



THE CAT'S MEOW

New documentary *Kedi* takes a look at Istanbul's beloved — and threatened — population of street cats

I live with two cats, and I haven't looked at either of them in quite the same way since seeing *Kedi*, a lovely new documentary about the entrenched population of street cats roaming the ancient city of Istanbul.

Don't get me wrong. I've always felt a profound spiritual connection to cats, but now a certain suspicion of mine — a tingly sense that they have something otherworldly and important to teach me about life, death and love — has become a conviction. My eyes have been opened, and I'm experiencing our relationship with an even greater sense of sanctity and, strange to say, responsibility.

That is the power of this film. Directed by Ceyda Torun, *Kedi* is the profile of seven stray felines — each one a distinct character and total charmer — and the various Turkish urbanites affected by their daily comings and goings. The documentary is simply constructed and lovingly construed; the cinematography, which captures the grit and grandeur of Istanbul, often through a cat's-eye view, is beautiful, and the interviews are pieced together in such a way that the simple narrative begins to plumb unexpected, almost religious depths of feeling.

The late novelist William Burroughs once said that "my relationship with cats has saved me from a deadly, pervasive ignorance," and such a claim seems borne out in *Kedi*. In interview after interview, shopkeepers and artists and fishermen from around Istanbul wax philosophic on what these cats have taught them about themselves and about life in general, and the lessons are nothing short of existential.

"It is said cats are aware of God's existence," says one man. "While dogs think people are God, cats don't. They just know better." Several people suggest that cats see people as mere "middlemen" in the heavenly swirl of existence, doers of God's will. Another woman goes so far as to compare felines to aliens whose language we must learn in order to understand the true nature of our place on the planet.

Undoubtedly this sounds like utter pish-posh to some of you, while others, like me, find nothing outrageous in the claim that cats are divine emissaries of deeper truths too often ignored by the myopic human race. The beautiful thing about the film is that it takes no great pains to establish such profundity; what's revealed, in a straightforward and conversational manner, is simply the way everyday people are affected by the animals around them. In that sense, the evidence of cats' spiritual impact is irrefutable, because it passes the litmus test of personal relevance.

Underlying all of this, then, is a more melancholy note. As Istanbul, like the world at large, succumbs to the onslaught of modernity and the relentless, seemingly mindless development that comes with it, the city's population of stray cats is being squeezed out. Hence gentrification takes on a new, more inhumane meaning, one that speaks to concerns beyond status and access. Cats are survivors, it is pointed out, but they are being forced — like people — out of natural habitats and established cultural centers and into the cold concrete jungle with its toxic denial of the fundamental rhythms of life.

Since the so-called Enlightenment, if not from the beginning of history, humanity's arrogance and shortsighted destructiveness have increased, while our sacred connection to the cosmos (call it God, for lack of better term) has atrophied, in seemingly inverse proportion. *Kedi* finds the endangered cats of Istanbul to be a symbol of our fall from grace. We are poor stewards. In mythic terms, the ejection from Eden is not an isolated event; it continues apace. Maybe we should put ourselves on the endangered list.

Or maybe we should take a lesson from the cats. Another person in the film suggests that it's impossible to love human beings if you don't love animals, and after witnessing the way Istanbul's street cats grant something like grace to the several human lives with which the cats interact, the truth of this becomes devastatingly clear.

And this brings me to a chilling realization about my own little city: Banning dogs in downtown Eugene is nothing short of banning people, and it reveals love for neither. I don't know what the opposite of a purr is, but it's what I feel when I think of where we might be heading if we don't break this terrible momentum now hurtling us blindly forward.

I think I'll go home and talk to my cats. (*Broadway Metro*)

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