

Gwyneth Peaty

Bloodthirsty (Amelia Moses, 2021)

Canadian horror film *Bloodthirsty* (2021) tells the story of Grey Kessler (Lauren Beatty), a singer-songwriter who begins transforming into a werewolf as she works on her second album. An indie musician who has been strictly vegan since childhood, Grey struggles with a seemingly inexplicable desire for blood and meat as she works to create new music. Accompanied by her girlfriend Charlie (Katharine King), she travels to the isolated forest cabin of Vaughn Daniels (Greg Bryk), an eccentric music producer who promises to bring out the best in her. Instead, what emerges is the beast.

While it is explicitly situated as a werewolf film, the narrative eschews elements that have become iconic in werewolf cinema – such as the moon, silver or infection via bites – in favour of a different set of markers. Grey's growing hunger for meat parallels her hunger for success. A focus on consuming and being consumed by others is linked to both the creative process and the entertainment industry as Grey tries to release the 'genius' within and satisfy her expectant audience. Accordingly, this chapter explores how *Bloodthirsty* engages with the figure of the female werewolf in the context of wider dialogues about contemporary celebrity culture as a monstrous, hungering, undying force.

Dances with She-Wolves

Directed by Amelia Moses, *Bloodthirsty* was written by Wendy Hill-Tout and her daughter Lowell Boland, featuring a score composed by Michelle Osis and Boland. Helmed by this all-female creative team, the narrative presents

a character study in which women's experiences of fame are centred. In fact, Grey's story can be described as somewhat autobiographical. Boland is herself a Canadian singer-songwriter (under the stage name 'Lowell') and was trying to craft a second album at the time of writing the script for *Bloodthirsty*. In interviews, she readily admits that the screenplay 'was inspired by her own experiences and the pressure she felt when trying to write a follow-up album to her first record' (Rubin 2021). Strengthening the link, her eventual second album, released in 2018, was titled *Lone Wolf*.

Gender is especially significant to the context of *Bloodthirsty* because the werewolf is commonly depicted as a male monster. There is a long history of this trend in popular culture and in folklore. As Hannah Priest, editor of *She-wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, notes, 'in medieval literature, werewolves are almost exclusively male creatures' (cited in Knight 2016). The etymology of the word itself would appear to foreground male origins; Merriam-Webster's dictionary identifies Old English 'wer' (man) and 'wulf' (wolf) as the term's most likely foundations. In *The Werewolf in the Ancient World*, Daniel Ogden observes that the Greek texts he studies 'employ no special term for the phenomenon but merely speak of people – predominantly men – turning into a wolf (*lykos*)' (2021: 4). Legendary tales of men turning into wolves can be traced as far back as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in ancient Mesopotamia, and may have been linked to the practice of dressing in animal skins and furs to hunt, as practised by early hunter-gatherer societies (Lidman 1976: 388–90). There are also historical links with myths of the 'wild man', described by Richard Bernheimer as 'a hairy man curiously compounded of human and animal traits' (1952: 1). References to female werewolves and women turning into wolves are much less extensive, although they do occur (see Priest 2018).

The connection between werewolves and men has solidified over the past century. As Chantal Bourgault du Coudray points out, werewolf mythology was increasingly masculinised during the twentieth century under the influence of psychoanalysis (2006: 65–77). Building on nineteenth-century theories about human experience as divided between conscious and unconscious, civilised and primitive, werewolves were seen to reflect 'a very specific conceptualization of the human psyche as "divided against itself" – or, as perpetually at war with the "beast within"' (du Coudray 2006: 69). More

specifically, the werewolf was seen to embody and express cultural ideas about Western masculinity, because ‘the battle against the “beast within” has been increasingly characterized as a peculiarly masculine problem’ (ibid). Early cinematic depictions, such as those in Universal’s *Werewolf of London* (1935) and *The Wolf Man* (1941), set the tone by representing the werewolf as a tormented man-wolf unable to control his violent outbursts (often directed at women). This association has carried on throughout the years, with such films as *The Company of Wolves* (1984) and *Wolf* (1994) continuing to link werewolves with predatory masculinity. Even more recent films have carried on the tradition; the ‘lycans’ of the *Underworld* film series (2003–present) are almost exclusively male.

Focusing on *Bloodthirsty* offers an opportunity to revisit the werewolf as a symbolic figure in the context of twenty-first-century culture. This is important because, as Craig Ian Mann points out,

to accept the beast within as the werewolf’s sole symbolic worth is to overlook the specific cultural and historical context of individual films. The werewolf film must be understood not just in terms of the beast within but also the ‘beast without’: a cultural understanding of the lupine creature as a product of its times. (2020: 10)

Grey is indeed a product of her time, emerging into her lycanthropic form in the context of contemporary celebrity culture and the twenty-first-century music industry. She may have a beast within, but she also grapples with the ‘beast without’: a society that hungers to consume her.

Everyone Wants a Piece

The opening scenes of *Bloodthirsty* directly contrast Grey’s life as a minor celebrity with her dreams of tearing into raw flesh. In a dark forest, she chews and slurps at the body of an unidentified creature, revelling in the blood that spills down her chin. Waking suddenly, she realises this is only a dream. However, as Grey stares into the bathroom mirror, her eyes gleam a piercing, predatory gold before shifting back to normal. Later that day, she poses at a photo



Figure 39. Grey (Lauren Beatty) looks into her bathroom mirror. *Bloodthirsty*, directed by Amelia Moses (Brainstorm Media, 2021).

shoot, glamorous in different costumes and wigs. At first she appears bright and confident, performing sensually for the cameras, but her energy flags and her smile fades. The flashing of the camera begins to seem intrusive; voices ask a cacophony of questions as she is pinned in the light. The sense of claustrophobia is heightened as a reporter follows Grey back to her dressing room after the shoot, asking more prying questions. ‘Oh come on, the public deserves to know’, he scoffs when she refuses to answer on personal grounds. The expectation that she give the audience everything – even private information about her lesbian relationship – is made clear. She is to be consumed in her entirety.

Grey’s dreams of being a predator contrast starkly with the reality of her life: as a public figure, *she* is the one being stalked. Yet, as Graeme Turner (2014) has pointed out, turning people into commodities is a key function of contemporary celebrity culture. Marketing oneself as a product to be consumed is an essential part of becoming a star. Fans ‘hunger’ for their favourite star – for information about them, for the sight of them and to be near them – and the celebrity must feed and foster this appetite in order to remain relevant. There is danger inherent in the process, however, because the desire being stoked can shift quickly: ‘Even in those sites which depend upon fans hungry for celebrity

gossip, there is a readiness to shift from admiration to antagonism without any sense of inconsistency' (Turner 2014: 136). Female celebrities are particularly vulnerable to cruel public commentary and shaming, as their bodies and behaviours are viciously critiqued (Turner 2014: 137; Doyle 2016).

A sense of being preyed upon comes through clearly in the song Grey composes for her new album. As the chorus goes:

I get the creeps
 From everyone's eyes on me
 Blood thirsty
 Sippin on us like
 Sippin on us like
 Flavour of the week
 I get the creeps
 And everyone wants a piece
 Blood thirsty
 Sharpen your tongues
 Sink in your teeth
 Bloodthirsty (*Bloodthirsty*, 2021)

Here, the audience, perhaps the celebrity industry as a whole, is framed as feeding on entertainers like a monster, draining them of their lifeblood before moving on to the next 'flavour of the week'. In the early twenty-first century, this sentiment is not uncommon. 'Fame has come to devour all else', argues journalist Lisa Robinson (2010) in the introduction to an interview with Lady Gaga. When actor Heath Ledger passed away, film critic A. O. Scott (2008) decried the 'pathological gossip culture that chews up the private lives of celebrities' and the 'rituals of media cannibalism' triggered by his loss. Indeed, as Anna Gibbs highlights in her discussion of Princess Diana, cannibalism is a metaphor that appears apt for discussing the media's 'insatiable appetite' for celebrities, especially after their death (1998: 12): 'If she was consumed in life', Gibbs argues, 'she has been cannibalised in death' (1998: 11). Rather than ending the 'chewing', death makes a celebrity even *more* readily consumable.

If contemporary fame is to be conceptualised thus, as a ravenous undead monster perpetually consuming the bodies of celebrities, it is no surprise when scholars observe that 'a sense of mercilessness characterises this mediated

spectacle age' (Penfold-Mounce and Smith 2020: 38). Celebrity culture has become relentless and death-driven, feeding on bodies both living and dead in the service of consumerism and commodification. Subject to such forces, Grey is left questioning her own ontological status:

Help me
 Heaven please help me
 I can't feel my heart beat
 Has my blood gone cold? (*Bloodthirsty*, 2021)

Depleted and drained, she questions whether she is still alive or perhaps undead as a result of being fed upon. Grey's interest in meat grows rapidly during this period, which might be read as her seeking an alternative source of power and vitality. Vaughn Daniels provides an array of plant-based meals for his guests, but eats meat at dinner every night. Grey becomes more and more fascinated, eventually going against all her vegan principles to try a bite. She later sneaks to the fridge at night and drinks bloody juice from a plate of steak. *Bloodthirsty* can thus be seen to highlight the impact of contemporary celebrity culture on the individual, and the individual woman in particular.



Figure 40. Sharp claws grow from Grey's fingers as she records a new song. *Bloodthirsty*, directed by Amelia Moses (Brainstorm Media, 2021).

Stressed and unsure of herself, Grey battles to maintain her equilibrium as increasing evidence suggests she is not holding it together.

Sady Doyle (2016) argues that the sense of shame generated by celebrity culture ‘creates a world in which women are afraid of themselves – where every girl lives like the lead in a werewolf movie, constantly monitoring herself for signs that she’s turning into a wild animal’. Indeed, contemporary media discourse encourages women to see themselves as constantly on the cusp of monstrosity, struggling to maintain a veneer of civilised perfection. Grey’s battle to suppress her wolfish traits, which include thick body hair, aggression, sharp teeth and a voracious appetite, aligns with her perceived inability to satisfy the expectations of others. ‘I’m not a monster’, she insists to her girlfriend, who is understandably troubled by the unfolding events. Later, however, Grey changes her mind; she has decided to embrace the power of lycanthropy.

Whatever It Takes

As Grey’s producer, Vaughn is there to help her create the best music she possibly can. Part of this involves working through the issues that prevent Grey from achieving success. ‘It’s like there’s something holding me back’, she explains to him in the recording studio, ‘it’s like I’m on the cusp of something, but as soon as I get there I hit a wall’. Vaughn’s solution is to send her on an exhausting run: ‘You need to get out of your head’. Grey is on prescription medication to treat her ‘hallucinations’ of turning into a wolf, but Vaughn throws the pills in the bin. A pivotal scene comes as they stand in the snow and he hands her a mouse.

You’re so worried what everyone else thinks. Trying so hard to be *nice*. You’re like this little mouse. Scurrying around. The world plays with you like you’re dinner. And it’s gonna get bored. Eat you up. Because there are predators and there is prey [...] Do you wanna be a predator, or do you wanna be prey? You have to be strong. (*Bloodthirsty*, 2021)

To survive a monstrous, predatory system, she must herself become a predatory monster. With his encouragement, Grey crushes the tiny rodent to

death in her fist. Blood covers her hands, and she punches Vaughn in the face. Grey's strength is increasing and her restraint is fading; during an argument, she lifts her girlfriend up against the wall by the neck with one hand. Faced with the fear of being ruthlessly consumed by the celebrity media machine, the 'beast without', she has decided to release the beast within. Vaughn highly approves of these developments. As the audience has come to suspect, he is himself a werewolf. In fact, he is Grey's long-lost father.

There is much more to be said about this film and, indeed, about the female werewolf as an intriguing contemporary figure. In the context of twenty-first-century celebrity culture, *Bloodthirsty* offers a dark vision of cannibalistic exploitation in which human effort is mercilessly consumed and discarded. Tangled within the wheels of this undying system, the individual may experience pressures that change their essence and challenge their very humanity. The price of fame and success, the film suggests, may be higher than we ever suspected; celebrity itself may manifest as a monstrous state of being.