

Cat People

By Chuck Bowen

Producer Val Lewton was a practitioner of the kind of suggestive horror film that seeps gradually into one's bones, haunting us long after we've seen it and for reasons that might not be readily explainable. Working on skeletal budgets for RKO Pictures, Lewton and his collaborators bring to mind a paraphrasing of something famously said of the music of Miles Davis: the notes that *aren't* played are as important as those that are. Their films are lush and spare, suggestive yet reductive, simple yet inscrutable. Silence is often a pivotal element, held for long periods of time to achieve an aura of existential dread and loneliness. Lewton's productions don't abound in the gothic claptrap that was common to the mainstream American horror film of the 1940s; they're often domestic dramas with a tinge of the supernatural, which heightens a subjective mood of melancholia. One stews in Lewton's films, feeling as if they could wander around within them.

"Cat People," Lewton's first and most famous title for RKO, as well as a collaboration with the elegant director Jacques Tourneur, weds avant-garde symbolism with a variation of the classic story of the were-creature. Lewton rose within RKO Pictures after the studio panicked over the lukewarm reception to "Citizen Kane." The studio's new motto was famously "showmanship in place of genius," though Lewton rendered this aim ironic by producing profitable horror films that appear to be heavily inspired by Orson Welles's, well, genius.

The film's cinematography features rich black tones that have a lush and deep vastness, and white tones that are hard, angular, and almost violently tactile. Soft lighting is purposefully used to cast a sense of dreamy subjectivity. Cinematographer and National Film Preservation Board member John Bailey, who shot Paul Schrader's "Cat People" remake, likens the film's elusive power and rigorous formality not to German expressionism, but Russian constructivism, abounding in geometric images and sharp and hard light. Tourneur created the film's soundtrack with equal mastery, profoundly alternating extended silences with small diegetic sound effects (most chillingly, the dripping of water). A recent restoration and



A zookeeper (Alec Craig) talks to Irena (Simone Simon) about her interest in the zoo's panther. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

DVD release by Criterion heightens the film's aural and visual expressiveness.

The story begins with boy meeting girl: At the Central Park Zoo, Irena (Simone Simon) tosses a sketch toward a trashcan, attracting the attention of Oliver (Kent Smith), who strikes up a flirtation with her. Irena is drawn to the cage of the panther, returning to see it throughout the film, and it comes to suggest the dark heart of her mania and torment. Tourneur even positions the cage in the middle of the frames, the large cat pacing within its enclosure like a stifled demon.

It doesn't take long for Irena to tell Oliver of her obsession with the bestial power that she believes to be inhabiting her—a suspicion that we accept for Simone's extraordinary feline qualities, particularly her oval eyes and sloped cheeks, which the filmmakers point up with sculptural chiaroscuro lighting. Born in Serbia, Irena discusses a statue she has in her apartment of King John, who drove the devil-worshipping Mameluks out of the country, though she notes that the craftiest of them escaped to the mountains. This intensely eerie speech—a case of exposition actually heightening a horror film's mood rather than dampening it—casually scans as a parable of the id and superego.

The statue of King John placed in Irena's apartment

shows a cat impaled on the ruler's sword, and the audience is told that the witches of these villages were cat people—women who turned into cats when sexually aroused or provoked into jealousy. Irena is torn between the cat at her emotional center and the morals pounded into her culture by yet another white Christian savior. The cat obviously represents the id, and King John the superego. But where's the ego? Perhaps Irena doesn't have one.

The resonances in the narrative are elusively dense, particularly for such a trim and unpretentious film. Stories of were-creatures are so inherently suggestive of social and psychic trauma that they can mean anything an artist or an audience wishes to assign to them. "Cat People" is aware of the irony that King John might not be the savior that Irena suggests, as he might have simply imposed his own kind of rule, and this possibility informs how we perceive Oliver and, later, Dr. Judd (Tom Conway), the psychiatrist who takes on Irena as a patient only to immediately commence in hitting on her.

Irena might be the literal monster in "Cat People," but she's also an immigrant woman who's manipulated and batted around by men of authority who're mostly concerned that she gentrify in accordance with American urban culture. Because Irena is afraid to have sex, given what she thinks she may be, the film is a coded tale of a frigid woman in need of conditioning. Irena faces a hypocrisy familiar to all women: She's relentlessly pressured by puritanical society to be chaste, yet resented when she doesn't sexually gratify men. Tom marries Irena, but strays toward his co-worker and friend, Alice (Jane Rudolph), who represents an ideal of the franker, more accommodatingly sexual and easygoing modern woman.

Lewton and Tourneur don't overtly psychoanalyze their film, as these nuances are imbedded in the nar-

rative primarily as free-associative subtext. This subtle, glancing trust in our ability to read the true story between the lines is pivotal to the film's sense of being simultaneously vague and explicit, succinct yet freighted with baggage. The themes exacerbate the primordial obsessiveness of the hard, prismatic shadow imagery. Dozens of images can be taken as puns on the hidden human nature that must be expunged so as to please convention, and on the rage that springs from this expunging.

Most famously, there's the sequence in which Irena stalks Alice around a swimming pool, with the shadows on the walls, and the contrast between the lit water and the dark room suggesting the physicalizing of neuroses in a fashion that's familiar to noir. This contrast is repeated near the end of the film, when a panther corners Oliver and Alice in their office, the light from their drafting desk pinning them to the wall, exposing them as inky darkness encroaches. The film's final punchline settles Irena's internal and external battles on a tragic and infuriating note: Finding Irena dead, Oliver proclaims to Alice that she wasn't lying to them about her curse. His wife destroyed, and this is all that matters to this man. That she honored him.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Chuck Bowen is a staff film critic for Slant Magazine, and his writing has also appeared in The Guardian, The Atlantic, New York Magazine, and Fandor Keyframe, among others. A few of Bowen's young years were spent in an apartment above a movie theater, living with parents who allowed him to occupy the projection booth during off hours. It could be said that these experiences had a formative effect.