



January 2023

## Cat Person

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### Recommended Citation

Deacy, Christopher R. (2023) "Cat Person," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/21>

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### Abstract

This is a film review of *Cat Person* (2023), directed by Susanna Fogel.

### Keywords

Romcom, Horror

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### Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



**Cat Person (2023), dir. Susanna Fogel**

*Cat Person* is a stunningly original riff on the romcom genre, both aware of and (for the first half at least) subservient to its dictums and conventions, and one which completely flips genres in the second half—making for a compelling, if unsettling, viewing experience. A parable about modern dating, this film, based on a short story in *The New Yorker*, goes all the way with its premise about the risks involved in embarking on a relationship with a total stranger.

Funnily enough, the central couple here don't meet online but at a cinema concession stand where Margot (Emilia Jones) serves the unreadable Robert (Nicholas Braun) who is more than a decade older than her and identified as “tall, dark and... problematic.” She is drawn to his somewhat awkward demeanor, the suggestion being that they might be kindred souls and someone who might be a first proper boyfriend for her. The film is ambitious in the way that it presents us with a range of imaginary scenarios in some very brief but punchy montages whereby Margot imagines the worst in Robert: not entirely joking when she acknowledges that for all she knows,

he might be a serial killer who keeps his victims chained to a bed in his downstairs dungeon. These alternate reality flashbacks stand us in good stead for later when these horror components end up becoming the mainstay of this film, as Margot, persuaded by her best friend to end their relationship after a humiliating sexual experience, becomes convinced that Robert is stalking her and is planning on revenge. The giddy and electrifying first date (or non-first date here as they like to put it after their first night out together ends in disaster) gives way to feelings of dejection, heartache, lack of trust, and a realization that the fact that he wants to take her to a *Star Wars* movie (when she couldn't be less interested) is the least of her concerns.

There is a scarily real-world dynamic to *Cat Person* which doesn't mine the romcom for laughs but genuinely asks whether we really know the person with whom we are so quick and so keen to exchange bodily fluids. This ends up as a fleshing out of a Margaret Atwood quote which appears at the film's opening regarding how men's worst fear is that a woman will laugh at them while a woman's worst fear is that a man will murder them. The film does go for a very violent second half which takes all the worst fears surrounding dating into a literal rendering, and while this is skillfully done, I am not sure that this will find a requisite audience as the romcom crowd and the horror aficionados are not necessarily the same. We tend to feel some measure of sympathy for both Margot and Robert, and there are times when Margot becomes the predator and he the prey—she goes to the cops with an accusation of being stalked, yet she is the one who plants a tracking device on his car—and we even have cause to wonder at the end whether she is actually imagining all that is happening to her, as a worst case scenario, rather than for this to be the reality itself. The film will appeal to anyone who has ended up in a relationship with someone they don't really know—or, the more their dating continues, even *like*—and it feeds on the ways in which we may sometimes be prepared to give someone the benefit of the doubt in early courtship as we are

eager to please the other person, but this can easily degenerate into disdain and acrimony, with Margot here fearing for her life. The ending in the film differs from the short story, but it is a brave and bold decision to turn the romcom into a thriller or horror movie, the lines between which are perhaps not really all that discrete after all.