

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE 1

How to Cite: Rooks, I. (2019) Caged by Fragile Bonds: A Review of Michael Pearce's *Beast*. *Gothic Nature*. 1, 285-287. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: 14 September 2019

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a double-blind process.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Gothic Nature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Caged by Frail and Fragile Bonds: A Review of Michael Pearce's *Beast*

(UK: Agile Films, Stray Bear Productions, 2017)

Isaac Rooks

A wide shot of the ocean opens *Beast* and immediately establishes Jersey's isolation. It initiates a montage of beautifully composed images introducing the island's landscapes. Nestled amidst these picturesque surroundings are memorials to a killer's victims. Photographs and flowers surround a lonely pole in a field and the roots of a fallen tree. A murderer stalks this community, raping and killing women. Two outsiders, Moll (Jessie Buckley) and Pascal (Johnny Flynn), fall in love against this paranoid backdrop.

The title and narrative suggest a fairytale. A young woman trying to escape her unkind family falls for a seductive stranger who emerges from the wilderness. This might be a riff on *Beauty and the Beast*, as a woman's love redeems an unrefined but misunderstood man. Alternatively, Pascal may be the Big Bad Wolf, rather than Prince Charming. The title could also refer generally to something non-human, or someone whose actions grossly violate social norms.

Beast engages a classic horror theme: fear of the unrestrained violence that may lurk beneath peoples' civilised facades. This applies not only to the enigmatic Pascal. In an introductory voice-over, Moll compares herself to a killer whale in captivity. In the wild, an orca's song travels vast distances to reach its own kind. In a tank, those cries echo and drive the orcas mad. *Beast* codes Moll's roiling interiority as animalistic. Her narration accompanies images of Moll plucking a dark hair from her neck and practicing her smile before a mirror. The film suggests that Moll struggles to repress her animalistic side, something confirmed by vague references to the dark past of this 'wild one'.

Pascal, a fellow wild one, enters Moll's life to save her from a man's unwanted advances. He then promises to rescue her on a deeper level. Examining a self-inflicted injury on Moll's hand, Pascal observes: 'You're wounded. I can fix that'. In Pascal's truck, Moll discovers a book featuring pictures of animals. Pascal muses that the illustrator forgot to include images of people, signaling that he understands the animal within himself and

recognises the same in her. Unlike Moll, with her mirror routine, Pascal embraces his animality. That difference comes through in their performances. In the early sections of *Beast*, Flynn's delivery has an almost lazy, relaxed quality, suggesting an individual at ease. In contrast, Buckley gives a tense and mannered performance. She becomes looser and more explosive as the characters' relationship progresses and Moll unleashes her pent-up wild side.

Moll and Pascal represent different elements of their Jersey home. The sunny isle seems an unlikely site for Gothic horror. *Beast* presents Jersey as having a mundane developed side. Moll's family lives in a spotless home in an affluent suburb. Yet Jersey has another side, an environment of jagged cliffs and raging seas. In the beginning, Moll primarily interacts with Jersey's countryside by leading sedate bus tours for the elderly. Pascal connects Moll to a less safe but more romantic part of Jersey. After meeting Pascal, a violent dream awakens Moll. She heads downstairs and stares out her home's patio doors at the ominously beautiful dark woods that stand just outside. Pascal, a poacher with scars on his face and dirt under his nails, represents something wild and ancient about the island. During an awkward dinner with Moll's family, her mother asks where Pascal is from. He claims deep roots on Jersey, dating back to Saxon lords who ruled the island. Pascal turns the question back on the suburb dwellers, asking what they are doing on his land.

The dirt on Pascal's hands becomes an important element in the film. Moll notices with pleasure how his work boots track dirt on her family's clean carpet. After a sexual encounter with Pascal in the woods, Moll rakes her nails across the couch cushions, leaving dirty trails. However, this earthy sexuality might be dangerous. Women are being abducted from their homes, their violated bodies dumped outside. One victim is found half-buried in soft earth, smothered after the killer stuffed her mouth with dirt. As accusations against Pascal overwhelm Moll, she visits this victim's shallow grave. She crawls in and covers herself with dirt, filling her own mouth with soil. Moll's character displays self-destructive tendencies throughout the film. Her relationship with this potentially dangerous man may be part of the same impulses. When choking herself, Moll seems to experiment with how much pleasurable dirt she could tolerate before it would destroy her.

Moll's relationship with Pascal is passionate and erotic. Their romantic encounters are linked to the land: they kiss on a cliff, embrace in the waves, and have sex in the dark woods. The film hints at a pheromonal quality to their attraction. Moll attributes her interest in Pascal

to his scent, which others find unpleasant. There is a sense throughout the film that an animal attraction based on their similarities draws the two together. The question becomes how much beast is in each of them?

Some might view *Beast* as accepting and perpetuating simplistic conceptual binaries of human/non-human and nature/civilisation. *Beast* arguably understands and presents the human/non-human division as a cultural construction, one whose repressive and judgmental connotations can have negative consequences. The film does less to undermine the nature/civilisation divide. However, in both cases, the film avoids attaching an unambiguous value judgment to the divisions. The human and civilised are not inherently superior to the non-human and natural. Nice guys in the film turn nasty when rejected. Self-righteous fathers protect their community through racist bullying. Moll's mother controls Moll abusively, switching abruptly between sweetness and venom. *Beast* also avoids romanticising the non-human and the natural world. It presents a scenario that resists the neat resolution of many horror texts. No matter the conclusion, *Beast* suggests that order and civility cannot be restored because they were always illusory. The film is ultimately about Moll's quest to figure out her place in the world and her relationship to those around her, and the film offers no easy resolutions to this journey either.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beast. (2017) [Film]. Pearce, M. dir. UK: Agile Films, Stray Bear Productions.