

I Walked with a Zombie: Colonialism and Intertextuality*

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Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

This article is about some uses of intertextuality between cinema and literature. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) is the second of nine films produced by Val Lewton that shaped the horror genre and had a lasting influence on the language of cinema. Reframing the classic Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* in a Caribbean setting, the film outlines the fault-lines of the European colonial enterprise long before the advent of postcolonial studies. Jean Rhys's partly autobiographical novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) rewrites *Jane Eyre* in a feminist and postcolonial perspective. In Manuel Puig's novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, cinema and films, including *I Walked with a Zombie*, are the intertextual means to the creation of literary character and the figure of a love that has no name.

Este artículo trata de algunos usos de la intertextualidad entre el cine y la literatura. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) es la segunda de las nueve películas producidas por Val Lewton que dieron forma al género de terror y tuvieron una influencia duradera en el lenguaje cinematográfico. La película, que replantea la clásica novela victoriana *Jane Eyre* en un escenario caribeño, esboza las fallas de la empresa colonial europea mucho antes de la llegada de los estudios postcoloniales. La novela parcialmente autobiográfica de Jean Rhys, *Ancho mar de los Sargazos* (1966), reescribe *Jane Eyre* desde una perspectiva feminista y poscolonial. En la novela de Manuel Puig *El beso de la mujer araña*, el cine y las películas, incluida *I Walked with a Zombie*, son el medio intertextual para la creación del personaje literario y la figura de un amor que no tiene nombre.

Cet article traite de certaines utilisations de l'intertextualité entre le cinéma et la littérature. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) est le deuxième des neuf films produits par Val Lewton qui ont façonné le genre de l'horreur et exercé une influence dur-

able sur le langage cinématographique. En recadrant le roman classique victorien *Jane Eyre* dans un cadre caribéen, le film met en évidence les failles de l'entreprise coloniale européenne bien avant l'avènement des études postcoloniales. Le roman en partie autobiographique de Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), réécrit *Jane Eyre* dans une perspective féministe et postcoloniale. Dans le roman *El beso de la mujer araña* de Manuel Puig, le cinéma et les films, dont *I Walked with a Zombie*, sont les moyens intertextuels de la création du personnage littéraire et de la figure d'un amour qui n'a pas de nom.

Questo articolo tratta di alcuni usi dell'intertestualità tra cinema e letteratura. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) è il secondo dei nove film prodotti da Val Lewton che hanno dato forma al genere horror e hanno avuto un'influenza duratura sul linguaggio cinematografico. Riformulando il classico romanzo vittoriano *Jane Eyre* in un'ambientazione caraibica, il film delinea i limiti dell'impresa coloniale europea molto prima dell'avvento degli studi postcoloniales. Il romanzo parzialmente autobiografico di Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) riscrive *Jane Eyre* in una prospettiva femminista e postcoloniale. Nel romanzo *El beso de la mujer araña* di Manuel Puig, il cinema e i film, tra cui *I Walked with a Zombie*, sono il mezzo intertestuale per la creazione del personaggio letterario e la figura di un amore che non ha nome.

Key words / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, Manuel Puig, *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur, Jean Rhys, *Ancho mar de los Sargazos*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña*.

Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña*.

Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña*.

It is well known to students of literature that Jean Rhys's experimental novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) rewrites Charlotte Brontë's Victorian classic *Jane Eyre* (1947) in a feminist and postcolonial perspective, retelling the story from the point of view of Rochester's first wife, a mad woman imprisoned in his castle. What is less known, even to students of cinema, is that a rather obscure B-movie, made in Hollywood in 1943, reframes the Jane Eyre story as a horror film set in the colonial Caribbean.

Cinema, unlike writing, is a collective art: no single individual is ever solely responsible for the outcome of a filmmaking product, although the director is typically credited with its success. The technical apparatus is essential to cinema as art, communication or entertainment because it is the means by which the language of cinema, its medium of expression, is elaborated over time; on that language is based the form of expression of each single film. *I Walked with a Zombie* is the second of nine films that shaped the horror genre and had a lasting influence on the language of cinema by virtue of their technical innovations in the areas of sound and lighting.¹ Their singularity is owed in part to the circumstances of their making, as well as to the talent and vision of their producer, Val Lewton.²

Contracted by Selznick to produce a series of B-movies (low-budget films produced quickly, with relatively unknown actors, intended for large audiences and high box-office results), Lewton had to create stories suitable to the titles assigned by the Studio, which clearly placed the films within the popular horror genre; titles such as *Cat People*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, *The Body-Snatcher*, *The*

Seventh Victim, *Ghost Ship*, and so on. That he did succeed in producing nine serious, intriguing, beautiful, and financially successful films in spite of those titles, in less than 10 years and at a very low cost, was an accomplishment for which his name is highlighted in film history, despite his early death at age 46. He gathered together a group of promising actors and technical people to form a collaborative filmmaking team in which the actors played roles in several of the films and the editor of one film could be the director of another.³

The Lewton Horror Unit, as the team was known at RKO, was enthusiastically dedicated to innovation and experimentation, especially in the area of sound. They devised the first directional microphones (earlier only one microphone covered an entire scene) and improved noise-reduction systems, which allowed for the spatialization of voices and sound effects, so that the voices of people who appear in the forefront of the screen are heard by the audience as if they were close, while background sounds, diegetically coming from far away, are heard as more distant.⁴ Another innovation was dubbing, or re-recording dialogue in post-production, which was famously used in Italian cinema but only later became standard practice in Hollywood.

Their sonic experimentation was favored by the horror genre, which relies on sound for its effects, and in fact had begun to develop with the first wave of horror movies, or monster movies (e.g., *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *King Kong*) in the first years of sound cinema (1930-1936). But the Lewton horror films are significantly different from

¹ *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), produced by Val Lewton, directed by Jacques Tourneur, cinematography by J. Roy Hunt, music by Roy Webb, editing by Mark Robson, screenplay by Ardel Wray from an original story by Inez Wallace.

² Like many working in Hollywood, Val Lewton was an immigrant. Born in Yalta as Vladimir Ivanovich Leventon (1904-1951), of a recently converted Jewish family, he emigrated to New York as a child of 5 with his mother, Nina Leventon. Her sister, Alla Nazimova, was a famous Broadway actress later to become a film actress and producer in Hollywood; to film spectators, Nazimova is best known for her silent film *Salome* (1923), based on the play by Oscar Wilde. Lewton grew up, attended college and began his writing career in New York, changing his name to fit his profession. At age 30, as a highly educated but moderately successful writer of pulp fiction, he moved to Hollywood to write a screen adaptation of Gogol's *Taras Bulba* for David O. Selznick of RKO, where he also worked on films such as *Anna Karenina*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Rebecca*.

³ To direct *I Walked with a Zombie* and *Cat People*, perhaps the two best known of the nine films, as well as *The Leopard Man*, Lewton hired Jacques Tourneur, assigning the cinematography of *Cat People* to Nicholas Musuraca; he hired Robert Wise, who had been senior editor of Welles's *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, to direct *The Curse of the Cat People* and *The Body Snatcher*; Mark Robson, who had been assistant editor to Wise in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, was the editor of *Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1942), and then directed four of the Lewton films, *The 7th Victim* (1943), *Ghost Ship* (1943), *Isle of the Dead* (1945), and *Bedlam* (1946); Simone Simon, the lead actor in *Cat People*, played a very different role in the «sequel» *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944); Tom Conway, who played the Rochester character in *I Walked with a Zombie* also played the character of the psychiatrist in *Cat People* and in *The 7th Victim*.

⁴ Two examples from *I Walked with a Zombie*: when the nurse Betsy and Wesley are at the dinner table and hear the sound of drums coming from the natives compound; or when Betsy on the ship is saying how beautiful everything is, the sailors' singing is heard in the background as if we were in Betsy's place. This would be expected in a film today but was quite new in 1943.

their predecessors not only technically, in the medium of expression, but also in content; they effectively redesigned the horror genre both formally and thematically.

Formally, they supplied cinematic language with a more flexible articulation of images and sound, in particular the possibility of desynchronizing and disjoining them. The dark lighting of exteriors and interiors, and the high black/white contrast in the images, which created an atmosphere of ambiguity, premonition, and invisible threat, influenced filmmaking long after the decade of the 1940s and well beyond the horror genre, as they were taken up in mainstream genres such as the suspense thriller and what became known as film noir.⁵ Unlike suspense, however, where the danger awaiting the characters is known or can be imagined, horror in the Lewton films is based on the sense of an impending but unknown threat;⁶ it engages sensory perception more than the intellect, producing anxiety rather than fear.

Thematically, Lewton's horror films are about the presence in human life of an otherness or an alterity that is not an emanation of Evil or preternatural powers, as in the earlier horror films and many recent ones, but comes from a place of darkness within the human. The woman in *Cat People*, who may transform into a panther under the sway of sexual emotions, and the seemingly cataleptic woman in *I Walked with a Zombie*, who does not bleed but cries in the night, are liminal figures – human and animal, living and dead. His characters live in a dark zone between body and soul, sensation and intellect, reason and faith. As Martin Scorsese says in the documentary he produced in homage to *Val Lewton*: «he was able to speak from a place of darkness during the dark times [the second World War and the Holocaust], to give presence to loss and oblivion.»⁷

⁵ E.g., the window blinds in Betsy's bedroom and elsewhere in the Hollands' home are a visual detail subsequently associated with film noir. After *Cat People*, Jacques Tourneur and Nicholas Musuraca worked together again as director and cinematographer of the mainstream noir *Out of the Past* (1947), starring Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, and Kirk Douglas.

⁶ E.g., the approaching sound of (Carrefour's) shuffling feet even before its source becomes visible.

⁷ *Val Lewton: The Man in the Shadows*, written and directed by Kent Jones, produced and narrated by Martin Scorsese for Turner Classic Movies and Turner Entertainment Co. (2008).

Lewton supervised the work of his team in every detail, edited or revised all the scripts, though always uncredited, and effectively «pre-directed his pictures on paper» (Scorsese, *ibid.*). The first of the nine films, *Cat People* (1942), was actually based on one of Lewton's short stories;⁸ in planning the second film, *I Walked with a Zombie*, Lewton instructed the credited script writer to gather information on Haitian voodoo and structure it using the storyline of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. As a result, the final product, the film, is not an adaptation of the novel as is the classic film *Jane Eyre*, starring Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles;⁹ *I Walked with a Zombie* is a subtle work of filmic intertextuality that testifies to Lewton's remarkable historical and transnational sensibility.

Intertextuality: Cinema and Literature

As its title announces, *I Walked with a Zombie* is framed in voice-over; the story is told in the first person by a young Canadian woman, Betsy Connell (Frances Dee), who takes a job as a nurse in a small island of the West Indies in the Caribbean Sea, an island by the fictional name of St. Sebastian. The narrative is set in an exotic, far-away place but the narrated events take place in the present, i.e., are contemporary with the audiences watching the film in the early 1940s. Betsy's patient is Jessica (Christine Gordon), the wife of the rich sugar plantation owner Paul Holland (Tom Conway). The plantation's name is Fort Holland, indicating its colonial origin or provenance. Jessica's illness is strange: she walks and breathes but does not speak or feel anything, as if she were in a permanent state of trance. Surprisingly, the nurse Betsy hears her cry in the night from a high tower adjacent to the family home, but apparently nothing can be done to cure Jessica. When, eventually, Betsy and Paul Holland fall in love, there is no possibility of marriage for them because Paul's wife is physically alive.

⁸ Val Lewton's «The Bagheeta» was published in the July 1930 issue of *Weird Tales Magazine*.

⁹ *Jane Eyre* (1944) was directed by Robert Stevenson for 20th Century Fox.

The similarity of this storyline to that of Brontë's novel, which is also told in the first person by its female protagonist, the young governess Jane Eyre, is easily recognizable. But if the intertextual references are many, there are also significant differences. With regard to the plot, the character corresponding to Paul Holland is Edward Rochester; his wife, the character corresponding to Jessica, is a mad woman imprisoned in Rochester's Thornfield castle; no one knows of her existence except Rochester himself and her nurse Grace Poole, who is effectively her guard. Jane Eyre, too, like Betsy, hears cries in the night coming from the attic but it is only much later, at a climactic moment in the novel, that she – and the reader – will discover who the mysterious woman in the attic is and why Jane and Rochester may not be married. In the film, on the other hand, Betsy and all the inhabitants of the island know that Jessica is the wife of Paul Holland; moreover, a local folksong, the «Fort Holland» calypso (composed for the film and sung on camera by Sir Lancelot), tells of her love affair with Paul's half-brother, Wesley Rand (James Ellison).¹⁰ Jessica's mystery is not her identity but the strange nature of her illness, for which two conflicting explanations are given early in the film.

Paul says, «my wife is a mental case,» suggesting some form of madness. Similarly, in the novel, Edward Rochester says he married his wife in the West Indies where her family kept from him the fact that she was already mad like her mother, which is to say that her madness was hereditary and therefore, according to common beliefs at the time, incurable. In the film, however, another, and more shocking, explanation is given by Wesley Rand, who is still in love with Jessica and drinks too much: he insists that she is a living dead, or what the natives call a *zombie*. Dr. Maxwell (James Bell) jokes about Jessica, «she makes a beautiful zombie,» but his diagnosis is in keeping with Western medicine: he explains that, due to a tropical fever, portions of Jessica's spinal cord were

¹⁰ Sir Lancelot is the stage name of the Trinidad-born musician, composer and singer who introduced and made famous in the Americas the West African rhythm known as *calypso* during the 1940s and 1950s. He subsequently made many other film appearances, of which two in other Lewton films. The calypso he composed for *I Walked with a Zombie* is also known as «Shame and Scandal.»

burnt and that's why she has no feeling or sensations in her body. This is the official version given to Betsy – and the viewers – by the doctor and by Paul and Wesley's mother, Mrs. Rand (Edith Barrett), at first, although later she will affirm Wesley's belief: Jessica is a zombie.

What is a zombie? In the films of the 30s and 40s, the zombie is a figure of the Haitian voodoo, the Caribbean religion centered in Haiti: a zombie is a dead body reanimated, a person who died but was brought back by the voodoo spirits to a kind of living death in order to perform services and tasks at the command of the voodoo priest. The character of Carrefour (Darby Jones), who stands at the crossroad to protect the entrance to the voodoo temple, is the classic representation of the zombie in the films of this period. (His name, *Carrefour*, means «crossroad» in French as French is the ground language of the Haitian *patois*.)

Thinking that Paul is still in love with his wife, Betsy decides to do whatever it takes to bring Jessica back to life and restore her to him. First, she and the doctor convince Paul to let them try a dangerous medical treatment, an insulin shock, which has no effect whatsoever on Jessica. Then, when the native housemaid Alma (Teresa Harris) tells her about the «better doctors» at the Hounfort, meaning the voodoo healers/priests at the temple, Betsy resorts to taking Jessica there during a voodoo ceremony. The Hounfort (or Houn fort, abode of the voodoo spirits, the houn) is the natives' «home» as opposed to Fort Holland, which belongs to the white colonials. With Alma's help, the two women walk through a jungle of sugar cane, hanging dead animals, human skulls, and other scary signs of warning until they reach the crossroad leading to the temple, where Carrefour stands on guard. They are allowed to pass by showing the voodoo patches provided by Alma and reach the place of worship where natives are singing and dancing to the sound of drums and falling into trance. During this long, climactic sequence, the leader of the ceremony (the houngan) wounds Jessica ritually with his saber, and Jessica does not bleed. This confirms to the natives that she is a zombie: she belongs to them, and they want her back.

For the moment the two white women are allowed to return to Fort Holland on the authority of Mrs. Rand, who turns out to be the voodoo healer/priest, but Carrefour will be sent for Jessica later. The houngan makes a voodoo doll for Jessica, who is thus compelled to answer the voodoo call. Betsy and Paul try to stop her by locking the gate but soon Jessica returns to stand by the closed gate. This time Wesley intervenes. He believes that Jessica is dead, if a living dead, and wants her to be in peace, that is, completely dead. He opens the gate for her and, before Carrefour can reach her, stabs her in the heart with one of the arrows stuck in the statue of the old St. Sebastian standing at the entrance of Fort Holland. The wooden statue, as Paul explained to Betsy early in the film, was the figurehead on the ship that brought the slaves to Fort Holland.

This is a tidy narrative solution to fit the *Jane Eyre* story line, as it makes possible the marriage of Paul and Betsy. When you think about it, however, this plot resolution is too tidy, or rather, lopsided: on the one hand, it resembles the traditional way to kill a vampire and is thus in line with the horror movie genre; but on the other hand, the zombie is not a vampire. How could Lewton allow such an inconclusive conclusion of the film? In the first place, this is no longer the story of *Jane Eyre*, and the film's ending marks precisely one of its main divergences from the novel, as Betsy and Paul are left on the sidelines. Secondly, the insistent presence in the film of the St. Sebastian statue suggests that the ending is symbolic: Jessica's manner of death is meant to remind the viewers of the slave ship and all the people killed in it during the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, the figure of the zombie initially referred back to that history.

Zombies

This being a horror movie, the presence of zombies is hardly surprising nowadays, but anyone familiar only with the zombies of recent horror movies, may be surprised nonetheless. Modern zombies are an entirely new version of the classic zombie. Starting with

George Romero's saga from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead*, and so forth, all the way to his *Survival of the Dead* of 2009 and beyond, zombies are figures of an entirely different imaginary, which is dominant in contemporary popular culture. The Argentine ethnographer Gustavo Blázquez points out that

the zombies of today in TV series like the North American *Walking Dead* and the British *Dead Set* and the post-zombies of *In the Flesh*, produced by BBC, are heirs to [Romero's] tradition. Their relation to magic, voodoo, Haiti, the Caribbean and the African slaves have disappeared. It is no longer a matter of subjects who lost their will but of dead who, for some reason, massively come back to life and attack the living. The zombie hordes are not under the control of capitalist businessmen [as were the plantation slaves]. Now they are automata of destruction, voracious and embodied consumption of human flesh, most specifically brains.¹¹

The classic figure of the zombie that became popular after Lewton's horror film and partly owing to its success, was an indirect and typically racist representation of the African people enslaved and taken to work in the colonial territories of Spain, Portugal, England, France and The Netherlands on the American continent, especially the Caribbean. The transatlantic slave trade and the related legal institution of slavery lasted from the late 1400s to the late 1800s – no less than four centuries.

Before *I Walked with a Zombie*, the figure had appeared in only one film, *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin and independently produced by his brother Edward in 1932.¹² Lewton's film refers to it directly or, better said, intertextually. By that I mean that a text (any text – a novel, a poem, a play or a film) that refers or alludes to other works intentionally, in more or less explicit ways, is intended to resonate with those cultural or artistic artifacts and to invite comparison and critical reflection, reflection that may be historical, aesthetic, political, or all of them.

¹¹ Gustavo Blázquez, «En carne viva. Algunas notas sobre zombis», *Docta-Revista de Psicoanálisis* (Córdoba, Argentina), Año 12, Nro. 10, Primavera de 2014. My translation.

¹² An obscure sequel set in Cambodia, *Revolt of the Zombies*, is reported to have been made in 1936.

White Zombie is also set in a Caribbean island, implicitly Haiti. It opens with two young white Americans, a bank clerk and his fiancé Madeleine, being taken by carriage to the house of a Mr. Beaumont, a white French colonial, who had met the couple on the ship and invited them to come and celebrate their wedding in his mansion. On the way to the mansion, the carriage with the newly arrived stops because a group of black natives with drums and ritual songs are in the process of burying a cadaver in the middle of the road. The black coachman provides the terse information that the dead are unburied and made to work at night in the sugar mills. Then he spots a group of strange characters stiffly walking behind a diabolic-looking man (played by Bela Lugosi) who stops at the carriage, glares at the girl, and steals her scarf. The terrified coachman only manages to say, «Dead bodies. Zombies. Living Dead» and drives away. This is the scene referred to, or «cited», in Lewton's film, as I will point out, with significant differences.

The Bela Lugosi character is a white voodoo master by the name of Murder Legendre.¹³ He is the owner of the sugar mill as well as the richest man on the island. By his magic powers and potions he takes control of people's will and turns them into zombies, thus avenging himself of his enemies and obtaining possession of anything he wants. The awkward men walking behind him are his personal zombie body guard, white men who were his former enemies. In the present instance, what Legendre covets is the girl Madeleine. He steals her scarf so he can make a voodoo doll for her, draw her to his castle and take possession of her; once turned into a zombie she becomes his sexual slave. The title *White Zombie* clearly refers to her, but its singular form further suggests an exception, since the zombies we are shown working as slaves in the sugar mill are all African men. In other words, if the film is about only one *white zombie*, then the white men of Legendre's body guard do not count as zombies, and the exception is Madeleine, or rather her status as sexual slave.

¹³ Bela Lugosi played the title role in the original *Dracula*, directed by Tod Browning for Universal Pictures in 1931.

In sexualizing the figure of the zombie, the film's title aims to sensationalize the white woman as sexual object. Watching the film today, however, anyone with even minimal knowledge of historical fact will remark the unintended irony of the film's title: insofar as Madeleine, although white, is a sexual slave, she occupies the position of black women slaves who were used sexually by their white owners. Because the children born of such unions, under the institution of slavery, were also slaves, both men slaves and women slaves added to the wealth of their white owners. The film, of course, stops much shorter of suggesting this. In the end, as Legendre is killed, Madeleine's life is instantly restored, and the film proceeds to the usual happy ending.

Unlike *White Zombie*, Val Lewton's film refers quite directly to the slave trade, and does so precisely in the sequence that «cites» the earlier film. The sequence is the arrival of Betsy in a coach at her employer's home in St. Sebastian. Even though the «arrival by coach» had become a topos of horror films ever since the first *Dracula*, the similarity of the carriage sequence in *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* marks the latter as an intertextual citation. In the earlier film, the black coachman only expresses his terror of zombies, conveying it to the viewers and preannouncing the horror to come. In the second, the old black coachman calmly tells the newly arrived Betsy about the history of the place, a place still marked by the horror of the slave trade. «Fort Holland was a fort, now no more,» he says; the Holland family, owners of the sugar company, is the oldest family on the island; «they brought the colored folks in 'Ti -Misery... the enormous boat brought the long-ago fathers and the long-ago mothers of us all, chained to the bottom of the boat.»¹⁴

The old coachman is referring explicitly to what history knows as «The Middle Passage,» one of the most ghastly aspects of the transatlantic slave trade. The response of the white Canadian woman, who clearly

¹⁴ A small detail testifies to the excellence of the script and the film's respectful attitude toward the native culture: Ti-Misery is the name used by the coachman for the slave ship, the only remnant of which is the wooden St. Sebastian that was its figurehead. But its memory remains in the island folk who still add the prefix «T» to their names, as in the bartender Ti-Joseph and even the newly born child Ti-Victor.

knows nothing of it, is, «they brought you to a beautiful place.» The black coachman, who clearly knows better than to disagree with a white person, does not demur and only replies: «If you say so, Miss – if you say...» At this point it may occur to the film viewers that the plantation name, Fort Holland, like that of its owner, Paul Holland, is not chosen at random but is a direct reference to the transatlantic slave trade and the role of Dutch ships in carrying the slaves, the human cargo, to the Americas and then carrying back to Europe a cargo of goods – sugar, coffee, cocoa, spices, precious wood, native artifacts, etc. Paul Holland himself tells Betsy that the statue of the black San Sebastian, which gives its name to the island, was once the figurehead on that slave ship. We see it standing at the entrance to Fort Holland as if to keep alive the memory of that history and watch over its present reverberations.

For all is not well in Fort Holland. When Paul and the young nurse meet on the ship that takes her to the island, Betsy is seduced by the plaintive singing of the sailors and the exotic beauty of the place, but Paul only sees death and decay: «It is not beautiful... those flying fish are jumping in terror because bigger fish want to devour them... there is no beauty here, only death and decay... everything dies here, even the stars.» And indeed his wife has become incurably ill; he and his half-brother are estranged because of Wesley's adulterous relationship with Jessica, and Paul's refusal to let her go away with him; his mother, who after the death of Paul's father had remarried the missionary Dr. Rand, has continued to work at the dispensary to bring medical aid to the natives, at first by acquiescing to their credence in voodoo and then by fully embracing it.

Perhaps the most significant element inserted by Val Lewton into the narrative of *Jane Eyre* is the actual presence of a non-Western culture, its beliefs and ways of survival, in the context of the white colonial family narrative. The conflict that the non-Western culture introduces in their Western heritage is focalized in Jessica's condition and in the character of Mrs. Rand. A healer by profession, Mrs. Rand is caught between Western medical knowledge and the sometimes more

efficacious practices of voodoo. She confesses to her family members that she is to blame for Jessica's condition: faced with seeing her family destroyed by the conflict between her two sons, Mrs. Rand, as a voodoo practitioner, fell possessed by the voodoo spirits and asked them to make Jessica a zombie. The Western doctor objects on the basis of voodoo itself. He argues that, although Jessica was in a coma, she did not die and, therefore, cannot be a zombie.

The film does not take sides with either the Haitian faith in voodoo, which the Hollands call «superstition,» or the Western medical knowledge which is incapable of shedding light on Jessica's condition. While she is shown as compelled to respond to the voodoo call, Wesley kills her before the «factual» issue of whether she is or is not a zombie can be resolved. The film treads softly on the dark zone between reason and faith, the unknown territory of death, or to say it with Hamlet, «the country from which no traveller returns.» In the end, Wesley and Jessica will drown and be fished out by the natives who are no longer slaves, though still utterly poor, and go on with their own ways of life regardless of white people.

What this horror film shows is the decline of the Western colonial enterprise. Paul's words at the beginning of the film, «there is no beauty here, only death and decay... everything dies here, even the stars,» are about not only the failure of colonialism but what colonialism has left behind in the lands it occupied, for the native people living in them, and for at least one colonial family, the Hollands.¹⁵ In sum, in receiving from the Studio the task of producing a film with as unpromising a title as *I Walked with a Zombie*, Val Lewton succeeded in introducing what can be called a proto-feminist and proto-decolonial perspective in a popular entertainment genre long before feminist and decolonial studies became part of the academic, intellectual and political discourse.

Historically, the setting of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the early and mid-19th century coincides with the high point of British colonialism. Rochester had married his rich

¹⁵ On the disavowal of the country's colonial past in the contemporary Netherlands, and hence the disavowal of racism, see *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* by the Dutch/Surinamese anthropologist Gloria Wekker (Duke University Press, 2016).

mad wife, the novel states, in Jamaica, then a British possession in the West Indies. By the mid-20th century, when Val Lewton's film is set, Fort Holland and the Holland family are in decay; colonialism has ceased to be an adventurous way for Europeans to acquire wealth and high social standing. In 1966, some 20 years after *I Walked with a Zombie* was produced, and probably unaware of the film, Jean Rhys's partly autobiographical novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a rich sociopolitical background to the view of the colonial West Indies that Lewton's film brilliantly adumbrates. Both Lewton and Rhys, independently of each other, re-image Bertha Mason as a casualty or collateral damage of colonialism.

Intertextuality: Literature and Literature

Jean Rhys (1890-1979) was a white creole woman born in the Caribbean island of Dominica, geographically located between the French territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique, when Dominica was still a British colony.¹⁶ She lived there until the age of 16, when she was sent to school in England, and never returned to the West Indies except in memory, a remembrance that must have been intensified by the process of writing and comes painfully alive in her last novel.

Wide Sargasso Sea is the story of Bertha Mason, a fictional character in the novel *Jane Eyre*. She is the mystery woman of whose identity the reader is finally informed, about two thirds into the novel, by Rochester's own account: he had married Bertha Mason for money in the West Indies without knowing of her madness, brought her back to England, and kept her imprisoned in the attic of his castle. Although this character is crucial, even pivotal to the narrative in that she is the impediment

¹⁶ The word «creole» refers to someone born in the island, whether of European or African descent. Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a white creole woman of Scottish ancestors. Rhys wrote her first three novels while living in Paris and elsewhere in Europe during the 1920s: *The Left Bank* (1927), *Quartet* (1928), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930). Two more were published after her return to England, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). Lastly, after a long hiatus, came *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

to Rochester's marrying Jane and eventually sets fire to the castle causing Rochester's blindness, Brontë leaves the character undeveloped and mysterious, most likely to add the element of suspense that was favored in the gothic novel genre at that time. *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not only contain precise intertextual references to *Jane Eyre*, such as the characters' names, but explicitly rewrites the part of Brontë's novel that concerns Rochester's first wife, filling in the temporal gaps. In other words, Rhys retells the story told by Rochester to Jane in *Jane Eyre*, but this time from the point of view of «the madwoman in the attic» herself.¹⁷ To begin with, her name is not Bertha Mason but Antoinette Cosway.

Wide Sargasso Sea's style of narration is as distinct from that of the Victorian novel as are its characters, presented in either their own or other characters' voices, its abundance of free indirect discourse, its non-linear temporality, and its setting in Jamaica and Dominica in what we understand must be the 1830s. The first part, written – or better, spoken – in the first person by Antoinette, describes her life as a young creole girl, alone with a distracted and emotionally unstable mother in a run-down colonial mansion, up to her arranged marriage with Rochester. Her disaster-ridden family history, as can be gleaned throughout the book from the voices of Antoinette, the household servants, and the ever-present and invasive island gossip, foreshadows her own story and, in a way, determines it.

Her mother Annette, a white creole from the French Martinique much younger than her husband Mr. Cosway, was left an heiress after his death by alcoholism, when the estate was already in decay. After the British Emancipation Act officially freed the slaves in 1833, the colonial plantation owners, with no slave labor to

¹⁷ *The Madwoman in the Attic* is the title of a book on the Victorian novel written by feminist literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1979. Taking a cue from Virginia Woolf, they showed that, in the English novels of the 19th century, women characters, restricted to the domestic sphere and kept apart from the larger social sphere that belongs to men, are either angels or monsters. The character they call «the Madwoman in the Attic» is the «monster», the obverse of the one Woolf named «the angel in the house», i.e., the woman who is only wife and mother. In fact, «monster» is one of the epithets used by Rochester for his Caribbean wife next to «wild beast, hag, clothed hyena, maniac, lunatic, demon», among others (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, New York and London, Bantam Classics, 1981, pp. 279-294).

work their lands, slowly lost all of their wealth and possessions. During a conversation with a neighbor (who shortly after committed suicide), Antoinette hears her mother say that they are «still waiting for this compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed.»¹⁸ Unable to manage her estate alone, and to bear her loneliness, Annette married an older British colonial, Mr. Mason, who thus became Antoinette's stepfather. Because women, under British law, could not keep their inheritance when they married, Annette's estate went directly to Mr. Mason, who provided a large dowry for Antoinette, including the mansion where she grew up and continued to live until an unexplained fire destroyed it. Their marriage did not succeed; Annette's irrational behavior after her young son Pierre died in the fire caused her second husband to remove her to a smaller house, to be cared for by a couple of servants. Once, on visiting her mother, Antoinette witnessed with impotent fury how they made her drunk and sexually abused her. Later she was told that her mother had died a madwoman.

What appears as «madness» in Antoinette's mother and later in Antoinette is the manifestation of their helplessness and desperation, the result of poverty, alcoholism, total isolation, and utter cultural deprivation. The black and mixed-race people, former slaves or children of former slaves, for whom being servants is the only way to make a living, hate them or at best have contempt for them, steal what they can, and more or less openly refer to them as «white cockroaches».¹⁹ Their hatred is acted out whenever possible, as in the anonymous burning of the Cosway family home and, earlier on, the poisoning of Annette's horse, which was her only means to leave the isolated estate and reach the town. Racism and the feeling of white superiority, like the sexist values of white colonial culture, are apparent

in Rochester and the white people doing business in the islands, who also despise the creole heiresses for being women without husbands, poor, and unwilling to abandon the life style they had grown up with.

After Mr. Mason's death, his son Richard took charge of the entire property, including Antoinette's dowry. Wanting to be rid of the young girl, now left entirely alone in the dilapidated family estate and without guidance except for one faithful black woman servant, Richard Mason arranged her marriage to Rochester, offering him her dowry (this is the «brother» who visits Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*). Rochester's own first-person voice and free indirect discourse will eventually confirm his story as told in Brontë's novel: being the second son and standing to inherit nothing of his own family estate, he accepts a marriage that would gain him wealth and, he hoped, his father's love and esteem. He travelled to Spanish Town, Jamaica, where the deal was concluded and the wedding celebrated, though not without doubts and hesitations on both sides.

The second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place during their «honeymoon» and while they live together in the West Indies, in a smaller house that belonged to Antoinette's mother. It is written primarily in the first-person voice of Rochester, with two short sections in the first-person voice of Antoinette. This is Rhys's stylistically daring and most effective way to convey the impossibility of dialogue between two young people who do not and will never understand each other. Their upbringing, cultural values, life experiences and gender expectations are incompatible; their relationship is marked by mutual mistrust, sexual disappointment and affective betrayal. He is seduced by the exotic beauty of Antoinette and the exuberant nature that surrounds them but at the same time annoyed by the brightness of the sun, the constant assault of moths, beetles and sundry insects, the familiarity of the black servants, and his incomprehension of Antoinette's sleeping habits, sudden laughter and unnamed fears. She is unsure of herself and afraid of becoming mad like her mother, but cannot tell him and only speaks of dying. She loves the flowers and the colors of her island and thinks of

¹⁸ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York and London: W. W. Norton Paperback, 1982 [1966], p. 17.

¹⁹ «Did you hear what that girl was singing?» Antoinette said. [This exchange is written in Rochester's speaking voice.]

«I don't always understand what they say or sing.» Or anything else.

«It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers.» (p. 102)

England as a dark, colorless place where people are stern and unfriendly.

When they try to make conversation, they soon begin to fight; she becomes wild with anger, and he resorts to drinking. When she locks her door, he has sex with a young servant girl in the next room, then pays her and sends her away. Antoinette's need for love and affection is met by Rochester's cold reasoning to himself that he desires her but does not love her. Antoinette finds out that her half-brother practically sold her to Rochester and realizes that she is totally bound to him; having lost even her freedom, she begins to hate him. Rochester receives a letter by an illegitimate son of Antoinette's father, or so the letter claims, who attempts to blackmail him with malignant information about the Cosway family: the father, a drunkard having sex with black women slaves and then discarding them and their children like worn clothes; Annette and Antoinette, fickle and sexually promiscuous; everyone, men and women, doomed to hereditary madness. Rochester dismisses the mixed-race man without yielding to the blackmail, but the doubt takes hold and festers in him. His hatred for the country becomes even more focused on Antoinette: he starts calling her Bertha, one of her mad mother's names, in order to resolve his ambivalence and turn the attraction–repulsion he feels toward her and toward the West Indies into hatred. In the end he decides to return to England with the mad wife he now definitively hates.

The third part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is spoken entirely by Antoinette, now imprisoned in Rochester's castle in England, except for a brief preface spoken by Grace Poole. Antoinette, unable to discern reality from fantasy, does not recognize Richard Mason when he comes to see her, or even remember that she attacked him with a knife. She has a dream of getting hold of the keys when Grace Poole is drunk and asleep: she leaves the attic, she wanders through the castle setting fire to the carpet and the curtains until she reaches the battlements, following Brontë's novel as a script. But when, looking down, Antoinette sees the swimming pool of her Jamaica childhood home, she screams and jumps – and wakes up. Mrs. Poole is also awakened by the

scream but, seeing nothing amiss in the attic room she shares with «Bertha», goes back to sleep. Then Antoinette gets up, saying, «Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do» (p. 190). The novel ends with her leaving the attic again, about to set fire to the castle.

Intertextuality: Literature and Cinema

The dream of burning the castle, which shows Antoinette the way to act, is a dream of freedom, albeit freedom in death. This ending uncannily resonates with that of another novel of approximately the same period and a similarly radical style of narration, a novel that, moreover, makes a very interesting use of intertextuality, this time with cinema.

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976) is written almost entirely in the first-person voices and free indirect discourse of the two protagonists: Valentín Arregui, a young Marxist political prisoner under one of Argentina's reactionary regimes, and Luis Alberto Molina, a female-identified transgender window-dresser, imprisoned for «corruption of minors.»²⁰ They are confined to the restricted space of a single prison cell in 1975 Buenos Aires. Two very short sections of the novel are written in the impersonal language of prison bureaucracy. The first, midway through the book, informs the reader that Molina was moved to Arregui's cell. This is followed by a conversation in which the Warden offers Molina a pardon in exchange for information about Arregui's political activities, and Molina feigns agreement in order to obtain special food packages presumably coming from his mother. Toward the end of the book, having intentionally failed in the role of police informer, Molina is released on parole. The second impersonal section is an official police surveillance report listing all of Molina's activities after his release and further stating that, two weeks later, in the

²⁰ Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, tr. Thomas Colchie, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, pág. 148.

process of being arrested after a suspicious phone call, he was killed by shots fired from a passing extremist vehicle.

A love relationship between the prisoners appears as unlikely as that of Antoinette and Rochester. The way in which they address one another is significant: Molina addresses Valentín by his first name whereas Valentín always addresses Molina by his last name (whose ending is feminine in Spanish). In the course of their time in jail, Molina will fall in love with Valentín, but Valentín is a confirmed heterosexual macho in love with Marta, the bourgeois woman he left to pursue his revolutionary ideals. Nevertheless a kind of love slowly grows in Valentín against his will as Molina tends daily to his comfort and whiles away the long prison hours by telling him films from memory.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, intertextuality is integral to the novel itself: its characters take form in discussing each film, as their personalities and desires are revealed in their respective identifications and disidentifications with the films' characters and settings. The films, no less than the healthier food, sweets and items of general comfort, including water, that Molina provides in the daily horror of their life in prison, establish a bond between them that will unite them in the dream of freedom that ends the novel.

Puig's novel opens with Molina's almost shot-by-shot account of Val Lewton's *Cat People*, where the amazingly precise visual and sound details outweigh some minor changes in the setting, admittedly due to Molina's personal preferences with regard to fashion and interior decoration. *I Walked with a Zombie* is the fourth film Molina tells, with several memory lapses because of having seen the film many years before. Here again the film is told with accurate visual and sound details – the figure of the black zombie Carrefour, a shadow passing by the nurse Betsy's window, the calypso music, the drum rhythm at the Hounfort, the voodoo doll pierced by the sword – but much confusion in the plot and characters. Evidently, to make up for the memory lapses, Molina inserts more of her own fantasies and turns the film into a romance, com-

plete with her favorite sentimental scenario of a traditional marriage and a happy ending.²¹

It is also possible to imagine that Molina's memory of this film is infiltrated by memories of the film *White Zombie*, which Puig might have seen or known of. But this would be reading the novel as realism, which is precisely the trap Puig lays for the reader by means of the dialogues, colloquialisms, and daily mundane activities that comprise the novel. The point of the novel, on the contrary, is the construction of two characters and a relationship between them that is a kind of love to which the terms «homosexual» and «heterosexual» are equally inapplicable. Molina's telling of the films reveals her own personality, her feminine gender expectations never fulfilled in the real world, and her creative escape from reality into the movies to give presence to her fantasies of beauty, wealth, success, admiration and romantic love, which Valentín regularly belittles and attempts to debunk.²² Valentín's character is also constructed by his words, and even more so by his silences, that is to say, his reticence to disclose his inner thoughts to his cell mate. His anger towards his upper-class parents, his shame for taking sexual advantage of a young indio girl, his sense of guilt for his violent actions in the guerrilla, whether real or fantasized, are expressed in long internal monologues and stream-of-consciousness sections that appear to be prompted by the films told by Molina. The changes that take place in Valentín through their interaction, slowly becoming evident in the dialogues, are fully expressed in the dream that concludes the novel after Molina's death.

²¹ Just an example: Molina's account of the film «about a zombie woman» (which in the original has a title, *La vuelta de la mujer zombi* [p.141]) begins with «some girl from New York taking a steamer to an island in the Caribbean where her fiancé is waiting to marry her» (p. 158). The fiancé, as it turns out, had been married to the zombie woman and, after intricate turns of the plot, is killed by the same zombie woman, who later dies in a huge bonfire. The told film ends with the girl leaving the island on a ship and clinging to the captain, «luckily, it's the same handsome captain who delivered her to the island in the first place», while «the music of love from the whole town is bidding her goodbye forever, and wishing her a future filled with happiness.» (p. 213)

²² For example, of Molina's all-time favorite film about a French singer who falls in love with a German officer in Nazi-occupied Paris, Valentín severely (and correctly) remarks, «it's a piece of Nazi junk» (p. 56). This film was wholly invented by Puig, who was also the author of several screenplays in addition to plays and novels such as *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1968), *Boquitas pintadas* (1969), *Cae la noche tropical* (1988).

Valentín, agonizing after torture, is given morphine by a kind male nurse. The dream takes him out of the hospital into a dark place where he wonders how he can keep walking, exhausted as he is, and a voice tells him not to be afraid because the kind nurse will help him. He replies to the voice as Marta's speaking inside of him. He cannot open his eyes because he's asleep, he says, but tells her he's being taken through a long tunnel to where he can touch water and eventually reaches the sea, and then an island where he can lie on the sand warmed by the sun... All along the dream Valentín continues the dialogue with «Marta»: «You don't know how beautiful it is here with this mixture of palm trees, and lianas, at night it's all silvery, because the film is in black and white.» He tells her of the spider woman: «poor creature... she can't move, there in the deepest part of the jungle she's trapped in a spider's web, or no, the spiderweb is growing out of her own body... I ask her why she's crying and in a close-up that covers the whole screen at the end of the film she answers me that that's just what can never be known, because the ending is enigmatic...» (p. 280)

As the dream proceeds, «Marta's» replies sound more and more as if uttered by Molina, using the very phrases and sentences Molina's voice had spoken in the prison cell. Their very last exchange leaves no doubt:

- That's the only thing that I don't ever want to know, the name of your comrades,
 –Marta, *oh how much I love you! that was the only thing I couldn't tell you, I was so afraid you were going to ask me that and then I was going to lose you forever,*
 –No, Valentín, beloved, that will never take place, because this dream is short but this dream is happy. (p. 281)

Valentín's statement, italicized above, is at first as enigmatic as the ending of the film in which «the spider woman is crying in a close-up that covers the whole screen». But Valentín is an intellectual, always looking for explanations and clarity. In keeping with his character, then, the statement can be understood in this way: if Molina had asked, «Do you love me?», Valentín could not have answered «yes» because he could not love Molina the way Molina would expect, i.e., as a man loving a woman. His

love for Molina is not heterosexual, like the love he felt for Marta, but is also not homosexual, a term that does not apply to Molina and that Molina would reject because she feels herself a woman. So Valentín's is not «the love that dare not speak its name» but a love that **cannot** speak its name because there is no name for it.²³ Of course, if he had answered «no», it would have been a lie, and he would have lost Molina forever. The achievement of the novel is the truth of such an unnamable love.

When this dream is filmed by Hector Babenco in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), Puig's novel is sold short. The onscreen presence of the actress Sonia Braga makes it most unlikely to hear Valentín's last words as addressed to Molina, as they clearly are in the novel. Because the language of cinema is audiovisual, made of images and sounds, and words are only one kind of sounds, however important their function may be in narrative cinema, in film the image takes precedence, especially when choreographed center-screen or in close up. The image is not only what we remember – as Molina's telling of the films constantly demonstrates – but what we believe in. Throughout the novel Marta is the declared, avowed object of Valentín's desire, whereas the «Marta» of the dream is the figure of his disavowal, the name by which he hides his unspeakable love for Molina. But the Marta the viewers see sitting with Valentín in the rowboat as the film closes is again the object of his heterosexual desire. Even though Braga is cast in all the female roles – Marta herself, Leni, the film heroine with whom Molina identifies, and even the spider woman, which is Valentín's image of Molina²⁴ – Braga's onscreen presence combined with the sound-name Marta gives the film a banal happy ending that destroys the subtle balance of Puig's creation.

The function of intertextuality is specific to both the medium and the form of expression of each text.

²³ «The love that dare not speak its name» is a phrase from a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas, a lover of Oscar Wilde. Cited at Wilde's trial (1895) and leading to his conviction, the phrase has become a synonym for homosexual love.

²⁴ «It's true, you are not the panther woman.

–It's very sad being a panther woman; no one can kiss you. Or anything.

–You, you're the spider woman, that traps men in her web.

–How lovely! Oh, I like that.» (pp. 260-261)

The reference to the panther woman is from Molina's telling of the first film, *Cat People*.

In *I Walked with a Zombie* the intertextual references to both *Jane Eyre* and to *White Zombie* are made within one medium of expression, cinema, while its form of expression may be said to convey the horror of history. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the rewriting of *Jane Eyre* also takes form within one medium of expression, language, with the form of expression (literary style) carrying the feminist and postcolonial perspective. In Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* literature and film are completely interwoven in a single text whose medium is language; its form of expression, consisting of dialogues and internal monologues, is made up of visual details and spatial cues as would a script to be filmed, so that the reader is aware of what each character sees and does. This is as close to cinema as language can get.

In Babenco's film, cinema does not even come close to what the novel achieves. What is lost is the figural or rhetorical aspect of Puig's language, its power to say something and signify something else; this is not transposed to the medium of cinema in the film. Now, the language of cinema is also equipped with a rhetorical power, a figurality, of its own (cinematic metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches, irony, paradoxes, etc.) and notably the power to desynchronize sound or disjoin it from the image.²⁵ The transposition of a literary work

into a film would require a process of intertextual creativity. Absent such creativity, Babenco's film, however commercially successful, remains a reduced adaptation of Puig's novel.

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²⁵ One example of creative intertextuality from literature to film is *Cat People*, the first of the nine horror films produced by Val Lewton and followed in the same year by *I Walked with a Zombie*. *Cat People* (1942) was developed from Val Lewton's short story «The Bagheeta» (see footnote n. 8 above). The film's intertextual creativity is most remarkable in the desynchronization of sounds and images. On *Cat People*, see T. de Lauretis, «Panteridad: vivir en un cuerpo dañado», *EU-topías*, Vol. 4 (2012), 9-18.