and self-definition that can be used in every day life" (26). In a telling moment of slippage, Amy declares that she'll never be able to learn arithmetic because numbers don't "mean anything," but Irena disagrees (Figure 37), explaining that the number one "is like a tall princess" and "two is the prince who kneels before her." It is a subtle indication that Irena has gained perspective on her own powers and her relation to men, and Amy's enthusiastic reception of this arithmetic is a small step towards the girl's view of her own willful power.



Figure 37: The ghost of Irena teaches Amy arithmetic. Source: *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) Directed by Gunther von Fritsch and Robert Wise, RKO Radio Pictures.

Oliver, the storyteller seeking absolution for his hand in Irena's death, justifies his harshness towards his daughter as his knowledge of "what can happen when people begin to lie to themselves" and describes his former wife as "something moody, something sickly." He recalls that he once "saw Irena lose her mind." Alice consoles her husband by praising his parenting skills and chides him for his guilt; both have apparently forgotten that in *Cat People* Irena's death revealed to them, if nothing else, that the cat woman had never lied to them. Oliver fears this truth and represses it; he cannot see Irena in his garden, even when Amy insists that she exists. When he discovers an old photo of Irena, he burns it in the fireplace and again the cat

woman is made abject, burnt like a witch in the patriarchal author's attempt to destroy the threat she poses to his happy home. As a ghost and death goddess, she is immortal, and her power is incalculable and uncontainable.

If Irena so willed, she could indeed draw Amy away from her family. At Christmas, Amy turns away from a group performance of a carol when she hears Irena outside, alone, yet singing the same song in her native language (Figure 38). It is perhaps a poignant moment, indicative of Irena's rejection from the warmth of company. However, it is also in this moment of slippage that Irena demonstrates her will to stand alone and free from cultural dictates, celebrating her otherness and sharing it with Amy. Throughout *Curse of the Cat People*, Irena's exhibits a serenity which differs greatly from man's description of her as "moody, sickly," suggesting that her return has granted her solace in Amy's vision rather than Oliver's lack thereof. It also implies that perhaps the "curse" is not *on* the cat people, but rather *of* them and their disruption of patriarchal conditioning. While true that Irena returns at the behest of her spiritual offspring, her resurrection also follows Oliver's discouragement of his daughter's difference; the return of the repressed, thoroughly.



Figure 38: Irena sings alone in the garden. Source: *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) Directed by Gunther von Fritsch and Robert Wise, RKO Radio Pictures.

Cursed Inheritance of Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)

The Dark Knight Rises (2012), introduces the cursed inheritance of Selina Kyle/Catwoman (Anne Hathaway), a character who exists in the narrative to primarily contrast and enhance Batman/Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale), who has a hero's journey to fulfill and a villain to defeat in Bane (Tom Hardy). Screenwriter Jonathan Nolan limits Catwoman's characterization as a foil for Batman, backhandedly stating that "she has a delicious greyness to her that helps define who Batman is... that relationship and that character enhances the universe — and the Batman character" (Chitwood). It is then ironic that Selina's primary drive is to wrest her independence from the authorities of Gotham. Her goal is attainment of "the clean slate," a device that is rumored to erase any one person's criminal history and thus grant total autonomy, the acquisition of which requires Selina to cross paths with Batman on numerous occasions. Like Irena in *Curse*, Selina's "creative" power of adaptability affords her a dangerous, incalculable mobility, and her reappearances and close calls throughout the narrative suggest a survival on par with Irena's ghostly immortality. She first intrudes on Bruce's mansion disguised as a servant to acquire the hero's finger prints (which she plans on exchanging for access to the clean slate).



Figure 39: Selina escapes with purloined pearls. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

While there, she also steals Bruce's deceased mother's pearl necklace from an "uncrackable" safe. By wearing the necklace as she makes her exit (Figure 39), she flaunts Bruce's concept of his mother's idealized femininity, which he prefers to be kept contained in a box. By making off with the pearls, she mocks the privilege of Bruce's inherited wealth, and by copying and escaping with his finger prints, she utilizes man's autonomy in service of her own.

Later, at a gala, Selina poses as one of the wealthy elite, sporting the purloined string of pearls as yet another guise. She engages in a tete-a-tete with Bruce and, in a dark moment of slippage, warns him that a "storm is coming," and he and his uppercrust friends had better "batten down the hatches." Her speech is in keeping with the film's caution against anarchy, and the danger that resistance poses to an orderly capitalist system. As Mytyl's brattiness is somehow conflated with the enormous threat of war in *The Blue Bird*, Selina's relatively minor, "selfish" quest for freedom is linked with the total chaos and violence unleashed by Bane's army of thugs. With that in mind, her warning sounds less like disgust with the wealthy and more like female rage against a patriarchal gatekeeper. While similar to Tylette's repulsion at being "dumb slaves to man," Selina's speech is wider in scope, and positions her as the presently caged but cursed inheritance to society; she is a harbinger of the "en masse" revolution that Doyle describes. Bruce shrugs this off and reclaims his mother's pearls, giving Selina the opportunity to swipe yet another object. This scene is immediately followed by Bruce being informed by a valet that his "wife" has just driven off with his Lamborghini. Selina is shown at the wheel, speeding down the city streets and grinning at her own trick (Figure 40). Her effortless ploy for control calls to mind *Bringing Up Baby* and Susan's fun at David's expense as she relinquishes his golf ball only to move on to his car, insisting it is hers to take-- much like his masculinity. Similarly, here Selina has taken Bruce's fingerprints, exchanged a token of femininity (the pearls) for his (phallic) car

key, and has made off with his sports car, the symbol of male freedom and control, with her in the driver's seat. After Selina's exit, her hapless date to the gala despairs to Bruce, "You've scared her off!" But even Bruce knows better, responding "No, not likely."



Figure 40: Selina steals Bruce's car. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

It is implied that the adaptable Selina is a callgirl by day, and she uses her trickery to make the most of her occupation, using her adaptability in exchange for goods and access to information. Like Irena, Selina is also friend to a young social reject, Jen (Juno Temple), who shares Selina's apartment and assists in her mentor's criminality. Her screentime is brief, but Jen's presence hints at Selina's maternal side and her acknowledgement of the plight of fellow othered women. In one scene, Jen performs what is apparently par-for-the-course activity for the duo by waylaying one of Selina's customers and stealing his wallet. When he realizes he's been robbed, he attempts violence against Jen, but is halted by Selina, who twists his arm and sends him away, chiding Jen that she shouldn't try stealing from "the assholes." Jen responds "they're all assholes," but Selina cheers her mentee by revealing that as a result of the scuffle she has procured a Rolex, which she gives to Jen. It's a darkly humorous moment of bonding between the "sisters," akin to Irena's arithmetic lesson; Selina demonstrates to Jen that the nonsensical can make sense through trickery, emphasizing the fruits of being a creative non-victim. In a later

scene, Selina and Jen move into an abandoned mansion, where an excited Jen embraces her mentor and says “this is our home now.” Selina is not as thrilled as her companion, and gazes out a window, contemplating their future (Figure 41). The women are lonely and ghost-like in the misty, grand building, drawing further comparisons to Irena and Amy. Like Irena, Selina exists in the margins of society, and she has taught Jen how to survive there as well, but she worries that Jen may suffer for such a spectral existence; it is a moment of slippage that points to Catwoman’s growing awareness of the plight of her fellow cat women.



Figure 41: Selina and Jen. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

Another interesting moment of slippage occurs after Selina leads Batman into a trap, where he is ambushed by Bane. Selina cries as she watches Bane beat and injure Batman, the intended effect being for viewers to realize Selina’s regretful allegiance to the wrong side, and shame for her betrayal and autonomous desires. Guilty she may feel, but Selina’s tears reveal a woman grieving the constraints that pit her will to survive against her better judgement. She gazes at the unfortunate consequences of her survival, darkness shielding her from man’s gaze-- like the ghost in *Curse of the Cat People*, Selina is trapped in a patriarchal cycle, her pain unwitnessed by men. Watching from behind the bars meant to keep Batman from escape, Selina

peers through the cage, unable to participate (Figure 42), in a fitting illustration that Landay would cite as illuminative of the restrictions placed upon her gender. With her theft of Bruce's car, she celebrates her adaptability, here she grieves its necessity.



Figure 42: Catwoman behind bars. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

Selina/Catwoman's habit of appearing and disappearing according to whim mirrors Batman's own demonstration of power and control, a problem that is not lost on Batman himself, who acknowledges Catwoman's threat and often tries to repress her abilities. After teaming up against their foes, he forbids her from using firearms or deadly force. In a moment of levity parodying Batman's signature move of disappearing on law enforcement, Selina vanishes from Batman's side as the hero is mid-thought, causing Batman to grumble "So that's what that feels like." Catwoman's final return to Batman is not an unwelcome one, but while the narrative attempts to rein her in, even her heroic behavior is disruptive of the law and Batman's code. While a weakened Batman scuffles with Bane in their final showdown, Selina again utilizes another of Wayne's vehicles to crash through a wall and shoots the villain (Figure 43), going against Batman's anti-gun, anti-murder code. Her use of forbidden (and phallic) tools undermines Batman's victory, while her actions also deny Bane a proper martyr's death at the

hand of his nemesis, or even a final speech. He is instead interrupted mid-sentence, and Catwoman's burst into frame is followed by Bane's ejection from it-- his demise is confirmed, but his hulking body, his primary tool of intimidation for all of Gotham including Selina, vanishes without commemoration. Selina's follow-up quip, "The whole no-guns thing? I don't feel as strongly about it as you do," undercuts the reverence of the moment for both hero and villain. Not unlike her 1960's predecessors, who overtook Batman's traditional show stinger "Same Bat Time..." with their own "Same Cat Time, Same Cat Channel," she has, if only momentarily, overtaken the very structure of Batman's story through sheer force of will.



Figure 43: Catwoman disrupts the scene. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

However, *The Dark Knight Rises* is in many ways a conservative male fantasy. Upon its release, the film's valorization of its repressive culture did not go unnoticed; critic Catherine Shoard writes that *Rises* "is a quite audaciously capitalist vision, radically conservative... [it] advances a serious, stirring proposal that the wish-fulfilment of the wealthy is to be championed if they say they want to do good." Such wish-fulfillment is exhibited when the film disregards Selina's modus operandi and attaches her permanently to Bruce, who fakes his own death and retires to a carefree life of anonymity in Italy. In the film's final shot, Selina wears the pearls, the

symbol of idealized femininity which she co-opted at the start of the film, and doesn't speak (Figure 44). The film's conclusion is a specific manifestation of a patriarchal dream, expressed early on by Bruce's father figure, Alfred (Michael Caine), who tells Bruce that when he once holidayed at a cafe in Florence he had "a fantasy" about the future. He says: "I liked to imagine that one day I'd look across the tables, and see you. Sitting there with your wife. Perhaps some kids...we'd both know that you were happy." In the final scene, this idealized scenario is tidily reproduced, again reminiscent of Segal's view of the confessional male hero's absolution. Though Selina is not murdered, the femme fatale's thirst for independence is ostensibly brought to an end in the form of containment. Despite her drive for independence, or perhaps because of it, here she is reduced to an accessory to complete an old man's dream for his surrogate son. However, this "perfection" belies the impossibility for such a continuance of repression.



Figure 44: Selina with Bruce in Alfred's fantasy. Source: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers.

Annette Schimmelfennig contends, "Bruce can control [Selina]" and uses her to "affirm the heterosexual bond and therefore his masculinity," however, Schimmelfennig also writes that Selina is "always in control of the situation because she knows how she is expected to act. Selina has adapted to the city and the gender roles it accepts" (16, 15). Like any idealized ending for the

cat woman that ignores her true character, the *Dark Knight Rises*' finale rings false-- just as in the conflicted conclusion of *Bell Book and Candle*, *Cat People*, or even *The Blue Bird*, the repressed female monster lurks beneath the placidity of the falsely restored order. As Selina has demonstrated, she is adaptable, and the pearls that here claim her as Bruce's property have been stolen by her and utilized in her past efforts to masquerade as high society. If Selina is caged by male fantasy in the film's underwhelming final scene, it is a performance of a creative non-victim, not a surrender to patriarchy. By playing her part in this male fantasy and pairing up with Bruce, she acquires the "clean slate" she has been hunting for, but as she warns Bruce during the masquerade, "I'm adaptable." Bruce is Selina's ticket out of poverty and he can grant her, due to his wealth and status, a new identity. Once again, "female trickery calls attention to the tensions between women's ambition and the limitations of femininity" (Landay 30).

However, even in the film's intended, fantastical interpretation, another means for Catwoman's return is implied. A preoccupation of *The Dark Knight Rises* is the concept of inheritance. In a pivotal moment, the villain from the first installment of the Dark Knight franchise, Ra's Al Ghul (Liam Neeson), materializes as a visiting apparition to Bruce, and informs him that Bane is his offspring and the bearer of Ghul's legacy, reminding Bruce: "there are many ways to achieve immortality." Bruce worries over protecting the legacy of his parents; noble rookie cop "Robin" John Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) idealizes Bruce as a surrogate father figure, and Bruce bequeathes him the Bat Cave after Batman's disappearance. Similarly, Selina's abdication from Gotham is not a clean break, as she also leaves behind a young sidekick, Jen. Jen's fate is not depicted in the film, but it is likely that she remains to haunt the house and the city that she had claimed for herself and Selina. Jen closely resembles Holly Robinson, a queer character from the Catwoman comic books, who serves as sidekick through

several iterations of the series. When Selina retires in *Catwoman #53*, Holly dons the cat suit and becomes the new Catwoman. As her role is curiously clipped in the grand scheme of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Jen's presence is glaringly inexplicable-- unless she is Catwoman's personal means of immortality, like Irena's spiritual daughter Amy in *Curse of the Cat People*, an agent of the cat woman's will.

Often punished by narrative or character for her autonomy, manifested as ambiguous morality or adaptability, Catwoman's resurrection/return from death and repression represents her will to survive. Her return is, as in the *bakeneko*, a source of greater fear to men who fear her revenge. Not unlike her trickiness and adaptability in life, her explosive resurrection comes in many forms, but all with the same will to survive-- she is a creative non-victim. This simple goal takes root for viewers who are othered, and may even provide a point of sympathy for those who are not, creating a cycle that repeats the cat woman's own punishment and return-- but it is also sympathy that threatens to break the cycle.

Catwoman is the explicit and thus most useful version of her archetype, and her popularity further exemplifies this threat in her consistent, yet adaptable narratives as well as her moments of slippage, which reveal the goddess along with the struggles of the average woman. Actress Anne Hathaway remarks that as a child she was asked if she wanted to be a princess, but "the truth was, no I wanted to be Catwoman. And I think a lot of women feel that way... I loved Catwoman's sense of humor. I love how sly she is... She's totally independent. And let's face it, she's badass" (Weintraub). Michelle Pfeiffer also expresses a longtime admiration for the character that began in childhood: "She's good, bad, evil, dangerous, vulnerable and sexual. She is allowed to be all of those things, and we are allowed to care about her" (Corliss 79). Halle Berry is quoted as expressing pride in playing Catwoman as well, saying the role for her "is

about helping women come into their own and feel their sense of power, their own sexuality... for their betterment” (Lipiner 29). The late Eartha Kitt often spoke of Catwoman as “autobiographical,” while Julie Newmar, the first to don the cat suit, claims that she is often approached by women who praise Catwoman for her intelligence as well as beauty (*All Things Considered*). Author Suzanne Colon claims that, even in her early incarnations, Catwoman represented “Not only empowerment; a proto-feminism that was very sexy and pretty and female, and yet very take-charge... Women have a such a visceral reaction to Catwoman because... she's her own woman... She doesn't like the goody-two-shoes side of women we are taught to be.” (*All Things Considered*) Feminist pioneer Gloria Steinem has even chimed in on Catwoman, writing “among other things, Catwoman [has] a story line and transformation of her own—plus class consciousness, a girl buddy, equal skills with the Batman equipment, and an apartment of her own...” (Lipiner 29). The feminist reclaiming of Catwoman from her male authors by women suggests the sisterhood of “cursed inheritance” that Catwoman’s cinematic self-reflexive evolution implies-- perhaps even a sign that the “en masse” rebellion of women “refusing to cede their autonomy” that Doyle describes is not a mere fantasy after all.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The cat woman archetype resurfaces throughout mainstream media due to, as Terrie Waddell argues, her usefulness as a signifier of female treacherousness. She embodies this treachery in her feline attributes, as well as her sense of play and laughter at man's expense, her transformation and transgressive sexuality, and ultimately her fight for autonomy as demonstrated in her harrowing return, all of which I have argued for in this thesis. But her power extends beyond mere narrative, as her tendency to reappear in media proves. Conceived as evil creatures to warn against dangerous women, the witch and the cat woman work as convenient scapegoats for male hysteria, but it is that same hysteria that ensures the constancy of such figures. Just as Max Schreck and even Batman vilify Catwoman and push her from rooftops for her crimes of autonomy, a patriarchal male system and its authors try to punish woman. Just as Catwoman returns for revenge on Gotham, the cat woman archetype magnifies the constancy of her threat to patriarchal culture by revealing its weakness. Patriarchal society's obsession with the cat woman's threat of autonomy essentially creates the threat, male creators and media makers are motivated to make their fears manifest, and so the monstrous cat woman appears. Men are haunted in cat woman's narratives by her willfulness, just as cinema itself is haunted by her many resurrections.

Outside of her individual narratives is the archetype's pervasiveness itself-- as I have demonstrated, she has reappeared over decades in a variety of genres, and always as a reflection of cultural unease. Like the witch figure in history and folklore, her return is determined by a demand for transgressive female characters to alleviate social tensions by personifying patriarchal fears, the threat to society is primarily signified via her cat-like abilities. In an attempt

to emphasize the necessity for her extermination, the patriarchal storyteller imbues the subversive woman with dark, mystical powers which ironically increase her potency, and so it is with the cat woman's cinematic cycle of resurrection. So long as the inherently imbalanced patriarchy exists, the cat woman comes back, exposing the fragility of male ego that inspired her with each reappearance.

Lori Landay writes that Catwoman is "the bad cat who lurks in the background of the screwball world of *Bringing Up Baby*, what is threatening but contained in the madcap Susan is out of the cage and on the loose..." (215). Indeed, Catwoman is the manifestation of her intertextual cat women, and she provides a potent microcosm of the subversive archetype. While Wonder Woman was intended to represent "the growth in the power of women" (Lang 78), Catwoman's status as a female trickster and feminist icon has been negotiated and inadvertent. She was conceived as a romantic interest for Batman, as well as a villain meant to display female detachment and criminal erraticism: the "habit" women have of stealing "souls" (Bob Kane qtd. Hanley 10). Yet, several decades later, Gloria Steinem refers to Catwoman as a "feminist superhero" (Lipiner 29). As with the witch and the femme fatale, a threatened patriarchy has indeed created a monster, and Catwoman has been embraced and repurposed.

It is "average women" who can see beyond the villainess that Catwoman is meant to be by "looking to the background," as Caputi suggests, to the complexity that has generated her image. Viewers can find points of identification with Catwoman on the basis of her otherness, identifying with her in her moments of slippage in which she expresses rage, mockery, or a thorough embrace of her sexuality. It is not surprising that actresses who have played Catwoman express a delight in their portrayal, or that many describe her as a survivor. Again, Landay argues "by articulating the possibilities of becoming creative nonvictims, female tricksters,

whether madcap, screwball, con woman, or catwoman-- perform a part of the cultural work of transforming the feminine into the human” (218). Catwoman marks the many ways in which women must manipulate a system that is imbalanced against them in order to survive, and represents the power, intellect, and strength inherent to those who do.

There are many more branches of study to be performed on this important, resilient character. With the intention of retaining a singular focus on the intertextuality of the cat woman archetype and Catwoman herself as a feminist study, this thesis has been restricted from analysis of other aspects. For example, as the cat woman archetype is frequently portrayed as other in terms of her “exoticness” and Catwoman has been depicted by several actresses of color, there is much to research in terms of ethnicity and race studies. Catwoman is also inarguably a queer figure who often engages in camp, and her predecessors, such as Irena in *Cat People*, have been read by many scholars as lesbian. Future studies in these fields as they pertain to Catwoman, as well as further analysis of the character and her archetype’s feminist representations in other narratives, should be pursued.

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