

New Statesman (1996), Nov 1, 1999 v128 i4460 p46
Claws and Effect by Jonathan Romney.
Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1999 New Statesman, Ltd.

FILM

Val Lewton was a producer for RKO Pictures in the 1940s, and his name has become a byword for subtlety and understatement in the horror genre. Titles such as *The Leopard Man* and *I Walked with a Zombie* hint at penny-dreadful tawdriness, yet their skilful play with the power of shadows illustrates Lewton's often-quoted tenet: "If you make the screen dark enough, the mind's eye will read anything into it you want." The most famous illustration of this is *Cat People* (1942), directed by Jacques Tourneur, in which shadows on the walls of a swimming pool, or footsteps in the park at night, suggest the presence of a giant cat, and the vengeful metamorphosis of a wronged woman. Is or isn't the mysterious Irena (the peerlessly feline French actress Simone Simon) really a cat in human shape? Five decades on, the critical jury is still out, such is the ambivalence with which Lewton and Tourneur - despite having their hands finally forced by the studio- paint their chiaroscuro picture.

The re-release of *Cat People* and its semi-sequel *The Curse of the Cat People* is a reminder that Lewton's time has come again. His philosophy of shade and suggestion had in effect been banished from horror for decades; now it's making an unexpected comeback. The year's most conspicuous hit, the camcorder chiller *The Blair Witch Project* is, for all its mock-verite zappiness, a textbook example of the Lewton approach, a story as much about apprehension in the dark as about verifiably ghastly events. Another recent US success, the Bruce Willis supernatural vehicle *The Sixth Sense*, similarly takes its cue from Lewtonian restraint. In the context of modern horror excess, both films seem nothing less than revolutionary, and both have this in common with Lewton's work: you come out asking yourself exactly what you think you've seen, exactly what it is that you found so unnerving.

Cat People is a classic case of more-than-meets-the-eye, in every respect. It's not just a story of things glimpsed (or apparently glimpsed) in the dark; it also yields the richest veins of Freudian subtext in 1940s Hollywood. Its heroine, and/or monster, is Irena, a young Serbian woman in New York, who marries the amiable designer Oliver (Kent Smith), but can't consummate her love for him because she fears that passion will turn her into a deadly cat. She sublimates her terror through a fetishistic love-hate obsession with the big cats at the zoo; she's particularly averse to the leopard, her apparent alter ego, because, she says, "it screams like a woman".

Irena's fear of her own sexuality is given a memorable twist at the wedding dinner, when an enigmatic vamp hails her with the words "Moya sestra". Nothing could be more embarrassing for a suspect bohemian trying to assimilate herself into the American heterosexual world than to be outed as both a sexual and national "sister". The lesbian theme extends to the feral Irena's prey being female - Alice, her rival in love, whom she (so we're led to assume) stalks in two sequences that remain classic examples of suspense technique.

In much Hollywood horror, foreignness stands for the ineffably sinister, but the Russian-born Lewton and the French director Tourneur turn xenophobia on its head. The treatment is all the more subtle because it's mostly done in the casting; while Simon, who had worked with Jean Renoir, radiates neurotic European allure, her American foils are bloodlessly stolid. Kent Smith allows the film to exploit his boyish woodenness as Oliver, while Jane Randolph's Alice is staunchly wholesome in her athletic sexuality. But Lewton, Tourneur and the writer De Witt Bodeen infuse even these dullards with complexity: Oliver confesses to Alice that he has no idea how to handle his failed marriage, simply because he's never been unhappy before. The triangle is memorably squared by a character almost as ambivalent as Irena. Tom Conway's suave shrink is at once a severe rationalist, a Holmesian demon-

buster and an urbane voluptuary (the honeyed drawl is strangely familiar - Conway shared it with his younger brother George Sanders). Cat People can still put the shivers up you, but it transcends the quickie-chiller bracket RKO intended it for. It's as complex a psycho-sexual melodrama as anything in 1940s Hollywood.

It was followed little more than a year later by one of the most singular sequels ever - The Curse of the Cat People, directed at first by Gunther von Fritsch, completed by Robert Wise. Lewton had the idea of a sequel foisted on him by RKO but took the opportunity to produce not so much a continuation as a variation. Oliver and Alice are married with a daughter, a dreamy, isolated child (Ann Carter), whose imaginary friend has taken the shape of Irena (Simon again, looking like a fairy-tale princess straight out of a Cocteau medieval fantasy). The film is largely about isolation and misunderstanding - little Amy's solitude is matched by the weird pair down the road, an embittered woman and her demented actress mother.

This is also, however, a very instructive study of inept parenting. Alice and Oliver, stuffer and more complacent than ever, are hopelessly protective of their ideal of normality, anxiously detecting something "moody . . . sickly" in their offspring. The film's most chilling moment is a remark by a briskly good-humoured teacher: "First spanking? It's an important occasion." The film pre-empts by several years the familiar 1950s stereotype of cocooned American suburbia, but this stiflingly sunny green-lawn world is abruptly, sublimely transformed by the cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca's games with picture-book light and dark. Lewton and his collaborators may have made some of the key films of American cinema, but what profoundly un-American films they were.

"Cat People" (PG) and "The Curse of the Cat People" (U) play at the NFT and ABC Piccadilly, London W1

Named Works: Cat People (Motion picture); The Curse of the Cat People (Motion picture)

Mag.Coll.: 100L3201