

# The Cat People [1942]

by

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Significant as the first of the literate, understated horror films Val Lewton produced for RKO in the 1940s, *The Cat People* is also notable for playing with audience imagination by refusing to show made-up movie monsters *a la* the Wolfman or Mr. Hyde. A haunting and subtle film, filled with sexual desires gone awry and everyday settings that inexplicably turn nightmarish.

It was a very successful B film, grossing \$200,000 first time out. The film was Lewton's biggest hit, its viewers lured in by such bombastic advertising as "Kiss me and I'll claw you to death!" – a line more lurid than anything that ever appeared onscreen.

And later it became a cult classic. For instance, the story is summarized in loving detail by Molina for his cell mate Valentin in the opening forty pages of Manuel Puig's 1976 novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

An example of producer Val Lewton's economization (as on all his B films) is by using RKO's existing sets. The apartment building in which some of the action takes place was built for Orson Welles' *Magnificent Ambersons* [1942] a few months before.

Most horror films have a taint of sexuality – repressed or distorted. In *The Cat People*, director Jacques Tourneur put it right out in front for everyone, including the Hayes Office, then responsible for film censorship, to see. Immigrant sketch artist Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon) and all-American marine engineer Oliver Reed (Kent Smith) fall in love and marry after a brief courtship, but Irena won't consummate the union for fear that she will turn into a panther compelled to kill her lover. She fears she will be transformed into a panther at the moment of orgasm and immediately kill him. Because of the Hayes Office, a single kiss becomes a stand-in for sexual intercourse.

Although earlier films had linked horror and sexuality, Tourneur's study of a woman tainted by an ancient Balkan curse was arguably more explicit in this direction than any previous film had been.

However, it is not only blatant sexuality, but jealousy works too. When Oliver confides in co-worker Alice Moore (Jane Randolph) though, Irena's jealousy proves

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equally effective in precipitating her "transformation." The disbelief of cynical psychiatrist Dr. Judd (Tom Conway) proves likewise ineffective against the powers unleashed by Irena's psyche. Dr. Judd is an interesting, though highly stylized character. He is a male psychiatrist who specializes in female problems. And his greatest qualification seems to be the confidence he has in his own sexuality. He fails miserably and pays with his life.

Of course, the center of the film is Irena, the eponymous Cat Person. Compared to her the other characters seem quite drab. From today's perspective, we can see her as a proto-feminist (and thus the subject of horror). She is the dream girl who becomes one's worst nightmare – one definition of femme fatale. Her cat-like characteristics mark her, in a very simplistic sense, an early feminist hero. She can't cook – after all, cats eat their food raw. She is an indifferent housekeeper – cats are nomadic. She prefers roaming the streets to dusting furniture. And she summarily refuses domestication.

Just in case we don't get it, symbolism is rife. She begins and ends the film in the zoo, next to a panther's cage. She dies curled up like a cat and wearing a shiny fur coat that resembles a panther's.

Supporting this story is some clever filmmaking on the part of Tourneur (ably assisted by brilliant cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca). For instance, the mundane New York settings, only occasionally hinting that evil is lurking. One example is a feline woman at a bar. Another is the reaction of the animals at a pet store to Irena's presence.

Once Irena's darker side begins to manifest itself, the film's pulse quickens and so does the viewer's. Perhaps most famous are the justly celebrated sequence where Irena stalks Alice along a park path at night (featuring the marvelously jarring cat-like hiss of bus doors) and the brilliant set-piece when Irena surrounds the terrified Alice at a darkened indoor swimming pool with the cries of a ferocious panther.

*The Cat People* testifies to the filmic power of suggestion and the priority of imagination over budget in the creation of great cinema.