

## The Strange Pleasure of the Leopard Man

### Gender, Genre and Authorship in a Val Lewton Thriller

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The recent release by Turner Home Entertainment of the entire Val Lewton horror collection on DVD is both a cause for celebration and an incentive to reevaluation. As one film (*The Ghost Ship*, 1943) has long been unavailable, this is the first time in sixty years that all of the great RKO producer's influential thrillers can be viewed together as an oeuvre. While a few of the films have stood the test of time, recognized as classics for decades, others have been paid little notice, and a few entirely forgotten. What follows is a close look one of the latter, 1943's *The Leopard Man*, adapted from the great pulp novelist Cornell Woolrich's *Black Alibi*.<sup>1</sup>

This story of the hunt for a disturbed serial killer who uses a cat's claw as his weapon of choice was the third film produced by the unit, following their masterpieces *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1942). Jacques Tourneur, who directed all three, would go on to make the film noir classic *Out of the Past* (1947). Auteur studies of the unit's films, whether focused on Lewton or Tourneur, normally mention *The Leopard Man* only in

passing; *Cat People* and *Zombie* are the great works and *Leopard* was a misfire. Three books published on Val Lewton share a dismissive attitude toward the film. The only sustained analysis in English is in Chris Fujiwara's book, *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*.<sup>2</sup> While it makes for an excellent starting point, there is much more to say about this flawed yet fascinating work.

I agree with the consensus that *Leopard* lacks the transcendent poetic quality of its two predecessors. Yet, there are a number of reasons why it deserves a closer look. A proper examination does not exist of the film's source material and the team's work of adaptation. Woolrich remains to this day an underappreciated figure in American literature, arguably contributing more material to film, radio and television than did any other pulp writer of his generation. His best novels of the 1940s, of which *Black Alibi* is one, can easily stand alongside those of his more celebrated contemporaries. *Leopard* also marks a number of firsts. The fusion of Woolrich, Lewton and Tourneur make the film arguably the first noir-horror hybrid, entangling generic, stylistic and thematic elements that remain in place in cinema to this day. Additionally, the rise of the serial killer as a significant figure in American popular culture lends importance to what is perhaps the first realistic representation of this modern monster in American movies.

It is the unique relays between authorship, genre and 1940s gender issues that animate this modest thriller, priming it for close study. My analysis of *The Leopard Man* will concentrate on three areas: affect, theme, and character. In all of these, the film has clear intentions, but its success with each is limited. At the level of affect, Lewton and his team have set out to create an atmosphere of terror and suspense, much as they had so successfully done with their first two attempts at the horror genre. In its best moments, the film equals its predecessors for nail-biting tension and frights. Yet, its unique approach in this area limits its ability to develop a narrative as thematically rich as those earlier works. The film's central theme of doomed fortune is both a legitimate poetic approach to sadness and loss, and a disturbing evasion of the real social issues of gender and violence tied to its representations. The tension between allegory and history plays out in the development of the story's central characters: Jerry Manning, the protagonist/investigator; Clo-Clo, the doomed dancer; and, Dr. Galbraith, the serial killer.

By comparing the film to its source novel by Woolrich, considering its relationship to horror and film noir, and reflecting on its representation of men and women, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of its ideological tensions as well as an appreciation for the film's strengths in spite of its weaknesses.

### **“An entrance they'll never forget”**

*The Leopard Man* is set in an unnamed city in the American Southwest in the present day. Jerry Manning/Dennis O'Keefe is a publicity agent for his girlfriend Kiki Walker/Jean Brooks, a performer who is looking for an edge over her competition on the nightclub circuit. Manning arrives in the opening scene with his latest scheme: he has rented a tame black leopard from a local and he wants Kiki to walk it on a leash in public as a publicity stunt. With some persuasion, she agrees. Kiki and her new “pet” waltz into the club in the middle of her rival performer Clo-Clo's act. In retaliation, Clo-Clo intentionally startles the edgy cat and it gets off its leash and flees into the night. As the hunt for the escaped animal carries on, young

Theresa Delgado, is shooed out the door by her mother to fetch cornmeal for her father's dinner, despite the girl's fears that the leopard might attack. Her worst nightmare comes true.

With Kiki and Manning absolved of responsibility by the police chief, a posse is formed to continue the hunt for the cat. Manning joins the search and meets Galbraith/James Ball, a former professor of zoology who is now curator of the local museum. Meanwhile, Consuelo Contreras, a beautiful young upper-class girl, heads out ostensibly to pay a visit to her father's grave. In fact, she has a clandestine meeting with her boyfriend planned. She arrives at the cemetery gates near closing time and promises not to stay too long. Inside, she cannot find her boyfriend Raoul at their usual rendezvous location and decides to sit and wait a bit. When she realizes it is getting dark, it is too late. The gates have closed and she is trapped inside alone. Soon, she meets the same fate as Theresa Delgado.

The next morning at the crime scene, Manning does not like what he sees and begins to wonder if a man, not a cat, is behind this second death. The killer seems to be using a cat's claw to mask his crimes and misdirect police. Manning talks his theory over with the chief of police and his new friend Galbraith but nobody finds it compelling. Clo-Clo, Kiki's rival performer is the next victim. At the club that evening, she meets a rich gentleman who gives her \$100 but she loses it on the way home and goes back into the dark streets to retrace her steps. The next day, examining Clo-Clo's body, Manning is convinced his theory is correct. A series of clues leads him to suspect Galbraith. He and Kiki concoct a plan to flush out the murderer. She risks her life to lure Galbraith into attacking her while Manning lies in wait with Raoul. When caught, Galbraith admits his crimes but claims that he does not know how to control his strange impulse to kill. Raoul shoots him before he can say anymore.

### **“In the darkness, the eyes full of fear” Lewton's Aesthetics of Terror**

Val Lewton told a story of how he went from his position as assistant to David Selznick to producer of horror films at RKO. “Someone told them I had written horrible novels, they mistook the word ‘horrible’ for ‘horror’ and I got the job”, he said. The anecdote, true or not, stands as a wonderful testament to his self-deprecating sense of humor as well as his modesty.<sup>3</sup> The real story is surely that he was one of the most promising young producers in Hollywood, well known to RKO, and a prime candidate for the position. It also points to a very significant aspect of his background. Between 1923 and about 1935, in addition to work in journalism and film, Lewton was a prolific and quite successful writer. He published at least ten works of fiction, six of non-fiction and a book of verse. As well, he estimated that he had contributed at least 100 short pieces (fiction and non-fiction) to various magazines during the period. One of his novels, *No Bed of Her Own* (1932), received notice at the time as the first serious work of fiction to deal with the depression in America.<sup>4</sup>

Lewton had a voracious appetite for literature to go along with a photographic memory and, beginning at an early age, he would employ the two to spin tales to whoever would listen. This skill for storytelling combined with economic circumstances led to his taking on more writing assignments than most people could handle. He even turned out two pornographic novels for the 42nd Street crowd. That this literate, Columbia University-educated son of an upper-middle class family could write poetry and history one week, and pulp novels and porn the next, indicates a tolerance of the extremes of popular culture that served him well with

RKO. While someone else may have turned up their nose at the position and either rejected it, or produced the films with the kind of hatred for the material that results in forgettable work, Lewton instead elevated what in 1942 was an embarrassing “low” genre into art.

By the beginning of the 1940's, the major studios' flirtation with big budget horror was over and only Universal was still producing the films with any regularity at all. Poverty Row production houses continued to rely on the horror formula and churned out most of what was now an established but poorly regarded genre. Lewton's task was simple then. Nobody would care about the quality of the films as long as he made them competently and efficiently. Yet, he saw a greater potential in the horror film and he set about getting it there. Around him, he collected a small group of respected colleagues (director Tourneur, editor Mark Robson, writers Ardel Wray and De Witt Bodeen, cinematographer Nick Musuraca) and consciously got to work at making a different kind of horror film.

From the very beginning, Lewton turned everywhere for source material. Drawing on his love for and knowledge of art, literature, and history, he used novels, short stories, poetry, painting, and music to enrich the series that began with *Cat People* in 1942. We know that among his first ideas for *Cat People* (he was given only the title by the studio) was to use a short story by the horror writer Algernon Blackwood. He eventually discarded the idea in favour of an original tale but the pattern of turning to literature and art continued. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) loosely retells Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* set in the unique milieu of Haiti's indigenous Vodoun religion (treated with the utmost respect after careful study by the unit). *The Seventh Victim* (1943) although an original story, employs references to John Donne and Dante. *Isle of the Dead* (1945) is inspired by an Arnold Boecklin painting of the same name as well as "The Premature Burial" by Poe; *The Body Snatcher* (1945), from the Stevenson story based on the notorious real-life grave robbers Burke and Hare; *Bedlam* (1946) from a painting and other works by the artist William Hogarth. This aspect of the Lewton cycle gives the films a distinctiveness and flavour of authenticity that positively shines next to their competition for horror audiences of the early 1940's.

Perhaps amidst all this sophisticated historical material, a contemporary suspense novelist like Woolrich, known for his work in pulp magazines, seems not to warrant a second glance. Maybe someone higher up forced this “junk” on Lewton and his team? Certainly, neither Joel Siegel nor Edmund Bansak, writing extensive books on Lewton's films, gives *The Leopard Man* much attention.<sup>5</sup> The latter spends a lot of time detailing the holes and implausible situations in the plot. Siegel, meanwhile, dismisses the film as “a straight-forward mystery thriller” with “a thin nasty-minded story” and finally, “little more than an exercise in sadistic voyeurism”. He seems incapable of recognizing the author's contribution to the work. While noting that the film is “unconventionally structured”, he claims the source novel “was probably too conventional to please Lewton and Tourneur...and lacking the kind of suspense they favoured...the Woolrich material hardly merits the sophisticated Lewton narrative technique”. To me, this statement is outrageous. Nobody who has read *Black Alibi* could ever come to this conclusion. The book is a masterly exercise in the orchestration of tension and suspense. Its unusual structure is punctuated with passages of breathtaking menace and dark poetry. *Black Alibi* fits perfectly into the pattern of sources drawn upon by the unit.

Far from being too sophisticated to appreciate Woolrich, Lewton surely identified deeply with the author. Besides the fact that they were both young writers who wound up writing genre fiction to eke out a living, Lewton and Woolrich had other things in common. They were the same age, born exactly six months apart (Woolrich in December 1903, Lewton the following

May). Both were of East European heritage, both grew up estranged from their fathers, and both attended Columbia University at the same time. It is not hard to picture them sitting next to each other in an English class discussing Scott Fitzgerald's latest novel and their dreams of following in his footsteps. What seems likely, if nothing else, is that Lewton knew of Woolrich's work, even if the decision to adapt *Black Alibi* was not his own. Siegel only mentions that the studio insisted on a name change to *The Leopard Man*. Woolrich's biographer notes that the movie rights to *Black Alibi* were sold within months of its publication or, in other words, by the summer of 1942, just after Lewton joined RKO.

Both the distinctive narrative structure and the orchestration of suspense found in *The Leopard Man* owe almost everything to the words Woolrich wrote. It is incredible to read *Black Alibi* and discover that Lewton and Tourneur's most powerful sequences, the three "night walks" ending in death, are described in detail in the novel, sometimes just as they've been shot. In fact, the moment always mentioned in descriptions of the film, Theresa Delgado's demise suggested with chilling economy by simply showing her blood trickle in underneath the door, is not the filmmakers' at all. Perhaps the ultimate example for horror aficionados of Lewton's less-is-more approach to screen terror appears exactly as Woolrich wrote it. Histories of the horror film continually honour Lewton's unit for pioneering a completely new kind of horror film: the less-is-more, psychological approach to terror. But, within *The Leopard Man*, Woolrich's writing deserves as much credit for the film's technique as Tourneur's eye and Lewton's governing hand.

Far less recognized than their invention of the subtle chiller-thriller, however, is the group's early development of horror's most famous modern subgenre, the slasher film. For the combination of Woolrich's unique narrative structure and the unit's decision to preserve it during adaptation resulted in RKO unwittingly producing a prototype for a cycle that would terrorize teens around the world some 35 years later. Many of the key ingredients are here: the repetition of stalking sequences, the killer whose identity remains hidden, the beautiful young victim (usually female), and the violent death. Significantly, the film predates by two decades Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), and Mario Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* (aka *Blood and Black Lace*, 1964)<sup>6</sup>, the examples almost every expert on the slasher film lists as the genre's forebears. Someone needs to rewrite the history books.

Because we are so used to the formula today, it is easy to miss what must have been shocking to audiences in 1943. How many people could have anticipated that the film would kill off young Theresa Delgado, after having spent time to sketch her character so sympathetically? It even tricks us into thinking she is safe when she makes it through the dark tunnel the first time, only to have her encounter the leopard on the way back. Even if they were able to recover from this terrible shock, the audience would now settle into what appears to be a traditional murder mystery. The amateur detectives, Jerry and Kiki, with the help of Dr. Galbraith, would go through the motions and solve the case. When introduced to Consuelo on the morning of her birthday, they would sense the narrative taking an odd turn, but with the time spent developing her character, it must have been stunning to see her die like Theresa. A killer who repeated his crime over and over until he was caught was a rare movie villain in 1943. The cemetery attack, minus today's slasher frame-of-reference, would be a terrifying jolt, leaving viewers wondering what they had got themselves into. Long before Hitchcock killed off Marion in *Psycho*, the Lewton team, following Cornell Woolrich's lead, set convention and audience expectation on its head in *The Leopard Man*.

It is because of this focus on the victims that the film stands out from so many of its stalk-and-slash brethren to follow. It gives us a chance to see what the slasher film might have been, had it taken a different path. We have to credit Woolrich with this approach, for it seems to have been his intention in *Black Alibi* to write a story that puts its reader in close identification with those doomed by the novel's dark menace. While the book is designed on the one hand as a very calculated exercise in tension and terror, on the other it is structured very much as a series of character sketches of each of its female victims. Lewton's faithful adaptation then presents us with a rare kind of psycho film, one that spends time and effort humanizing its victims. They are not there just to serve as objects of violence. Instead, there is time to get to know a little about each of these women: Theresa Delgado, Consuelo Contreras, and Clo-Clo. The novel, in fact, has two more: Sally O'Keefe and Marjorie King from a fourth attack left out of the film, and this last pair is the real key to Woolrich's vision.

Near the end of *Black Alibi*, Sally survives an attack by the killer but watches her friend Marjorie become his latest victim. The next day, Manning goes to her and asks her help in his plan to catch the madman. The book saves its most powerful writing for this penultimate chapter, as Sally risks her life to lure and capture the killer. "A very brave girl. A girl who has more courage than you or I have any right to expect any girl to have," as Manning describes her. Both a brilliant exercise in suspense and a moving, celebratory portrait of a woman's strength in the face of tragedy, this chapter complicates any simple accusation that the violence the story directs at its female victims is cheap and exploitative. While the bravery of Sally O'Keefe doesn't quite survive the translation to the screen, where Kiki's similar actions in the final moments get lost in the rush to tie up the storyline, the film still seems to have its heart in the right place. Unlike so many stalker films that follow it, here is a thriller that in the end is more interested in its victims as persons than it is in the psychosis of its killer, his method of murder, or his hunt and capture by the authorities.

Yet, *The Leopard Man* for all its innovation leaves me unsatisfied. I can trace this feeling to the disjuncture between the theme it wants to express and its representation of a modern serial killer. Here is where poetry and ideology inevitably entangle in a swiftly made 66-minute low-budget thriller. The Lewton team wants to convey a sense of doom and fate hanging over the town and its people, preserving the dark premise of Woolrich's novel. To do so, it must carry out a delicate dance with realism. The victims, the setting, and the killer need to be true-to-life in order to capture just the right sense of modern terror, but the film cannot address what kind of person Galbraith might really be. It reminds us that these monsters, soon called serial killers, really do exist; but the wellspring of their monstrosity is unfathomable. They are just evil, plain and simple.

In Lewton and Tourneur's *Cat People*, Dr. Louis Judd (played by Tom Conway) serves as a voice of reason and medical science brought in to cure Irena's fears that she will turn into a cat. In their first session together, he tells her that her strange beliefs are likely the result of a repressed memory from childhood, "a canker in the mind" he calls it. He exudes total confidence in his ability to cure her. Of course, things hardly go as planned, but this scene raises an important question about *The Leopard Man*: Where is Dr. Judd when we need him!? After all, despite his untimely demise at the hands of Irena at the end of the story, Lewton later revived the character for an appearance in *The Seventh Victim* when the script called for another psychiatrist. In fact, psychoanalysis was everywhere in Hollywood movies by 1943, so much so that the absence of a clinical voice has to have been a conscious decision on the part of the Lewton team<sup>7</sup>. In sequences mainly added to Woolrich's story by the filmmakers, characters instead struggle to find words and ideas to explain why a man

might commit such a crime.

Jerry: There's all sorts of men. I've met some pretty funny ones in bars and nightclubs. Galbraith: Oh, I understand what you mean. Demented men, pathological cases. But what sort of man would kill like a leopard and leave the traces of a leopard. Jerry: Crazy guy?

And in a later scene,

Jerry: You know a lot. Taken a lot of fancy college courses and that kind of stuff. If it were a man, what kind of a man would kill like that? Galbraith: All those fancy courses were about the dead, Jerry, not the living. Jerry: Alright, the dead then. In history, there must have been men like that, men with kinks in their brains. Galbraith: Yes, there have been men who killed for pleasure, strange pleasure. There was Bluebeard in France, Jack the Ripper in London. It's not uncommon. Jerry: And if there were a man like that, with a kink in his brain, running around loose. What would he be like? Galbraith: He'd be a hard man to find, particularly if he were a clever man. He'd go about his business calmly except when the fit to kill was on him.

The terrible irony is that the person taking the place of the psychoanalyst in this conversation is himself the killer. Moreover, he will later confess that he does not know why he kills, why the urge comes over him. Dr. Judd's "a canker in the mind" situated within the discourse of repressed memories and childhood trauma becomes "a kink in the brain", "strange pleasure" with no contextualization or explanation at all. A damaged human psyche with a cause and a cure becomes the modern psychopath, a terrifying sexual predator whose motives are inscrutable, and whose crimes are frighteningly unpredictable, unexplainable and therefore uncontrollable.

Why the absence of a medical opinion in the film? There are two ways to answer this. One, the killer's inexplicable urges are part of the film's theme of doomed fortune. At the same time, by effacing the real psychosexual explanation for Galbraith's murders, the narrative can sidestep the social issues raised by the psychopath in the 1940's. I will deal with these one at a time.

### **"We know little about the forces that move us" Fatalism and Doomed Fortune**

While crime, mystery and horror films were often lumped together in the 1930's and 40's, from today's perspective *The Leopard Man* looks like the first true horror/noir hybrid. Others make the case for *Cat People*, which does share some themes and stylistic elements with film noir, and of course the same production team. Yet, only *The Leopard Man* combines a crime thriller (the genre of most noir films) with so many elements of horror. Moreover, it boasts unbeatable credentials in its source material. For if ever there were crowned a "king of film noir", it would have to be Cornell Woolrich. The list of his stories and novels adapted to film, television and radio in 1940's and 1950's is something to behold. I doubt there is any other person with more fingerprints on the cycle of post-war thrillers we know today as noir. The themes and subjects of all his work (death, fate, loneliness, murder, suspense, shadows, desperate men, dangerous women, and dark streets) read like a summary of the genre.

Perhaps the defining hallmark of noir is its tone of bleak fatalism. It is through this tone, and its expression in the theme of doomed fortune, that we best see Woolrich's contribution to *The Leopard Man*. Devilishly, the film puts its theme in the mouth of its killer. As Manning expresses concern about the danger of the escaped leopard, Galbraith responds:

Don't feel so concerned Jerry...I've seen a bit of life, and I have learned one thing. We are like that ball dancing on the fountain. We know as little about the forces that move us and move the world around us as that empty ball, which lives only because the water pushes it into the air, lets it fall and catches it again. You shouldn't feel too badly about Teresa Delgado.

The same sentiment is repeated at the film's conclusion by Manning himself. In between, we see three women die, a respected member of the community revealed as a serial killer, and a young man imprisoned for his murder. Why do these things happen? If we look to the pattern of the murders, we sense that some unspeakable force hangs over the entire town, orchestrating events.

The dancer Clo-Clo is the first character introduced to us in the film. We hear her castanets, a motif that runs throughout the film, and we see them provoke an angry reaction from her rival, Kiki. From this point on until she meets her end, Clo-Clo will touch the lives of each of the characters in the film, carrying doom to all who cross her path. Her actions set the leopard loose in the first place, as she frightens it off Kiki's leash. She greets Theresa on the street just before the girl leaves for the store. She has an encounter with the Contreras family's servant girl on the day Consuelo dies. The film uses Clo-Clo narratively to connect all the victims and their stories but she also seems to curse them by her presence. Thematically, she is a doomed character, as her friend the fortune teller knows full well, and she brings misfortune to all those who encounter her. But why Clo-Clo? She is actually a very likable and positive character. We must remember Galbraith's lines: "We know little about the forces that move the world around us". It is not our place to ask why, and the answers are not available to us. The more innocent the victim, the more powerful the theme of doomed fortune becomes. Throughout this town, forces are moving that appear on the surface to be mere chance. All of the deaths turn on this element of chance. Martha Nochimson's recent analysis suggesting an economic connection in the deaths contains a mistaken impression of key details.<sup>8</sup> While her mother forces Theresa to go to the store for cornmeal, she goes all the way across town, and into the leopard's path, for no reason other than bad luck. Arriving too late at the nearby store, the owner refuses to re-open for her. This leads to her terrifying walk across the arroyo and under the bridge to find another store that will still be open. Consuelo's story is the same. She is not in the cemetery to hide her lower-class boyfriend from her family (as Nochimson claims). Her mother knows that she is going to see him. She simply misses meeting Raoul by mere moments. Another case of unlucky timing. ("Time is strange. A moment can be as short as a breath or as long as eternity", the gatekeeper tells her as she enters the cemetery). We later learn that Galbraith just happened to be walking by that night and heard her cries for help. Finally, Clo-Clo completes the pattern. What at first seems like a good break, the chance encounter with the man at the nightclub, and his gift of \$100, turns bad when she loses it by accident on the way home and must go back out into the night to retrieve it. This pattern of bad breaks, bad timing, and chance encounters may seem like little more than coincidence or lazy screenwriting, but the film's status as noir compels us to take the theme of doomed fortune seriously.

It is important to see that the use of fate in *The Leopard Man* is a legitimate dramatic device,

based on a longstanding moral conception of human and divine justice. Personified as a feminine deity in late Roman culture, the mysterious ways of Lady Fortune, remained a central concern of philosophy, literature, and visual art throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With her wheel, upon which the rich and powerful balanced on top and the downtrodden dwelled below, she reminded all of society that both happiness and sadness were only temporary. At her whim, a gentle spin sent those on top crashing down, exchanging places suddenly with the poor and powerless. Theologians debated her nature. Church fathers agonized over the persistence of her cult following. Dante gave her a special place in the heavens in the *Inferno*, while Calvin dismissed her as a misunderstanding of Divine Providence. She appeared throughout Elizabethan and Baroque tragedy, and remained an influence into the 19th century. Finding a traditional theme like this in a low-budget horror film might seem like a stretch under any other circumstance, but we are dealing with Val Lewton here.

Of course, the idea of Fortune blindly controlling our fate does not sit well in modern times. It is a deeply religious conception of life, far out of step with our whole worldview today. We believe strongly that each individual makes his or her own destiny. Choice, responsibility, material cause and effect: the modern world operates, at least ideally, with transparency. In a narrative, an appeal to a predestined order is easily misunderstood as a cheap means of explaining away unexpected events, or as a way to give a “thin nasty-minded story” an illusion of depth. In this case, however, the sense of tragedy is genuine. It comes directly from Woolrich’s universe. Nobody had a darker sensibility and a more fatalistic view of existence than Cornell Woolrich. Francis Nevins, his biographer, returns repeatedly to a moment in the author’s youth that crystallizes his outlook. In Woolrich’s own words, it went like this: “One night when I was eleven and, huddling over my own knees, looked up at the low-hanging stars of the Valley of Anahuac, and knew I would surely die finally, or something worse.”<sup>9</sup> The sadness and the darkness of these words haunt every sentence he ever wrote, and they cast a long shadow over the world of *The Leopard Man* as well.

In the end, however, by offering fate as an explanation for the events of the film, including the psyche of the killer, the film avoids addressing the social psychology of violent crime and sexual predators. Although it has no obligation to do so, its subject and its representations implicate it in the discourse anyway. I want to turn, finally, to a look at gender and ideology, and the historical context of the psychopath in American society.

**“What sort of man would kill like a leopard?” The Sexual Psychopath in the 1940s** The *Leopard Man* is the first realistic depiction of a serial killer in American cinema. Today, serial killers are everywhere, from box office hits to academy awards ceremonies, network television series, and best selling books of fiction and non-fiction. In 1940, very little fiction attempted his representation. Leopard’s only predecessors are Fritz Lang’s German masterpiece *M* (1930) and Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) which was actually released just months before *Leopard*. I want to briefly compare those films’ depiction of the killer along with the differences between Woolrich’s and Lewton’s, then I will look more closely at how Galbriath operates within *The Leopard Man*’s narrative. First, a bit of history. Estelle Freedman reminds us that beginning in the late 1930s a “sex crime panic” swept America. In 1935, the first of many government commissions formed to investigate the situation. In the media, more and more coverage of attacks on women and children appeared. So much so that “in 1937 the *New York Times* itself created a new index category

‘Sex Crimes’ to encompass the 143 articles it published on the subject that year.”<sup>10</sup> At this time, Woolrich was at the peak of his power and success as a short story writer for the detective and thriller magazines. In 1939, he wrote *The Street of Jungle Death*, a story about a series of murders in Los Angeles that would become the basis of *Black Alibi*. The tale’s psychopath, and his descendants in the novel and screen versions, is very much the product of this historical moment. One question that emerges from the study of this era—and it is a difficult one to answer with any certainty—is how much of the public fear was socially constructed and how much of it was a reaction to a genuine threat. Certainly, one can list a whole string of macabre and sensational cases from Jack the Ripper (1888) and Chicago’s H.H. Holmes (1895) to the Vampire of Düsseldorf, Peter Kurten (1930), who may have inspired Fritz Lang’s *M*, and the unsolved Cleveland Torso Murders (1937). Freedman, however, emphasizes the social purpose served by the sex crime panic. She suggests that the exaggerated threat of the prowling urban psychopath helped society deal with “a complex redefinition of sexual boundaries in modern America.”

For a number of years, especially since the end of the First World War, the Victorian ideal of female purity had been eroding. Women who were once desexualized and confined to the domestic sphere were now circulating in the public spaces of the modern city: working, playing, dressing in comparatively revealing modern fashions, and generally rewriting what it meant to be a woman. At the same time, the meaning of manhood was undergoing its own transformations. The 19th century’s emphasis on character, when interior values of honesty, integrity, and self-made success were most important, had begun to shift to an emphasis on appearance and attitude.<sup>11</sup> The term “hard-boiled”, used to describe a certain kind of tough male detective emerged at this time (and would be a key ingredient in film noir). In these ways, American society adjusted its understanding of female and male sex roles and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. In the 1930’s, the onset of the Great Depression added another factor, as many men found themselves out of work, unable to be the breadwinner for their family. It is in this context that the psychopath, previously a little-used clinical term came to be associated with a dangerous, specifically male, sexual deviant.

The boundaries drawn by the new category of “sexual psychopath” were used to regulate the definition of “normal” masculinity in a time of upheaval and crisis. They positioned the male subject according to his perceived gender traits: a sex fiend was a man with too much masculinity, and a homosexual was a man with not enough. The associated moral panic then presented homosexuals as dangers to children while the sex fiend preyed on women alone or unaccompanied in the city. Freedman interprets these warnings in the context of the changing sex roles during the period. In this way, public fear was as much about the control of women as it was about any real threat to them. Society told women that they were at risk of attack if they are out alone in public. At the same time, it warned of the constant peril to their children of attack and/or recruitment by homosexuals. Naturally, safety was best achieved if women remained at home, supervised the kids, and accepted their domestic role rather than continue their disruptive breach of the public sphere.

As an occasional gruesome news story and as a general social panic, the phenomenon of the violent sex predator undoubtedly appealed to Cornell Woolrich’s dark imagination. How would he integrate this into his world of noir fiction? In *Black Alibi*, with its metaphysical approach to evil, we never learn anything about the killer’s life, background, motives or actions. He just appears, kills and sinks back into the night, until the final chapter reveals his identity. He turns out to be the Chief of Police, a character Manning interacted with throughout the story and who appeared completely normal all along. The Lewton unit’s

adaptation chooses to flesh out the killer's character some more. Galbraith is also an esteemed member of his community, a former professor, now the museum curator. This aspect of their characters is worth noting. In both *M* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, the murderer was a more typical outsider to the community.<sup>12</sup> By bringing the killer closer to home, the film forces us to rethink standard histories. Freedman, for example, leaves us with the impression that it would not be possible for audiences in the 1940s to imagine a sexual psychopath as we see him today, as someone seemingly very normal, the so-called "guy next door". This frightening picture is generally thought to have emerged later.<sup>13</sup> But here, the Lewton approach to everyday horror, mixed with Woolrich's noir sensibility, leads the film in a startling direction. At a time when America was told to direct their fear at outsiders, transients, and "perverts", *The Leopard Man* warns that sexual psychopaths could be just about anyone around you.

What the film does not address is why a man like Galbraith does what he does; or, more accurately, I would suggest that it simply cannot address this. For, the very ideological apparatus that lay behind the sex crime panic also animates the generic codes of the horror film's production and reception, especially in this classical period. An answer to why men attack women and the reasons behind the "sexual psychopath scare" of the 1940's are both found at the intersections of gender, power, and fear. A horror film like *The Leopard Man* can't directly address why psychos kill because, as a horror film, it is constructed upon the very same ideology of gender that must be questioned to find the answer. Only a deconstructive horror film could perform this analysis, and in the genre's classical period this can not be expected. As Rhona Berenstein has shown, the standard gender dynamics in the reception of classical horror rely on the activation of female viewers' fear, reflected on screen by the victim's scream, and a corresponding notion of masculinity, asserted by the male viewers' refusal to show the same fear, and by comforting and "protecting" the woman.<sup>14</sup> In other words, when most men and women went to horror movies, the girls would act scared and they guys would act like they weren't, and put their arm around them. That this was how you were supposed to react was reinforced in the film's publicity material, critical reviews, and on the screen itself. This performance of gender, contrasting fear with courage, was at the heart of the popular reception of the horror film in its classical period, and *The Leopard Man*, for all its innovations, remains classical in this regard.

The film establishes its motif of the woman's scream in the opening scene. Manning enters Kiki's dressing room with the leopard on its leash. The cigarette girl and Kiki each let out a scream and Kiki even climbs onto a chair in a classic display of fear. Manning, in turn, reassures her that the cat is not harmful and talks her into using it in her act. In its first five minutes, the film has economically established classical horror's traditional gender roles: women show fear; men act cool and reassure them that they are safe. Later, the design of each of the three "night walks" is punctuated by a look of fear, a scream, and a death. As Berenstein points out, these two elements, the woman's scream and her look of fear at an off-screen terror, were staples of the horror film from its earliest years. The Lewton team is employing an easily identifiable generic signifier here and the way it is implicated in Galbraith's madness invites an ideological reading of the film's killer. For this, a closer look at Galbraith's character is needed.

Our first opportunity to learn about him is in the nightclub the day after the Delgado attack. Jerry invites Kiki to come along for a drink with Galbraith before she goes on stage. In what is otherwise a rather casual encounter, our killer's body language and speech suggest he feels uncomfortable around women. He fiddles with his pipe and makes cryptic comments.

He seems in awe of Kiki's modest celebrity. The best line in this scene is easily misunderstood as poor writing when it is actually very calculated. As Kiki expresses concern about a poor reception from the crowd, Galbraith tells her, "I'm sure if you are as talented as you are beautiful, Ms. Walker, you'll have nothing to worry about." She politely thanks him but you can almost sense her and Manning giggling under their breath. Galbraith simply does not know how to talk to women. Instead, he spouts lines from a romance novel. With claims that James Bell does not make a very convincing serial killer, I disagree completely. In this scene, the actor conveys just the right mix awkwardness, harmlessness and mystery, anticipating portrayals like Anthony Perkins's Norman Bates and Robert Deniro's Travis Bickle that will follow it.

To work, however, this scene needs a counterpart later in the film. It is important that we see Galbraith speak to men with confidence and control because it will help emphasize his difficulty relating specifically to women. The scene in which Manning and Charlie How-Come, the naïve owner of the escaped leopard, visit Galbraith at the museum does just this. Manning begins by running his theory of a human killer past the professor. Their discussion, at first friendly, begins to take on a hint of menace, even cruelty. We can see him take pleasure in his power and authority over both men, control which derives principally from the confident way he uses words. In contrast to the scene with Kiki, Galbraith's command of language here allows him to both put Manning off his trail and even convince the two that Charlie may have committed the murders while he was drunk! He insists he's just playing a game of whodunit, but we get to see here another side of our killer. Strong and confident in his own element, he only loses his power in the presence of a beautiful or desirable woman. One way of understanding sexual murderers from Jack the Ripper to Ted Bundy and Galbraith in *The Leopard Man* is that they act out violently at women as a way of dealing with their fear or frustration when faced with female sexuality. If they are not confident that they measure up to society's definition of legitimate masculinity, female sexuality can seem to hold power over them. An inability to relate to women in an acceptable and effective manner, and the loss of power that seems to go with it, can suggest to them that to act out violently will put sexuality back on their terrain, back in their control. This is what is playing itself out in *The Leopard Man*. A final contrast between scenes drives this point home.

Finally, on the last night of Clo-Clo's life, she goes to the nightclub and meets an older gentleman (named Brunton in the film's screenplay and in the novel). He buys her a drink and the ensuing scene between them is a wonderful game of cat-and-mouse as the two flirt and laugh. The gentleman, who never appears again, exists on the narrative level simply to provide Clo-Clo with the \$100 bill she will lose on her way home. Venturing back out into the night to retrieve it will cost her her life. Yet, this scene also echoes the one between Kiki and Galbraith mentioned above. Brunton represents a striking contrast to the tongue-tied killer in the way he relates to women. Here is a man who is not threatened or intimidated by the beautiful Clo-Clo's sexuality. He charms her, makes her laugh and shows an interest in her beyond her looks. She in turn seems genuinely attracted by his approach. We are left with a picture of positive male-female relations, a perfect date. Appropriately, the scene is the only light moment in the entire film. If only Galbraith could act this way with Kiki, he might not find himself stammering a confession in these final words – words that vividly tie fear to notions of gender and power.

Galbraith: I didn't wanna kill but I had to. I heard the little girl talking to the man in the cemetery. When he went away, I thought I was gonna help her get over the wall. I can't remember. I looked down. In the darkness, I saw her white face, the eyes full of fear. Fear,

that was it. The little frail body, soft skin, and then – she screamed.

He may not understand why he is attracted to the sight of fear in a woman's eyes and the sound of her scream but, surely, we can.

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## Notes

1 Cornell Woolrich. *Black Alibi*. New York: Ballantyne Books, 1982. This is the most recent paperback edition. The original hardcover was published by Simon & Schuster in April, 1942. (return)

2 Chris Fujiwara. *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*. Jefferson, N.C./London: McFarland, 1998. (return)

3 This anecdote appears in Manny Farber's tribute to Lewton upon the producer's death. See Manny Farber. "Val Lewton and the School of Shudders" in Roy Huss and T.J. Ross eds., *Focus on the Horror Film*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972. (return)

4 Kingly Books republished *No Bed of Her Own* in 2006. (return)

5 See Joel E. Seigel. *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1972, and Edmund G. Bansak. *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 1995. (return)

6 Oddly enough, a young Bava was the director of photography on one of Tourneur's last features, *La Battaglia di maratona* (1959). Might the two have discussed *The Leopard Man* on the set five years before Bava invented the Italian slasher genre, the giallo? (return)

7 On the portrayal of psychoanalysts in cinema, see Krin Gabbard and Glen O. Gabbard. *Psychiatry and the Cinema*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. (return)

8 Martha Nochimson. "Val Lewton at RKO: The Social Dimensions of Horror". *Cineaste*. Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 2006), pp 9-17. (return)

9 Francis M. Nevins, Jr. *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, and Then You Die*. New York: The Mysterious Press, 1988, pp. 8. (return)

10 Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960". *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No.1 (Jun., 1987), pp. 83. (return)

11 See, for example, Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950*. Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press, 2000. (return)

12 Although in *Shadow*, Hitchcock blurs this distinction by making him a member of the extended family. (return)

13 The “guy next door” phenomenon is also known as the “mask of sanity”. This term comes from a pioneering work of psychiatry published in 1940 by Dr. Henry Cleckly. The notion, thus, was just emerging but far from accepted at this time. See <http://www.cassiopea.com/cassiopea/psychopath.htm> (return)

14 Rhona J. Berenstein. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Berenstein goes on to argue that the actual psychology of reception is much less straightforward than this, but the basic assumption, embedded in the films, their publicity, and their critical reception, holds true. (return)