



SCALA: SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK AND ROLL CINEMA

The Beast (La Bête)

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Director: Walerian Borowczyk

Production Company: Argos-Films

Producer: Anatole Dauman

Production Manager: Dominique Duvergé

Production Assistants: Alain Cayrade,

Claude Delon, Michel Valio, Jean-Pierre Platel,

Monique Prim, Florence Bory, Florence Dauman

Assistant Director: Christiane Regnault

Screenplay/Dialogue: Walerian Borowczyk

Directors of Photography: Bernard Daillencourt,

Marcel Grignon

Camera Operator: Noël Véry

Editor: Walerian Borowczyk

Art Director: Jacques d'Ovidio

Set Decorator: Alain Guillé

Costumes: Piet Bolscher

Make-up: Odette Berroyer

Music: Domenico Scarlatti

Sound Recording: Jean-Pierre Ruh, Michel Laurent

Sound Re-recording: Alex Pront, Jean Duguet

Cast:

Sirpa Lane (*Romilda de l'Espérance*)

Lisbeth Hummel (*Lucy Broadhurst*)

Elisabeth Kahson (*Virginia Broadhurst*)

Pierre Benedetti (*Mathurin de l'Espérance*)

Guy Tréjean (*Pierre, Marquis de l'Espérance*)

Dalio (*Rommondelo, Duke de Balo*)

Roland Armontel (*priest*)

Pascale Rivault (*Clarisse de l'Espérance*)

Jean Martinelli (*Cardinal Joseph de Balo*)

Robert Capia (*Roberto Capia*)

Hassan Falle (*Ifany*)

Marie Testanière (*Marie*)

Stéphane Testanière (*Stéphane*)

Anna Baldaccini

Mathieu Rivolier

Thierry Bourdon

Julien Hanany

France 1975

98 mins

Digital

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When Walerian Borowczyk's erotic fable *The Beast* was first released in France in August 1975 it marked a decisive moment in the critical evaluation of the Polish-born filmmaker. Previously heralded for his various avantgarde animated shorts and the arthouse favourites *Goto*, *Island of Love* (1968) and *Blanche* (1971), here he was riding the wave of the relaxation in film censorship that had enabled *Emmanuelle* to become an international phenomenon, and fast earning himself the accusation of being a superior pornographer. The label would dog Borowczyk for the rest of his career (his last feature was made in the late 80s), suggesting a great talent gone to waste. But I believe the picture is more complex than that and would even suggest that 'Borowczyk going erotic' was pretty similar to what happened in popular music when 'Dylan went electric'.

Of course the backward stance of Britain's censorship system – which only in 2001 passed *The Beast* uncut for theatrical exhibition – has affected the perception in the UK of Borowczyk's work. The first signs that the director had shifted into a cinematic terrain where nudity (mainly female) and sexual explicitness were a continual testing ground came with the presentation of *Immoral Tales* as a work in progress at the 1973 London Film Festival. Three short self-contained films were shown, each focusing on a specific taboo, concluding with 'The True Story of the Beast of Gevaudan' (the Gevaudan mystery is France's equivalent of Nessie). In a Fragonard-like setting, a young aristocrat is disturbed from her harpsichord practice (this is the 18th century) to search for a lost sheep in the woods and is ravaged by a hairy beast which she in turn kills through her own inexhaustible sexual appetite.

A packed house contained a number of BFI bigwigs who stayed to the end to fulminate against what they had witnessed. Not only was this a rape fantasy perpetrated by a man, but the beast's oversize phallus was shown oozing what seemed like gallons of semen. If this was meant to be comedy on the theme of bestiality (and the jaunty Scarlatti on the soundtrack suggested as much), it was a real test of British humour. An outraged Anthony Howard wondered in a *New Statesman* editorial if the festival's 'no-censorship' stance was now acceptable. *The Beast* raised its head again in 1975 when the London Film Festival presented its new feature-length incarnation, the original short now appearing as a dream sequence in a contemporary tale of a declining French aristocratic family's attempt to preserve its line by marrying off its dubious male heir to an American heiress.

Also shown that year was a feature Borowczyk had made in Poland at the end of the previous year, *The Story of Sin*, an adaptation of Stefan Zeromski's fin-de-siècle saga of a young woman's journey from repression to passion via poverty, murder and prostitution. But while *The Story of Sin* contained only occasional nudity and sexual congress (no more than was standard for European films of the time), *The Beast* exceeded all conventions in what was deemed acceptable or 'tasteful' in mainstream cinema, with scenes of coupling horses, female masturbation with a rose, and of course, that hairy monster again. The BBFC declared the film impossible to pass and even when *The Beast* was finally released – in London only – with a GLC 'X' in September 1978 its nervous distributor made extensive cuts, mainly of those excessive ejaculations (made with flour and water, for those who like to know these things).

It's important at this distance to stress that Borowczyk was a revered figure in the 70s, fascinating such filmmakers as Terry Gilliam, Neil Jordan and the Quay

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Basket Case

Mon 1 Jan 15:20; Thu 25 Jan 20:40

Pink Flamingos

Mon 1 Jan 18:20; Fri 19 Jan 18:20; Fri 26 Jan 20:50
(+ intro by Mark Moore and Tasty Tim)

Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!

Tue 2 Jan 18:20; Thu 18 Jan 21:00 (+ intro by film scholar and writer Virginie Selavy)

Taxi zum Klo

Wed 3 Jan 20:50; Mon 8 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by Vic Roberts, Scala usher)

The Warriors

Sat 6 Jan 18:15; Sun 14 Jan 12:00; Wed 17 Jan 20:55 (+ intro by SCALA!!! co-director Ali Catterall)

Thundercrack!

Sat 6 Jan 20:00; Sun 14 Jan 14:10

The Evil Dead

Fri 5 Jan 20:45 (+ intro by Graham Humphreys, freelance illustrator and designer of the original UK marketing for The Evil Dead); Tue 30 Jan 18:10

Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom

Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma
Tue 9 Jan 20:35 (+ intro by season curator Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Tue 23 Jan 18:10

Sight and Sound Presents:

Scala Spirit 1993-2023

Thu 11 Jan 18:20

Shivers

Thu 11 Jan 21:00; Sun 21 Jan 15:20

Pee-wee's Big Adventure

Fri 12 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ben Roberts, BFI CEO);
Wed 31 Jan 18:20

Pink Narcissus + Un chant d'amour

Fri 12 Jan 20:40; Thu 25 Jan 18:20

The Saint: Teresa + intro by Dick Fiddy, Archive TV
Programmer + **The Avengers: A Touch of Brimstone**

Sat 13 Jan 14:30

Looking for Mr Goodbar + Dick

Fri 12 Jan 17:45 (+ intro by season curator Jane Giles); Mon 22 Jan 20:10

The Thing

Sat 13 Jan 20:40; Mon 29 Jan 20:45

The Beast La Bête

Tue 16 Jan 20:45; Tue 23 Jan 20:50

Surprise Film + intro by season curator Jane Giles
Sat 20 Jan 17:10

A Clockwork Orange

Sun 21 Jan 18:00; Wed 31 Jan 20:25

Shock, Horror! The Scala All-nighter:

An American Werewolf in London; The Creature from the Black Lagoon – 3D; Videodrome; The Incredible Shrinking Man; A Nightmare on Elm Street

Sat 27 Jan 22:30 BFI IMAX

Brothers. It's also worth noting that he was turning 50 when *Immoral Tales* was being made. As a young man he was attracted to painting (he executed his first nude woman before he saw one for real) and attended the prestigious Cracow Academy of Fine Art where Andrzej Wajda was a fellow student. He worked as a graphic artist and then made a series of highly sophisticated short films based on drawings and animated objects, most notably *House* (co-directed with Jan Lenica, 1958) which featured eerie processed sounds, copious Victoriana and disturbing juxtapositions of rare beauty and violent destruction, all of which would become key elements in Borowczyk's very particular world.

In 1958 Boro (as he became known) left Poland for France, where he created what is arguably his masterpiece, *Angels' Games* (1964), a series of disquieting gouaches invoking a prison camp where heads roll and angels' wings are clipped. Gradually the human form came to predominate in his films and the shift to live action was consummated in the short *Rosalie* (1966), with the director's wife Ligia Branice as a woman who has to defend the death of her child against the objects of her transgression.

Living quietly outside Paris, Borowczyk today confines himself mainly to writing short stories and making artworks. He insists all his creativity is the same, whatever the medium. 'I conceive all my films in an instant, and only objective means prevent me from making them in that instant.' He claims the original *Beast* episode was thought up over one session in a café and the subsequent feature scripted in just two days.

Borowczyk has succeeded best when at his freest, either as the solitary animator – 'Filmmakers are lonely people,' he ruefully told me – or working with sympathetic producers, as was the case up to *The Beast*. Much of the decline attributed to him after 1975 can be explained by the genre-casting of a market which sought only to exploit the superficial elements in his work – the sex and violence. In a catalogue drawn up for an exhibition of 'Borophernalia' in Annecy, he limited his own filmography to mainly the 60s and 70s and he insists that everything else was ruined through the compromises he was forced to make (for instance, extant copies of *The Art of Love*, 1983, even feature crude inserts from another Roman sexfest).

The Polish-made *The Story of Sin* remains one of the most popular films in Borowczyk's homeland. According to its director, 'They gave me complete freedom over subject and script. The only cut they imposed was a scene showing the Czarist army marching through a Polish town. Now that Wajda has cut an erotic scene from his 1974 film *Land of Promise* so as not to offend the Pope, I would like to reinstate my sequence!'

What particularly divides people when it comes to *The Story of Sin* and *The Beast* is Borowczyk's celebration of female masturbation. In both films the heroines lie naked and use flowers as surrogate objects of adoration, but while in *Story of Sin* the sequence is self-consciously framed as if part of the literary scaffolding, in *The Beast* it's filmed in intense close-ups, eventually rendering visible what is supposed not to be seen. So in 1975 one could (in theory) choose between what might be called Boro-lite and a dangerous leap into an explosively sexual world. Borowczyk himself is not keen to pursue too much retrospective analysis, simply noting that it was the melodramatic form of Zeromski's novel which interested him most of all, and that *The Beast* 'really is more of a comedy than an erotic film'. Perhaps, 25 years on, audiences will agree.

David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, June 2001