Cats and Carnivorousness: Themes in *Daddy Cool*

--an interview with Pittsburgh filmmaker Brady Lewis by Brent Dean Robbins

Brady Lewis is in the process of finishing his first full-length feature film, *Daddy Cool*; yet he has a long history of making films. Since graduating with his Bachelor of Arts in Film and Television at New York University in 1978, Lewis has directed over ten experimental short films, and assisted, in some capacity, in the making of hundreds of other independent films by local Pittsburgh artists. In the process, he has earned over two dozen awards for his work, including the Grand Prize at the Black Maria Film and Video Festival, Best Narrative and Grand Prize at the Bucks County Film Festival, two Festival Awards at the Three Rivers Arts Festival, and an Honorable Mention and Red Ribbon prize at the American Film Festival. His work has been funded by 20 different grants over the years, from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He has presented his films and given film workshops at numerous universities and film festivals, including one person shows at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, eight southern sites with The Southern Circuit, and the Figuera da Foz International Film Festival, Portugal. Collections of his films can be found in archives across the globe, such as the Danish Film Archive, National Library of Australia, The Carnegie Museum of Art, and the New York Public Library.

Lewis, a well-respected Pittsburgh artist, has trained hundreds of budding artists at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, one the largest and oldest independent media arts centers in the country. There, he serves as Director of Education and instructor in cinematography, lighting, animation and all levels of film production. At Pittsburgh Filmmakers, he is responsible for curriculum development, faculty development and management of a film, video, photography and digital media program with 40 faculty members, serving 8,000 students per year. A curriculum of more than 50 courses is offered for credit through eight different regional universities, including Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh, and Duquesne University. When Pittsburgh Filmmakers was founded in 1971 to provide media-making tools to artists, Lewis was involved in the constructing of its first location. Drawing on his long experience teaching students, he co-authored *Shot by Shot: A Practical Guide to Filmmaking*, a textbook published in 1993 for beginning filmmaking students that is being used in more than 70 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

Up until now, Lewis. films have been short, non-narrative, experimental films. His earlier films, such as *Colliding* (1977), *Frequent Seas* (1980), and *No Action* (1982), were portrait films, best characterized as kinetic visual art that uncannily captures the style and comportment of a particular person, most often someone Lewis knew well.

His first film, a 16mm documentary, entitled *Them Days, These Days,* was a portrait of his grandfather, Alex Lewis, Sr., a simple farmer with strong opinions who enjoyed watching professional wrestling. The 16mm experimental narrative, *Colliding*, works well as a profile of sculptor and animator, Robert Breer by capturing Breer. s artistic style with the use of animation, montage and composition and serves as both an homage and portrait of the celebrated avant-garde artist. Lewis. next film, *Frequent Seas*, was a portrait of Carla Hignett, then his long-time girlfriend, now his wife. His animation and optical effects play with single frames or short clips of film, leaving the viewer with a sense of his awe before the enigma of his love. But no other film, appropriately enough, better captures the obsessive quality of his filmmaking and personality than his self-portrait, *No Action*. In this 5 minute, 16mm short, Lewis stares unblinkingly at the camera while an explosion of animation fills the panes of a window behind him. To get the effect, he had to cement the tripod of his camera to the floor to prevent it from moving during the grueling process.

With a large grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Lewis made a lengthier film, *The Suicide Squeeze* , a 27 minute, 16mm narrative which he completed in 1986. Too short to be marketable, the film gave Brady increased recognition among the experimental film circuit. The film's unconventional narrative and use of multiple genres foreshadows the complexity and genre-play which would evolve into his style of work in *Daddy Cool* . The film has a mixture of references to fiction, baseball, and film noir, but it is most memorable for its innovative and unusual play with narrative devices. "Its . . . playing with story-structure," Lewis explains. "Or trying to create the illusion that there is a story when there really isn't much of one. Its all suggestion and inference, but nothing that's actually developing."

The narrative play of *Suicide Squeeze,* on paper, sounds like the worst kind of avant-garde nightmare, the kind of pomposity that turns so many film buffs away from the experimental element. But rather than leaving the viewer with the feeling of a being cheated, the film instead creates a work which is overdetermined, and thus invites the audience to participate in creating multiple meanings. In the process, Lewis creates a feast for the eyes with a dazzling array of optical effects and animation, weaving a

seamless thread among a host of different styles and genres.

Daddy Cool is the largest film project Lewis has directed since his career began over 20 years ago. On the one hand, he is, for the first time, in the position of needing to make a film that can be, at least marginally, commercially viable. On the other hand, he is known for his talents in experimental films with unconventional narratives. While Lewis. earlier films included minimal narrative structure, *Daddy Cool* is a complex cast of strange characters: a psychologist who is a reformed werewolf, fraternal twins, a boy who grows up to be a woman, and a televangelist who was once a TV scientist. But like his earlier films, *Daddy Cool* defies being categorized as any one particular genre, instead blurring the lines between genres such as black comedy, science fiction, horror and film noir. He jokingly refers to his film as "comic-sci-fi-horror-film-noir." What follows is an exploration of images and themes in *Daddy Cool*, and a look inside the mind of an artist who is faced with the first opportunity for commercial success in the world of independent film.

In October 1999, I walked into Brady Lewis' duplex in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pleasantly greeted at the door by his wife, Carla, I soon found myself confronted by a bright-eyed, energetic young boy. Lewis' son, Liam, was surrounded by a scattered assortment of trinket toys. The dinosaur picture books caught my eye. "You like dinosaurs?" I asked Liam. "Oh, yes," he said, and before long we found ourselves immersed in an imaginative experiment about what would happen if a dinosaur came knocking on the door. "Wouldn't you be afraid of being eaten?" developed into the operative question. "No," Liam insisted. After all, he explained, his daddy would protect him.

My conversation with Liam was interrupted by the entrance of the man himself -- daddy (cool?). Lewis shook my hand and directed me to the second floor of the duplex. After saying my goodbyes to his son, I followed Lewis up the narrow staircase which lead to his apartment studio. As we made our way up, I wondered about the widespread fascination children like Liam have with the grotesquely lumbering lizards of the Paleozoic past. Lewis, however, would soon turn our conversation toward another species of animal: the domestic feline. Yet, thematically, my interview with him would share a common thread with my discussion with his son: carnivorousness. The minor theme of cats and kittens which sets part of the

background tone for his new film, *Daddy Cool*, is punctuated by the fact that kittens are food for one of the main characters, a psychologist who is a reformed werewolf.

As I trailed behind Lewis, we entered his studio, a strange, ambiguous cross between clutter and order. As we entered the door, I saw a shelf on the left stacked with books and a variety of filmmaking equipment. Beyond the first half of the room, the room narrowed and contained an editing table on one side and an Apple computer on the right. But the first thing Lewis moved toward was not a piece of equipment or book, but a bizarre rack of tattered stuffed animals. He proudly introduced me to his 20-year-old cat rack, which had lived its former life at Kennywood Park, a themepark in Pittsburgh. I was embarrassed to say that I had no clue what a "cat rack" could possibly be, but quickly learned, as Lewis explained, that "it's like an antique carnival game. You can't buy one anymore. This guy had a partial interest in a carnival that went bankrupt, and he was selling stuff off. It was advertised in the newspaper at $300 or best offer."

You can still find variations on the cat rack at just about any carnival or amusement park. You pay your money, receive a number of balls which you use to knock down the stuffed animals on the rack. If you knock down a certain number of cats, you get a meager prize.

"Why the interest in cat racks?" I asked.

"Well, I had named my production company Cat Rack films."

I knew that, but, as far as I was concerned, the name was a neologism of trivial importance. Little did I know, the cat theme would pervade our conversation for the next two hours. Rather than describe what a cat rack looks like in action, Lewis showed me the cat rack scene in his film.

In the cat rack scene of *Daddy Cool*, a pre-pubescent boy is seen tossing balls at a cat rack and missing the targets one after another. "This kid keeps missing," Lewis explained, "and then he has this slow-motion fantasy of knocking down cat after cat . . . After he knocks some down, you see him ripping them to shreds with his teeth. I need a couple more shots of these cats exploding."

Carnivorousness. Boys chewing apart cats, cats exploding, carnage, werewolves eating flesh . . .

"What interested you about cat racks?" I asked.

"This game was my nemesis," he replied. "I would always play and lose."

Playing and losing. It's appropriate, I thought, that an artist making his first full-length film would be concerned with issues of winning and losing. Things are at stake: money, reputation, artistic integrity. That Lewis named his film company Cat Rack Films began to make much more sense to me. The world of commercial films is a world of carnivores. One can. t help but wonder if Lewis will be one of those who are eaten or one of the lucky few who do the eating. I think of his son, Liam, and about dinosaurs knocking on doors. If Daddy's doing the protecting, who's protecting Daddy?

Being the youngest of three brothers, Lewis knows a little something about being a small fish in the pond. For example, when he was a child, his older brother terrorized him with a jar containing a preserved head:

Lewis: When I was a kid, my brother kept a cat's head in a bottle and he used it to keep me out of his bedroom.

Robbins: Your older brother?

L: That was my brother, Dennis. He was about seven years older than me. He would scare me away if I was bothering him by pulling that out. He had stolen it from a biology class at school; it was in formaldehyde.

R: It was just a head?

L: Yeah, he kept it in a jar. The mouth was open like it was in a pain cry, like its head had been chopped off, screaming or something. It was pretty horrifying.

R: That's pretty interesting. In one of the scenes of your film, you have a head in a jar, which is a human head, and then your company is Cat Rack Films. The cat theme and the jar theme.

L: There's a major cat theme all through this film. That's why the cat rack itself is sort of important. There is one character who has a relationship with a couple of different cats.

Lewis shows me a scene in the film, in which a female character is trying on hats and petting a cat.

R: Is that your cat?

L: Yes. My other cat also has a cameo in another part of the film, as well. But part of the cat theme, also, is a fellow who is a werewolf. He's a reformed werewolf.

R: A reformed werewolf?

L: Yes. Instead of killing people, he hangs out a seedy hotels on the night of the full moon and just eats kittens.

He shows me a scene of the werewolf character, who looks a bit like a younger Marlon Brando with more hair.

L: He's coming into the hotel room, and sets his lunch box down. There are a couple of scenes where you see kittens in the lunch box, implying but not actually showing that he's eating them. That would be in poor taste. And, there is a cat watching him as he transforms into a werewolf. So, there's a quite a lot of cat images all throughout.

R: What is it about cats? Why "Cat Rack Films?" Why all the cats?

L: I chose Cat Rack Films as the name of my company because I had that cat rack. The kid knocking down cats from the cat rack was one of the first scenes that I had written. And it was just something that I liked as an image. I had to choose a name for the production company, because I had to form a corporation. So that was what I came up with. That might be where the cat theme for the film started, but it developed in the idea of the werewolf character trying not to kill people, but still having to find sustenance -- blood -- somehow. Kittens were an easy thing because you can get them for free; you don. t have to catch anything. You just have to get them once a month, sort of like feeding a snake a mouse once a month, or something like that, if you have a boa constrictor.

From Lewis' description, the reformed werewolf is a werewolf racked with guilt. He's a reluctant carnivore.

L: This other character, the woman who actually wants to kill her evangelist father, has a cat as a pet. A cat seemed like a good pet for her because she. s a detached character. A cat, as opposed to a dog, is an aloof pet. I have a scene in which she's petting a cat while you're hearing a voiceover. She's not just petting the cat, she's wearing white gloves while she's petting the cat, which is an even more detached action since she's not even touching the animal. This worked out well on a practical level, too, because the actress happens to be very allergic to cats.

I just can't help it. Not being a journalist, per se, but a psychologist, I have this compulsion to tie loose ends together, to find meaning in the obscure and ambiguous.

R: So, you have this aloofness and detachment with the cats, but they're also these sort of . . . victims.

L: Yes, I don't think there is a deep meaning about it. It just developed to the point where there are cats all through the film. Although I would say also, as far as horror films go, one of the real deliberate models for a horror film, for me -- and for this film, to the extent that it is a horror film -- is the old 1942 *Cat People* , which is notable as a horror film for the fact that it doesn't show anything. Everything is suggested or implied, but you don't see monsters and that kind of stuff. And that is exactly what goes on in this film. There's a lot implied, a lot off-screen where you hear something and you watch somebody watching it. You watch someone watch something horrific on the television, but you never see the TV screen during the horrific moments. That's really pushing the cat theme, but *Cat People* happens to be one of my favorite horror films.

R: That's something I find really interesting about your films, too. For example, in *Suicide Squeeze* there are all these suggestions and inferences and the audience fills in the gaps, making sense of it in their own way, if they do at all. Or else they say, "What the hell is this?"

L: Yes, and [*Suicide Squeeze*] is a little more difficult of a film than [*Daddy Cool*]. There is really not a story there, but it's presented as if there is. So, the idea is to get people to figure out their own story. [*Daddy Cool*] really does have a story.
With *Suicide Squeeze* , the problem of marketing, aside from the fact that there is not much of a market for half-hour works of fiction, is that there isn't really a story, so many people are going to quit paying attention and watching after awhile. With a film of this length, which is an hour-and-a-half, I started out with the idea that there really had to be a story. But the other films I've done over the years have explored the idea of doing films without a narrative, without really telling stories, at least in any conventional way. But this time, I said, okay, there really has to be a story. So, instead of going minimal on the story, which I've always done before. there are story elements, but not really a story there. I went the whole other direction. I made a very elaborate, involved, wild story. The danger is that people won't be able to follow it. In the early scenes, I re-state in five different ways a core idea that this little boy is the female narrator that you're going to see shortly afterwards -- that they're one and the same person. I have to drive that point home without seeming to beat people over the head with it. But there are a lot of difficult relationships and connections that I have to make. And in terms of a story, it's very involved. There is a psychologist who's a werewolf, and an old version of a father who's a televangelist, but in his young version he was a TV scientist. And a woman who was a boy, and fraternal twins. So, its got wild, elaborate stuff, and I fear people may not catch a lot of it.

R: So you give them a number of chances.

L: Yes, but without seeming to restate things. I try to say it in different ways that seem natural and seem casual in the context of something else, without getting real expository.

R: So you've gone from having little narrative in your earlier films to having a complex narrative. But in both cases there is a postmodern sensibility that creates an ambiguity, giving the film over to the audience.

L: Yeah, yeah. [But in *Daddy Cool*] there is not nearly as much ambiguity and interpretation. There's a lot of room for interpretation, but there is an unmistakable storyline.

R: What kind of people do you think your film will appeal to?

L: Well, I think it will have a college-age and older audience. I think its going to be the audience that goes to see independent films, art films, foreign films, interesting work that is outside of the mainstream; [they look for] something that's entertaining, but something that's a little different. It won't have a mass audience in terms of a blockbuster film, but there should be a few theaters in every [major] city that could successfully play this film or a film like this.

R: It seems to have cinematic elements of films like David Lynch's -- films that develop a real cult following. The films always sell years after they finish at the theaters because they have a base audience of fanatics.

L: Well, if it ever attains that kind of cult status and has a 20 or 30 year life like some of those films do, then I hope I. ve managed to have maintained the rights to it.

R: Your film, as far as distributing, doesn't necessarily have big names involved.

L: I have good actors. That's one thing. An awful lot of low budget films have terrible acting. For a dramatic film, terrible acting is the end. Well, it's almost the end. I suppose there are some notable exceptions. I can think of some films where the acting was pretty bad but they were still successful at the box office. But then that's because the acting is almost tongue-in-cheek bad. If you're doing that kind of film and you lose believability, people quit watching. So I think my film will hold up that way, at

least. I feel pretty good about that.

R: Who are your actors?

L : There are three lead actors. Streeter Nelson is the local stage actor. She does comedy. She does some commercials. She does a lot of stage work, and she's been in Pittsburgh for maybe six or seven years. Larry Myers is a longtime Pittsburgh actor. He's also a writer and director. He's been in thirty or more Hollywood-type feature films and lower budget feature films, probably none so low budget as mine, though. He gets character roles in big movies. He's been in *Hoffa* and *Citizen Kohn* . He's been in a lot of movies where he has had roles that were maybe a few minutes in the film. And then John Amplis, who plays the other major character in the film. He's had some lead roles in some feature films and has done a lot of horror film work. It was a struggle for me to persuade him to do this, because he doesn't want to be type-cast as a horror film guy. He did a lot of films early in his career with George Romero. He was the lead in Romero's, I think, 1976, low-budget feature called *Martin*. John played Martin, a teenage vampire, and that was over 20 years ago.

R: Streeter Nelson was more of a stage actor? Had she done film work before?

L: She had only done a very little bit before this. And when we were casting, I actually had some people who had considerably more film experience who were very, very good and who we were thinking about for the role. In a sense, because I didn't know her, it was kind of hard for me to choose her; I felt like I was taking a risk, but she just seemed so right for the part. I ultimately said, regardless of background, this seems like the right person. And I'm really glad that I did cast her because she was really right for the part. Just sort of perfect for the role and I think she brought a lot to the film.

R: It seems like it would be a big transition from stage acting to acting in front of the camera. In stage acting, you have to use big gestures, and, in front of the camera, you have to be much more subtle.

L: It has to be more subtle. Also, on stage, you do a performance from beginning to end. When you do it for the camera, you do it out of sequence, and you do it in bits and pieces, with stops and starts. You have to do the same thing over ten times in a row, and you have to do it the same way every time. Move your left hand the same

way each time you perform every bit of it, and when you do other angles, you have to do the same thing with your left hand during the same words so that its cuttable. Experienced film actors do all that technical stuff repeatedly and very well. I was very fortunate to have three lead actors who all gave me strong performances.

By the time I finished my interview and walked out the door, saying goodbye once again to Liam, I left with the feeling that I had just spoken with a veteran filmmaker. A veteran filmmaker, I decided, has no delusions about the industry and, more than anything else, is happy enough to make a good film -- but would be even happier if it made a little bit of money along the way. I think I understood why Liam felt protected by his father and why he believed that, at least not anytime soon, no dinosaurs would be gobbling him up at his own front door. Lewis knows all about the carnivores, and, although he is reluctant, he is aware of his own carnivorousness, too. Like his psychologist werewolf character in *Daddy Cool*, Lewis himself is a reluctant carnivore, who is all the wiser for knowing who he is. I think of a scene from *Daddy Cool* in which the werewolf recalls the first time he discovered his carnivorous nature:

> *When I got out of bed, I ran my tongue along the edges of my teeth. They were distinctly sharper, and it filled me with a sense of wonder. I felt the pressure of my fingertips. My skin was cool, vibrant, alive. Life has its special moments. This was one of mine. Always, one of mine . . . No more intuitive, random, painful miscalculations. I understood who I was. Today was a beautiful day. Tonight would be even more magical. I had all the time in the world.*