

The Leopard Man

USA | 1943 | 66 minutes

Credits

Director	Jacques Tourneur
Screenplay	Ardel Wray Edward Dein Cornell Woolrich (novel)
Photography	Robert De Grasse
Music	Roy Webb

Cast

Jerry Manning	Dennis O'Keefe
Clo-Clo	Margo
Kiki Walker	Jean Brooks
Maria - Fortune Teller	Isabel Jewell

In Brief

The Leopard Man is a wonderful little film in love with being in the shadows and excavating in the darkness; a psychological thriller tailor-made for lovers of film noir cinematography.

In a small New Mexico border town, showbiz PR man Jerry Manning pulls a foolish publicity stunt to get his nightclub entertainer client and girlfriend Kiki Walker some attention, as he rents a leopard from a travelling zoo. When Kiki walks into the nightclub with the leopard on a leash, the wild animal gets spooked by the noise coming from a dancer's clapping of the castanets and flees outside. The local sheriff gets the advice of museum curator Dr. Galbraith, an animal expert, on how to track the animal, and enlists the help of the guilt-stricken Kiki.

The first murder is one of the most frightening scenes ever in a horror movie leaving it all to the viewer's imagination. There's also the macabre "procession" scene at the conclusion, the town's nighttime celebration of the massacre of Indians at the hands of their white conquerors—an event marked every year by this eerie march so it won't be forgotten that mankind is capable of so much cruelty.

Tourneur's fast paced film is armed with a taut and intelligent script, and is one of those memorable films that gets even better with age like a good wine.

Some consider the three low-budget films Jacques Tourneur made with iconic producer Val Lewton—head of RKO's horror unit from 1942 until his untimely death in 1952—the greatest works of the B-movie genre, but many theorists remain hesitant to use the auteurist model when discussing the late director. After *The Leopard Man*, Tourneur went on to make a successful string of film noirs (most significantly *Berlin Express* and *Out of the Past*) every bit as ambiguous and unassuming as any of the Lewton-Tourneurs: *Cat People*, *Leopard Man*, and *I Walked With a Zombie*. Though the director was forced to show the titular monster from 1957's *Curse of the Demon* (a.k.a. *Night of the Demon*), the film's legendary storm sequence was proof that Tourneur's cinema was about what lurked implicitly in the dark shadows of his aesthetic.

Mario Bava is often credited as the father of the giallo, a sub-genre of Italian horror films known for their extreme and unsettling spectacles of violence. Though Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Luis Buñuel's fetishistic cinema had an insurmountable influence on Bava, no discussion of the origins of the slasher film would be complete without mention of Tourneur's 1943 classic *Leopard Man*. Tourneur was less concerned with bloodshed than the very suggestibility of violence, which is probably what has made him so difficult to place on an auteur grid than Bava or Argento; not only was he overshadowed by Lewton, but by his own images. In his book *The Cinema of Nightfall: Jacques Tourneur*, Chris Fujiwara says, "Tourneur's compositions and lighting schemes insistently involve the characters with their surroundings, creating a sense of human interaction as a tapestry." Who else but Tourneur could tell a story entirely in shadows?

In *Leopard Man*, a runaway leopard grips a New Mexican town in fear, killing three young women in the course of a few days. Tourneur was able to deliriously evoke the presence of the film's killer cat with as little as a darkened alleyway and with no more than a swaying tree branch. Three women are killed during the course of the film: Teresa (Margaret Landry), a girl sent to fetch cornmeal by her mother in the middle of the night; Consuelo (Tula Parma), a young woman locked inside a cemetery (a sequence that anticipates a set piece from Argento's *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*); and Clo-Clo (Margo), a dancer at a local nightclub. In Argento's *Suspiria*, a series of murders at a boarding school serve to push the plot along—in the end, there's a sense that the innocent are merely expendable. Tourneur's approach appears equally mischievous. Though characters are still being introduced halfway through the film, they still engender our sympathy via the constant cross-cutting between the story's mini-narratives.

There's a certain multi-cultural conflict that distinguishes the Lewton-Tourneurs. In 1942's *Cat People*, the director's most famous film, the exotic Irena Dubrova (Simone Simon) embraces her cultural past as her sexual urges begin to overwhelm her. In 1943's superior *I Walked With a Zombie*, Betsey Connell (Frances Dee) similarly acknowledges the power of tradition inherent in Caribbean voodoo lore. In *Leopard Man*, resistance to tradition and authority and the desire for privilege kills the film's three Mexican women. These anti-racist conflicts seemingly pit a foreign culture against an American one, challenging cultural expectations. In Tourneur's charming short film *Killer-Dog*, a dog must save himself from execution when a local farmer accuses him of killing his sheep. As he would later



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do in *Cat People* and *Leopard Man*, Tourneur evokes an instinctual—though not necessarily vicious—drive that connects human beings and animals. He goes one further in *I Walked With a Zombie* by summoning an existential conflict between the living and the dead.

Tourneur's use of sound is perhaps as well regarded as his shadowplay. The women of *Leopard Man* may seem anonymous, but Tourneur uses sound to both scare and complicate them. *Leopard Man* may be a horror film but it also has the texture of a musical. There's the train that clamors above Teresa's head on her way back to her mother's home, evoking her distance from home; the dripping water inside a tunnel that summons her fear of the dark; and the sound of ever-clinking castanets, an example of culture turning against itself. When Clo-Clo (even her name is rhythmic) strides down a street sparsely populated by friends, gypsies, and lovers smooching within darkened doorways, it's only natural to assume that she will be the film's first victim. But Tourneur courts such expectations, subverting them and using them to his advantage; Clo-Clo won't die until the audience understands that her castanets (symbols of comfort and feminine wile) will be her undoing.

Two years after *Leopard Man*, Tourneur made the gaslight melodrama *Experiment Perilous*. Set in 1903 New York, the film tells the story of a society woman (Hedy Lamarr) from a fairy-tale wonderland whose husband (Paul Lukas) may or may not be trying to kill her. (The film's labyrinthine *mise-en-scène* and Jungian finale seemingly prefigure Argento's *Inferno*.) More successful were Tourneur's crackerjack noirs *Out of the Past* and *Berlin Express*. The latter's pictorialism is ravishing (the film was the first American production shot in post-war Germany) and, not unlike Welles's *Touch of Evil*, the drama is successfully elevated to a level of performance art. During the film's gripping finale, Tourneur summons suspense via reflective surfaces,

shotguns-as-flashlights, duplicitous clowns, and broken ladder rungs. The director's fascination with conditions of visibility makes his cinema every bit as unique as Argento's yet the very suggestibility of his freakshows have forever rendered him an elusive figure in the annals of film history. Fujiwara says it best: "Unlike the classic auteur who imposes his vision on his film, Tourneur effaces his vision, not by the absence of style but by a style that emphasizes absence."

Cornell Woolrich (1903 - 1968), who used the pseudonyms William Irish and George Hopley, began writing romantic fiction in imitation of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He turned to pulp fiction in 1934, writing for magazines such as *Black Mask*, *Detective Fiction Weekly* and *Dime Detective*. Thus he has a claim to being among the founding generation of hard-boiled fiction; however none of the hundreds of formulaic stories he wrote in the 1930s is equal to the work that he did as a "suspense" writer in Hollywood during the 1940s. Many of his stories were turned into noir movies by Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Siodmak, and other directors. "The Twilight Zone" and other 1950s television series owe to his influence.

Born in New York City in 1903, Woolrich grew up in Mexico, where his father worked as a civil engineer. His parents soon divorced, Woolrich moving back to New York with his mother when he was twelve. In 1921 he entered Columbia University, where he studied journalism for three years. During an illness he began to write fiction, which he then took up full time, dropping out of school. His *Cover Charge* (1926) is a Jazz Age romance that owes to Fitzgerald, as is *Children of the Ritz* (1927); but the latter won \$10,000 in a First National Pictures contest and was filmed in 1929. Woolrich hired on to write scripts in Hollywood in 1928, also completing a gritty *Times Square* (1929) and the autobiographic *Young Man's Heart* (1930). Then he suddenly married the daughter of a movie mogul, but the marriage was annulled, apparently on his bride's discovery of a diary that he kept detailing his homosexual life. Biographer Francis Nevins has written that Woolrich idealized his young wife and loathed his own secret and promiscuous homosexuality. But "in the middle of the night he would put on a sailor outfit that he kept in a locked suitcase and prowl the waterfront for partners." ¹ "For the next quarter century he lived with his mother," wrote Nevins, "trapped in a bizarre love-hate relationship which dominated his external world." ² Though financially able, they lived in a vermin-infested Harlem tenement with pimps, prostitutes and petty criminals. Woolrich decayed emotionally and physically even as he wrote his best work, but with his mother's death in 1957 the rate of decline accelerated. He lost a leg to gangrene and years of alcoholism took their toll. He died of a stroke in 1968.

It was only with *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) that Woolrich arrived at a remunerative post-Hollywood profession. Rather than a detective novelist, he was a suspense writer, in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe. Far more formulaic than his colleagues, Woolrich employed a limited number of plots. According to Foster Hirsch,

...innocent characters are accused of or in some way involved in a murder, and saved at the last minute after a series of escalating catastrophes. The Woolrich world is a maze of wrong impressions as the author sets traps for his luckless protagonists and then watches as they fall into them. Filled with pitfalls and sudden violence, the landscape in Woolrich is the kind of place where a single wrong turn, a mere chance encounter, triggers a chain reaction in which one calamity follows another.... The first person mode, with its necessarily limited perspective, increase the aura of claustrophobia and entrapment which hovers over all of Woolrich's work - Woolrich's characters seldom see the light, and are rarely prepared for what happens to them. ³

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Francis Nevins has divided Woolrich's plots into 1) the Noir Cop story (a plainclothes policeman solves a crime, but some sadistic police procedure is the real interest), 2) the Clock Race story (the protagonist or loved one will die unless s/he makes a discovery about who or what is killing him or her), 3) the Oscillation story (the protagonist's tiny foothold on love or trust is eaten away by suspicion, then restored, in greater and greater swings, until s/he sees that the other is really evil), 4) the Headlong Through the Night story (the last hours of a hunted man as he careens through a dark city) and 5) the Annihilation story (the male protagonist meets his one true love, but she disappears without a trace, and 6) the Final Hours plot (sharing the final moments of someone slated to die in a particularly terrible way).

The best known of these are *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1945), *I Married a Dead Man* (1948), and "Rear Window." The latter became a famous Alfred Hitchcock movie in 1954. Woolrich's reputation owes as much to the movies made from his works as to his writing. Beginning in 1940, the words "black," "dark" and "death" appeared in so many of his titles that he is credited with suggesting to others the label "film noir." These movies featured important actors and directors. The first, *Street of Chance* (1942, based on *Black Curtain*) starred Burgess Meredith; the second, *Phantom Lady* (1944) was directed by Robert Siodmak and featured Elisha Cook Jr. as the disreputable jazz drummer. 5 A rush of Woolrich-based movies followed: *Black Angel* (1946) featured perennial noir protagonist Dan Duryea; *The Chase* (1946); *Deadline at Dawn* (1946); *Fall Guy* (1947); *The Guilty* (1947); and, more significantly, *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948), starring Edward G. Robinson. His plots provided episodes of the television series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and influenced "The Twilight Zone." Even François Truffaut filmed some of his stories.

Woolrich's widely quoted aphorism -- "First you dream, then you die" -- sums up his worldview and his plots, but also provides a clue to his mastery of suspense. Woolrich was not a lean and mean writer in the tradition of Hammett and Hemingway, but endlessly descriptive. As biographer Nevins concedes, "purely on its merits as prose, it's dreadful." Likewise his plotting: "As a technical plot craftsman he is sloppy beyond endurance." 6 But Nevins and others point out that the long sentences and plot contrivances act as a retarding force against the protagonist's obvious appointment with fate, creating suspense. At his best, Woolrich creates a divided reading response, in which complete identification with the protagonist, while desirable, is impossible because of his or her paranoia, amnesia, hypnosis, or a dose of drugs. The character's initially admirable love or fidelity slowly becomes corrupt, and the reader understands that there is a reasonable logic in the protagonist's suffering or even feels that it is deserved.

1 Francis Nevins, "Cornell Woolrich," in *Mystery & Suspense Writers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1998. Vol II, 968. 2 Francis Nevins, quoted in "Cornell Woolrich," *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (new revised) 77, 386. 3 Foster Hirsch, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (new revised) 77, 400. 4 Francis Nevins, "Cornell Woolrich," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 402. 5 Bruce Crowther, *Film Noir*, 14-15. 6 Nevins, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 77: 403.

William Marling, Ph.D. Professor of English, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, USA

Selected films based on Woolrich stories

- *Convicted* (1938) (story *Face Work*)
- *Street of Chance* (1942) (novel *The Black Curtain*)
- *The Leopard Man* (1943) (novel *Black Alibi*)
- *Phantom Lady* (1944) (novel)
- *The Mark of the Whistler* (1944) (story *Dormant Account*)
- *Deadline at Dawn* (1946) (novel)
- *Black Angel* (1946) (novel)
- *The Chase* (1946) (novel *The Black Path of Fear*)
- *Fall Guy* (1947) (story *Cocaine*)
- *The Guilty* (1947) (story *He Looked Like Murder*)
- *Fear in the Night* (1948) (story *Nightmare*)
- *The Return of the Whistler* (1948) (story *All at Once, No Alice*)
- *I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes* (1948) (story)
- *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948) (novel)
- *The Window* (1949) (story *The Boy Who Cried Murder*)
- *No Man of Her Own* (1950) (novel *I Married a Dead Man*)
- *El pendiente* (1951) (story *The Death Stone*) directed by León Klimovsky.
- *Si muero antes de despertar* (1952) (story *If I Should Die Before I Wake*) directed by Carlos Hugo Christensen.
- *No abras nunca esa puerta* (1952) (stories *Somebody on the Phone* and *Humming Bird Comes Home*) directed by Carlos Hugo Christensen.
- *Rear Window* (1954) (story *It Had to Be Murder*) directed by Alfred Hitchcock
- *Obsession* (1954) (story *Silent as the Grave*)
- *Nightmare* (1956) (story)
- *The Bride Wore Black* (1968) (novel) directed by François Truffaut
- *Mississippi Mermaid* (1969) (novel *Waltz Into Darkness*) directed by François Truffaut
- *Seven Blood-Stained Orchids* (1972) (novel *Rendezvous in Black*)
- *Union City* (1980) (story *The Corpse Next Door*)
- *I Married a Shadow* (1983) (novel *I Married a Dead Man*)
- *Cloak & Dagger* (1984) (story *The Boy Who Cried Murder*)
- *Mrs. Winterbourne* (1996) (story *I Married a Dead Man*)
- *Original Sin* (2001) (novel *Waltz Into Darkness*)
- *Four O'Clock* (2006) (story *Three O'Clock*)

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Val Lewton: The Producer as Auteur