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Stuart Gordon's *King of the Ants* (2003)

Fred Barrett

When Stuart Gordon's *King of the Ants* was released in 2003, many critics zeroed in on its unconventional mixing of genres and its brutality, while also expressing disappointment that it was not, in fact, a straightforward horror film featuring mutated killer ants. Gordon takes cues from classic *film noir*, such as Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953) and Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), to shed light on something rotten at the heart of American society, transplanting his forebears' disillusionment with post-war optimism to the paranoid and jingoistic era of the War on Terror. The focus on violence was particularly prominent amongst the generally mixed reviews, but critics neglected to address the contours and political undercurrents of said violence—beneath its grisly veneer, the film is rife with thorny animal-human imagery that points towards an anti-anthropocentricism.

King of the Ants follows Sean Crawley (Chris McKenna), a young drifter living in Los Angeles, working odd jobs, trying to make ends meet. The plot kicks into motion when an electrician (George Wendt) shows up at a house Crawley is painting. The electrician introduces himself as "Duke," and the two men get to talking. Duke senses a certain aimlessness and malleability in Sean and puts him in touch with his boss, the shady real estate developer Ray Matthews (Daniel Baldwin), who asks Sean to follow Eric Gatley (Ron Livingston), an accountant who has been investigating Matthews' company. Sean, who by this point has revealed himself to be suggestible at best and amoral at worst, takes the assignment without question, shadowing the husband and father of a young daughter and snapping the occasional photograph, while also setting his sights on Gatley's beautiful wife Susan (Kari Wuhrer), who works at a homeless shelter.

Things escalate when a drunk Matthews waits outside Sean's apartment and tells him a long-winded, repugnant story about killing a persistent dog in order to have sex with his eighteen-year-old secretary—he makes sure to mention that the young woman "looked like she was thirteen," much to Sean's amusement. Matthews describes kicking the dog before snapping "its" neck

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"like a twig" when "it" wouldn't stop scratching at the door. He finishes the story by recounting how he coldly walked back into the bedroom after disposing of the dog's body by throwing "it" down the laundry chute. "There's a point to the story, Crawl," he says, his expression turning stern. "Sometimes, you gotta be a little bit ruthless. Something gets in your way, you eliminate it… So the question really is, how far are you willing to go, Crawl?" Matthews uses the disturbing anecdote to goad Sean into killing Gatley, agreeing to pay him $13,000 for the hit. This exchange not only sets Sean on a path that leads him to murder, double crossings, torture, and, eventually, revenge, but it also positions animals as objects within the film's moral and ethical framework.

Written by Charlie Higson (as an adaptation of his own 1992 novel), *King of the Ants* is, at first glance, a departure from the grotesque, Lovecraft-inspired horror on which the acclaimed Gordon made his name. Aside from the appearance of a characteristically Gordon-esque creature during a dream sequence, this bleak neo-noir conjures a unique kind of horror that stands out from the legendary director's famous Lovecraft adaptations. The violence in *King of the Ants* is neither random nor an abstracted force of nature, but rather an outgrowth of the long arms of power, of capital. The film's conception of violence is fascinating in its exacting specificity; it extends beyond the realm of human suffering and into the realm of animal abuse and murder. It's a profoundly ugly film, filled with ugly people who take pleasure in inflicting pain and causing misery. Gordon uses budgetary restrictions to his advantage by employing a dour color scheme—both the day and nighttime shots rival each other in their unpleasantness—and the film's rough contours and harsh textures enhance its vision of a world in disarray, inhabited by sleazy, sweaty, red-faced crooks and people happy to do their bidding for petty monetary rewards.

Sean carries out the hit with only minimal reluctance, viciously beating Gatley after posing as Susan's coworker to gain entry into the house; he delivers the fatal blow by dropping a refrigerator on an unconscious Gatley's head. Following the killing, Sean wanders the streets before finally returning to his tiny apartment, where he is plagued by terrible nightmarish memories of his deed. A confused, scared, and agitated Sean gets in touch with his employers again and agrees to meet Duke at a zoo. Duke denies that Matthews ever wanted Sean to kill Gatley and refuses to pay him. Sean protests and attempts to flee but is abducted by Matthews' men, who take him to a secluded house in the desert. There, Matthews reveals he never intended on paying Sean for the killing and mocks Sean's naïveté. Sean, in turn, reveals that he has hidden the incriminating evidence he stole from Gatley. Realizing they

can't torture the information out of Sean, Matthews and his men spend several days battering him in an effort to inflict cognitive impairment.

This stretch initiates a kind of dehumanization ritual that essentially turns Sean into an animal, an object for his captors to mistreat—a development the film gestures towards during Sean's zoo meeting with Duke, wherein Duke likens Sean to a variety of animals (the film gets its name from Sean being described as an ant). Not only do Matthews and his men treat Sean with extraordinary sadism, but it also causes a psychological rupture where Sean's consciousness is reduced to more base ("animalistic") instincts—it's difficult not to connect his abuse to footage of slaughterhouse workers gleefully torturing animals, which regularly emerges even amidst guarantees of "humane treatment"; his captors even call him "a filthy animal" as they force alcohol down his throat. Sean struggles within and against both human and nonhuman animal registers. During the first night of his captivity, he begins masturbating as he fantasizes about having sex with his victim's widow. His fantasies and dreams quickly curdle, however, and his guilt begins to consume him. Susan appears to him in increasingly harrowing, grotesque ways, culminating in her taking the form of a bizarre and monstrous creature that eats its own excrement. All the while, Sean desperately apologizes to the mirages. The guilt eventually becomes so debilitating that he readily accepts his torture, and at one point even attempts suicide—not as a way out, but rather to inflict the ultimate punishment on himself.

King of the Ants becomes something of a libidinal fugue, one where violence, sex, and extreme emotional and psychological states overlap and intermingle. Contrasted with two other notable films that, in one way or another, situate the question of meat and animal slaughter at the same intersection—Ryuhei Kitamura's underrated Clive Barker adaptation *The Midnight Meat Train* (2008) and Tobe Hooper's legendary *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)—Gordon's approach doesn't make this connection quite as explicit. But put in conversation with each other, the films form an unlikely triptych. *Texas Chain Saw* is both the most politically fiery and viscerally upsetting film of the bunch, but the other two prod at the question of sex in interesting ways. In Kitamura's film, the main character's subsumption into the world of Vinnie Jones' Subway Butcher (and the meat industry-esque brutality that comes with it) coincides not only with his abandoning his vegetarian diet (which the film mocks early on), but also a heightened sexual appetite.

King of the Ants scrambles this dynamic, complicating the causality that propels *Meat Train*'s plot. *Ants* is assembled like something of a Frankenstein

monster: the noir setup gives way to a psychological horror/thriller/drama—complete with flashes of creature-feature body horror—that then devolves into a grim revenge tale. It all seems to zip by in a flash: a badly battered, beaten and bruised Sean manages to make his escape by killing Duke—crouching on all fours, Sean suddenly leaps at him and bites a large chunk out of his throat in supremely "animalistic" fashion. He then jumps into the van of his friend George (Timm Sharp) who, somewhat miraculously, appears at the house just as Sean is breaking free from his captors. George drives Sean back into the city but throws him out of the car when Sean confesses to murdering Gatley. Covered in bruises and dried blood, Sean wanders the streets with nothing but an old blanket until, in another miraculous turn, he winds up at the homeless shelter that employs Susan. While there, Sean forges a connection with Susan (who is oblivious to his involvement in her husband's death) and ends up moving into her house, the very house where he killed her husband, after she nurses him back to health and he can no longer stay at the shelter.

The two become lovers. Sean, having "rejoined humanity," sees the budding relationship, as well as his fatherly role toward Susan's daughter, Catlin (Carlie Westerman), as a chance at redemption, seemingly oblivious to the twisted nature of his presence in their lives. But the deceptive domestic bliss proves short-lived, and Sean's struggle against becoming-animal is further prodded: while watching Sean from her porch, Susan suddenly recalls seeing him lurking around her house before her husband's murder. Alarmed, she goes through Sean's dresser and finds the stashed evidence, finally connecting him to the killing. When she confronts him, a violent argument ensues and a threatened Sean accidentally kills Susan while defending himself from her attacks. With Sean's connection to humanity now severed, the coda sees him transform into something resembling a butchering animal, turning a very deliberate, very "human" violence against his former captors—the cruelty of omnivore society turned against itself.

King of the Ants depicts the torture that Sean suffers as giddy and sadistic. The abuse exacted on Sean does not reflect the false images of clean, efficient, industrialized processes projected by the animal industrial complex, but is instead depicted in grisly detail to emphasize the cruelty that undergirds the overwhelming majority of capitalist macro-economic processes that are usually rendered invisible. The film is undergirded by the reduction of human to (nonhuman-animal) object. Sean kills Gatley with reluctance and clumsiness, but the Sean that emerges during the film's final stretch makes use of both human cunning and animal instinct; he disposes of his tormentors

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using an axe, gasoline and matches, and, notably, a butcher mallet, before blowing up the house flanking the farm shed where he was tortured. In an overtly stylized shot—really, it borders on genre cliché—Sean walks away from the house and into an uncertain future and embodiment as the explosion rages behind him.

If considered through the framework of animal liberation, *King of the Ants* reveals an order in which animals are always positioned as exploitable, consumable, and killable, an order which extends from a capitalist economic structure that requires continuous sacrifices. This is the terrain of necropolitics where power dictates who lives and who becomes disposable. Gordon's film illustrates how this logic extends across species: the dog who is killed to clear a path for a sexual conquest, Sean's killing of Gatley for monetary gain, and Sean's body subsequently being turned into a site of discipline after stepping out of line. In this world, the distinction between human and non-human animals becomes porous and unstable, and violence emerges not as an aberration but as a foundational element of the capitalist superstructure and its logic of disposability—a logic which has anti-animal violence at its heart.

Fred Barrett is a writer, critic, editor, and cleaner currently based in Hamburg, Germany. His writings on film and music have appeared in *Little White Lies*, *Slant Magazine*, *In Review Online*, and *The Big Ship*, amongst others. He also runs *Electric Dreams*, a newsletter on Substack, where he and the occasional guest contributor publish criticism, essays, short fiction, and interviews. Though his sensibilities generally push him toward the strange, the abrasive, the transgressive, he has also written about contemporary pop music, Japanese melodramas, and teen comedies. His favorite film of all time is *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

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