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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

### The Construction of the Female Monster in *Cat People* (1942)

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## Contents

1. The Horror Genre and Val Lewton	1
2. Analysis of <i>Cat People</i>	5
2.1. Narrative: Circular Structure and Gradual Construction of the Monster	6
2.2. Motherhood and Femininity	11
2.3. Ego, Id and Super-ego	15
2.4. Religion, Nationhood and Alienation	19
3. Conclusion	23
4. Works Cited	24

## 1. The Horror Genre and Val Lewton

According to Allan Jones (2005), horror as a film genre started with *Le manoir du diable* in 1897 in Paris, and ever since that two-minute clip, it has evolved through each decade in a different way, like cinema as a whole. Technological improvements, the imposition, relaxation and later removal of the Hays Code and incorporation of the Production Code of the Motion Picture Association (or MPAA rating system), aesthetic preferences, the development and importance of psychoanalysis and the cultural and historical context such as the feminist waves and the First and Second World War have been of critical importance for the development and production of Hollywood horror cinema.

In the Hollywood context of 1942 Val Lewton became a film producer for a low budget set of eleven films for RKO, the first being *Cat People*, coinciding with the division between A and B movies. The latter were low-budget productions generally used as program fillers. Nine of these productions were part of the horror genre: *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) and *The Leopard Man* (1943), directed by Jacques Tourneur; *The 7<sup>th</sup> Victim* (1943), *Ghost Ship* (1943), *Isle of the Dead* (1945) and *Bedlam* (1946), directed by Mark Robson; and *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) and *The Body Snatcher* (1945), directed by Robert Wise. All of these films followed a specific formula, as Val Lewton explained in an interview: “Our formula is simple, a love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fadeout. It’s all over in 70 minutes.” (in Vieira) This gradual and subtle accomplishment of the horror sensation not only made the action slower but also introduced Lewton's notion of “suggested horror” and the usage of darkness to play with the spectator's visual acceptance of the scary scenes. In

this sense, as DeWitt Bodeen said, “[t]he stories he [Lewton] produced are dramatizations of the psychology of fear. Man fears the unknown – the dark, that which may lurk in the shadows. [...] That which he cannot see fills him with basic and understandable terror.” (in Vieira) In the dark anything can happen, anything can be suggested. Even Tourneur himself talked about the shadows in *Cat People* and how they would make the spectator believe they were seeing something on the screen that did not clearly exist, making the horror more self-dependent and variable according to the spectator himself. The fact that Lewton preferred to use “suggestion horror” also has to do with the Hays Code, since any harder explicit horror scene could have meant the banning of the film, and an increase of expenses.

Another important point about suggestion and horror in these films is the duality that characterizes the monster in each film: this figure is presented with a rational and an irrational explanation for its existence, sometimes guiding the spectator towards the rational explanation from very early, as happens in *Ghost Ship*, where the spectator is able to see the madness of the monster in contrast to the irrational explanation for the mysteries on board presented at the beginning of the film. However, in other films such as *I Walked with a Zombie*, it is not clear whether the “monster” comes from an irrational or a rational explanation, since the use of magic and the fact that she is called a zombie contrast with the medical explanation also offered. This is in concordance with Tzvetan Todorov's idea of the fantastic as a hesitation between a rational or irrational explanation for a natural or supernatural event (16) . The hero, protagonist or spectator is placed in between a natural explanation, as would be the hesitation between a leopard and a man killing people in *The Leopard Man*, and the supernatural explanation for the same film, the possibility that it is a man turning into a leopard (as happens in *Cat People* with Irena). In all of Lewton's horror

films for RKO there is this hesitation, whether it is of great importance for the development of the story or just a subtle remark on it, as in *The Ghost Ship*. There it is suggested from the very beginning that it is the sea that makes the killer mentally ill, with the help of the presence of a blind man and a mute man's presence and speaking (in the case of the mute man we get his view on the facts by a voice-over representing his thoughts). It is also suggested by the mystery of the first death before getting on board, which just supports what the blind man says: "Only the old ones know that there is only bad luck and bad blows at sea. (...) If you are on board of that ship. She's a bad ship," and by the thought of the mute character: "In my own silence I can hear things they cannot hear," suggesting there is a curse on the ship.

This rational versus irrational contrasting formula to construct the monster is directly related to the constant references to the soul and mind in many of Lewton's films. One of the greatest examples can be found in *Cat People*, but it is also present in some other films such as *The Body Snatcher*, where there is a binary opposition between the "mathematics of medicine", standing for the mind and logic, and the "poetry of medicine", which stands for the irrationality and the soul. In *The Body Snatcher* the doctor's inability to know his own soul as a result of focusing too much on science ends up in a fragmentation of the self, but he is not the only monster in the film. The body snatcher is the one who murders and steals, going beyond all morals and ethics. Through the doctor's neglect of his involvement in the events, repression together with fragmentation act to unleash horror and madness, only finding equilibrium in the young hero.

This duality is also related to the concept of the abject, introduced by Kristeva and used by Barbara Creed in relation to horror movies, and explained as "that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border'." (67) This border, although dependent on each construction

of the monster, still has a common meaning for the monster's function in the horror film: “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.” (67) The symbolic order, a term coined by Lacan and explained by Dino Felluga (2002) signifies the acceptance of rules and the laws of the world. In the symbolic, the monster is positioned as a thread to the social order.

However, this opposition is not only related to the mind and soul but also to science and inner or religious beliefs, and is highly related to the feeling of alienation and otherness that help construct the monster and the horror atmosphere. Most of Lewton's films either incorporate foreigners or feature a foreign land in which the horror taking place is foreign. For Robin Wood, as quoted in James Donald, “the real monster turns out to be the dominant ideology” (236), contrasting with the alien, the Other, which is evil mainly because of being different, as Fredric Jameson explains (140). In *Freaks* (1932), for instance, the monsters are in fact those labelled by society as “normal”, and the ones supposed to be evil are only so because of their physical otherness. Otherness or alienation is another way of crossing the border.

In general, most of Lewton's monsters happen to be male, and even when each of them has a different meaning depending on the film and its construction, they still differ from the female monster. In *Ghost Ship* it is suggested that the ship, being a female, is the monster, but only in *I walked with a Zombie*, *Cat People* and *The Curse of the Cat People* is the monster presented as feminine, and its construction is derived from the patriarchal social structure and the otherness that women represented in the 40s. The first-wave of feminism starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant a gradual change in the view of women but still, US society was male-governed and patriarchal. This means that female monsters were constructed by male eyes, representing not women's fears and worries, but men's. In this

essay I am going to analyze the female monster of *Cat People* as constructed by a patriarchal society representing male fear and desires, and also as a Val Lewton monster constructed gradually through an ambivalence between logical or illogical events with religion and alienation as important elements for its construction.

## **2. Analysis of *Cat People* (1942)**

*Cat People* tells the love story between Irena (Simone Simon) and Oliver (Kent Smith), which is interrupted by his colleague and friend Alice (Jane Randolph). Having Alice in the middle of their marriage, and in fear of becoming a panther if she is kissed by her husband, has sexual intercourse or gets jealous, the Serbian protagonist grows more and more obsessed with the cat people tale from her home-town. Eventually, she becomes what she fears the most when Oliver decides to put an end to their marriage and start a relationship with the always-awaiting Alice. The film presents the female monster through shadows in the dark, by suggesting its presence but only twice confirming it. At the same time, the monster is constructed from a patriarchal perspective, representing male fears of the 40s.

## **2.1 Narrative: Circular Structure and Gradual Construction of the Monster.**

Unlike other Val Lewton's films, *Cat People* is constructed upon a circular structure. This is achieved on two levels; first, the film starts with some writing over a picture of King John of Serbia, where the power of the unconsciousness is suggested, and ends with some writing over the last scene at the zoo suggesting the triumph of unconsciousness over consciousness and the destruction of the two as a result, signifying the death of Irena. Also, one of the first scenes takes place in the zoo when Oliver and Irena first meet while she is drawing a sketch of the black leopard. The spectators get to see this picture after they leave the zoo: a drawing of the leopard pierced with a sword. This is exactly what we find at the end of the film when the leopard body of Irena is pierced with Doctor Judd's sword and runs to the zoo to die there in her animal form. Thus, the sketch acts as a prediction of future events and as a presentation of the monster, relating Irena to a leopard and along with the next events, suggesting that she is in fact going to become one.

As the rest of Val Lewton's B series horror/monster movies, *Cat People* works with the power of suggestion and the ambivalence between logical and illogical events to offer a gradual construction of the fantastic. The film can be divided in three sections: from the beginning until Irena is treated by Dr. Judd (Tom Conway); after the doctor's consultation until the next formal one, and from there to the ending. This division is marked by the psychiatrist's influence over Irena, which makes the action move forward. The conversion into a leopard is also gradual and dependant on the division of the narrative, and the ambivalence disappears when the film approaches the end.





The power of suggestion through shadows.

The first section serves to introduce the possible monster and establish the ambivalence. It makes use of six important moments. From the moment when Irena and Oliver first meet in the zoo the image of the leopard and her drawing introduce the monster, although the spectator still cannot establish a clear relation between it and Irena. This only happens when the spectators (as well as Oliver) have access to her apartment full of leopard images and a statue of King John of Serbia, whose story of ending with the evil witches and the cat people we and Oliver learn about at this point. The relation between Irena and the cat people is only found in the story that she tells, but is enhanced by the friendly cat that Oliver gives Irena as a present, and which becomes dreadfully frightened when approaching her. About this she only states that “cats don't seem to like me”, but her facial expressions suggest that she is hiding something. This is corroborated by all the animals in the pet store that start making noises and going wild when Irena enters the shop, and only stop when she is outside, also corroborated by the shopkeeper's words: “They [the animals]

seem to know who's not right, if you know what I mean.” It is at this point that the friends start to be a couple and she finally states that she is afraid of kissing or even loving Oliver for she fears the story of the past. Yet we are still not given a thorough explanation and it is not certain what would happen if she ever kissed him. However, her relation to the cat people is enhanced again at the wedding dinner, when a lady resembling a cat greets her and calls her “sister”. The doubt is already sowed: is it all part of Irena's imagination and exaggeration or do the cat people really exist?

Yet another important moment that pushes the spectator into the fantastic is Irena's return to the zoo and the zoo cleaner's speech about the black leopard: “No, he ain't beautiful. He's an evil cretter ma'am. You read your Bible. In Revelations when the book's talking about the worst beast of them all: 'And the beast that I saw was unto a leopard'.” It was not a leopard, but like a leopard, which is closer to Irena's dread of becoming a leopard than to the rational explanation that it is just a coincidence that the zoo cleaner talks about it. The last instance of ambivalence in this section is the death of the bird she exchanges for the cat, which dies when she tries to catch it in its own cage in a cat-like manner.

All this first section serves for the second and stronger section to make a heavier impact on the spectators and to lead them towards the irrational explanation of the events, despite Oliver's insistence on the rational one. Thus, a horror atmosphere is gradually created. The second section starts with the hypnosis of Dr. Judd on Irena, who reveals all her repressed traumatic stories from her childhood related to the cat people, and what is most important, she discovers her own fears in depth and their roots. However, the uncovering of the unconscious only drives her to becoming more and more obsessed with the cat people and the fact that she will become a leopard if kissed. In fact, it is in this section that two of the three scenes of suggested horror included in the Lewton formula

formula appear. The first happens out of jealousy with Irena following Alice in a dark, empty street. Before the chase, Alice just tells Oliver “a cat just walked over my grave,” which enhances the fantastic side of the story. At first, she walks slowly, with the only sound of her soft shoes clicking in the street, but as she starts to feel chased, she starts to go faster, the shots become slightly shorter and the clicking louder, only to be interrupted by the loud and sudden noise of the doors of the bus opening in front of her, giving the spectator a shock. There is also a suggested shot of the presence of the leopard form of Irena moving in a tree, followed by a shot of some dead sheep and another one of what seems to be leopard footprints. This ends with a shot of Irena walking in a disoriented way.



King John stands in the middle of the couple

Another important scene is the dream Irena has where a parallelism between King John and Dr. Judd is established, and the merging of the sword with the zoo key suggests not only that the latter is as powerful and dangerous as the former, but also that Dr. Judd has the power over Irena's unconscious and fate.

However, the second scene of suggested horror happens at the swimming pool,

again with Alice as victim. The lack of music helps create the perfect atmosphere of helplessness, loneliness and isolation. Also, the shadows on the walls suggesting an animal presence and the frightened cat present something that is not human, something evil. This idea is enhanced by Alice's ripped robe, at the same time dismissing it by the presence of the cat, which in this sense acts as a reinforcer of the logical explanation.



Alice feels chased on her way home

The third section starts with the second visit of Irena to Dr. Judd after all the lapses of memory related to the chasing of Alice. However, he does not believe her story and tells her that her only chance to be cured is to get rid of everything related to the cat people. Yet even though he states that he does not believe her story, he keeps a sword in his cane and hides it in her house so as to kill her in case she becomes a leopard. The parallel between him and King John becomes even more obvious. The climax comes when Irena finally listens to Dr Judd and is ready to kiss Oliver (and more likely to have sexual intercourse with him). But it is too late for he is already decided to leave her for Alice, who has been

patiently waiting. The doubts whether Irena has in fact a leopard form are very much dissipated when she cuts the sofa in a leopard-like manner. It is after this that the third scene of suggested horror is presented. It is set in Oliver and Alice's office and once again, silence takes over, and after an empty phone call, a leopard appears in the office. Shadows and lighting help create the atmosphere for the monster, transmitting a feeling of confinement and helplessness. Also, the importance of religion and alienation are emphasised by Oliver's use of a crucifix to chase away the animal, at the same time as he calls it Irena, making the relation between animal and woman perfectly clear, and leading the spectator towards the irrational answer. However, it is only at the end that it is completely clear that Irena has become a leopard, and it is actually the only scene of actual violence, despite its being shown through shadows. Although we never get to clearly see the transformation of Irena into a leopard, it is implicit in the shadows when the woman disappears and the leopard takes over after the kiss between Irena and Dr. Judd. Again, silence and lighting are central elements to create the atmosphere and introduce the presence of the monster. To finally dissipate any doubts about the transformation, Irena is shown with a sword stuck in her, which was supposed to be in the leopard, and the last scene shows a leopard where a woman should be.

## **2.2 Motherhood and Femininity.**

The fact that the female protagonist is the monster is of crucial importance, taking into account the historical context into which the film was released and the fact that it is one of the few female monsters of the time and even among Val Lewton's B movies.

First-wave feminism had a crucial impact on women and patriarchal society,

although the small changes happened gradually, just as the construction of the monster in *Cat People*. Starting in the 1890s and continuing up to the 40s, middle-class women claiming their rights were finally allowed suffrage thanks to demonstrations, and although the requests were mainly political, their fight meant the start of a social revolution, as explained in DeFonza. Women's empowerment, however, also meant a weakening of men's power over women, which was translated into a fear for women and caused the female monster to exist, but not as a representation of female's fears, but instead a projection of men's fears of women attitudes and power, and at the same time, a means of indirectly controlling women's attitudes and place in society.

*Cat People* perfectly represents these male fears, and not only of women's empowerment in the political and social fields, but also in the sexual. In fact, the protagonist is punished for not having sexual intercourse with her husband and not being "normal" by turning into a terrifying leopard. This is achieved not only through the presence and acts of Irena, but also through the contrast between her and Alice. Normally, it is the mistress who is not normal, the evil one, but in *Cat People* it is the wife, Oliver's lover, who is a little odd and eventually evil. The figure of the cat is again a central element for the contrast, as it was for the construction of the monster in the swimming pool scene. The first little cat appears when Oliver takes it to his office as a present for Irena, and ever since this scene, another cat in Alice's office and one in the swimming pool appear, always in Alice's presence. Irena's attitude towards the cat resembles the attitude of a mother towards her child, as happens in the much later *Alien* (1979), when the protagonist, alone with the cat in the spaceship, stops being an astronaut to start acting caringly for the only survivor, and adopts a mother-like attitude towards it. In this sense motherhood becomes a central element of the film, but not through the eyes of Irena, who may be said to be afraid

of being a mother and growing up, leaving behind her childhood stories, but through the eyes of Oliver and the patriarchal system that see women as reproductive objects. For this character, not only does love decline because of the lack of sexual activity, but also because having an active sexual life can lead to having children. In comparison with Irena, Alice is the mother that Oliver needs for his children, and this is even more obvious when she appears in the sequel *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) almost exclusively as wife and mother, but the difference there is that Irena, who now appears in the form of a ghost and friend of Oliver's daughter, also acts as a caring mother.



The cat helps construct the mother-like image of Alice.

Alice is not only shown as a very caring mother, but also as a versatile woman. Even though she is in love with Oliver and works with him, she can hide her feelings for the sake of Oliver's happiness and she is even capable of throwing a party for their marriage and supporting them, as she says at the party: “Nonsense, Irena is a grand girl. Oliver and she are going to be very happy together”. She even finds a Serbian restaurant and tells Irena

that she knows all about the city, is a fun and cheerful woman, and is such a free woman that allows herself to smoke. In addition, and despite being so open-minded and as versatile as a man, she is still feminine. The fact that we get to see her in her swimming costume is also of special interest in terms of sexuality. It is also interesting that she is a strong woman, who in spite of believing the story of the cat people, does not go mad about it as Irena does and stays firm. However, all these enhanced features are not so obvious in the sequel, which diminishes her character to a loving and caring mother so as to make a contrast with the dictator-like attitude of Oliver. In this sense the fact that she is such a free woman in *Cat People* is only a means of contrasting her with Irena, for when she is already a wife she almost stops being a woman. This suggests that stop being a woman is what was expected of Irena when she married Oliver.

Another contrast between the two women is in terms of clothes and colours: while Irena always dresses in black, Alice is shown in white, which once again suggests that Irena is evil while Alice is good. A more important contrast is in terms of their relation with Dr. Judd. Since Irena is his patient, the relation is already very different, but at one point Alice tells her: "The way he goes around kissing hands makes me want to spit cotton. But I guess he knows all there is to know about psychiatry." This suggests that he takes advantage of women, as is confirmed in the way he looks at Irena and asks her whether she would become a leopard if he kissed her, and finally kisses her. Also, it suggests that even though she complains about his kissing hands, she does let him do it. In this sense there is also a contrast between Oliver and Dr. Judd, for the former is respectful, not only towards Irena but to every women.



### 2.3 Ego, Id and Super-ego.

Apart from a lack of motherhood and versatility, the female monster is constructed around sexuality and this is central to the story. In her essay “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection”, Barbara Creed explores the Kristevan term “the abject” and applies it in relation to *Cat People* as the border being “between normal and abnormal sexual desire” (“Horror and the Monstrous-feminine”, 67). Thus, Irena becoming a monster is a result of crossing the border, of not having-normal sexual desire. But again, this does not represent female fears towards sexual intercourse, but men's.

For Frederic Jameson (“Magical Narratives”, 1975) the monster is a threat to one's existence by the other, the one which is different, and this includes the woman, “whose biological difference stimulates fantasies of castration and devoration” (140). Mary Ann Doane also points out that “the question of the woman reflects only the man's own ontological doubts”, and even more: “the cinema [is] a writing of images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem.” (18) This is related to the fact that, even though they were not able to show much explicit content, the producers chose to show the female body for men's visual pleasure, like Alice in her swimming costume, for men are the sexually-free gender and the ones allowed to enjoy sensual images. In contrast, as Betty Friedan explained in *The Feminine Mystique*, “Freudian thought helped create a new super-ego that paralyses educated American women,” (80) and this is clear in Irena's behavior in the sense that her super-ego represses her sexual appetite and activity.

Freud divided human personality into ego, super-ego and id, each of them developing at a certain moment in the child. The id stands for the most primitive instincts, namely the sex instinct and the life instinct, and at the same time the aggressive instinct and

death, and it is part of the unconscious. The ego, explained by Freud, is “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (203), and is more reasonable than the id and part of the conscious, and can control the id according to some reasonable principles. Finally, the super-ego also controls the id but from the unconscious, incorporating the values learned from society, parents and close people. As Saul McLeon (2008) explains, it consists of two systems, conscience and ideal-self; the former able to punish the ego for giving in to the id's impulses, and the ego-ideal being the image of how the ego should be according to his/her own values.



The unconscious of Irena during hypnosis

Taking into account this division and the view of women in the 1940s, the construction of the monster as a female is even of more importance. In the case of Irena, we learn that her super-ego was developed when she was a child and she was told about the cat people and the witches, and the other children teased her about her mother being one of the cat people. She was told that she would become a big panther if she were to either have

sexual intercourse or even fall in love, or get angry or jealous. That big panther and cat people, thus, stand for Irena's id, her most basic instincts, as the wish to live and die are, and as the ego and the super-ego.

Dr. Judd also tells her about the death drive, the wish to die that we all have and that in Irena hides in the animal form, growing bigger as she keeps repressing her life and sexual instinct. Her super-ego is so controlling and hidden that she is unable even of kissing her husband without having her conscience to punish her. It is obvious that her ego-ideal is far from herself, and it very much resembles Alice. But Alice is not only Irena's ego-ideal. She is presented as a role-model for every woman, an example of how a woman should behave towards men. Then, by repressing her id through the unconscious, Irena is unable to control it through her ego, leaving her in a very weak and helpless position.

However, it is not until she is hypnotized and her unconscious uncovered that she actually starts letting her id take over to a greater extent. The first time she sees Dr. Judd a gate for her aggressive instinct is opened, and the second time, after being told to leave behind every panther image that runs directly to her unconscious and influences her super-ego, a gate for life is opened. It is after this second time that she is ready to sleep with her husband and let the sex instinct be controlled by her own conscious ego with no consequence from her conscience. Yet, as she is not allowed because it has taken her too long to achieve the ego-ideal, the aggressive instinct is again, and to a greater extent, allowed to appear. As a consequence, she finally kills Dr. Judd when he kisses her. Here the aggressive instinct and the death drive act together, and the parallel between Dr. Judd and King John is further enhanced, for it was the latter who had the power to end the cat people's lives, and it is Dr. Judd, with his intrusion, who has the power of opening the aggressiveness gate and end with her life. It is also the leopard in the zoo that ends up with

her life and then gets killed, suggesting that it stands for her sexual instinct that is at last liberated. The fact that she has the key to open the gate and that it had been Dr. Judd's suggestion to take it for the sake of her death drive, leads to thinking that liberating the repressed sexual instinct means instant death for her. She even once told Oliver that that leopard sounded like a screaming girl from her house, which can be understood as a woman's sexuality trying to break free, as hers is. In this sense, her personality is very fragmented: not only does she turn into a panther and changes forms in accordance to the part of her personality that is taking over, but one of these parts is found outside and far from her. In addition, the quote at the end of the film by John Donne: "But black sin hath betrayed/ to endless night/ My world, both parts and/ both parts must die", can make reference to the two parts of the id, the first having caused death (not only that of Dr. Judd but also hers). The second must also disappear, although it can also make reference to the world of consciousness and unconsciousness (her human form and her panther form), and the death of both of them.



Dr. Judd kisses Irena, which triggers the monster.

Her death is necessary to show women that the non-achievement of the ego-ideal and role-model only drives to punishment, and the fact that she dies because of her death drive suggests that this non-achievement leads to an unhappy life. Her repression of the sex instinct signifies men's fear of those women who refuse to have an active sexual life with them. The spectator empathizes with the gentle Oliver, who waits for her patiently but eventually becomes unhappy, in part, because his "needs" are not satisfied. Her id kills her, and thus, she kills herself, which is equal to committing suicide, very much related to her unhappy life and her inability to have sexual intercourse and to be rejected later.

However, in the remake of 1982, the monster is a woman (Irena, Nastassja Kinski) trying to become sexually free, and representing a threat for the phallogentric and patriarchal society. She gets punished by becoming a monster for having sexual intercourse with Oliver, and it is not only that she is a monster because of having sex, but also the femininity and nakedness and sensuality make her visually attractive for the male audience. The liberation of her sexual instinct gives way for her aggressiveness to appear. They are very similar, however, in the sense that in both it is Irena who flirts with Oliver, in comparison with Alice, who waits passively. Therefore, both films end up punishing Irena by becoming a monster for sexual reasons and throw their aggressive id against a man. While the original film transmits the message of having sexual intercourse with one's husband as something essential, the remake suggests women should repress their sexual id.

## **2.4 Religion, Nationhood and Alienation**

As in the other horror films by Val Lewton, alienation is central to the construction of the monster. In *Cat People* alienation comes from the nationality of the protagonist, who is

Serbian. Not only does she come from Serbia, but so does the legend of the cat people. She surrounds herself with Serbian objects in her house and seems to find it a little difficult to adapt to the new country. She even tells Oliver that he is her first real friend in America, and it is no wonder that she feels lonely. Yet for the construction of the monster what is more important is the way the Americans feel, rather than the way she does about immigration, for the spectator is to be scared of it, not to empathize with it. Taking a far-away country from the United States, the belief in the existence of the monster grows out of the psychological distance that helps the spectator create the picture of a mystical place, just as the first scenes of the remake offer a deserted, mystical, dream-like village. Although she appears to be perfectly normal on the outside, when we go inside her house we cross the barrier, we get to see her most private space and relate her to this mystical place, also thanks to such odd objects as the statue, the screen with the leopard image and the painting.



One of the first scenes of *Cat People* (1982)

We get even closer to this image when we get to know yet another Serbian woman at the restaurant on the wedding night. She is presented as odd and intrusive but also mysterious, and serves to enhance the image of Serbia as a mystical place. Yet another Serbian person is spoken of, the barber of one of the guests, who far from being more normal than the other two, calls the guest at the party “thief, bandit” in Serbian. Thus, all the Serbians who appear in the film are presented as odd people and in no way similar to the Americans. Taking into account that the Second World War had started before the film was released in 1939, and that the countries of Eastern Europe were being invaded and involved in fights, the fact that all the Serbian immigrants are presented in this way can represent a fear of immigration by the American people. Although the USA did not get involved in the war until 1942, they had been receiving immigrants from Europe since the war started, despite their restrictive immigration policies. In this sense Irena does not only represent the mystery of a far-away country, but also a threat to the integrity of the nation. This idea is enhanced by her becoming a monster, and even more in contrast with the American Alice.

Although religion seems not to be an important factor in the film in relation to the monster and not even for the characters’ daily life, there are some instances where it is mentioned in relation to the leopard and also in relation to Irena's obsession with evil. This obsession leads her, once again, to alienation, to feeling lonely with her beliefs in a country where nobody believes in those stories or seems to be as worried as she is about evil. The first time we hear about religion is when Irena first tells Oliver about the cat people and their story: “At first, the people were good and worshiped God in a true Christian way. But little by little, the people changed. [...] People bowed down to Satan and said their Masses to him.” The second time it is the cleaner in the zoo who refers to the Bible to explain why the leopard is evil, and the last instance of religion appears when Oliver uses a cross to

successfully frighten the panther, suggesting that the animal is in fact a Satan worshipper, and that is why it runs at the sight of the cross.



The leopard enters Alice and Oliver's office and he uses a tool resembling a crucifix to make it go away.

All in all, Irena's animal form is related to evil because of religion. It is not naturally evil, but it becomes so, gradually, by giving it evil features and because of Irena's obsession. In this sense the fact that the leopard represents Irena's sexual instinct is related to the restrictions on sex by Christian religion. It is also related to the antagonism between inner beliefs and soul, and mind and logic that the film uses to construct the monster. Dr. Judd's inability to distinguish between mind and soul leads him to kiss Irena and get killed by her animal form. For Irena, her soul is related to inner beliefs and then to religion, the cat people, witchcraft and Satan, and these are the reasons why her soul (personality) is fragmented and repressed, for these are the constructors of her super-ego and the leaders of her obsession. She once tells Dr Judd that when he speaks of the soul he means the mind, implying that hers is a real problem and that the panther really exists, making her obsession grow even more.



### 3. Conclusion

As a conclusion, the monster in *Cat People* is constructed from a patriarchal perspective, finding the female monster as the opposite of the role model that a mother in the 1940s was supposed to take. Motherhood is a crucial subject in this film and is presented through a contrast between the versatile, feminine and man-like Alice and the odd, evil Irena. At the same time, Alice acts as the ego-ideal not only of Irena but of every woman. She is the type of woman that every woman should be like, and Irena is punished by becoming a monster for not achieving the role model's personality. By repressing her sexual desire for the fear of becoming a leopard, Irena, once again, fails to become the perfect wife, which leads her to actually become a leopard. This transformation into a leopard is gradually achieved through three stages marked by the visits to the psychiatrist. The ambivalence between logical and illogical events to explain the situations dissipates little by little to finally disappear at the end. Also, the transformation is achieved by suggesting instead of showing directly what happens in the scene through the use of shadows and darkness. Apart from the patriarchal perspective, the fact that the protagonist is not American but Serbian is of crucial importance to the construction, for she represents the other not only as a woman but as an immigrant, and thus, she is double alienated.

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