

Mapping the unassimilable: The Balkan other as meme in Val Lewton's *Cat People*

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Abstract

World War II era Hollywood horror films were sometimes produced and promoted as wartime propaganda, and several featured characters of Eastern European origin as evildoers and monsters intentionally cast as such in a political sense. Certain of producer Val Lewton's horror films from this period bear a curious thematic relationship to these propaganda films, although they are not considered as straightforward war propaganda. In particular, *Cat People* presents a bizarre story about a Serbian woman who is a shape-shifting 'cat woman'. Her strange, irresolvable curse plagues her marriage to an American gentleman, and winds up breaking apart their dubious union. In view of its ethnic and cultural representations, *Cat People* reproduces long-standing Western European stereotypes about Eastern Europeans by trading in received gothic fantasies. The danger is that the film holds the potential for becoming a popular meme by relaying the demonizing of a Serbian immigrant, certainly an insensitive and reductive portrayal when viewed from a more contemporary and culturally informed perspective.

Keywords

Cat People, cultural memory, Eastern Europeans, ethnicity, ideology, meme, stereotypes, World War II era Hollywood horror films

Introduction: Horror and its functions

Several World War II (WW II) era horror films reveal disquieting representations of ethnic and cultural difference and otherness. Significant examples feature ethnic/racial subjects in roles as monsters and/or mysterious individuals portending grave dangers. For

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example, *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943) includes blacks victimized as zombies by an evil German scientist, and *Return of the Vampire* (1943) stars Bela Lugosi as an undead Rumanian revenant menacing London during the Battle of Britain (Worland, 1997). Produced as wartime propaganda, these films frame allegories of a relentless foreign enemy portrayed as inhumanly monstrous and imbued with a terrifying alterity. Such figures promoted a need for vigilance regarding their potential for wreaking havoc, in order that society might be saved from their menacing blight. Their propagandistic appeals demanded no less than a call to war on behalf of civilization itself. A horror film classic from this period that thematically intersects with such ideological concerns is Val Lewton's and Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942). A psychically complicated and tragic tale of mysterious origins and failed love across ethnic lines, *Cat People* obtrudes into areas of culture, history and politics in unsettling ways that its producers failed to predict, or to account for. The film therefore stands in need of contemporary critical reassessment. *Cat People* exemplifies a notable type of horror film, the monster tale, and as such discloses, under closer analysis, how horror films have functioned as boundary markers between acceptable norms and unacceptable deviancy within their fictive life-worlds. The social threat these films imply may be located relative to their grotesque creatures, figures that 'represent a call to antisocial instincts and a threat of regression that the civilized self must struggle to overcome in order to maintain the precarious barrier of civilization' (Hanafi, 2006: 777). This antisocial resonance, prefigured as a cathartic effect, has sometimes served to reinforce the frontier between mainstream and marginalized social, political and ethnic/racial groups. This generally occurs in productions that feature unfamiliar ethnic figures whose suspicious differences are paraded as monstrous, thereby promoting an outright othering of particular cultures and/or nationalities. This is no trivial issue; such portrayals can relay profoundly dangerous notions influencing what peoples may or may not be considered as fully civilized. In short, films that traffic in such representations can generate corrosive ideological memes, these becoming uncritically received as naturalized social facts.

It is worth considering that 'memes are said to resemble genes in that they produce cultural change through a process similar to natural selection: those memes that are passed on by imitation and learning tend to dominate social life' (Coker, 2008: 904). However, this does not always produce beneficial effects, since this process can result in an 'unconscious selection of memes that are positively a menace, but which prey on flaws in the human decision making apparatus' (Dennet, 2001: 317–318), thereby encouraging reified presumptive responses.

I would suggest that *Cat People* is precisely a film that transmits a prejudicial meme, for manifold reasons. Indeed, the further that one digs into its historical context, dialog, rhetoric, characterizations, cinematic effects, received criticism and its social message, as well as its various subtexts, themes and motifs, the more the film reveals issues that have seemingly eluded critics, or perhaps proved too disturbing to open up to rigorous critical inquiry. In order to comprehend this critical perspective more fully, it is necessary to understand the history and creative background informing *Cat People*, particular to reevaluating the cultural significance of this landmark example of classic horror cinema. *Cat People* was initially envisioned as a wartime propaganda piece. Originally, conceived as a story about Serbian patriots, they were to have been portrayed as

shape-shifting cat people, valorized as valiant heroes fighting against fascist invaders. The war film idea was finally scrapped, however, because studio executives disliked Val Lewton's outlandish concepts (Bansak, 2003: 125). The script was then rewritten, the eventual story based on a formerly published Lewton short fiction, 'The Bagheeta', a shape-shifting tale that takes place in Ukraine, featuring a mysterious woman who transforms into a panther (Bansak, 2003: 122–123). Thus, the ground for the film's ultimate inception is rooted in a story set in an Eastern European region, a place not well known in the West during that time. The production of Hollywood horror films as wartime propaganda pieces was aided by the Office of Wartime Intelligence, or OWI Bureau of Motion Pictures (Worland, 1997: 47–48). Informing such efforts were serious concerns about possibly misrepresenting ethnic groups falsely or negatively, something considered untenable by the OWI. This imperative was deemed essential, since the United States did not want to alienate international support for the war effort: 'OWI insisted that Hollywood's depictions of non-Western peoples at the very least ought to avoid characterizing them as backward and superstitious as this carried the unambiguous stigma of white supremacy' (Worland, 1997: 53).

The obvious contradiction, of course, relative to *Cat People*, is that Serbs are considered racially white, and are certainly not 'non-Western' in the conventional sense of what that term implies. Yet Eastern Europe, in the purview of its Western European neighbors, is not quite 'the West'. Typical of such perceptions, *Cat People* obviously trades in strange and superstitious behaviors, so evidently it slipped past OWI oversight in a manner similar to the ethnically freighted *Son of Dracula* (1943), which apparently seemed too utterly fantastical to be considered as harmfully ethnocentric (Worland, 1997: 51). Even so:

OWI's understandable sensitivity to images of contemporary Britain, China, and Russia in various big-studio war movies does not quite prepare us, however, for discovering the lengths to which the agency went to effect a more accurate rendering of Egyptian culture in Universal's *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944). (Worland, 1997: 54)

This is highly ironic from a hindsight view of *Cat People*, given that the film develops its underlying story via its main antagonist delivering an inspired discourse on Serbia's long history of Christian – Muslim conflicts and their perceived spiritually damaging aftermath. While *Cat People* is not precisely a wartime propaganda film, it does not escape from its wartime context. Alexander Nemerov (2005) relates that 'WW II haunts the films of Val Lewton' (p. 1). This is especially true of *Cat People*, since it presents a Serbian antagonist in the guise of a shape-shifting monster that exacts revenge on her enemies, recalling the original idea for the film. Serbia was at that moment struggling to throw off invading German and Italian armies, as well as their Croatian allies.

More important to its cultural message, the film's antagonist must live out her fate as a bizarre, Eastern European other, unassimilable within American society, suggesting a grave uncertainty about Eastern Europeans, not an unknown gesture in both Western literature and popular culture. Given the film's historical background and specific cultural elements, *Cat People* inevitably, intentionally or not, calls into question the nature of the cultural and political wartime relationship between the United States and Serbia,

then considered as an ally against Hitler's Germany, if in many respects a politically problematical one.

Given that 'misleading images of U.S. allies' (Worland, 1997: 51) were a priority OWI concern, *Cat People* remains in hindsight a troubling conundrum. Analyzed from this perspective, the film discloses a strange cultural allegory of the period, since its monster, the Serbian-born fashion designer, 'Irena Dubrovna', and its protagonist, her American husband, 'Oliver Reed', flounder on the rocks of a failed marriage that implodes due to their lack of consortium, caused by insurmountable supernatural problems.

The film thus reproduces a long-standing regional stereotype, conceivable as an allegory of East–West European relations, by representing an Eastern European as an inscrutable and dangerous interloper who threatens to cause havoc as she intrudes into Western society. Historical precedents for this theme are readily discovered in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and in Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Bollen and Ingelbien, 2009). Critical work on *Dracula* (Arata, 1990) has confirmed its rhetoric as driven by fears of unwelcome Eastern European incursions into Victorian England. Similar prejudicial trends have been located in 19th century British travel literature and art (Hammond, 2007). Tom Jackson (2004) observes:

in an age of expanding travel, the men and women of the Enlightenment increasingly visited and studied the lands of Eastern Europe, and combined observation with mythology to give the 'half-wild', 'half-civilized' image that colors descriptions of non-Western Europe to this day. (p. 110)

Eastern Europe has been rendered as a gothic nightmare so often by now that these trends constitute a received meme, attesting to how 'stereotypes derived from popular literature permeate contemporary discussions of the Balkans' (Jackson, 2004: 111). Moreover, 'powerful and persistent images of the Balkans and its people had coalesced over the centuries in western literary and political discourse' (Finney, 2002: 3–4). These representations have served to imprint the notion that the region remains 'a domain of exotic primitives prey to blood feuds and doomed to repeat a cyclical history of barbaric savagery' (Finney, 2002: 2–3). Films reproducing these notions are therefore party to a legacy of prejudice and ethnocentrism long overdue for an appropriate accounting. Worland (1997: 56) examines several period films that transmit similar ethnocentric models, such as *Return of the Vampire* (1943), in which the Hungarian-born Bela Lugosi plays a ruthless vampire, 'Armand Tesla'. Unfortunately, this figure drags a famous Serbian name into questionable view, tying it to an evil monster in an odd, coincidental way: Nikola Tesla, the genius scientific inventor and longtime resident of the United States, was of Serbian origin, something that Worland fails to mention. It is indeed surprising how the OWI failed to catch this embarrassing faux pas, especially since it is reported that the US government took a special interest in Tesla's work, this having contributed in recent times to certain conspiracy theories.¹

Cultural and historical background

It remains an indisputable cultural fact that ancient legends about strange, shape-shifting beings form a significant part of the unique repository of Eastern European folklore. This

fantastical legacy is found in the region's traditional tales, these for many centuries having been transmitted far beyond their homelands by way of persistent storytelling. These incredible stories evolved imaginatively over time and across cultures, their various inflections becoming part of the Western literary tradition, supplying a fund of fabula for the horror classics of modern popular culture, both literary and cinematic. While Western audiences now receive such fare as sheer fantasy, these uncommon tales are not without their supposedly actual antecedents, retained among this region's long-held folk beliefs. Stories of incredible monsters inform the cultural history of these lands, even into recent times:

the Ottoman Balkans was thus a world densely populated by invisible spirits, both malicious and benign. Some families were dreaded because they were known to be vampires in human form. There were even reports of men with tails hidden by their undergarments. Charms were employed against the evil eye by devout members of all religions, as were garlic, rope with knot tied in it, animal horn such as boar's tusks, and certain berries. Priests were kept busy writing messages on amulets in response to their flock's demands, and when Christians found their own amulets did not work, they would go and borrow Muslim ones. Many of these beliefs linger on today, though they are rarely expressed for fear of ridicule. (Mazower, 2002: 56)

This cross-cultural borrowing of ostensibly magical talismans becomes all the more ironic when brought into comparative consideration with the Serbian folk legend that first comes into Western view in *Cat People*. Irena's supernatural tale underlies the film's evolving story, which turns on the medieval persecution and yet survival of a group of witches, the evil 'cat people', who were in ages long past cursed by being transformed into shape shifters capable of morphing into great cats. Irena is a woman so plagued, who fears that she will shape-shift during erotic play, a certainly unwelcome and untoward condition rendering her incapable of natural fulfillment, and unable to pursue a normal life with anyone outside of her reviled group.

Irena explains her cultural past to Oliver, advancing that a number of these witches were hunted down and destroyed by a legendary figure known only in the film as 'King John'. Responding to a query by Oliver, her future husband, Irena discloses the significance of a unique statue decorating her home, a sculpture of a knight on horseback impaling a large, rampant cat:

Oliver: Who's it supposed to be?

Irena: King John.

Oliver: Oh – King John, the Magna Carta and all that stuff.

Irena: No, King John of Serbia. He was a fine king. He drove the Mamalukes out of Serbia and freed the people.

Oliver: Well, why have this around?

Irena: Well, perhaps you have in your room a picture of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

Oliver: Well, what does it mean? ... Why is he spearing that cat?

Irena: Oh, it's not really a cat. It's meant to represent the evil ways into which my village had once fallen. You see, the Mamalukes came to Serbia long ago, and they made the people slaves. Well, at first, the people were good and worshipped God in a true Christian way. But little by little, the people

changed. When King John drove out the Mamalukes and came to our village, he found dreadful things. People bowed down to Satan and said their masses to him. They had become witches and were evil, but King John put some of them to the sword and some, the wisest and the most wicked, escaped into the mountains ... Those who escaped, the wicked ones, their legend haunts the village where I was born. (Dirks, 2014: 1)

This icon and its background serve as the prelude to Irena's being disclosed as one of these cat people, unhappily burdened by this evil legacy. This scene presents a complex ethnic semiotic: the alluring if enigmatic Serbian, Irena, the naïve American nice guy, Oliver, and the curious and cryptic medieval statue, its cultural meaning informed by diabolism and an obscure legend of a medieval Serbian hero's battle with supernatural evil. Adding to the uncanny nature of this constellation is Irena's penchant for hanging out at the local zoo, where she first encounters Oliver. He initially finds her sketching a black panther, which seems to fascinate her for some unaccountable reason. One of her efforts depicts the beast skewered by a large sword, an image that furthers the impalement motif and ties her inner life to the statue's historical and cultural meaning. Irena's ironic sketch of the penetrated cat may be interpreted in multivalent ways, given the film's heavily laden Freudian themes, an essential plot element explored in detail by Worland (2007).

While the film dramatizes a tortured Freudian psychodrama around Irena's repressed and unfulfilled sexuality, her condition is highlighted by her cathexis with the statue, heralding medieval Serbian history, and its terror of witchcraft. Behind this story are the Ottoman invasions, to which all of this strange, profane degeneracy is ultimately attributed. Irena, a victim of this curse, valorizes in her animated retelling the destruction of the Turks/Mamalukes, and also of the cat people, while desperately seeking to transcend the onus of her cultural past.

Irena's behaviors present a paradox: she admires her ancestors' bold destroyer, and yet simultaneously identifies with the zoo panther that symbolizes her inner demon. A black panther is featured on a decorative screen in Irena's apartment, indicating her deep obsession with her past. More sinisterly, her exotic charm, beauty and sexual appeal entice the unsuspecting Oliver, leading him benightedly into a complicated and frustrating union with a woman he cannot fully comprehend, nor finally bond with. Highlighting this tragic irony, Irena is approached at her wedding celebration by a Serbian woman who calls her 'sister', suggesting either a lesbian advance, or that a fellow cat woman may be stalking her (Newman, 1999: 31). All of these untoward elements reinforce her strangeness, her irresolvable psycho-sexual issues, and her inability to openly stand forth and join in mainstream American society as the wife of a 'normal' American. Irena's marginalized status is reasserted throughout the film, especially in those scenes in which she intimidates and attacks people, including, Alice, Oliver, and her corrupt analyst, Dr. Judd, whom she ultimately kills after he tries to seduce her. Irena's attempt to resolve her bizarre identity crisis by entering into a marriage ultimately disintegrates, as she is trapped by this toxic legacy of witchcraft, victimage and paranormal horror.

The film's dramatic tension turns on Irena's contradictory roles as victim and victimizer, lover and monster, desirable woman and shape-shifting ethnic other. As the film

unwinds through her romance and failed marriage, her resentment over her sexual repression emerges, fueled by the eventual intrusion of another woman, 'Alice', who attracts Oliver's attention. Viewers are treated to Irena's inflamed yet denied libido, displaced in certain tantalizing scenes: she claws a couch in erotic pathos, and weeps naked in a bathtub, lamenting her frustration. During darkly menacing moments of sublimation, she stalks her perceived rival at an ill-lighted indoor swimming pool, and slaughters a number of sheep while in her panther form. We may sympathize with her tragic plight, but we cannot embrace her, since she may turn without warning into a merciless killer. She is, finally, dangerously unpredictable.

The larger dimensions of this debility factor into Irena's role as an unassimilable foreign other threatening to destabilize American social conventions at a dangerous time in America's history. Film critic Kim Newman (1999) asks, relative to the audience's reception of the anodyne Oliver and his co-worker friend, Alice, 'is it possible that square audiences of the time identified with these limited "Americanos" and were repulsed by the sinisterly foreign Irena?' (p. 40). Newman's rhetorical question calls forth an unexplored raft of cultural and ideological issues. However, Newman fails to examine the underlying ramifications of her question, thereby leaving a glaring critical gap concerning the film's ethnic complexities.

Further complicating this matter, Irena strongly identifies with her statue, which represents a famous Serbian military leader, possibly Jovan Nenad (John is translated as 'Jovan' in Serbian). Irrespective of Newman's (1999) dismissal of him as an unlikely personage (p. 24), Irena's 'King John' statue has been linked to Jovan Nenad, who lived until 1527 and fought heroically against the invading Turks.² Her details about him point up his persistence in Serbian cultural memory:

whole legends spread concerning his origins. He continually claimed that God had appointed him to convert the pagans and unbelievers to Christianity, and to root out the Muslims and 'other sects'. It is interesting to note that he did not differentiate between Orthodox and Catholic believers, nor between the different nationalities who served him. (Bjelajac, 2010: 9)

Nenad (2010) was a figure of international significance (pp. 9–10); ergo, Irena's discourse about 'King John' versus the 'Mamalukes' cannot be put off to a mere imaginative legend, even though 'the people who had rallied to Emperor Jovan saw in him a supernatural being' (Nenad, 2010: 9). However, he finally alienated his political supporters and was thrown into a conflict with the King of Hungary and other regional leaders. As a result, he was ambushed, captured and beheaded. In spite of his ignoble end, he attracted many loyal Serbs into his army, drove out the Turks and for a time established his own Serbian state, over which he set up rule as its self-appointed king (Nenad, 2010: 9).

Irena describes Nenad as a valiant champion against spiritual evil, likewise validating his political mission. She compares him to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, a nation founder and a nation defender, situating her discourse in a comparative frame of political reference significant to the ongoing events in 1942 Serbia, in which nation founding and nation defending figured prominently. Given this weighty configuration of ethnic and historical details, Newman (1999) is entirely correct to suggest that *Cat*

People resonates with a ‘bizarre effect for a film directed and produced by immigrants, a Frenchman and a Russian’ (p. 40). Yet, this is entirely an understatement, considering what is ethically at stake in its deeper implications.

Vital to the film’s current reassessment is that the sheer monstrousness of the events that transpired in the Balkan theater during WW II exists in a disturbing historical and rhetorical tension with the fictive trauma enacted in the film. For Lewton and Tourneur not to have realized this, at least to some extent, to say nothing of the failure of the OWI, appears both politically ignorant and incorrect, both then and now. Contemporary viewers may regard the film’s emphatic connection to Serbian history as an ideological catalyst, whereby their recognition of the film’s ironies contributes to both unexpected epiphany and sobering reevaluation:

throughout World War II, Yugoslavia fought a bloody civil war in which Serb Četnici, Croat and Muslim Ustaše and communist partisans of all ethnicities brutally massacred one another and destroyed their respective villages. All sides inflicted brutal violence against civilians. One might then question the virtue of applying ‘genocide’ to one particular group and not the rest. (Levy, 2009: 810)

Based on a more historically and critically informed perspective, the film begs for an exploration of its buried cultural significance, for its thematic elements to be more fully treated long after its historical moment, with the intent of disclosing a plethora of contradictions and ironies, both relevant to its own time and to more recent history involving the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, and also including certain political issues of our present moment.

Paramount among these concerns is that while the peoples of this region have at times engaged in hideous practices, these were the result of particular leaders and their political agendas, and did not occur because Eastern Europeans are preternatural monsters incapable of civilized behavior. It is thus all the more necessary that ethnic portrayals in any popular medium, particularly those emerging during periods of political turmoil relative to their conceived figures’ representative cultures and nations, no longer be taken for granted. Film characters are capable of promoting spurious ideological views about ethnic groups, or nations, while naturalizing their supposedly inherent antisocial behaviors. Ergo, they are not to be innocently received as merely intriguing figures mobilized to enhance the exotic appeal of some mysterious, far-off land. On the contrary, they must be mindfully interrogated concerning their potential for relaying damaging and unethical political beliefs, since ethnic film figures are capable of reinforcing stereotypes that may become uncritically transmitted as received memes. As Dennet (2001) warns, ‘some memes are more like rats; they thrive in the human environment in spite of being positively selected against – ineffectually – by their unwilling hosts’ (p. 317). It is necessary that the (perhaps unconscious) influence of such memes be disabused, lest they override the better angels of everyone’s cultural logic.

There emerges in view of these issues a recursive imperative to reevaluate *Cat People*’s historical, ethnic and legendary features in terms of how Eastern Europe was always already conceived, politically, and in popular culture, as a place of arcane mysteries, harboring un-modern beliefs and strange hermetic practices. The contemporary

outgrowth of this assumption has manifested in the perceiving of this locale as a repository of untenable social otherness. Slavoj Žižek (2004) remarks on the politics of a condescension that promotes:

the patronizing Western cliché which characterizes the East European post-Communist countries as a kind of retarded poor cousins who will be admitted back into the family if they can behave properly. Recall the reaction of the press to the last elections in Serbia where the nationalists gained big-it was read as a sign that Serbia is not yet ready for Europe.

Žižek's point is clear: the weight of history's nightmares in this region inevitably burdens any Western perceptions of its current or emerging political alignments. Since the film presents a historicized nationalist rhetoric as one of its chief framing devices, and indeed, deeply nationalist issues were on the line in the region's international and internecine conflicts during the film's release period, the explication of the King John legend, real or not, both calls forth and extends a cornucopia of Eastern European problems regarding ethnicity, religion, nationalist alliances and political instability.

Cats, shape shifters, witches

Freighted with this ethnic and nationalist rhetoric and unconscious politics, *Cat People* is a horror film that capitalizes on the fear factor of a shape-shifting monster. Shape shifters have terrified audiences for centuries as nightmarish figures that disrupt our received ontological expectations, due to their supernatural ability to transform into creatures bereft of their formerly presumed humanity. Invariably, such 'a monster always indicates a transgression, a breakdown in hierarchy; it is quintessentially a symbol of crisis and undifferentiation' (Hanafi, 2006: 778). Their presence frightens deeply because they retain a hidden malevolence that unexpectedly erupts to cause chaos, mayhem and murder. It is no mere trend of modern cinema that such tales have the capacity to elicit atavistic fears, since their earliest recorded origins are notably saturated with onto-theological conceptions of evil. These were promoted through church teachings, by official reports based on actual forensic investigations, and by folk traditions relating frightful legends of how these ghastly creatures made their horrid presence felt throughout their native lands and cultures of origin (Jenkins, 2010).

Encountering a story or a film featuring a shape shifter does not defamiliarize the limits of one's imagination so much as it recalls an ancient substratum of folk tales, fables, myths and legends that are, by virtue of their ubiquity, archetypal. A shape shifter's phantasmagorical evil can emerge in unpredictable ways that may take victims utterly by surprise. We find such creatures more conventionally defined in terms of a sinister, diabolic threat:

in medieval eschatology, metamorphosis by almost any process belongs to the devil's party; devils and their servants, witches, are monstrously hybrid in themselves in form, and control magical processes of mutation. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, metamorphosis has marked out heterodoxy, instability, perversity, unseemliness, monstrosity. (Warner, 2007: 35–36)

Relative to *Cat People*, this epistemological rubric that limns shape-shifting is retracable to the film's greater themes and conflicts, which it reproduces in multivalent ways:

as a philosophical and literary trope, as a theological principle, as a cosmic and biological explanation, it often serves to distinguish good from evil, the blessed from the heathen and the damned: in the Christian heaven, nothing is mutable, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters – and mutants. (Warner, 2007: 36)

Speaking to this profane compromising of the human, Vedriš (2006) notes that the Balkans was a region in which 'there was also widespread belief that the witch could turn into an animal or change her size so that she could pass through very small holes in order to attack her victims' (p. 85).

Cat People is orchestrated entirely around shape-shifting as a diabolic curse. According to Irena's testimony to Oliver about her strangely fated village, execrable conditions arose there as the outcome of a devil's bargain struck by those who had lost their Christian faith in the wake of the Islamic invasions. She specifies the fallen nature of those who became witches and engaged in satanic worship, suggesting that their practice of black magic enabled this curse to become willingly incorporated into their demonic abilities. Her testimony to Oliver also corroborates the lasting power of this regional folklore, retained in her cultural memory:

cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these 'figures of memory'. (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995: 129)

These 'figures of memory' may also be viewed as memes: 'obviously, folklore consists of memes, and the *concept* 'folklore' is also a meme – ballads and folk tales are memes, as are the concepts "ballad" and "folktale"' (Pimple, 1996: 236). More specific to Irena's folkloric conflating of anti-Christian and Islamic influences having precipitated her village into satanic practices, one assessment considers that in the Balkans 'religious and ethnic diversity also affected witchcraft accusations':

rich ethnological material shows the existence of strong prejudices among Christians about Muslims as practitioners of magic and sorcery (as well as vice versa). People in the Balkan borderlands sometimes believed that the 'Turks' (as Muslims were called, whatever their ethnic origin) could turn into wolves or become vampires. (Vedriš, 2006: 85)

Not surprisingly, considering that she is apparently an Orthodox Christian Serb, Irena's tale transmits an explicit anti-Islamic bias. Yet, the film's treatment of this fearful legend may not be so historically well founded: 'we know much more about the history of witchcraft in Latin Christian regions of central Europe, where the persecution of witches was institutionalized, than we do in the Orthodox lands of southeastern Europe' (Pócs, 2006: 527). Be that as it may, *Cat People* reinscribes well-known conceptions of diabolical evil as manifesting an unnatural and irredeemable otherness, a

perverse and monstrous morphing of human and animal that becomes generationally extended:

witches, beings who transgress the confines between human and nonhuman, are also a kind of monster. The monster shares a number of characteristics and functions with the witch: they both may have a connection with supernatural forces; their appearance may indicate an evil done or about to be done; they may appear in times of social crisis; their wicked origins are attested to by their telltale bodies; they may have an 'unnatural' connection with animals; they may be agents of divine or diabolical retribution; they may tempt good people off their path of righteousness; a possessed person may be monstrously deformed; and they are both associated with powers of transformation, illusion, deception, and diabolic intervention. (Hanafi, 2006: 777)

The cat people's similarities in these ways signify not only a particular fall from grace of a given population, but a continuum of beliefs originating with the warfare that has plagued the Balkans since the 14th century, carried forward to Irena's own time. She defines herself in relation to this historical trajectory, and its cultural memory, which supplies her with an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), although one fraught with disturbing ambiguities. Her sense of self is substantiated through what has been called a 'political myth': 'myths are powerful elements that connect the past with the present. Their influence extends from the mere *hic et nunc* to a supernatural reality offering legitimacy and power to religious and political actors' (Leustean, 2008: 421). Irena's telling of her village's witchcraft story, first to Oliver, and later to the psychoanalyst, Dr. Judd, during her therapy sessions, recalls the fear of the supernatural that witches have historically provoked in the social imagination:

witches were thought to be a virulent menace not only to the Christian faith but also to the orderly progress of society and humanity itself. To make the phenomenon all the more horrifying, they were, as we noted, the people down the street. The witch was your spouse, your clergyman, your teacher, your doctor, your cousin the nun, or even your child. (Davidson, 2012: 59)

The witch in this case is Oliver's spouse, and the disclosure thereof supplies the horror quotient of the film, disrupting the sanctity of both their marriage and the social order. A deracinated social order is also the subtext to the regional history that Irena recounts. Irena's use of the term 'Mamalukes', in her description of these events, is perhaps an anachronistic reference to the Ottoman incursions, which would have been accurate for the period of 'King John'. While it was not the Mamalukes that invaded Serbia, it was their continual 13th century invasions of the Levant that eventually set up the conditions for the later Ottoman invasions of Eastern Europe, including the Serbian defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389 (Riley-Smith, 2005: 240–242).

In addition, many Mamalukes were of Kipchak Turkish origin, so perhaps this is simply a screenwriter's creative license (Riley-Smith, 2005: 240). More significantly, Irena's story confirms that 'the ethno-genesis and evolution of Serbian national identity is inextricably linked with an Islamic "Other"' (Khan, 1996: 49). Irena's explication of her cultural past prefigures what is now regionally understood as the 'Turkish Taint': 'a cluster of themes, images, and stereotypical characterizations that relates to the ambivalent

complex of the Ottoman legacy' (Zivkovic, 1997: 27). This ideological configuration has been called 'more a jeremiad than a story' (Zivkovic, 1997: 27). One of its troubling Serbian presumptions is that 'we are forever cursed' (Zivkovic, 1997: 27). Irena's connection to this ground of Serbian identity is realistic, yet remains controversial and politically provocative, during the film's period, and now.

It is worth noting, relative to the quasi-historical significance of Irena's invoking of the Mamalukes as harbingers of evil, that this view was a received tenet of medieval theology. The theologian Alan of Lille promoted that 'Islam is a depraved cult based on carnal pleasure' (Tolan, 2002: 166). For Christian exegetes of that time, Islam represented merely 'another heresy of Eastern origins' (Tolan, 2002: 167). The black mass, which Irena mentions, is the very nadir of Christian apostasy, since this practice defiles the most sacred of church ceremonies in a grotesquely perverse and depraved manner.

Beliefs that Muslims were allies of the devil were widespread in the early Eastern Christian purview. 'Anastasius, a Monk of Saint Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai' is among those who 'does not hesitate to put them in the devil's camp' (Tolan, 2002: 43). For Anastasius, 'the Saracens figure prominently as the demons' chief allies' (Tolan, 2002: 43). There are therefore theologically based arguments in the Christian tradition that could have feasibly supplied the background for Irena's diatribe about the Mamalukes, although it is not certain whether screenwriter DeWitt Bodeen or producer Val Lewton were aware of them. Jane P. Davidson (2012) grants a different perspective: 'by definition, a witch – a Christian who had eschewed God and become a worshipper of the Devil – could not be a Jew or a Muslim' (p. 59). Even so, the distribution of various ethnic groups across the Balkans, with their conflicted and overlapping social and religious histories, tends to call this view into question. For example, Eastern European traditions tell of 'double beings', a near duplicate of Irena's shape-shifting witches:

double beings penetrating the boundaries of the worlds of the living and the dead are the Bulgarian, Croatian, and Serbian *mora*, *morina* (a related Hungarian figure is the will-o-the-wisp *lidérc*) who were humans or demons (corresponding to German *mahr/mare/mara*). As humans they had a double life; in a state of trance, they were capable of turning into demons that attacked humans. (Pócs, 2006: 523)

Irena conjures an entire catalog of mysterious phenomena with her devotion to her ancient story, and it likewise draws forth the matter of cats as figures of evil:

during the Middle Ages in Europe, cats became connected with evil powers, which was based partly on the popular beliefs about cats' lewdness, partly on their Christian association with Satan. In the European tradition of the *Last Supper* painting, a cat may represent Judas (see, e.g., Zuffi 80–89). Such attitudes led to cats' connection with witches; indeed, black cats, together with ravens, frequently appear in folktales as witches' familiars (such as Grimalkin, a cat from Celtic lore, also featured in *Macbeth*), and witches also turn into cats, a fact reflected in the *Harry Potter* books when Professor McGonagall occasionally takes the shape of a cat. An evil cat monster appears in King Arthur stories. Bayun-Cat in Slavic folklore is a giant hostile black cat who imposes irresistible sleepiness on people, often by telling tales or singing songs. (Nikolajeva, 2009: 250)

It is also said that ‘the diabolization of felines seems closely linked with the fight against heresy’ (Di Simplicio, 2006: 173). This proved an unfortunate circumstance for both cats and witches:

Christianity turned against the feline hunters. Because they were revered by pagan religions, cats came to symbolize Satan during the medieval era and to be seen as accessories to evil and witchcraft in general. Millions of the animals perished in the so-called Great Cat Massacre ordered by Pope Gregory IX in 1233. Amid the anti-feline hysteria, women with suspicious connections to the creatures were also put to death. Hundreds of thousands died. (Anon, 2000: 14)

This event establishes that people indeed believed in what scholars confirm about the conflating of cats and witches in the Middle Ages: ‘both witches’ familiars and the Devil took the form of a cat’ (Di Simplicio, 2006: 174). The film thus trades in numerous well-known cultural traditions and legends, this being one of its more compelling motifs. Yet these remain disturbing, controversial, relative to *Cat People*’s reproduction of stereotypes promoting Eastern Europeans as ontologically ‘the other’.

Transcending a historical nightmare

The crucial issue concerning how *Cat People* may be understood in a contemporary context as a film significantly influencing its genre is that there is a profound ethical contradiction regarding its historical reception. American audiences were entranced by a horror film representing a Serbian antagonist as a monstrous, shape-shifting other, one who could not establish a permanent alliance with an American partner, while at that very moment, Serbs were being massacred and tortured by the thousands in the Nazi Croat concentration camp, Jasenovac. This was the third largest and widely considered the most brutal of all the death camps, wherein the Croat Ustaše targeted their victims precisely on the basis of their ethnic and religious differences (Levy, 2009: 817–826).³ Jasenovac, and the depredations that transpired in this region’s theater of war hover behind *Cat People* as ghoulis real-life reminders of the moment’s actual horrors, and likewise function to amplify the film’s fantastical nightmare. Nemerov (2005) explains, regarding Lewton’s productions: ‘if the war does not literally appear in the horror films, it lurks there all the same, and I believe, it is now coming into plain view as the source of their pathos’ (p. 57). *Cat People* corroborates this point, irrefutably.

If there is a social allegory behind the irresolvable contradictions of *Cat People*, it is not, as director Jacques Tourneur implies, that it merely satisfied a vicarious audience impulse: ‘during war, for some mysterious reason, people love to be frightened’ (Nemerov, 2005: 1). On the contrary, *Cat People* exposes that the deep-seated fears at the root of Irena’s problems originate with the same ethnic strife that has inevitably promoted acts of murder, mayhem and carnage throughout the troubled Balkans: ‘in the 1940s, this means above all the Nazi genocide of Jews, Gypsies and others; the Ustaša, a genocide of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies; and the Četnik genocide of Muslims and Croats’ (Hoare, 2010: 1195). *Cat People*’s ethnic factors establish a psychic, cultural and political relay between history, stereotypes, regional legends and religious conflicts while insensitively reducing a

Serbian woman to a reductive portrayal of an inscrutable cultural other, a member of an ethnic group that still retains an ancient curse from medieval times. Recalling Slavoj Žižek's (2008) re-conceptualizing of Luke 23:34, we must take into account that when audiences in 1942 enjoyed this film, 'they know not what they do'. This becomes my operative imperative in disclosing *Cat People*'s political unconscious, and my critique of its ironic and stereotyping memes, themes and cultural subtexts.

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Notes

1. See 'Nikola Tesla.Co' (n.d.). Available at: <http://www.nikolatesla.co/conspiracy.html> (accessed 29 March 2014).
2. See 'Jovan Nenad', *Wikipedia.com*, Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Jovan_Nenad (accessed 28 April 2014):

In the 1942 film, *Cat People* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat_People_\(1942_movie\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat_People_(1942_movie))), a small statue of Jovan Nenad (albeit referenced as 'King John of Serbia'), plays a central role in developing the underlying mythological milieu of the film's setting ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setting_\(narrative\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setting_(narrative))). The statue is of 'King John' on horseback, holding up an impaled cat on his sword.

3. See What was Jasenovac? (n.d.).

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