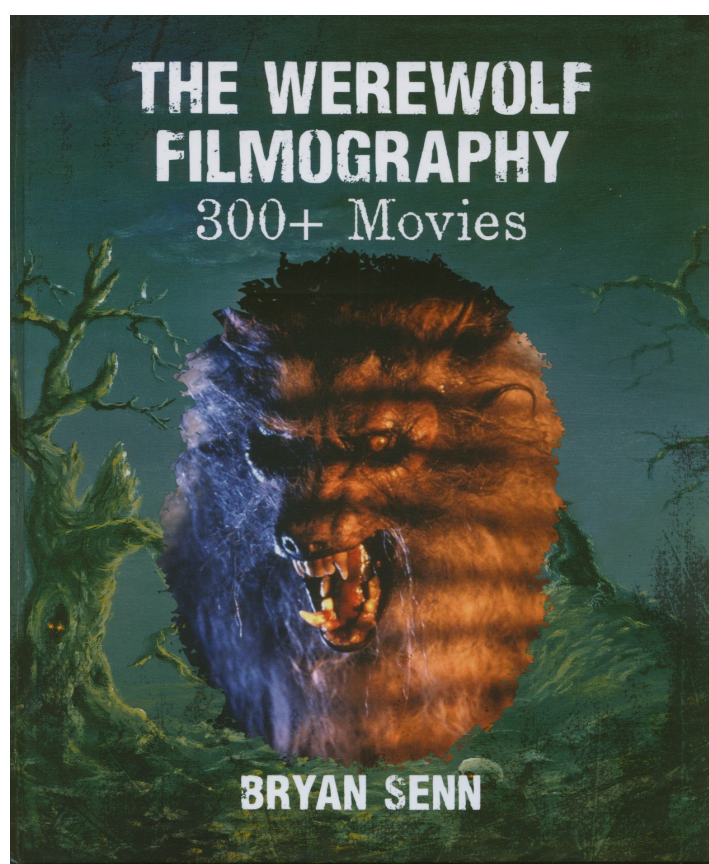


Are werewolf films xenophobic and misogynistic?



Notes on Bryan Senn, *The Werewolf Filmography: 300+ Movies* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 2017).

Willem de Blécourt

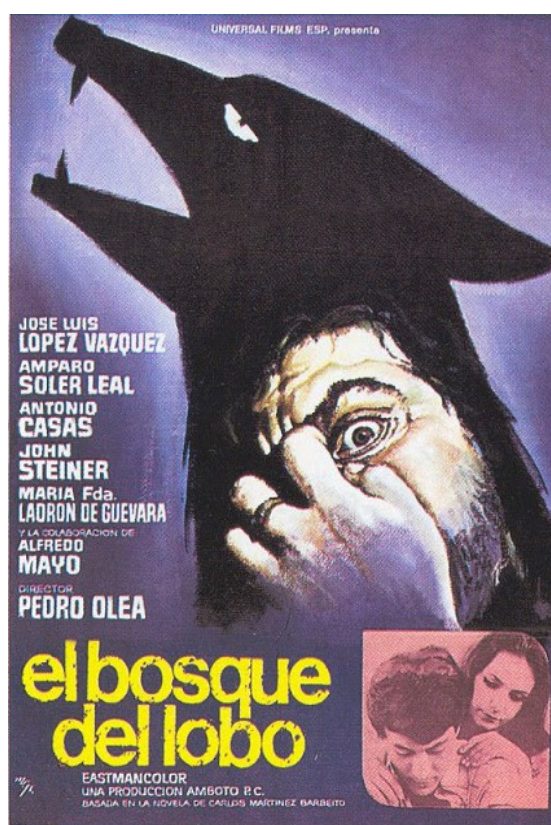
Writing a review of Bryan Senn's *Werewolf Filmography*,¹ something started to gnaw at my consciousness. My interest in werewolf films stems from a fascination with the magic of shape-shifting rather than the horror genre. Yet through the gore and the blood, this book forced me to return to the "real" world of self-interest, power games and greediness. Let me be fair: there is no doubt that the *Filmography* will prove very helpful to the student of werewolf films. It has 158 entries in its main section on films that are accessible to the Anglophone viewer, 135 entries in the section "Pseudowolves" which deals with multi-narrative films (or anthologies) and foreign films, and a smaller section on "Other Were-Beasts" (which will not concern me much here), a rating system that classifies the films from nil to five and extensive descriptions of each film. These classifications and assessments nevertheless point in a certain direction; they do not just evoke a proper scare but celebrate violence and a certain form of masculinity that is, in my view, politically flawed. It is easy to blame the author for this as he wrote and organised the volume and his preferences shine through his ratings and his texts. His material is, of course, not always innocent either. This can be shown by analysing a select number of films which I will forego here. The *Filmography* offers the opportunity to lift the analysis to a meta-level and to potentially uncover

1 To be published in the Winter issue of *Gramarye*, 2017.

both traces of the author's bias and the werewolf's character. The wolf may be an admirable animal, but "The Beast Within" appears cruel and vicious.

In the following I will briefly scroll through and comment on the *Filmography's* categorisation, its ratings and reviews. The argument I put forward is that by devising a section on "Pseudowolves", Senn automatically prioritised the English-language film above others, most of all those in Spanish, and turned not just its werewolves but also its speakers into lesser beings. In "Pseudowolves" the texts are shorter, only the director is named, annotations are minimal, and the rating is missing. This subtle xenophobia becomes evident also in the way Native American werewolves are delegated to the sidelines. There is no real discussion how to compare different "werewolves" from different cultures.

Furthermore, the rating system seems far from neutral and is certainly not in line with the popularity of films. I thought this especially influenced the ratings for films with women werewolves but it only does so a little. Senn's scepticism about feminism becomes evident when he writes about *Ginger Snaps*, that it "never *devolves* into a feminist polemic" (p. 104, my italics). He nevertheless places the very few feminist werewolf films in the top half of his rating system. The stars actually appear indicative for misogyny when they are approached historically. Of course ratings convey the quality of a film, but they are less relevant when a film is considered part of a wider culture in which it reveals first and foremost the attitudes to the werewolf. Budget strictures and the filmmakers' quest for fame mean that script writers do not experiment as much as novelists or short story authors; films thus stay closer to more general notions.



The Other werewolf

When the films listed by Senn in his appended "Chronology" are compared with those in the International Movie Database (IMDb) and the *Filmography's* predecessor, Stephen Jones' *The Illustrated Werewolf Movie Guide*² one of the most striking things is the discrepancy between the three. I have chosen the 1960s for a first impression, partly because the relatively few werewolves

² London: Titan Books, 1996.

films in that period ease the task. A next step would be to extend the exercise through other decades, which I may do at a later stage. It appears that most 1960 films in the IMDb which do not figure in the Chronology can be found in the pseudowolves section. *Hell's Creatures* of 1968, originally *La Marca del Hombre Lobo*, can be found in the main section of the *Filmography* under the title *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror*. The films in the pseudowolves category include *Demonio Azul*, a Mexican film which was only issued in Spanish and *Las noches del Hombre Lobo*, with the English title *Nights of the Werewolf*. *Sadisterotica*, a Spanish film of 1969 apparently featured a "werewolf-like" man and is not in the *Filmography*, possibly because the presence of the wolf man was deemed too feeble. The pseudowolves are left out of the Chronology; it is an unfortunate label as the wolves here are as genuine or fake as their English cousins, and it would have been better had this section been split up in: Foreign Werewolf Films (perhaps even listed per country) and Werewolves in Anthologies.

Stephen Jones's more inclusive approach, on the other hand, has listed 30 films in his chapter on the 1960s that can with some effort be called werewolf films (I have omitted all the films with other animals). Here titles can be found such as the Mexican *Santo Contra Las Mujeres Vampiro*, which according to Senn only touches on the werewolf theme (p. 173) or *Santo en el museo de cera* of 1963, in which a wax werewolf is briefly visible. Senn has omitted the last title too, again for good reasons. *La Loba*, also a Mexican production, features in the pseudowolves. *El Charro de las Calaveras* (a.k.a *Rider of the Skulls*) is, again, described in the pseudo section, which also applies to *La Venganza de Huracán Ramirez*. The tendency to banish Mexican (wrestler) films from the main section becomes even more obvious when the *Filmography* is compared to the *Werewolf Movie Guide*.

Moreover, Jones has found several foreign language films which do not feature in the *Filmography* at all. For some this may be justified: the Italian *Io Uccido, Tu Uccidi* (English: *I Kill, You Kill*) features, according to Jones, "a woman who suffers from sexual lycanthropy", of which I have not yet found any confirmation.³ In the Czechoslovakian *The Valley of the Bees* one of the protagonists "transforms into a werewolf before being torn apart by hounds". The Philippinean *Tore ng diyablo* even features, thus Jones, a whole "army of lycanthropes led by a powerful werewolf".⁴ Most interestingly, however, seems the Spanish film *El Bosque de Ancines* or *El Bosque del Lobo* of the late 1960s which is a predecessor of the 2004 Spanish werewolf film *Romasanta*.⁵

It should be evident that the way a horror enthusiast like Senn classifies or selects werewolf films does not necessarily have to reveal anything about a possible xenophobia in werewolf films. At the most it is an indication of how a number of their viewers consider strangers. The counter example in the *Filmography* is provided by the Spanish *Lobos de Arga* of 2011, known in the USA as *Game of Werewolves* and in the UK as *Attack of the Werewolves*. This is the only foreign-language werewolf film that is celebrated by Senn with the maximum of five stars. Yet there is at least another clue to the preference for home-grown werewolves.

In the *Filmography* the designation "Native American" is not indexed; I have found it in three "proper" werewolf films and in four pseudo ones. In Senn's view *Wolfen* (USA 1981) "is not a werewolf film" (p. 348), which denies its literary history. The Native Americans only appear in the film version and not in Strieber's book on which it is based; in the latter the werewolf is French. In the film the Native Americans are comparable to the wolfen rather than the same. Nevertheless, a Native American is shown (not) changing during the full moon, or changing in his mind. Not discussing *Wolfen* in relation to (other) werewolf films impoverishes the discussion. Genuine Native American werewolves,⁶ even a whole pack, can be observed in *The Twilight Saga*. This hugely popular series of four films has been granted an average rating of 1¼ star and is, in Senn's view, for adolescent girls and not for real men: "A fad blown out of all proportion to its actual depth or real value" (p. 207). Only the Canadian/UK production *Skinwalkers* of 2006 comes somewhere near a

3 Cf. the Italian wikipedia page: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Io_uccido,_tu_uccidi

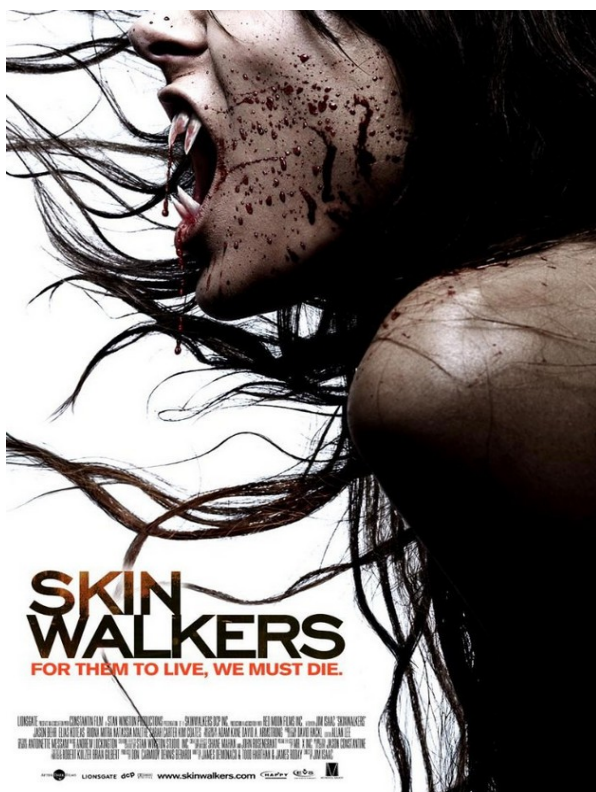
4 Both quotations from Jones, *Werewolf Movie Guide*, 72.

5 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_bosque_del_lobo

6 At least in the eyes of the film makers.

decent assessment, as it focusses on the contrast between considering the werewolf as a curse or a gift. The werewolf western *Blood Moon* (UK 2014) also staged a Navajo skinwalker but missed a few opportunities: "Is the skinwalker's unprovoked attack a form of Native American retribution? Is it something more personal? Is he merely hungry? The script ignores such potentially intriguing issues, making this werewolf merely a one-dimensional monster" (p. 45).

Of the three "pseudo" werewolf films, *Breaking Wind* is described as a failed parody on *Twilight*, "the cinematic equivalent of a fart in a windstorm" (p. 278). The other two, however, entice a rethinking of the concept of the werewolf from a Native American point of view. *The Legend of Wolf Mountain* is a children's film in the same mode as the *Witch Mountain* sequence but with a wolf spirit (p. 312). In *Monsterwolf* the spirit protector of the local tribe fights against illegal drilling. According to Senn these are not even werewolves.



She-wolves

Cinematic werewolves are predominantly male. Less than 5 % of the werewolf films features a female werewolf or female werewolves. Women (and men) have always been victims of werewolves; the people in *Tickle Me* (UK 1965, with Elvis Presley) who are scared by a crook wearing a werewolf mask is only the friendly version.⁷ Thanks to the pioneering work of Hannah Priest, there is now an exiting volume on She-wolves.⁸ Female werewolves, argues one of its contributors, loose their femininity and become more masculine. They are "visually indistinguishable from male beasts" and their transformation degenders them.⁹ That implies that at least one way to deal with female werewolves is to rob them of the very thing that makes them stand out. They can thus be seen as representative for women in werewolf films.

At first glance, the ratings do not display a stark rejection of female werewolves; films with she-wolves perform slightly better than average, although only one has 4½ stars and six others 3

⁷ *Werewolf Movie Guide*, 72. Not in the *Filmography*.

⁸ Hannah Priest, *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015)

⁹ Peter Hutchings, 'The she-wolves of horror cinema', in: *She-Wolf*, 166-179, quotes from pp. 171, 172, 174.

and 3½ respectively. Thus there are seven she-wolf films in the top half stand compared with 61 male werewolf films there, which is far less than half of the total of 158 (minus the pseudos). None of the she-wolf films are in the very top, only *Ginger Snaps* has been accredited 4½ stars. The very best films, in Senn's estimate are *An American Werewolf in London*, *Dog Soldiers*, *Game of Werewolves*, *The Howling*, and *The Wolf Man* and they are about male werewolves, although *Dog Soldiers* and *The Howling* feature packs in which a few she-wolves are included.

Another eight films are ranked below 3 stars, but this is where the majority of the werewolf films are placed. The situation becomes clear, however, once these films are listed chronologically. I have added some, I hope, revealing quotes, plus the ratings in the *Filmography*:



- *Cry of the Werewolf* (USA 1944) **½

".. this *Cry* turns out not to be one of women's liberation but of longing for traditional gender demarcation ... the film casts the woman in power ... as a literal monster, one who willingly sacrifices the notion of love and support to instead walk the path of brutality and evil" (p. 57)

- *She-Wolf of London* (USA 1946) [Pseudo, no rating]

".. a tepid drive-the-heiress-mad drawing-room melodramas" (p. 334); the werewolf is only talked about.

- *La Loba* (Mexico 1965) [Pseudo, no rating]

".. one of the most stunning she-wolves in cinema" (p. 315).

- *Santo vs. the She Wolves* (Mexico 1976) ***

The werewolf queen is the opponent of the hero (p. 192-194).

- *La Lupa Mannara* (Italy 1976), USA: *The Legend of the Wolf Woman* *½

".. a morass of dull soft-core sex and pointless sadism" (p. 145)

- *Wilczyca* (Poland 1982) [Pseudo, no rating]

".. the ungodly woman has burned the family crucifix and sold her soul to the Devil, promising to return after death as a wolf" (p. 347)

- *Howling II ... Your Sister is a Werewolf* (UK/USA 1985) *

An evil werewolf queen and an excuse for voyeurism: "she ... rips off her top to expose her ample breasts in a moment sure to make male viewers sit up and take notice" (p. 125).

- *My Mom's a Werewolf* (USA 1989) *½

".. decided to race ahead with the comedy aspect, leaving its horror elements as non-starters" (p. 162); ".. various adult-oriented sex jokes" (p. 163)

- *An Erotic Werewolf in London* (USA 2006) *

".. a thin .. veneer of lycanthropy thrown over its softcore Sapphic sex scenes" (p. 83).

Although it is very well possible to have a different approach to (some of) these films, the ratings and the quotes indicate a denigrating attitude towards female werewolves and by implication to women. This started to change in the 1980s. From then there are at least four films about women whose metamorphosis into a wolf is celebrated as an acquisition of female power and agency:

- *The Company of Wolves* (UK 1984) ***

A coming-of-age collection of tales which Senn does not seem to fully understand.¹⁰

- *Wilderness* 253-255 (UK 1997) ***½

".. a thought-provoking film about the animal within us all and our innate need to belong" (p. 254)

- *Ginger Snaps* (Canada 2000) ****½

".. utilizes lycanthropy as a metaphor for the transformation of girl into woman, with all the hormonally induced confusion, rage and, yes, blood that entails" (p. 102)

- *The Curse* (USA 2001) ***

".. 'what makes you feel like a werewolf?' Frida's response: 'I ate a guy last night'" (p. 60).¹¹

Marginality

With only 5% of the werewolves female it leaves 95% male. Even if the number of she-wolves were to double, that would still make the proportion 10% to 90%. Not every she-wolf signifies female empowerment either. The role of female werewolf in *The Howling*, for instance, is reduced to seducing the husband of the protagonist. The function of the she-wolf in *The Beast of Bray Road* is mainly to surprise the viewers in the end. *War Wolves* is more about a pack than about the women in it. Or take the old ladies in *Late Phases* who provide extra man [!] power to the male werewolf. The handful of good films about she-wolves can still be considered as marginal, which does not bode well for the women in all the other films.

The same can be concluded for the circa twenty Spanish and Mexican werewolf films, or for the few about Native Americans. Especially the latter have great potential for a rethinking of the werewolf concept which has yet to develop. The films mentioned here can certainly be put through the rating systems of the IMDb. As long as it remains unknown who did the actual rating and on which criteria, it does not reveal much (and in its turn the exercise may influence the popularity rating). Internet opinions are problematic since they are too often anonymous. Does the brief meta research I performed here then confirms my suspicions? I would say: yes, on the whole it does. The amount of films that bear traces of xenophobia and misogyny only needs to be qualified and some films do show signs of improvement. Nevertheless, I will keep the concepts of xenophobia and misogyny in the back of my mind when I next watch a werewolf film.

¹⁰ Cf. my article in *She-Wolf*, 'The case of the cut-off hand', 148-165.

¹¹ This film was made before *Ginger Snaps* and there is a disturbing similarity between the two which needs to be properly analysed.