



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Of Rats and Men

***How Willard Exemplifies the Fallacy in Polarized
Understandings of the Categories of Man and Animal***

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í kvikmyndafræði

Salvör Bergmann

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Extract

This essay provides an in-depth analysis of Glen Morgan's 2003 film *Willard* in relation to an exploration of the issue of polarities, in particular those that separate man and animal. To analyse how the film not only displays said polarities, but subsequently showcases them as residing in fallacy, the categories of man and animal must at first be somewhat adhered to, where the human and animal characters of the film are recognized as originally residing in their separate spheres. It is then scrutinized how those characters exit these spheres, as well as how the spheres themselves seem to hybridize and intermingle. The essay consists of five segments; a foreword, three theoretical and analytical chapters, and a conclusion.

The first chapter, "Man becomes Animal", introduces Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's hypothesis of "becoming-animal" as a recurring focal point of reference throughout the analysis. It also explores film critic Robin Wood's basic formula of horror in relation to the effect of a man and an animal being doubles. In addition of making use of animal studies alongside general film studies, the essay also utilizes studies of humanistic geography, as the chapter also includes Chris Wilbert's workings with philosopher Karen Barad's term "intra-action". The second chapter, "Animal Becomes Man", explores animal agency in film, making use of Jonathan Burt's book *Animals in Film*. The issue of anthropomorphism is visited, which appropriates Sandra D. Mitchell's essay on the matter. The nature of pet-keeping is also looked at, making use of humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's book on the subject. The third and final chapter, "Of Rats and Men", with great help of Jonathan Burt's book *Rat*, looks more generally to the representation of the film's species, their superfluous relationship, and the matter of their separate spheres, concluding what it is that divides, and subsequently joins, rats and men.

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1. Foreword

This essay will explore the various ways in which the film *Willard* (2003, Glen Morgan) highlights the falsehood in humanity's perception of polarities, in particular those that separate man and animal. This is principally achieved through analysing how the characters of *Willard*, human and non-human alike, gradually and consistently exit their original sphere of existence, and subsequently how those very spheres turn out to be of a hybrid nature. The essay will focus primarily on the 2003 film, but recognizes it as a remake of the original 1971 *Willard* (Daniel Mann) which it will reference at various points throughout the analysis.

The plot of the film revolves around a lonely and socially awkward young man, Willard Stiles (portrayed by actor Crispin Glover), who resides with his sick and elderly mother of whom he takes care. Willard is down on his luck in every conceivable way, as he slaves for the company his deceased father built alongside Frank Martin, Willard's tyrannical and bullying boss. When Willard finds his basement inhabited by rats, he rescues Socrates the white rat, whom he befriends and keeps as a pet. Through their relationship Willard manages to train the other rats of the basement to help him exact revenge upon his boss. One of the rats, Ben, separates himself from the group, for he is not only unusually large but of exceptional intelligence and fierce independence. After the death of Willard's mother, Willard brings Socrates and Ben with him to his office where Socrates is discovered and subsequently killed by Frank. Willard and Ben avenge the white martyr by joining forces in destroying Frank, after which Willard tries to dispose of Ben and the other rats, deeming them to be too many and out of control. They however return to the house and a final battle occurs, where Willard eventually defeats Ben, but is subsequently apprehended by human authorities and confined to a mental institution.

To explore the issue of polarities and how it is portrayed throughout the film, the essay looks to animal-human relations, animal agency in film, the anthropomorphism it might hold, the nature of pet-keeping, the nature of looking, and the cultural history of the rat-human affair. The tumultuous and complex relationship that develops between Willard and Ben is one of boundless exemplar to the topic, where boundaries are bridged and supposed realities are shattered. The two characters reflect the broader division of their species, where what divides them is explored, and wherein the fallacy of that division lies.

2. Man becomes Animal

This chapter will explore how Willard Stiles, the main human character of the film, partakes in a journey of surpassing his humanity and (re)entering the animal kingdom. The focal point of this analysis is the concept of “becoming”, which, according to the theorists who hypothesized it, explains how polarities are deemed false when their opposing forces enter into each other’s realm, or “become” one another. The point being that those opposing forces are simply two sides of the same coin, as opposed to actually belonging to clashing realities. I will argue for how, in the film, this superfluity is reached primarily through the complex and superabundant relationship of Willard and Ben, and additionally through the representation of other animal characters within the film.

2.1 The Concept of Becoming and the Function of Doubles

In many ways Willard and Ben become one another as characters and as entities, not only throughout the film’s duration, but also in the relationship of differences existing between the 1971 original and the 2003 remake. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were French intellectuals and theorists who, in their 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus*, wrote an influential text in animal studies on their hypothesis of “becoming-animal”. In editors Kalof and Fitzgerald’s prologue of said text in their anthology *The Animals Reader*, they illustrate how the two French theorists “develop the concept „becoming-animal” to capture the notion of human-animal relationships based in affinity rather than identity or imitation – with a heavy emphasis on difference.”¹ Since the topic of this essay is the importance of said affinity, manifested in *Willard* through the general bridging of the divide between man and animal, it is essential to visit Deleuze and Guattari’s radical and somewhat-perplexing version of the concept of becoming. The term, first discussed by Deleuze in an earlier work on Nietzsche, refers “to an ever expanding set of differences that are always in transition and in continuous creation.”² Becoming is then a term of opposition to the hierarchical status-quo, one which does not

¹ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, “Becoming-Animal” in Linda Kalof & Amy Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings* (New York: Berg, 2007), p. 37

² Kalof & Fitzgerald, p. 37

presuppose an oppositionary understanding of the disjunction between polarities, such as those of man and animal. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not “really” become an animal any more than the animal “really” becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself.³

Becoming, as a term, is therefore a paradoxical oxymoron, the point being that people already are animals and animals are already people. Let us explore how Willard, as a character, engages in a journey of becoming along with his becoming-animal, Ben the rat. In comparison, Kalof and Fitzgerald note how “one enters into becoming alliances with anomalous beings, such as Captain Ahab who entered into a “monstrous alliance” with Moby Dick, his becoming-whale.”⁴ Together, Willard and Ben truly enter into a monstrous alliance when they join forces to murder their mutual enemy. I name that sequence Willard’s “night of true becoming”, but before that sequence is to be analysed, let us first visit the various ways in which *Willard* exemplifies the concept of becoming.

In their chapter “Memories of a Moviegoer” Deleuze and Guattari recap, if somewhat crookedly, the story of the original film as they remember it, accounting for how Willard’s destiny, although he tries to escape it, is in his becoming-rat.⁵ I dare suggest that had Deleuze and Guattari been alive at the time of the remake’s release, they would have found the 2003 film to be a veracious pillar in becoming-stories, for I believe it in many ways to surpass the original in this regard. The final scene of the 2003 film is particularly enlightening in regards to its exhibition of the true meaning of becoming. The remake, in its alternative ending to the original, sees Willard confined to a mental institution after his final battle with Ben. There, an employee of the institution comes to Willard’s cell carrying a tray of food. Willard having already participated in a journey of becoming-rat is suggested in the dialogue, for the employee says to him “Food’s here, food!” in much the same fashion as Willard had on several occasions addressed the rats earlier in the film. After this line is spoken, the audience sees the employee and he is a man that visually resembles a rat if there ever was one (image #1). In an attempt to get Willard to eat he holds up a piece of cheese and, asking if that isn’t

³ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 38

⁴ Kalof & Fitzgerald, p. 37

⁵ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 38

what the mice eat,⁶ draws in his upper lip (revealing his larger-than-average front teeth), turns up his nose and audibly smacks his lips. He imitates a mouse/rat and thus marks his visual resemblance to the animal as final (image #2). Deleuze and Guattari continue: “We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes.”⁷ The employee is an imitation, which in turn exemplifies Willard’s journey of actual becoming even more greatly: “A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification.”⁸ The employee is of a (supposedly) fixed human status, which is why he identifies the patient as rodent-like and imitates said rodent in an attempt to connect with him. But Willard does not imitate rats and neither does he identify as a rat. He does not resemble them either, which is why it is enlightening to mention how some of the filmmakers supposedly suggested using make-up to fashion Crispin Glover as rat-like by accenting certain features of his face. This suggestion was however left at the drawing board and never made it into the final film.⁹ This is important regarding the point of imitation not equalling true becoming and the film returns to this point time and again. “Alright, Rat-Boy”, says the employee to the patient as he leaves his cell, referencing human-animal hybrids of horror such as the Wolf-Man, hybrids that are based on the very idea that humans and animals are based in oppositional realities, and that when those realities cross the result is unnatural and grotesque. The film’s constant refusal to let Willard enter that sphere, whilst at the same time recognizing and referencing it, only serves to further distinguish his true becoming.

Not only does the remake include such examples of becoming in its original content, but also in its conscious relationship of differences to the original. The most obvious indicator of that relationship are the paintings and pictures of Willard’s father around the house, since they are all of actor Bruce Davison who portrayed the original Willard Stiles. The 1971 film concludes with a battle between human and rat in the attic of Willard’s house, after Willard attempts to give Ben food laced with pesticide. The other rats come flocking up the stairs and chew up the door Willard had locked in fear

⁶ Willard’s story is obviously known to the employees of the mental institution, but in a classic speciesist manner this employee fails to make the distinction between rats and mice.

⁷ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 38

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *Willard* Trivia, *The Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310357/trivia?ref=tt_trv_trv accessed 16. March 2014

of them. As Willard tries to escape through the small attic window, several rats jump on him and bite his face and neck, whilst Ben looks commandingly on. Willard eventually tumbles backwards and is instantly covered by rats gnawing through his flesh, meeting his end. The last shot of the film is a close-up of Ben, as he now commands the narrative as the victorious one of the pair. The sequel's climax begins in much the same way, where Willard attempts to destroy Ben with a mouse-trap hidden in a bag of food. Ben loses a paw but otherwise emerges. Willard had at this point barricaded the house to keep the rats from returning, but that entails that he has now locked himself in it. As he flees upstairs he is swarmed by rats from all sides, now aggressive to him, and ends up climbing a spiral staircase, aiming for the top window as a possible escape route. Ben is waiting at the top where he attacks Willard's face, so he falls backwards into the sea of rats below, in a clear and visual echo of the death of Scully the cat earlier in the film (images #3-4).¹⁰ There is a cut to the exterior of the house, where Ben's shadow is seen limping in the window, licking his wounds, seemingly victorious. This is where the sequel however presents its twist, as Willard emerges with his father's pocket knife and stabs Ben repeatedly, finally destroying his enemy.

Seeing as *Willard* is, at least in terms of its representation, a film belonging to the horror genre, one need not look further than to film critic Robin Wood's basic formula of horror to demonstrate why either Willard or Ben had to die by the other's hand (or paw). The formula Wood offers is simple: normality is threatened by the figure of the Monster.¹¹ The three variables of this formula are "normality, the Monster, and, crucially, the relationship between the two."¹² Wood argues that the third variable, the relationship between the two, constitutes the essential subject of the horror film and that this relationship has "one privileged form: the figure of the doppelgänger, alter ego, or double".¹³ Willard and Ben are without question doubles, not only in the sense of them constituting the protagonist and antagonist of a horror film, but also in relation to their aforementioned becoming-relationship. This is perhaps never as luminous as when one looks at the film's final battle. Wood explains how "the hero's drive is to destroy the doppelgänger who embodies his repressed self."¹⁴ The fact that the deaths of these

¹⁰ The death of Scully and its surrounding sequence will be thoroughly analysed in the next chapter, "Animal becomes Man".

¹¹ Robin Wood, *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 78

¹² *ibid.*, p. 79

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 82

doubles can so easily be switched in the film's remake only goes to show how immensely interlinked these two characters really are. Even if one renounces the original film in analysing the ending, an argument for the pair's interchangeability still remains. In Oscar Wilde's famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the titular character ends his life by stabbing the image of himself in the heart.¹⁵ Ben, to Willard, is like the picture to Dorian Gray, a mirror that represents Willard's own darkness. In the words of Wood: "The doppelgänger motif reveals the Monster as normality's shadow."¹⁶ When Willard stabs Ben it is in clear and metaphorical correspondence to Dorian stabbing his picture, so even when Willard survives he perishes, for he has destroyed himself through destroying his double. I draw that conclusion because of the nature of the film's ending. Willard fails in all his goals; he does not keep his house, he does not get the girl and he does not possess his freedom. The particular knife used for the deed is as well an indicator of this through it being a repeated motif. It is the same knife used by Willard earlier in the film whilst contemplating suicide and the very one Willard's father had used years before to take his own life. Bearing in mind that Bruce Davison, the original Willard, portrays Willard's father, yet another layer is added to Willard destroying himself, his own Dorian Gray portrait, by using this particular knife on Ben.

After the rat's death, Willard is confined to the mental institution and, as has already been noted, he is not eating. Willard is not only castrated by his confinement, he is also immobile. After destroying Ben, Willard is not free, and neither is he vigorous. He is the shadow of himself, for he has lost a piece of himself. As a film that deals with a riddance of polarities, its message is the merits of affinity, and in comparison the error of its opposite. Although Willard at a certain point bids farewell to false distinctions, in abandoning his becoming and destroying his becoming-animal he forgoes any reward it could have borne. For the 2003 film, Crispin Glover recorded a cover of Michael Jackson's song "Ben", written by Don Black for the original character of Ben the rat.¹⁷ The original song is humorously played over the scene in which Ben and the other rats kill and eat Scully the cat, whilst the credits make use of the cover version by Glover. Let us not dismiss the use of the song as merely a playful or whimsical flair, for it highlights the importance of Willard's interlinking with Ben. As soon as Willard's face

¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Great Britain, Wordsworth Classics, 1992)

¹⁶ Wood, p. 80

¹⁷ Referring to the 1972 film *Ben* (Phil Karlson), the official sequel to the 1971 *Willard*.

disappears from the screen in the final fade to black, the credits roll and the first word that is heard is “Ben”, sung with Glover’s/Willard’s voice. As the lyrics continue, they serve as a reminder of the message of this superabundant relationship: “I used to say / I and me / Now it’s us / Now it’s we”. A song about friendship¹⁸ suddenly becomes something of an anthem of a man and his becoming-animal. But when are they finally, if only briefly, joined in their block of becoming?

2.2 The Night of True Becoming

Before the night of true becoming is to be visited, I would like to further establish Willard’s relationship to the other rats in the film. In his essay on animal killings, tourism geographer Chris Wilbert puts to use philosopher Karen Barad’s term “intra-action”, a term which differentiates from “interaction”, which suggests polarity to be the presupposed:

Rather than seeing that two categories of things such as nature and culture *become* mixed in particular scenarios, it is argued here that, actually, things are always mixed (are always intra-acting) and that the categories of nature and culture are outcomes and purifications of processes of ordering.¹⁹

Despite Wilbert’s usage of the phrase “to become” being used to display the false polarity of divided entities, it does not necessarily separate Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-term from Barad’s intra-action term. Rather, they can be seen as two different terminologies for a very similar idea, the idea that we in general, or in this essay Willard in particular, do not *really* become animals at any point because we already are. But it is evidently so that humans think of themselves as not truly being animals, which is why we interact with them, master them, and imitate them, as opposed to admitting that we in fact are them. Because the terminology of *interacting* has already been introduced, if even so only as the opposition to *intra-acting*, I would like to visit and analyse some of

¹⁸ The plot of *Ben* revolves around Ben befriending a young boy, now that Willard is dead. Interestingly, the tag-line of the film reads “Where Willard ended, Ben begins” which on one level represents simply a transition from an original to a sequel, but on another level it can be read post-analytically as a nod to Willard and Ben’s becoming-relationship, in much the same way as does analysing the song.

¹⁹ Chris Wilbert, “What Is Doing the Killing? Animal Attacks, Man-Eaters, and Shifting Boundaries and Flows of Human-Animal Relations” in *Killing Animals / The Animal Studies Group* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 32

Willard's key interactions with the rats throughout the film, precisely to then demonstrate how he will finally intra-act with them on his night of true becoming.

"Go on, crawl out of here" says Frank Martin to Willard Stiles in the 1971 original. This comment is a true indicator of what is about to come; the event that could be called Willard's final meltdown, his cracking out of his stifling conformity, his riddance of societal boundaries, his *night of true becoming*, as the sequence of murder of another human being is set in place. I shall focus primarily on the remake concerning this sequence, but this comment by Frank is suggestive of Willard becoming animal-like, and is therefore an excellent starting point for that particular character journey. The night of the murder is when Willard, in a sense, finally and completely lets go of being human. I use "human" in this specific context somewhat figuratively, meaning that Willard has lived his life as a human according to all of the usual ideological and social boundaries of that role. Up to this point, Ben had functioned as Willard's mirror, representing his lack but also his potential. Willard had resisted facing this mirror and recognizing its image as his own, for that would entail him admitting to the fact that he and Ben were not really a man and an animal, but two animals/individuals/entities of equal calibre. Such revelations do indeed come forth in the process of becoming. If a becoming produces nothing other than itself, the night of becoming enables Willard to, momentarily, become capable of recognizing Ben as his mirror image and his double, but more importantly his equal. Willard is finally capable of this because of his and Ben's equal cause to avenge Socrates. In the storage room where Socrates was murdered, Willard contemplates his options out loud: "What *could* I do" he repeats several times, then changes the question to "What *can* I do", before finally looking at Ben and changing the question to "What can *we* do". This dialogue, along with the aforementioned comment by Frank in the 1971 film,²⁰ serves as an omen of what will follow: a joining of rats and men.

Willard takes the rats out of his house on two occasions: first to tear Frank Martin's tires and then to have him killed. Each revenge can be said to be of equal

²⁰ In the 1971 film, this line of dialogue is spoken before another sort of a night of becoming. There, Willard exacts his original, petty revenge on Frank Martin by infiltrating his anniversary garden party with the rats, as opposed to using the rats to tear his tires like in the 2003 film. At the garden party, its human guests all scream and howl in horror at the sight of the rats. In the following scene, when Willard returns to his house, his relative looks at him in horror in much the same fashion. It is shortly revealed that the look was due to Willard's mother having just passed, but the parallel nature of these reactions suggest that Willard has, at least momentarily, participated in becoming-rat as Deleuze and Guattari suggested his destiny to be.

calibre to its grievance, as Frank Martin's first crime against Willard was to humiliate him in front of his co-workers by locking him in the office building's elevator, and his second crime was to kill Socrates in the office storage room. When Willard takes the rats out for the tire-tearing, he is a general commanding his soldiers and a trainer making use of his trained. He is shown training them particularly for the cause and on the night of the deed he uses strict and clear verbal commands such as "in", "out" and "tear it". He also carries the rats in two black suitcases, which allows them to be separate from his person until he releases them to deliver the damage. As Willard is walking the street up to his boss's house, a police car slows down next to him, observing the suspicious man who is nervously walking the street and shakily clutching his suitcases. As the tires loudly burst, Frank awakes and storms down into the garage, making Willard frantically gather the rats and making a narrow escape through the backyard. This is all an indicator of Willard interacting with the rats as opposed to interacting with them, which is why the mission subsequently played out in such an undexterous manner. The nature of this sequence can thus be seen as demonstrating how interacting with animals, mastering them, or using them, does not produce a fluent affinity or a prosperous becoming-relationship.

The sequence of the tire-tearing is in sharp contrast to the night of true becoming. It should first of all be noted that the cause for the act was not based on Willard's personal (and therefore anthropocentric) pride, a crime against his person so to say, but on the vengeance of a non-human animal. An eye for an eye as they say, except here the eyes of rats and men have been granted the same status of consequence. Willard places Socrates's dead body in his father's cinerary urn, which perfectly marks the beginning of a sequence of becoming where the bodies of rats and men merge. Willard is twice heard whisper his previous command "in" whilst gathering the rats in several suitcases, but gone is the harsh, commanding tone. After these two brief commands, no more are heard throughout the sequence. After a van is fully loaded with rats, Willard instead has a word with the rest of them as a group, speaking for himself and Ben, not commanding anyone but explaining how he and Ben will now partake in this mission and then be back later. Willard then looks at Ben and asks him for a confirmation of this act, and Ben answers silently through returning Willard's gaze in a matching eye-line shot. What follows is a parallel-editing sequence in which Frank Martin is shown working late in his office as Willard and the rats make their way through the floors of the office building. Gone is the nervousness, gone are the

commands and gone are the suitcases. Willard finally emerges out of the very same elevator Frank locked him in, but as its doors slide open the audience does not see the man, but a sea of rats. As the rats leave the elevator, the man is revealed among them, perfectly calm and motionless as they crawl off his body. (images #5-7) In this powerful and visual “money-shot”, Willard is now finally and indisputably one with the rats. As they enter Frank’s office, he exclaims to himself “Jesus, look at all the rats”, to which Willard responds “Yes, look at the rats”, simultaneously notifying Frank of his presence in the centre of this swarm, bidding his boss to look at *him*. (image #8) When Willard tells his victim that these rats will do anything he tells them, it is merely a frightening tactic, for he does not have to tell them to do anything as they simply do it.²¹ This is not a case of a human master commanding his non-human commodities, but a case of animals, of people, working as one. The speech that Willard then delivers to his boss showcases the merit of his becoming-rat, as he explains to him: “You’ve made me hate myself. I thought a lot about it, hating myself, or, right now, at this moment... I *like* myself.” Willard allows himself a moment of true becoming, and for that he is rewarded with a moment of non-existence as a human, exemplified in a moment of powerful self-worth as opposed to crippling self-hate.

As Frank runs down the hall and into the elevator, Willard locks it and delivers several blows with the very same metal rod that had been used to kill Socrates, as Ben and the rest of the rats bite and gnaw the man’s flesh. However, a turning point occurs as Willard abandons his becoming as suddenly as he entered it. With Frank, Ben and the other rats locked in the elevator with Willard located outside of it, he sends it down whilst he himself remains, and his intentions are made clear when he bids Ben goodbye. The consequences of Willard having abandoned, not only his own becoming but his becoming-animal, have already been visited. Willard and Ben are now doubles of which one must destroy the other. In betraying found affinity, Willard brings doom upon himself, for now it is he who must have revenge exacted upon him. Indeed, in coherence with the film’s mirroring of animals and men, the very same revenge. Just as Frank had locked Willard in an elevator in front of his co-workers and left him, now Willard has locked Ben in the very same elevator. Just as Willard then destroyed Frank’s tires, Ben marks his return by having destroyed the tires on Cathryn’s car as she and Willard make an attempt at leaving the soon-to-be rat-infested house. And finally Ben attempts to

²¹ This is not as prominent in the original, as Willard snaps his fingers as a commanding tactic to make the rats enter Frank Martin’s office.

destroy Willard himself after Willard makes an attempt on Ben's life. Not only do we see Willard merge with the animal bodies of Scully and Ben, but also Ben merge with the figure of Willard through mirroring his actions. Not only is *Willard* a film in which men merge with animals through a block of becoming, moreover is it a film in which animals merge with people, not only through mirroring their actions, but by being granted a status usually reserved for human characters of film.

3. Animal becomes Man

At no point does *Willard* provide its animal characters the linguistic competence of humans, instead it makes use of cinematic techniques to convey their supposed desires and motives to the audience. This chapter will look at how the animals of *Willard* obtain what we could call a human status through filmic representation and character agency. When I speak of a human status I am referring to, for instance, how human characters in film are allowed desires and emotions without any dispute. The animal of most relevance to this argument is without a doubt Ben, which is why this chapter will also include an in-depth study of his character, all in relevance to his exceptionally imperative agency. The possibility of anthropomorphism will be visited in relation to both its problematic and enlightening connotations, as well as the importance of an animal being a pet or not. By allowing the animals of *Willard* to surpass their status as animals, the film yet again displays how the polarized understanding of what it means to be a human or non-human animal is ultimately misguided.

3.1 The Issue of Anthropomorphism and Aspects of Agency

Ben is without question a layered character, bearing his own desires and motives. He not only shows intelligence, resourcefulness and adaptability, but also seems to harbour jealousy, desires, vengefulness and resentment. Exact examples of these sensibilities will be visited shortly, but let us first examine the problem of anthropomorphism that they might hold. “The move to attributing explanatory mental states to non-human animals has been controversial since its beginnings,”²² writes philosopher Sandra D. Mitchell in her essay “Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling”. When Ben gnaws to pieces the cane that Willard had attempted to strike him with, is he not being made out to be spiteful? When a close-up of Ben coiled up in a corner is shown after Willard forbids him from spending the night in Willard’s room, is it not being made clear that he is jealous? When Ben returns to the house in the film’s finale after being left in the elevator, is he not on a mission of revenge? And so on. When the film grants Ben these emotions, or at least the distinct appearance of them, one could simply dismiss them as serving the purpose of the story. But do they make Ben any less of a

²² Sandra D. Mitchell, „Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling“, in Lorraine Daston & Gregg Mitman (eds.), *Thinking with Animals* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 100

rat? To paraphrase that question: do those emotions and desires fall into the realm of anthropomorphism, and does that diminish Ben representing a non-human animal who is equal to humans in status? Mitchell continues: “But anthropomorphism is neither *prima facie* bad or necessarily non-scientific. It can be both, but it need not be either.”²³ My argument is that even though the various mental states attributed to Ben might be considered overly human, it does not diminish Ben’s role as a non-human animal and neither does it overly-anthropomorphize him as a character. What it does, however, is provide him with an agency and a prestige usually reserved for the human. In introducing (and subsequently debunking) one of the logical objections to anthropomorphism, Mitchell writes:

Anthropomorphism is defined as the *overestimation* of the similarity of humans and nonhumans and hence by definition could not yield accurate accounts. But this is humpty-dumptyism. “When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”²⁴

Mitchell continues by saying that if anthropomorphism is so defined, “then we merely shift the question to be, *When* is it anthropomorphism, and *when* is it possibly a legitimate similarity?”²⁵ This essay is not a platform for arguing if a rat could ever be scientifically proven to harbour spitefulness, jealousy, or desire for revenge. The argument is that, cinematically, those specifics do not accountably matter. Is it perhaps necessary to attribute human feelings to non-human animals in film if one is to provide them with agency and/or inspire audience sympathy? I would argue that it does not, but neither is it something that has to be avoided. Mitchell mentions how anthropomorphism might be considered “*necessary* or *unavoidable*, since there is no amorphism or neutral language with which to describe behaviour.”²⁶ However, Mitchell continues, one of the mistakes of this position is “to confuse anthropocentrism with anthropomorphism. It is true that the descriptions we apply to anything are created *by* us, but they need not be *of* us. That is, we are the source of the terms and predicates, but they need not be terms and predicates that apply principally to our behaviours.”²⁷ It is perhaps the case then, that since film is made by man, methods like reaction shots and

²³ Mitchell, p. 100

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 103

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 104

story-lines are made *by* man, but they need not display attributes and/or emotions that are solely *of* man.

Perhaps the most intrusive aspect of the human status in film is that of character agency. Agency is, as theorists such as Jonathan Burt in his book *Animals in Film* have pointed out, usually reserved for human characters in film. When animal agency occurs, Burt argues, “the animal, even if unintentionally, comes to determine its effects as much as they are determined by the position it is placed in by humans.”²⁸ Animal agency therefore redresses “an imbalance in the theorizing of human-animal relations by seeking [...] to outline the impact animals have on humans rather than always seeing animals as the passive partner, or victim.”²⁹ When an animal determines its own actions in film, it need not even display the aforementioned mental states usually attributed to humans such as the various ones attributed to Ben. Let us visit the sequence of Scully the cat to further hypothesize this effect of the film.

Scully is introduced as a gift from Cathryn, Willard’s co-worker and possible love-interest. After Mrs Stiles’ funeral, Cathryn comes knocking on Willard’s door and remarks how lonely he looked at the service. She then presents him with the very thing that helped her get through the death of her own mother; an orange housecat. Now, Cathryn is right to assume that an animal companion is something that Willard wants to abide his loneliness, but she is unaware that the position has already been filled by Socrates. As Willard tries to refuse the cat, knowing that the house is already infested by rats, Scully notices Socrates in Willard’s pocket and reaches out for him. “See, she likes you!” Cathryn remarks and gives the cat to Willard. This can be interpreted as a case of Cathryn assuming that an indisputable animal-trade, a cat being interested in a rat, is of a more emotional and therefore possibly anthropomorphised nature, namely the cat liking Willard. To the audience, Scully is thus from the get-go introduced as, so to say, purely a cat and nothing more. She has no background or character build-up and neither does she have a relationship with Willard. When Willard cannot come up with an excuse to refuse this well-meaning gift from the girl he likes, he puts the cat inside and leaves the premises with Cathryn. That is, we assume that he does, for here the frame of the film completely abandons the human pair but stays with Scully. The main narrative comes to a halt and a sort-of musical number occurs, where Michael Jackson’s

²⁸ Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (Great Britain, Cromwell Press, 2002), p. 30

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 31

original version of “Ben” accidentally and diagetically starts playing on the television. Another indisputable animal-trait, the want for survival, is evident in Scully as she is instantly surrounded by a swarm of hungry rats. The following sequence of attempted escape entails several reaction shots of Scully as she looks around the area for possible escape routes. She seeks refuge on top of a cupboard, in the basement and on the top-shelves of its cabinets, before finally facing the basement air vent, preparing for a life-or-death jump. Scully makes the jump, but Ben is revealed to have been waiting for her and they exchange blows, until the cat falls backwards into the sea of rats below where it is instantly outnumbered and gruesomely devoured. The entire sequence completely avoids any hint of anthropomorphism in relation to Scully’s character, but all the way through it she determines her own actions actively, and those actions are filmed in such a way that the cat’s desires are completely apprehensible to the audience. (images #9-12) The 1971 film also saw Willard’s love interest gift him a cat, but that cat was left at a sidewalk in the very next scene, reducing the cat’s character to a simple joke. By providing Scully with her very own short but shocking narrative within the story, the 2003 film presents us with an example of a non-human animal gaining both agency and audience sympathy, without character build-up, without narration, and without a trace of anthropomorphism. Scully is a cat and nothing more, but does that make her any less human?

But what of Ben lurking in the shadows of the air vent, seemingly having diabolically plotted poor Scully’s demise? Let us return to Chris Wilbert’s essay on animal killings. In the East-African area of Tsavo, two local lions reportedly preyed upon railway workers in 1898. Speaking of a lieutenant’s account of these two man-eating animals, Wilbert explains how people saw the lions in question as “devils”, rather than animals. He says this to potentially be a reflection of “colonialists’ inability to frame the man-eater as animal, that the man-eater threatens the distinction of ,the animal,‘ becoming diabolical, more active, calculating, in ways that suggest qualities reserved for the human.”³⁰ It seems to be the case that when animals act beyond our definitions of them, beyond our understanding or control, they must be more than “simply” animals. Ben is precisely such an animal; a calculating, diabolical man-eater (and cat-eater, for that matter), which again brings us to why he might be considered overly anthropomorphized as a character. Let us briefly account for Ben’s several

³⁰ Wilbert, p. 33

actions of man-eating in the film, starting with the obvious murder of Frank Martin. In the 1971 film, Ben indirectly caused the death of Willard, although he was killed by the pack in total, but with Ben as their on-looking and murderous leader. In the remake, Ben might not have caused the death of Willard's mother directly (it is suggested that she might have met her death falling down the basement stairs due to her frailty), but in a moment of man-eating monstrosity, he gnaws at her bare heel as he descends down in to the basement, literally crawling over her dead body to get there. In the film's climax, although Willard does not meet his end, Ben vigorously attacks Willard's face with a blow of blood-inducing bites. When Willard is confined to the mental institution in the film's final scene, the bite marks can be seen clearly on his mangled face. The film's final dissolve highlights his face for just a moment before the fade to black,³¹ leaving the audience with a final reminder of Ben's monstrous and calculating man-eating actions, therefore marking his agency as a character even post-mortem. Wilbert argues for the case of the man-eating lions of Tsavo to demonstrate "the seemingly complex mixings of what conventionally would be termed social, natural, and technological entities and how entities circulate in differing forms and are made and remade in exchanges with other things."³² This brings us back to the concept of becoming, for in things becoming one another, they demonstrate, in Wilbert's words, "continuous exchanges of properties between "things" – human and nonhuman – which can also be seen to be the effects of these exchanges."³³ By demonstrating complex, and therefore generally considered human, attributes, Ben makes evident the continuous exchanges of animal and human properties.

If Scully is nothing but a cat, Ben is perhaps something more than "simply" a rat; he is diabolical, he is cunning and he is emotional. But Willard is more than "simply" a man, so does a character displaying larger-than-life qualities necessarily diminish their human status? In her brilliant essay on anthropomorphism, Mitchell concludes:

A deeper understanding of the lives of other animals may shift the focus from the anthropocentric question of whether other beings are sufficiently like humans to warrant

³¹ The final scene of the film is arguably in clear reference to the final scene of *Psycho* (1961, Alfred Hitchcock). Just as Norman Bates' face is juxtaposed with Mother's skeleton-face, reminding the audience how Bates and Mother were in fact two psyches inhabiting the same body, Ben's marks on Willard's face serve as a reminder of their connection, their joined psyches, their becoming-relationship.

³² Wilbert, p. 34

³³ *ibid.*, p. 24

the same moral rights as humans to a more generalized analysis of what capacities, whether found in humans or not, ought to be the basis of moral consideration.³⁴

Whilst Mitchell is making her case within the realm of science and animal ethics, the issue of Ben exists only within a film. Characters in film are not real, but to us, they are a reflection of the real, and it is therefore that we relate to them and perceive their actions and mentalities to be as human as our own, even when those actions and mentalities are perhaps extra-ordinary. By being a character within a film, Ben is still rooted in the reality of him being a rat, even though some of his actions are perhaps extra-ordinary for a rat. Unlike the lions of Tsavo, he is more than a man-eating demon to those who witness his story. He remains a rat, no matter the humanity of his actions.

3.2 Looking at Animals and the Issue of Pets

On many occasions, Willard *looks* at Ben in the film's several noticeable matching eye-line shots. (images #13-17) The look is always that of surprise, awe, shock, or even horror. For Willard, and this is important, never expects Ben to appear. Ben's agency is so exceptional that it exceeds the main (human) character's presumption of his surroundings. Here it is ideal to touch upon the differences of the representations of Ben and Socrates. When Willard first encounters Socrates, it is after he is aware of rats harbouring his basement, and indeed after Socrates gets caught in a trap that Willard himself had planted. On the surface, Willard seems to abort his slaying of the trapped animal because he notices Socrates's presumed rat-family calling out for him, appealing to Willard's sentiment and conscience. However, a closer reading might reveal that Willard chose to spare the animal's life because Willard had control of the situation from the start. He indirectly put the rat in the trap, then he directly released it from the trap, groomed it, named it and claimed it. Socrates becomes Willard's pet and that, despite all the love and sincere affection he bears towards the creature, makes Socrates a property and an extension of Willard himself. This is exhibited throughout the film from the pair's on-screen relationship, for Socrates always seems to be submerged within Willard's influential or physical frame. The white rat is first seen literally stuck to Willard's glue trap, in the next scene in Willard's hand, and in every scene after that Socrates is either in Willard's bed, on his shoulder, in his office drawer or his jacket

³⁴ Mitchell, p. 115

pocket. The only exceptions to this structure are when other humans are within close proximity to Willard; when his mother falls in the stairs Socrates is seen running up the rail to hide, and when Cathryn shows up to the funeral Socrates hides in Mrs Stiles' casket. Indeed, when Willard finally does leave Socrates further away from his personal space, in the office storage room, Socrates pays for it with his life. Both Socrates and Ben are with Willard at work that day, but only Ben survives, which brings us back to the matter of Ben's agency.

When Willard first sees Ben, he is not caught in a trap and therefore not in need of Willard's assistance or rescue as Socrates was. Ben is chewing on a car tire in Willard's basement, and the man is evidently in awe of the rat's size and power. But noticing the animal's physicality from looking at it does not seem to enable Willard to notice its mentality and/or intelligence as well. Speaking of animals in film, Burt writes: "The animal body is caught up [...] in a complicated system of reactions and effects which is registered as a play between the surfaces of bodies, but not necessarily as revealing anything about the interaction of minds."³⁵ From the get go, Willard therefore seeks to claim this animal as well, as he names him after the Big Ben clock tower and, noticing the animal's action, comes up with the plan of using the rats to destroy Frank Martin's car tires. Here, the implications of the names Willard gives to the two rats also come to light. Socrates gets his name from an acclaimed philosopher, and Willard's reasoning for that name-sake is revealed to be paradoxical and therefore accountably biased: "Despite getting caught in that trap, you seem pretty smart." Ben is however named after a large building, because Willard only notices his exterior frame but not his interior mind: "Jeesh, you're big... Big Ben!" The ironic implication here being that, paradoxically to their names, Ben later displays a fiercely independent mind whilst Socrates becomes an extension of Willard's body. It should however be noted that this argument is not a denigration of Socrates's intelligence as such, but rather a testimony of the difference between his and Ben's agency, and what that difference eventually results in for Socrates as a character.

If Socrates is merely an extension of Willard, he is only safe as long as he remains with him. The pet does not survive the separation from its owner. Willard chose to bring Socrates with him to work that day. Ben, however, made the choice by himself without Willard's permission. When Willard opens his bag that morning, Ben is already in it, and once again Willard is shocked to see him. He objects to the bigger rat coming

³⁵ Burt, *Animals in Film*, p. 31

along at first, but Socrates climbs down Willard's arm and into the case alongside Ben, so Willard grudgingly agrees. Socrates comes along as a pet, whilst Ben makes use of his agency and comes along as an individual. Although Socrates might inspire sympathy as a character, he does not seem to hold full agency, and it is my argument that this is precisely due to his primary status as Willard's pet. Yi-Fu Tuan, a theorist of humanistic geography, studied the nature of pets in his book *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*. In it, he examines the aesthetic exploitation of nature that pet-keeping entails and argues that "domestication means domination".³⁶ One of Tuan's central arguments concerning this issue of pet-keeping relates to their size, which is a compelling point of reference to visit whilst comparing Socrates with Ben. Tuan explains how humans established their dominance over animals by diminishing their size: "Manageability or control was the real aim. The smaller size helped."³⁷ Tuan also informs us of how even the word *pet* literally means *small*.³⁸ This sheds a new light on the importance of the differences in appearance of Ben and Socrates, since their frames do not only suggest a division of mind and body (referring to the aforementioned naming of the rats by Willard), but also of power and frailty (Ben's powerful and awe-inspiring introduction as opposed to Socrates's original status as a small and helpless victim caught in a trap), and wildness and tameability. Socrates perhaps resides within Willard's pocket, not only because of Willard's affection for him, but because he is literally small enough to fit there. For instance, when Willard is gathering the rats in two suitcases to bring them to Frank Martin's home, he forbids Ben from coming along because he is too big: "Ben, no. If you get in, nobody else will be able to fit." Ben, of course, does not obey this command and sneaks into the suitcase when Willard is distracted, driving out the other, smaller rats while he's at it. Tuan notes how a pet "must not be in doubt as to who is the master and as to the consequences of disobedience."³⁹ Ben however defies Willard's supposed mastery time and again. When Ben makes his second attempt of spending the night in Willard's room as opposed to the basement, Willard is expecting him and attempts to strike him with a cane he has hidden under his pillow. When Ben dashes the attack, Willard speaks to the on-looking Socrates and tries to justify his behaviour: "I wasn't really going to hurt him... but he has to learn, I am the boss!" Ben, alas, refuses

³⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 141

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 144

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 148

to learn, and that secures his survival in the office that day. In addition to gaining said survival through character agency, the case of Ben defying Willard's mastery also brings to light the fallacy that pet-keeping entails, since it is of a direct result to understanding the categories of man and animal to be based on, not only polarity, but hierarchy. When Willard trains the rats for the tire-tearing, several shots clearly show Ben watching the training, but never participating in it. It is clear from all of this that Ben cannot and will not be tamed in any way, and neither is he a pet. He is large and unmanageable and does not fit into pockets or follow orders. When the larger, un-tamed rat drives the smaller, trained ones out of the suitcase, it is therefore yet another visual indicator of Ben's agency, as well as a symbolic reminder of the error of human-animal hierarchy and division.

Yet another interesting aspect of this difference between Socrates and Ben's relationship to Willard comes to light when one notices how Willard never touches Ben. Willard only grabs Ben by the tail on two occasions and then only to throw him back in to the basement where he, according to Willard, belongs. When the two rats accompany Willard to work, Willard is seen picking Socrates up from his bag in the storage room, placing him on a shelf and petting him. Then Willard simply holds the suitcase up to the shelf and lets Ben jump out on his own. These relationships are clearly and visually established right from the start, for Willard actually *had* to touch Socrates to release him from the glue trap, and he kept touching him ever since. When Willard first encounters Ben, he does not attempt to pick the rat up or pet it, and that as a motif holds throughout the entire film. Whilst Willard and Socrates share a relationship based on physical interaction, Willard and Ben share an oppositional relationship of looks, displayed through their several matching eye-line shots. Some time here has been spent analysing the fact that Socrates, not Ben, dies in the storage room. It is true that Ben dies in the film's climax, but the nature of his death says nothing of his agency, since, as has already been noted, he died due to his character function as the hero's doppelgänger. When Willard then, on so many occasions, *looks* at his double, what is it that he sees?

In their book, *Fierce Friends: Artists and Animals, 1750 – 1900*, Louise Lippincott and Andreas Blühm examine the evolution of looking, specifically how the human race has looked at nature, and animals in particular, over the course of the last two and a half centuries. They found four themes to have emerged: Looking around, referring to European explorations of the eighteenth century, looking within, referring to

a new knowledge of animal anatomy, physiology and behaviour, looking back, referring to geology and palaeontology, and, the theme of most relevance to *Willard*, looking in the mirror. This fourth theme sees the other three joined in the amazing implications the Darwinian evolutionary theory provided for humanity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The theory's publication "was not only a landmark in biology and philosophy but also a turning point in the history of looking at animals."⁴⁰ When Willard looks at Ben in shock/horror, it is because he took independent action (coming along for the tire-tearing or for work), displayed a high level of intelligence (making it up from the basement through locked doors and blocked holes) or showcased extreme resourcefulness (making his way back to the house after being left in an elevator across town). In other words, whenever Willard looks at Ben, he sees an amazing Darwinian adaptability that is most definitely equal, and very possibly superior, to his own and that frightens and frustrates him. Lippincott and Blühm note how "after Darwin, humans conceived a new "natural" order based on power and strength – "survival of the fittest" – rather than moral or spiritual values."⁴¹ When the attorney of the Stiles estate visits Willard at his mother's funeral and informs him of how his parents' debts have denounced Willard's claim to his house, Willard hysterically screams: "Do you get off on telling people that they have no control over their lives?" Willard's non-control over Ben is thus reflected in Willard's non-control over his own affairs. Ben is the mirror that represents both Willard's potential and his lack, which exemplifies how the man holds both fear and awe towards the animal, in a tumultuous marriage of admiration and hate. In his looking at Ben, Willard is looking at a mirror, and in it he sees his own lack, his own failure in this race of the fittest. "Business is a rat race, and I will not be devoured by all those other rats because of *you*!" Frank berates Willard in one of the film's earlier scenes, referencing social Darwinism and pointing Willard out as a weak link in its hierarchical chain, realizing Willard's own sense of worthlessness. Perhaps the most relevant eye-line match between the pair occurs in the film's climax, after Ben has returned to the house and broken through all its barricades with a huge army of rats. In this scene, Willard is positioned on his kitchen floor, with Ben up on the opposing counter. This makes Willard's gaze point upwards, towards his now definitively superior mirror, as he frustratingly confesses to Ben: "You can go *anywhere*. You can do *anything*... I have *nowhere*." The frustration obviously stems from the notion that

⁴⁰ Andreas Blühm & Louise Lippincott, "Looking at Animals: Vision and Evolution" in Christine Davis (ed.) *Fierce Friends: Artists and Animals, 1750-1900* (London: Merrel Publishers Limited, 2005), p. 25

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 28

Willard is the one that should be able to do anything and go anywhere. But he is stuck, due to his social, personal, situational and psychological restrictions – in one word we can call it his *human* restrictions. If Willard feels worthless, it is due to him being stuck in one end of the human-nonhuman pole. As has already been noted in the previous chapter, Willard is rewarded with a sense of self-worth only after he lets go of these human restrictions, at the night of his becoming. In a film where humans are rewarded for forsaking their humanity, and animals are rewarded for “acting” human, acquiring agency and prestige, the fallacy of the human-animal divide is not only displayed, it is corrected through a system of retributions.

4. Of Rats and Men

Much has been said concerning the individual animals of *Willard*, human and non-human alike, but what of the issue of their species? This chapter will explore some of the key aspects of the emblematic, weighty and ancient relationship between rats and men, and how those aspects are represented throughout *Willard* as a film. A brilliant and thorough analysis of said relationship is to be found in Jonathan Burt's 2006 book *Rat*, in which he traces the history, myth and culture of the rat-human affair. "The rat is, as some writers have phrased it, a twin of the human, and their mutual history is dark."⁴² Burt lists the key elements that link the two species to be, among others, their amazing and superfluous breeding abilities, and their rapacious appetites⁴³. Burt argues for the hatred that we humans bear towards rats to therefore lie in their unflattering mirroring of ourselves. The granddad of rat-based hatred is then, of course, the Bubonic Plague and the rat as a bringer of death. We are therefore left with the three major themes of sex, greed and death. Let us explore how these elements are touched upon and referenced in the film, and what that brings to light on the issue of polarities.

4.1 Of Sex, Money and Death

The issue of reproduction is somewhat supplementary in the 2003 film. When Willard feeds the rats after the night of the tire-tearing, their numbers have obviously increased vastly as he says to the group: "We're running out of room. I'm very sorry about this, but I can't feed you anymore. I can't afford it." He then proposes that the rats find a new place to live, and that Ben should lead them there. The 1971 film plays on this issue more, where Willard is seen early in the film rejoicing over the several nests the rats have built, smilingly looking at the litters of new family members. Later however, he gets increasingly frustrated of this activity and remarks how the rats are "like goddamned rabbits". In much the same fashion that Willard bares hatred towards Ben, Burt proposes how human-kind's disdain for rat-kind lies in the former's disdain for itself: "Like evil twins with no redemptive qualities, their rapacity, appetites, breeding abilities and adaptability make them world-devouring."⁴⁴ If rats overpopulate their environment, it serves as an unflattering mirror to humanity overpopulating the earth.

⁴² Jonathan Burt, *Rat* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 7

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 13

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

As for Willard's contempt over the sexual excessiveness of the rats, it rather and more narrowly results from his own sexual lack and frustration. Both Willard's mother and Frank Martin comment on him not having a girlfriend ("When will you ever find yourself a girl" / "There's no need for a single man to be living in such a large house") and Cathryn remains out of reach. Willard's relations with the rats being pseudo-sexual is humorously referenced when Willard locks himself in his bathroom to release Socrates from the glue trap using cooking-oil. Due to the oil on his hands and him having spent all that time in there, Willard's mother scolds her son for being too old for masturbation.

As for the topic of appetite and greed, its representation in the film lies with Frank Martin and his business. "Martin-Stiles Manufacturing" reads the sign outside the office building, linking Willard to the company, not only as its employee, but as its son. Willard's father co-founded the business alongside Frank and a huge aspect of Willard's hatred for his boss stems from the notion that Frank stole the business from Mr Stiles, which is what led him to commit suicide and drove his wife to illness. Burt draws on examples ranging from the Chinese horoscope to Freud's Rat Man case to state how "the association of rats with money is an extensive one."⁴⁵ The aforementioned theme of sex is coupled with this theme of money in the scene leading up to Willard murdering Frank Martin. Frank is seen working late in his office, accounting for numbers and salaries on his computer. Then the business man opens an internet tab and starts looking at pornography. These themes of lust and greed are manifested in the appearance of the rats, come to take his life, which brings us to the third and final theme of rats and death.

One of humanity's most severe sins is indisputably when it kills its own. Murder, war and genocide are without question considered shameful and generally resented aspects of human history. In his book, Burt recounts Hans Zinsser's 1935 writings *Rats, Lice and History*, in which the theorist alleges how the human species and the rat species have "unlike any other species of living things [...] made war upon their own kind".⁴⁶ To kill one's own, Burt argues, is the central point of the human/rat mirroring. If *Willard* is a horror film, its truest scene of horror is when Willard, Ben and the other rats murder Frank Martin. "We got Mr Martin back together" Willard later exclaims to Ben, rejoicing in this mutual and horrific sin of their separate species. Burt

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 52

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 13

only once and very briefly mentions the film in his book, where he states it to be “One of the few films with human-rat relations central to the plot”, and that plot he describes as such: “A young man uses his power over a group of rats to destroy his bullying boss but in the end they destroy him.”⁴⁷ For what can a film revolving around the relationship of rats and men, giving their thematic history, result in anything but destruction and death?

4.2 The Riddance of Polarities

Willard certainly exemplifies these major themes of the rat-human relationship, their focal point being their mirroring of these two interlinked species, but what does that tell us of the film’s commentary on the error of polarities? Burt explains how this mirroring is what generally upsets humans when it comes to rats, for anything that highlights humanity’s false claim of superiority, reached through the division of polarized entities, is sure to be represented as evil: “The symbolic order as much as the physical order is frail and can be easily threatened, especially around dangerous ideas that are so often associated with the horror of the rat.”⁴⁸ These dangerous ideas that threaten the symbolic order of man are, besides from the aforementioned unbounded sexual reproduction and limitless appetite, the rat’s association with filth and dirt. Humankind’s reasoning for *why* exactly the rat is associated as such is significant, for it seems to stem from how the rat moves freely between spaces of ordering. Burt continues:

Cultural attitudes to the rat reveal that it is a pollutant with the ability to move between bodily and symbolic boundaries with an overall trajectory that seems to make it an especially threatening phenomenon as much in the realm of language and thought as in the granary or the food store.⁴⁹

Just as the rat threatens the cultural distinction of man by acting as its twin, the rat also threatens the very physical sphere of man’s domain by refusing to remain outside of it, as much as man tries to secure it: “The rat adapts with humans to the ever more

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 85

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 12

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

complicated structures and networks that are produced by modernization.”⁵⁰ This is exemplified and established very early on in the film, where Willard’s numerous mouse traps did not catch a single rat on his first try in eradicating the “problem”. When Willard proposes the rats leave, they stay. When he leaves them behind, they return. The rats always adapt to whatever structures are put in their way. Does that not indicate the supposed human environments as just as much belonging to the rats? Sarah Whatmore wrote in depth on such matters in her essay “Hybrid Geographies: Rethinking the “Human” in Human Geography”. As is made evident in Whatmore’s title, she seeks to introduce hybridized conceptions of an otherwise binary-ridden understanding of human geography, in which nature and society in general, and man and animal in particular, are doomed to be opposites. *Willard* is a film that sees such binaries being gradually and consistently bridged, not only in terms of its human and non-human characters, but also their natural and social environments.

At first glance, the film might not seem to entail much nature at all. It takes place in NYC, a city of cement and steel which in fact has the highest population density of any major city in the United States, hosting over 27.000 people per square mile.⁵¹ Such a city might seem as precisely the kind of place which, in Whatmore’s essay, would normally reside at the far end of the social pole (as opposed to the natural pole) of the nature/society binary in the “geographical imaginations and environmental sensibilities rehearsed in [the] pervasive distinctions between”.⁵² Humans have however shared the Big Apple with rats for as long as anyone can remember.⁵³ This adds another level of effect to *Willard*’s primary non-human characters being rats. As has already been noted, when Burt wrote on the various reasons why humans seem to have such distain for rats as they do, one of the primordial elements was the rat’s amazing adaptability to co-exist with the generally considered intrusive human animal. Wherever man goes, the rat seems to follow. No matter how “controlled” man’s (un)natural environment seems to be, the rat always adapts. The rat, more than any other animal, seems to be the perfect vessel for displaying the false polarity of man’s division of natural and unnatural domains, nature and city, outside and inside, precisely because the

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 15

⁵¹ Population Facts, *NYC: The Official Website of the City of New York*, http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/pop_facts.shtml accessed 16. March 2015

⁵² Sarah Whatmore, “Hybrid Geographies: Rethinking the “Human” in Human Geography” in Linda Kalof & Amy Fitzgerald (eds.) *The Animals Reader* (New York: Berg, 2007), p. 338

⁵³ Michael M. Grynbaum, „Subway Study Finds Rats Remain Wily“, *The New York Times* [online journal], June 15, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/nyregion/16rats.html?_r=0 accessed 30th of March 2015

rat constantly seeps through those supposed seams, reminding us of our own error in our understating of geographies. The ideal example of this infiltration would then be the case of sewage.

Burt writes: “As rats came up out of the sewers they were a visible embodiment of the filth that society was placing out of sight.”⁵⁴ After Willard’s night of true becoming, he seeks to become “human” again, not only by abandoning Ben and the other rats that assisted them on their mission, but by trying to dispose of all the remaining rats in the house and rat-proofing it in the process to stop them from ever returning. There is a sequence in which Willard is seen gassing the basement, collecting the rats’ bodies, burning them, then shutting all windows, bolting all doors and blocking every opening – which includes taping down the toilet seat. (image #18) Of course, none of this works to keep the rats out or Ben from returning, quite the contrary, Willard’s attempted abandoning of his becoming-animal only serves to see it return in an explosive and final manner in the film’s finale. As Cathryn shows up at Willard’s doorstep to tell him of the brutal killing of their boss, Willard immediately suggests that they leave the house. As he goes to collect his coat, the camera zooms in on its blood-soaked collar, the sequence’s first indicator of Willard’s error in and failure of abandoning his becoming. As he excuses himself to solve this problem, Cathryn lets herself in to use his bathroom. As she leaves, the camera lingers on the now-opened toilet in a low-angled shot, eerily suggesting what is about to come, which is several black rats emerging from it (images #19-20). In the 1974 film *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola), Gene Hackman’s character is investigating a bathroom, sees a taped-over toilet seat and opens it, revealing the clear water of the bowl. As he however flushes it, horror transpires. Scarlet blood comes gushing out of the bowl and onto the white marble floor, completed with a jolting cue of David Shire’s uncanny score. In his and Sophie Fiennes’ popular film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006), Slavoj Žižek says the following of this scene:

In our most elementary experience, when we flush the toilet, excrements simply disappear out of our reality in to another space, which we, phenomenologically, perceive as a kind of a netherworld. Another reality; chaotic, primordial reality, and the

⁵⁴ Jonathan Burt, *Rat*, p. 39

ultimate horror is, of course, if the flushing doesn't work, if objects return, if excremental remainders return from that dimension.⁵⁵

When Willard notices that he can't leave the premises in Cathryn's car due to Ben having chewed through the tires, he bids the girl to wait and re-enters the house. An eye-before-the-storm moment occurs, where nothing is heard throughout the house except the rattling of a fire poker Willard had used to lodge the fireplace shut. The audience has already seen the rats emerge from the toilet, so it comes as no surprise when the poker breaks off and a colossal amount of rats come tumbling down the chimney and into the living room. Whenever the rats had left the basement before, they were simply scurrying around the living room or kitchen. Now that Willard has tried to get rid of them completely, they return in such an explosive manner and in such massively multiplied numbers that they completely take over the whole house, so much that the ceiling literally comes crumbling down. (images #21-22) Making use of Žižek's analysis, we can conclude that Willard entered his own netherworld in his becoming, and that when he tried to shut the doors on the dimension that he had allowed to be opened, its hinges broke apart chaotically, perfectly exemplified in the rats returning, and symbolically so from the very toilet of the house.

The truth of *Willard's* finale therefore lies in its crumbling portrayal of the hybrid networks we participate in as a species. Whatmore concludes that "geographies must strive to find ways of exploring and expressing the kinds of sensible and relational knowledge of these hybrid worlds" and that the greatest challenge therein is "to overhaul our repertoire of methods and poetics in ways that admit and register the creative presence of creatures and devices amongst us, and the animal sensibilities of our diverse human being."⁵⁶ Correspondingly, Wilbert's conclusion speaks for the "growing moves toward treating the nonhuman realm [...] as potential actors, as affective entities in constant relational intra-actions with other entities, including, of course, different peoples."⁵⁷ Whilst the theorists are speaking broadly of, not only all animal species, but devices, buildings, natural forces and other "things", cultural studies such as those conducted by Burt perhaps reveal that when the subject is rat, the potentiality of exposing the true hybridity of these realities is at its greatest. Humanity's own hidden dimension, the sort-of netherworld that we, as a species, *know of* but refuse

⁵⁵ Sophie Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, P Guide Ltd, England/Austria/Netherlands, 2006

⁵⁶ Whatmore, p. 345

⁵⁷ Wilbert, p. 46

to *recognize* as part of our reality, perhaps has a protruding agent in our twin, the rat. *Willard* is a film of rats and men, and as for cases of their sameness, being revealed through man becoming-animal, animal becoming-man, or species intra-acting, it is one positively brimmed with precedents of each.

5. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated how *Willard*, as a film, exhibits a fallacy in the polarized understandings that surround the distinctions of man and animal. To reach that point of conclusion, the essay has made use of animal studies, existential philosophy, humanistic geography and theoretical film studies, connecting ideas relating to the topic of polarity to the text of the film. The focal point of reference throughout the analysis has been Deleuze and Guattari's influential hypothesis of "becoming-animal". To return once more to that text, the theorists speak of the *plane of consistency* as an intersection of all the different dimensions. My conclusion recognizes the supposedly different worlds of animals and men, as they are portrayed and subsequently shattered in *Willard*, to be a case of those different dimensions. Willard participates in a momentous journey of becoming-animal, but it can also be said that the film's animals engage in a process of becoming-human, all the while the distinctions that surround them, as well as their natural environments and social roles, enter into a corresponding becoming of one another. Deleuze and Guattari conclude: "The plane of consistency is the intersection of all concrete forms. Therefore all becomings are written like sorcerers' drawings on this plane of consistency, which is the ultimate Door providing a way out for them."⁵⁸ The once-opened doors may never be shut again without ramification. Once Willard experienced a non-identity as a human and recognized his animal-twin, he could not return to the comforting arms of a dualistic reality. For the remake to have him wind up alive, but damaged, in the institution, as opposed to having faced annihilation by Ben, therefore arguably benefits the film's becoming-message. Whichever polarities the film portrays, whatever originally separates them is revealed to be a glass ceiling waiting to be broken and, once broken, cannot be rebuilt without glaringly visible cracks on its surface.

⁵⁸ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 48

6. Image Directory

#1



Rodent-based casting?

#2



Imitating \neq Becoming

#3



Willard becomes Scully

#4



Scully's Death

#5



A Moment of True Becoming

#6



...

#7



„Yes, look at the rats“

#8



#9



Scully looks...

#10



Scully sees...

#11



Shot/Reaction Shot

#12



What Scully wants

#13



Matching eye-line 1



#14

Matching eye-line 1

#15



Matching eye-line 2



#16

Matching eye-line 2

#17



Matching eye-line 2 (close-up)



#18

A door to another dimension?

#19



The door is symbolically opened



#20

Agents of our Netherworld surface

#21



Explosive Return



#22

Bringing down the house

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