Gratuitous moonlight| Jacques Tourneur, Val Lewton and the allure of the labyrinth

Glen Hirshberg

The University of Montana

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University of Montana
GRATUITOUS MOONLIGHT: JACQUES TOURNEUR, VAL LEWTON,
AND THE ALLURE OF THE LABYRINTH

by

Glen Hirshberg
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M.F.A., University of Montana, 1991

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While directors and critics have acknowledged the influence and importance of the series of films produced by Val Lewton between 1942 and 1946, none have accurately identified the most unique aspect of Lewton's filmmaking. Instead, critics have focused on his influence, which was minimal, and on his films' subtlety and restraint, which resulted from the Production Code then enforced in Hollywood. Much more important is the world within these films, which differs from other screen worlds. Where most films attempt an approximation of conventional reality onscreen, Lewton and his crew sought to create an entirely new world.

*Cats People* relies on a script which lifts bits of mythology from many cultures and reconnects them into a new system of belief which forms the foundation for a reality unique to this movie. Jacques Tourneur's camera work and the cinematography of Nicolas Musuraca turn ordinary streets and rooms into enchanted places. Finally, Simone Simon provides the bait which lures viewers into this new world with her sympathetic performance. The world is seductive, despite its dangers, because of its sensuality, as well as its capacity for accommodating lonely people who have been alienated from the world outside the screen by their passion, their beliefs, or both.

The ensuing films attempt variations on this technique, with mixed results. *I Walked with a Zombie* is the best of Lewton's films, because its reality is the most sensual. Until the entrance of Edith Barrett as Mrs. Rand, though, the film lacks the center Simone Simon provides *Cat People* with. In *The Leopard Man*, Tourneur's visuals swamp the movie, and the new world never really solidifies.

*The Seventh Victim* points up the uniqueness of the technique even as it fails to employ it properly. Lacking both Tourneur's imaginative eye and the clever scavenging that makes the other scripts work so well, the film offers glimpses of another reality but lacks the essential sensuality.

All nine Lewton films, though, remain exciting experiments. By using imagery and language from conventional reality to build new worlds, Lewton's team explored cinema's ability to transform the mundane into magic.
# Gratuitoous Moonlight

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INTRODUCTION

When Val Lewton's name appears at all in works of film criticism, the word 'influential' or some synonym thereof almost always accompanies it. Like a tag someone affixed to his body at the morgue. Pauline Kael, in a one paragraph discussion of Cat People in her 1968 book Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, declared that "for a brief time, he [Lewton] revolutionized scare films with suggestion, imaginative sound effects and camera angles, leaving everything to the fear-filled imagination" (246). The New York Daily News' Phantom of the Movies, who specializes in B-movie history, says, "Lewton navigated the genre in a new direction" (188). Even Ephraim Katz, with the whole of film history spread out before him as he compiled his Film Encyclopedia, states that his films' "influence on the subsequent films of the genre has been considerable" (719).

Any comprehensive study of the horror films made since Lewton produced his series of low-budget classics in 1942-46, however, reveals that the films actually had little discernible impact on the genre. Even if one accepts the parameters Kael sets out to confine the scope of Lewton's influence--his emphasis on suggestiveness over graphic
representation, his directors' use of imaginative camera angles and sound effects, and his penchant for ambiguity—few films can be found which reflect that influence. By the early 1950's, the monster film had once again risen to dominate the horror movie mainstream. In the 1960's and '70's, genre filmmakers split into two camps: directors like Roman Polanski and Harry Kumel used the liberating freedom of the horror film to explore elements of sensuality and psychosis previously left untouched by the cinematic world, while studios like Hammer and Amicus tested the limits of newly revised production codes by pouring out bloodier versions of previously filmed horror classics. By the late 1970's, slasher/exploitation movies dominated the genre. With a very few exceptions, horror filmmakers have ignored Val Lewton.

Still, filmmakers and critics alike are quick to acknowledge Lewton's achievements. Tom Milne, editor of the excellent *Time Out Film Guide*, calls Lewton's films a "wondrous series of B-movies" (96). Barry Gifford, in his *Devil Thumbs a Ride*, joins Kael in crediting the camera work and restraint displayed by the Lewton films for the fact that "they remain truly suspenseful and visually exciting" (74). Directors ranging from Curtis Harrington in the 1960's to John Carpenter today declare Lewton a guiding influence.

While all of these people pay lip service to the strength of Lewton's films, not one of them has
satisfactorily explained their lingering afterglow. The restraint which everyone lauds Lewton and his crew of actors, directors, camera-men, and set designers for was more a result of the stringent restrictions imposed by the production code that dominated Hollywood in the 1940's. Several of the Lewton films, particularly those directed by Jacques Tourneur, do indeed have unique visual and aural aspects, but more imaginative camera work was being done in the expressionistic films noir from the same era. The absence of overt horror in Lewton's movies has less to do with any commitment to subtlety than to the approach Lewton and his group took to filmmaking.

That approach is more important, more original, than any of the elements others have perceived in these films. In fact, Lewton's ouvre represents one of the most ambitious experiments in film's brief history to that point. Most American films, in any genre, maintain what Andrew Sarris has described as a "treacherous resemblance to reality" (American Cinema, 276). By confirming that we were watching a world that conformed to the same laws of physics as our own, populated by creatures who looked, acted, and reacted like people we knew, filmmakers offered easy access to the reality of the screen. Even in horror films, the monsters usually appeared as aberrations within an otherwise conventional reality: Dracula in 19th century London, Frankenstein in his tiny village. The Wizard of Oz, one of
the only pre-1940 American films to introduce an entirely new world, begins with a cinematic representation of ultra-conventional Kansas, thus providing viewers with both a reference point and an anchor.

Beginning with *Cat People* in 1942, though, and continuing right up until his split with RKO five years later, Val Lewton presented a filmic reality that did not so closely resemble our own. Lewton's scriptwriters borrowed legends and histories from assorted cultures throughout the world, recombined them, and created all new histories and cultures. Initially familiar images of street corners and houses and buildings and rooms transformed into new, magical places that no longer resembled anywhere we had been. A series of clever performances emphasized Lewton's conception of loneliness as a connector between our own reality and the reality within his films. Like Frankenstein, the monsters in Val Lewton movies are also victims. Unlike Frankenstein, though, Val Lewton's monsters seduce us into following them back to where they came from. Lewton, whom Mark Robson describes in *The Celluloid Muse* as a "marvellous talent" who "didn't know much about film," understood as well as any producer or director who came before him the camera's possibilities as an alchemical device for turning the mundane to magic (207).

When Lewton's movies aim to scare--and only half of them do--they rely entirely on their ability to entice you
into the world on the screen. Through the use of rigidly ordinary settings like an ordinary English manor, Tod Browning, director of the famed 1931 version of "Dracula," attempted to make his monster materialize within the confines of a reality that approximated our own. But Irina, the cat-woman in *Cat People*, moves through a world of shifting shadows and glistening snow, of storytelling and magic, which resembles our world only for a moment. If the film fails to draw us into its reality, it cannot scare us, because the monster exists only within the onscreen reality. Here is where Lewton's films attempt their most ambitious variation on traditional cinematic reality.

Why would you enter a nightmare if you knew it was one? Val Lewton's movies provide an answer. In every one of them, the nightmare within the film, for all its dangers, its readily visible monsters and demons, ultimately seems friendlier and more welcoming than the conventional reality outside the film. Terrible as Irina's curse is, we wind up wishing we knew her, or that we could at least provide her with the same comfort the fairy-tale world does. Frightening as the voodoo Gods at the Homefort in *I Walked with a Zombie* are, they at least take care of their own, offering a peculiar yet undeniably appealing brand of salvation. We enter the nightmare because it is more wondrous than our own world. Fright, finally, seems a small price to pay.

Lewton's films achieve this effect primarily through
their sensuality. The language spoken in this labyrinth does indeed resemble ours, but has an added poetic element not often encountered in our world. For all of the dangers they may hide, the shadows in Val Lewton's world have a lushness, a tangible presence as inviting as shade on a blazing summer day. The anonymity they offer is a friendly one. Slip inside one, and you could be yourself, or better yet, become someone else. And the inhabitants of the fairy-tale realm, most of whom have slipped out of our world through the cracks loneliness makes, seem somehow more at home in their world of magic than most viewers have ever felt in their own reality. Too passionate, or too alienated, or just too strange for this world, the characters in Lewton's films find peace only in escape into the fairy-tale. Because they are so familiar with not feeling at home, their release upon discovering the spirit world verges on bliss. And that bliss is contagious. We want to share in it. We want to consider ourselves capable of going where the more passionate people go. And so we submit ourselves to the spell.

All nine horror films Val Lewton produced during these five years attempt the creation of a singular world, and the seduction of the viewer into it. With the advantage of director Jacques Tourneur's exceptional eye, the first three are the most successful, although The Leopard Man's visuals are so striking that they overpower viewers instead of beckoning to them. An exploration of Tourneur's films, as
well as the *The Seventh Victim*, the first Lewton film without Tourneur, reveals the machinery that creates the illusion, but does not destroy that illusion. Even after we understand the source of these films' magic, they retain their magic. They remain worlds unto themselves, magical places we drift through now and again, without ever quite managing to anchor ourselves there.
Cat People

If film, as Andrew Sarris suggests in his *American Cinema*, is "a labyrinth with a treacherous resemblance to reality," *Cat People*, the first film Val Lewton produced for RKO, is about the seductive appeal of losing one's self in the labyrinth (278). DeWitt Bodeen submerges his plotline, about an accumulation of petty cruelties and pent-up frustrations that eventually bring out the beast in a terrified and alienated young woman, in an ever-deepening pool of displaced myth and fragmented fairy-tale. Simone Simon embellishes her lines and gestures with an impassioned but understated longing. Advancing both plot and character development in concise bits of screen time, Jacques Tourneur lingers instead on the gentle snow slipping past unlighted windows, the gradations of shadow on empty streets and in empty rooms. In Lewton's movies, the labyrinth of film becomes less a funhouse mirror reflecting conventional reality than a separate reality altogether. And if that separate reality is a source of fear in *Cat People*, it is also a source of beauty, of refuge, and finally, of peace.

Even before the opening scene, DeWitt Bodeen begins weaving his peculiarly post-modern web. The film opens with
a superscription from Dr. Lewis Jude's *Anatomy of Atavism*:
"Even as fog continues to lie in the valleys, so does
ancient sin cling to the low places, the depressions in the
world consciousness." While having only the vaguest possible
connections to the ensuing story, this superscription sets a
quiet, eerie tone. The words themselves connote not only
menace, but barely concealed sexuality, and silence, and
seductiveness: fog, valleys, antiquity, sin, low places,
depression, consciousness. In this context, Jude's sentence
itself is virtually meaningless. But the language in that
sentence becomes the film's bait. It lures us in.

Moments later, after Irina (Simone Simon) crumples up a
sketch, tosses it at a trash can, and misses, the camera
pans towards yet another quotation, this time printed on a
sign near the panther cages where Irina is drawing: "Let no
one say and say to your shame/ All was beauty here until you
came." Following so closely on the heels of the poetic
opening quotation, this one seems ludicrous, laughable, and
indeed it effectively deflates the mood the film had already
begun to establish, and so sets the conditions of this
particular chase. Lewton's films roll in to get you, but
then recede back, tugging you ever further from any
"treacherous resemblance to reality," out into a darker and
more unsettled world of fairy-tale events and intensified
loneliness. Silly as this second quotation is, it provides
the film with two more critically suggestive words: shame
and beauty. Within seconds, we find ourselves adrift, far from our familiar reality, riding a raft of mysterious and evocative words.

Later in the same scene, as Irina and Oliver (Kent Smith), an architect who comes on to Irina, begin walking home towards Irina's house, an organ grinder passes by them, playing a mournful melody. The tone of the song seems to fit with the language, although there has been nothing overtly sad or menacing to this point. But the melody and the solitary figure of the grinder reinforce both the fairy-tale feel of this new world and the insistent loneliness lurking at the heart of it.

Once Irina and Oliver arrive back at Irina's apartment, Bodeen scavenges another piece of mythology to add to the fairy-tale nest he is building, and introduces the supernatural directly into the movie. Irina tells Oliver the legend of the Cat People of her Serbian village, who escaped into the mountains centuries ago and were never found. Angered, or aroused, these creatures metamorphosed into ferocious cats who devoured the objects of their emotions. This story fuses with the superscription from the opening, and becomes a foundation for this specific fairy-tale. It will take place in fog, in low places. It will involve sin, and shame, and cats. It will focus on an exile, and a savage return.

Bodeen borrows next from twentieth century psychology.
After stopping Oliver from kissing her during one of their dates, Irina tells him that she's terrified of sexual contact, or even passion. She believes that if she kisses him—if she is aroused—she will turn into a panther. Here is the most elementary form of sexual repression. A young, beautiful, lonely woman, afraid of her own sensuality and convinced it is forbidden, constructs a monster, a force which prevents her from doing what she desperately wishes to do.

"Fairy tales," Oliver scoffs, and indeed he is right. In conventional, non-movie reality, such a fear would reveal only an intense anxiety about one's own sexuality. Unfortunately for Oliver, he happens to exist in a fairy-tale, where myths lose their demystifying and illuminating significance and transform once more back into stories. In this labyrinth, the monsters are real.

The least successful sections of Bodeen's script are those that veer back towards reality, out of the elongated shadows of fairy tale. During an engagement party the members of Oliver's office throw for him and Irina, the believably flat, uninspired jokes and pats on the back and earthy displays of camaraderie seem jarring, out of place in this more mythic reality. The multiple legends lay a seductive veneer over the surface of Cat People. Through language, through the rigorous repetition of evocative words and phrases like those in the superscription from Jude,
Bodeen creates a convincing aura of fable. Myths in *Cat People* are connected to each other, and appropriate to the reality of the film. Office parties are an unwarranted and confusing intrusion.

Finally, even Christianity becomes just another point in the matrix, the final strand of Bodeen's web. A zookeeper responds to Irina's observation that the panthers are beautiful by snapping "No, he ain't beautiful . . . You read your Bible. Revelations. Worst beast of 'em all. 'And the beast I saw was like unto a leopard.'" In most contexts, Biblical references contain a myriad of cultural connotations. Centuries of Christian dominance in the West have imbued the Bible with a weighty and complex set of signifiers. But here, in this separate place, the quotation fits so seamlessly into the mythic foundation that it sheds those signifiers, becomes simply another element of the story. The terrifying beast the quotation describes is no longer the Devil; it is the leopard. In their *Hollywood in the Forties*, Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg suggest that the Lewton group's "self-conscious literariness...vitiated some otherwise splendid films." (64) They fail to recognize the use that all these literary references are put to. Bodeen is not merely showing off his knowledge, or attempting to imbue a diverting story with significance. Rather, by lifting segments from so many different cultural mythologies and recombining them into an all-new, and newly
frightening, revised mythos, Bodeen reinvests these stories with some of their original power. By taking them out of their cultural contexts and installing them in a brand new system of mythology, he restores their capacity to evoke wonder.

Without Jaques Tourneur's elegant, elegiac, poetic direction, Bodeen's script would fall far short of creating a convincing other-reality. Film is an essentially visual medium, and Tourneur, with assistance from Mark Robson's editing, Nicolas Musuraca's cinematography, and Albert D'Agostino's sets, maximizes the screen's potential for creating new worlds. In his slow, graceful tracking shots through gradations of shadow and half-light, Tourneur creates a labyrinth that occasionally resembles our reality, but decidedly is not.

B-films in the forties had a strict 75-minute time limit, so as to fit neatly onto the second half of a double bill. Yet the gentle, creeping mood that both Bodeen and Tourneur sought required time to establish. As a result, plot movement and character creation had to be accomplished as concisely as possible, with no wasted movement or moments. *Cat People* strings together a series of remarkably efficient scenes between longer, more atmospheric sections that fill in the visual gaps in Bodeen's ghostly outline.

One example of the precision of Tourneur's characterization occurs in the opening scene between Irina
and Oliver at the zoo, which tells us almost all we need to know about Oliver. When Irina fires her sketch at the trash can and misses, Oliver picks it up, shoots it accurately into the can, and then smiles a bright, self-satisfied smile. Before he so much as opens his mouth, he has revealed his primary characteristics: well-adjusted ease, shallow but effortless charm, a smug streak. Moments later, when Irina tells Oliver how alone she is and Oliver replies with a barely-concealed leer, his characterization is complete.

Such concise work leaves ample time for the more mysterious, haunting shots which are Tourneur's trademark. Pieced together, they form a tapestry of a place not quite like ours. Irina's room, as designed by D'Agostino, contains perfectly positioned, disturbing statues, comfortable couches, spotless tabletops: the predictable trappings of a lonely, and somehow separate life. Tourneur spends the first few seconds of screen time inside the room with his camera trained on a motionless Irina as she stares out her window, humming. The room is dark. Lights come on in the windows of rooms across the street, and set the shadows lurking in the corners spinning into recombinant patterns. Lions roar from the nearby zoo. Tourneur, Lewton, and Robson wisely decided not to enhance the roars. The sound, in that strange room, in that ethereal light, has already become alien again, and threatening.

Every time we see a street, we are struck by the
peculiar play of shadows over the sidewalks. We see the shadowy shapes of trees, but never the trees, as though we were staring up from the bottom of a pool, or back from the other side of a mirror. We are looking at our own world inverted. The engagement party for Irina and Oliver takes place in a restaurant, and before we go inside to join it, Tourneur allows us to watch it for a moment from outside, through a veil of gently falling snow. Always, we are reminded of the world this fairy tale takes place in. Always, we are moving inexorably forward towards terror, but in languorous, delicious slow motion. We can sense the danger coming, and yet the beauty and otherness of this world leave us reluctant to leave it.

Inside the restaurant, a woman at another table, all dressed in black, stares continuously at Irina. One of Oliver's co-workers notices, and observes that the stranger "looks like a cat." In another film, this would be a throw-away line, a careless B-movie pun. Here, though, the line seems utterly appropriate, because the woman really does look like a cat. Without the use of any outlandish cat ears or strange hairstyles or long fingernails, the costume designers and casting directors created a character who could only be described as cat-like. Tourneur was absolutely aware of what he was doing. In an interview in The Celluloid Muse, he reveals that "We wanted a woman who looked like a cat, and we looked and looked until we finally found this
very thin model" (216). In everyday reality, in jeans and a sweatshirt, this woman's feline characteristics would be unnoticeable. But here, in this world of shadow and strange sounds and storytelling, she becomes an unnerving figure of menace.

From this point on, Tourneur never breaks the fragile mise-en-scene he has established. On Irina and Oliver's conjugal night, when Irina begs Oliver to give her time to overcome her fears before she consents to sleeping with him and finally shuts him out of her room, Tourneur catches her sagging against her door, sinking down into another pool of misshapen shadows while the snow sweeps past the window behind her. The harsh, physical reality of door, doorknob, bare floor and window contrasts with the enticing gentleness of the snow, the soothing dark. It is not surprising that Irina tells Oliver "I love the dark. It's friendly." For her, terror lies in the daytime, well lighted, everyday world. The darkness is her haven.

The eventual chase sequences, where Oliver's co-worker and eventual lover Alice gets trailed down those otherworldly, shadow-strewn streets, are remarkable mostly for their duration and their quiet. Those streets finally cease to resemble streets, and become instead the corridors of the labyrinth. Once again, the set design adds to the sense of claustrophobia. Alice's increasingly panicked walk leads down ever-narrower streets, between high, forbidding
brick walls. In the film's most famous scene, cat-Irina, mostly unseen except as a shadow on the wall (which Tourneur himself created with his hand), stalks Alice as she treads water in a dark, empty swimming pool. The minimal light, rippling down the walls and over Alice's face, seems fragile. At any second, it could shatter, surrendering Alice to the darkness. The pool itself, as Tourneur points out, "was like the inside of a shoebox" (219). The visuals here not only heighten the suspense and intensify the alien atmosphere of the film, they pack thematic significance as well. How appropriate to find Irina, unable to escape her fears, trapped in her cat-body in this suffocating room. The monster here is every bit as boxed in and trapped as the nominal heroine.

Only at the very end, with Irina lying dead outside the panther cage, does the skewed perspective of Tourneur's camera suddenly right itself. Only then do the images once more take on a "treacherous resemblance to reality." Oliver, moralizing and sanctimonious to the end, stands over Irina's body with Alice in his arms and declares "she never lied to us." The shadows behind them are suddenly well-defined, familiar. The night is harder, darker; it has lost both its menace and its gentleness. Oliver and Alice fade back into their brightly lighted American night, their less mythical reality, free at last of foreigners and troubled, sensual women. The regret this scene engenders stems not from our
sympathy for Oliver's loss, or from his sentiments, but from his stubborn insistence on exiting on the labyrinth, escaping the fairy-tale, and dragging us out with him.

Bodeen and Tourneur create this world for us, entice us into it, but without Simone Simon's subtle, consistently intelligent performance, Cat People would lose its focus. Slow motion pacing becomes dull the second the audience loses interest. Ironically, Tourneur "wasn't too happy with her [Simon's] performance as the cat girl" (Celluloid Muse, 219). But RKO had a contract with her, and Lewton liked her, and she stayed in the film. Tourneur also complains that Simon's accent forced them to make the heroine foreign, something he did not intend to do. Even outstanding directors, working on their best films, do not always know what they have.

Simon's character became a prototype for the entire Lewton series. Her desperate loneliness renders her susceptible to the charms of the labyrinth. Where Oliver and Alice are tourists in this fairy-land, Irina seems to have come home. What makes Simon's performance such a triumph is her refusal to deliver any of the camp dialogue in a camp fashion. Instead of making the monster real, she makes the ache inside Irina real. Her intensity and vulnerability are the most seductive invitations of all into the fairy tale.

When Irina tells Oliver about her Slavic heritage, staring out her window, watching America go by and humming
while Oliver paws obliviously through her things, she acquaints us early on with the solitary life she has become used to. It is Simon's comfortable slouch against her window, the lilt in her voice as she sings, the way she leans into the shadows, that make her solitude so convincing. It seems absolutely habitual and familiar. And when she tells Oliver, "I like the dark. It's friendly," she does so with no trace of menace, but only a quietly ambiguous, friendly smile. This "monster" does not love the dark because it provides her with opportunities to kill. She loves it because in the dark, she feels at home. In the dark, everyone is alone.

Simon also shades Irina's character with a troubled, irrepressible sensuality. The easy swing of her arms as she walks, the playful pout in her voice, have already laid indelible hints by the time Oliver falls asleep one night in Irina's apartment. Irina cradles him by her fireplace. The look on her face—a forlorn and distant smile, mixed with an undeniable carnivorous gleam, the result not of cat-hunger but very human desire—betrays her happiness, her hopefulness, her anxiety, and her unshakable sense of otherness, of being an outsider. It is almost as if she were standing outside her own window in that snow, peering in at a scene she longs for but can never take part in.

During her tormented conjugal night, Irina's desire and fear combine into a torturous frustration. Contained within
her pleas to Oliver to give her time are the conflicting hopes that he will grant her wish and that he will ignore it. Irina has learned to equate sexuality with wickedness. In the fairy-tale world, the wickedness is made manifest. After she closes Oliver out of her room, Irina collapses to the floor in a paroxysm of longing. Barry Gifford, in his *Devil Thumbs a Ride*, points out the film's examination of "the power of exotic young women over older, rather straight-laced men," but neglects to mention its examination of the power of the promise of sexual connection and passion over beautiful but frightened and alienated young women. Simon's multi-layered performance makes all of this possible simultaneously.

Even as her character takes on more monstrous overtones, Simon never allows us to forget Irina's fundamental loneliness, her foreignness, her fear, all of which make her more comfortable as a cat-person than as a young woman. The real horror in *Cat People* comes from our empathy for Irina, who finds no refuge anywhere. She reaches inside her bird cage to pet her canary, and the bird dies of fright. Irina's face is a portrait of anguish, of frustration, but reveals no surprise. She has learned to expect such reactions. The creatures of the world outside the labyrinth simply are not prepared for such a sensual and passionate woman. Irina does not really know whether she is a cat-person or not. She knows only that she can find
neither love nor acceptance.

Oliver and Alice eventually seem considerably more monstrous than Irina. Oliver just cannot understand his wife's anger when he reveals that he has told Alice about Irina's trips to a psychiatrist, and cavalierly disregards her objections by saying "Oh, you can tell Alice anything." Far from the traditional trapped horror film hero, married to a monster, Oliver is a shallow, arrogant man whose callous insensitivity exacerbates the loneliness that is slowly devouring his wife. It is Oliver who responds to Alice's comment that he loves Irina by shaking his head. "I don't know," he says. "All this trouble." One month without sex, a little marital strife, primarily a result of his own impatience, and he is ready to move on. Like a real cat, Oliver betrays as quickly as he loves. Just show him the next warm body.

Eventually, all of the doors leading out of the labyrinth close behind Irina. She agrees to go with her husband and Alice to a natural history museum, in an attempt involve herself in Oliver's interests. But once there, Oliver orders her upstairs to look around on her own, while Alice and he continue on together, sharing the knowledge their work provides them with. As usual, Simon elegantly underplays the moment. We sense her disappointment mostly by an all but imperceptible droop in her shoulders. Any more obvious display of self-pity would have squashed the moment.
Simon not only preserves it, but her subtlety enhances it.

Finally, when Oliver spurns Irina's last efforts and tells her it's too late, Irina murmurs, "But I love silence. I love loneliness." And she slips away into madness. Again, the peculiar, wounded smile Simon selects to use with the line elevates it from a monster-movie threat into a moment of pathos. This woman does not love loneliness, or silence. But she has become convinced that, for her, there will be nothing else.

At last, Irina discovers for certain that she is a cat-person. She transforms, attacks her psychiatrist, receives a mortal wound, and stumbles out to the zoo, where even the panthers hiss at her. The only person in the whole film who has expressed any companionship with or compassion for Irina is the cat-woman in the restaurant, who calls her "Sister." In the world of the labyrinth, at least, Irina may find others like her. Her change, monstrous as it is, finally seems merciful rather than horrible.

In the world Irina comes from and, in the end, returns to--the world of fairy tale, of the film, which Oliver and Alice no longer seem part of--she at least may find an outlet for her passions, some release from her restless sexual hunger. At least, as a panther, Irina has a defense against all the predators swarming in around her, and some refuge from them.
I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE

Several of Val Lewton's horror films do not bother with horror at all. In films like *Curse of the Cat People*, the filmmakers seem so enchanted by the world they invent that they do not even bother giving it menace. An absence of menace, though, has the peculiar effect of weakening our attraction to the spirit world. The presence of monsters gives the decision to submit ourselves to the fairy tale a necessary and compelling edge. Without it, the other world takes on a resemblance to familiar conceptions of heaven that renders it both less foreign and less interesting. We do not want these worlds to be places we go when we die. We want to know what it is like to live there.

The Lewton group's best films terrify as well as bewitch, and *I Walked with a Zombie*, Tourneur's second feature for Lewton, may be the best at both. The monsters in *I Walked with a Zombie* are every bit as mysterious as the cat people, but their presence does little to dilute our attraction to the friendlier fairy-tale world they exist in.

Where *Cat People* employs elements of fairy tale to unravel our sense of conventional reality, *I Walked with a Zombie* begins inside the fairy tale world and never returns.
As in the first film, the fairy tale reality comes complete with monsters, demons, and menace, but it is also permeated with a seductive fragility and warmth. The light and language, as well as the inhabitants of this world all seem softer, more poetic, more enchanting than their counterparts outside the labyrinth. Curt Siodmak and Ardel Wray wrote the script this time, and they add a dose of folklore to the potent mixture Bodeen discovered the year before, but otherwise follow each step of his alchemical recipe for creating a new world out of materials from our own. Freed from the conventional street scenes and decidedly American ambience of *Cat People*, Jacques Tourneur creates an exotic, magically lighted Caribbean island that does not quite resemble any other Caribbean island. With help from J. Roy Hunt's sinister cinematography and the thoughtful sets and costumes, Tourneur creates an even more convincing, frightening, and peculiarly appealing world than he did in his first film for Lewton.

Without Simone Simon, though, the film drifts in its earlier sections. With the introduction of Mrs. Rand, mother of the two feuding brothers the plot revolves around, a character appears capable of anchoring the haunting imagery inside the story. Like Irina in *Cat People*, Mrs. Rand is both monster and victim. As with Irina, it is Mrs. Rand's increasing awareness of the gap between herself and the people around her that makes her so susceptible to the
I Walked with a Zombie begins without superscription, but Nurse Betsy Connell's (Frances Dee) voice-over serves the same purpose. While we watch the ocean slip softly over a velvety beach, under a twilight sky patrolled by strangely shaped clouds, Betsy tells us "I walked with a zombie." Then she giggles. As with the superscription that opens Cat People, this voice-over acts as an invitation, drawing us into the picture. The words are peculiar. She does not say she ran from a zombie, or killed one, or was killed by one. She walked with one. The word zombie suggests monsters, danger, but the construction of Betsy's sentence and the longing in her voice contradict those connotations. And her giggle, her admission that "It does seem a funny thing to say," encourages us to trust her. Betsy has visited a fairy tale world, walked in one, but she has come back. She is one of us. At this point, we need such a character, someone who exists in our conventional reality, to act as a bridge between our own world and the one we are about to enter.

The only scene that takes place in our more conventional reality is the first one after that voice-over. In an ordinary office overlooking an ordinary Ottawa street, an agent interviews Betsy for a job nursing a mentally ill woman on a Caribbean island. "Do you believe in
witchcraft?" he asks.

Betsy replies, "Well, they didn't teach it at Memorial Hospital, although I had my suspicions about the directress of training."

The agent impatiently shrugs this off. He is eager, as the film is eager, to bypass such ritualized and predictable jokes and expressions of doubt. Unlike most other films, I Walked with a Zombie requires neither belief nor a suspension of belief from its viewers. It is the charm of the world it creates that will make the monsters real. Where horror films have traditionally made viewers relieved to escape the nightmare worlds they present, Lewton films leave us wishing we could stay.

Onboard a small ship traveling to the West Indies to take up her post, Betsy first encounters Paul Holland (Tom Conway), the elder of the battling brothers. Paul interrupts Betsy's reverie over the beautiful night to tell her, "You think it's beautiful because you don't understand. Those flying fish. They're not leaping for joy. They're jumping in terror...There is no beauty here. Everything good dies here." As with our first meeting of Oliver in Cat People, this cynical speech establishes most of Paul's key character traits. He is smug, melodramatic, angry, a little ridiculous, and sad. Betsy, a shallow and prudish woman, is predictably attracted to such obvious self-pity. In Paul, she senses darkness, but not enough of it to make her
uncomfortable. She can afford her attraction to Paul, because he is so obviously harmless. He, too, belongs firmly in our world.

Not until we reach the island do Siodmak and Wray begin unpicking the stitches that hold our reality together. Where DeWitt Bodeen used quotations from literature and history, though, Siodmak and Wray rely more on folklore. During her first drive out to Fort Holland, Betsy listens to a black servant describe how the Hollands "brought the colored folk to San Sebastian. And T-misery...an old man who lives in the garden at Ft. Holland with arrows stuck in him and a sorrowful look on his old black face." T-misery turns out to be a statue of St. Sebastian, once used as the figurehead for the slave ship. Where Bodeen spun his web one strand at a time, Siodmak and Wray weave thick swaths of lore into the conversations of the islanders, which catch up viewer and character alike and cocoon them. This particular swath contains strands of local black legend and Christianity, bound together at both ends by an overriding sense of misery and violence. The world of San Sebastian has begun to take shape.

When the servant tells Betsy how the slaves came "chained to the bottom of the boat," Betsy replies carelessly, "They brought you to a beautiful place," and so confirms her obliviousness, her shallow, unshakable good humor, just in case anyone missed those traits back on the
boat. Inserted here just after the servants' story, Betsy's comment cues us that she will no longer be our guide as we near the enchanted realms the remainder of the action takes place in.

Elements of folklore and myth recur throughout the film, locking themselves together like the quotations in *Cat People* to from the foundations of an all-new reality. A black maid at the fort tells Betsy, "For generations, they [the slaves] found life a burden. That's why they still weep when a child is born and make merry at a burial. This is a sad place." In the morning, the maid wakes Betsy by touching her feet. "I didn't want to frighten you out of your sleep. That's why I touched you farthest from your heart." A folksinger sings an unsettling but convincingly folksy tune about the Holland family. Mrs. Rand places her drunken son Wes aboard a horse and tells Betsy, "Don't worry about a sugar planter. Give him a horse and he'll ride to his own funeral." The precipitation of poetic language about sleep and hearts and sugar planters and jungle drums and misery forms an enchanted mist over the island within the film. The legendary suddenly seems ordinary here.

By the time evil creeps into this fairy-land, the charm and persistence of the folklore has piqued even Betsy's curiosity about the new world she has come to. Having failed with traditional remedies to cure Paul's wife Jessica of her illness, Betsy asks the maid about the Homefort, where the
natives practice voodoo. "There are other doctors," says the maid. "Better doctors."

"Nonsense," Betsy says.

"They even cure nonsense, Miss Betsy. . . . Better doctors," says the maid, her smile suffused with radiance. As with Betsy's voice at the beginning, it is not the menace in that smile that makes it so riveting, but the utter belief behind it. On this island of slaves and zombies, merry funerals and sugar planters, folktales and T-misery, voodoo seems suddenly logical, completely appropriate, even to someone as unsusceptible to enchantment or romance as Betsy.

Part of the trust Tourneur, Siodmak, and Wray engender as they create their new world comes from the concise nature of their characterization. Because we understand and believe the inhabitants of the island, we believe in the island. The feud between Paul and Wes over Paul's wife Jessica is made palpable by the fact that the observations that Paul and Wes make about each other are accurate. In most films, screenwriters use one character to tell us about another to fill in gaps in their scripts. In I Walked with a Zombie, Siodmak and Wray use observations to demonstrate how well these two brothers know each other, and their knowledge makes them seem very much like brothers. Over dinner one night at the fort, Wes responds to Betsy's compliments about Paul by calling his brother strong, dark, and "very sad."
Quite the Byronic character. . . . Maybe I should cultivate it." At this point, we have only seen Paul once, on the boat, but everything Wes describes has already been shown to us. We believe what he says, but perhaps more importantly, we believe he has spent time with his brother. Similarly, when Paul hears about a day Betsy and Wes spend in town, he admits grudgingly that "Wes can be very entertaining." His bitterness towards his brother is evident in his tone, but so is his awareness of his brother's strengths. In the presence of so many believably complex human beings, struggling through familiar quarrels, we overcome the sense of alienation such a strange island might otherwise evoke.

Betsy's character also remains consistent. When she admits to herself that she has fallen in love with Paul, she decides not to pursue him, but to attempt to restore his wife, trapped in a zombie-like coma, to health. "Because I loved him," she tells herself on the windy cliffs one night, "I felt I had to restore her to him." This is believable not because Betsy is so good, but because she is so rigidly in control at all times. Restoring Jessica to Paul will allow her to escape her own feelings. Love and passion are terrifying emotions. For Betsy, restoring Jessica is her own personalized fairy tale, a yellow brick road back to Ottawa. As a result, our focus readily slips from her when Mrs. Rand arrives.

Like Oliver and Alice in Cat People, Betsy is more of a
tour guide for the fairy tale world than an inhabitant of it. Too narcissistic to be lonely, too well protected to be broken, she seems out of place on such a sad, if magical, island. But her presence is critical. She provides the viewer with a reference point. Betsy is the kind of woman we meet every day. She is Alice down the rabbit hole, an ever-present reminder that we will have to wake up soon.

Despite his calculated cynicism and bitterness, Paul displays a likeable perceptiveness. Jessica's coma came on while she was threatening to leave Paul for Wes, and the blame Wes places on Paul for what happened forms the centerpiece of their feud. Betsy wants to take Jessica to the Homefort, to see if the voodoo might cure her (Betsy believes only that it might have some psychological effect), but Paul stops Betsy by telling her, "Wesley insists she stay here."

"But he hasn't the right," an outraged Betsy sniffs, displaying her habitual insensitivity.

"Oh, he hasn't any legal right, if that's what you mean," Paul replies. Angry as he is at his brother, bitter as he is about love, Paul still makes an effort to understand the complex emotional tangles that have choked off every avenue of communication he once had with his family.

Paul displays that same perceptiveness about his own love. Discussing his hostile speech on the boat with Betsy,
he listens to her interpretation of events—"You were trying to warn me"—then answers her with a more accurate one: "No, I was trying to hurt you."

Paul's bitterness may be calculated, but it is also real, and spiky, and hard to like. He has come to doubt his own capacity for gentleness, and now turns on himself with the same vindictiveness with which he has attacked his brother and, we imagine, his wife. But at least he is aware of his baser tendencies; indeed, he tortures himself with them. Betsy, on the other hand, remains blissfully ignorant of her own shortcomings from start to finish. Never comfortable in the alternative reality of the island, the world of passion, Paul nevertheless has developed an affection for that reality which aids our own assimilation into it. While Betsy stands oblivious with her back turned, Paul unties the ropes which moor us to our conventional reality, pushes us out into the river, and waves a regretful goodbye. Paul is not part of our new world, but he wishes he could be.

If the concise characterization and preponderance of folklore make the magical possible, the sensuality of this fairy-tale world makes it alluring. As in *Cat People*, Tourneur and his crew use the folksy, mythical language of the script as a springboard into a place just a little too lush, a little too eerie to be real. It is a refuge, and a playground, for desperate people and monsters alike.
As soon as Betsy leaves Ottawa and sets foot on ship, she exits her conventional reality. There is a glow to the night the sailboat glides through, a lilt to the boat's gentle rocking motion, a mournful edge to the sea chantey the crew sings, which make the body of water we are crossing resemble the river Styx more than the Atlantic Ocean.

During her first night at the Fort, Betsy lies in her room while the moonlight sifts through her blinds and takes on an ethereal glow: another piece of our more familiar world reinvented by Tourneur's fairy tale lens. We hear the sounds of trickling water, of the wind whispering through the over-burdened branches, and when we first hear the disembodied sound of sobbing, it fits so well into that magical play of murmurs and light that it seems as though the place itself is weeping.

Getting up to investigate the weeping, Betsy enters a tower at the back of the garden, where she meets Jessica for the first time. As with the cat-woman in the restaurant in Cat People, the choice of actresses and clothing for Jessica illustrate the care Lewton's crew took with each and every scene of these films. There is nothing striking about Jessica's expression, or her walk, except perhaps their blank purposelessness. But her formidable height as she towers over Betsy, and her diaphanous white gown, give her a wraithlike appearance that understandably terrifies Betsy, and the audience as well.
In *The Devil Thumbs a Ride*, Barry Gifford describes the light in this movie as "hazy, the black not quite black but with an opaqueness that makes you strain to see more clearly" (74). The overall effect is like watching events taking place underwater, in a world we can see but are not familiar with.

Later, Betsy takes Jessica to the Homefort, and Tourneur capitalizes on the opportunity to present another of his memorable set pieces. Betsy and Jessica sneak out of the yard, while the ever-present breeze lifts their hair, drops it again, like a little girl playing with her mother's braids. The rows of cane, taller than Betsy and Jessica both, cast disproportionately long shadows. At the end of one of those rows, the women encounter a guard, pop-eyed, tall, much too thin, and inhumanly still, who, like Jessica, terrifies not by threat but by appearance. The sound of a blown conch shell moans in the trees. By the time we finally get to the Homefort, we feel far indeed from our own world, where the practice of voodoo holds no menace.

The Homefort itself is believably ramshackle. But the eerie chanting of the followers, the strange, jerky rhythms of the dancing, the pulsing drums, invest it with power. The voodoo priest commands Jessica to raise her arms by gesturing at her. Jessica responds, either because she is a zombie or because she thinks she is. The presence of so much magic has multiplied the number of possible explanations.
All through the movie, drapes flutter as though breathing. Footfalls susurrate on overgrown garden paths. Shadows cling to corners and doorways like cobwebs. Owls, frogs, and other unseen and less familiar animals croak, hoot, and hiss through the night. Like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *I Walked with a Zombie* is based at least in part on the story of Rochester's mad first wife in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and like Ms. Rhys' novel, the film never lets us forget the throb of life in the tropics, the sense of more primitive organisms threatening to overrun the buildings and houses. Mankind, here, and white mankind in particular, has lost control; that is what makes San Sebastian so exhilarating, and so terrifying. In this place, voodoo and zombies, passionate love and fairy tale redemption, seem not only possible but absolutely natural. As Tourneur himself points out in *The Celluloid Muse*, "The whole thing had the consistency of a legend, something you're telling to children" (219).

For all its visual and linguistic magic, though, *I Walked with a Zombie* lacks a center for all the cinematic magic to gravitate towards during its first half. In *Cat People*, Simone Simon's haunted, irrepressible sexuality provided the final ingredient necessary to make that magical world accessible. Our empathy with Irina's struggle immersed us in the fairy tale. In *I Walked with a Zombie*, though, Frances Dee, as Betsy, is appropriately sexless. Tom
Conway's somewhat stiff performance as Paul suits the character fine. Paul is a man who retreated inside his own carefully constructed fortress long ago. We can sympathize with him, but we are not attracted to him. Wes, too, is blocked. After years of watching Jessica lie insensate, he now seems far more comfortable sniping at his brother than passionately loving someone. Near the end, he begs Betsy to commit euthanasia on Jessica, arguing that Jessica "ought to be free." Free not just from her illness, or from San Sebastian, but from Wes as well. He has become so transfixed with hate that he has forgotten how to love.

Not until the arrival of Mrs. Rand do we encounter a character compassionate and passionate enough to attract us to this special place. From the moment she appears at the cafe and places a drunken Wes on his horse, Mrs. Rand (Edith Barrett) commands our attention. Her step is strong, assured. Her posture is erect without seeming rigid. Her smile is more of an echo than anything else. It no longer lights up her face, but we sense it did once. She is the only person Betsy immediately cedes authority too, and with good reason. Mrs. Rand is clearly at home here.

A missionary's widow, Mrs. Rand now nurses children in a town infirmary. We watch her treat a child who wears both a crucifix and a rabbit's foot around his neck. She asks the child, "how do you expect to get to heaven with one foot in the homefort and the other in the church?" But the tone of
her voice, while gentle, suggests a surprising sadness lurking just under the surface. She does not ridicule the Homefort or the church. But she seems to know, somehow, that neither set of beliefs will get you to heaven.

Betsy enters, and asks Mrs. Rand whether voodoo has power. Mrs. Rand has been mocking such ideas, but when she hears Betsy's question, she stops moving, just for a second, and then resumes. She says she believes voodoo works because people believe it works, and so, in a sense, it does have power. Appropriately, it is Mrs. Rand, an intelligent and firmly grounded white woman who seems unsettlingly at home amongst the mysteries of San Sebastian, who raises the question the rest of the movie leaves unanswered: Is voodoo's power purely psychological, or does it actually dominate events, at least here in the labyrinth?

After taking Jessica through the cane fields, Betsy is shocked to discover Mrs. Rand at the Homefort. Mrs. Rand is inside a cabin with the high priests, and her presence is clearly not uncommon. She reassures Betsy, again, that she comes because the natives trust her more this way. They believe she has power. But she also delivers another of her unexpectedly sad offhand comments, which suggest that there is more to what she believes than what she says. She tells Betsy, "There's no easy way to do good." Barrett delivers this line with just the right mixture of wisdom and ache. It is Mrs. Rand's capacity for doubt, for struggle, that makes
her much more likeable than any other character in the film. This is someone who has learned, the hard way, how few answers there are.

Finally, Mrs. Rand makes a confession to her sons and the police commissioner which colors in the film's magical outlines. The look of relief on her face as she reveals how she went to the Homefort to ask the Gods there to keep Jessica from destroying her family tells us all we need to know about the secret this compassionate, guilty, lonely woman has carried inside her year after year. "I went to the Homefort. I pretended I was possessed by their Gods... I kept seeing her face smiling because she was beautiful enough to take my family in her hands and tear it apart." Mrs. Rand had already lost her husband, and journeyed far from her own conventional reality. Now, finding her sons pitted against one another for the love a cruel woman, she finds the allure of the spirit world too tempting to resist.

"The drums," she says, "the chanting, the lights... Then I heard a voice speaking in the sudden silence... My voice." Like Irina, Mrs. Rand finds an opening into the fairy tale world at the mouth of the ever-deepening well of her loneliness. The spirits come to her, and welcome her, and do her bidding. "On my way home," she says, "I said over and over again, there are no such people... There's no such thing as a zombie." But Jessica never awoke again from her coma. And even before Jessica slips away, Mrs. Rand is
convinced that there are indeed such people, at least in this place.

The doctor and police commissioner shrug off her story. "You were tricked by your imagination," the doctor tells her.

Mrs. Rand replies, "I am not an imaginative or fanciful woman." This is true. Mrs. Rand is far more settled, more sure of herself than Irina ever was. But she is just as alone. Whether the creatures of the labyrinth prey on such loneliness or provide a release from it remains open to interpretation. All that seems certain is that they respond to it.

Like Irina, Mrs. Rand finds no happiness in this life. Her redemption, should she find any, will come from within the labyrinth. Her son Wes kills Jessica, then carries her into the water and drowns himself. The pop-eyed guard watches from the beach with his arms outstretched. At that moment, this strange, thin, inhuman looking creature seems to represent a far more gentle and forgiving world than our own. On San Sebastian, where voodoo and magic retain their power, lonely creatures may find no comfort. But at least they will find companions, and release, and compassion.

It is a fortunate person indeed who walks with a zombie.
THE LEOPARD MAN

Cornell Woolrich's novel *Black Alibi* provided Jacques Tourneur and Val Lewton with the richest material yet from which to build their magical universe. Set in a small Southwestern town where the Hispanic, American Indian, and white American cultures converge, and depicting a series of murders that may or may not have been committed by an escaped circus leopard, *Black Alibi* works with the same ambiguity, the same essentially unfamiliar world that the RKO group continually strove for. The reasons for the film version's failure to finish creating such an unfamiliar world and draw us into it reveal much about the delicate touch the Lewton group's magic requires.

Tourneur's visuals have never been more striking than in *The Leopard Man*. In set piece after set piece, Tourneur and his crew infuse the nighttime city with marvel and menace. Almost every scene in Ardel Wray's script weaves elements of folklore or myth into ordinary conversation. The mystery remains a mystery until the very end. But the cleverness of the structure undoes the film. By deflecting our attention so skillfully from the murderer, and by treating Clo-clo, the dancer, as mere victim rather than the
unwitting accomplice she seems to be, The Leopard Man leaves us no one to empathize with. Without an inhabitant to invite us inside, the separate reality in The Leopard Man looms like a half-finished house. We are intrigued by its structure, interested in its contents, but, for the first time, we do not want to live there.

The movie's failure to finish its fairy-tale world is especially astounding given the poetry of its visuals. Disembodied shadows bloom on every street corner. In every doorway, voices whisper and magic lurks. The low brick buildings look at once authentically western and unfamiliar, with those shadows sweeping over them. Tourneur's direction takes advantage of every opportunity to skew the perspective, without ever becoming mannered.

As soon as Clo-Clo steps out of her nightclub into the night, she enters another world. Her castanets chatter in her fingers like rattlesnakes giving warning. A circus harmonium sounds from far off. From an alley, a pair of hands holding a deck of cards suddenly spring out of the darkness like a jack-in-the-box. "One card," says a scratchy voice. Clo-Clo draws the Ace of Spades, but instead of responding with fear, she laughs, calls the unseen fortune teller a fakir, clicks her castanets, and continues on. If these streets are another world, then Clo-Clo certainly seems at home in it.

A different, younger woman, less at home in the magical
world, steps out into the night. The empty streets glow with wet. In the park, branches whisper in the faint wind. Beyond the train tracks, the desert looms, its vast emptiness encroaching on the crowded city, which suddenly feels small and unprotected. A bulbuous ball of tumbleweed bounds out of the shadows. Every prop carries a portent of danger. Every set solidifies the mood.

Indeed, the sense of magic streams in so many different directions that it becomes diffuse, and drains itself of its power. In *Cat People*, Tourneur confines his separate reality to the world Irina moves in: the zoo, her room, the streets she stalks. She carries her world with her. In *I Walked with a Zombie*, the fairy-tale feel permeates the whole island of San Sebastian, but the Homefort is its focus, and its source. Unanchored by either place or person, the magical world of *The Leopard Man* shifts location and focus seemingly at random, and leaves us for the first time with the sense that the filmmakers are manipulating us.

At first, the magic lurks in the city streets. But later, it seeps into a cemetery, where a young woman waits to meet her lover. A luscious twilight filters through the leaves of the trees onto stones that suddenly look soft as pillows, statues with welcoming arms extended, a grove with a collection of columns that look lifted from the Parthenon. As darkness falls, the stones harden, shadows creep across the paths, and the open arms of the statues begin to promise
danger rather than comfort. What makes this scene problematic is not the fact that the graveyard is also magical, but that its magic exists in place of the magic on the city streets. The woman gets locked inside the graveyard, and calls for help. A distinctly rational human voice calls out to her from the street that he will get a ladder and come back for her. The conventional sounds of cars passing contrast with the unearthly whisper of the trees, the tumble of shadows. The magic world has left the streets entirely, and climbed into this graveyard with this woman, who, unlike Irina, does not carry it with her. Ripped free of its moorings, the spirit world drifts from place to place, person to person, without ever anchoring itself for long enough for us to climb inside of it.

The concise visual characterizations which freed Tourneur to track so long through the spirit world of the previous two films are also missing here. The young girl who wanders in the park is only a scared young girl. Her motions, her expressions, the speed at which she walks, all make her seem like she has never been in this park before, or on these streets. Unlike Oliver in *Cat People*, so quick with his cocky smile, this girl has no life outside the scene. Similarly, the woman trapped in the cemetery displays none of the loneliness or sense of alienation that would leave her susceptible to the allure of the fairy universe. Nothing about the way she sits or the places she chooses to
go in the graveyard or the way she looks divulges anything about the man she is meeting, or how long she has been seeing him, or the nature of their love. Nothing links her to the backdrop. Both of these women are introduced merely to become victims. As a result, the sense of an encroaching separate reality is unnecessary. For all the considerable visual skill with which it is drawn, it is irrelevant to the characters in the story, and so becomes a gimmick.

Ardel Wray's script contains a similar wealth of folklore from which to build an alternate reality, and a similar dearth of characters with which to populate such a world. Kiki, an entertainer, mocks a jealous cigarette girl who has been trying on her clothes by telling the girl, "I bet someday you'll try on my coffin." In Cat People, when Oliver's co-workers remark on a woman's resemblance to a cat, the woman's undeniable feline characteristics not only lend the line credibility, but also connect it to the world within the film. In the fairy-tale world of Cat People, it seems perfectly natural to encounter a woman who resembles a cat. But no such world has been established when Kiki delivers her line in The Leopard Man, and so it comes off as precisely the sort of gag-line the earlier Lewton films avoided.

Nevertheless, after this initial miscue, Wray's language does begin to lead us down the same magical path as the language of the preceding films. When Clo-Clo takes her
first moonlit walk, she says, "Hey, Shorty" to something in the shadows. We never see just who or what she says this too, and so are left only the name itself, and any associations it conjures up within us. Although we never encounter Shorty again, his name alone adds another element to the carnival feel of the streets.

Tapping the built-in mystique of tarot cards, Wray returns time and again to the mysterious fortune teller, who draws the Ace of Spades every time she tells Clo-Clo's fortune. Neither the fortune teller nor Clo-Clo takes the card's appearance seriously at first. But the recurrence of the event unnerves them both, and lends subsequent happenings a near-religious aura of fate.

That aura solidifies when Galbraith, the curator of the local museum and, it turns out, the killer, points out the strange fountain in the dining room where Kiki entertains. "We're like that ball," he says. "We know as little about the forces that move us ... as that ball does about the water that pushes it into the air, lets it fall, then catches it again." Where the lore centered on cats in Cat People, and voodoo in I Walked with a Zombie, the lore in The Leopard Man initially concerns our own knowledge of and control over our destinies.

Unfortunately, the focus shifts. A young Contessa, sitting in her living room quilting with her grandmother, asks why they must work so hard. "We must do a little every
day," the grandmother replies, "or you'll be a poor bride." This is a charming piece of local culture, and it does authenticate the Hispanic presence in this Southwestern town, but it does not fit with the lore of carnival streets and tarot cards that has preceeded it.

Similarly, when Galbraith relates an indian story to the local Native American leopard trainer, Charlie How-Come, the legend has no connection with the earlier tales. Galbraith says that the jaguar "was considered the personification of force and violence." Not only has there been no jaguar in the film, there has been markedly little folklore about any kind of cat. In the earlier films, every borrowed piece of culture fit snugly into the culture of the new world evolving onscreen, and made the new world real. In The Leopard Man, bits about leopards, fortune telling, marriage, and cats are shuffled around, but never lock together. They remain pieces from separate puzzles.

The language also lacks the poetic sparkle that gave San Sebastian and Irina's world their airy incorporeality. Jerry, Kiki's agent and the film's nominal protagonist, asks Galbraith about the kind of men who might commit vicious murders like those occurring in the town. Unlike the maid at Ft. Holland or the janitor at Irina's zoo, Galbraith is an academic with no flair for storytelling whatsoever. Instead of a litany of legendary killers who ravaged their worlds, Galbraith supplies us with a list: "Bluebeard in France.
Jack the Ripper in London. It's not uncommon. Any hint of the romance that has attached itself to these men would not only have added to the sense of menace in the film, but also helped define the dangers of the world we are moving in. The town in this film certainly seems suffused with supernatural peril, but the source of this peril remains a frustrating enigma, and finally a non-entity. Neither cards nor cats nor killers seem to possess the necessary poetic connotations to justify the sense of fairy tale that prevails here.

Even at the very end, when the black-hooded procession of men moves by candlelight out into the desert, the movie undercuts its own mise-en-scene. If an explanation is to be offered for the festival the film's climax takes place in, it must suit the mood established by the visuals. But when a woman badgers Galbraith for an explanation, he retorts, "A peaceful village of Indians was wiped out by the Conquistadores in the 17th Century. And now, if you'd had your history lesson..." A history lesson is exactly what he has supplied us with. Such conventional, neutral language clashes with the poetic visuals, leaving us suspended between ill-defined worlds. The fairy-tale world enveloping The Leopard Man is unconvincing because its inhabitants have so little use for it.

The inconsistent use of folklore weakens the foundations of the magical reality Tourneur and Lewton have attempted to create here, but it is the lack of an
empathetic character that ultimately prevents the town in The Leopard Man from becoming an attractive and complete world unto itself. Part of the problem lies with the structure of the film. The introduction of so many characters, most of whom fade from the film as quickly as they enter it, leaves us little time to develop much connection with them. In I Walked with a Zombie, though, Mrs. Rand became an effective beacon, leading us into the world with only a few minutes of screentime. Despite the number of characters, Wray and Tourneur have dozens of opportunities to present us with that one character who bridges the two worlds for us, but they miss them all.

Kiki and Jerry, the two characters who spend the most time onscreen, remain undefined from start to finish. When Kiki tosses off the affections of the cigarette girl at the beginning, she seems less harsh than used to the life of a professional entertainer, and the adulation and envy that comes with that life. Yet, moments later, when she makes her entrance into the nightclub with the leashed leopard that eventually causes most of the problems in the movie, she appears uncertain. Jerry has to urge her out into the room. Perhaps the leopard is making her nervous. But since we never see Kiki entertain, we have no idea just what it is she does, and the stunt with the leopard seems to indicate someone far less sure of her talents than her attitude would indicate.
The scene that is supposed to reveal the most about Jerry and Kiki actually blurs their characters even more. At the funeral of the first young girl—the only person in the film to actually die at the paws of the leopard—Jerry suggests that he and Kiki give the grieving mother the money they have made in town, to pay for funeral expenses. "Don't be soft," Kiki sneers. Soon afterwards, when the sheriff asks Jerry to join a posse heading out to hunt down the leopard, Jerry waves him off, making a grand display of feeling untroubled by what has occurred because of his publicity stunt.

In secret, though, both he and Kiki slip off and give the mother money, and when Kiki is safely occupied back at their hotel, Jerry sneaks out and joins the hunting party. The conceit is that these people are striving to appear hardboiled to each other. We have no idea why they would wish to be so, however, and because both of them put their play-acting to each other above their responsibilities, at least momentarily, they appear vain and shallow at best. Mostly, though, they are just confusing.

As a result, Jerry and Kiki seem to act at the whim of the filmmakers, and exert no pull over the audience. When Jerry becomes obsessed with the idea that the killer is not a leopard, his action becomes little more than a vehicle with which to introduce the manhunt aspect of the plot, for nothing that we have seen in him reveals any sensitivity to
or even awareness of the well-being of those around him.

Back in the cemetery, Kiki and Jerry find themselves sitting in the grove where the young Contessa was murdered. Tourneur's visuals are ethereal and haunting, as usual. The statue reaches out with its comforting arms. A bird flaps past. A gentle wash of light and wind bathes the whole scene in movement and magic. "Such a sad little place," Kiki tells Jerry, but she says this like a tourist staring at some ruins. No hint of connection can be discerned in her tone, and so we feel none either. In this place, Kiki and Jerry confess to each other that they both gave money to the mother, and that they are both "complete softies." The confessions come much too easily for them, and are in fact permeated with smugness. Both of them have decided in advance that being soft is good, and so they are confessing to something they secretly love revealing. This makes them seem more manipulative than soft. Such an assessment may seem overly harsh. In the end, though, we simply do not know enough about them to say for sure. All we do know is that their professed softness does little to sensitize them to the magical place they have wandered obliviously into.

Whereas side characters in the first two films—Alma the maid in _I Walked with a Zombie_, the pet-store owner in _Cat People_—all enriched the fabric of the fairy-tale world, the minor characters in _The Leopard Man_ are stereotypes, and exist primarily as plot devices. A grocery store owner
extends a family's credit while pronouncing a Truism: "The poor don't steal from each other." His kindness is an illustration of kindness, rather than a singular and personal action. Charlie How-Come believes he may have killed the women, since he was drinking at the time of the murders and cannot remember where he was. Yet his character has so little hint of violence when he is sober, which is the only time we see him, that his drunkenness becomes a mere convenience, something obviously intended to throw us off the track. Cornered and taken from the procession at the end, Galbraith, the killer, tells Jerry, "You don't understand. Nobody understands. You don't know what it's like to be tormented this way." He is right that we do not know, and his plea for compassion seems to fit the Lewton design. But it rings hollow this time. Cat People showed us Irina's torment. No such speech was required. Her susceptibility to the spirit world and her capacity for violence were hopelessly interlocked. Mrs. Rand, in I Walked with a Zombie, driven by loneliness, also slipped into the spirit world through a startling and horrifying desire to do damage to someone. We have no idea, finally, where Galbraith's pain is. If the town in The Leopard Man is a magical place, Galbraith has no connection to it, at least that we have seen. He has no poetry in him.

A few well-drawn and fascinating characters do appear in The Leopard Man, but they have so little to do with the
story that they become more visitations from the luminous other-reality inside the film than invitations into it. After the opening scene, we encounter the jealous cigarette girl only one more time, while Kiki and Jerry are packing to leave to head for Chicago and their next gig. With her eyes glowing and her head tipped forward in a wistful pose, the girl says, "The big buses go by my house. At night I can hear their tires on the road. Like someone humming." This lovely line transforms buses into shuttles between worlds, and conveys a longing that stretches beyond a small-town girl's desperation for her chance. The poetry of the language gives the woman an ethereal quality that connects her to the town she is trapped in, and makes her the first person we have seen who we actually believe lives in this dangerous fairy-land.

When Kiki and Jerry leave the cemetery, they meet a gatekeeper and remark to him, "It must get lonely here." The gatekeeper smiles a soft, easy smile of conviction and peace, reminiscent of Irina's smile before she says that she finds the darkness friendly, or Alma's smile as she informs Nurse Betsy that there are "better doctors." "No," says the gatekeeper, "I have many friends. But they don't bother me with talk." As with the aforementioned moments from the earlier films, the subtlety and conviction with which this line is delivered elevates it from the realm of throw-away B-movie dialogue to a statement of intent. The gatekeeper,
like the cigarette girl, no longer seems to inhabit the conventional reality we are familiar with. Not only does he belong to the spirit world, he is happier there.

Of all the minor characters, though, only Clo-Clo, the dancer, spends enough time onscreen to have the potential to entice us into her world with her. Indeed, her character, for most of the movie, presents an intriguing variation of the troubled female character (Irina, Mrs. Rand) who has previously acted as bait for Lewton's alternate realities. Dancing with her castanets at the nightclub, Clo-Clo finds herself upstaged by Kiki's entrance with the leopard. She sashays over to the leopard, rattles her castanets at it, and the leopard springs free and disappears into the night. Indirectly, Clo-Clo unleashes the ensuing terror. More importantly, she seems to direct it.

The last person Clo-clo encounters on her first wondrous walk through the magical nighttime streets is Teresa Del Gato, leaning out her mother's apartment window. "Hello, chiquita," Clo-Clo greets her, and passes on. But the camera, like the eye of a murderer spotting an opportunity, relinquishes Clo-Clo, and instead follows Teresa as she leaves her apartment, races to the grocery store through the shadowy menace of the park, and finally dies screaming just outside her mother's apartment door. Clo-Clo has not only turned the killer loose, she has led him to his victim.

Suddenly, the insistent recurrence of the Ace of
Spades, the death card, in Clo-Clo's fortune takes on an even more sinister meaning. Instead of a victim, Clo-Clo appears to become an unwitting Typhoid Mary, spreading death around her. The idea is fraught with possibilities. If Irina and Mrs. Rand seek refuge in the spirit world, perhaps Clo-clo, like the cigarette girl, longs to escape it, believes that she has, and traipses through her life with that other world trailing unnoticed behind her, like the forgotten train of a wedding dress. Such a situation, and the guilt and horror it would inevitably evoke in Clo-Clo when she discovers what she has done, has at least as much potential to induce an empathetic reaction in viewers as Irina's or Mrs. Rand's.

For a time, The Leopard Man sticks to this conceit. Clo-clo begs a flower from a servant, who gives her one and then returns to her mistress, the young Contessa, who in turn becomes the killer's next victim. Clo-clo, meanwhile, resolutely performs at the club, flirting with potential benefactors who might lift her away from this place once and for all. "You mean I'm a gold digger?" she tells one older man she has flirted with. "Sure I'm a gold digger. Why not?" Her tough survivor's smile suggests worlds of hurt and resilience. Returning home, she gives her child a goodnight kiss that somehow conveys her knowledge that her lifestyle does not make her an adequate mother, and her promise that she will find a way out. Clo-Clo's plight has more than
enough complexity to tug us into her at once magical and threatening world with her. Drifting through the lives of many, Clo-Clo is essential to none, until she becomes a harbinger of death.

After that goodnight kiss, Clo-Clo returns to the night, and the film abruptly abandons its most fascinating course and kills her off. Her death closes the doorway to the labyrinth of The Leopard Man. The remainder of the plot becomes a barely-related series of vignettes, providing occasional glimpses of a magic we as viewers no longer have access to.

Years later, Jacques Tourneur expressed his frustration with this film, referring to it in The Celluloid Muse as "neither fish nor fowl." He is right that the film satisfies neither as mystery nor horror film. But the problem is not that it exists between genres. I Walked with a Zombie can hardly be called a traditional horror film. The trouble with The Leopard Man is that it makes visible an enchanting and menacing world, a world that easily steals our attention from the simple murder plotline, and then prevents us from entering into it.
THE SEVENTH VICTIM

After Jacques Tourneur left Val Lewton's stable at the end of 1943, editor Mark Robson took over as principal director. His first film, The Seventh Victim, has been hailed, particularly by English critics, as the apex of Lewton's ouvre, and indeed Robson's crew demonstrates an understanding of how the preceding three films created self-contained worlds instead of adding monstrous elements to a more conventional reality. Unfortunately, sensitivity to the material is no substitute for skill in handling it, and The Seventh Victim appears more dated today than any other film Lewton produced in this era. Where The Leopard Man primarily lacked an empathetic character to carry us past the boundaries of our own world, The Seventh Victim is so inept in connecting the various elements of its story to each other that it fails either to convince us of the existence of a magical reality or to attract us to it. In failing, though, it pointed up just how crucial Jacques Tourneur's facility for rendering the conventional extraordinary was to the Lewton process.

To be sure, none of the machinery behind The Seventh Victim fires properly. The script, by Charles O'Neal and
DeWitt Bodeen, contains the usual literary quotations and sprinklings of folklore, but this time each reference seems completely unrelated to any other. O'Neal and Bodeen cast blindly into seemingly random reservoirs of cultural mythology in the hopes of reeling in something relevant to the story. Not only does The Seventh Victim lack an empathetic central character, it lacks a convincing character of any kind. Without the concise characterization that distinguished the earlier films, Robson's movie never secures our trust in the magical world these unbelievable people move in. Worse, our lack of trust makes the new world less attractive, and like its predecessors, The Seventh Victim relies on the allure of its labyrinth to make its monsters threatening. Since it makes no attempt to render its horrors believable in a conventional context, it must give us an alternate reality and then involve us in it. But most importantly, Robson's own markedly unpoetic direction robs the fairy tale world of its most compelling aspect: its visual majesty. The light and language, as well as the inhabitants, lack the necessary luster to bewitch an audience.

Like Cat People, The Seventh Victim begins with a superscription, this time from Jonne Donne: "I run to death and death meets me as fast, and all my pleasures are like yesterday." Predictably, the superscription has little to do with the ensuing story, but aims to establish the proper
tone through suggestive and mysterious language. The words 'death' and 'pleasure' and 'yesterday' promise menace, and possibly sexuality, and the past, but these promises remain unfulfilled in the movie, which locks itself in the present tense to depict the pursuit of the members of a pathetic cult of devil worshippers by a group of oddly sexless characters.

The restaurant/hotel in Greenwich Village where Mary, the protagonist, stays while searching for her vanished sister, is called The Dante. Previous scripts for Lewton films avoided such canonized figures in Western Literature, tapping instead lesser known sources like Lewis Jude, whose work retains more mystery because it has less established cultural significance for our own reality. Nevertheless, Dante's nine circles of Hell might have provided The Seventh Victim with the first rungs of a ladder leading down into another world, if Mary's journey had actually taken her to another world. But since she stays firmly within a conventional reality, the reference becomes affectation.

When Mary first enters The Dante, she overhears the proprietress singing an aria to herself in Italian in the restaurant's kitchen. The soaring melody and unfamiliar language, combined with the emptiness of the dining room, lend the restaurant an otherworldly feel, and Mary's assertion to the proprietress that "Once you've seen my sister, you'd never forget her" might have sounded the first
mythic overtones in the film. Unfortunately, Hunter's lifeless delivery quashes any such possibilities. She becomes once more a plain girl in an ordinary room, looking for some other ordinary--i.e. nonmagical--person.

Gregory, the sister's husband, displays a similar lack of poetry in describing the missing woman. "There's something about Jacqueline you can't quite get hold of... something that would keep a man following after her." If Hugh Beaumont injected these lines with the same mixture of longing and awe that fueled Edith Barrett's confession in I Walked with a Zombie, the absent figure of Jacqueline might begin to shimmer with the mysterious glow that reverence endows people with. Unfortunately, Beaumont, like Hunter, chooses to belittle the speech, to undermine it with a shrug of his shoulders. As a result of his own gesture, we do not care about his opinion, and we do not believe him.

Tom Conway, reprising his role from Cat People as sleazy psychiatrist Lewis Judd, makes yet another awkward reference to Jacqueline's deification when he leads Mary to the hotel where Jacqueline is staying. In the opulent but not particularly impressive lobby, Judd announces that "It's amid marble splendors such as these that Jacqueline dwells." The self-conscious structure of the sentence and the reference to marble splendors should combine with the previous declarations to imbue Jacqueline with a magical aura. But Conway, like Beaumont, delivers this line with an
archness that robs it of its significance. Moreover, marble splendors have little obvious connection with Dante, or yesterdays, or any other previous reference made in the film. This time, the separate strands of folklore and cultural allusion never weave together into a magical web. They remain separate, connected to nothing.

Peculiar and unsatisfying as the poetic language in The Seventh Victim is, the absence of any mythology concerning the devil cult that has abducted Jacqueline is even more frustrating. We learn the group's name—the Piladists—and enough of their history to know that they profess nonviolence while insisting that any member who betrays them will die. But not once do we encounter anyone to tell us just what they believe in, nor do we hear about any of their previous actions. The term 'devil worshippers' alone is not enough to create a mystique. Similarly, no attempt is made to take advantage of New York City's own labyrinthine layout to locate a new world within it. The possibilities for an alternative reality appear throughout the story, containing both seductive aspects (Jacqueline's supernaturally enchanting beauty, the neighborhood restaurant) and menacing ones (the devil worshippers). But storytelling, the potent system of incantation employing lexicon and mythology to render such a world real, is consistently absent.

Even if the script had successfully sketched the outlines of a new world, the characters in The Seventh
Victim are so erratically drawn and unappealing that viewers can never quite make them out. The magical reality within The Leopard Man never completely took shape either, but the presence of a handful of intriguing, somehow alien characters—the graveyard gatekeeper, the cigarette girl, Clo-Clo—drew us to that reality anyway. The inhabitants of the world within Robson's film are unsympathetic, unempathetic, and finally unconvincing.

Our first encounter with Mary seems intriguing enough. Exiting the sheltered world of her convent school to search for her missing sister in New York, Mary displays a simultaneous determination and naivete on her face as she confronts the headmistress with her decision to go. Here, seemingly, is a young woman capable of guiding us into the new world, acting as our surrogate as she experiences the wonders and terrors of that world.

Unfortunately, Mary's capacity for connection and wonder proves limited. She does find The Dante, and once inside, she does smile at the arias the old proprietress sings, but she keeps herself carefully distanced. She enters into no conversations with the proprietress that do not directly concern her sister. She offers no songs or legends of her own from the sheltered world she just came from. The lovingly prepared, potentially magical meals she eats at the restaurant get wolfed down without comment. If any magic exists around Mary, she is oblivious to it, and since she
occupies the center of almost every scene, she tends to make us oblivious to it as well.

Worse, Mary's characterization becomes increasingly inconsistent. When a private investigator informs her that he may have located her sister inside a factory, Mary bullies the investigator into accompanying her to the factory that very night. She pushes her way into the dark lobby, determined that nothing should slow her single-minded quest to see Jacqueline, then abruptly develops a paralyzing fear and cajoles the detective into going down the hallway to find her sister for her. No explanation is given for this transformation, which begins to seem a mere plot device when the detective stumbles out moments later with a knife in his back. Compounding the inconsistency, Mary this time races out of the lobby and neglects to go to the police, even though she showed no hesitation in going to the Missing Persons Bureau just a few hours before.

After this incident, Mary doggedly returns to her search, but one night, when Mrs. Redi, the imposing owner of the factory and a member of the Devil Cult, breaks into Mary's room and warns her to leave, Mary complies and packs her suitcase. This decision contradicts the only consistent trait Mary has been given: her determination to find Jacqueline.

The most contradictory and confusing element in Mary's character is that for all her stubborn directedness, the
only time she shows any emotion is when someone refers to her as a kid. Her sister's husband says that Jacqueline's mystical beauty is "hard to explain to a youngster," and Mary bristles. Later, moments after claiming that she feels guilty about the private detective's death by telling Ward, "I made him go down that hall into the darkness," she forgets the incident entirely when Ward orders her to drink her milk. "I don't like being ordered about by anyone," she says, and never mentions the detective again. The amorphous nature of Mary's character deprives her search for Jacqueline of any mystery and poignancy it might have had. Because we have no idea who Mary is, we cannot sympathize or empathize with her. Because we cannot sympathize, we cannot share in any enchantment she stumbles across, whether inviting or threatening.

Other characters display similar inconsistencies. Ward develops a crush on Mary for no reason at all, and in the end declares that he loves her. Another of the characters aiding Mary in her search is a poet who published one successful book years ago and has been unable to write since. Upon being introduced to Mary, the poet asks her to "Look into your own heart. Do you really want to find your sister?" The restaurant proprietress, fortunately, bursts out laughing at this question, but the poet is clearly not joking, and his credibility is instantaneously destroyed. No one straining so hard and tossing off such embarrassing
platitudes can be convincing as an artist. During a meal Ward and Mary share at The Dante, the proprietress brings the poet over to make Ward and Mary laugh, even though we have never heard him utter an amusing word. Finally, the poet lures Mary to his apartment, a single, eerie room with a wide skylight that frames the city outside. Mary says, "It's a small room, Jason," and the poet replies "Oh, but it's grown big with the years." With the proper twist of loneliness in his voice, Jason might have used this line to transform his room into the first outpost of the magical reality the film seeks for but cannot find. If we believed that he had spent the last ten years holed up here, staring at the city as frustration slowly strangled him, we might at last sense the need that drives so many Lewton characters--Irina, Mrs. Rand, Clo-clo--into another world in search of peace. Unfortunately, the line's flip, smug delivery makes it seem like just one more of Jason's attempts to appear poetic. Rather than sympathetic, he is merely pathetic.

Most important of all, Jacqueline, once we finally meet her, does nothing to validate the adulatory descriptions we have been given of her. Short, a little stocky, with jet-black hair chopped straight across her forehead in a style intended to look otherworldly but which instead looks like a bad haircut, Jacqueline's physical presence is a disappointment. Nor does her personality match the portrait Judd and Ward have painted of her. Judd describes her as "a
sensationalist," attracted to the devil worshippers because of unhappiness, and thinks that the threat of death might make her value her life more. Onscreen, though, Jacqueline is only tired. We see not even a hint of the passionate discontent that supposedly drives her.

All of these misleading pronouncements and contradictory characterizations undermine our trust in the filmmakers. Since we do not even believe in the people who act out this story, we never accept the magical realm Robson and his crew are attempting to create. Robson reportedly edited out a line revealing that each member of the Devil Cult had some mental or physical handicap, and this decision confirms how badly Robson misunderstood the necessary steps in creating a believable and seductive alternative reality. Even without extended characterization or a mythical history, such a line by itself would have made the members of the cult victims, and their search for another world where they could find acceptance would have seemed more logical and sympathetic. Without the line, the cult members are just a group of ordinary people claiming to love the Devil, for no apparent reason. We have no idea how their belief empowers them, and so they hold neither menace nor attraction for us.

Only twice in the entire film do characters appear who could have engaged us in the desperate search for a friendlier and more passionate world. Frances, a young woman
who once worked for Jacqueline and now belongs to the cult, replies to Mary's assertion that her sister "always seemed . . . sort of lonely and unhappy" by saying, "Mary, I guess most people are." Such a line betrays a loneliness and overriding sadness that encourages our empathy. Unfortunately, we never discover what makes Frances so sad, and she essentially disappears from the film.

By far the most intriguing member of The Seventh Victim's catalogue of losers, though, is Mimi, a woman who lives upstairs in a rundown hallway above The Dante. Mimi appears only a few times, peering out of her room or sneaking back into it. She does not figure in the plot. But at the end, she introduces herself to Jacqueline by announcing, "I'm Mimi. I'm dying." Then she coughs, and begins again. "I've been so quiet . . . Still I'm dying. I'm tired of being afraid. Of waiting." In fifteen seconds of screen time, Mimi renders the rest of the story irrelevant. We are much more interested in the surreal, somehow comforting reality Mimi hints she has built herself behind the half-open door of her apartment in that hellish hallway as she waits alone for her death than we are in Jacqueline and her self-indulgent tinkering with devil worship. At last, we meet a woman whose plight and strength in facing that plight could carry us into a magical reality. But we are forced to leave her.

Whereas The Leopard Man depicted a half-finished but
visually stunning magical realm, *The Seventh Victim* never gives us a glimpse of what the new world it keeps hinting at might look like. Jacques Tourneur's facility for composition and lighting helps create a halo of magic around the town in *The Leopard Man*. If we are never quite seduced into that town, we cannot help but be intrigued by it as it sails past. It becomes a city in the clouds we can just make out but cannot reach. Mark Robson strains for a similarly mysterious mise-en-scène, but he lacks the eye for it, and misses almost every opportunity he has. The set design and cinematography also appear plain for the first time in a Val Lewton film, suiting neither the realistic nor the supernatural elements of the film.

The best shot Robson manages in the entire movie may be the first one. In dim light which filters through three stained glass windows, we see the staircase of the school Mary has been cloistered in for years. Disembodied voices float towards us from all sides. Robson has dropped us into an unfamiliar world, swimming in spectral light and inhabited, seemingly, by ghosts. A group of girls appears and start down the hallway, laughing, none of them so much as glancing at the still camera. Suddenly, like Scrooges accompanied by a silent, unknown figure, we have become the ghosts, allowed a peak at this peculiar world. We can see the girls, but they cannot see us. Mary appears, moving alone against the tide of laughing girls, none of whom
acknowledge her, back up the stairs to meet the headmistress. She is a ghost here too. Within seconds, Robson has created a complete and magical universe, and given us a guide, another outsider, to show us around.

Unfortunately, once Mary leaves the school and arrives in New York, Robson begins plodding through scenes instead of creating around them. He does not even bother with an establishing shot of a city street, but simply moves Mary in a single frame from her school to the inside of the factory Jacqueline once owned. No ghostly veils of snow or oddly insistent winds greet our arrival. The film goes exactly where it is supposed to. Amid the humming electric looms and industrial sewing machines worked by expressionless employees in white coats inside the factory, Robson had another opportunity to establish an air of mystery, but the harsh, direct lighting he selects for the scene and his insistence on keeping the camera hovering within a few inches of Mary's face like a gnat cloud rob the setting of all its mystery. The inside of this factory is only the inside of a factory. Instead of our first clue that we might not be in Kansas anymore, we get confirmation that we still are.

At The Dante, Robson at least takes a little more time. He uses his first establishing shot, showing Mary approaching the restaurant on a Village street. There is circus music sounding from somewhere. Children skate past in
the street, playing some unidentifiable game. At last, we appear to have returned to the fairy tale world we thought we were inside at the beginning of the film. Inside the restaurant, a lovely diffusion of light through the draped windows heightens the otherworldly atmosphere.

Upstairs in the hallway where Mimi lives, the lighting on the filthy walls is effectively dim and unpleasant. Mimi emerges from the bathroom in a robe, which looks rumpled enough to look slept in for weeks, and coughs twice before skulking into her own room. A sense of claustrophobic unhealth clings to this space.

Once the landlord opens the door to the room Jacqueline rents from him but never uses, Robson returns to his plodding plot advancement, and so wastes the labyrinthine atmosphere he had so successfully created. He gives us a close-up of a chair, pans upward to take in a noose suspended from the ceiling, and then immediately removes us from the room. By not drawing back and allowing us to stare at the austere loneliness of a space populated only by the promise of death, Robson again supplies us only with the facts and not the sensual elegance that Tourneur used to force us ever deeper into his world.

At the Missing Persons Bureau, Robson elects to scan down a row of detectives taking down vital statistics, allowing each citizen to present one or two details about the person they are looking for. No conversation bleeds into
any other. When we get to Mary, hers is the only voice we hear. If Robson had instead given us a shot of all the detectives in the row, all the people waiting in line, then allowed us to hear the conversations stratifying, bleeding together, layering over each other like sedimentary rocks, we would have gotten a much more moving sense of the surreal, lonely atmosphere surrounding such a place. Robson's choices reflect a desire to shroud the Bureau, the restaurant, Jacqueline's room, Mary's school, with the fairy-tale feel that Tourneur managed so effortlessly, but they also display a lack of the imagination necessary to evoke that feel.

When Mary and the private detective return to the factory at night, they encounter an unrecognizable shadow of some machine that perches like a praying mantis on the wall farthest from the doorway. At last, Robson takes advantage of the machinery to work some cinematic magic. But because of the abrupt culmination of the scene--the protagonists find what they are seeking in the first hallway they come to--and the clumsy lighting, emphasizing square blocks of light and shadow with no seepage between the two, both room and shadow quickly revert to their conventional dimensions.

After the detective is killed, and Mary races off to the subway, the film flounders around trying to decide which world it wants to show us. At first, we seem to be somewhere magical. The train's gentle rocking motion, the scattered
riders, mostly couples whose togetherness contrasts with Mary's plight, suggest we are being transported out of our own world. But when the element of danger finally appears—two men dragging the private detective's body—it appears in harshly realistic fashion. The men are grubby and rough. They act like men, not demons. Again, everything occurs in shadowless white light. This section of film seems to strive for realism. The two worlds never overlap, and Robson is equally uncomfortable in both.

The further into the story Robson gets, the more apparent his confusion becomes. In the scene where Mrs. Redi warns Mary away, we get a shot from Mary's perspective of Mrs. Redi's blurred face through the shower curtain. Smoothed free of its features by the curtain and the lighting, that face takes on a demonic, threatening aspect. Moments later, though, Robson inexplicably turns the camera around and shows us Mary's featureless face through the curtain from Mrs. Redi's perspective. We are left wondering who is supposed to be the demon. Such a break in point-of-view muddies the surface of the enchanted pool the Lewton lens becomes in the best of these films, and leaves the viewer uncertain what he is supposed to be seeing.

The room where the cult meets and, we assume, worships, is not adorned with any of the strange statues and eerie lighting or alien sounds which lend Irina's room or the Homefort on San Sebastian their unfamiliarity. Members of
the cult refer to various mysterious activities, but reveal so little of what those might be that they finally cease to be mysterious. Mrs. Redi warns that no member can ever "give knowledge of our beliefs and deeds," but never says what the cult knows or believes. In scene after scene, the cult members seem little more than pathetic, overgrown children, playacting at evil as a means of glorifying themselves. If the script had explored the implications of this situation, such a depiction would have been more appropriate. But because the movie concerns itself only with Mary's search for her sister, and her attempts to fish Jacqueline out of the nightmare she has slipped into, the cult must radiate menace, and Robson invests it with none. In the end, Judd's suggestion that the devil worshippers remember the Lord's Prayer devastates every single member of the cult, and they bow their heads in shame. Because of the weakness of their own convictions, the cult members fail to convince us. Because we do not believe them, we cannot believe in what they believe in, even within the labyrinthine world of film.

The final scene in The Seventh Victim appears ripped from another, better Val Lewton film. Mimi, promising herself one last night in the real world before succumbing to whatever world waits on the other side of death, appears in a gown at the top of her crumbling stairwell. Behind the door of Jacqueline's room, we hear the chair kick over, and know Jacqueline has hanged herself at last. Yet because we
care so little about Jacqueline's plight, understand so little about the worlds she moved between, the sound barely registers. Our attention is held instead by the dying woman at the head of the stairs. She turns a distracted, mournful glance towards the sound, and her eyes seem to stare out at us from a great distance, as though she had already begun her long trip to some other, healthier place. Then she glides away down the stairs, while Mary's voice repeats the superscription from the opening.

Incapable of attracting us into the magical reality of Val Lewton's movies, Mark Robson proves equally incapable of hiding that reality from us. Like the light shining on the drawn curtains of the Dante, the mystery bleeds through.
CONCLUSION

Mark Robson directed three more films for Val Lewton before Lewton left RKO in 1946. All of them contain frustrating glimpses of other worlds lurking somehow just out of sight of the events on camera. *The Ghost Ship* was released in 1943, but has been virtually unseen since then due to an extended copyright suit alleging that the film was based on Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*. *Isle of the Dead*, a 1945 mood piece about a plague infecting a group of travelers on a mysterious Greek island, benefits from a downbeat, menacing performance from Boris Karloff and from an isolated and exotic setting which encourages the sense of otherness so essential to the success of the Lewton group's films, but once again Robson's unimaginative direction renders even the most unusual sequence, in which a woman assumed dead is buried alive and then awakens, with a thudding conventionality. The final film in the Lewton series, *Bedlam*, suffers from an ill-conceived premise that doomed it before filming even began. Robson and Lewton wanted to make each scene from the film look like it took place inside a Hogarth painting. Such an arbitrary and limiting ambition prevents the filmmakers from working their
magic. Trapped in one decidedly strange world with no mythological foundation, the movie is rescued only by a marvelous Boris Karloff performance.

A third director, Robert Wise, showed more skill in locating new scenarios within magical realms. *Curse of the Cat People* is more overtly a children's movie than any previous Lewton work, and lacks menace, but it does create an eerie, enchanting neighborhood out of striking visuals, fragments of fairy-tale, and some inspired storytelling by Julia Dean. And its accomplished depiction of a lonely little girl and her escape from her conformist parents and her cruel classmates into a fairy-tale world issues viewers the most seductive invitation into Lewton's fantasies since the entrance of Mrs. Rand in *I Walked with a Zombie*.

*The Body Snatcher*, set in a labyrinth-version of Ediburgh crawling with black, demonic horses whose hooves clap on the cobblestone streets and populated by angel-faced street singers and desperate, unhealthy little girls, creates the most authentic and alluring alternative reality the Lewton group managed without Tourneur. Sticking uncharacteristically close to its source material (Robert Louis Stevenson's story about grave robbers Burke and Hare), *The Body Snatcher* nevertheless uses folksongs, fragments of pub conversation, and medical lore to create a world all its own, and again benefits from the enthusiastic presence of Karloff.
All nine films, then, attempt the same thing. Each begins by borrowing a set of myths and stories from a variety of cultural sources and using their most poetic and mysterious elements to knit the fabric of a brand new world. Each relies on empathetic characterizations of alienated, lonely, passionate people to seduce viewers into that world. And each turns its director free to explore the visual possibilities of the labyrinth.

Only Jacques Tourneur took full advantage of the opportunity Lewton's scenarios offered. By endowing his visuals with the same sense of poetry that permeates the language of the films, and especially by emphasizing the more forsaken aspects of the enchanted realm, as well as its unfamiliar beauty and its menace, Tourneur created a haven for remarkable creatures like Irina and Mrs. Rand, whose passion and pain were just a little too strong for our own world. Whereas Robson and even Wise struggled to make their new worlds strange, Tourneur began with the labyrinth's strangeness, and then, by focusing on the painful lives of the inhabitants of that labyrinth, turned it into a home.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


