

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

Directed by Jacques Tourneur

Written by DeWitt Bodeen

Produced by Val Lewton

Original Music by Roy Webb

Cinematography by Nicholas Musuraca

Film Editing by Mark Robson

Simone Simon...Irena Dubrovna Reed

Kent Smith...Oliver 'Ollie' Reed

Tom Conway...Dr. Louis Judd

Jane Randolph...Alice Moore

Jack Holt...The Commodore

Henrietta Burnside...Sue Ellen

Alec Craig...Zookeeper

Eddie Dew...Street policeman

Elizabeth Dunn...Miss Plunkett, pet shop owner

Dynamite...The leopard

Dot Farley...Mrs. Agnew, scrubwoman

Mary Halsey...Blondie, apartment house desk clerk

Theresa Harris...Minnie, waitress at Sally Lunds café

Elizabeth Russell...The Cat Woman

Steve Soldi...Organ grinder

Selected for the National Film Registry, 1993

Jacques Tourneur (12 November 1904, Paris, France—19 December 1977, Bergerac, Dordogne, Aquitaine, France) directed 62 films, the last of which was *The City Under the Sea* (1965). Some of the others were *Fury River* (1961), *Timbuktu* (1959), *Night of the Demon* (1957), *Way of a Gaucho* (1952), *Berlin Express* (1948), *Out of the Past* (1947), *The Leopard Man* (1943), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Cat People* (1942), *Doctors Don't Tell* (1941), *Nick Carter, Master Detective* (1939), *Yankee Doodle Goes to Town* (1939), *Romance of Radium* (1937), *Killer-Dog* (1936), *Les Filles de la concierge* (1934), *Toto* (1933), *Tout ça ne vaut pas l'amour* (1931), *Un Vieux garçon* (1931).

Simone Simon (23 April 1910, Marseille, Bouches-du-Rhône, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France—22 February 2005, Paris, Ile-de-France, France) acted in 39 films, the last of which was *La Femme en bleu/The Woman in Blue* (1973). Some of the others were *The Extra Day* (1956), *Das Zweite Leben/A Double Life* (1954), *Le Plaisir/House of Pleasure* (1952), *La Ronde* (1950), *Pétrus* (1946), *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), *Tahiti Honey* (1943), *Cat People* (1942), *The*

January 22, 2008 (XVI:2)

Jacques Tourneur *Cat People* 1942 (73 minutes)



Devil and Daniel Webster (1941), *Cavalcade d'amour* (1940), *La Bête humaine/Judas Was a Woman* (1938), *Love and Hisses* (1937), *Les Yeux noirs/Dark Eyes* (1935), *Le Voleur* (1934), *Tire au flanc/The Sad Sack* (1933), *Le Chanteur inconnu/The Unknown Singer* (1931), and *On opère sans douleur* (1931).

Kent Smith (19 March 1907, NYC—23 April 1985, Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California, heart disease) acted in dozens of American television series, beginning with a role in the 1950 "Masterpiece Theater" production of *Hedda Gabler*; and also appeared in more than 60 films beginning with *The Garden Murder Case* (1936). Some of the rest: "Wonder Woman" (1977), *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977), *The Disappearance of Flight 412* (1974), "The Streets of San Francisco" (1973), "Owen Marshall: Counselor at Law" (1972), *Death of a Gunfighter* (1969), "The Wild Wild West" (1967), "Mission: Impossible" (1967), "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." (1966), "I Spy" (1966), "The Beverly Hillbillies" (1965), *Youngblood Hawke* (1964), "Gunsmoke" (2 episodes, 1963-1964), "The Untouchables" (1963), *The Balcony* (1963), "77 Sunset Strip" (1962), "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (1959), *Sayonara* (1957), "Studio One" (1952), *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950), *The Fountainhead* (1949), *The Curse*

of the *Cat People* (1944), *Hitler's Children* (1943), *Cat People* (1942) and *Back Door to Heaven* (1939).

Tom Conway (Tom Sanders, 15 September 1904, St. Petersburg, Russia—22 April 1967, Culver City, Los Angeles, California, cirrhosis of the liver) appeared in about 60 films and dozens of tv shows, but he was perhaps best known for being George Sanders' brother and for his 10 appearances as his brother's replacement in the RKO B-movie Falcon series, beginning with *The Falcon's Brother* (1942) and ending nine films later with *The Falcon's Adventure* (1946). Some of his other appearances were in "Perry Mason" (1964), "Have Gun - Will Travel" (1961), "Rawhide" (1959), "Cheyenne" (1957), *Operation Murder* (1957), *Death of a Scoundrel* (1956), *Prince Valiant* (1954), *Tarzan and the She-Devil* (1953), *Bride of the Gorilla* (1951), *One Touch of Venus* (1948), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Cat People* (1942), *Mr. and Mrs. North* (1942), *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* (1941), *The People vs. Dr. Kildare* (1941), and *The Great Meddler* (1940).

Val Lewton (Vladimir Leventon, 7 May 1904, Yalta, Russia—14 March 1951, Los Angeles, heart attack) produced 13 films in addition to *Cat People*: *Apache Drums* 1951, *Please Believe Me* 1950, *My Own True Love* 1949, *Bedlam* 1946, *Isle of the Dead* 1945, *The Body Snatcher* 1945, *Youth Runs Wild* 1944, *The Curse of the Cat People* 1944, *Mademoiselle Fifi* 1944, *The Ghost Ship* 1943, *The Seventh Victim* 1943, *The Leopard Man* 1943, and *I Walked with a Zombie* 1943.

Jacques Tourneur from World Film Directors V.I. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Company, NY 1987

Jacques Tourneur (November 12, 1904–December 19, 1977), American director, was born in Paris, the son of Maurice Thomas, better known as Maurice Tourneur. Originally an artist, the elder Tourneur adopted his pseudonym when he became a stage actor and director, and retained it when he joined the film production company Eclair. His wife, and Jacques Touneur's mother, was Fernande Petit, herself an actress who worked as Fernande Van Doren.

With characteristic understatement, Tourneur described his childhood as "rather tough." His father was an aesthete and a solitary, cynical and sarcastic. Jacques Tourneur's "first confrontation with fear came in his father's studio on Christmas Eve when he was four. His parents had put his gifts in a "huge mysterious room" and told him that he must go alone to see them: "There was a long corridor, pitch dark, and in the distance I could see the white shapes of my presents. I went all on my own, torn between my desire for the toys and a fear which nearly paralyzed me."

On other occasions, if he misbehaved, his parents "would put the maid in the cupboard and she used to jiggle a bowler hat while my parents would tell me: 'That's the terrible Thunderman.'" Tourneur believed that this grotesque punishment was the root of one of his cinematic obsessions: "to suddenly introduce something inexplicable into the shot, such as, for instance, the hand on the balustrade...in Curse of the Demon; in the reverse shot the hand isn't there any more."

In 1914 Maurice Tourneur went to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to take charge of the small studio Eclair had built there. He sent his son "to a school which happened to be in the poorer section of town. The other kids were very violent and, as I was a foreigner who couldn't speak their language, I got into some sticky situations. But I learned very quickly....I was the only kid who wore suspenders. My father insisted on that, and the other kids were always pulling on them, very hard, and then they would let them snap against my back. After a while, I had to walk holding up my trousers myself. I think this is what prompted me to introduce comic touches into the dramatic moments of my films....Mixing fear and the ridiculous can be very exciting."

According to Jacques Tourneur, his father "was passionately interested in scientific, medical and philosophic research. He had an incredible library and followed all the discoveries in psychoanalysis very closely. It is through him that I discovered Freud, Jung, Adler, Havelock Ellis. I never read novels, only essays, scientific works. They are much more exciting. I was already fascinated by the cinema and my father bought story ideas from me for ten dollars apiece. At that time he was a very important filmmaker in America."

Indeed, by the end of World War I, Maurice Tourneur was head of his own production company and generally regarded as the great aesthetician of the American cinema. In 1918 he moved his company to Hollywood, where the following year Jacques Tourneur became an American citizen. In 1922 Jacques appeared as an extra in Rex Ingram's *Scaramouche*, and in 1924, finishing high school, he went to MGM as a script clerk. He worked in the same capacity for his father in 1925–1926, but in the latter year Maurice Tourneur, whose Hollywood career was in decline, returned to Europe. He left his son a hundred dollar bill and the suggestion that he try and make it to Europe himself.

Jacques Tourneur did not at first take advantage of this offer, instead finding odd jobs in Hollywood as an actor and usher. But in 1927 his father invited him to Germany to work on *Das Schiff der verloren Menschen* (*Ship of Lost Men*), and this time he went. He served as his father's editor and assistant on this film and then on a series of talkies made in Paris for Pathé-Nathan in 1929–1934. It was during this period that Jacques Tourneur directed his own first movies for the same company, beginning in 1931 with *Tout ça ne vaut pas l'amour* (*None of That's Worth Love*).

In an interview with Bertrand Tavernier in *Positif* (November 1971), translated in Johnston and Willemen's *Jacques Tourneur* (1975), the director said that in his own opinion the best of his four French films was *Les Filles de la concierge* (*The Concierge's Daughters*, 1934)—"a little comedy [inspired by Unanimism], it was realistic, giving a fairly accurate portrait of a social milieu. It had many comic elements, especially for that time. The other films weren't very good, at least not as far as I can remember."

In 1934 Tourneur broke away from his father and returned to Hollywood. He directed sequences in Charles Riesner's *The Winning Ticket* and Jack Conway's *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in 1936–1938 made a whole series of one-reelers for MGM. The following year he directed his first American feature, *They All Came Out*, and there were three more B-pictures in 1939–1941, two of them starring Walter Pidgeon as the "master detective" Nick Carter.

Tourneur had worked with Val Lewton on the crowd scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in 1942 he began his seven-year association with RKO, where Lewton was then working as a

producer. Their first movie grew out of a conversation—a suggestion that “Cat People” was an oddly suggestive title from which an interesting thriller could be derived. A script was developed by DeWitt Bodeen (with the uncredited participation of Lewton and Tourneur), and the movie was made on a budget of \$130,000.

Val Lewton was an eccentric workaholic of exceptional ability, and there are those who credit him rather than Tourneur with the quality of the three low-budget pictures they made together. One argument against this view is that what

David Thompson calls the same “sense of unrevealed horror within the everyday” is evident in a film that Tourneur made years after Lewton’s early death, *Curse of the Demon*. Robert Wood concludes that Tourneur’s personality was the decisive influence on the films, though “much of their taste, intelligence and discretion is attributable to...[Lewton’s] planning and supervision.” Tourneur himself said that “with Val Lewton, we really worked together as a team. Everyone participated in the preparation of the script, and yet he never set foot on the set. He left you completely free.”

Cat People (1942) tells the story of Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), a feline young woman obsessed by cats, which arch their backs and spit when they encounter her. She half-believes the legend that her Serbian ancestors became cats when aroused and dares not make love to her husband Oliver (Kent Smith) for fear that she will sprout claws and destroy him. She discusses those fears with a psychiatrist (Tom Conway), who scoffs, while Oliver finds a more sympathetic confidante in Alice at the office (Jane Randolph). One night, in the park, Alice hears ominous snarls, and more frightening encounters follow on a dark street and in a swimming pool with something like a great cat. Then the lustful psychiatrist makes a pass at Irena. His torn body is found in her apartment. Hunted and desperate, Irena frees a black panther at the zoo and is killed by it.

According to Tourneur, the Serbian legend was Lewton’s idea, but he himself “was the one who proposed that we should suggest the presence of the panther rather than show it. I was so afraid that the studio people would come along and add a superimposition of the panther in the swimming pool scene I decided to combine a pan with a long traveling shot while making the shadow of a panther by moving my fist in front of the camera in the middle of the movement. Then, no matter what happened, they couldn’t spoil the scene afterwards.”

Cat People has been called “the first monster film to refrain from showing us the monster.” Tourneur said that RKO were “furious” when they discovered this and wanted to sell the movie off. In fact, it did immensely well at the box office. Together with Lewton’s other low-budget thrillers and Hitchcock’s *Suspicion*, it saved the studio, which at that time was in great financial difficulty. One morning, Tourneur found in his mailbox “a check for a quite vast amount, signed by the head of the studio, to thank me for having made such a film. That kind of thing doesn’t happen any more.”

Robin Wood, writing in *Film Comment* (Summer 1972), carefully analyzes the “accumulation of suggestive detail” that accounts for the extraordinary power of this movie, saying that its “packed, complex and suggestive” dream sequence “concisely embodies the film’s sense of life itself as a shadow-world in



which nothing is certain, no issue is clear-cut, nothing is what it seems.” Wood calls *Cat People* “a small masterpiece—perhaps the most delicate poetic fantasy in the American cinema.” It was remade in 1982 by Paul Schrader.

“To show that, unconsciously, we all live in fear—that is genuine horror,” Tourneur wrote. “Many people today are constantly prey to a kind of fear they don’t wish to analyze. When the audience, sitting in a darkened room, recognizes its own insecurity in that of the characters of the film, then you can show unbelievable situations in the

certain knowledge that the audience will follow you.” It seemed to Michael Henry that “with these words Tourneur doesn’t just give a definition of the horror film, he outlines an aesthetic of disquiet undoubtedly more in tune with contemporary anxieties than the costumed fantasies of the Gothic tradition.”

Tourneur’s second venture into “disquiet” was one of the few films he himself initiated: “One day I said to Val Lewton ‘I have an idea. We are going to take *Jane Eyre* and we’re going to do a remake of it, without telling anyone, simply by radically changing the setting.’” The result was *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) which, in spite of its crass title, some place even above *Cat People*...

As Robin Wood wrote, this film “hints at an equation between the zombie state...and emotional death” (just as *Cat People* can be read as an investigation in symbolic terms of sexual repression). In *Zombie*, Wood says, “all our moral preconceptions are subtly undermined, all motivations prove ambiguous or suspect, and even the apparently immaculate heroine is not exempt from doubt. The shadowy nocturnal world of the film is more than ‘atmosphere’: it becomes the visual expression of Tourneur’s sense of the mystery and ambiguity underlying all human action and interaction.” ...

Back at RKO, Tourneur made another film which—underrated at the time—has achieved the status of “a classic B-picture,” *Out of the Past* (1947). ...*Out of the Past* has come to be recognized as one of the best films noirs of the immediate postwar years, beautifully played by Mitchum and Greer, and lit and photographed to marvelous atmospheric effect by Nicholas Musuraca, who had been Tourneur’s cameraman on all three of his films with Lewton.

... His last important picture was *Curse of the Demon*, made for a minor British company in 1957. A return to the concerns of Tourneur’s first successes, it has Dana Andrews as John Holden, an American psychologist (and representative of rational modern man)... As Michael Henry writes, in *Curse of the Demon*, as in *Cat People* and *I Walked With a Zombie*, the protagonist is invited “to explore an occult reality which, although reason can indeed throw light upon it, nevertheless remains beyond the imagination of the investigator. The unbelievable situation receives an irrefutable explanation, but not before it has put into question all the certainties of the person experiencing it....The hero abandons his attempt to pronounce on the nature of the phenomenon registered by his senses, while the medium of the forces of darkness dies without relinquishing his secret. The signs retain their ambivalence right up to the end.”

“I hate the expression ‘horror film,’” Jacques Tourneur said. “For me, I make films about the supernatural because I believe in it. I believe in the power of the dead, witches. I even

met a few when I was preparing *Curse of the Demon*. I had a long conversation with the oldest witch in England about the spirit world, the power of cats....I happen to possess some powers myself." He was appalled by the crude process shots of an avenging demon inserted into the film against his wishes, though, as Robin Wood says these "emphasize by contrast the restraint and delicacy of his treatment elsewhere."

None of Tourneur's subsequent films were of anything like the same quality, being ruined by poor scripts or interfering producers. He recognized this himself and made his last "very bad" picture in 1965. Before and after that, he worked in television, a medium he despised. His *Positif* interview with Bertrand Tavernier gives some useful insights into his working methods—his concern for realism in the way his actors spoke, moved, entered a room with which they were supposed to be familiar or unfamiliar; above all, the importance he attached to light.

Tourneur said he had one basic principle he always imposed on his cameramen: "Only use natural, logical sources of light (a window, a lamp) and you must be able to see this source in every single shot. The presence of the light must be very concrete, you should be able to feel it. Cameramen hate that kind of thing because they have to rack their brains trying to find new solutions every time" but "in this way I also obtain very heavy contrasts which often lend dignity and truth to human relationships....It also changes the acting....For instance, a young woman in order to be able to read a letter, will go to the oil lamp or to the window....Another actor will unconsciously lower his voice....I look for very strong visual unity by using a type of framing and camera movement that is very simple. Everything must come from inside. It mustn't be superficial. I hate weird camera angles and distorting lenses."

For Robin Wood, Tourneur's camera style, "which is the most distinctive feature of his heterogeneous oeuvre, has two chief characteristics, movement and distance. The fluid long takes that keep the characters in long shot within the shadowy environments, branches and foliage obtruding darkly in the foreground, greatly enhance the haunting, sinister atmosphere of the suspense sequences; they also help to preserve the objectivity with which Tourneur customarily views his characters, and on which the ambiguity of the horror movies depend."

In Higham and Greenberg's *The Celluloid Muse*, Tourneur is described as an "extremely amiable, comfortable-looking, plump man" who "speaks slowly, diffidently, modestly, and carefully, anxious at all times to make every point absolutely clear." He and his wife lived in a Hollywood duplex, furnished with "quiet but exquisite taste," that once belonged to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Cat People, Kim Newman, bfi film classics, London, 1999

It is often blithely stated that Koerner [vice-president in charge of production at RKO] hired Lewton to produce B horror pictures, but *Cat People* and its successors were never strictly B products. RKO had B units churning out Falcon mysteries and

Tim Holt westerns, but Lewton's horror films were always intended to be modestly-budgeted A features and to go out on the top of double bills....

At RKO, Lewton began assembling a team, depending heavily on his contacts from the Selznick organisation: director Jacques Tourneur, with whom he had worked on the second unit of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) and writer DeWitt Bodeen, who had been a research assistant to Aldous Huxley on a *Jane Eyre* script that eventually became the 1944 film with Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles. They tell slightly different stories about how *Cat People* came to be. According to Tourneur, "Val Lewton called me up at RKO one day and said 'Jacques, I'm going to produce a new picture here, and I'd like you to direct it.' He said, 'The head of the studio, Charles Koerner, was at a party last night and somebody suggested to him, 'Why don't you make a picture called *Cat People*?'" And Charlie Koerner said to Lewton, 'I thought about it all night and it kind of bothered me.' So he called in Lewton and asked him to make the picture.

Tourneur later added 'Val said: "I don't know what to do." It was a stupid title and Val, with his good taste, said that the only way to do it was not to make the blood-and-thunder cheap horror movie that the studio expected but something intelligent and in good taste.'

Bodeen's version is that "Val departed for RKO two weeks before I'd finished my work at Selznick's, and when I phoned him, as I had promised, he quickly made arrangements for me to be hired at RKO as a contract writer at the Guild minimum, which was then \$75 a week. When I reported for work, he ran off for me some US and British horror and suspense movies which were typical of what he did not want to do. We spent several days talking about the subjects for the first script. Mr Koerner, who had personally welcomed me on my first day at the studio, was of the opinion that vampires, werewolves and man-made monsters had been over-exploited and that 'nobody has done much with cats'. He added that he had successfully audience-tested a title he considered highly exploitable—*Cat People*. 'Let's see what you can do with that,' he ordered. When we were back in his office, Val looked at me glumly and said: 'There's no helping it—we're stuck with that title. If you want to get out now, I won't hold it against you.' I had no intention of withdrawing, and he and I promptly started upon a careful examination of the cat in literature. There

was more to be examined than we had expected. Val was one of the best-read men I've ever known, and the kind of avid reader who retains what he reads. After we had both read everything we could find pertaining to the cat in literature, Val had virtually decided to make his movie from a short story, Algernon Blackwood's 'Ancient Sorceries', which admirably lends itself to cinematic interpretation and could easily be re-titled *Cat People*. Negotiations had begun for the purchase of the screen rights when suddenly Val changed his mind. He arrived at the office unusually early and called me in at once. He had spent a sleepless night, he confessed, and decided that instead of a picture with a foreign setting, he would do an original story laid in contemporary New York. It was to deal with a triangle—a normal young man falls



in love with a strange foreign girl who is obsessed by abnormal fears, and when her obsession destroys his love and he turns for consolation to a very normal girl, his office co-worker, the discarded one, beset by jealousy, attempts to destroy the young man's new love.

Tourneur's version of the metamorphosis from 'Ancient Sorceries' to Cat People is that "At first, Bodeen wrote Cat People as a period thing but I argued against that. I said that if you're going to have horror, the audience must be able to identify with the characters in order to be frightened. Now you can identify with an average guy like me, but how can we identify with a Lower Slobovian or a fellow with a big cape? You laugh at that. So we changed to modern period which I think is a good thing."...

Whatever the truth, and everyone agrees Koerner gave Lewton the title and ordered him to come up with a film that fit, there are foggy patches...A memo composed by Lewton outlines what he hoped to do with *Cat People*. He wrote "most of the cat/werewolf stories I have read and all the werewolf stories end with the beast gunshot and turning back into a human being after death. In this story, I'd like to reverse the process. For the final scene, I'd like to show a violent quarrel between the man and woman in which she is provoked into an assault upon him. To protect himself, he pushes her away, she stumbles, falls awkwardly, and breaks her neck in the fall. The young man, horrified, kneels to see if he can find her heart beat. Under his hand, black hair and hide come up and he draws back to look in horror at a dead, black panther."

This is, of course, an inverse of the finale of *The Wolf Man*, in which just-killed werewolf Larry Talbot (Chaney) transforms into his human self....

Cat People, officially RKO Production 386, was shot between 28 July and 21 August, coming in ahead of schedule and, at a cost of \$134,000, under budget.

[In the opening credits] over an image of a figurine of a mounted knight hoisting a sword upon which a cat is speared, we have the quotation:

Even as fog continues to lie in the valleys, so does ancient sin cling to the low places, the depressions in the world's consciousness. (Dr Louis Judd, *The Anatomy of Atavism*)

In *The Reality of Terror*, Joel E. Siegel asserts that this sentence, ascribed to the psychiatrist who is a major character in *Cat People* (and who is identified with the sword-wielding knight), comes from Sigmund Freud. This seems not to be the case. J.P. Telotte, in his own study of Lewton, notes 'I am unable to locate a precise source, particularly since Freud seldom uses the key term here, "sin", which seems more like an injection of that religious element that recurs throughout Lewton films. In Freud's discussion of the relationship between religion and conscience, however, we might discern the broad outlines of this passage. See his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961, pp 31-2.) More boldly, Edmund G. Bansak claims the quote bears all the earmarks of having been penned by Lewton.

[Irena explains that King John of Serbia banished the Mamelukes and restored Christianity, while some of the wickedest escaped into the mountains and still haunt the villages.] This sounds like a précis of the backstory of 'Ancient Sorceries' and, unsurprisingly, has little to do with real (as opposed to symbolic) Balkan history. The Belgrade-born film-maker Dusan Makavejev once used *Cat People* in a lecture about the potential for beastliness demonstrated by the Serbs with catastrophic results at

least twice in this century. He reported that there was no such historical personage as King John, and that John isn't even a credible Serbian name. The Mamelukes, an Islamic faction of Kipchuk Turks, are best remembered for their control of Egypt in the Middle Ages, and can hardly be said to have enslaved Serbia. Nevertheless Serbia (as opposed to the Transylvania of *Dracula*, the Tibet of *Werewolf of London* or the Wales of *The Wolf Man*) lends *Cat People*

more specific meanings resonating back to Sarajevo in 1914 and the first shot of a European descent into mass insanity close to lycanthropy and forward to the fracturing of Yugoslavia into a bloody mess of ethnic cleansing (especially with regards to the enmity between Christian and Moslem) and shattered communities. The knight on horseback looks far more like our image of a medieval western European, suggesting again that perhaps Irena Dubrovna was once more likely to have a name like that sported by the Berlin-born Nastassja Kinski in the remake, Irena Gallier....

The aspect of *Cat People* most astonishing to modern audiences is the frank treatment of frigidity within marriage, demonstrated as Oliver consents to bed down on the couch ('Darling, you can have all the time in the world, and all the patience and kindness there is in me') while Irena crouches against the door of her bedroom, hand pawing the door like claws, torn apart by desire and fear, the mewling of the panther echoing on the soundtrack. Films in the 1940s just weren't about subjects like this; the only comparison that comes to mind is *Lady in the Dark* (1944), a ponderous and roundabout adaptation of the Broadway musical about psychoanalysis...

Make no mistake, the animals in the pet shop were psychic: this is not—though many commentators have said it is or should be—a respectable psychological study of a woman with a neurosis; *Cat People* is a horror film about a woman who turns into a panther....Lewton himself made his intentions clear in his early notes about the character of Dr Judd, whom he planned as "a man, possibly a doctor, who always gives the scientific or factual explanations for any phenomena that occur, brushing the supernatural aside, and yet, who is always proved wrong by the events on the screen. This device, I hope, will express the audience's doubts even before they are fully formulated in their minds and quickly answer them, thus lending a degree of credibility to the yarn, which is going to be difficult to achieve."

The innovation of *Cat People* was not ambiguity—which often in horror films serves merely as a respectable get-out clause,



allowing the audiences who don't recognise the validity of supernatural stories to read fantastical events as symptoms of a deranged mind (cf., *The Innocents*, 1961)—but subtlety. Lewton decreed: “We tossed away the horror formula right from the beginning. No grisly stuff for us. No mask-like faces hardly human, with gnashing teeth and hair standing on end. No creaking physical manifestations. No horror piled on horror. You can't keep up horror that's long sustained. It becomes something to laugh at. But take a sweet love story, or a story of sexual antagonisms, about people like the rest of us, not freaks, and cut in your horror here and there by suggestion, and you've got something. Anyhow, we think you have. That's the way to do it.”...

Though Irena never sports yak-hair and fangs, *Cat People* is unambiguous about her status: the film's last line ('she never lied to us'), along with details like transforming footprints and a shredded bathrobe, prove that Irena really is a Cat Person. Dr Judd interprets what she tells him as a childhood trauma, but we are supposed to understand what really happened before Irena was born: her father made love to her mother in the forest, impregnating her, and she transformed into a panther and killed him. The lesson is not that a psychological study is more worthy than a cat werewolf movie, but that a horror film can have psychological depth. That Irena is a cat person doesn't make the film any less affecting as the story of a troubled marriage....

The ‘bus’ [which stops so Alice can evade her pursuer] is a punchline, but the stalking sequence is the set-up, and demonstrates the quality for which Lewton's horror films were famous: darkness. In an interview, Lewton boasted ‘I'll tell you a secret: if you make the screen dark enough, the mind's eye will read anything into it you want! We're great ones for dark patches. Remember the long walk alone at night in *Cat People*? Most people swear they saw a leopard move in the hedge above her—but they didn't! Optical illusion; dark patch.’...

Lewton decided against his planned final shot of the dead Irena as panther, but couldn't resist a last stab at culture. The end title is another verse, authentic this time:

But black sin hath betrayed to endless night
My world, both parts, and both parts must die.
(John Donne, *Holy Sonnets, V*)

The production code prohibited plot resolution through suicide, but it is clear that Irena—perhaps fatally wounded by Dr Judd—has used the panther to finish herself off, as is obliquely confirmed by the Donne passage....

Tourneur always seemed to be in two minds about *Cat People*; he once said *Cat People* was very childish but audiences in those days were much more naive than they are today. If you made *Cat People* today exactly as we did, they'd laugh you out of the theatre because it was naive—a kind of joke. But there were some very good things in it.' On another occasion he mused, "The picture was made during the war, and during war, for some mysterious reason, people love to be frightened. Subconsciously we all enjoy being afraid, and in war that feeling is intensified. Wars release all our needs: young men can rape with sanction,



plunder without retribution. We all love wars and love to be frightened, and in wartime people had money from the plants, money to burn, and they loved that kind of film."

Unlike Robson and Wise, he never quite became an establishment director: even career highlights like *Out of the Past* (1947) and *Night of the Demon* were not major successes, and he found himself stuck with too many oddball projects....

Lewton's films were recognized on their first release by perceptive critics like James Agee and Manny Farber as extraordinary by any standards, and are treated sympathetically by the first critical histories of the horror film.

from *The Cinema of Nightfall Jacques Tourneur*. Chris Fujiwara, with a foreword by Martin Scorsese. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore & London, 1998

Foreword by Martin Scorsese.

It's appropriate that so many of Jacques Tourneur's movies deal with the supernatural and the paranormal, because his own touch as a filmmaker is elusive yet tangible, like the presence of a ghost—in a way, you could say that Tourneur's touch is so refined and subtle that he haunts his films. It's as though he cast a spell over each project, from a movie that actually deals with the supernatural like *Cat People* to one that only seems to deal with it, like *The Leopard Man*, to a western like *Canyon Passage*, a period piece like *Experiment Perilous*, a noir like *Out of the Past* or a routine B assignment like *Nick Carter, Master Detective*. Which may be the reason why he remains so under appreciated. Tourneur was a great director....He never made grand statements and he never worked with large budgets or big stars. He cultivated the most fleeting and elusive aspects of experience, things that other filmmakers would never bother with but that, for Tourneur, were the essence of movies.

Tourneur was an artist of atmospheres....Tourneur's films are very special to me, and they've been a great inspiration throughout my career. He's one of those directors whose work renews your enthusiasm for movies—whenever I look at one of his films on tape or on screen, I remember why I wanted to make movies in the first place. The craft, taste, and extraordinary fluid artistry of his cinema make most other movies look bloated and synthetic.

...Tourneur's achievement remains underappreciated and misunderstood. His films are mostly relatively obscure thrillers. Westerns, and adventure films that, at first glance, have little in common. Of the five best-known films he directed, three of them—*Cat People*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, and *The Leopard Man*—are more often credited to their producer, Val Lewton, than to the director, whereas the other two, *Out of the Past* and *Night of the Demon* (as it is known in Britain where it was produced; in the United States it was released as *Curse of the Demon*), tend to be praised as quintessential genre pieces rather than as personal works....

Tourneur's “themes” are conceptual oppositions between whose terms his characters seek to define themselves, boundaries that are simultaneously or fluctuatingly real, imaginary, and

symbolic: the boundaries between human and animal (*Cat People*, *The Leopard Man*), between living and dead (*I Walked with a Zombie*), between health/sanity and sickness/insanity ("The Magic Alphabet," *Cat People*, *Experiment Perilous*, *Easy Living*, *Stars in My Crown*), between town and wilderness or open country (the Westerns, *Way of a Gaucho*), between law and crime (*Out of the Past*, *Nightfall*), between male and female (*Anne of the Indies*), and "between the powers of darkness and the powers of the mind" (*Night of the Demon*). Tourneur's special territory is the space between these poles. As Paul Willemen writes, "Although the films dramatise the conflict between terms A/B, it is the '/' which constitutes the enigmatic pivot upon which Tourneur's films turn."

The typical Tourneur narrative is full of confusion and ambiguity, signs that point in no clear direction, and messages that circle back on the sender. The director's narrative and stylistic choices constantly underline absence and distance....

Himself a figure at the crossroads of two worlds, his native Europe and his adoptive home America, Tourneur persistently explores in his films the antagonisms and misunderstandings that arise from cultural difference.

Tourneur was one of several European directors who, working in Hollywood during the 1940s, evolved an alternative (some might argue, oppositional) film practice. In order of their first American feature directing credits, they include Elgar G. Ulmer, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Tourneur, Billy Wilder, Jean Renoir, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk, and Andre De Toth. The group members share several characteristics: they almost all started directing in Hollywood in the late 1930s or early 1940s (Ulmer, the exception, directed his first American film in 1932); they all have an affinity for what has become known as film noir; and many of them express a politically liberal viewpoint in their films. The liberalism of Lang, Renoir, Preminger, and Sirk is explicit. That of Tourneur is less definite but no less perceptible: the liberalism of *Berlin Express* probably owes more to its producer, Bert Granet, than to its director, but the sympathetic treatment of blacks and other minorities throughout Tourneur's films is a clear-enough sign of the director's attitude....

The cutting in Tourneur's films gives a sense of dislocation and disorientation to spaces that characters inhabit precariously....Tourneur's sound practice represents a deliberate attempt to make use of an often neglected potential of the film medium. Frequently in Tourneur films, off-screen sounds disrupt the images, accentuating the instability of the narratives....

Tourneur's cinema, obsessed with the unshowable and with the conditions of its own impossibility, is the antithesis of the cinema of spectacle.

Cat People derives its situations, including its horrific ones, from the emotions of the protagonists, a tactic that sets it apart from the typical horror cinema of the time. The main tension in the film comes from Irena's fear of her own sexuality as "evil"—a daring choice of theme for 1942....

The most famous of the many ellipses in the film is the refusal to show the transformation of Irena into a cat. This refusal leaves a number of traces in the film....

Cat People is so famous that it has, inevitably, suffered a backlash, and now it might even be called underrated....

Cat People remains, with all its flaws, a perfect film—which means that even its flaws have become classic.
Afterword

Asked in 1977, a few months before he died, what place he thought his films had in the history of cinema, Jacques Tourneur replied: "None. Nothing is more evanescent than an image in celluloid....I'm a very average director. I did my work the best I could, we're all limited. On the one hand, one shouldn't have false modesty; on the other, one shouldn't seem to boast; I'm somewhere between the two."

Tourneur's willingness to consign himself and his works to oblivion is typical of him. Throughout his career he was a soft-spoken, self-effacing artisan; later he was happy to tell interviewers that he never turned down a script. That he was far from an "average" director, however, is apparent from his films (several of which, despite his own final assessment, are likely to endure as long as the cinema) but also from his interviews, which invariably betray the concerns and the point of view of a self-conscious, precise artist.

The 1977 interview was conducted in French; the word "average" is an unavoidable (in context) translation for a word, *moyen*, that has other meanings more appropriate to Tourneur's achievement. *Moyen* also means "middle" or "medium"—words closely related (like the phrase "somewhere between the two") both to themes of thresholds, borders, and transformations that Tourneur treated consistently in his films and to his view of his own role as an artist, a role that he saw as similar to that of a medium. "You must be more modest, try to handle as well as possible what you are given and let your subconscious work....This attitude forces you to be open, receptive to all genres, to all forms of narration. It's a way of refusing to specialize."

Tourneur's insistence on the "evanescent" nature of film is also significant, since his work is so preoccupied with, and so brilliant at tracing, the invisible and the absent. His films not only embrace their own obscurity and the risk of their disappearance but seem to make these the conditions of their existence. Tourneur's cinema, though remaining the most "average" of Hollywood cinemas, also finds the most elusive way imaginable of dispersing the limits that Hollywood imposed on representation.



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Feb 12 Billy Wilder WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION
(1957)
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Feb 26 Masaki Kobayashi HARA KIRI (1962)

Mar 4 Robert Altman MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (1971)*
Mar 18 Hal Ashby BEING THERE (1982)*
Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)
Apr 1 Krzysztof Kieslowski THE DOUBLE LIFE OF
VERONIQUE (1991)
Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)
Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)
Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

CONTACTS:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu

...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu

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