

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

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GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S MONSTROUS FILMMAKING:

a demonstration of monstrosity

Porto Alegre

2021

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Trabalho de conclusão de curso de graduação
apresentado ao Instituto de Letras da Universidade
Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito para
a obtenção do título de Bacharel em Letras.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Claudio Vescia Zanini

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CIP - Catalogação na Publicação

Mayer, Gabriel da Fonseca
Guillermo del Toro's monstrous filmmaking: a
demonstration of monstrosity / Gabriel da Fonseca
Mayer. -- 2021.
87 f.
Orientador: Claudio Vescia Zanini.

Trabalho de conclusão de curso (Graduação) --
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto
de Letras, Bacharelado em Letras: Tradutor Português e
Inglês, Porto Alegre, BR-RS, 2021.

1. Cinema. 2. Guillermo del Toro. 3. Monstro. 4.
Mal. 5. Fantasia. I. Zanini, Claudio Vescia, orient.
II. Título.

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Aprovado em: 13 de maio de 2021.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends and my family. More specifically, I would like to thank: Laís Paris, my girlfriend, for understanding and sharing the things I love; Claudio Zanini, my supervisor, for dragging horror in films and literature by their feet and throwing them into the academic context; GHOST, the research group I am part of, for all the deep and extensive discussions on the most despicable of the subjects, and for being a sanctuary of progressive, constructive and critical thinking, and also a refuge from the real, dark and mad world; Rosana Fonseca, my mother, for making it possible for me to go to the university, for helping me to try to understand my life and myself, and for never hesitating in telling me what is right, what is wrong and what is *evil*; and lastly, I would like to thank Odete Fonseca, my grandmother, whom I deeply miss, who taught me to look at monstrous birds and monstrous ghosts, only to realize that, in fact, looking at them is to look at ourselves.

*What is a ghost? A tragedy doomed to repeat itself
time and again? An instant of pain, perhaps.
Something dead which still seems to be alive. An
emotion, suspended in time. Like a blurred
photograph. Like an insect trapped in amber.*

(Guillermo del Toro)

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a representação monstruosa em três filmes do diretor mexicano Guillermo del Toro: *A Espinha do Diabo* (2001), *O Labirinto do Fauno* (2006) e *A Forma da Água* (2017). Como suporte para a análise, as discussões sobre monstruosidade apresentadas em Asma (2009) e Cohen (1996) serão utilizadas; da mesma forma, Calder (2020) e Scarre (2012) servirão como base para analisar, em meio à monstruosidade, o conceito de ‘mal’. Os três filmes analisados demonstram o movimento de um tipo de narrativa recorrente na obra de Guillermo del Toro que busca uma maior identificação com personagens de aparência monstruosa e um distanciamento de personagens de aparência humana, mas que, ao longo da narrativa, demonstram uma monstruosidade maléfica subjacente. Nessas histórias, o monstro tradicional é humanizado, ganhando relevância narrativa e nuances de protagonismo, enquanto que a figura humana é monstrificada, evidenciando lados sombrios do comportamento humano. Por outro lado, ao desenvolver personagens humanos monstruosos, estabelece-se uma realidade complexa que evita representações superficiais, uma vez que dar espaço ao monstro, ainda que ele seja humano, significa buscar compreendê-lo e, como consequência, torná-lo humano novamente.

Palavras-chave: Guillermo del Toro. Cinema. Monstro. Monstrificação. Mal.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the representation of monsters in three films directed by the Mexican-American filmmaker Guillermo del Toro: *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). Support for the analysis will be provided by the discussions on the concept of 'monster' made by Asma (2009) and Cohen (1996); likewise, the underlying topic of 'evil' will be addressed through the considerations of Calder (2020) and Scarre (2012) on such a matter. The three analyzed films present distinguishing narrative movements in Guillermo del Toro's work, one that seeks a more emphatic identification with characters that are visually monstrous; on the other hand, it also inspires detachment from characters depicted with human appearance, and such characters reveal undisclosed evil behaviors as the narrative progresses. In these stories, the traditional monster is humanized, achieving a greater narrative relevance and hints of protagonism; meanwhile, the human figure is suffers a monsterring process, underscoring the darker aspects of human behavior. However, as monstrous human characters are developed, a complex reality is established, avoiding superficial representations; as a result, putting a spotlight on a monster, even if it is a human, means to try to understand them, therefore turning them back to human once again.

Keywords: Guillermo del Toro. Cinema. Monster. Monstrification. Evil.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Monsters have populated the mind of humankind since the dawn of times. Dragons and other tyrannical beasts can be seen in writings as early as the Bible or even drawn on maps to represent the danger of certain sea travels. In his discussion on the development of the concept of “monster” throughout history, Asma (2009) describes how the discovery of ancient fossils of gigantic creatures such as dinosaurs would make people think that beings like those could still exist in some remote corner of the world; after all, unlike today, there was no sense of completion regarding mapping our environment, and in a world that seemed infinite – similar to what outer space seems to us right now –, how could one be certain that a place where monsters dwell did not exist? As soon as monsters integrated fiction, especially gothic, horror and fantasy, they started to become more and more popular, such as in Penny Dreadfuls and Pulp Magazines. But if on the one hand monsters had gained popularity, on the other, in terms of cultural relevance, for quite some time fantastic fiction had been avoided by criticism. Monster fiction was considered a product of mass culture, therefore it did not hold any artistic value in the eyes of critics.

The world saw the artistic relevance of fantastic fiction grow with authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, C. S. Lewis and Neil Gaiman, to mention a few. And then, just as the filmmaking industry became solid, criticism would start to recognize fantastic fiction as soon as these stories appeared on the screen. Even though the first steps of the moving images are frequently connected with the Lumière Brothers and their documental short films such as *The Arrival of a Train* (1895) and *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), another much relevant character to populate cinema origins is George Méliès, who became known for using special effects in fictional productions that most often involved fantastic elements, as opposed to the Lumière Brothers. The astounding novelty of the moving pictures became a great ally to Méliès’s career as a stage magician. It is often said that the first audiences of Lumière Brothers’ *The Arrival of a Train* were scared of being possibly rolled over by a train coming toward their direction,¹ which leaves to our imagination the effects caused by Méliès’s films such as *The Four Troublesome Heads*² (1898), *Robbing Cleopatra’s Tomb*³ (1899) and the most famous, *A*

¹ “In *The Arrival of a Train*, the locomotive approached from afar, going toward the audience, who were scared, fearing to be rolled over. They were identifying the screen as their point of view: for the first time, the camera became a drama character” (SADOUL, 1963, p. 21, our translation).

² In this film, George Méliès himself plays a magician who performs some stage magic tricks with the aid of visual effects made possible by the film genre. The tricks involve the removal and substitution of his own head to others exactly equal, and consequently, a headless body that goes on with the performance.

³ In *Cléopâtre* (1899), Méliès’s character digs out Cleopatra’s mummy from her tomb and resurrects her body.

*Trip to the Moon*⁴ (1902). Having explored fantastic narratives, the topic of the monster naturally came up in Méliès's films: liminal beings such as mermaids and phantom skeletons would appear on the screen, and the same would happen to mythical creatures like dragons and genies; such as in his 1903 short film aptly called *The Monster*.⁵

From this beginning, monster fiction would see its ups and downs in terms of critical acclaim. As the years went by, these films would, sometimes, be seen as an easy way of making profit with low-budget productions to be screened at drive-ins, not more than spectacle-centered pieces that aimed to provide mindless cheap thrills; on the other hand, occasionally, these works would hint at their artistic potential with cases like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), for which Fredric March won an Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role, or Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), a box office success at the time of its release and whose artistic value only increased since then. The development of the popularity of fantastic narratives on the silver screen followed the advances in technical and visual effects in the film industry, and releases like *Star Wars* (1977), *E.T. - The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) gave more and more validation to the fact that those stories were not just escapist entertainment. As such places and characters grew tangible and real, discussing and documenting social and political tensions of their times, the mirrored realities they represented were eventually understood as popular forms of expressing the world; suddenly, we were not that far from what one could call art anymore. This progression culminated in what could be called a landmark for fantastic narratives in cinema: *The Lord of the Rings* achieved an unprecedented success in terms of box office and in awards as well – the third film of the trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), for instance, won 11 Oscars⁶ and generated over 1.1 billion dollars⁷ in box office revenue worldwide in its original release.

One of the most prominent film directors to delve into the monster subject is Guillermo del Toro. His first feature, a vampire film called *Cronos* (1993), explores some of the existentialist potential of vampirism while developing interesting discussions regarding death and family and focusing on the relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter; by calling it a “vampire film,” one is likely to expect more action and violence from the story, but

⁴ *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902) depicts an expedition to the moon in a bullet-like spaceship.

⁵ Set in Egypt, *Le Monstre* (1903) tells the story of a prince who asks for a priest to resurrect his wife. By praying, the priest makes her skeleton dance, then become a monster who grows in size quickly, after that finally becoming the prince's wife alive again, only to return to being a lifeless skeleton once more.

⁶ The prizes mentioned were awarded at The 76th Annual Academy Awards (2004).

⁷ Data extracted from IMDb: INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE. **The lord of the rings: the return of the king**. Retrieved from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0167260>. Accessed on: March 18, 2021.

even though such components are still part of the film, the plot explores more dramatic aspects, which is very positive in terms of originality; this way, the film achieves a more universal form of expression.

Throughout his filmography, it is quite interesting to notice the strong relationship Guillermo del Toro has with monsters: every single one of the 10 feature films he directed – his “strange little tales”, as he calls them⁸ – is focused on monsters. Also, just like Cohen (1996) points out, one of the main aspects of the monstrous character is to highlight difference. Guillermo del Toro has already made some public claims about himself feeling displaced. About that, there are some points to be discussed. First, the director is a Mexican immigrant in the United States. This is important because part of his work will discuss the implications of the xenophobic discourses that Mexican immigrants often deal with. It is possible to see that such matter is extremely relevant to him given that, as he went up the stage of Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles in 2018 in order to accept the Best Director award at the 90th Academy Awards ceremony, in what could be considered the apex of his career until then, the first words he said were “I am an immigrant.” Sayer *et al.* (2019) discuss the characteristics and consequences of the emergence of the White nationalist xenophobia in the context of Mexican teachers living in the United States, also describing how Donald Trump’s electoral campaign and subsequent federal government underscored such preexistent tension. The presence of strong negative claims against Mexican immigrants in Trump’s political discourse is a depiction of a social barrier: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best ... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists...” (LEE, 2015).⁹

The second point to be discussed regarding Guillermo del Toro’s feeling of displacement is that of fat phobia. By saying the following, “negative attitudes toward and stereotypes about fat people, which we have termed ‘fat phobia’” (p. 252), Bacon *et al.* (2001) discuss the use of the term to describe a social phenomenon. Among some of the negative effects such social behavior may cause, the authors mention, in general, the placement of restrictions “on important aspects of their lives, such as going to school, changing jobs, buying stylish clothes, dating or enjoying a sexual relationship, or even seeking medical care” (2001, p. 252). The authors describe how critical attitudes toward plus-sized people can lead to isolation, like in cases in which they are left out of social relations at school, because “other

⁸ This statement is taken from Guillermo del Toro’s acceptance speech of the Best Director - Motion Picture Golden Globe in 2018.

⁹ This is a report of Donald Trump’s declaration published in The Washington Post.

children are less likely to want them as friends” (2001, p. 252), and can “affect their employment opportunities” (2001, p. 252).

Considering these points and having in mind that the director is a Mexican plus-sized man, possible intersections of interest in discussing the topic of marginalization can be pointed out; another factor to be considered is the fact that the author is attached to fantastic narratives, a type of text that has been historically marginalized. That being said, it seems a fruitful discussion to compare the mentioned characteristics to the way “differences” can be highlighted in the form of monsters in the author’s work. By doing that, of course, it is suitable to acknowledge the descriptive approach that will be used, since there is not much space for pieces of factual knowledge and Aristotelian logic in a topic as subjective and abstract as art. I do not intend to try to *prove* that an author thought *necessarily* X just because Y happened in his life; on the contrary, my goal is to invite possible readings of the analyzed films. The term *author* is employed here meaning “a creator of a text,” while the term *text* refers to ‘film.’ The use of such nomenclatures evokes many endless complex discussions regarding, on the one side, film authorship, and on the other, the concept of text, genre, discourse, and art. In regard to authorship, the concept I chose to explore is that of Nehamas:

An author [...] is whoever can be understood to have produced a particular text as we interpret it. Authors are not individuals but characters manifested or exemplified, though not depicted or described, in texts. They are formal causes. They are postulated to account for a text's features and are produced through an interaction between critic and text. Their nature guides interpretation, and interpretation determines their nature. This reciprocal relationship can be called, not simply for a lack of a better word, *transcendental* (1986, p. 686, emphasis in the original).

Nehamas postulates such a definition of *author* by discussing Foucault (2008). This definition is valuable for the present study inasmuch as it provides support for the view that, by analyzing films, there are no inherent hidden meanings to be ‘deciphered,’ only features and possible readings to be offered in order to develop knowledge. The subject of authorship in film and its broadness is addressed directly in Tregde (2013), and in accordance with the view presented here, the author highlights a point supported by Tomasulo (1997) that says that “opening the discussion and studying films and filmmakers will make the reality of theory more visible” (TREGDE, 2013, p. 1), a vision that contributes to the aim of progressive and aggregating studies in film in order to improve the comprehension of a topic as complex as authorship.

Considering the film a text, the notions used here are taken from Heath (1973), in which many different approaches, sometimes also regarding authorship, are displayed from a semiotic

perspective in consideration of film as sign and in what characteristics it is similar to the view of language. Heath eventually offers the concept of *cinetext*, “what is commonly understood by ‘film’ (as ‘finished work’), but regarded not as object of consumption (surprise), regarded as, on the contrary, set of signifying systems, the activity of which is to be described” (1973, p. 105). Such concept seems to be strongly connected to the author’s discussion of Eco (1978) when mentioning cinema being a signifying practice to be analyzed through multiple processes of codification (HEATH, 1973, p. 113), and this description seems to be effective in a way of depicting film as text.

In view of the preliminary considerations presented thus far, the aim of this study is to analyze the depiction of monsters in the three most successful films of Guillermo del Toro’s filmography in terms of critical acclaim – *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Shape of Water* (2017) – in order to understand the roles of monsters in each narrative. These three films share a group of characteristics, like the fact that all are set in specific historical backgrounds – the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish Civil War and the US during the Cold War, respectively. Also, these three narratives contain a particularly interesting set of characters: each has at least one “monstrous figure,” a being whose existence is closely connected to the supernatural, like ghosts, mythical creatures and new species, and also human characters whose monstrosity is moral rather than physical. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster culture (seven theses)* provides the main theoretical background for this part, whereas Stephen Asma’s *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* will serve as the basis for my understanding of the monster’s forms of interaction with its respective social and cultural environments. Incidentally, Asma addresses notions concerning moral, humanity and corruption, especially when discussing what he calls “criminal monsters,” which is a particularly relevant category for the present study. In this sense, Calder’s *The Concept of Evil* will provide support to a better understanding of the concept from which those seem to originate: *evil*.

As a product of the analysis, I intend to cross the characteristics identified in each subject in order to better visualize how the representation of the monstrous character was transformed over the years of Guillermo del Toro’s film production. Since three films of the same author will be analyzed, it is natural to expect some characteristics to be recurrent. However, I expect to find shifting aspects that point to the different social-political contexts in which each work was conceived; also, presumably, technical and professional improvements of storytelling skills; and the development of the discussions regarding the monstrous character

set through the three films, which is expected to reach some kind of philosophical maturity, being this last aspect the most relevant of all those mentioned here.

According to Cohen (1996), ever since Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), the main purpose of the existence of a monstrous character in a work of fiction is, up to some extent, to ask their creators the reason why they exist. In this sense, it seems reasonable to consider as a path to be followed in the present study two main steps: first, to identify the most relevant monstrous characters in each narrative; and second, to try to understand why they exist, and being this a very philosophical question, its reflection in this study will be the goal of considering *the role* of the these characters – what are the discussions that come up in these stories due to their presence? Well, to do so, first we need to establish exactly what we mean when we use the word *monster*.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 MONSTROUS ESSENCE

The concept of monster has changed through the years and, according to Asma (2009), much of this process can be explained by the changes in humankind's view of the environment; such changes are reflected not only in the way we see the world around us, but also in how we see each other, and therefore, how *humanity* is perceived in each individual. This existential inquiry seems to make even more sense when we consider the appeal of topics such as *teratology*, the study of abnormalities in human physiological development: if, even nowadays, the status of a perfectly formed fetus as a human being is still open to debate, the same discussion considering a malformed specimen could go even further. Just like the most primitive explorers felt the thrill of entering uncharted territories, despite the difficulties, as Asma goes on to say, the liminal characteristics often linked to monstrous characters seem to engage the human mind in a paradoxical state of simultaneous repulsion and attraction that emulates the Freudian idea of the *uncanny*.

The whole idea of uncanniness is the description Freud seeks in *The Uncanny* (1963), and among the key characteristics he shows in his essay is the comparison between the *heimlich* (the "familiar") and the *unheimlich* ("unfamiliar"¹⁰). According to Freud, the feeling of uncanniness arises when provoked by something that is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time: it resembles something known by the observer, while it shows characteristics that also make it, somehow, unknown. When Freud describes this dichotomy, he analyzes the case of the automaton in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sand-man* (1967), which resembles a person due to its humanoid form, clothes and lifelike eyes. The duality of what is familiar and what is not seems to be part of a process that eventually reached the comparison between repulsion and attraction. Cohen (1996) discusses the connection between what he calls *ambient fear* to the popular manifestation of such anxiety in the form of a fascination with monsters; according to him, this interest deals with "the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens," (p. viii) and the author illustrates such paradox as a dinosaur that simultaneously resembles "[a] velociraptor and Barney" (p. viii). Note here that one of the ideas Cohen develops is that the monster is something difficult to understand, and the author expands this concept describing how the monstrous entity presents

¹⁰ When discussing this topic, Asma uses the word "foreign" to refer to *unheimlich*.

a challenge to categorization. Eventually, Cohen postulates that the fact that the monster does not fit categories is, in a way, a kind of freedom, and that maybe, in spite of fearing them, we also *envy* such freedom (p. 17) – as a consequence, the author provides a possible explanation to the feeling of attraction toward the monster.

However, before all these elements were somewhat clearer to human knowledge, as discussed in the Introduction, monsters had a central role in representing the fear of the unknown, a way of giving an image to hypothetical creatures our primitive ancestors thought to exist due to traces like fossils and oral traditions being transformed and exaggerated over the years. Asma calls such an image the *ancient monster*, and this concept is also aligned to a reality in which humankind struggled to conquer the environment, just as it is the case in examples of explorations of exotic lands, in which people are set in a scenario of survival, of a predator and prey dualism. Asma points out that, in this sense, the exaggeration of oral tradition is useful to the human species for keeping people away from dangerous areas (p. 20): maybe the first time a hunter faced a crocodile, he went back home and told stories about the newly discovered creature; as time went by, the crocodile became larger and more dangerous each time the story was told; as a consequence, the risk of such predator was underscored, driving those who heard the story away from the location where it took place. The crocodile in the given example fits what Cohen (1996) describes as *the monster of prohibition*, which stands as a representation of what is possible and what is not: it is not possible to go to that place because there is a dangerous creature there, and the story told is a warning that serves as a reminder of this message. The author goes on to extend his definition: “*The monster of prohibition* exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed” (Cohen, 1996, p. 13, emphasis added). The natural narrative structure that surrounds this kind of monster and the monstrous figure produced in it were factors in shaping what would, one day, become the modern concept of *monster*.

Considering the context of the crocodile example, we may also argue about the connection between the monster and masculinity; about that, Asma (2009, p. 25) points out that “Monsters, both real and imagined, are bound up with our feelings of insecurity and our responses to those anxieties. Masculine audacity and bravado is the reflex response to vulnerability.” In this sense, one must remember that, in spite of being evolutionarily successful, before developing traits that favored the survival in the environment, humankind was hardly a predator (EHRENREICH, 1997), being fragile when compared to other animals; such characteristics can be understood as possible sources for feelings of vulnerability, which, by extent, may arouse aggression in response. With this in mind, the tendency toward

reaffirmation of manliness is clearer. The clash between masculinity and monstrosity, as we are going to see in the close analysis, can be symbolically present in confrontations between characters. Going further in this discussion, Asma discusses the recurrent role of the monster killer as father, who becomes aggressive in order to protect his offspring from the menacing monsters: besides having the figure of a father as a model of manliness, this scenario also points to the relationship between the monster and figures of authority. Furthermore, we can connect the tension of the ancient monster as a menacing agent with the need of reaffirmation of manliness of the monster killer and, consequently, to the search of authority.

The figure of the ancient monster, subsequently, would be developed up to a point of reaching a new set of characteristics during the Medieval Age, when religion played a major role in society, and therefore, also shaped the notions of monsters in its own way. According to Asma, one of the forms the *religious monster* is seen, like in the cases of the Leviathan and the Behemoth, is as servers of God's will, provoking fear of His power. Thus, through the exertion of power and strength, the concept of God has its authority reaffirmed:

Some of the most well-known monsters of the Bible, Behemoth and Leviathan, also appear in the Book of Job and echo this henchmen theme of God's monster accomplices. They don't actually plot against anyone, but these giant beasts of earth and water, respectively, serve as evidence of God's power and strength; they act as living billboards for God's sublime creativity and awe-inspiring *authority* (ASMA, 2009, p. 64, emphasis added).

On the other hand, besides acting as God's instruments, the monster is seen in the Bible as a portent of what will happen to those who fail to act in accordance with God's will. In this sense, such concept of monster is not an extension of God's power anymore; in fact, it is the lack of God's influence that makes beings monstrous, and they are only monstrous for choosing not to follow God – *fallen* beings –, may it be by having another religion or through actions that are wrongful in the eyes of this faith: “The four beasts of Daniel and the dragon and hydra of Revelation are incarnations of the *fallen* state of being: fallen angels in the case of Satan [...]” (ASMA, 2009, p. 67, emphasis in the original). Similarly, Asma points out St. Augustine's view that giants could exist as corrupted creations of God that were fated to fall; in such a way, the existence of monstrous beings like giants could be explained as a form of displaying cautionary tales that praised the quality of being spiritually righteous. Interestingly enough, the duality of repulsion and attraction aforementioned is echoed by that of fear and love toward God: the fear of His power and strength, and the love for an entity infinitely benevolent and merciful evoked by the respective religion.

Similar aspects of the described fear and love can be identified as we analyze more closely the etymology of the word *monster*: as discussed by Zanini (2019), “monster” is related

to “monstre,” in French, used in the beginning of the 14th century to describe creatures that had congenital deformities – aligned to our discussion of teratology and Asma’s concept of *scientific monster* yet to be described –, and it is also related to “monstrum,” in Latin, which means “a divine omen,” specially an ill one; “monstrum” is derived from “monere,” which means “to teach,” “to remind of,” “to warn” (HARPER, [ca. 2010a]); Cohen (1996) also discusses the etymology of “monstrum,” saying that it means “that which reveals,” and that “the monster exists only to be read: [...] a glyph that seeks a hierophant” (p. 4). The etymology of “monster” is also relevant when we consider the word “monstration,” that, according to Harper ([ca. 2010b]), is a word from the 16th century that meant “a showing, a demonstration, proof,” and that comes from the Latin word “monstrationem,” that meant “a showing.” These meanings are specially insightful if we think of how people with congenital deformities were explored in forms of entertainment like “freak shows” and *vaudevilles*, in which they were presented to audiences as extraordinary curiosities: the way people saw them in such spectacles tells a lot about the duality of fear and love – the audience stands at a distance, feeling secure from possible harms from the “monsters,” and yet is deeply interested in them, because they are different from everything experienced in everyday life. These forms of entertainment and their relationship with the concept of monster are yet interesting when considering how they share similarities to the moving images: in a way, “freak shows” and *vaudevilles* were ancestors of monster narratives in cinema.

Accordingly, Asma discusses how non-Christian peoples suffered a *monstering* process in the eyes of those who practiced this religion. That could be said about the Persians and the Muslims. The Christian view toward these peoples could be considered as what Asma calls “spiritually deformed” (2009, p. 234), being a case similar to that of barbarians during the Roman Empire. Barbarians, however, besides sharing the notion of having another spirituality, are seen also through a xenophobic view of an unknown and exotic exterior land that insistently tries to invade; therefore, anything related to these people is seen as *bad*. Cohen (1996) also investigates what he calls *monsterizing depiction* stating that the “normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster” (1996, p. 11); note here that Cohen describes a metaphorical structure in which the monster is an outsider. The author goes on to say that such process states a logic of master/slave dialectic that defends the subjugation of the monster “by writing the body excluded from *personhood* and agency as in every way different” (p. 11, emphasis added); it is an interesting use of the word *personhood* here because Asma (2009) does the same in order to differentiate to *human* as a zoological term:

the use of “personhood” in both cases seems to represent a way of thinking of the *human being* as a member of an organized society. Cohen goes on to say, by discussing Girard (1989), that “Monsters are never created *ex nihilo*, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination in which elements are extracted ‘from various forms’ (including—indeed, especially—marginalized social groups)” (COHEN, 1996, p. 11, emphasis in the original), also underlining the connection described by Girard of the monsterizing depiction to the scapegoat phenomenon; later, Cohen goes back to the topic of the monster as a scapegoat in order to debate the concept of their ritualistic sacrifice and the possibility that it may represent a purge to the community, functioning as an exorcism (1996, p. 18): be it in history or in fiction, the monstrous figure is created as a representation of deviant characteristics, heritages or behaviors, and the destruction of such an individual may be also symbolically taking those unwanted features away.

It is convenient to state that, in view of Asma (2009) and Cohen (1996), the present work will make use of the terms *monstering process* and *monsterizing* to refer to the process in which an observer attributes monstrous characteristics to another individual or group. Many different kinds of monstrous characteristics can be used in order to perform such a process, but most often they will be physical – like making a people seem taller than they are and consequently calling them ‘giants’ – or psychological – like intensifying one’s aggressiveness or selfishness in order to make them seem immoral. Moreover, these concepts are also connected to those of *humanization* and *dehumanization*, which correspond to the already discussed notions of *human* as a *person*, a way of addressing *personhood*, that is a way of describing the quality of a moral responsible human being living in a community. The process of monsterization often results in someone being considered *less human*, which could imply a process of *dehumanization*. However, *dehumanizing* somebody does not necessarily mean that such a person is becoming monstrous, since becoming less human can also be a way of making that person to be seen as an object.

Repercussions of the monstering process can also be pointed out in considerations of the figure of Satan through time:

Satan’s relative power has always been a topic of interest for theologians. Most of his appearances [...] show Satan as a servant (albeit an unpleasant one) to God. But there are incidents [...] where Satan appears to act according to his own free will against God [...]. This autonomous Satan is sometimes thought to be the result of influences from Iranian Zoroastrianism, a dualistic religion of two equally powerful good and bad Gods, influences that seeped into some monotheistic scriptural narratives (ASMA, 2009, p. 64).

The relationship between the Iranian Zoroastrianism and Christianity pointed out by Asma is interestingly ironic: after so much time spent monsterring another religion as spiritually deformed, and therefore connecting it with the idea of Satan, eventually what once was considered degenerate paganism is digested and becomes part of Christian religion itself, not being monstrous anymore. Satan is present once more when we consider the discussion about witch persecutions, which is, in fact, another incidence of a religion trying to eradicate forms of heresy, or, in other words, *spiritual deformation*. According to Asma, witches were seen as “peculiar vessels of demonic ill will” (2009, p. 107), servants of demons, even though such accusations were most often “paltry and circumstantial” (2009, p. 108). On this topic, Schmitt (2020) argues about the connection of witchcraft accusations and the nonconformity of women to the roles that were expected from them in society. By discussing De Blécourt (2000), the author points out that, in spite of such persecutions being not directed expressly toward women, ultimately, the most affected were them (DE BLÉCOURT, 2000). In addition to that, Schmitt argues that women in vulnerable situations in a community, sometimes for being independent, were most likely to be accused of witchcraft. In this sense, we must recall the notion of the monsterring process in order to point out that it might have been the case with witch trials. Accordingly, the nonconformity of those accused of being witches with the expected social roles may have been seen as a menace to the figures of authority in the communities, be it that of male political or religious leaders. A fact underlined by Asma that serves well to this explanation is that one of the main threats the witches supposedly represented during the medieval era was that of penis removal.

The relationship between the male organ and authority has been widely discussed, and one may remember Freud’s *castration complex* (2014) as we address it and include the concept of paternal figures of power and repression to the equation. Kristeva (1982) discusses the *maternal phallus* as an impossible object and describes the concept of *hallucination of nothing*, in which the author articulates that, ultimately, the confrontation of the individual with such an impossibility results in a fantasy of desire. Penis removal, a concept often connected with that of castration, and subsequently, *emasculatation*, calls for the idea of losing one’s authority. Sotunsa and Jegede (2017) discuss the connection of such concept with becoming weak and unmanly, also pointing out that one can be emasculated physically or symbolically, later providing O’Neil and Nadeau’s definition of *emasculatation* as “fear of losing masculine status and power in the eyes of others” (O’NEIL *et al.*, 1999 apud SOTUNSA *et al.*, 2017, p. 256). Considering this, it is easier to understand the process of monsterring an individual or a group as a response to the feeling of threat toward the authority aroused by them. When women were

successful in being independent, the feeling of losing the authority over them may have sparked in their oppressors a process that distorted their vision, making them see, instead of people, sinners who had sold their souls to the devil in exchange for power.

As we discuss the monsterring of other peoples, we may as well jump ahead in time and observe how such process is carried in periods of war. Asma (2009) points out how the Vietnamese, Iraqis and Afghans become monsters in the eyes of the US soldiers, and also, in a similar way, how the Nazis did the same to Jews. As the author argues about, such a tactic is a tool to make violence used against the enemy more tolerable to the perpetrators. Cohen (1996) also discusses this topic, stating that “Representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic” (p. 7); the author offers an example from the Bible to describe the phenomenon, a moment in which the inhabitants of Canaan are seen represented as giants in order to legitimize the Hebrew colonization: if they were human, causing any harm to them would be wrong; however, since they are giants, and therefore, not human, the Hebrews could do anything they want to them. According to Cohen, the Canaan inhabitants are transformed into giants by having their cultural differences exaggerated (1996). Reflections on these processes seem to be offered in some of the audiovisual fiction developed recently. On the views of the Jews created by the Nazis we can underline Taika Waititi’s *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), in which the director himself plays the role of a cartoonish imaginary friend Hitler created by the mind of a young boy during the Second World War; this narrative effectively depicts the forms of characterization employed by the Nazis in order to dehumanize – and, subsequently, monsterize – the Jews as ridiculously exaggerated, in fact so deeply based on fantasy that even a ten-year-old eventually realizes how tendentious they are; also, the film capitalizes on the view of the audience to see how absurd the representation of the Jews are, whereas within the narrative, and during the war as well, the people under the influence of that monsterring perspective had a degree of alienation due to Nazi propaganda, one that fails to reach the film audience, who, as a consequence, sees such view of Jews as even more absurd. Another interesting instance to discuss this topic is *Men Against Fire* (2016), an episode of the Sci-Fi British television series *Black Mirror*, in which the main character is a future soldier who fights in a war against beast-like mutants but eventually realizes that the supporting sense-enhancing technology the troops use, also, literally, make them see their enemies as non-humanized, even though they are, in fact, just as human as the soldiers themselves.

2.2 MONSTROUS KNOWLEDGE

Recovering the topic of *teratology*, we may again ask the reason why, apparently, the differences to the norm tend to arouse feelings, probably related to fear, that instigate the observer to judge the observed as some sort of monster. Also, like in the case of teratology, the human mind seems to take interest in such subjects. As discussed earlier, in traces of unknown beings like dinosaurs or reports of never-seen animals, one could find elements of the concept of monster. However, as we learned what dinosaurs were and started to take note of every existing species of animal, the idea of an unknown menacing being was progressively cast aside. As human knowledge began to understand the existence of these beings, they were no longer monsters. The exaggerated stories of mysterious predators became legends, cultural representations of the tension and angst of their times. But if in some cases science cast light upon monsters and revealed them to be beings that could be understood, in others this progress of knowledge also started to make new inquiries. Lovecraft's quintessential fear of the unknown¹¹ (LOVECRAFT, 1973, p. 12) had not disappeared, only escaped to other shadowy areas.

After much struggle, the Medieval Era and its intolerant, dogmatic and retrogressive thinking, the very same that had justified mindless brutal clashes like the witch trials or the Crusades, had been finally abolished by the Enlightenment, which was preceded by the Renaissance humanism and the Scientific Revolution. These changes in the way of building human knowledge were fundamental and set the foundations to modern science. As the years went by, concepts that one could once not understand became clearer. However, the gigantic array of new possibilities offered by technology advances soon became, in its own way, frightening. Additionally, the Enlightenment inspired the return of Greco-Roman Classical ideals such as anthropocentrism, the beauty of even proportions and the appreciation of the human body; the representations of these ideals in the arts, and the notion of making arts available not only for an intellectual elite, but for everyone else, would contribute to a standard vision of the human body. Meanwhile, even though the French Revolution proposed progressive notions of liberal democracy and liberty, the violence of the conflicts it involved made the Enlightenment questionable due to its connection to the French movement. As a result, a movement of Counter-Enlightenment began to grow and, according to Asma, "to stress the

¹¹ "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (LOVECRAFT, 1973, p. 12).

negative consequences of ‘too much reason,’ too much science and not enough heart” (2009, p. 151). At this point it seems relevant to emphasize that the concept of Counter-Enlightenment discussed here is directed to the dangers of plunging deeply into science and the objection to the perfectness of the human body; I take such an advisement to be imperative due to the growing negationism of science that has been happening lately, so I directly address it here that through the present discussion on Counter-Enlightenment I do not intend to question the value of science, but only make use of discussions that are derivative of this topic; there is no benefit in discrediting science, as long as it is practiced with ethics: science can surely be frightening when we think that the same technology that fueled entire cities were also capable of vaporizing them as fast as it had never been seen, like it is the case of nuclear fission, power plants and atomic bombs.

The study of the human body eventually revealed the nature of its form. If the Roman Laws said that newborns with congenital deformities had to be sacrificed (ASMA, 2009, p. 41), and people thought that those represented divine punishment or portents of evil, now science could understand these cases as eventual anomalies of human physiological development. However, even though the diversity in shapes of the human body could now be scientifically explained, it still aroused the curiosity of the mass culture, as we can see through the existence of forms of entertainment like “freak shows.” The dualist notion of a human being born with congenital deformities and the possibility of seeing such a being as *human*, and yet attributing to them monstrous characteristics due to their unexpected difference, is what Asma calls the *scientific monster*. An example of this concept is Victor Frankenstein’s creature, which represents the feeling of anxiety regarding the progress of science. Asma calls Mary Shelley’s novel “the principal cautionary tale warning us that science can go too far” (2009, p. 152), and such description echoes the Counter-Enlightenment perspective that questioned excessive rationalism. The monster of Frankenstein can be seen as a human being through the notions of biology because he is composed of the same structures as we all do; on the other hand, he can also be seen as monstrous due to his unprecedented unnatural origins and non-normative proportions: he is very tall and something in his appearance makes people dislike him, fear him, a kind of difference that seems to come from the lack of proportion in his body that usually would not be seen in nature. Asma points out that *Frankenstein* (1994) is responsible for giving us the “tragic archetype of the misunderstood outcast” (2009, p. 12): the creature is born without being neither good nor evil, but is treated with so much hostility and prejudice due to his appearance that he fails to find solidarity anywhere, which results in aggressive actions as a response.

Conversely, in spite of his symmetric and seemingly friendly proportions, Victor Frankenstein is the one who in fact “commits the crime” of pursuing forbidden knowledge, thus trying to play God. Furthermore, he abandons his creation/offspring. However, to what extent can we call him a *monster*? According to Asma, the use of the term *monster* in such a case can be explained through understanding Victor Frankenstein’s wrongful actions as expressions of his *moral corruption*. As opposed to what we have already discussed in regard to religion, the practices of seeing as *spiritually deformed* those who followed different faiths or failed to act in accordance with God’s will, the case of moral corruption explains a tendency of seeing as monsters the perpetrators of actions that are, to some extent, culpable. In such a case, according to Asma, we are talking about a *criminal monster*. The author starts his approach with the way the word *monster* is used to refer to criminals as an epithet, then discussing several cases of extremely violent behaviors, like mass shootings, the Columbine case, for instance.

The way the word ‘monster’ is used in day-to-day language takes us back to some evolutionary aspects of the human being. Asma points out these characteristics by discussing how some experiments, particularly one conducted by Donald Hebb as a continuation of Darwinian theories, have elucidated the behavior of chimps in relation to snakes. Eventually, it is possible to reach the following understanding:

Experiments demonstrate that animals and humans respond to their earliest experiences by internalizing a cognitive classification system based on the creatures they regularly encounter. After a certain time, however, the classification system ‘solidifies’ into a cognitive framework, and any subsequently strange and unclassifiable encounter produces fear in the knower (ASMA, 2009, p. 184).

Such a process can explain evolutionarily the so frequent hesitation one may feel when facing unknown beings. The experiment conducted with chimps and snakes revealed that these apes, even when exposed to those reptiles for the first time, had extreme fear from them, but how could they, since it was the first time they saw one? According to the study, the chimp would have been exposed to different animals for some time, internalizing the differences seen in their day-to-day basis and creating a way of classifying them, but eventually such a way of classifying would become crystallized and, from that moment on, any received stimulus that failed to fall into this classification would produce fear. In this particular case, the fear of the snake would have been produced due to the morphology of the reptile being so radically different that it could not fit into the internalized classification of the chimp. Such a radical difference, as a consequence, arouses fear as a response. In a way, the elucidation of this cognitive process makes it easier to understand the resistance of accepting difference. Maybe the way our cognitive framework responds to seeing such extreme and violent crimes like the

Columbine High School Massacre is to fear it due to its radical difference to the patterns we once crystalized, just like in the case of the chimps and the snakes.

The notion of failure in categorization resulting in fear echoes Cohen's (1996) postulate that the monster defies easy categorization. That would partially explain the appeal of teratology and "freak shows": a deformed fetus and conjoined twins are challenges to our ability of categorizing the world, therefore we hardly remain indifferent to them; among the many feelings they might arouse we find fear, repulsion and attraction. Here, it seems suitable to discuss what Kristeva (1982) calls *abjection*, since such a concept is intertwined to the process of treating the other as monstrous. The author describes *abjection* as an intermediary level that stands between the notions of *objective* and *subjective*: the former is a point of view dissociated from the observer; whereas the latter is a form of addressing viewpoints intimately connected to the personal view of the observer. However, as Kristeva points out, *abjection* is a way of projecting to outside the inner perceptions of the self. According to Harper ([ca. 2010c]), the term is connected to the notions of 'casting off' and 'throwing away,' and the element 'ab' is related to its Latin meaning as a preposition, that stands to 'off' and 'away from.' Kristeva says that abjection is a feeling of disturbance of units like identity, order, system, and the author describes the recurrent movement of 'casting off' the abject. When Cohen (1996) says that the monster defies categorization, we may say that an observer who perceives such a monster projects his or her subjectivity, the feeling that this individual do not fit in the internalized patterns, in him – here, the monster acts as an 'object' –, which results in the feeling of *abjection*; as a consequence, the monster is 'cast off,' and the same may happen with entire groups. Kristeva also describes that the abject arouses paradoxical feelings of desire and worry, which evokes Asma's similar words about the monster. Similarly to Kristeva, as Asma (2009) points out, Carroll (1990) says that monsters often arouse, besides the feeling of threat, that of *disgust*, connecting to the horror reaction a sense of *impurity* felt by the observer; the impurity mentioned by Carroll is related to the concept of *interstitial entities*, and the author describes it as something that falls between what could be considered as 'normal' categories of being; to elucidate Carroll's (1990) vision, Asma (2009) cites blood, feces and spit, because those are things that dim the limits between what is 'me' and 'not me.' Carroll's view is in accordance with Kristeva's (1982) notion of *abjection*: the interstitial entities mentioned by Carroll are targets of abjection, they fail to fall into categories and, because of that, become outcasts. Besides, the notion of the monster as an *interstitial entity* provides explanation to why it is difficult to categorize, and therefore, to understand; also, such a view supports the feeling of fascination experienced by observers that encounter beings or ideas they cannot comprehend.

When discussing the *criminal monster*, Asma sustains that the shocking acts performed by those labeled *monster* by the media stem from either an emotional response to extreme feelings of rage or humiliation, or the complete lack of feelings at all. When discussing rage, Asma points out many aspects, especially Freud's considerations regarding the fact that humankind has essential inclinations toward aggressive behavior. In order to discuss that, some concepts of Freudian psychoanalytic theory have to be addressed:

[Freud's] psychoanalytic theory [...] proposes that one's early psychological life (the psyche) is dominated by the narcissistic pursuit of pleasure (the pleasure principle), whereas one's later psyche is more accommodated to a world indifferent to one's particular ego satisfaction (the reality principle) (ASMA, 2009, p. 188).

Here, Asma discusses Freud's notion that every living being follows the pursuit of pleasure due to the narcissistic impulse (FREUD, 1922). When a child is born, he or she will have the urge of wanting and having everything that seems to provide pleasure. Freud calls such drive the *Id*, and it represents our instinctual force of survival, the same that makes one who is hungry look for food or one who feels threatened to produce an aggressive response as a form of defense. According to Freud, a child, for example, is born dominated by the *Id*, impetuously looking for pleasure; however, as the infant faces continuous reprimands from their parents, which arouse in them the fear from the authority of the parent and also the fear of losing parental love, the desires from the *Id* suffer a process of *repression*, becoming internalized and eventually submerging into the subconscious: as the *Id* is internalized, gradually two other facets appear, the *Ego* and the *Superego* (FREUD, 1999). The *Superego* is a force that controls the impulses of the *Id*, and its existence seems to be related to the logic pattern followed by the reprimands of the parents and the experiences of the individual in the environment. The *Ego*, on the other hand, represents the conscious individuality of the person, the will responsible for making choices and the part of the personality that seems accessible to be understood.

Freud points out that the *psyche* is composed of two parts: the conscious, where we find the *Ego*; and the subconscious, in which the *Id* and the *Superego* are submerged (1999). In contrast to the conscious, the subconscious is an inaccessible part of the *psyche*, which can only be analyzed through hints it might show in some specific situations, such as dreams. In the aforementioned child example, as the *Id* is repressed, the *Ego* emerges, having the *Superego* as a form of restraining the *Id*, with both of them being conflicting forces fighting each other in the subconscious. Freud's conception that the human mind has a natural tendency to aggressiveness comes from the existence of the *Id*, which, when free from restraint, shows the primal side of human behavior, like an animal that does not hesitate in killing the enemy, even

if it is of its own species. The Superego is a component that favors living in a community because it usually represents ideals of equality: that killing, stealing and raping are wrong actions because they are *harmful* to others.

However, there are some factors that may hinder the activity of the Superego, like having the individual in scenarios in which rage or humiliation are present. We can consider this perspective by analyzing the following: a mass murder at a high school is surely a monstrous action, there is no doubt about that; but then, why are narratives like *Carrie* (1976) so appealing? Brian De Palma's adaptation of Stephen King's novel sets as one of its main goals to make the audience emphasize with Carrie, the main character, and struggle alongside her through all her ordeals, and as a prelude to the climax, we witness Carrie being victim of a revolting bullying prank, as she is crowned queen of the prom just to have pig blood spilled all over her, thus facing an audience that laughs at her. After the humiliation, Carrie falls under a state of surge and goes on a killing spree, and even though we then witness a mass murder, it also feels comforting. Following Asma's and Freud's theories, this strange feeling of relief when Carrie takes her revenge may be explained by a way of the audience to identify with the humiliation, and subsequent rage, of the character. This example elucidates the process described by Freud in which the restraints of the Id are hindered: even a reasonable person when subjected to a higher level of this kind of stress may end up releasing impulses from the Id in the form of violent behavior. Besides, those around the individual also serve as prospective targets for aggression (FREUD, 1961).

Similarly, there are other factors that, just like rage and humiliation, may contain the action of the Superego: different states of consciousness, like when under the effect of drugs; and cases in which the individual fails to understand sexual desires and ultimately represses them, like when a child suffers bullying for expressing affection for somebody of the same gender. There is also the case of children who were raised in adverse scenarios; if the parents are abusive, the child will end up with a Superego that is not powerful enough to constrain the Id as much as it should, or even not at all, and also a tendency of externalizing unmeasured aggression – which is, to some extent, a possible explanation for criminal activity. Another possibility pointed out by Freud is that of a too powerful Superego, resulting in strong tendencies towards self-punishment and guilt (FREUD, 1961).

Freud's ideas of the *psyche* may explain how a person could end up releasing the Id and performing acts that are not in accordance with social conventions, our laws, being considered as crime. The same logic is applied to those whose Id is so expressively set loose that results in heinous crimes. The failure of dealing with strong emotions is indicated as a possible

explanation for triggering these actions. However, another very recurrent character in mass media and popular culture is known as being unable to feel any emotion at all, and the reasons just discussed do not apply in this instance. That would be the case of what we call *psychopath*, and Asma points out that Hare (1999), after analyzing many cases of psychopathy, reports a set of distinctive symptoms, being the most important of these *lack of conscience* and *lack of empathy*. Furthermore, Asma discusses how the behavior of a psychopath represents a “robotic unemotional deviance” (2009, p. 218) and how the analysis of the topic of *humanity* presented in the film *Blade Runner* seems to fit this reasoning. As the author points out, the narrative is centered on differentiating human beings and replicants, who are androids physically identical to their human counterparts; aptly, the Blade Runners, those who hunt insurgent replicants, in order to identify them, use the Voight-Kampff test, a procedure in which signs of empathy are measured through the perceived pupil dilatation of subjects when they are exposed to emotion-inducing stimuli. The story brings us a strong metaphor of the relationship between empathy and humanity, and on the following, Asma argues that “since *human* is a zoological term, the real question is: What are the defining traits of a *person*? And what are the entitlements or rights that *personhood* entails?” (2009, p. 221). By bringing up this inquiry, Asma proceeds to discuss possible causes of psychopathology and further considerations on the relationship between empathy and personhood, but a definitive answer is never reached, and it is an understandable fact given the complexity of such an inquiry. However, the question itself elucidates much of our discussion on the concept of monster. In the end, Asma proceeds to analyze how the criminal monster is, in reality, dealt with by bringing up reports from Judge Brodsky (2009, p. 226), who is frequently involved in cases like those which, in the newspapers, are presented with monstrous epithets in the headlines.

Working as a judge must have made Brodsky see unimaginably extreme crimes. However, his point of view of the criminal monster is quite curious. According to him, the way mass communication tends to draw attention to violent criminals and picture them as monsters is an unhealthy manner of oversimplifying very complex quandaries. Of course, that does not mean that these criminals are innocents, and Asma makes it clear that relieving their culpability is not the intention of such discussions; however, Judge Brodsky claims that, in spite of the violent deeds, in many cases what he ultimately sees is the *person* behind the one a newspaper headline calls *monster*; besides, Brodsky states that he never doubted the humanity of the criminals. From this, Asma discusses the fact that the overdramatization of criminals, in the end, closes off real understanding. This view elucidates how the monsterring process of the other, ultimately, functions as a form of justifying the lack of intention of understanding this

other. Just like it is the case when a civilization monsterizes another as a way of making aggression to them more acceptable, the monstering process of criminals offers a release from the responsibility of trying to understand them; considering the great effort involved in trying to understand a complex topic, it is natural to expect most of the people to follow the easier path.

Asma goes on to say that Brodsky argues about the existence of two instances of monstrosity: a monstrous *deed* and a monstrous *person* (2009, p. 227). The former falls into the concepts we have already discussed of components that influence the agency of the restraint of primal impulses – like a drunk and angry person whose Superego is suppressed and, as a consequence, releases a violent, Id-driven behavior. The latter, on the other hand, in the pragmatic perspective offered by Asma’s discussion on Judge Brodsky’s experience, is connected to a legal concept called *malignant heart*, which is a way of perceiving *evil*. The chronic occurrence of the monstrous deed can also be seen externalized in the behavior of groups and institutions. According to Asma, this offers an explanation to the existence of grim episodes in history like the Holocaust. All the expressions of monstrosity discussed until now, if analyzed in a collective perspective, seem to be, in reality, part of macrostructures that influence the monstrous behavior.

The tendency of the human mind to interpret the world in terms of ‘us versus them’ and the ensuing monsterization of the other results in civilizations that, in the end, give rise to ominous aspects of humanity. There are places in our world where people lack basic needs like food and shelter, and such a scenario is a consequence of the social inequality produced by capitalist societies. On the other hand, there are places where the environment has too much wealth, which results in a population too attached to pleasure and appearance. Asma highlights how both scenarios are embedded in dehumanization (2009, p. 241), and in the latter case George Romero’s 2004 *Dawn of the Dead* provides an ideal example, inasmuch as it depicts a group of people trying to survive a zombie apocalypse by taking refuge in a shopping mall, all the while criticizing consumer’s society and displaying the pointlessness of the glorification of consumerism. Likewise, the same macrostructural phenomenon can be seen in practices like *torture*, which entails a relationship where the perpetrator hardly sees his/her target as human anymore, in a logic quite similar to that underlying acts of *terrorism* and *genocide*. The recurrent processes in the described scenarios are large groups of people that share perverted notions of others and banalized practices that involve humiliating and dehumanizing. Zimbardo (2007) offers us an elucidating example of the functioning of these macrostructures by comparing them to a “bad barrel” that produces “bad apples” – it is not an individual that passes on the own

monsterized view to another until it eventually reach an entire community; in instead, it is an entire “corrupted community” that contaminates each new member.

The concept of *monstrous societies*, however, may imply that, to some extent, every one of us is a monster. Ultimately, the concept of monster is a way of trying to celebrate and understand *difference*, and each time a monster is subjected to an analysis, the differences identified in his or her essence are what makes them monstrous, but the attempt to understand those, on the other hand, are what makes them *human*. In fact, if everyone is different, everyone is a monster; but, as Asma puts it: “When everyone is a monster, there will be no monsters” (p. 253), which leads to an idea that has been growing throughout our entire discussion – we are not concerned with what makes a person *be* a monster anymore, but rather with what makes one *seem* a monster (ASMA, 2009, p. 252); by extent, we may say that *monstrosity* is a point of view.

2.3 THE EVIL MONSTER

Asma points out that the terrible dimensions of the human capacity perceived in the form of the most heinous crimes we are aware of eventually shuts us down to the intention of trying to make sense out of them. Contemplating signs of such kinds of behavior, as discussed, instigates one to cast aside the monster, denying attempts of understanding them. On the other hand, Calder suggests that the same factors are also responsible for motivating the search for a way of understanding the concept of evil:

Since World War II, moral, political, and legal philosophers have become increasingly interested in the concept of evil. This interest has been partly motivated by ascriptions of ‘evil’ by laymen, social scientists, journalists, and politicians as they *try to understand and respond to various atrocities and horrors, such as genocides, terrorist attacks, mass murders, and tortures and killing sprees by psychopathic serial killers*. It seems that we cannot capture the moral significance of these actions and their perpetrators by calling them ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ or even ‘very very wrong’ or ‘very very bad.’ We need the concept of evil (2020, p. 1, emphasis added).

The author develops this topic by saying that, in fact, there are reasons to believe that the concept of evil may be the only form capable of addressing properly such atrocities. Similarly to Asma’s articulation, Calder mentions that the word ‘evil’ can be used to mean ‘something that cannot be explained,’ which could imply that such concept may not be beneficial to the understanding of this phenomenon; however, Asma suggests that the idea of ‘monster,’ which we are presently connecting to that of ‘evil,’ can serve as a “conceptual place-holder” (2009, p. 253), which makes it an effective tool in the process of understanding a complex aspect of the

world. Calder also proposes a differentiation between evil in broader and narrower senses, stating that his discussion is focused on the latter, which is characterized by “only the most morally despicable sorts of actions, characters, events” (2020, p. 1). According to the author, such form of evil is involved with moral condemnation, and therefore it is “ascribed only to moral agents and their actions” (p. 1). Also, Calder argues that the described form of evil seems to be the one meant when the word is used contemporarily, also specifically mentioning the legal context. This points out that, probably, the evil described by Calder here is connected to what Judge Brodsky called *malignant heart* and that Asma articulates with chronic forms of expression, those that eventually result in monstrous societies, a concept that is aligned with Calder’s discussion on *evil institutions*.

Stating the possible dangers that the concept of evil may offer, Calder uses as example how George W. Bush’s words saying that Iraq, Iran and North Korea represented ‘the axis of evil’ are likely to have inclined the people of the United States to be resistant to interacting with people from those places. Likewise, Scarre (2012) says the same in regard to Ronald Reagan’s use of the expression ‘evil empire’ to describe the Soviet Union. It is noticeable that in both cases presidents of the United States uttered such words, a factor that widens the reach of such statements and their consequences. The articulation of ‘evil’ being attributed to the other in these cases is similar to the monsterring process described by Asma and Cohen. Nevertheless, Calder also argues that understanding ‘evil’ is a way of preventing events and expressions identified as such of being repeated. The same can be said about the concept of monster: in the process of understanding how peoples and individuals have been monsterized throughout history, we grow awareness capable of preventing the recurrence of such harmful manifestations. Calder reminds us of Card’s discussion on intellectuals interested in abandoning the concept of evil (2002), in which she states that the task of understanding evil may be overwhelming. When articulating a view on moral conflicts, Hare calls the factor involved in a scenario, one similar to that described by Card, as “intellectual sloth” (1981, p. 39).

Calder proceeds on elaborating the concept of evil by saying that “It is universally accepted that to perform an evil action an agent must be morally responsible for what she does” (2020, p. 12); also, the author argues about the connection between evil and *harm*, saying that *causing* harm is not an essential property, but rather the *willingness* of causing it: if a terrorist group installs a bomb in a public place, but the damage is prevented due to efficient law-enforcement activity, it is reasonable to say that, even though no harm has been caused, the terrorists are evil. Also, another characteristic that Calder underlines as being distinctive in ‘evil’ is that of extremity, which separates it from mere ‘wrongdoing,’ and a concept that

elucidates such difference is what Arendt (1973) calls *radical evil* in order to analyze the horrors of the Holocaust: according to her, ‘radical evil’ is what changes the status of an ordinary ‘human being’ to that of a ‘*superfluous* human being.’ Arendt suggests this notion in need of a term that could capture moral concepts that others could not; and even though she borrows this term from Kant (2009), the ‘superfluous’ use is introduced by her, changing its meaning. As Calder argues about the characteristics of the kind of harm that could define an action as evil, he brings two definitions: *serious harm*, that describes the harm caused by evil actions as serious and excessive (KEKES, 2005) and that “interferes with the functioning of a person as a full-fledged agent” (KEKES, 1998, p. 217); and *intolerable harm*, that says that this kind of harm makes life not worth living from the point of view of the person whose life it is (CARD, 2002).

Analyzing moral responsibility, Calder refers to Thomas’s (1996) remark that an *evildoer*, as opposed to a ‘normal person,’ is not stopped by his or her moral sensibilities in the process of performing an evil act, a movement similar to the Freudian ideas of the Id overcoming the Superego. This is what Asma apparently means by stating that “[t]he criminal monster is just the waking dream, the nightmare realized. The psychopath is simply acting out all the taboo fantasies that the rest of us have learned to control” (2009, p. 212), which goes back to Calder’s claim that, in order to be evil, one must have the intention of translating a harmful thought into an action: it is not evil to feel intense or even extreme emotions, as long as the Superego is strong enough to prevent them from becoming something harmful. Developing Calder’s discussion on the fact that, in order to be evil, one must be morally responsible for his or her acts, we recover aspects of the inhibition of the action of the Superego, like in cases of drug abuse, for example. On the following, Calder sustains that, besides being morally responsible for his or her own acts, the actions of the agent must be *morally inexcusable*, a characteristic borrowed from Card (2010); an ‘excusable’ and seriously harmful action, for example, could be a person having to fatally injure an aggressor who threatens that person’s life.

In regard to moral responsibility, Calder points out three situations in which the attribution of evil is controversial: “(1) serious harms brought about by psychopaths; (2) serious harms brought about by individuals who have had bad upbringings; and (3) serious harms brought about through ignorance” (2020, p. 12). By saying that, the author argues about whether psychopaths are morally aware of their actions or not and, in a similar discussion, about what he calls ‘bad upbringings,’ a form of addressing the possibility of banalization of evil actions due to experiences during childhood and different problems in the development of the moral consciousness of the individual, similar to what Freud says about upbringings that result in too

lenient or too harsh Superegos; still on this matter, Wolf (1988) describes how people who have had bad upbringings are sometimes unable to have accurate understandings and judgement of normative and moral concepts for having been taught the wrong values.

Ignorance as a factor involved in seriously harmful actions, however, seems to be the more interesting of the three controversial situations cited by Calder: the author uses as example a scenario taken from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2003), in which Dorian shoots a gun into some bushes and ends up harming a person; is he responsible for the harm caused? Calder points out that, in this case, we should inquire whether there would be any reason to believe that somebody could be hiding in that bush or not: since Dorian, who shot the gun, is in a country estate, he should not have any reason to consider so; this way, Calder points out that, in such a case, ignorance could legitimately excuse causing unjustified harm. According to Card (2010), should we consider that that person hiding in the bush is unexpected and unpredictable in the described context, we could say that such presence is not *reasonably foreseeable*, and therefore, we may say that the action would not be evil, because the ignorance in this case could be excused; on the other hand, the case would be different if a person, for example, shot a gun with his eyes closed in a crowded public park – even if the perpetrator could be unaware that he may harm somebody, he has strong reasons to believe that he probably would, it was reasonably foreseeable. According to Calder, the last case described would be that of *self-deception*: if somebody were harmed, even though the agent was ignorant of the person being there, such ignorance resulted from the choice of the agent of closing his eyes, thus such ignorance is inexcusable; Calder argues that ignorance as a result of self-deception is a form of culpable ignorance. On this matter, we may also point out that the employment of tactics of self-deception may be also connected to Hare's concept of *intellectual sloth*: deliberately choosing to close his eyes before shooting in order to ignore the fact that he will probably harm somebody, the man can be, somehow, looking for ways of excusing his own responsibility, and that is nothing but the easy way out. *Intellectual sloth* is a possible factor in making him pursue such an alternative – dealing with the real responsibility would be too arduous a task.

Calder proceeds, then, discussing the concept of *evil institutions*, stating that it can refer to two distinct scenarios: an evil social practice, like genocide and slavery; and an evil group of individuals, like the Ku Klux Klan and Al Qaeda; however, Calder's analysis is restricted to the former, and the author highlights Scarre's (2012) debate on the latter for further reference. Calder says that, according to Card (2002, 2010), a social practice is evil if it is "reasonably foreseeable that intolerable harm will result from its normal or correct operation without justification or moral excuse" (CALDER, 2020, p. 19), which explains the attribution of 'evil'

to paradigmatic evil practices like genocide and slavery: when these are operated normally and correctly, they do, necessarily, result in *intolerable harm*, which means, as we have discussed, that they make life not worth living in the eyes of the victims. However, in order to develop Card's definitions, Calder states his own view that a social practice may be considered 'evil' if intolerable harm is an *essential component* of such institution (2009). In opposition, Scarre offers a view of evil institutions as groups of individuals – 'collective bodies' –, and the author borrows Kekes's (1998) notion of evil as "serious unjustified harm intentionally and culpably inflicted on sentient beings" (SCARRE, 2012, p. 74).

Whether a collective is evil or not is an inquiry to be addressed similarly to our previous debate on the attribution of 'evil,' being one of the few distinctive characteristics here the debate about imagining *collective intentions* as motivations to collective acts. Calder insists on analyzing forms of social practices as evil institutions because the author considers this form manageable through the use of individual notions of 'evil,' whereas evil collectives would not be susceptible to the same method: Calder and Scarre agree that the latter form of institution require thinking 'evil' as a collective expression, as opposed to the possibility of reducing it to the analysis of repetitions of the same individual 'evil.' Still on this matter, Scarre differentiates between *aggregates* and *conglomerates* as forms of collective bodies: 'aggregates' are unstructured groups formed spontaneously in which they aim to do the same, like people sharing the same screen in a film theater; 'conglomerates' are organized groups formed in order to achieve a goal or a purpose that belongs to the group as a whole, in which the participants distribute roles and tasks among themselves, like a football team trying to win a match – Scarre calls their common objective as *joint purpose*. Scarre points out that the case of evil aggregates would be possible to be analyzed as a projection of multiple evil individual actions, just like what Calder says about social practices; on the other hand, the same cannot be said about conglomerates, which is precisely the form in which the most paradigmatic evil institutions are presented. In fact, Scarre argues that "a great many of the worst instances of human inhumanity are the work of agents who self-identify with groups of one sort or another, and who conceive themselves to be acting on their behalf and in their name" (2012, p. 74), and such description seems to apply to what he calls 'conglomerates.'

The way evil collectives work is elucidated as Scarre describes their internal processes, but the statements of the author regarding the power of corruption exerted by the macrostructure on the individuals seem to be the most valuable to our discussion on evil. Scarre points out how the responsibility for determined actions is ultimately diffused in a collective: committing a crime by yourself surely feels wrong, but being part of a group in which many people are willing

to do the same makes it feel *less* wrong; the same applies to evil. Likewise, Scarre describes an effect called *moral insulation* (NAGEL, 1978), a kind of influence that makes the members of evil conglomerates think that they are only following orders or doing what they are expected to; as a result, committing evil actions becomes gradually more tolerable, and the moral of the individuals, more corrupted.

Furthermore, Scarre describes more mechanisms identifiable in the functioning of the evil conglomerate that are involved in making its members convinced that the institution they are part of is not evil. The author argues that even people with righteous moral values may eventually fall for the tempting distorted reality perceived through the lens offered by the evil institution. The first factor he cites is that evil institutions often deal with matters that are very influential on a certain individual or group: promoting white supremacy for farmers who recently lost slaves, for example; accepting the evil concept of genocide is much more easier for a person who sees in it a solution for his or her discontent. The second factor to be addressed is that of disfavoring influences that are external to the institution: several strategies can be cited here, like discrediting every journalistic sources and favoring only information provided from internal sources, making it easier to censor or suppress any event that could make one question the reasons supported by the institution; also, mutual support of the institution's monovision between individuals may possibly intensify the effect of favoring only internal sources of information, functioning as an endless cycle. Similarly, Scarre says that the third factor involved in corrupting the members is the creation of institutionalized notions that value mindless loyalty and obedience: in such a way, the members of the conglomerate are less likely of defying their leaders and questioning their own actions; this policy may be strictly mandatory or indirectly active, resulting in the feeling of moral obligation even when only among members. As the fourth and last factor, Scarre describes the approach of evil institutions of distributing roles and tasks in an isolated way that each individual may only be able to consider the consequences of his or her own specific task, being unable to see the bigger picture: consider a group trying to murder a person – member A lures the victim; B buys the weapon and brings it to C; member C is the one who commits the murder some time later and, in fact, he may be the only one who is actually aware that somebody was killed. The same could be said about the Holocaust: a person who drove the truck taking many people to an extermination camp may or may not have been really aware to be doing so. As a consequence, the individual is advised to focus on his or her own task, and such isolation to the final product of the bigger picture offers the advantage of evading the moral unease that could be caused if the evil action were to be dealt with directly.

The descriptions offered by Scarre of the functioning of evil institutions echoes Calder's (2020) discussion on *self-deception*: even though we have to consider the influence of the evil institution itself, part of the corruption of the individuals may be linked to their disposition of not acknowledging the truth. Scarre pointed out that these conglomerates often offer points of view that deal with matters that are important to the individuals; choosing to become a member of such institutions, then, can be seen as a form of, again, *intellectual sloth*: in spite of being evil, the institution also offers an easy answer to the problems of the individual, and accepting the described mechanisms of *self-deception* is somehow avoiding the responsibilities of their evil actions.

3 ANALYSIS

3.1 METHODS

The following analysis will be divided into three parts, each one of them addressing a different film by Guillermo del Toro, in chronological order from the least to the most recent. Each examination will be conducted qualitatively and descriptively, aiming to underline the most relevant connections that each film suggests with the present discussion of ‘monster.’ As explained in the Introduction, the films will be approached from the perspective of *cinetext* (HEATH, 1973), which means that they will be seen as multiple and simultaneous codes (ECO, 1978), currents of meaning that do not ask to be deciphered, but that evoke the development of multiple significations when analyzed alongside different instances of meaning, such as the social context of the film by its release, of the film audience,¹² etc. The chronological order is motivated by the intention of understanding the way the topic of the monster progresses throughout the films: such a discussion is expected to have grown gradually more complex as the years went by, accompanying the expansion of the discourses; given that the topic of monstrosity seems to be recurrent and significant in Guillermo del Toro’s production – see Mayer (2020) for more on this discussion –, and particularly in these three films, it is natural to expect the scrutiny of this philosophical theme to become wider and more mature.

The films will be analyzed through the close observation of characteristics like narrative structure, plot points, aesthetics, dramatic approaches, creative choices, etc., making use of descriptions of important scenes and frames, the latter being sometimes reproduced along the text. The underlined characteristics, then, will be compared to many of the concepts discussed in the Theoretical Background. Furthermore, after considering the aspects of each film individually, the three films will be analyzed as a group, in the Conclusion, in order to address directly the meanings that stand out from their interactions, as opposed to their isolated interpretations.

¹² This is a way of addressing film as text through the models of interpretation proposed by Dascal (1992) and discussed by Koch (2011).

3.2 *THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE* (2001)

Taking place in 1939 Spain, *The Devil's Backbone* (TDB) tells the story of a young boy called Carlos as he arrives at an orphanage. The man who brought him there, Ayala, who is said to be his tutor, asks Carmen, the headmistress of the institution, to take care of the kid, and tells her that his father died fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, and that Carlos is not aware of this yet. Carmen accepts, in spite of mentioning that the institution is running low on funds and that one more kid to provide for will make things even more difficult. From this moment on, we follow Carlos as he gets to know his new home and the people that live there, like some of the other few orphans, like Jaime, Gálvez and 'Owl', and some of those who help Carmen in taking care of the children and their education, like Dr. Casares, who also works as a medical doctor, Conchita, who is a teacher, and Jacinto, who acts as sort of a caretaker. The building is secluded, with the nearest town said to be one day away, and the surrounding landscape conveys an arid and relentless atmosphere. In the middle of the courtyard there is a bomb (Image 1) which had been dropped not long before and that, for some reason, never exploded; the children say it has been defused, but they also claim to be able to hear beatings from its inside, like of a heart.

Image 1 – The bomb in the courtyard.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

The kids talk about comics, drawings, adventures, and eventually Carlos hears rumors about a ghost they call 'the one who sighs.' Also, when Carlos is assigned to his bed – which, in this orphanage, is numbered –, he learns that that bed used to belong to a boy named Santi, who has recently disappeared.

As the story progresses, we learn that Carmen is a widow, that her deceased spouse used to be the headmaster of the institution, and that he was an intellectual who defended progressive and democratic ideas; she states that, after dying, he had left her to stand for his ideals by herself. Carmen's past provides background to explain why she and Dr. Casares seem to be favoring the Republican side of the Civil War, and such political position is reinforced by their relation of friendship with Ayala – the man who brought Carlos to the orphanage –, who is openly fighting for this side and is even ultimately executed for it; also, we learn that Carmen keeps gold ingots inside a safe, and that those are used to finance the Republican cause; these factors imply the possibility that maybe the bomb in the courtyard was a failed Nationalist attack to the institution motivated by suspicions of alliance to the Republicans.

Moreover, in Carlos's first night in the orphanage, after spilling the water of the dormitory, he is challenged by Jaime to go to the kitchen get some more, even though leaving the bed during the night is not allowed; Carlos accepts the challenge, but claims that Jaime would not have the guts to go with him; as a result, they go together. As the boys sneak through the area in order to reach the kitchen, the presence of Jacinto, the caretaker, lingers around, arousing fear of the punishment they could suffer in case of being caught. As they reach the kitchen, however, Jaime fills his jug of water first and tells Carlos he would be waiting outside; in the meantime, Carlos is alone in the room, and suddenly some metallic objects fall to the ground, causing noise and drawing Jacinto's attention, who goes to the kitchen in order to verify the place. In spite of almost being caught, Carlos succeeds in hiding from Jacinto and witnesses as the caretaker tries to open a safe in the room without success. After Jacinto leaves, Carlos stops hiding and is attracted by sighs that had seemed to draw the caretaker away; the boy is led to a basement where there is a large cistern filled with dirty water, and there he hears steps. Judging it to be the ghost he heard about, Carlos tries to communicate with him. Even though Carlos sees the ghost just for a brief instant, this is the first moment in the film in which this supernatural entity is clearly presented; and as opposed to what Carlos sees, the ghost is openly shown to the audience, away from the boy's gaze; curiously, Santi, the ghost boy, seems to be hiding from Carlos, trembling, as if he was afraid (Image 2). Eventually, we receive information that may imply that Santi, in this scene, was afraid because he may have thought that, instead of Carlos, the person in the basement was the one who killed him. Besides, it is pertinent to discuss the consequences of the choice of presenting Santi in a position of frailty: in spite of his supernatural essence, the fact that Santi is shown on the screen as being afraid softens a possible threatening aura, one that was to be expected from a ghost, a type of character that usually arouses fear; as a consequence, it is much easier to feel empathy for him, which means that,

even though Guillermo del Toro presents us a deformed child, a ghost, a monstrous entity, the fact that such a character is depicted as being afraid is, actually, a way of humanizing him, in a process of *de-monsterization*.

Image 2 – Santi, a ghost who fears the living.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

As a response to Carlos's attempts of communication, Santi, in between frightful sighs, utters a warning, "many of you will die," (THE DEVIL'S, 00:29:50), which could also be interpreted as a threat. Upon hearing that, Carlos becomes fearful and runs away hastily, ultimately being caught by Jacinto. Santi's warning in this scene and the fear aroused in Carlos as a response echoes Asma's (2009) trope of the *misunderstood outcast*: Santi is a monstrous figure that hides in the basement (outcast), and Carlos's perception of his warning as a threat could be seen as a misunderstanding, because the ghost was probably just trying to warn the boy, one just like himself was when still alive.

Santi is the ghost the kids call 'the one who sighs' despite the fact that they did not realize it; eventually, Carlos becomes aware of the connection between the kid who disappeared on the same day that the bomb was dropped and the mysterious presence that lingers in the basement. Being a ghost, Santi is a visual representation of the limit between life and death, and his paradoxical state of being dead and alive at the same time qualifies him as an interstitial entity; the visual emphasis to the bloody wound in Santi's forehead (Image 2), besides calling attention to the fact that he is a ghost, also echoes the examples of feces and spit cited as we discussed Carroll (1990) and Kristeva (1982), because just like these things, it makes unclear the limit between "what is me" and "what is not me," being the blood a part of the human body, something that should stay under the skin, but is projected outward acquiring a position of in-

between; the character defies categorization, fitting Cohen's (1996) postulate. Moreover, Asma's (2009) panorama of the concept of 'monster' through time offers possibilities of reading Santi as a monstrous figure, especially when we see him as an expression of the unknown nature of death, just like very often we see in narrative roles of other ghosts.¹³ As I stated elsewhere (2020), a way of corrupting the image of an ordinary body is the *deformation*: the wound in Santi's head is one of many uncommon elements that extract him from a 'natural' configuration and moves him to that of 'different,' similarly to what Asma (2009) describes in regard to the Roman Laws, in which it was said that a father should 'put to death' a newborn who had a form that was different from that of 'members of the human race,' which pointed out the connection between monstrosity and deformity, be it a congenital characteristic, like in the case of a hermaphrodite, or that of an acquired disability, like a severed limb.

The contrast between normality and monstrosity through normative body shapes may also be linked to the revival of Greco-Roman views of body perfection in the arts during the Enlightenment. The deformation as a form of monsterization can also be identified in Carmen (Image 3), the headmistress of the orphanage, due to her disability: even though it is not explained how, the narrative presents us the fact that she lost one of her legs; therefore, in order to be able to walk, Carmen wears a prosthetic leg.

Image 3 – Carmen.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

Most of the time, Carmen wears a dress that hides her disability, so the only hint of it is the fact that she also uses a cane to walk. However, though her disability does not make her threatening,

¹³ Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is a good example, especially in the case of the Ghost of the Christmas Yet to Come, that is surrounded by a gloomy and grim atmosphere.

it can be interpreted as a symbol of a woman in a position of authority, after all, she is the headmistress of the orphanage, and if, still in the 21st century, a woman may not be taken seriously in such a position, in 1939 that view pervaded by machismo was even more evident. Carmen's disability is a characteristic that seems very relevant in the narrative, since it is presented in the first scene she appears: Carmen, sitting, talks to Dr. Casares, who is standing; the first shot in which Carmen appears is a close-up, but right after that there is a shot of her prosthetic leg, showing the movement of her hand in order to unlock a mechanism; then, she stands up and the scene ends. The shot focusing on her leg in the scene she is introduced highlights the importance of this detail to her as a character; besides, the fact that the first action of the character in the film is to stand up hints to possible allegories. The discussion regarding Carmen and her position of authority is also pointed out in another scene in the beginning of the film, in which she talks about accepting Carlos or not: Ayala says that her deceased spouse was a man who supported the Republican cause and that he was a brave man; as an answer, she tells him "Oh, no! I am the brave one!" (THE DEVIL'S, 00:09:04) which reassures her independence and assertiveness being in a position that once belonged to a man. Therefore, if women in positions of authority were once monsterized as witches, having a female character that is disabled in the same context is certainly not arbitrary. Just like women struggle to stand as equals in the same context as men, Carmen, in order to exert her functions as headmistress, needs the support of her prosthetic leg and her cane, which are, interestingly, two phallic symbols. In this sense, we may say that Carmen is a woman in a position of authority but that, for being a woman, stands as a symbolically emasculated individual; however, as the character arms herself with her phallic symbols, two objects that make her able to, physically, stand up, she defies that status of emasculation, fitting the role of authority that she needs to play, succeeding her deceased spouse, a man.

Still in regard to the relation between the phallus and authority, we may discuss some aspects about Dr. Casares. There is a scene in which he is treating a cut in Carlos's face, and the two characters are in a place that seems to be Casares's office. As Casares treats him, they talk, and among the topics discussed by them is that of the Devil's backbone, from where the film takes its title (Image 4). Dr. Casares shows Carlos some jars in which there are fetuses stored, and these fetuses have a particular type of malformation that is a spine that is projected outward of the body, in a way that it is visible for an outside observer.

Image 4 – The Devil’s Backbone.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

According to Casares, those fetuses have what is called the ‘Devil’s backbone,’ a type of congenital condition that, rumors say, occurs to those that should never had been born; since the story takes place in times of conflict due to political tensions, the ongoing Spanish Civil War, it is natural to think that, maybe, the way the concept of the Devil’s backbone is introduced in the narrative is a form of talking about how, frequently, children are born in threatening, oppressive environments, just like that one in which Carlos is spending his childhood in the film. Besides, having this congenital deformity is a way of becoming a monster, and if oppressive environments make it so that children should not be born, we may argue that it means that such environments may be creating monsters; such a claim recovers Asma’s (2009) discussion on the criminal monster and the possibility that, even with some genetic predisposition to psychopathy, bad upbringings and traumatic events may be the real triggers for a person to become a criminal. In the end, it is not hard to agree that kids should not be born in such contexts, because nobody should have to deal with, and be raised in, periods of trouble like that.

On the other hand, Casares also talks about the liquid in which the fetuses are submerged, which is called ‘limbo water,’ that has been there for decades and has rum and spices in its composition; Dr. Casares mentions that people believe that drinking that liquid may help curing illnesses, like blindness and kidney ailments and, more specifically, it may cure sexual impotence; therefore, he commercializes it, taking advantage of such a delusional belief in order to earn money to provide for the orphanage. Casares discusses how so much tension and fear all over Spain due to the conflicts are constant sources of uncertainty, making people risk trying so debateful alternatives such as a miraculous liquid like ‘limbo water.’ The scene

ends with Casares offering a sip of the water to Carlos, who denies it; just after that, Casares sips from the water himself. This scene gives us a direct addressing of teratology in the film: including deformed fetuses in the narrative is a way of approaching the topic of monstrosity. Also, the described rumor of the limbo water curing sexual impotence underlines the connection of monstrosity to ways of dealing with authority, like Asma (2009) described. Some time later in the story, we learn that Dr. Casares has a relationship with Carmen but he is not able to fulfil his role as a partner in its entirety for being sexually impotent. Besides, we also learn that Carmen has constant sexual relations with Jacinto as a way of satisfying herself, despite the fact that Jacinto grew up in the orphanage, which makes Carmen a mother figure to him, to some extent, and therefore, resulting in a form of incestuous desire. Jacinto is aware that Casares is impotent, and eventually provokes him saying that he is the one who has to satisfy Carmen since the doctor cannot; such a scene puts Casares in a position of symbolic emasculation and humiliation. However, even though Casares is presented as someone willing to try the miraculous and controversial solution of the limbo water to deal with his impotence, and in spite of being humiliated by Jacinto, he eventually arms himself with a shotgun in order to protect the orphanage from Jacinto. Casares's shotgun, just like Carmen's prosthetic leg and cane, is a way of abandoning the status of emasculation and acquiring authority. Another interesting point here is the way of presenting the deformed fetuses with a connection to magic, because the limbo water is supposed to cure; such a point of view is similar to how mass culture would be interested and fascinated in people that would stand out for their differences, like when they would go to freak shows or hear legends about incredible creatures. Furthermore, when Casares mentions that those who have the Devil's backbone were said that should never have been born, we may also see it as a symbol that children should not grow up in violent scenarios such as the Spanish Civil War; in fact, nobody should. This vision is reinforced when we consider those fetuses as monsters and align them to the last of Cohen's (1996) postulates, that say that, in the end, monsters exist in order to ask their creators the reason why they exist; why those children should never have been born? The answer may be 'because there is a conflict.' However, the real question, then, becomes: 'Why is there such a conflict?'

Jacinto (Image 5) is a character that grows progressively more menacing throughout the narrative. In the beginning, he seems to be no more than an unpleasant person. However, as the story goes by, we learn how resentful he is about the orphanage, that he hates that place. Still in the beginning of the film, he tells Conchita that he is ashamed of the 15 years he spent there and that, when he was still a kid, he would stare at the sky and dream of becoming rich and buying the orphanage, just so he could tear it all down. If some kind of authority was expected

from him because he is the caretaker of the place, being one of those responsible for maintaining the order in the institution, after some time it is possible to realize that he goes well beyond that when using his power, abusing it.

Image 5 – Jacinto.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

There are two major turns in the way this character is depicted on the screen: first, it is when we learn that he was the one responsible for the death of Santi; and second, it is when it becomes clear that he wants to steal the gold from the orphanage and that he will do whatever it takes to achieve that, which includes killing people, including children, and setting the place where he grew up on fire. Jacinto may be pointed out as a way of symbolizing the unmeasured use of authority, like what we see in dictatorial governments like the one that would be declared in Spain in the same year the story of the film takes place. A major element that contributes to such an analogy is a photograph that Jacinto keeps of his family, where it is possible to see him still a baby alongside his mother and father; he became an orphan not much longer after that. In this photo, baby Jacinto is seen *blurred*: according to him, he is blurred in the picture because he could not stay still; such a characteristic, of movement in opposition to stillness, can be a hint that, being with his family, Jacinto was excited, happy. This photo echoes a line from a narration that is presented both in the beginning and ending of the film, one that starts with “What is a ghost?” and discusses possible definitions to this kind of supernatural entity; one of the concepts discussed in this narration is that a ghost could be seen as “An emotion, suspended in time. Like a blurred photograph” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:01:39), which could imply that, symbolically, Jacinto could be seen as a ghost, an embittered shadow of the happiness he once had and lost along with his parents. Moreover, another point regarding ‘ghosts’ addressed in

the narration is that it could be seen as “A tragedy doomed to repeat itself time and again” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:00:55), which could be referring to dictatorial regimes, violence and wars, and Jacinto serves as a character that embodies the representation of such conflicts, and, as I stated elsewhere (2020), fitting Cohen’s (1996) postulate that says that the monster can serve as “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (p. 4).

When Jacinto faces Carmen as he tries to steal the gold of the orphanage, she says “Of all the orphans, you were always the saddest. The lost one. A prince without a kingdom. The only one who was really alone” (THE DEVIL’S, 01:03:16), which states that Jacinto was a lonesome person, usually unable to create bonds with other children. That may be a way of establishing his connection to the power being centered in an individual in opposition to a community in which many people collaborate, sharing the power equally. Maybe Jacinto happened to not find a group of friends during his childhood in order to, together, survive the oppressive environment. There are some cases in which we see a possible comparison of Jacinto to Jaime: some of them are that they share the same initial letter and that Jaime seems to be older than Carlos and the other orphans, which means that he spent some more time there, like Jacinto, who lived there for 15 years. When Carlos arrives at the orphanage, Jaime has some mean attitudes toward him, like a bully; the challenge Jaime poses to Carlos of going to the kitchen during the night is related to that. Such attitudes may be Jaime’s way of reproducing whatever was once done to him. However, as opposed to Jacinto, Jaime eventually succeeds in becoming part of a group. That may have been the decisive moment that made the difference for him not to become a person like Jacinto: if Jaime eventually managed to collaborate with others to overcome the environment, maybe Jacinto did not, and as a result, cracked. Furthermore, one of the clearest scenes to compare Jacinto to a monster is when he tries to reinforce his own authority toward Conchita, who is defying him. Realizing that she will not obey him anymore, Jacinto stabs her with a knife, which results in her death; however, Conchita struggles to utter her last words to him: “You’re an animal” (THE DEVIL’S, 01:24:58). This is a way of dehumanizing Jacinto, comparing him to a beast and underlining his lack of *personhood* as a result.

The discussions of Asma (2009) and Cohen (1996) of the monster as a portent, a divine or ill omen, as the etymology of the word hints, find a great example in Santi, since one of the most relevant actions of the character to the story is, indeed, to bring Carlos an alert to possible dangers: “Many of you will die” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:29:50). Besides, the name ‘Santi’ is an acronym of the word ‘saint,’ which suggests possible readings of this character as a divine entity, like a guardian angel, for instance. As we learn more about the ghost throughout the

narrative, we discover that, on the day in which the bomb was dropped, a stormy evening, Santi – who was still alive – and Jaime were in the basement looking for snails, and hearing noises from upstairs, Santi decides to go check, which resulted in him witnessing Jacinto trying to open the safe in the kitchen, just like what happened to Carlos – however, unlike Carlos, Santi was spotted by Jacinto; Santi tried to run away, going back to the basement and telling Jaime to hide, but is ultimately caught by Jacinto. Trying to intimidate Santi for fear that he could reveal his secret, the caretaker beats the boy, accidentally pushing him against a stone wall, and the impact injures badly his head; Santi falls to the ground in convulsions, and even though Jacinto appears to be slightly regretful of what he has done, he decides to tie the boy up and throw him into the cistern (Image 6), leaving Santi to die and eliminating the risk of having his secret revealed.

Image 6 – The cistern in the basement.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

Jaime, who witnessed the scene, tries to help his friend, but fails to save him for being unable to swim. Santi's background presents characteristics that make him, also, a good example of what Cohen (1996) calls *monster of prohibition*: Santi haunts the basement, the place where he died, which functions as a way of keeping other kids away from there, protecting them from the same fate; the story of the ghost also serves as a cautionary tale of what may happen to those who fall victim to the oppressive self-centered individual, like Jacinto, a symbol of the fascist menace throughout 1939 Spain that stands in opposition to the democracy, and that would not hesitate in killing people in order to *silence* them, like what Jacinto did to Santi; Jacinto's crime represents how the abuse of power and authority may lead to the violation of human rights, like

it is the case of murder. Similar to Santi, the bomb that lies in the courtyard serves as a portent as well, having its own ghost-like aura.

Even though the narrative of TDB happens almost entirely restricted to the orphanage building, the way such environment is composed on the screen suggests strong comparisons to the reality of Spain at the time, not exactly to the historical facts per se, but to the clashing tensions of the individual-centered autocracy – the Nationalist, fascist side – versus the ideal of nation as a community in which each individual plays a smaller but equally relevant part in political decisions – the Republican side, in defense of the democratic Constitutional-based regime that was in operation until the coup that started the Civil War in 1936; in many occasions, the orphanage proposes a symbol of a community living in an oasis in the middle of the desert, a safe haven of democracy in opposition to the fascism that is taking over Spain, and that, still in the year of 1939, would establish definitely a nondemocratic regime that would only be surmounted in 1975, with the death of Francisco Franco, the dictator; such a symbol of community, in spite of being addressed as expressions of *communism* by antagonist characters throughout the narrative, seems to represent *democracy*.

However, the orphanage does not seem a welcoming place. In fact, the way it is presented hints to its similarity to an actual prison: its geographical isolation; the attribution of numbers to the children; Carmen's report that some boys had escaped from there, and even a line in which she says "There are no bars here. This is not a prison" (THE DEVIL'S, 00:13:58), seem to invite to the comparison – although paradoxically, in the last example –, just like the fact that Carlos is in possession of a copy of the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, in which the imprisonment of the main character represents a relevant and emblematic portion of the story. In this sense, the orphanage seems to be depicted as a threatening environment, a dark and gloomy place, intolerably hot by the day and ominously cold during the night, filled with tension of the underlying war that may reach at any moment those in that community; and yet, the bomb that rests on the courtyard serves as a reminder – another portent – that everyone around it could be already dead if it had not failed to work properly. On the other hand, in spite of any unfavorable aspects of such a place, it still represents a refuge to the war, and throughout the narrative, Carlos and his friends slowly learn not to fear each other or the environment in order to overcome hostilities as a group. We may even say that the orphanage can be seen as a monsterized place (Image 7); however, as the narrative progresses, their relation with this place becomes different, and the location that used to seem menacing slowly grows friendly, eventually becoming an ally, a process that equally happens to Santi.

Image 7 – The orphanage is a monstrous ally.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

Comparing the orphanage to a prison is a way of monsterizing it, and it is interesting that most of the comparisons that do that in the story happen closer to the beginning of the film; on the other hand, when the children learn how primitive hunters would work together in order to overcome a bigger threat, it is the same monstrous environment that provides the knowledge that will eventually lead to their survival. Similarly, the seclusion of the place and its architecture that resembles a prison are, also, characteristics that contribute to its good aspects as a defensive structure: the bars that may prevent people from running away are the same that protect them from possible invaders. The duality of a prison as incarceration versus a form of protection seen here can be compared to what happens in *The Walking Dead*: one of the story arcs in the comic book has the group of survivors from a zombie apocalypse to take refuge in a prison; the arc is properly entitled *Safety Behind Bars*.

Even though the Spanish Civil War is often said to have presented a dispute between fascism and communism, TDB does not seem to look for a way of polarizing these political views, choosing instead to create a complex and plural panorama of tensions; this narrative does not try to depict neither fascism or communism as inherently good or bad – in accordance with reality, in which there is no black or white, only grayish areas. However, the opposition of community versus individual is, indeed, much developed, and it seems to imply a commendation to constitutional democracy as opposed to dictatorial regimes, a vision aligned to the contemporary progressive notions of human rights. As a result, the narrative establishes an axis of morality that seems to comprise a spectrum with a community working together at one end, and, at the other, an individual overpowering others for self-interest; the latter, then, acts as a representation of the oppressive authority presented by the war, whereas the former

stands for a population trying to survive this conflict. As a way of representing that, we have two mirroring scenes throughout the film: while the orphanage slowly transforms into an ally for Carlos and his friends, we witness as they have a class about prehistory, in which Carmen tells them that in ancient times humankind needed to work together, organizing and collaborating, in order to be able to overcome animals like mammoths, which were much stronger than them; Carmen shows them an illustration in which a group of primitive humans, using spears, hunt a mammoth; the prehistoric scenario described in this class emulates what Asma (2009) says about humankind trying to conquer the environment in a dualism of predator and prey; in such a logic, the mammoth can be seen as an *ancient monster*. Furthermore, the class scene is recovered later in the narrative, when Jacinto invades the orphanage again, which is now destroyed, in order to steal the gold; this time, however, Carmen and Dr. Casares are already dead, so the children have to face him themselves (Image 8).

Image 8 – Jacinto is pierced.



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*.

Santi, of whom they had been afraid of until then, is now an ally, just like the orphanage, and the ghost asks the children to bring Jacinto down to the cistern so he can have his revenge. The kids lure Jacinto to the basement and arm themselves with handmade spears, engaging in a fight with him. Carlos and his friends manage to pierce Jacinto many times, wounding him, just like the primitive humans would do to the mammoths; as they reproduce what they learned in class, Jacinto is put in the position of the ancient monster they are facing. Besides, the use of spears, phallic symbols, is a form of losing the status of symbolic emasculation the kids had throughout the narrative for being weaker and younger than Jacinto, and penetrating him with their spears is a way of, also, symbolically emasculating and deforming him. After wounding Jacinto, the

children push him into the cistern, where Santi embraces him to his death (Image 9). Regarding the cistern, it is yet interesting to notice the similarity between the color of the water and the ‘limbo water,’ as if the cistern were a form of mirroring the deformed fetuses that are kept in jars; as a result, Jacinto and Santi become symbolically equals to the children who had the Devil’s backbone type of deformity, and therefore, “should never had been born.”

Image 9 – “Jacinto. Bring him to me.”¹⁴



Source: Digital copy of *The Devil's Backbone*

3.3 PAN'S LABYRINTH (2006)

Guillermo del Toro’s great breakthrough in international cinema happened with the film *Pan’s Labyrinth* (PL), a narrative that tells the story of a young girl named Ofelia as she moves with her pregnant mother to a mill in the countryside. The film is set in 1944 Spain, as the initial letterings underline, a year in which the Spanish Civil War has already ended and the country is under a dictatorial regime led by Francisco Franco; however, there still are troops fighting for the Republican side trying to resist the already established fascist government. The reason why Ofelia and her mother are moving to the mill is the fact that it is a Nationalist military post under the command of Captain Vidal, a man who is currently having a relationship with Carmen, Ofelia’s mother, and who is the father of the baby that she is carrying. As they approach their new home, Carmen asks Ofelia to call Vidal ‘father,’ even though the child’s behavior suggests that she is not keen on getting to know the new stepfather. As soon as Ofelia arrives at the mill area, she notices some strange stones and statues that suggest that there once

¹⁴ This line is uttered by Santi (THE DEVIL’S, 01:29:25).

were some ancient buildings around. Besides, after finding a fragment of a statue with an eye engraved on it and putting it back to where it seemed to belong, Ofelia finds a strange insect, a mix of a stick bug and a grasshopper, that starts following her (Image 10).

Image 10 – An insect-like fairy.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

In spite of its insect-like appearance, Ofelia sees this being as a fairy. In this regard, the first image the film presents of Ofelia is of her reading a book of fairy tales during the car trip to the mill (Image 11). Throughout the narrative, accordingly, it is possible to understand that the girl really likes this kind of story and that she has already read a lot of them.

As Ofelia and her mother approach the mill, the girl eventually goes a separate way and reaches a large labyrinth located nearby. At its entrance there is an arc in which there is the statue of a faun's face with an open mouth (Image 12). Ofelia enters the labyrinth briefly, but Mercedes, a woman who works at the mill, finds her and gets her out of there, warning her not to go there because it is easy to get lost. Regarding the design of the labyrinth entrance, we may point out a possible intersection of the faun's face to Cohen's (1996) discussions of the *monster of prohibition*, as if the figure of the faun were there filling the same role as monsters that were drawn on the edges of maps: to ward off people, as if the faun were a guardian of the entrance of the labyrinth. The wide-opened mouth of the statue, added to the high position it is situated, besides, seems to convey an unwelcoming and oppressive feeling; however, we must also consider the faun's head as possibly being some kind of gargoyle – a statue of a monstrous figure used decoratively, sometimes located at the top of churches as a way of reminding people of the evil that religion protected them from –, or a figurehead, those statues that could be seen at the bows of ships and that would often function as protection charms.

Image 11 – Ofelia really likes fairy tales.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Image 12 – Pan's Labyrinth.



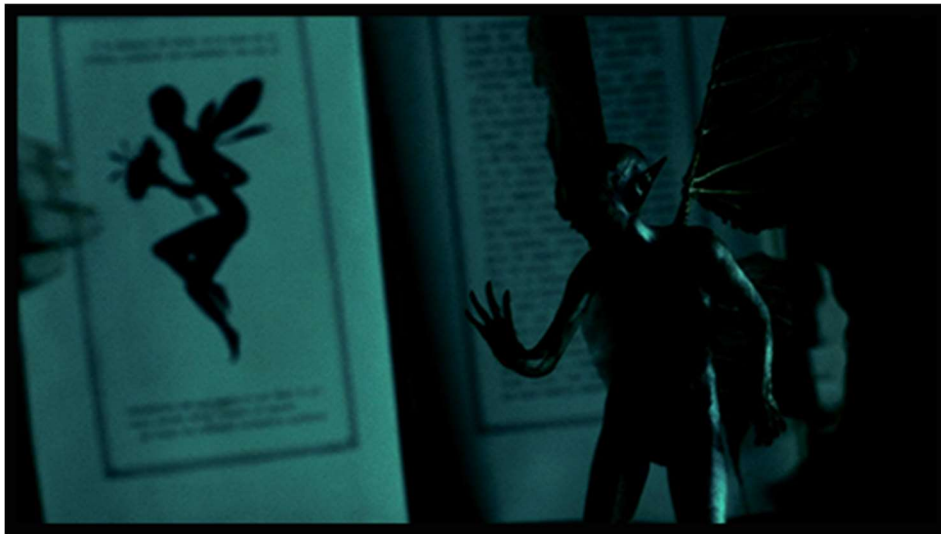
Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Figureheads, however, are usually representations of deities – their use by the Romans, for example –, which is closer to a visual of idealistic perfection than the grotesque forms of gargoyles, but we could also mention the *carrancas*, a similar decoration used in Brazilian culture that shares characteristics of both gargoyles and figureheads: they are monstrous heads that would be used in boats through the São Francisco river in order to provide protection from evil spirits; as the years went by, the use of *carrancas* became also common inside houses, facing the entrance, as a form of protection as well. The figure of the faun at the entrance of the labyrinth could be compared to a *carranca* because it is monstrous, arousing fear, but it could also represent a deity, Pan, like it is mentioned in the English title of the film, that is the Greek god of nature, providing protection as a result. The duality of the faun, of being a god and a

monster at the same time, is also in accordance with the idea of nature: it is beautiful and miraculous, creating amazing landscapes and an incredible multitude of life forms; and yet it can be mercilessly destructive, being responsible for earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and many other natural disasters. These notions suggest that the faun is a representation similar to Asma's (2009) *religious monster*, a concept used by humankind to understand the powerful duality of nature, like the Leviathan and the Behemoth.

Ofelia and Carmen, her mother, settle themselves and join Vidal. Eventually we get to know that in the woods around the mill there is a group of Republican rebels hiding, and that one of the main occupations of Vidal's post has been to locate it in order to kill them. We are also presented to a character called Dr. Ferreiro, who is a medical doctor called to look after Carmen and her pregnancy. On their first night at the mill, before falling asleep, Ofelia, who was reading her fairy tales, notices the insect she befriended is in her room. The insect approaches her and sees the illustration of a fairy in the book, suddenly shape-shifting into that same appearance (Image 13).

Image 13 – Acquiring the body shape of a traditional fairy.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

After that, Ofelia seems even more interested in her new friend, and follows the fairy, who leads her out of her room and into the labyrinth. Together, they reach the center of the maze, where there is a descending spiral set of stairs, which Ofelia goes down. By the end of the stairs, the bottom of an ancient mossy grotto, Ofelia finds another statue similar to the one she found during the day. As she looks around, eventually the fairy interacts with a static figure that suddenly starts to move, which reveals itself as a talking faun, a humanoid being with horns and legs like those of a goat (Image 14).

Image 14 – “I’ve had so many names, that only the wind and the trees can pronounce.”¹⁵



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

The faun greets Ofelia and tells her that she is Moanna, the long-lost princess of a hidden underground realm, and that centuries ago her father, the king, built many portals all over the world of the surface hoping that she would someday return. Afterward, the faun also tells Ofelia that she can now come back to her rightful position of royalty, but she needs to fulfill three tasks before, so she can prove her identity. The faun gives Ofelia the Book of Crossroads, a book with blank pages that, in the right moment, would reveal each task to her.

Before we go deeper into the story, it is relevant to discuss how the fairy character is dealt with in the narrative. Being presented as an insect, this entity avoids instant empathy from the audience due to its inhuman characteristics. At first, it is somewhat surprising how Ofelia, without much hesitation, identifies the insect as a fairy. Such a reaction may arouse suspicion from the audience, thinking that maybe the girl sees the insect as a fairy due to her fertile imagination. However, in the scene in which the insect actually becomes physically similar to the image one would expect from a fairy, such suspicion lightens. The illustration of a fairy in Ofelia's book is very representative of a prototypic notion of a fairy; it resembles the designs of some of the most popular fairy characters in mass culture, like Tinker Bell, from *Peter Pan*, the Blue Fairy, from *Pinocchio*, and the Three Good Fairies, from *Sleeping Beauty*.¹⁶ In the mentioned stories, the fairies are benevolent characters who come in aid of the protagonists, so their designs seem to evoke positive feelings; considering this, it is foreseeable that they all would have feminine characteristics and even-proportioned bodies; Tinker Bell resembles a

¹⁵ This line is uttered by the faun (PAN'S, 00:22:15).

¹⁶ The characters and designs mentioned here are from the Disney animated film adaptations.

cute young girl; the Blue Fairy has an aura of motherhood, as if to fulfill the lack of such a figure to Pinocchio, who had only Gepetto as his parent; and the Three Good Fairies are older women, probably so they could emanate the cozy feeling of hospitality that a grandmother would. On the other hand, the fairy in PL is presented as an insect, an animal with many limbs, more than a humanoid body has, with wings and the characteristic texture that evokes the stiffness of an exoskeleton. Just like the example given in the Theoretical Background of Donald Hebb's experiment with monkeys and snakes, these features of the insects are radically different from humanoid bodies in a way that they may arouse some kind of fear, like repulsiveness, because it is harder to see oneself in the face of another being if it is that much different.¹⁷ Considering this, the form Guillermo del Toro creates the first fairy in the story is very interesting because it avoids the expected friendly face of this type of character. An insect-like fairy is somewhat monstrous, a conflicting characteristic to a trope that most often is graceful. However, that does not mean that this fairy is evil; it aids the protagonist just as much as the others. Additionally, it is appropriate to mention that the insect-like shape of Guillermo del Toro's fairy in PL seems to evoke another popular character that is connected to fairies: Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio's partner in Disney's adaptation, who received from the Blue Fairy the task of aiding him as his conscience, acting as a form of *Superego*; Jiminy Cricket is not usually thought of as being a fairy, but his relation to the Blue Fairy and his role of supporting the protagonist, when compared to the fairy in PL, suggest possible connections.

Ofelia's first task is to crawl into the rotten roots of a fig tree in order to retrieve a key. The girl first learns about her task by opening the Book of Crossroads alone, before taking a bath, and the instructions she reads are written in the form of a tale. In the book, Ofelia learns that a long time ago, "when the woods were still young" (PAN'S, 00:30:59), men, women, animals and magical creatures lived together and protected each other; they would sleep together in the shade of a colossal fig tree, the same tree that is now dying. This tale serves as a parallel to the conflict between the Nationalists and the Republicans, two groups of people that, before the start of the Spanish Civil War, would share the same country, even if they had their differences. However, as the conflict started and the war began, the community which they were both part of slowly became "rotten." The ideals of democracy that once were all over Spain, during the constitutional republic, had to hide in the underground, just like the magical creatures, waiting for the day that they could come to the surface once more; that would happen

¹⁷ The contrast between human and insect bodies is well discussed in David Cronenberg's 1986 *The Fly*.

in 1975, when the dictator Francisco Franco died and Spain started its transition into a democracy once again.

Captain Vidal's first appearance in the story has him checking a clock and stating that Carmen and Ofelia are 15 minutes late. Such action seems to be intended to underline a characteristic that is recurrent in this character: as stated elsewhere (MAYER, 2020), Vidal is a very strict person, and this trait is translated into his way of dealing with formal habits like being punctual, carefully shaving, and greasing his boots. Just after he complains about the delay, he has his first interaction with Ofelia: Carmen asks her daughter to greet Vidal; the girl seems to be afraid of him, but offers her hand for him to shake; Vidal holds her hand carelessly, maybe even hurting her, and answers "It's the other hand, Ofelia" (PAN'S, 00:06:50), stating that she should always greet someone with the right hand, not the left, which is a way of reassuring another formal habit. This characteristic seems to be also related to his own self-image as a military, a context that values strictness, and even more since he is on the Nationalist (fascist) side; what is more, it seems related to his way of dealing with his own masculinity, putting himself above women, and some of these habits, like shaving and greasing the boots, are also actions that cultivate his own ego. After Carmen arrives, Vidal calls Dr. Ferreiro to examine her, and he tells the Captain she is very weak and that she should not have traveled in such a late state of pregnancy; Vidal answers that that was just Dr. Ferreiro's opinion and says that "A son should be born wherever his father is" (PAN'S, 00:15:22), which means that he would rather risk Carmen's life for the sake of his own ego than failing to act according to nothing more than a tradition of his own. Then, Dr. Ferreiro asks Vidal how he could be so sure the child was going to be a boy, and the Captain just insults him as a response, which means that Vidal probably sees the idea of having a daughter as a sign of weakness. Another instance in which Vidal presents his view that men are superior to women happens in a conversation he has with Mercedes, in which he says "What must you think of me?" (PAN'S, 01:27:28), and she answers that "It doesn't matter what someone like me thinks, sir," and even though what she means with 'someone like me' is up to debate, one of the possible readings is that of her being a woman. As a result, after Vidal becomes aware that Mercedes had been helping the Republicans, she states that she only managed to remain unnoticed because he underestimated her. Accordingly, Vidal's way of depreciating women is the reason why he turns his back to Mercedes, which gives her the opportunity of backstabbing him and escaping.

On the day after Carmen and Ofelia arrived at the mill, Vidal hosts a dinner party, probably so he could introduce Carmen to his acquaintances: among the people who come to the party there is a priest and the mayor of a nearby town, which implies that Vidal values his

political relations and that the dinner is also a way of promoting his social image, exhibiting his new attractive wife who is carrying his child. During the dinner, Carmen is asked about how she and Vidal had met: the film narrative had provided already, through a conversation between Ofelia and Mercedes, the information that her father used to be a tailor and that he died fighting in the Civil War; however, at this point Carmen explains that when Ofelia's father died, she went to work as a tailor to succeed him, and that they used to make Vidal's uniforms. Vidal's reaction to the telling of this story hints that he had conflicts with Carmen's deceased spouse, which suggests that he may dislike Ofelia more for seeing him in the girl's image. During the dinner party, also, after being asked by the mayor, Vidal states that he is not taking part in that conflict for obligation, but because he wants his son to be born "in a new, clean Spain" (PAN'S, 00:39:52), and that the people he was fighting held the "mistaken belief that we're all equal." By using the word 'clean' to refer to a Spain without Republicans, Vidal simultaneously dehumanizes and monsterizes them, and saying that he does not believe that 'we're all equal' automatically means that he sees himself – and all the other Nationalists – as superior: such a point of view echoes our earlier discussions on the ideas of Asma (2009) and Cohen (1996) about soldiers and conquerors monsterizing their enemies to mitigate the responsibility of exterminating them; and the mutual support of such a view within the Nationalists, which results in an endless cycle, is similar to Scarre's (2012) description of evil institutions.

Furthermore, one of the most relevant scenes to develop the character of Vidal (MAYER, 2020) is when he is called by one of his officials during the night because two men were found in the area nearby. The two, an old man and his son, claim to have been hunting rabbits to provide for their sick children. However, after taking a quick look in their belongings, an old almanac is found, in which there is a sentence that Vidal sees as being 'red propaganda,' which results in him brutally murdering both of them, hitting hard the head of one of them with a bottle and shooting them both just after. Not much later, examining their belongings more carefully, they do find dead rabbits, which means the men were both innocent. This scene may be the most shocking and brutal in Guillermo del Toro's whole filmography, and the lack of regret in Vidal's expression is a dramatic quality that builds his lack of empathy, lightening his *personhood* – dehumanizing – and depicting him as evil. Captain Vidal's action in this scene is a good example of making human beings superfluous, fitting Arendt's (1973) *radical evil*. The lack of hesitation of Vidal in taking such an extreme action seems to be, also, a way of reassuring his position of authority to the officials around him at that moment. Afterwards, as Vidal confronts Mercedes, he ends up being wounded by her, which becomes particularly evident due to one of the wounds being a cut on the side of his mouth (Image 15). The fact that

this wound is so visible highlights it as a form of deformation acquired by the character, making Vidal visually monstrous, besides the already stated monstrosity of moral corruption and evilness.

Image 15 – Deformed Vidal.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Being successful in the first task, Ofelia meets the faun again, who briefs her about the second one: “You're going to a very dangerous place, so be careful. The thing that slumbers there, it is not human” (PAN’S, 00:52:50). The way the faun talks about the lack of humanity of the creature that guards Ofelia’s next task is curious, given the fact that the faun himself is not actually human. As discussed in the Theoretical Background section, the faun is not talking about a zoological category; he is talking about *personhood*, hinting that Ofelia will be facing a being that is not going to feel empathy for her, that it will not hesitate to hurt her, like a predator after a prey; therefore, he is talking about an *evil* being, something that is inherently *monstrous*, whatever its appearance may be. Such a behavior is similar to that shown by Vidal to the rabbit hunters.

Ofelia’s second task, then, is to draw a door on the wall using chalk, which will lead her to a place with the Pale Man (Image 16), a creature who sleeps in front of a tempting feast. Ofelia needs to avoid the creature and use the key she acquired in the previous task to open a lock near the Pale Man and obtain whatever is kept there. The faun sharply warns her not to eat anything from the feast, not even a bite, stating that her life depends on it. Ofelia manages to get the object she was supposed to, but on her way out, she ends up eating a grape, which wakes up the Pale Man, who goes after her; this results in the death of two of the three fairies that were

helping her; however, in spite of the mistake and the difficulties it causes, Ofelia is able to escape, being successful in the task.

Image 16 – The Pale Man.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

The Pale Man, Ofelia's obstacle in the second task, is probably the most emblematic figure in Guillermo del Toro's career. The scene that features it has a very episodic characteristic, as opposed to the first and third tasks, which mixes elements from Ofelia's quest as a princess and parts of the plot involving Vidal and the rebels he is tracing. This feature and the position of the second task being right in the middle of the narrative structure are attributes that make this scene a form of outline of the whole story. Even though the Pale Man has a humanoid form, its body is deformed in a way that evokes Freud's (1963) notion of uncanny, and its beast-like behavior seems to be a form of discussing authority. In this regard, we may highlight how some camera angles and elements of production design seem to invite to a comparison between the Pale Man and Vidal (Image 17).

When the Pale Man first appears on the screen, it is sitting at the end of a long table where there is a feast served. Likewise, when the dinner party hosted by Vidal is presented, he is sitting in the same position. It is not unusual that Vidal is sitting in a place that is culturally considered a position of power, being him the host of the dinner. However, the recurrence of such similar environments, the long table and the feast, is a hint to the connection between the two characters. Besides, just like the faun tells Ofelia that the Pale Man is not human, there is a line in which Vidal also suggests something similar about himself: when he is interrogating Mercedes, suspecting that she may be an informant working for the Republicans, he says "You must think that I'm a monster" (PAN'S, 01:27:31), and such statement not only functions as a

provocation but also as a form of intimidation, as if he wanted her to know that should he need to act like a monster, performing evil acts like torture, he would be willing to.

Image 17 – Captain Vidal.



Source: Digital copy of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

The Pale Man's design gives many hints. One of the most evident characteristics is its flaccid skin and wrinkles, which evoke the idea of elderliness, of a body that becomes deformed as it ages. As a consequence, it becomes a way of addressing decay and death, especially when we consider that the character who faces the Pale Man is a girl, who is still growing up and in the process of fully understanding the nature of life and death. Similarly, the Pale Man walks slowly and with difficulty, which is also something that becomes common as a person ages. The main characteristic of the Pale Man, however, is its eyes: when it is asleep, it keeps its eyeballs on a plate, outside its body; when it is awakened by Ofelia, it places its two eyeballs into holes in its hands, then being able to use them to see. Such a bizarre way of placing the eyes in the design of a character seems to be a way of provoking uneasiness: as stated by Freud (1963), eyes are particularly relevant elements in regard to causing the feeling of uncanniness; on the other hand, the Pale Man's eyes are also symbols of needing external help in order to see, as if it were to use glasses, and this is another element to point out to elderliness, because as someone ages, the tendency is for the eyesight to become weaker. Being the Pale Man a character that serves as a representation of figures of authority, the name of this creature is particularly relevant;¹⁸ having pale skin is a way to underline its whiteness, which hints to possible discussions on the authority as an institution of the white people; considering this, the

¹⁸ Even though the character is never called by the name of "Pale Man" during the film, that is the name used to refer to it in the official credits.

fact that the film is set in Spain acquires new meanings, because then we evoke the Spanish colonization of the Americas and the death of indigenous peoples.

Moreover, we may discuss the place where the Pale Man lives: it has long halls with columns, an architecture that has an atmosphere of antiquity, and the room where the feast unfolds has a roof with self-supporting arcs, which is called a *vault*, and that reminds us of a church. On the ceiling we find frescoes depicting the Pale Man devouring children, and such form of art is also common in churches. Having this in mind, we may say that, besides being a representation of authority, the Pale Man embodies the concept of evil institutions, like the Holy Inquisition and fascism. Such a view is supported by the presence of the priest in Vidal's dinner party and the connection of the Spanish Civil War to religion.

Ofelia is later scolded by the faun for her mistake of eating a grape during the task; the faun says that she had lost her opportunity and that she would not be able to move on to the third task. However, eventually the faun comes back and offers her another chance. In the meantime, Carmen gives birth to a boy and dies during labor. Ofelia's third task, then, is to steal her baby brother and bring him to the center of the maze. The girl manages to do so, but at the last moment the faun asks her to make a cut in her brother so the blood of an innocent could be used to open the portal to the underworld. Ofelia, once again, refuses the orders of the faun, in spite of having agreed to obey him no matter what. As a result, Vidal, who was chasing her, manages to reach her and shoots her, resulting in her death. However, some moments later, we are presented with a scene in which Ofelia is dressed like a princess and meets her father and mother, the King and Queen of the underworld, and he explains to her that her test had always been to not blindly follow orders, and that she conquered her position when she offered her own blood as a sacrifice instead of her brother's. Considering this, we can discuss how Ofelia's tasks are a way of representing her journey towards becoming an adult: she succeeded in the second test not just because she managed to reach her goal, but because she managed to deal with the consequences of her mistakes, which is an important lesson in growing up. Then, by denying the orders of the faun, she demonstrated critical and moral thinking, avoiding what Hare (1981) calls *intellectual sloth*, even though blindly following his orders and hurting her own brother would be beneficial to her and much easier. The matter of obedience is addressed in another point in the film, in which Vidal suspects that Dr. Ferreiro is secretly helping an injured rebel and asks him why the doctor had not obeyed him, since it would be much better for him; the doctor's answer is that "To obey, just like that, for the sake of obeying, without questioning, that's something only people like you can do, Captain" (PAN'S, 01:23:52), and such a statement connects the act of blindly obeying to the military force, portraying it as an evil institution. Not

questioning orders is an action that is related to evil institutions as discussed by Scarre (2012) and Calder (2020), because it is a way of self-deception.

Approaching the end of the film narrative, Guillermo del Toro makes an interesting move through the character of Vidal. Throughout the film, Captain Vidal had been compared to his father, who was also a military, and whose image and position seem to be a burden to him. It is said that Vidal's father, moments after dying on the battlefield, broke his watch so his son could know the exact time of his death and "how a brave man dies" (PAN'S, 00:42:26). Vidal's behavior through the film suggests that he resents his father. However, as Vidal chases Ofelia through the labyrinth, he is wounded and deformed due to his encounter with Mercedes, which can be seen as a symbolic emasculation, a form of humiliation to him. Eventually, Vidal is surrounded by reinforcements of Republican troops, and realizing he is going to die, he breaks his own watch, attempting to reproduce his father's act, and gives it to Mercedes asking her to give that to his son. Mercedes, however, denies it, stating that Vidal's son would never even know his name. In spite of Vidal's evil acts, the ending puts him in a position of weakness, making his monstrous figure softened and making it easier for the audience to empathize with him. As a result, it is possible to see such narrative movement as a form of humanization of the monstrous Captain Vidal; as a consequence, humanizing the monster de-monsterizes him, putting the character in a more favorable position for empathy and rapport.

3.4 *THE SHAPE OF WATER* (2017)

If, on the one hand, *Pan's Labyrinth* was the film that established Guillermo del Toro as one of the greatest monster creators in cinema, on the other, *The Shape of Water* (TSoW) led him to the apex of his career so far as a worldwide renowned storyteller. This film brings together many of the qualities the author had been showing throughout his production over the years, attaining results similar to those of TDB and PL while also finding a new echo in a lengthier discussion about the form of the individual and its repercussions on social contexts, given the defying nature of the monster character. From 2006 to 2017, social awareness increased and many social problems had been debated more expressively once again, like homophobia, racism, xenophobia, sexism and gender identity.

Set in 1962 Baltimore, Maryland, USA, TSoW is a story about Elisa (Image 18), a woman who lives alone and works as a cleaning lady in Occam Aerospace Research Centre, a government laboratory.

Image 18 – Elisa and Zelda.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Elisa is mute, but that is not an obstacle for her to have good conversations and be friends with Giles, her neighbor, and Zelda, a co-worker. Besides, Elisa grew up in an orphanage, having been found abandoned by the side of a river when she was still a baby; at that time, she already had some mysterious scars on her neck (Image 19), a characteristic that may be related to her disability.

After we get to know a little of Elisa's routine, a turning point in the normality of her life presents itself: she and Zelda, during their work, witness a strange container being brought to one of the rooms in the research facility.

Image 19 – Elisa's scars.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

They listen as the authorities of their workplace state that inside that chamber lies what could be considered the most sensitive *asset* to ever be housed there. Curious about that, Elisa takes a peek and realizes they are talking about a humanoid being. Since she and Zelda have to enter the secret room in order to clean it sometimes, Elisa ends up seizing such opportunities to learn more about that being (Image 20). As time goes by, she gets to know the Amphibian Man, a human-like lifeform that is kept chained inside a water tank, and they grow progressively closer.

Image 20 – The Amphibian Man.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Elisa tries different forms of communication with him, offers him eggs and puts on some music for him to listen to, and his responses to these actions make her aware that the Amphibian Man is more rational than the facility authorities seem to realize. Aside from that, Elisa feels a lot of empathy for him, identifying herself with him because he also needs other ways of communicating than that of speech; as opposed to other people, who would likely see her as a person who lacks a voice, the Amphibian Man seems to see her as a complete person.

Accompanying the mysterious being, another character comes to the facility: Colonel Richard Strickland, the man who located and imprisoned the Amphibian Man in South America and who is being responsible for him. Strickland is a prejudiced and strict person, showing a personality that resembles that of PL's Captain Vidal. He is self-centered, intolerant and nurtures his own pride. Through his behavior, it is possible to notice that Strickland dislikes the Amphibian Man: many times we see the Colonel being violent, hurting him.

The interest of the US government in the Amphibian Man can be explained through the fact that, being the year of 1962, the country was taking part in the Space Race: the US and the USSR had been investing enormous amounts of money in research during the Cold War as a

way to demonstrate their technological power, which would, as a consequence, reflect their respective weapon technology and military power. The year of 1962 is a time in which the US was losing the race, because in 1961 USSR had established their advantage by being the first nation to a human being (Yuri Gagarin) to space with Vostok 1; besides, 1962 was the year in which John F. Kennedy, then president, delivered one of his most important speeches, in Houston, Texas, which would be marked by the sentence ‘we choose to go to the moon.’ Considering this background, discovering a humanoid being in nature that is able to endure conditions the human body cannot could be the edge the US needed to take the lead over USSR.

Eventually, however, Elisa finds out that the authorities of the facility intend to vivisect the Amphibian Man, which would result in his death. In order to prevent that, Elisa devises a plan to help the Amphibian Man escape the laboratory. To achieve her goal, Elisa receives help from Giles and Zelda, and also from Dr. Robert Hoffstetler, a scientist who happens to witness Elisa trying to take the Amphibian Man out of there but, as opposed to what she expected, ends up providing the decisive help for her to succeed. Hoffstetler is actually an undercover spy working for the Soviets, as we learn from his secret meetings with other agents speaking Russian; however, as this character is developed, it is possible to see that he is not that much interested in seeing the USSR overcoming the US at all costs: when Hoffstetler learns about the plans of vivisecting the Amphibian Man, he warns his Soviet superiors, who deny the possibility of abducting the being themselves as a way of preserving him; in fact, Hoffstetler is instructed to kill the Amphibian Man before the US-Americans can manage to vivisect him. The scientist’s disappointment with such orders is clear, and his subsequent aid in Elisa’s plan tells that he sees himself as a man of science above all, and that the political matters he is involved with are secondary. Therefore, it is noticeable that his intention is to save the Amphibian Man and that he does not see the being as an object, but rather a miracle of nature and a living source to priceless advancements in modern knowledge. As opposed to all the other professionals there, who can only see a monster, Hoffstetler is able to see *personhood* through the strange shape of the Amphibian Man, like Elisa, and, in the end, his decision to help her leads to his own death.

The form of representation of Hoffstetler here is important. Considering that the story happens in the year of 1962, during the Cold War, it would be expected from a Soviet character to be seen negatively due to the opposition between the US and the USSR. In fact, the other Soviets, those who interact with Hoffstetler, are portrayed in an unfavorable way indeed. Likewise, the US-American militaries are also depicted as authoritarians and unscrupulous. This seems to be a form of depicting both sides as controversial, which results in a complex scenario that avoids Manichaeistic views. When Hoffstetler is presented as someone who feels

empathy to the Amphibian Man, that is his individual view, which stands in opposition to both the Soviet agents – representing communism – and the US-American militaries – representing capitalism. Similar to what is seen in TDB, this articulation favors a humanistic view instead of choosing a specific part of a political spectrum to stand for.

In spite of difficulties, Elisa is able to take the Amphibian Man to her house. She plans on keeping him there, surviving in her tub, until a date in which it is expected to rain so she can release him into a canal. Meanwhile, Strickland is demanded by his superior to retrieve the fugitive. As time goes by, Elisa and the Amphibian Man develop their relationship (Image 21), she and Giles realize that he has some sort of healing powers, and Strickland gets closer to finding out the being's whereabouts.

Image 21 – Elisa and the Amphibian Man.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

On the day Elisa had scheduled to release the Amphibian Man, Strickland manages to reach them near the canal, shooting both of them. However, the being is healed from his wounds through his power, then being able to face Strickland, hurting him to defend himself and subsequently taking the wounded Elisa in his arms just before plunging into the water of the canal. Now submerged, the Amphibian Man uses his healing powers in Elisa, which restores her health and, curiously, makes her scars on the neck become gills.

Just like TDB and PL, TSoW starts (and ends) with a narrator. Among the interesting ideas expressed by this voice, there is the form in which he presents us to Elisa, the main character of the story (that he calls ‘tale’): “the princess without a voice” (THE SHAPE, 00:02:28). TSoW is a narrative that deals with elements that had been explored in TDB and PL, and the use of the words ‘tale’ and ‘princess’ in its introduction call for comparisons to the

popular imagination of fairy tales. Thus, Elisa becomes an interesting choice for a role compared to a princess, because she does not fill patterns that could be expected to such a character: even though she is not unattractive, she is not a person that could be called ‘the fairest one of all,’ like Snow White;¹⁹ although her age is not directly mentioned in the narrative, the casting of 40-year-old actress Sally Hawkins for the part suggests Elisa is not a teenager or young adult like many princesses in fairy tales;²⁰ and also, she is mute, which is a form of disability, a characteristic that makes her *imperfect*; however, this last characteristic evokes *The Little Mermaid*, not only the Disney animated film adaptation, but also the original fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen, in which a mermaid offers her tongue and beautiful voice to a sea witch in exchange for a potion that transforms her into a human being.

Elisa Esposito is not depicted as a sad person. As we watch her daily routine, she seems to be at ease. However, she is presented as a dreamy person: as she is introduced by the narrator, we see Elisa sleeping in a room that is underwater, which is then revealed to be the dream she was having. On the way to work, Elisa stops to look into a window display of a store where there is an elegant pair of shoes, as if she dreamt of owning it. Besides, Elisa works the night shift, so she has to sleep during the day. These elements, added to the fact that she lives in a building where the ground floor is a movie theater, suggest that Elisa is a daydreamer, escaping from reality when she feels she does not fit. Also, the scenes in which the character is shown in the bathtub, or when she stares at raindrops on the window of the bus, and the fact that she was found abandoned beside a river connect Elisa to the water. The scars on her neck at first seem to be wounds that resulted in her disability of speech; however, the film subtly shows that those marks are symmetrical, hinting that they may be congenital. In fact, when the Amphibian Man leaps into the water of the canal with Elisa and uses his healing powers, her scars become gills (Image 22), implying that the marks on her neck may have always been atrophied parts that were natural to her body, and not the result of some wound that damaged her vocal cords. As a result, Elisa used to see herself as not a normal human being, whereas she was, actually, a normal being, just maybe from another species.

¹⁹ The line “magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” uttered by the Evil Queen in Walt Disney’s 1937 animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is one of the many elements that point out the connection between the notions of fairy tale princess and beauty.

²⁰ Another popular examples are *Cinderella*, Jasmine, from *Aladdin*, and Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*. Besides their classic animated feature film adaptations, these three stories had been recently remade into live action films, also by Disney, and the actresses who played the roles of the princesses were all, by the time of the shooting, around 25 or 26 years old.

Image 22 – Elisa’s gills.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Such a change can be seen as a metaphor to the fact that people can feel bad and suffer prejudice for being different, but the concept of normality is arbitrary, not more than a social construct that results in segregation. Through the narrative, Elisa finds out that what once made her flawed was actually a trace of an evolutionary advantage, one that later made her able to endure conditions the human body cannot, that is to breathe underwater.

In a scene in which Elisa and Zelda are cleaning the men’s bathroom, they have their first interaction with Colonel Strickland. Here he introduces his point of view regarding women and masculinity: as he enters the bathroom, the character mentions that the two women seem to be having fun with their “girl talk” (THE SHAPE, 00:16:54). An object that seems to be highlighted by the camera angles is Strickland’s stun baton, a phallic object connected to Law Enforcement Activities and authority. Strickland leaves his baton near the sink while he uses the urinal, and when Elisa approaches to clean, he says “Look, don’t touch, that lovely dingus right there” (THE SHAPE, 00:17:11), subsequently telling her that it is an “Alabama Howdy-do” and describing its features (e.g., molded grip handle) like a man praising a recently bought car. Still in this scene, Strickland explains that, in his opinion, a man should wash his hands “before or after tending to his needs” (THE SHAPE, 00:17:35), and that washing both before and after “points to a weakness in character,” as if having proper care and personal hygiene were characteristics restricted to women. Strickland washes his hands only before urinating, which means that he values himself over the others, he wants his hands to be clean when using the bathroom, and having the hands clean after that so he can shake hands with others is not his problem. In the scene immediately after that, Elisa and Zelda are cleaning a corridor and hear screams, which is followed by Strickland being shown leaving wounded from the room with

the Amphibian Man, whose attack resulted in the Colonel having two of his fingers severed (Image 23).

Image 23 – Strickland loses two fingers.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Losing body parts in del Toro's oeuvre is a form of becoming physically deformed while highlighting monstrous traits (MAYER, 2020). Such a process can be compared to PL, when Vidal has his mouth cut by Mercedes. However, considering that such deformation is the loss of two fingers, two phallic symbols, and given that these are part of a hand, a limb that is directly connected to the status of being able to take actions, we may conclude that this narrative element can be seen as a symbolic emasculation. At first, Strickland has his wound treated so he can have his fingers back, but the stitched parts slowly acquire a darkened color and start to secrete pus and to smell bad. Later, he tells Elisa and Zelda about the surgery of reconstruction of his fingers, mentioning the word 'phalanx' in reference to a bone of the fingers, but that is an interesting a choice of words because it can also mean 'a body of troops,' according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021), and it has spelling and sound that resemble the word 'phallus.' Similarly, there is a scene in which Strickland is reporting the incident to his superior, and he mentions that he has three fingers left, the "thumb," the "trigger," and the "pussy finger," naming his parts according to what seems to be the actions he uses them that he values the most. Eventually, during an outrage, Strickland ends up ripping his fingers from his hand, what can be seen as an acceptance of his monstrosity, one that would otherwise be hidden (to some extent, at least) behind his appearance and formal behavior. Another element that puts Strickland in the position of a monster is the introductory narration, in which the narrator wonders about how

he could tell that “tale of love and loss,” afterward mentioning “the monster who tried to destroy it all” (THE SHAPE, 00:02:42), which most likely refers to Strickland.

Giles, Elisa’s friend and neighbor, is another character to be a monster of sorts. He is an elder person, arousing some of the debates the Pale Man also did in PL, like the changes of the human body through the process of ageing, which are reflected through the thick lenses in his glasses and his baldness. In fact, Giles is presented as unsatisfied with his lack of hair, sometimes wearing a ‘hairpiece’ to hide it; afterward, in one of the interactions between Giles and the Amphibian Man, the latter touches his head, which reveals to be a form of ‘healing’ Giles’s body cells, resulting in his hair growing back. Giles lives alone and seems to be lonesome, and part of that seems to be connected to a feeling of not being accepted for being a gay man. Regarding homosexuality, the year in which TSoW takes place, 1962, is meaningful, because that was the year in which consensual sexual relations between same-sex couples were decriminalized in the state of Illinois, which represented the beginning of a series of legal changes that would happen for the decades to come, in which the LGBT communities would fight for their legal rights; many other states, like Colorado, Oregon and California, would decriminalize homosexuality in the 70s; however, the state where TSoW takes place, Maryland, would only decriminalize same-sex marriage in 2013. Not only is he an elder gay man, but he also works as an illustrator for advertising, in a time in which the US-American idealistic notions of nuclear family – a working man who provides for the household, a housewife, and their children – were so praised; Giles’s illustrations (Image 24), then, depicted a stereotypical image of family that he, for being an elder gay man, would never be part of, and in which he had never seen himself represented.

Image 24 – Giles’s illustrations.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Giles's unidentification with the family configuration he uses to draw is underlined when he delivers his work to his employer, who says "Oh, they want them to be happier, the family" (THE SHAPE, 00:23:05), to which Giles answers "Well, what are they supposed to be happy about?" This dialogue, besides, points out to an overvaluing of appearances in the US-American society in this discussion.

Zelda, Elisa's colleague from work and friend, similarly to Giles, embodies different aspects of otherness in TSoW. Zelda is an African-American plus-sized working woman, so she sees herself not represented in Giles's illustrations as well. Besides the Space Race and the Cold War, the 60s were also a decade marked by the civil rights movement in the United States, which sought to end institutionalized racial discrimination and segregation. That happened because, even though African-Americans had acquired the right of citizenship and many other legal instruments on their favor after the end of the American Civil War, in practice they were unable to vote and still suffered from unequal life conditions. The civil rights movement in the US is frequently connected to the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. and to events like the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, one of the many examples of pacific protests that happened in this period. Taking place in the year of 1962, TSoW catches some of the attitude of the political development involved in the civil rights movement. Besides, just like Giles, who would be seen as different for not fitting the norm, being homosexual and a man who became elder without marrying, or Elisa, a single middle-aged disabled woman, Zelda escapes the US-American notions of nuclear family and 'normality' for being an African-American, plus-sized woman. The contrast between the worldview expressed in Giles's illustrations and the differences of these characters put them in a position of marginalization, and therefore, of monstrosity.

In opposition to Elisa, Zelda and Giles, Strickland seems to represent the absolute ideal of 'American way of life,' being a military man, 'fighting for his country,' with incisive views of his own masculinity, seeing himself as superior to women, African Americans, Soviets, homosexuals. There is a scene in which we see Strickland arriving home and being greeted by his family (Image 25), who live in a suburban house. Strickland's spouse is a representation of the stereotypical housewife, who takes off his coat as he enters and serves him his meal. The color palette of this scene seems to evoke those of the illustrated advertisements of this time, like the ones Giles makes. Strickland's son and daughter go to school, and then we are presented to a sex scene between the Colonel and his wife, in which it is distinctive his behavior of asking her to keep silence, even covering her mouth with his hand; in a way, this is a form of objectifying her, because removing her capability of speech means restraining her personhood; such a process is close to that of monsterization.

Image 25 – “This is America.”²¹



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

Another instance that contributes to the parallel between Strickland and the ‘American way’ is a scene in which he purchases a new car. At the store, the seller tells him that “four out of five successful men in America drive a Cadillac” (THE SHAPE, 00:54:11), which instantly creates a comparison between that Cadillac and the notions of ‘normality’ comprised within the idea of ‘American way.’ Still not convinced that the Cadillac meant that much, Strickland argues that he did not like the color of the car, “I’m not sure about the green,” and the seller replies “It’s not green, my friend. Teal.” Strickland ends up buying the teal Cadillac, and then we see a scene in which he is driving it and a woman waves and winks at him (Image 26).

Image 26 – “Four out of five successful men in America drive a Cadillac.”



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

²¹ This line is uttered by Strickland, sitting at the kitchen table (THE SHAPE, 00:30:59).

Some time later, a colleague of Strickland's praises his new 'green' Cadillac, and the Colonel corrects him, saying that it was not green, but 'teal'. Such a transition, from a Strickland who thought that 'green' and 'teal' were the same and did not care about the difference, to a Strickland who corrects another person who did the same that he once did, implies that Strickland sees himself as superior now, as if the American way were an evil institution of those who do not call it 'green,' but teal, and that starting to use the latter word is a form of making part of such an institution and, as a result, feeling superior. The symbol of the teal Cadillac is discussed once again when Elisa, Zelda and Giles escape from the laboratory with the Amphibian Man: on the way of leaving the building, Giles loses control of the vehicle he is driving, and ends up crashing into the Cadillac; this does not stop them from escaping, but the car is left destroyed. This scene has a symbolic meaning, because it acts as if these three characters, who have many characteristics that oppose 'normality,' were the ones responsible for damaging the notions of 'American way,' represented by the teal Cadillac. Besides, the damage the car suffers is a *deformation*, which makes it *monstrous* to some extent.

Even though TSoW takes place in 1962, it is imperative to consider, also, that it is a film produced in 2017. Therefore, we must not think that the discussion presented in this story is restricted to the past in which it takes place. In spite of all the development that occurred in terms of knowledge from 1962 to 2017, TSoW seems to reflect contemporary debates on intolerance. Considering this, the fact that the Amphibian Man, in the story, was brought to the US from South America, we may say that he is Latin American, just like Guillermo del Toro, who is Mexican. Therefore, discussing intolerance and celebrating the difference through TSoW is much more necessary given that the release of the film happened in a time in which the US had Donald Trump as a president, a person who many times expressed directly his personal aversion to immigrants, especially from Mexico. As a result, by starting with "I am an immigrant" his speech of acceptance of the Best Director award in the 2018 Academy Awards, Guillermo del Toro directly addresses his own difference, a characteristic that the president at the time would monsterize repeatedly in his public statements.

The Amphibian Man has a humanoid shape: two arms, two legs, one head. Yet, he cannot talk. However, as Elisa tries to communicate with him, she notices that he is intelligent, that he can understand complex concepts, like feelings. He can breathe underwater and out of water as well; however, he cannot stay out of the water for too long. The character receives the name 'amphibian,' which is a group of animals known for being able to have both gills and lungs throughout their development, which qualifies it as what Carroll (1990) calls an interstitial entity. The color of his skin is unusual, different from what a person like Strickland, white,

would consider ‘normal,’ but this color is also similar to ‘teal,’ which the Colonel started to praise after buying his car and that represented everything he valued. Throughout the narrative, the Amphibian Man does not act deliberately aggressive: first, he attacks Strickland, who loses two fingers, to defend himself from violence; second, he attacks – and devours – Giles’s cat, but that is not much different from a human being who hunts another animal to eat; and third, after Strickland shoots him and Elisa to stop them from escaping through the canal, the Amphibian Man ends up becoming, indeed, a monster, using his claws to hurt Strickland (Image 27), who falls to the ground, defeated, which makes it possible to the Amphibian Man to take Elisa in his arms and finally be free.

Image 27 – The Attack of the Amphibian Man.



Source: Digital copy of *The Shape of Water*.

In this last confrontation, it is interesting to think that here, the body of the Amphibian Man, an evolutionary miracle, capable of maybe giving the edge the US needed to surpass the USSR in the Space Race, capable of healing the shots Elisa took, is ultimately used as a tool of destruction; in this sense, Asma’s (2009) trope of the *misunderstood outcast* returns: just like the creature of Frankenstein, a miracle of science, the first life to be born from knowledge, a clean slate, when facing a world that was intolerant to what was different, suffered violence, and ended up learning such violence as a response. Therefore, just like it happened to the creature of Frankenstein, the world saw somebody different and judged it, abjected it, treated it like a monster, fearing that such a difference could mean that it was evil; however, it was not evil, but the prejudice that it suffered made it so, even if just for a brief moment.

Even if the Amphibian Man, in the end, attacked Strickland, and such is the behavior to be expected from an actual monster, it is also a form of protecting those he loved, which is the

behavior of a human being. Therefore, the moment in which the Amphibian Man most shows his monstrous side is, also, an expression of his humanity. Surrounded by Elisa, Giles, Zelda, Hoffstetler, and even Strickland, the Amphibian Man, in this narrative, becomes an amalgam of monstrosities, a symbol of all the abjected differences of those who once were marginalized, just like in Cohen's postulate that says that "the monster is difference made flesh" (1996, p. 7). Besides, being an aquatic creature, TSoW compares the monstrosity to the element of the water: we are all almost entirely composed of it, and yet, it has no definite shape, being able to acquire anyone; if water is life, and water has no shape, why should the shape of the body of a living being matter at all? Different from TDB and PL, TSoW creates a stronger connection among the main characters and the monstrous figure, represented by the Amphibian Man; as a result, TSoW plunges into the topic of monstrosity as much as TDB and PL, but distinguishes itself as being, among these, the narrative that most celebrates the monstrosity, and, as a consequence, the difference.

4 CONCLUSION

Comparing the representations of monsters in TDB, PL and TSoW, it is possible to identify two recurrent tropes: *Visual Monstrosity* and *Behavioral Monstrosity*. The former refers to physical traits identified in characters whose bodies are non-normative, like lacking some limbs or having too many of them, or having claws and other beast-like features. Behavioral monstrosity, on the other hand, is depicted through actions; in most of these cases, as discussed by Asma (2009), the element that makes an action *monstrous* is the presence of *evil*.

Throughout cinema history, the monster character is often endowed with both visual and behavioral monstrosities, like the cases of *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931, 1958), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Alien* (1979), *Hellraiser* (1987), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Cloverfield* (2008) and *It* (2017), to mention just a few. In these films, monster characters have visual abnormalities that reflect the evil that guides their actions. However, there have always been some exceptions, cases in which a visually monstrous character does not present a monstrous behavior, or eventually lose such a trait, like in the films *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), *The Elephant Man* (1980) or *The Toxic Avenger* (1984). The narrative structure of TDB, PL and TSoW is similar to those. In TDB, we are introduced to Santi, a ghost, in a position of weakness; as the story progresses, the other characters stop fearing him and he becomes an ally in the confrontation to the real threat, Jacinto, a behavioral monster. In PL, we are introduced to a fairy and a faun who are visually monstrous, but they become Ofelia's allies in order to face Vidal, whose monstrosity is behavioral. In TSoW, the Amphibian Man is presented as having a monstrous body, but this characteristic becomes pointless given Strickland's evil behavior. Similarly, these three characters whose bodies are monstrous eventually undergo body mutilations that highlight their monstrosity: Jacinto is pierced by spears; Vidal has his mouth cut; Strickland has two fingers severed from the hand and is lacerated by the Amphibian Man's claws.

Furthermore, considering the historical backgrounds of TDB, PL and TSoW, even though Jacinto, Vidal and Strickland are presented as selfish, narcissistic and authoritarian, and that those traits are related to them as individuals, these characters seem to offer symbolic representations of immoral notions contained within political ideas that existed in those times. Given that, they can be seen as 'embodiments of cultural moments' (COHEN, 1996). The evil depicted in these three characters – and their behavioral monstrosity, as a result – is a form of portraying non-democratic ideals – like fascism, in Francoist Spain; and obsessive meritocracy and neglected minorities, in the US. Therefore, each one of these three characters stands as

symbols of what Scarre (2012) and Calder (2020) call *evil institutions*, social structures that disseminate and support conceptions that go against human rights and egalitarian societies. When these characters behave as if they were superior to others and violate human rights, they are, in fact, demonstrating their lack of empathy and, as a consequence, weakening their statuses of *personhood*.

However, it is imperative to highlight that Jacinto, Vidal and Strickland, in their respective narratives, are not entirely monstrous. There are storytelling efforts to compose humanized dimensions of them. Such choices are coherent when considering Asma's argument regarding the monsterring process, that monsterring someone is to segregate, instead of understanding them. Therefore, if there were no means to humanize Jacinto, Vidal and Strickland, ending their threats in the film narrative would have no purpose but to purge them. What we see, then, is different: they are evil, but we are presented to scenes that give possible explanations to why they are like that; in addition, we witness moments in which these characters are in positions of weakness. Examples of these scenes are: Jacinto talking about the photograph he has with his family; the anxiety Vidal feels to fulfil his deceased father's expectations; Strickland's satisfaction upon buying the Cadillac, and his subsequent laughable discontent of seeing it destroyed. The balance between monstrosity and humanity is critical: if characters have too much behavioral monstrosity, they become Manichaeistic; and if they behave monstrously but are depicted with too much humanity, they become victims. However, such a balance in the three films discussed seems to be appropriate.

As a consequence, the whole narrative process in these films seems to be, firstly, about establishing non-normative bodies and connecting to them the expectation of a matching monstrous behavior, as in the cases of Santi, the Faun, and the Amphibian Man, for instance. Secondly, the stories present us characters whose figures are human but whose behavior is indeed monstrous - Jacinto, Vidal and Strickland. As we witness their degrees of behavioral monstrosity, these three characters become increasingly monstrous, whereas those whose forms are inhuman are revealed as not being evil, thus becoming de-monsterized, humanized. Finally, as Jacinto, Vidal and Strickland are confronted, after having become physically monstrous, they are, then, humanized once again, so we can understand their monstrosity and what it represents. This last movement, then, is a form of de-monsterizing them, and it contributes to the portraits of the respective moments in time that they represent and their understanding. Just like Calder (2020) argues, producing and watching films like these, that show representations of critical cultural moments in the history of humankind, we improve our knowledge about the evil of these institutions and become more familiarized with them; trying to better understand such

evil, we are contributing to a world in which similar events are avoided, preventing these monstrous memories from being forgotten.

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