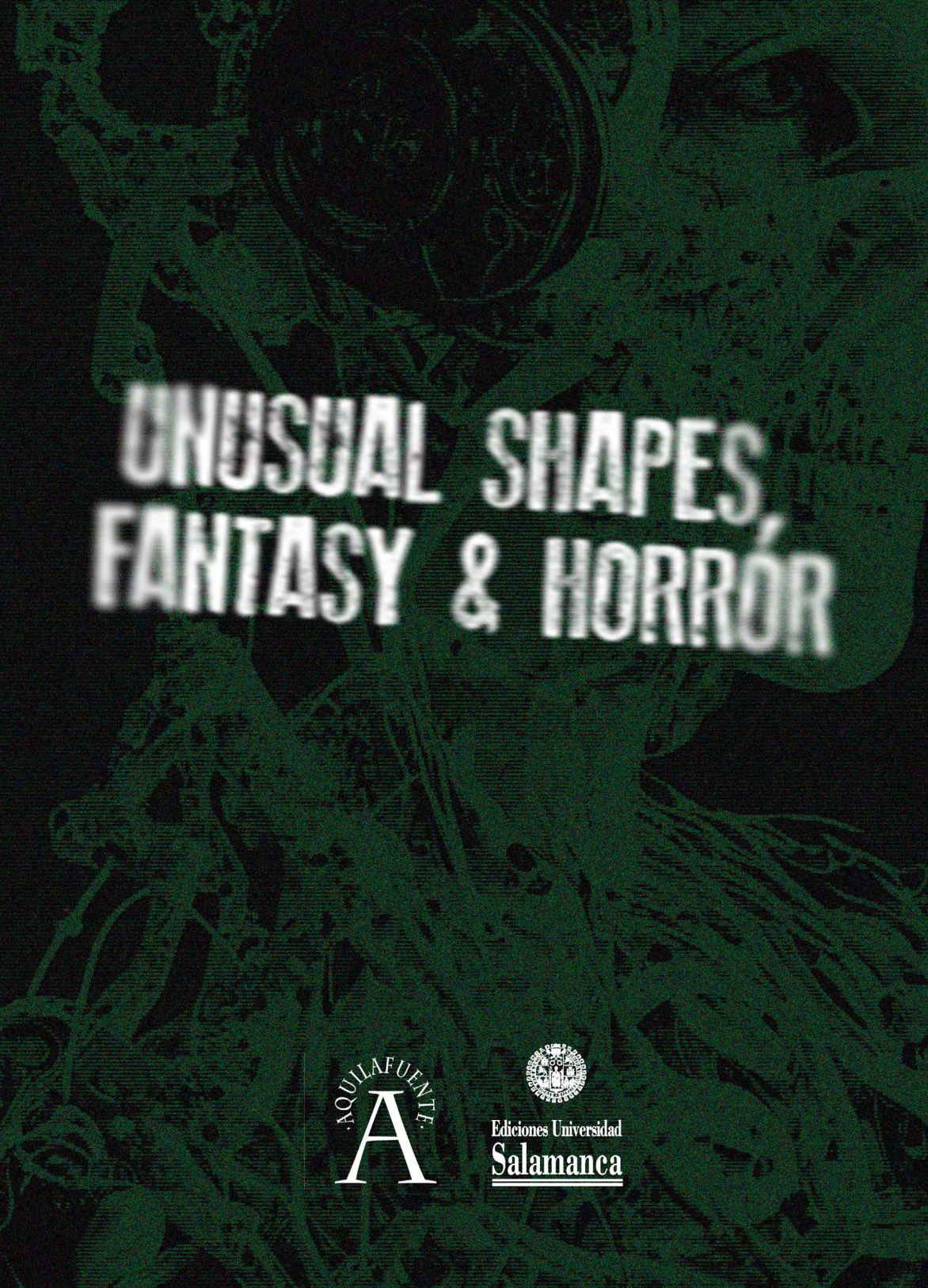

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VICENTE J. PÉREZ VALERO
& FRANCISCO CUÉLLAR SANTIAGO (Eds.)

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INNER REPRESENTATION OF OUTHER FEARS

Vicente Javier Pérez Valero & Francisco Cuéllar Santiago
Miguel Hernández University of Elche

REALITY IN HORROR

The forms in the representation of the abject or monsters in fantasy and horror stories have traditionally been deformities, magnification of scale or any other facial or bodily features that might be associated with the ugly or bizarre. In contrast, the evil has also been represented through extreme beauty and sometimes as the flip side of evil –as, for example, the woman who becomes a decrepit old woman in *The Shining* (Kubrik, 1980) or the character of Melisandre in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019)–. The sophistication of the horror genre, and here we can also include science fiction and fantasy territories, has given way to a multitude of representations of the monstrous, the out of the ordinary and, in the end, evil. Among them, a point of view has been gaining ground whereby horror is shown, actively –not as a complement to the plot– from old age, but also from everyday life, through the creation of stories that are close to the spectator and so real that he or she can identify with the protagonists, whether they are victims or executioners.

Over the last few decades there has been a gradual change of paradigm in which beauty, or the absence of it, are the two main parameters in the "real" representation of the terrifying. A clear example of this, and a clear reference for later creators of horror and science fiction, is David Cronenberg and his films from the 1970s to the early 1990s in which he explores body horror through bodily transformations and mutations and, in general, the use of the body in a symbolic way. Perhaps the clearest exponent of the contrast between beauty and inner evil that is shown to through, in this case, the female body, is his film *Dead Ringers* (1988), where the physical appearance and successful environment of twin gynaecologists and a famous actress are set against uterine mutations.

Figure 1.
Frame from *Dead Ringers* (David Cronenberg, 1988).

In horror and science fiction cinema after the Second World War, new monsters began to be introduced with a symbolic and contemporary variable in the representation of evil and, by extension, of monsters. This came about as a representation of the social reflex in the face of the atomic bomb and the cold war, and was further accentuated by the changing audience in the mid-1960s and as the censorship of the Hays code was disappearing. Clear examples of this trend are *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby and Hawks, 1951) –which served as the basis for John Carpenter's film *The Thing* (1982)–, *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954), *The Blob* (Yeaworth, 1958) or later *Alien* (Scott, 1979).

Figure 2.
Images from *Godzilla* (Ishirō Honda, 1954), *The Blob* (Irvin Yeaworth, 1958), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982).

The use of this resource as a denunciation began to transform, at the beginning of the 1990s, into an increasingly real representation of evil with *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) or *Seven* (Fincher, 1995) where we would have a cultured murderer capable of producing greater admiration in the spectator and another with a "normal" appearance. These films would mark the aesthetics and narrative of future films such as the film adaptation of Brett Easton Ellis's literary work, *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000), in which the most perverse aspects of human beings come to the surface through a physically attractive character who exposes the internalisation of the cult of beauty in Western culture.

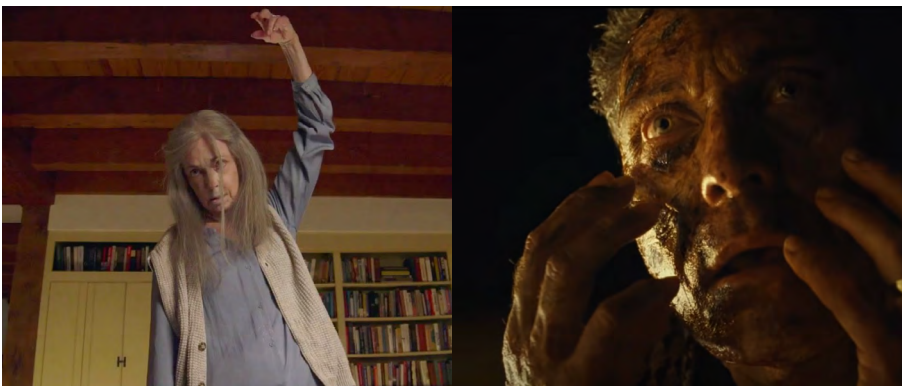
Figure 3.
Frame from *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000).

This approach to reality is perhaps provoked by the insensitivity or lack of affection towards classic horror and the need to go a step further in our fears. This is reflected in the creation of plots and situations with a high degree of verisimilitude, real, after all, that are capable of conveying physical sensations, if we take into account Linda Williams' classification of Film Bodies in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* (1991)[1]. On the other

[1] Williams classifies the only three genres that are capable of conveying physical reactions and sensations –pornography, horror and melodrama– and sets out their comparative characteristics through the viewer's bodily reactions, preferred audience and perversion, among other classifications. Today, some of this analysis, while useful as a reference, has become obsolete, as the evolution and juxtaposition, above all, of pornography and horror have been modifying this 1991 photograph.

hand, there is also the appeal to our own fears, projected towards the "other" (Pérez Valero and Copmans, 2023) –be it racism, xenophobia, sexism and LGTBIphobia– or the fear of old age and the rejection of all its physical projections of the abject and the passage of time of which, for example, Gore Verbinski's *Wellness Cure* (2016), Brandon Cronenberg's *Infinity Pool* (2023) and M. Night Shyamalan have been advocates. Night Shyamalan has echoed in *The Visit* (2015) and *Old* (2021). Importantly, the representation of the aged, mutilated, transformed or mutated body is almost exclusively projected onto women.

Figure 4.
Frames from M. Night Shyamalan's *The Visit* (2015) and *Old* (2021).



Undoubtedly, there is a sociological component that is bringing to the surface, in any artistic expression –literature, comics, videogames or cinema– a tendency to show reality, credible and stark, in fiction, and accentuated, in contrast, by the extreme exposure and pressure we face through the Internet and Social Media concerning physical appearance and the intrinsically human desire to stay young.

OLD AND NEW REPRESENTATIONS OF HORROR

In this journey, which we present in the book, *Unusual Shapes, Fantasy and Horror*, we delve into the different faces of personified horror but, more

specifically, into this current tendency to diversify these forms of representation through the reality and everydayness of the terrifying and fantastic fact.

Marta Miquel-Baldellou in her text *C'est L'autre Qui Est Vieux: Old Age as a Source of Abjection and Otherness in Paco Plaza's La Abuela*, addresses this proliferation, in the last decade, of horror films dealing with old age and the representation of the elderly. In this case, from Paco Plaza's point of view, his film aims to raise a deeper reflection in society, about how the cult of the body is venerated and old age becomes a trope of possession. In this way, old age, and especially the female nude, is denounced as the devil in today's society.

The second text, entitled *Corporeality in Elderly Women and Art House Horror. Towards a Categorization of Certain Modern Gorgons* by David Fuentefría Rodríguez, delves into the decrepitude of old age, analysing it as a resource and treating it from different points of view, historical, aesthetic and social, cataloguing its use as a "new" entity in the horror genre, isolating the specific figure of "the decrepit old woman" as a modern gorgon. To this end, he analyses three productions in which the presence of the naked bodies of old women transmits, throughout the film, its own atmospheric vibrations: *La Abuela* (Paco Plaza, 2021), *Relic* (Natalie Erica James, 2020) and *X* (Ti West, 2022).

In Marta Miquel-Baldellou's second text in this publication, she addresses another aspect of current reality through racism - in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement - in *From Gothic Romance to Plantation Horror: Spatial Dynamics, White Manors and Black Zombies in Jordan Peele's Get Out*. Peele's film conveys covert displays of contemporary racism, depicting and denouncing a current context of pervasive racial discrimination. This aspect crystallises through a horror narrative rooted in the sub-genre of plantation horror from gothic romance. According to Elizabeth Christine Russ, this resource becomes the crucial narrative of the post-slavery era that extends beyond the turn of the twenty-first century (2009). Miquel-Baldellou's analysis highlights the symbolic use of the trope of zombification as a metaphor evoking the trauma of slavery.

The fourth work, by Fran Mateu, explores the innovative aspects in the study of advertising strategies to promote films, through the ingenious tricks or *gimmicks* of the American director and producer William Castle.

In *Floating Skeletons, Electric Shocks and Interactive Punishments in William Castle's Horror Films*, Mateu presents a case study focusing on three of Castle's most significant productions: *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), *The Tingler* (1959) and *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961). In this analysis, the figure of the director, considered as "the other Hitchcock", is extolled and the influence he has had on subsequent horror films, both in the independent and mainstream circuits, is assessed.

Sara Calvete-Lorenzo also examines the theme of the female body in horror cinema in *Violence, Imperfection and Vengeance of Female Bodies in The New French and Canadian Cinemas*, but this time through the cutting of flesh and its physical and explicit representation of violence on the female body and, in particular, on the multiple ways of destroying and fragmenting it on screen. The study, which is based on doctoral research in which the theory of the Triple Cut is set out, is centred on two different but directly related cinematographies, the French case and its Canadian equivalent, where in recent years a large number of horror productions have been produced by female directors.

To close this block, Mario-Paul Martínez Fabre presents his work *Slasher, Heavy Metal, and Digital Games. The Exemplary Productions that Inaugurated the Horror Genre in Videogame Cinema*, in which he analyses, transversally, films whose themes are based, on the one hand, on the interweaving of the virtual universe of videogames and their correspondence and effects with the real world. And, on the other hand, films that approach digital games from a social approach, more connected with the "real" everyday space, and with the questions raised by their network of relations based on their consumption and market. To this end, Martínez Fabre considers three films that can serve to outline a cinematographic panorama of the videoludic horrors, or "ludic evils", that initiated this trend of representation in videogame cinema: *Nightmares* (with its episode *The Game Master*, Joseph Sargent, 1983), *Brainscan* (John Flynn, 1994) and *Stay Alive* (William Brent Bell, 2006).

FANTASTIC TERRITORIES AND NARRATIVES IN THE ARTS

The second part of this volume, in the form of a miscellany, deals with various formal representations of the approach to the fantastic terrain from the different arts, as well as in education.

Cynthia Bagousse, Nathalie Bonnardel, Grégory Lo Monaco and Thomas Arciszewski offer a vision of educational alternatives through science fiction in *Science-Fiction: Critical and Creative Cognition of The World to Come*. This genre seems to be able to contribute to the development of students' skills to enable them to envision the future in its alternative forms and adapt to the changing environment of the 21st century. In this chapter, the authors focus on the development of creativity and critical thinking –as two of the competences necessary for adapting to the future (OECD, 2019; P21, 2019; UNESCO, 2015)– and how science fiction, as alternative knowledge, fosters creative thinking.

Andrew Connor, from the College of Art at the University of Edinburgh, presents *"Meanwhile..." Multiplicity of Plots in Vr Experiences*, an essay in which he demonstrates the versatility of videogames in allowing the player to engage with the story and shape their own character (within limits), as well as explore a diverse set of pre-established plots. Connor emphasises the importance of creating immersive experiences through the use of Virtual Reality (VR) and the enrichment of the main plot with subplots that the player can navigate.

The Fritz Lang's Fantastic Territories is the title of the chapter in which Juan Agustín Mancebo Roca explains the fundamentally fantastic aspect of the work of the filmmaker Fritz Lang. Lang's imagination, cultivated from his earliest readings thanks to the works of Emilio Salgari or Karl May, constructed, without any previous reference, completely new visual and narrative contents. His films are cinematographic and cultural archetypes that have marked the science fiction of the last two centuries and are permanently relevant in contemporary visual culture.

Cristina Ogando González deals in her chapter with the resource of retelling, or retelling the same stories through myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) or

archetypes (Propp, 1968), that is, small repetitions of ideas that are mixed into a story and become easily recognisable to the public. In his text *Retelling: a way to unlock gameplay*, Ogando argues that, faced with the practical impossibility of creating original ideas, videogame developers have found in the retelling of legends a way to reach players directly and efficiently. And it does so through the creation of immersive game-fictional worlds with stories that the public is already familiar with. However, this begs the question of whether the adaptation of these stories to the new medium represents yet another way of keeping them alive, or simply a new form of storytelling.

Finally, Verónica Navarro Navarro and Mª Isabel de Vicente-Yagüe Jara present *Influence-S. Escher's Drawing. Escher's Drawing, a journey through the fantasy of the artist M.C. Escher* and how different authors in the arts and other disciplines have found inspiration in his works. Impossible spaces, abstract mathematical concepts such as infinity, optical illusions and the representation of three-dimensionality, project a fantastic and captivating vision onto Escher's work, but at the same time linked to our environment and reality, which explains the fascination that it has provoked in a large number of creators.

TOWARDS A TERRIFYING REALITY

Through the eleven works presented here, *Unusual Shapes, Fantasy & Horror* proposes, in short, to show a wide range of visions of the forms adopted by horror and the fantastic through the different arts. This volume aims to be a place for analysis and creation through research and dissemination. From cinema, videogames, education and, in general, all the arts involved in their processes, we reveal a continuous dialogue both in the revision of what has happened and in current narrative trends. The evolution and applications of the fantasy and horror genre stimulate an increasingly broad and complex creative panorama, with innovative contributions and hybridisations, but also with a retrospective view. At this point, one might ask whether these unusual forms of horror and, more broadly, science fiction have a wider route to a more complex conception of the genre in which we, as spectators, are questioned directly. The monster can be ourselves regardless of our appearance, age or situation; the plot can be as complex as life itself. So, is reality

more terrifying or fantastic than fiction itself? Is our mirror the witness of our own fears? The trend indicates that the narratives and plots of the future will continue to emphasise sophistication through direct interpellation of the spectator, to put him or her in situations where once we only saw the obvious evil, but where now, increasingly, we see ourselves through the passage of time.

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C'EST L'AUTRE QUI EST VIEUX: OLD AGE AS A SOURCE OF ABJECTION AND OTHERNESS IN PACO PLAZA'S *LA ABUELA*

Marta Miquel-Baldellou
University of LLeida

INTRODUCTION

Following the release of his film *La abuela* (2021), Spanish director Paco Plaza claimed that genre cinema becomes most appropriate to address our deepest worries and concerns (Scope Invest, 2020, p.4). According to Robin Wood (1996), horror films possess a subtext of social criticism, insofar as, by means of portraying a monster that symbolically threatens to destabilise the established order, they raise awareness of what remains repressed in our culture (p.166). Plaza's film is indicative of this dissident quality that mainly characterises the horror genre, particularly bearing in mind the historical context in which this film came into being. *La abuela* was created during the pandemic that spread worldwide in 2020, when hospitals and nursing homes were overcome by the surge of critically-ill patients. At that juncture, dissident voices referred to the prevailing ageism— a term that gerontologist Robert Butler coined in 1969— which befell the Western society, insofar as it was implied that the elderly were left to die owing to the impossibility of attending to an overwhelming number of patients. This tragic situation laid bare the ambivalent attitudes towards the elderly in our cultural context, which range from respect and consideration to ostracism and exclusion. At a public level, the exponential growth of the aging population arises as one of the most serious social issues in Spain. At a more private level, old age usually involves a source of dread and anxiety, since, as cultural gerontologists like Margaret Gullette argue, this life stage has often

been associated with a process of decline (2004, p.13). As Plaza claims, "we are terrified by old age" (Scope Invest, 2020, p.4), while we must face the assumption that, all being well, sooner or later, we will surrender to old age and its effects.

Owing to the evolving state of affairs that has contributed to categorising old age as a source of public and personal concern in the last decades, Cynthia Miller and A. Bowdoin van Riper (2019) give evidence of the proliferation of cinematic representations in which the "horrors of aging are prominently featured" (p.1). Film portrayals of old age reflect as well as endorse the disturbing ambivalent attitudes toward the elderly prevailing in contemporary society, which depict older characters through features that determine their ambiguous roles as victims or villains. In the last few years, there has been an increasing number of horror films addressing old age and the representation of older characters, such as Adam Robitel's *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), M. Night Shyamalan's *The Visit* (2015), Fede Álvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016), Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2021), Axelle Carolyn's *The Manor* (2021) and Andy Fetscher's *Old People* (2022). The spread of elderly-themed horror films ratifies that old age and its effects have become a source of disquiet, not only for the elders, but also for the younger individuals who are in their care. Recent horror films, like Paco Plaza's *La Abuela* (2021) —which centres the attention of this analysis— and Raúl Cerezo and Fernando González Gómez's *Viejos* (2022), ratify the flourishing of horror cinema around old age also in Spain.

In this context, characterised by the proliferation of genre cinema addressing the discourse of old age, Paco Plaza and Carlos Vermut wrote the script of *La Abuela*, with the aim, in Plaza's words, to create "a terrifying piece that, like the kind of films that I prefer, would contribute to triggering a more profound reflection" (Scope Invest, 2020, p.4). *La abuela* portrays the highly-symbiotic relationship established between Pilar and Susana, grandmother and granddaughter —performed respectively by actresses Vera Valdez and Almudena Amor— who meet again in Madrid after Susana's absence, since she has been working as a fashion model in Paris. When she is informed that her grandmother, Pilar, has suffered a stroke, Susana resolves to go back to Madrid to take care of her. When she was a child, following the premature death of her parents, Susana was raised by Pilar and, for years, they developed a very

close emotional bond. With the intention of resuming her career shortly after, Susana moves to Madrid to live with her grandmother. Nonetheless, their daily coexistence gradually acquires disturbing undertones, as their roles of dominance and dependence become blurred, along with their respective identities.

Plaza alludes to Peter Paul Rubens's painting "Susanna and the Elders" (1607) as a pictorial inspiration (Scope Invest, 2020, p.5), which is evoked in the film by means of the younger character's name, Susana. Besides, in analogy with the film, the painting portrays the modesty and unease characterising the young damsel, which stand in contrast with the decadence and even vicious desire of the elders, as they symbolically intend to deprive the young woman of her last remnants of beauty and vitality. As Plaza admits, *La Abuela* displays "two opposed worlds which intertwine" (Scope Invest, 2020, p.5), involving, on the one hand, the cosmopolitanism, the cult of the body and the omnipresence of youth which prevail in Susana's glamorous world of fashion in Paris and, on the other hand, the hoary quarter in Madrid where Pilar's fusty apartment is located and which replicates its tenant's physical and mental decline as a result of illness and old age.

From a narratological perspective, although the narrative voice remains focalised on Susana, the plot constantly revolves around Pilar. Given the symbiotic relationship established between both female characters, and the manifest influence that Pilar exerts on Susana, Plaza claims that *La Abuela* is "a picture about possession in which old age is the demon" and "that demon is real" (Scope Invest, 2020, p.5). Plaza's film, thus, turns into an allegory in which old age becomes inextricably linked to the trope of possession, which endows the older character with terrifying, but also extraordinary, qualities. This ambivalent portrayal of female aging is rooted in the ambiguous cultural representations of the older woman in the Western tradition as embodiment of the archetypes of the witch and the fairy. This dichotomy finds correlation in Mary Russo's stigmatising notion of the grotesque female body (1995) and in Barbara Walker's vindicating figure of the crone as a source of female empowerment (1985). Accordingly, the fact of envisioning old age as symptomatic of decay evokes Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection (1982), insofar as the image of the aging body has often elicited aversion. Furthermore, there is also the estranging psychological effect of identifying oneself as old, which lays its roots in Simone de Beauvoir's claim that

"*c'est l'autre qui est vieux*" (1970, p.306), as suggestive of the individual's reluctance to recognise oneself as old. The parallel and contrasting dichotomies established between victimisation and demonisation, physical decline and psychological splitting, and abjection and otherness pervade Plaza's film as symptomatic of the ambivalent attitudes towards old age and, especially, female aging. What follows is an analysis of these concepts in different scenes of Plaza's film.

ABJECTION: GROTESQUE, DECAY, HORROR

As Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie (2016) argue, Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece, *Psycho* (1960), involved a turning point in horror cinema, inasmuch as it left behind the general tendency to depict fantastical monsters in favour of "horrific 'normal' people" (p.79), embodied, in this case, by a grotesque aging woman. According to Peter Shelley (2009), the histrionic role that aging women have played in horror cinema, as either unstable protagonists or victimised women, is legacy of the ambivalent portrayal of Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (p.8). In her reluctance to accept the passage of time, Miss Havisham not only reflects the latent dread of the effects of old age, but also the ancestral unease towards the figure of the older woman. In this respect, in the collective unconscious, the aging female arises as a source of abjection, which Kristeva (1982) defines as the human response —through denial and anxiety— to "the collapse of the border between inside and outside" (p.53), that is, between what is self and what is not. Nonetheless, as Barbara Creed (2021) claims, even if there is a general propensity to "exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (p.40). Henceforth, although the abject may involve a challenge to identity, it also contributes to defining its meaning.

Following this premise, in Plaza's film, as an older woman, Pilar is gradually portrayed in accordance with the notion of the abject. As Susana starts living with her grandmother and gains awareness of her illness and its eerie effects, the granddaughter's attitude towards Pilar begins to change, thus moving from affection and tenderness to increasing animosity and even sheer panic. In the course of living together in the same apartment, as Susana takes

whole responsibility for taking care of her grandmother, who depends on her granddaughter to perform all her daily routines, a series of scenes illustrate different instances of abjection. On the basis of Kristeva's concept, Creed (2021) enumerates three ways in which horror films portray the abject, thus involving bodily functions, the notion of the border and the construction of the maternal figure (pp. 40-3), which are all addressed in Plaza's film.

The recurrent display of bodily fluids in different scenes of the film evokes the notion of the abject, inasmuch as it reflects the transition between the internal and the external, thus symbolically evoking the subversion of the boundaries that distinguish the familiar from the strange. Susana is in charge of cooking the meals and feeding her grandmother, even if, as a result of her declining physical condition, Pilar often chokes or spits the food that she is aided to ingest. At night, Susana notices her grandmother's incontinence, which makes it necessary to wash her and change her periodically. Furthermore, the omnipresence of the aging female body and its explicit nakedness —particularly, in scenes in which Susana bathes Pilar's body— also evoke the abject, since, as Sue Matheson (2019) contends, in the compulsive dramatization of physical decay, images of the aging body are evocative of disintegration and of "the individual's sense of being an entity distinct from nature" (p.85), which ultimately invokes the moment of death.

Also, as related to abjection, other scenes underscore the concept of the frontier which Creed (2021) defines as the "encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (p.42), as happens when an individual transgresses socially prescribed values. As a result of illness, Pilar gradually displays some strange behaviour that leads her to diverge from the norm. In a mostly perturbing scene, when Susana decides to hire a domestic worker with the intention of going back to Paris to resume her career, she suspects that the violent death of the employee in the street has been motivated by her grandmother's bizarre gesticulations in front of the window.

Horror films have also evoked the abject by means of portraying the mother figure in conjunction with that of the child, since, on the basis of Kristeva's concept of abjection, Creed (2021) observes that, if "the child struggles to break free," conversely, "the mother is reluctant to release it" (p.43). Owing to the premature death of Susana's parents, Pilar acted as the

mother of her granddaughter and, even though Susana is now a grown-up woman, the illness that befalls her grandmother still prevents their physical separation. The pervasive image of an empty cage, which presides the living room in their apartment, evokes Susana's claustrophobic existence not only as a result of Pilar's weakening condition, but also on account of Pilar's increasingly possessive demeanour that precludes Susana's will to live a life of her own.

Nevertheless, although Pilar's aging body mostly arises as a source of abjection and is apparently identified as non-normative in accordance with cultural discourses, it also seems to conceal outstanding supernatural features. As Sally Chivers (2013) claims, in cinematic representations, "old age is believed to indicate (at the very least) ill health," and moreover, "ill health often visually appears in the form of a disabled body" (p.8). In this respect, the physical frame that is culturally perceived as deviant is constructed discursively in opposition with bodies that are socially considered as normative. Consequently, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) notes, those bodies which do not fit into some sort of alleged normativity are categorised as non-valid and even disabled (p.27), when they could simply be defined as extraordinary. In Plaza's film, as a result of the astonishing events that Susana witnesses, she begins to wonder whether they are the result of her grandmother's old age or the intervention of some supernatural forces. Pilar's body gradually displays attributes that have been associated with archetypes pertaining to the Gothic tradition and are endowed with preternatural features, such as the witch, the ghost, and the vampire.

As Herbert Covey (1991) contends, cultural representations of the old woman have conventionally associated her with the figure of the witch (p.71), who was alleged to possess magic abilities, but was condemned to ostracism on account of prevailing social prejudices. In some scenes, Pilar exhibits attitudes and mannerisms that are highly evocative of the archetype of the witch. When Susana reads the diary that she used to write as a child, she recollects a passage in which her grandmother cut off her braid while they were dancing in a ritualistic ceremony. As an adult, in a concealed trunk, Susana finds her braid, joined together with a picture of her as a child, which appears to be a lucky charm that her grandmother used for witchcraft.

In a series of scenes, Pilar also seems to vanish and emerge at will, thus showing an alternation between absence and presence that brings to mind the archetype of the ghost. When Susana realises that her grandmother is missing, she leaves the apartment in a rush to try to find her and, to her surprise, when she goes back home, it seems as if Pilar never left the place. Besides, after Susana takes her grandmother to a nursing home, she watches the news and realises that the building has been destroyed in a fire, which makes her assume that her grandmother is dead. Nonetheless, Susana eventually finds out that Pilar is safe and sound once again in their apartment. As Julia Briggs (2000) argues, in the Gothic tradition, the ghost is interpreted as the visual manifestation of lurking family secrets (p.127) and as the spectral embodiment of neglected individuals with vindictive purposes (p.128). In resemblance with the archetype of the ghost, Pilar stands for repressed traumas from the past, but also for her will to vindicate herself for having been deserted in her old age.

Finally, Pilar is also characterised by means of some traits that have conventionally been associated with the vampire in the Gothic tradition. As Anna Chromik (2016) explains, iconic representations of vampires often highlight their lack of shadow, their inherent connection with some animals, their sharp teeth as indicative of their deviant sexuality, and their polymorphism (p.709). When Susana arrives at her grandmother's apartment, she notices that there is no mirror in the bathroom to reflect back her image. In the initial scenes of the film, Pilar is wearing a long coat with a prominent fur collar which subtly suggests her inherent predatory nature. At night, Pilar approaches her granddaughter when she is lying in her bed, while veiled references suggest a latent erotic relationship that verges on incest. The interaction between youth and old age that is enacted between grandmother and granddaughter also emulates the fluid transition between different life stages that vampires personify, insofar as their body rejuvenates and never truly reflects their older chronological age.

OTHERNESS: THE DOUBLE, MIRRORS, POSSESSION

Although old age arises as a source of the abject throughout the film, it also reveals itself as the basis of otherness. In her homonymous volume on

old age, Simone de Beauvoir (1970) claims that the subject that is identified as old corresponds to the figure of the Other (p.306). Since the recognition of the individual's old age comes from outside, it is the stranger within the individual who is categorised as old. As Woodward (1986) claims, this premise implies that the individual is eventually compelled to acknowledge the point of view of the Other, since "the recognition of our own old age comes to us from the Other" (p.104), as if it were installed in our own body. In this respect, following Freudian theories, Woodward (1986) further argues that the event of recognising one's double as elderly arises as an experience of the uncanny (p.105), insofar as it involves the blurring of the familiar and the strange as a result of refusing to recognise the aging Other —the intruder— as oneself.

In Plaza's film, the aging subject fluctuates from abjection to otherness, as Pilar and Susana —and their respective identities as grandmother and granddaughter— begin to merge with one another. As Susana turns into her grandmother's carer, when it was her grandmother who used to take care of her in her childhood, they exchange their original family roles. The different life stages that they respectively represent —old age and youth— are gradually subverted as a result of their daily coexistence and the systematic repetition of their everyday routines, which gives way to a symbiotic relationship. In fact, it is even revealed that Pilar and Susana celebrate their birthday on the same day.

The gradual overlapping of identities between both characters acquires psychoanalytic undertones which recall the Jungian dyad between 'persona' and 'shadow', whereby the 'persona' responds to the social mask in the public sphere, whereas the 'shadow' involves the unconscious self that the ego tries to resist. Susana's career as a fashion model symbolically forces her to resort to this social mask, which is evocative of the Jungian archetype of the 'persona', whereas, her grandmother, Pilar, turns into the symbolic personification of Susana's 'shadow', which unveils disturbing secrets from the past and also unleashes Susana's sense of guilt for having deserted her grandmother to pursue her own professional aspirations.

A series of frames juxtaposing the images of Pilar and Susana suggest the iconic trope of the double by means of resorting to symbolic mirrors, which turn into a pervasive motif throughout the film. In the streets of Madrid, Susana beholds a marquee advertising poster of herself posing as a model that conjures

the spectral image of her grandmother as a young woman in the portrait hanging on the wall of their apartment. Alternatively, the painting and the photographs that symbolically invoke Pilar's looks in her youth arise as illusory mirrors which bear resemblance with Susana and serve as an alternative youthful image to Pilar's aging body. Drawing on Beauvoir's premise (1970), owing to the patriarchal dictates that have traditionally proscribed the image of the aging female body, the older woman experiences a latent sense of doubleness, since a spectral youthful image from the past superimposes on her aging face (p.318). In addition to the myriad pictures that evoke Pilar's youth, it is truly her granddaughter, Susana, who arises as Pilar's alternative mirror and personification of her youthful self as a substitute image that superimposes itself on her aging self.

Drawing on Woodward's notion of the mirror of old age (1986), "the subject resists this identification rather than embraces it because what is whole is felt to reside *within* the subject," while, conversely, "the image in the mirror is understood as uncannily prefiguring the disintegration" (p.110). In absence of actual mirrors, which suggests the denial of the aging other, Pilar symbolically resorts to Susana to revert back the aging process, thus rejecting the mirror of old age and enacting, instead, Lacan's notion of the mirror stage. According to Lacan, as Woodward (1986) explains, "the infant holds his mirror image in an amorous gaze" (p.110), as the virtually integrated image, which the mirror replicates, differs from his still fragmentary inner self.

As the film progresses, Pilar's increasingly eccentric and even childish ways as a result of her declining condition find correlation in Susana's incipient aging process, hence suggesting a symbolic exchange between youth and old age that ratifies their transformation into doubles of each other. According to Otto Rank (1971), the double implies "a wish-defence against a dreaded external destruction" (p.86), which suggests accepting as well as repelling the awareness of mortality that is evoked. As she takes care of her grandmother during her illness, Susana literally emulates her behaviour, routines and habits to the extent that they end up replicating the same actions in spite of their differing life stages. As Gullette notes (2004), "the life-course opposition of progress and decline" (p.19), which is considered "as universal in its process as the biologized body" (p.15), actually responds to a cultural stratification of the life course into different stages that opposes

youth and old age. These clearly differentiated stages thus conform to illusory categories and, in Plaza's film, they reveal themselves as mostly counterfeited.

Following a steady process of emulation of her grandmother, Susana begins to notice her incipient grey hair and the aging lines on her face. In a deeply disturbing scene, she awakes to find out that she has turned old prematurely, as her hair is completely white and her hands are those of an old woman. The premature process of aging that appears to befall Susana evokes the trope of the *puer senex* in medieval iconography, which consists in a figure with the body of a child that displays traits pertaining to old age. As Vanessa Joosen notes, the *puer senex* brings to the fore the connection between childhood and old age (2018, p.5), and it also suggests Aristophanes's classical notion of envisioning old age as a second childhood.

The trope of the *puer senex* also arises as an embodiment of otherness in artistic manifestations, and it has been metaphorically portrayed in contemporary horror films. In one scene of Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), Grace's daughter, Anne, suddenly transforms into an old woman. In Jaume Balagueró's *Fragile* (2005), the identities of the aging nurse, Charlotte, and her child patient, Mandy, are mistaken. In Jaume Collet-Serra's *Orphan* (2009), as a result of a growth disorder, the body of a grown-up woman, Esther, looks like that of a female child. The symbolic exchange of old and young selves in Plaza's film becomes evident when Susana awakes in her grandmother's bed, whereas Pilar is found sleeping in her granddaughter's bedroom, thus suggesting that their personalities are gradually exchanged, along with their life stages, since as Susana grows older, it is suggested that Pilar will also grow younger.

As Dawn Keetley (2019) claims, in genre cinema, old age has often been portrayed as a traumatic experience that happens "all of a sudden" (p.58), instead of envisioning it as a gradual process. The sudden transformation from youth into old age is portrayed in Plaza's film when Pilar dies and takes possession of her granddaughter's youthful body as a result of the sorcery that she concocted when Susana was a child. In Plaza's film, the trope of demonic possession thus arises as an allegory of aging, since Pilar is possessed by old age only to take possession of Susana's young body as an evil spirit and revert back the process. Prior to this climactic passage, a series of scenes are reminiscent of classics revolving around demonic possessions, such as Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)

and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). In resemblance with scenes from these classic horror films, Susana beholds her grandmother's body swelling as if she were pregnant, while she must also immobilise her grandmother's body in bed for her own safety. The supernatural undertones of these scenes suggest the demonic possession that is taking place in Pilar's body which will also take effect in Susana's body as a result of the symbiotic connection that binds them together.

CONCLUSION

Horror films have conventionally portrayed female aging as the embodiment of abjection. In the last decades, though, cinematic representations of old age have suggested a gradual shift from abjection to otherness. Even if both concepts are related —since both refer to the blurring of identities between what is self and what is alien— it can be argued that abjection places emphasis on revulsion, owing to its eminently physical component, whereas otherness accentuates ultimate integration, as a result of the notion of the uncanny that blends the strange and the familiar. Plaza's film enacts the transition from abjection to otherness, insofar as the initial deviation from old age gives way to assimilation.

Although old age is portrayed through decay and decline, it is also revealed to be the source of empowerment, as Pilar succumbs to the weakening effects of old age, but in doing so, she also acquires preternatural dimensions. To use Tzvetan Todorov's terms (1975), there is a progression from envisioning old age as a source of 'the strange' to considering its effects as the result of 'the marvellous' (p.41), insofar as the bizarre events that initially take place seem related to Pilar's illness, although it is eventually unveiled that there are some supernatural forces taking part in the process. Henceforth, Plaza's film turns into an allegorical horror tale about old age that arose in a specific social and cultural context in which the elderly and, in particular, older women vindicated themselves for having suffered invisibility and neglect.

The convergence between the characters of the grandmother and the granddaughter in Plaza's film, together with the metamorphosis that takes place between them, also responds to what Pamela Gravagne (2013) has termed as the need to create narratives that leave behind representations of old age as redolent

with decay in order to emphasise, instead, the possibility of becoming that old age implies (p.185), which acquires literal connotations in Plaza's film. According to Woodward (1995), despite the fact that the Freudian models of development have traditionally focused on two generations —comprising the parent and the child— it is necessary to draw attention to the figure of the older woman as the third element that completes this genealogy (p.86) in order to ensure equality and continuity.

Finally, it may be argued that —as a result of the proliferation of horror narratives which depict old age and, in particular, older women playing a central role— a hypothetical third stage can be added to Ellen Moers's historical development of the genre of female Gothic (1976, p.90). According to Moers, female Gothic presents two phases of development, insofar as, at a first stage, narratives addressed women's fears of marriage and sexuality, whereas, at a second stage, narratives explored women's dread of birth and motherhood. Given the centrality that the character of the older woman acquires in the film, Plaza's *La Abuela* appears to prefigure a third stage in female Gothic in which the fears and concerns about female aging are given full exposure, abjection gradually gives way to otherness, and the figure of the older woman is ultimately conflated with that of our own self.

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CORPOREALITY IN ELDERLY WOMEN AND ART HOUSE HORROR. TOWARDS A CATEGORIZATION OF CERTAIN MODERN GORGONS

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that the main revisionist quality of the new *art house horror*[1] consists of requiring a certain degree of intellectual demand from an audience who has been used to, until not long ago, exercises of instinctive resistance or exploration of visual limits. Such requirement would arise from the questions formulated by it, the mise-en-scène, a pair of atmospheres that generally take place in these types of films: the first one, typical in films of all nationalities and times, is demarcated by the *zeitgeist*[2], whereas the second tends to convene a formal *stimmung*[3] in which context and characters would be (re) defined from a psychological perspective and, more specifically, around certain moods.

In fact, if we speak about the "revisionist quality", it is because it is not difficult to trace, historically, the influence of these atmospheres of the indefinite. Psychological horror films have always existed. Nonetheless, the origin of their present interpellative detours can be found in relatively recent specific experimental approaches, which have helped to gradually change the beholder's dispositions towards fear, sometimes in isolated pills, and others as part of filmographies about intimate and dark stories, with some sociological discourse.

[1] A sub-genre of horror based more on the creation of an atmosphere of psychological unease, and a certain cinematographic stylism, than on the resources of *jumpscares*, blood or gore, typical of previous decades.

[2] In german, "spirit of the times", referring to the cultural and intellectual environment.

[3] In german, mood or state of mind.

An instance of the former ones can be found in *Let Me In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, Tomas Alfredson, 2008) or *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006), whose universe was described as the answer to those who have always asked "what happens within a tumour-invaded brain" (2017) by Dulce. Apart from the undeniable classical codes, in many of its productions, *art house horror* has inherited these *crescendos* where the rupturing atmosphere, the infectious alterations and the located violence are precise ingredients "to establish an effective *stimmung* that transports the audience to a suggestive frame of mind, which is usually finished off with a shocking plot twist" (Toriz, 2022)

Nevertheless, it has called our attention, as part of the experimentation with the artistic resources of this new wave, the recurrent use of female old-age nudity as an element to promote *stimmung*, and, especially, as a representation of some contemporary anxieties, such as fear of death, physical decrepitude or the dissolution of the self, present in an era of narcissism and the culture of the ephemeral.

In the following paragraphs, we will analyse the correspondence of this resource in current horror films. We will approach it from a historical, aesthetic and social point of view, trying to catalogue its use as a "new" entity of the genre, and even isolating a specific figure (which we will call "The decrepit old woman"), a kind of modern gorgon, proposed as a construction proper of modern horror. For that purpose, we will analyse three productions where the presence of old women's naked bodies transmit, throughout the footage, its own atmospheric vibrations: *The Grandmother* (*La abuela*, Paco Plaza, 2021), *Relic* (Natalie Erica James, 2020) and *X* (Ti West, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

According to Genovard and Casulleras (2005:8), "The main topic in cinema about old age is corporeality". In this sense, one of the highest taboos regarding old women's corporeality analysis is nudity: a naked old lady precedes or reflects some evil. She can also be an archetypal cultural representation of the "old woman", commonly marked by procuring and witchcraft curses.

But we are dealing with a triple perspective. Firstly, regarding aesthetics, Arnaiz was a pioneer aiming that this dimension (2011) "has always accompanied the development of the human being, establishing inclusion and exclusion guidelines of the subjects contextually located". Regarding this, many studies highlight both the early concept of the necessity of establishing a renovated aesthetic of old age in the media (Polo, 2008) and, more recently, the implications of the aesthetic construction in the erotic treatment of elderly women (De los Santos, Arroyo and Arreola, 2021). On one side, the different aesthetes and artists have profusely claimed that old age does not necessarily mean the end of the great vital narratives (love or the celebration of existence, together with the search for beauty and, therefore, for life in an aesthetic sense). However, the aesthetic archetypes of the female "monster" do not have a smaller specific weight in our culture (beginning with Pandora's offspring, according to Hesiod's *Theogony*).

From an historical point of view, the place of old age in the civilised world has also experienced many mutations, from its essential decision-making role in Ancient Rome to its decline in the Middle Ages. According to Chaparro (2016), it is from the Renaissance onwards when, again, "West Europe feels attracted by the legacy of Ancient Greece". An influence that "was patent in art and literature", being "youth, beauty and perfection" its principal values, and rejecting "ugliness, imperfection and, naturally, old age". Added to this situation, after the invention of the printing press, "oral memory, belonging to the elderly people, is no longer essential". She concludes that the transformations of the contemporary world not only have not contributed to repeating the situation, but they have also introduced the idea of the old person who is unable to adapt to changes (present still in our time).

Finally, on a social level, Sarabia concludes that elderly people with depression or anxiety showed greater dissatisfaction with body image, prevailing, in this case, women over men (2012). It has also been proven a lesser intensity in the affection of fear, hostility and blame in third-age depression related to adult years (Alcalá and Giner, 2007). Women are usually more afraid to die, regardless of factors such as their academic level, and elderly people who fear to die avoid talking about it, showing an increasing wish that the reality they have had to live was different (Sanchís, 2018). Also, with the advances of modernity,

"the process of individuation has radicalised certain topics regarding the self and the precariousness of the body, such as fear of aging, pain, sickness and death" (Olvera and Sabido, 2007), and it has multiplied the studies about the old age negative stereotypes. Only some very recent ones, such as the one from Amezcua and García (2022), have begun to point out current inaccuracies of the term "old age", questioning ageism.

In the *art house horror*, the particularity is that these three aspects tend to plot with the purpose of creating arcane and terrifying images, where the nudity of old women serves as a catalyst and visual expression of fears, as the ones mentioned, and its cultural correspondence. Thus, we propose, as an analysis method of the selected films, an observation, with evaluative reading, of the main nudity scenes, with the aim of categorising "The decrepit old woman" as a specific image within contemporary horror, delimiting, at the same time, her pattern of behaviour, if any.

The Grandmother

In *The Grandmother*, Susana (Almudena Amor) has to quit her job as a model in Paris in order to go back to Madrid to take care of Pilar (Vera Valdez), who raised her and urgently needs help after having suffered a stroke. In terms of our analysis, the psychological horror *art house* has been organised since its initial sequence around female nudity, promoting a game of contrasts and disturbing symbols which will usually interchange the natural roles of old age and youth as receptacles of life. In this sequence, Pilar returns to her flat in Madrid to find her friend, Julita (Gabriela Calonfirescu), who is also an old woman, dead on the floor, just before the young and beautiful Eva (Karina Kolokolchykova) appears, completely naked. Right after that, the old lady hugs the girl, kneeling before her in an odd, insane and indeterminate image, with lesbic-gerontophilic and ceremonial connotations.

Eva's nakedness makes sense here because, later on, we will understand that what the screen shows is a desire to return to youth (and to some sexuality previously repressed), which will be reflected in a radical antithesis of harmonies and in an extreme intergenerational division which motivates the real *stimmung* of the film.

Thus, presented the mirrored proposal, from then on, the resource of the old woman's nudity appears firstly in Susana's immediate dreaminess, who, during her train trip to Madrid, dreams with strange memories of her childhood. Fleetingly, her grandmother is seen having fun with Julita at a party, with the particularity that she appears naked from the waist up (pointing out, again, certain prejudices towards old age and custom)[4]. However, outside the oneiric world, the director realistically shows the demanding work that taking care of elderly people implies (including their suffering), introducing the social factor by this means. In the scene where Susana showers Pilar, the grandmother's nudity is shown through fragments. The actress is standing in the bathtub so that we can observe, successively, how meticulously Susana washes her back, forehead and side, also suggesting the wash of her genital organs. The shots take delight in the aesthetic impact of her slimness and wrinkles, also catching sometimes the old lady looking at the ceiling with a blank stare. The moment evokes weakness and dependency but also a pictorial connotation, similar to ecstasy or transfiguration, close to an old woman's version of Caravaggio's Magdalenes.

From here, however, partial nudity will keep, at some point, its realistic mark. Nevertheless, total nudity will take a violent turn as a narrative discourse, showing a diabolic condition, and an aesthetic perception, utterly opposed to the objective helplessness and intimacy portrayed until now. Susana is peacefully asleep while the sheet covering her starts to slide towards the floor. Her grandmother is watching her from the bedroom door, naked and with her back to the camera, in a pose and situation which reminds of witchcraft, predation and vampirism of some of *The Caprices* created by Goya, specifically number 71 ("Si amanece, nos vamos"), and, especially, number 68, "Linda maestra", in which an old sorcerer is taking a novice to the coven.

In addition, not only the "decrepit old woman", Pilar, is unsatisfied with her ranged spell (making Susana's trousers being pulled down and revealing her underwear, in another assault on her corporeality and sexual intimacy), but she also introduces her fingers in her granddaughter's mouth, while whispering

[4] There is a moment where the dream can remind us, especially with the characterisation of both women, of some of the parodic-grotesque experiments about the feminine that we can find in Cindy Sherman photographic work.

inscrutable spells. At the end of the film, we discover that Pilar and Julita used to be lovers and that they bewitched their granddaughters, taking advantage of the fact that Susana's and her grandmother's birthdays were on the same day, to take their bodies when the time of their death came. Supposing Susana's soul has been trapped forever in her grandmother's lifeless body, the film finishes with an encounter between Eva (who has been Julita since the first sequence) and the "new" Pilar, who awaits her, following the logical narrative, completely naked.

Relic

In *Relic*, Kay and Sam (Emily Mortimer and Bella Heathcote), daughter and granddaughter of Edna (Robyn Nevin), return to the family house due to her sudden disappearance. After reappearing strangely, both women will be affected by the effects of the progressive dementia of the grandmother, in a spiral that, in the end, "turns the house into a hell feeding daily fears: getting old, loneliness, absences, silent reproaches, sickness and death" (Sans, 2020).

Being a tale focused on and from the old woman's mind, where old age is a curse that transforms the familiar home physically without referring to witchcraft or any magic, the film must be analysed according to this particular indetermination. The absence of specific elements also restricts nudity in *Relic* to two scenes, at the beginning and at the end of the story, although both, from our point of view, have prime importance.

When the film starts, Edna appears alone, naked and backwards in her living-room, standing, absent-minded and trembling, while the bath is overflowing and flooding her house, which, here, is a reflection of her defenselessness and the loneliness of the elderly. After Kay, and especially Sam, have walked literally throughout the pure ontological dispersal represented by the rambling and impossible corridors in which the owner's mental chaos has transformed the house, Edna mutates into a strange and new entity which Kay must strip of its old skin to be revealed. In this case, the complete dissolution of the being transcends the proper physical nudity to find a strange creature underneath, non-human and non-dead, but which, stripped of all clothes, equally looks like the image of mummification and a mockery of the beginning

of life: Pitch-black, consumed, absent of any attribute, but, at the same time, familiar, recognisable, with a moving expression of necessity and the resignation of a stiff face. Old age, oblivion and the loss of identity acquire a corporeal form in the film's last seconds.

Except for this specific representation of the typical sickness of old age, already used by James in the short film *Creswick* (2020), the readings of the movie about lost memories' pathologies are very rich. However, nudity concretely establishes the beginning and the ultimate progression of evil. Finally, the clash of nudities between the old being and the creature that embodies absolute oblivion supports Zizek (2006) when, regarding the symbolic spaces, he stated that "reality is a feeling of belonging" in *The pervert's guide to cinema* (Sophie Fiennes, 2006).

In the middle, there is a brief nude scene as little explicit as the one at the end of the film, although it is equally revealing: that which, in a specific moment, allows us to see the necrotic flesh on Edna's chest (sign of the real and metaphorical blackness that inhabits her) while the old woman is having a bath. It is the way James understands the "contagious" scourge of old age. A contagion that, in fact, Sam cannot fail to notice growing on her mother's back, like a tiny spot in the last scene. Another mirrored exercise between old age and youth, in this case, as a reminder of the inevitable.

On its terrifying journey, we will see Edna fulfil some recognisable actions, such as stalking Kay behind the bathroom door or the assault on the intimacy of her room (recurrent, it seems, in the configuration of the "decrepit old women") touching her daughter's forehead while she is sleeping.

X

In *X*, the team led by Martin (Wayne Gilroy) rents a farm to an elderly couple, Howard and Pearl (Stephen Ure and Mia Goth), with the purpose of filming "The Farmer's Daughters" in secret, a pornographic film whose shooting will awaken sexual desires in the old lady, reduced by age, isolation and her husband's heart problems. That, together with the frustration of an incomplete life, will provoke a massacre.

The first coincidence with the rest of the analysed films is given by the fact that Pearl and Maxine, the young protagonists, are played by Mia Goth. Not only does this provide a new mirrored exercise between old age and youth but also, in this occasion, this game takes the form of a *doppelgänger*, representing the exacerbated sexuality of both women; the old one due to necessity; the young one, due to her need of fame and rupture with conventions. Pearl watches Maxine bathing nude in the lake, recreating the old slasher cliché where the exhibition of young nudity sacrificially precedes death (contrary to what we have seen until here, and that will also happen with the old woman's nakedness in *X*, it is a prelude of death or misfortune for others).

The ancestral danger, and some of the recurrences seen here, will take place when the old woman appears naked: for example, Pearl watches from a window Maxine's turn to shoot with Jackson (Kid Cudi); their glances cross and, for some moments, we can see the woman making love in the place of the young one, exaggeratedly made up, emphasising her total decrepitude. At this moment, tellingly *art house*, the film also seems to demote and exhaust itself, subsuming the real world in Pearl's insane mind imaginary and metaphorically switching off the hopes for survival of the team with the sexual image of the old woman.

On the other side, the assault on the protagonist's intimacy, in this case, is more explicit and deeper. Pearl gets completely naked to get into bed with Maxine. The old woman caresses her whole body, staining it with blood, and unleashes a wide sexual gesticulation when she caresses her hair with the face. The young woman awakes and, finding the old woman face to face in a new mirrored reflection, shouts and frightens her away. Bobby-Lynne (Britanny Snow) will find her, still naked, by the lake. In this case, the old woman's undressed body provokes a sense of defenselessness in the girl, who approaches to support her, which will be her damnation because Pearl pushes her into the water so that the alligators eat her.

The murders trigger the lost sexual spark between husband and wife. They make love in the bed under which Maxine is hiding after Howard has taken delight in caressing his wife's naked breasts. For Iniesta and Santos (2022), this scene connects with the children's taboo of watching a sexual encounter between their parents. According to this, the bond between Pearl and Maxine "becomes a

mother-child relationship and links both generations": the one cut short by two wars and the one that saw the defeat against Vietnam. There could not be a more social (and political, from the United States of America's point of view) component in this clash of schemes. In this game of archetypes, with Goad's sarcasm (2017), we can add that (the "guilty white male") "is afraid to admit where his sincere compassion exactly ends and his instinct of self-preservation starts" regarding the figure of the *redneck*. So, it is also perfectly possible to integrate her busybody typology, proper of the gossiper-witches, and another one, closer to the mythological succubus, in terms of *white trash* lowering of status into Pearl's characterisation as "decrepit". In this case, a crooked version whose "curse", before her death under the wheels of Maxine's truck, consists of shouting to her that both are the two sides of the same "social" coin ("two perverted women").

CONCLUSIONS

In the three films studied, the old woman's nudity is not only an *objet trouvé*. In fact, it can be approached as part of its own and renewed iconography, whose typical features frequently materialise the predominant mood in *art house horror* films, and which, under visual representations of decrepitude, also extends to proposals with a certain degree of hybridness (as seen in *X*). Old women whose repeated nudity on the screen takes us back, definitely, to historic and old images related to witches folklore, among other figures, but which express modern phobias, like those related to the loss of one's identity, or with physical and mental decline. The three films studied in this article show, in their ways, our society's *angst* in that sense, they join horror and stigma, and they promote their own author's share, between the revision of the genres and the social demand, through interpellating the audience.

The female nudity pattern in old age will remain, thanks to the figure of "The decrepit old woman" we have isolated and categorised in the present study, tied down to this segment of contemporary horror, as a blow of the mentioned social taboos in subtext or as an expected menace inside the

narrative. With it, we can also establish a curious antithesis regarding the young female nudity of the preceding subgenres, which implied generally a preface of death for the naked one.

Frequently delimited inside the strange mirrored relationships between the characters, another recurrent pattern discovered in the analysis is that "The decrepit old woman" tends to assault the intimacy of their victims in their sleep. It is a classic trope in horror films, with the particularity that these attacks do not necessarily imply death. It is the sleep perturbance (the whisper, the spell, the libidinous intention) that becomes something horrifying on its own, with the immodest and "anti"-aesthetic addition, when both coincide, that it is the naked old woman who perpetrates it.

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FROM GOTHIC ROMANCE TO PLANTATION HORROR: SPATIAL DYNAMICS, WHITE MANORS AND BLACK ZOMBIES IN JORDAN PEELE'S *GET OUT*

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INTRODUCTION

The intrinsic connection between the infamous institution of slavery and the genre of American Gothic was first put forward by critics like Leslie Fiedler (1960) in relation to narratives in which traces of the actual horrors of slavery merged with the fantastic. According to Teresa Goddu (1997), as slavery found reflection in the literary Gothic tradition, the factual reality of slavery and the pure fiction of Gothic (p.139) blended in narratives which portrayed horrors that were too real to be narrated.

As David Greven (2016) notes, Southern Gothic narratives, which are often haunted by the spectre of slavery, display a double-edged approach, since, on the one hand, they vindicate the condition of the oppressed, whereas, on the other hand, they evince that marginalised voices are relegated to the threatening category of otherness (pp. 474-5). Arising from this two-fold approach, and in the context of the activist movement known as Black Lives Matter, Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017) arises as a horror narrative in which Chris Washington, an African-American photographer from Brooklyn, spends the weekend in Upstate New York to meet the family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage. Although the Armitages are welcoming and accept Chris gladly as a new member in the family, their recurrent words of praise in relation to Chris's African-American identity not only end up highlighting his difference and identifying him as Other, but also gradually reveal a more intricate kind of covert racism, which is not based on hatred, but on jealousy and covetousness.

In his seminal volume on horror fiction, Robin Wood (1996) claims that cultures deal with the notion of otherness, which embraces other cultures or ethnic groups within the culture, by means of either rejecting them or assimilating them as their own (p.168). More recently, Anne Anlin Cheng (2001) analyses racial formation from the perspective of melancholia and refers to the melancholic subject who excludes the racialised Other, but incorporates it in its psyche, thus establishing the dynamics of exclusion and retention that remain at the core of American identity (p.8). On the basis of this approach, Peele's film comments on contemporary covert displays of racism on behalf of white liberals —often disguised behind acceptance and assimilation— which lay their roots in the subgenre of plantation horror that extends beyond the turn of the twenty-first century according to Elizabeth Christine Russ (2009, p.6). By means of amalgamating tenets from different genres, Peele's film resorts to elements from Gothic romance, Southern Gothic and plantation horror narratives that place emphasis on the spatial dynamics of slavery, the power structures of race, and the trope of zombification.

According to Janina Nordius (2016), Gothic narratives about slavery took a new turn when African-American writers began to tell their own stories (pp. 630-1), drawing on tropes and conventions borrowed from Gothic romances. The classic plot of confinement, symbolic rape and uncanny terrors was transposed from old castles to American antebellum plantations, where enslaved individuals were exploited by slaveholders. In its intertextuality with these narratives, Peele's film resorts to the conventions of Gothic romance and plantation horror, but it enacts a process of gender reversal, insofar as the male protagonist, Chris, matches the role of the heroine in a Gothic romance, but rather than being subjected to patriarchy, he is subdued to the power structures of race, as happens in plantation horror.

In the postbellum period, as Charles Crow (2016) claims, writers of the plantation school provided a melancholic portrayal of the period before the war (p.18). With a particular focus on the big plantation houses of the old South, these narratives enacted symbolic spatial dynamics that disclosed hidden mixed-race genealogies. In Peele's film, as Chris is hosted in the Armitage home as Rose's boyfriend, their relationship induces the white hosts to look back in time

with nostalgia, while Chris symbolically reverts back to a dormant traumatic past. According to Meredith Miller (2016), Southern Gothic narratives bridge the gap between historical and psychological components (p.632), inasmuch as the uncanny return of the historical trauma of slavery finds correspondence in the psychological sense of fractured identity. In Peele's film, the coexistence of white hosts with his black guest enacts these dynamics which shift from overt tolerance to covert discrimination and propel the symbolic fragmentation of subjectivities, thus displaying structures of repression and resistance through the symbolic trope of zombification.

The horror archetype of the zombie is grounded in African-American folklore about voodoo rituals in the context of New World plantations, which were transposed in early horror films about zombies. Some cases in point are Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1933), Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988). In particular, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which lay the foundations of the genre, features an African-American protagonist and, even if obliquely, reflects issues about civil rights and class struggle prevailing at the time. Films in which the archetype of the zombie arises as a metaphor of rebellion and subjugation in relation to race can be considered forerunners of Peele's film *Get Out*. In origin, voodoo rituals leading to zombification were linked to slave uprisings —such as the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s and the establishment of the Black Republic of Haiti in 1804— but also turned into a metaphor of slavery, insofar as zombies are deprived of determination and will. As Carol Margaret Davison (2016) claims, African-American writers resorted to Gothic tropes to counteract the rational discourses of the American literary tradition (p.8), and the horror archetype of the zombie evoked the spectre of slavery. In Peele's film, the trope of zombification is reappropriated by a white family in order to subdue their African-American victims, thus reviving the traumatic past of slavery in contemporary society.

What follows is an analysis of Peele's film in terms of its transition from a Gothic romance to a plantation horror narrative, its spatial dynamics evoking the Gothic tradition but introducing the perspective of race, its instances from overt to covert racism, and its symbolic use of the trope of zombification as a

metaphor conjuring the trauma of slavery. The analysis of these four aspects is aimed to evince that Peele's film is rooted in the Gothic tradition, particularly in Gothic romance and plantation horror, but that it also subverts and updates its conventions to address the discourse of race in the contemporary context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

TRACES OF GOTHIC ROMANCE: THE ROLES OF GENDER AND RACE

Peele's film *Get Out* is rooted in the tenets of Gothic romance, as it portrays a love story with Gothic undertones, which also comprises significant elements pertaining to plantation horror, involving the discourse of race, the spectre of racism, and the trauma of slavery. As Goddu (2013) argues, slavery often reads as Gothic romance (p.72), and in Peele's film, the power structures of race are reflected in the love story between Rose, a wealthy white woman, and Chris, a middle-class African-American man.

Even though the film initially displays the conventions of Gothic romance, since the couple sets off on a journey to a family manor, a series of scenes disrupt the traditional gender roles pervading the genre. In the film, it is Rose who adopts a dominating attitude towards Chris, but in doing so, it is also implied that the female white subject gradually dominates over the male black individual, thus subtly evoking racial roles suggestive of plantation horror, which characterises itself, as Michael Kreyling (2016) claims, through "white control of the black body" (p.235). In an initial scene, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) stays in his flat, in the bathroom, doing his toilette and shaving off some white foam that highlights and symbolically brings out his black skin, whereas Rose (Alison Williams) has gone out to buy some breakfast. This scene reverses the traditional separation of spheres according to gender that often prevails in Gothic romance. When Rose gets back, she meticulously cross-examines Chris to make sure he is taking his toothbrush and his deodorant in his luggage, which not only implies that she treats him like a child, but also that she wants to make sure he keeps himself clean. They set off in Rose's car and, along the journey, she adopts an overprotective attitude with her boyfriend, particularly, when they have an accident and

a police officer asks Chris for his identity card, even when he has not been driving. Rose defends Chris in front of the officer and, afterwards, she reassures Chris and declares that she will not allow anyone to show contempt towards "my man", thus plainly categorising him as her property. Rose's paternalistic attitude towards Chris reveals a disruption of conventional gender roles, while it also displays prejudiced structures of race.

The arrival of the young couple at a mysterious manor, where its inhabitants conceal a dreadful secret, is also highly evocative of the conventions of Gothic romance. In resemblance with the heroine in narratives of the genre, Chris also feels exposed in an apparently welcoming, but truly confining and isolated abode, where Rose's parents, Dean (Bradley Whitford) and Missy (Catherine Ann Keener), live in the sole company of their African-American servants, their maid Georgina (Betty Gabriel) and their groundkeeper Walter (Marcus Henderson). At first, this encounter is evocative of romance films depicting multicultural couples, particularly, Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), even though, in comparison, Peele's film soon acquires sinister undertones. At dinner, Rose's brother, Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones), attempts to startle Chris telling him that, when they were teenagers, Rose bit the tongue of one of her boyfriends when he tried to kiss her, hence symbolically conjuring latent fears of the castrating female subject. At night, when they are alone in their bedroom, while Rose is brushing her teeth —as a veiled reference to the psychoanalytic motif of the *vagina dentata*— Chris's dormant concerns about sexuality are brought to the fore. If gender conventions in Gothic romance are thus disrupted, racial roles are also reinforced. As a case in point, Chris explicitly declares admiring Rose on her own "racial flow" in the company of her white relatives, while he calls himself "a beast", thus quoting Jeremy's prejudiced remarks at dinner about Chris's prominent physique.

In the middle of the night, when Rose's mother, Missy, who is a psychiatrist, hypnotises Chris under the pretext of treating his addiction to smoking, his traumatic memories concerning the death of his mother in a car accident are revived. According to Anne Williams (1995), a distinguishing feature of the Gothic is grounded in the Oedipal plot (Wallace, 2016, p.235), whereby the protagonist longs to restore bonds with the missing mother figure

in order to overcome dormant traces of childhood trauma. As Missy forces Chris to surrender to her hypnotic power, although he is reluctant to grant her entry into his subconsciousness, her action simulates a symbolic rape, which may also befall the heroine in the Gothic romance on behalf of an older patriarch. In Peele's film, this role is reversed in terms of gender, insofar as it is played by an older woman, while it sets in motion power structures of race, insofar as it is an older white woman who submits a younger black man to her will.

In analogy with the heroine of a Gothic romance, who symbolically meets her double, in Peele's film, Chris also encounters a double figure who helps him gain insight into the threatening situation that he is about to face. When the Armitage family holds an annual social gathering, Chris meets the only African-American guest, who introduces himself as Logan (Lakeith Stanfield) and appears to be the spitting image of Andre —a man whom Chris used to know— but looks so different in terms of clothes, behaviour and speech that Chris can hardly recognise him. Logan is dating a white woman who is thirty years his senior, while he makes the point that, "the chores have become my sanctuary", thus submitting himself entirely to life in domesticity and his senior white partner. Following the advice of his friend William Rodney (Milton Howery Jr), with whom he keeps in touch by phone, Chris suspects that Missy might have hypnotised Andre in order to subdue his will, which leads Chris into thinking that he may eventually meet the same end.

When Chris shares some of his worries with Rose, she resorts to gaslighting, hence leading him to believe that he is overreacting and losing touch with reality. Nonetheless, on opening a locked closet, Chris finds a box containing photographs of Rose with all her previous African-American boyfriends, in a scene that is highly evocative of the Bluebeard motif in Gothic romance. According to Williams (1995), the female version of the Gothic is often grounded in the myth of Psyche and Eros, in which Psyche is afraid to discover that her husband is truly a monster (Wallace, 2016, p.235). Following this epiphanic scene and many dangers that threaten his life, Chris eventually manages to escape from captivity and leaves Rose to die on the road, thus symbolically re-enacting his mother's death, while his male friend, William Rodney, is coming to his rescue. The final scenes in Peele's film are once more highly evocative of a Gothic romance, insofar

as, in analogy with the heroine, Chris overcomes his childhood traumas and his latent fears of sexuality.

SPATIAL DYNAMICS: POWER STRUCTURES AND POLITICS OF HOSPITALITY

Plantation horror often resorts to features of the Gothic tradition in relation to space —such as enclosure, locked rooms, and secret passages— as metaphors to evoke the spatial dynamics of race operating in slavery. As Michelle Alexander (2010) claims, these spatial dynamics have evolved to a symbolic contemporary carceral state that perpetuates racial discrimination (p.12). In Alexander's words, mass incarceration involves "a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls —walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively" (p.12). Accordingly, the notion of mass incarceration not only refers to criminal laws, but to pervasive prejudices that contribute to instigating more subtle, but equally operative, instances of racial discrimination. A series of scenes in Peele's film display the spatial dynamics of race that fluctuate between oppression and liberation on the basis of power structures and politics of hospitality. In this respect, as Patricia Sharon Holland (2000) contends, liminal subjects are relegated to spaces of marginality and invisibility, which can be empowering, but also mercurial (p.16), thus disclosing a doubled-edged interpretation of the dynamics of space.

The title of Peele's film, *Get Out*, makes explicit reference to these spatial dynamics, which turn into a metaphor of power structures, since, as Cheng (2001) notes, the racial question usually involves an issue of place (p.12). Depending on the location of the interlocutor who addresses this command, the shift in perspective displays opposing meanings. In the initial scene of the film, an African-American man, Andre, finds himself wandering around a wealthy suburban area when, all of a sudden, he is attacked and locked in a car trunk. This scene is reversed at the end, which endows the film with a circular structure, when Chris —as an African-American who is confined in the basement of a suburban manor— is released and picked up in his friend's car. These fluctuating

spatial dynamics are addressed explicitly, when, upon learning that Chris is dating a white girl, his friend William advises him not to go "to a white girl's parents' house", whereas, when Chris is already in the Armitage house, William instructs him to "get out of there". Such prevailing dynamics of space also involve a symbolic shift of roles between host and guest and, by extension, a change in power relations between factions.

According to Amy Clukey (2015), plantation horror comprises narratives in which planters in big manors interact with interlopers (p.125), thus enacting the spatial dynamics between white masters and racialised others. In Peele's film, the Armitage house is inhabited by white proprietors, Dean and Missy, and African-American servants, Walter and Georgina. Although they make the point that their masters treat them like family, Walter and Georgina hold on to conventional roles in terms of race and gender, as they inhabit their rooms as servants and Georgina, who is the cook, works in the kitchen, whereas, Walter, who is the gardener, stays outside, mostly cutting wood and mowing the grass. Their presence in the house raises the spectre of slavery, since, even if, as free subjects, they are no longer deprived of liberty, they still occupy that space within the house that Toni Morrison describes as peripheral or marginal (Holland, 2000, p.17). In comparison, as a guest, Chris inhabits a liminal space, insofar as he enjoys apparent freedom, but he is actually subjected to permanent vigilance. At night, Chris encounters the servants who appear to monitor all his movements, while, during the Armitage family's assembly, when Chris goes upstairs to his room, the rest of the guests permanently follow his movements.

In resemblance with plantation horror narratives, in which the white manor becomes an extension of its white owners, in Peele's film, the colonial style of the Armitage mansion reflects the views of its inhabitants. Insofar as Dean offers Chris to make a tour around the house, he establishes their respective roles as host and guest. Dean conducts Chris along the corridors and rooms, where he displays the souvenirs that he has been collecting from different countries, thus subtly evoking the spectre of colonialism. Besides, the house is filled with deer heads, which are exhibited as ornamental trophies and reveal the Armitage family's fondness for hunting. Allegorically, these souvenirs and trophies contribute to the construction of a racialised other enclosed in a white

manor, hence calling to mind Cheng's claims (2001) about racially prejudiced spaces keeping the racialised other within their structures (p.12). In contrast with these tokens symbolising other ethnicities, some places in the house become emblematic of the white masters. Drawing on Gothic terminology, these sinister spaces in the house concealing some secrets evoke distinctive gothic settings, such as dungeons (Stevens, 2010, p.54). As a contemporary counterpart to these places, in Peele's film, the basement —which had to be sealed up on account of containing, in Dean's words, "some black mould— functions as a veiled pun that makes reference both to the family's dark secrets and, most uncannily, to the ethnic origin of their victims. In spite of his initial hospitality, Dean thus introduces Chris into an apparently welcoming, but inherently menacing, scenario which obliges Chris to shift positions from a hosted guest to a hosting body, hence establishing an analogy with slavery, whereby white masters literally owned the body of their slaves.

Accordingly, the initially established spatial dynamics, which are suggestive of the roles of host and guest, are gradually reversed. Drawing on Derridean politics of hospitality (2000), from being hosted, the guest turns into a host who gives accommodation to a parasitical being with his own body (p.3). In Peele's film, it is disclosed that the bodies of the African-American individuals that Chris encounters during his stay in the house host some white spirits, since white subjects have literally taken possession of their black bodies. At the social gathering, Chris meets another African-American guest, Logan, who all of a sudden suffers a seizure and abandons his subservient ways to yell at Chris and tell him to get out. Logan's phrase once more carries an ambivalent meaning, since, as coming from an African-American man hosting a white spirit, these words are meant to be a desperate warning for Chris to get out of this treacherous place, but, as coming from a white spirit taking control of a black body, they may also imply a racist threat to expel Chris from this all-white gathering. Owing to this display of spatial dynamics in terms of race, white subjects, who appear to be overtly liberal and tolerant, are covertly racist and autocratic, whereas, apparently black individuals prove to be intrinsically white, since their bodies are hosting white spirits that subdue their will.

WHITE MANORS: MELANCHOLY OF RACE, PREJUDICES, RACISM

Over a century after the abolition of slavery in the United States, decades after the advent of critical race theory and in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement, racism still pervades the American society in different ways. Critics like Cheng (2001) refer to the melancholy of race, arguing that melancholia is pathological and interminable, since the melancholic ego sustains itself by means of the ghostly emptiness of the lost other (p.8). As Cheng further argues, American racial dynamics operate in two ways: on the one hand, by means of the overt process of producing a dominant white identity that is sustained by the exclusion of racialised others and, on the other hand, by virtue of the covert process whereby racialised others are assimilated into American nationality (p.10). In this spectrum of racial dynamics, Peele's film offers examples of melancholy of race, structural racism, and racial discrimination.

The Armitages are considered a white liberal family —of wealthy extraction and Democratic values— who are not only tolerant, but emphatically enthralled by other cultures. Before visiting her parents, Rose makes a point of telling Chris that "they are not racist", and that her father would have voted for Barack Obama again if there had been a third term —a statement that Dean ratifies later on. Nonetheless, when Missy implements her sessions of hypnosis, she makes use of a teacup and a teaspoon, which inadvertently brings to mind the Tea Party Movement, as an initiative that eulogised conservative political ideology within the Republican Party in the year 2009. Besides, upon escorting Chris on a tour across the house, Dean exclaims that it is "such a privilege to be able to experience another person's culture", hence declaring his admiration for other ethnicities, but also stressing some melancholy of race, to use Cheng's term, which contributes to reinstating traces of their colonising white identity in contrast with the racialised figure of the Other.

The admiration that the Armitage household displays toward the African-American culture gradually gives way to some paternalising attitudes that reveal instances of structural racism. Dean initially feels obliged to excuse himself for having African-American servants working at home, describing the situation as conforming to the cliché of "white family, black servants". As he explains, he hired them to take care of his parents and, when they died, he could not bear to let them go, thus subtly resorting to affection and paternalism in order

to perpetuate structural power relations of dominance and oppression based on race. Besides, as Dean shows the photographs of his father, it is disclosed that Roman Armitage took part in the historic race of the Olympic Games in Berlin —where Jesse Owens won, thus invalidating racist theories about the alleged perfection of the Aryan race— although Dean, as a scientist and surgeon, enigmatically adds that his father almost got over this defeat.

Furthermore, at the social gathering, upon meeting Chris, Dean's friends constantly bring to the fore the issue of race, even if it is by means of flattering comments and words of praise. One of the guests, who is a professional golfer, puts forward that Tiger Woods is the best golf player he has ever seen. Besides, upon meeting Chris, an older woman boldly presses his arm and asks Rose whether it is true that sex is better with men like him. Finally, an older man blatantly retorts that "fair skin has been in favour for the past couple of hundred years, but now the pendulum has swung back", ultimately declaring that "black is in fashion", hence disguising structural racism through adulatory remarks.

Some scenes in the film rather convey overt displays of racial prejudice. Discriminatory allegories whereby African-Americans were subjected to a process of symbolic animalisation —as a derogatory image reverting back to slavery times— recur in the film. As a case in point, after Rose hits a deer with her car, in subsequent scenes, Chris is framed next to a number of dead deer heads exhibited as trophies in the house, thus establishing a recurring parallelism which foretells the tragic fate that may be awaiting him. The allegory of animalisation is further developed when Rose's brother, Jeremy, encourages Chris to take up wrestling, stating that "with your frame and your genetic makeup […] you'd be a […] beast", thus judging him on account of his physical strength. Analogously, when Dean organises a bingo at the social gathering, it is soon revealed to be an auction to literally assign Chris's body to the best bid among the white attendants, in resemblance with public sales where slaves were infamously sold to the best purchaser.

Prior to the surgical operation whereby Chris will be deprived of his self and just exist in body, Dean finally discloses his supremacist views, as he states that they are "the gods trapped in cocoons", insofar as they claim ownership over African-American bodies, thus depriving them of their will and reducing

them to mere commodities. In Peele's film, Cheng's thesis about the assimilation of the racial other through the shift from rejection to incorporation (2001, p.10) acquires literal undertones, insofar as it resorts to the Gothic motif of zombification as a metaphor of the subjugation of black subjectivity under white rule.

BLACK ZOMBIES: COMMODITIES, VOODOO, DOUBLES

Despite the transmutation of the African-American community from enslaved to freed subjects following the aftermath of the American Civil War, this legal change took longer to become effective at the level of the collective unconscious. Consequently, as Holland (2000) argues, in spite of this official change in terms of status, African-Americans were hardly granted the position of living subjects (p.15). In this respect, according to scholar and writer bell hooks (1992), African-American people learned to present themselves before whites as though they were zombies, casting the gaze downward and resorting to invisibility (Holland, 2000, p.15). In Southern Gothic narratives, as Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner (2015) claim, zombification became an iconic metaphor of slavery (pp. 1-2), inasmuch as it is envisioned as a symbolic death-in-life existence that replicates Orlando Patterson's notion of social death (2018). Drawing on this symbolism, Peele's film conjures voodoo practices and the ancestral figure of the black zombie, since the African-American people whom Chris encounters at the Armitage house are subdued to the will of their white counterparts.

The portrayal of the two servants, Walter and Georgina, conforms to the features associated with the characterization of the classic zombie rooted in ancestral rituals of voodoo which were practiced in slavery times. Their bodies are commodified, their will is completely subdued and, despite being black in appearance, their disposition totally conforms to the white mindset. A series of scenes give evidence of the process of commodification that African-Americans are made to undergo in the film. When Dean introduces Chris to their African-American servants, his words stating that, "we hired Georgina and Walter to take care of my parents [and] when they died, I couldn't bear to let them go", acquire uncanny undertones. As is revealed later on, Dean does not really mean that he

could not bear to let the 'servants' go as it may seem, but rather, that he could not bear to let his 'parents' go, since, Dean's parents, as white spirits, have taken possession of the bodies of Georgina and Walter.

In the film, except Chris and his friend William, African-American characters display a great sense of servility and subservience. In the scene in which Chris approaches Walter while he is chopping wood and he cracks a joke about how hard they make him work, Walter replies "nothing I don't want to be doing", and after a brief exchange of words, he declares that, "I should get back to work and mind my own business". When Chris tries to establish some comradeship with Georgina, telling her that he usually feels nervous with too many white people around, she dutifully declares, "that's not my experience, not at all, the Armitages treat us like family". Analogously, when Logan is explicitly asked about his views on the African-American experience and he replies, "I find that the African-American experience for me has been, for the most part, very good", he gives evidence of his overstated compliant disposition.

As suggestive of their white mindset in spite of their black appearance, Georgina, Walter and Logan resort to a kind of formal language that deviates conspicuously from that of Chris and that not only conjures the language of white people, but that of an older generation. As cases in point, Walter appears to resort to a set of fixed expressions as if he had memorized them, while Georgina seems incapable of understanding Chris's jargon until he exchanges his idiomatic phrases for their standard linguistic equivalents. When Chris meets Logan and greets him with his closed fist as a gesture of brotherhood among African-Americans, Logan ignores it and rather offers him a formal handshake. As black people —who are possessed by members of older white generations— Georgina, Walter and Logan undergo a symbolic process of ventriloquism and alienation that leads Chris to affirm, "it's like all of them missed the Movement", hence suggesting that they seem unaware of all the changes achieved by the African-American community as a result of a long fight for equal rights.

The latent sense of depersonalisation that intrinsically haunts some African-American characters in the film evokes the archetypal figure of the double. According to Otto Rank (1971), the double symbolically functions both as a protection against destruction and as a harbinger of death (p.86). Insofar

as Georgina, Walter and Logan are characterized as black bodies whose will is subjected to that of their older white masters, they exist only in body, whereas their white masters endure in spirit, thus turning into a double figure whose duplicitous condition is disclosed at specific intervals. In this respect, Chris notices that Georgina often contemplates her reflected image in the mirror, thus visually denoting an inherent sense of doubleness and, when she tries to convince Chris that she takes delight in working for the Armitages, Chris notices the tears falling from her eyes, thus displaying contradictory emotions. Chris also observes that, while Walter spends the day tending to the garden as a groundkeeper, at night, he works out and goes running as Dean's father —who was a professional athlete— used to do, thus giving evidence of his depersonalisation. Analogously, when Logan forgets his gallant ways and warns Chris to run away from the place —which Dean hastens to excuse, declaring that Logan suffered an epileptic fit— Missy wittingly adds, "we are happy that you are yourself again", although it is suggested that it is precisely when he was caught in the fit that he was genuinely himself.

Insofar as these double figures are subjected to a process of alienation, their subdued condition conjures the trope of voodoo from slavery times. Although Missy apparently resorts to hypnosis as a scientific cure to treat her patients, her purpose of submitting them to her will brings to mind the practice of voodooism. In her role as a white mistress, Missy appropriates the belief system and rituals developed by slaves in order to hypnotize their descendants and resurrect their roles as subservient beings, with the result of re-establishing some covert system of slavery. By means of her hypnotic sessions, Missy allegorically confines her patients in a sort of dungeon called "the sunken place", which resembles the area that Morrison describes as the liminal space that has conventionally turned African-American people into symbolic spectral non-living entities (Holland, 2000, p.17). While Missy subjects Chris to one of her hypnotic sessions, which is alleged to be the first phase of the depersonalisation process, others like Georgina, Walter and Logan have completed all the phases of the process. This distinction calls to mind the difference that Anne Schroder (2016) establishes between voodoo, in which "devotees return as subjects when the ritual ends", and zombification, whereby "zombies lose their selfhood permanently" (p.430).

As Chris awakes from his temporary hypnotic state, in resemblance with voodoo, he finds the way to briefly destabilize the permanent zombified condition that befalls Georgina, Walter, and Logan.

As a photographer, Chris notices that, when he takes a picture using the camera flash, the victims are briefly awakened from their trance. This moment of awakening is endowed with significant symbolism, since Chris's look becomes evocative of bell hooks's notion of the oppositional gaze (1992, p.115), which challenges the all-time-white perspective and manages to put African-American individuals back into the picture, so that they can abandon their invisibility as virtual slaves. Although Chris is finally saved from undergoing all the phases in this zombification process, he learns that a blind white artist, Jim Hudson (Stephen Root), bought him at the auction to take possession of his body and his gifted gaze. As African-Americans are possessed by white spirits, W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness (1986) not only acquires literal undertones in Peele's film —insofar as Du Bois refers to the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p.3)— but it is suggested that this notion is appropriated by whites. Throughout Peele's film, scientific methodologies —such as hypnosis and brain transplantation— become evocative of voodoo rituals and zombification, thus appropriating ancestral African-American rituals to reinstate a system of covert racism, which is no longer based on hatred of the racialised others, but rather on the acknowledgement of their virtues and assets.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, Peele's film *Get Out* displays the uncanny message that a structural sort of racism still pervades the country through the notion of the melancholy of race, which is assumed to be inherently linked to the American identity owing to historical reasons. As Peele (2017) claims, in an interview with Scott Mendelson, *Get Out* is "a horror movie […] from an African-American perspective" which depicts the myriad forms of racial discrimination "from subtle […] to extreme racism". Moreover, critic Richard Roeper (2017) describes Peele's film as "a work that addresses the myriad levels of racism" and, in his review of the film, Keith Phipps (2017) notes "how unchecked white privilege can be just as destructive as more overt forms

of racism". At the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, Peele's film thus brings to the fore the disturbing mood lying beneath the overt acquiescence of the African-American identity on behalf of white liberals. Rooted in the tradition of Gothic romance, Southern Gothic and plantation horror, Peele's film makes use of their conventions to update them and address a more subtle, but prevalent, form of structural racism that impregnates contemporary America.

From an African-American perspective, Peele's film belongs to a series of contemporary horror films that address the spectral traces of slavery and the pervasive presence of racism, ranging from Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992) to Deon Taylor's *The Intruder* (2019). These films resort to motifs and tropes from the Gothic tradition in order to depict traces of the historical trauma of slavery and signs of prevailing racial discrimination. Peele's film thus contributes to the contemporary tendency to resort to classic Gothic tropes and archetypes to reverse them and retell them from the point of view of those who were conventionally regarded as racialised Others.

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FLOATING SKELETONS, ELECTRIC SHOCKS AND INTERACTIVE PUNISHMENTS IN WILLIAM CASTLE'S HORROR FILMS

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INTRODUCTION

In his autobiography, American director and producer William Castle (1992) claimed to have been fascinated by horror gadgets since childhood. When his parents took him to Broadway to see a play called *The Monster*, the young William Schloss Jr. decided to become an actor (Cuevas, 2017). To do so, he changed his surname to its English meaning —Castle— and made his stage debut as a teenager (Leeder, 2018, pp. 3-4). However, Castle abruptly decided to change his career and started working behind the scenes. His chance came in 1929, when one of his idols, Béla Lugossi, pushed him to be the assistant stage manager for a theatrical tour based on *Dracula* (Browning, 1931). Later, in 1939, Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, took him to Hollywood to work as a dialogue rehearsal director (McCarty, 2022; Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66).

Castle quickly learned the techniques of film directing and made his debut with *The Chance of a Lifetime* (Castle, 1943). It was his foray into the well-known adventures of detective Boston Blackie. Although the film turned out to be a failure, the industry saw in Castle an efficient filmmaker, commissioning him to direct more films and gaining a reputation for being very competent at shooting quickly and on a low budget (Cuevas, 2017; Leeder, 2018, pp. 4-5). Thus, Castle directed Richard Dix in the first film of a new detective saga, *The Mark of the Whistler* (Castle, 1944); and in the following decade, Castle

directed more similar films, as well as film noir, westerns or melodramas for Columbia Pictures or Universal, among other production companies (McCarty, 2022), even directing the second unit of *The Lady From Shanghai* (Welles, 1947).

In 1954, Castle decided to work for himself with his production company, creating William Castle Productions. The impetus, however, came from the French film *Les Diaboliques* (Clouzot, 1955), which was enjoying an international box-office success (McCarty, 2022). Castle found a story that combined the macabre of Clouzot's film, along with unexpected plot twists, in Theo Durrant's novel *The Marble Forest* (1951).[1] After buying the rights to the book, Robert White adapted the novel and Castle mortgaged his house to finance the film with a budget of only 90,000 dollars (Cuevas, 2017; Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66), which he called with a title that also sounded French: *Macabre* (Castle, 1958). This milestone would be the starting point that would lead Castle to specialize in B horror films, but offering his own vision (Cantrell, 2011; Wong, 2021).

To persuade the audience that *Macabre* was going to be the most scariest film ever made, Castle convinced the company Lloyd's of London to insure each spectator for $1,000 in case they died of fright or wanted to commit suicide while watching the film (McCarty, 2022). This *gimmick*[2] allowed *Macabre* to be a success, grossing close to two million dollars, despite the bad reviews received and the supposed horror that the audience could experience (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66; Simón, 2021); and, likewise, it opened the door to other stranger *gimmicks*, even being compared to Hitchcock himself (Castle, 1992, p. 160). In fact, Castle was known as «the cheap Hitchcock» because the British filmmaker advertised himself and promoted his films in a similar way, appearing, for example, at the beginning of *The Wrong Man* (Hitchcock, 1956), or playing bird sounds at the premiere of *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963) (Wong, 2021), among other resources such as the numerous *hosted trailers* in which he himself presented his films (Lozano Delmar, 2015, pp. 128-129).

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[1] Theo Durrant is the pseudonym of a group of authors who each one wrote a different chapter for the creation of the novel.

[2] A *gimmick* is a marketing trick designed to attract the public's attention through an element that by itself may be trivial, but which offers a special difference (Cantrell, 2011).

CASE STUDIES

Three examples of the *gimmicks* used by Castle, which appeared in films released during the following years, are found in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), *The Tingler* (1959) and *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961). What each of these involved will be discussed in detail below. These are cases, therefore, in which it will be possible to see how Castle put his famous *gimmicks* into practice, with which the spectators were practically obliged to visit the cinema theatre in exchange for receiving a surprise that the filmmaker had prepared especially for them (Ruiz Liñán, 2020).

House on Haunted Hill

House on Haunted Hill marked the first time Castle appeared in one of his films, introducing it and talking about the *gimmick* in question that the audience would experience. In its plot, the famous actor Vincent Price plays Frederick Loren, an eccentric millionaire, who invites five people to the mansion he has rented, offering them $10,000 to spend the night there. All at the request of his wife, Annabelle, played by Carol Ohmart. These guests are the owner of the house whose brother was murdered there some time ago, a pilot, a secretary who works for Loren, a psychiatrist and a journalist. However, the guests must be cut off from each other, and the mansion has a murderous past, as well as rumors that it is haunted.

Castle's film plays with false appearances from the outset towards the audience, as it is not made explicit whether the characters are really dealing with paranormal phenomena, or whether it is all Loren's charade. In fact, Annabelle warns the guests that they are in danger because Loren, her husband, is suffering from some kind of psychosis. The situations that will occur are connected to the stories of Poe, Agatha Christie and the *whodunit* genre, and will be accompanied by the subplots belonging to each of the guests. One of the most memorable scenes, however, comes at the end of the film, when Loren uses a fake skeleton, manipulated with ropes, to chase Annabelle, his wife, until he throws her down a well.

Castle's *gimmick*, which he called the *Emergo* effect, consisted of installing a glow-in-the-dark inflatable skeleton that appeared to float above the audience (Leeder, 2018, p. 6). This trick, under a metanarrative effect, had its effect during the first screenings in 1959, as in later screenings, people who came to the cinema theatre had already been warned of the surprise, to the point that the most hooligan audience used the skeleton as a target to throw all kinds of objects (Cuevas, 2017). In fact, one spectator even pulled off the skeleton's leg, causing the person in charge of pulling the strings to start shouting, threatening to stop the screening (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66).

Figure 1.
Scene from *House on Haunted Hill* (left) and audience during the screening (right).

Source: Castle (1959); and A. H. Fellig, International Center of Photography and Getty Images (1959).

As an added value to this *gimmick*, people had the possibility to leave the cinema theatre and get their money back if they did not feel able to watch the whole film; to do so, however, they first had to cross a kind of «coward's walk», thus exposing themselves to the rest of the audience (Ruiz Liñán, 2020). Despite everything, the film was a box-office success, grossing two and a half million dollars from a budget of 200,000, which allowed Castle to continue filming (Stockman, 2014); furthermore, a remake was made in 1999, where filmmaker

William Malone adapted the same story as Castle. In the same way, Castle would once again feature Vincent Price as the main star, although this would be the second and last collaboration between them, which took place with *The Tingler*.

The Tingler

In 1959, following the success of *House on Haunted Hill*, Castle made *The Tingler*, also starring Vincent Price, in the same year. Along with the appearance of heads rising and screaming at the camera, the film stars with another introduction of Castle himself. In his speech, Castle addresses the audience in a wide shot: «I am William Castle, the director of the motion picture you're about to see», he says before an abrupt cut switches to a medium shot. As De Seife (2011) suggests, with this introduction, Castle warns us that the introduction and the film's narrative itself are two distinct entities, a separation that the film itself soon challenges. In its plot, which Wilson (2018) considers a misogynistic melodrama, Price plays Warren Chapin, a pathologist who discovers that when a person feels fear, a strange creature, called Tingler, appears in their spinal cord.

Chapin, in his role as *mad doctor*, holds the theory that the insect-like creature can only be extracted by compulsive screaming in fear. When the pathologist meets Martha Higgins, he has the chance to test whether his theory is correct. Higgins, played by Judith Evelyn, is deaf and dumb and therefore does not possess the ability to scream, so extreme fear should allow the creature to appear and grow inside her without any problems. To carry out his experiment, Chapin uses LSD to induce nightmares in the woman, thus enabling the creation of the creature. When Higgins literally dies of fright, Chapin performs an autopsy and discovers the creature, but because Higgins was unable to scream, it has grown rapidly and ends up escaping into a crowded cinema theater.

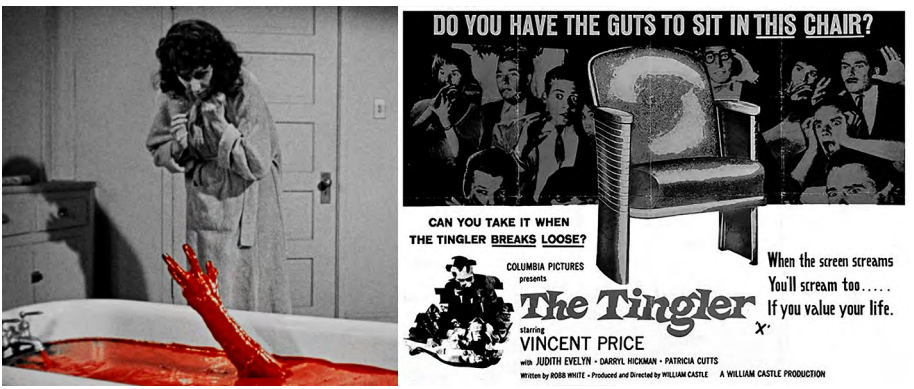
On this occasion, the *gimmick* designed by Castle, which he called *Percepto*, consisted of the installation, in the cinema seats, of vibrating motors normally used in the wings of airplanes to de-ice them (Simón, 2021), which generated a small vibration and a slight electric shock that surprised some[3] spectators.

[3] Heffernan (2004, p. 100) points out that this is because Columbia Pictures paid for the wiring of only one tenth of the seats in the cinema theaters where the film was screened.

This moment occurred when the creature crawled across the projector lens, just before the screen went completely black (Stockman, 2014). The lights in the cinema theater were also switched off (Leeder, 2011, p. 773; Simón, 2021) and those spectators would jump out of their seats and scream, while Vincent Price's voice could be heard, asking them to scream for their lives, as the monster was on the loose in the cinema theater (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).[4] It is also worth noting that, although the film was shot in black and white, there is a scene where a bathtub and a sink are shown in glowing red blood. To achieve the effect, Castle used colored film in this scene, but painted the set in white, black and grey, and applied grey make-up on the actress (Heffernan, 2004).

Figure 2.

Scene from *The Tingler* (left) and the film poster (right).



Source: Castle (1959); and Ronald Grant Archive and Alamy Stock Photo (1959).

Raising over two million dollars from a budget of $400,000, *The Tingler* was expected to emerge as another major source of revenue for Castle

[4] This *gimmick* was adapted to the plot of the film *Matinée* (Dante, 1993), in which John Goodman plays the filmmaker Lawrence Woolsey, a transcript of William Castle. Under this ironic gaze, in the film a boy who works in a petrol station asks Woolsey for his autograph when he mistakes him for Hitchcock. Likewise, the film's director, Joe Dante, belonged to William Castle's fan club, which the latter promoted, reaching 250,000 members (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67). With *Matinée*, Dante managed to give new visibility to the figure of Castle, in the same way that Tim Burton did with Ed Wood a year later —both, in turn, influenced by Castle himself—.

(Wilson, 2018). Likewise, thanks to the experience provoked by the *Percepto* sensation, at that point in his life Castle was already considered the Barnum of Hollywood (Stockman, 2014), making people look forward to his next quip. Ultimately, *The Tingler* was supposedly the first time in the history of cinema in which some people were able to feel part of the characters' feelings (Wilson, 2018), although it was a limited and controlled experience that did not involve them, but rather the filmic experience was partially applied to them at a certain point in the film. The participation of the spectators, or at least the sensation of being part of the story, would come later, with the film *Mr. Sardonicus*.

Mr. Sardonicus

Two years later, in 1961, Castle released *Mr. Sardonicus*. The plot was set in the fictional town of Gorslava in 1880. The face of Baron Mr. Sardonicus, played by Guy Rolfe, has taken on a ghastly contraction after desecrating his father's grave, the latter having been buried with a winning lottery ticket. Because of his appearance, the aristocrat manages to convince Sir Robert Cargrave, a famous neurosurgeon, to help him recover his former face, unaware that the neurosurgeon is the lover of his wife, Baroness Maude Sardonicus. After Sir Robert Cargrave's unsuccessful attempts, the Baron threatens him and demands that he try other treatments.

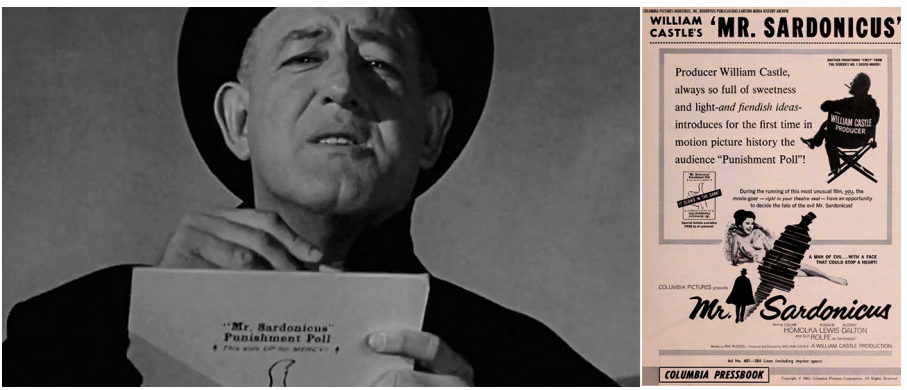
Finally, the neurosurgeon injects the Baron with a plant extract and then recreates the trauma that caused his face to contract. The operation is successful and his face is restored. The neurosurgeon advises the Baron not to speak until the muscles in his face have fully adapted. The Baron, who is now aware of the relationship between the neurosurgeon and his wife, then writes a note to the latter, releasing her from her marriage, and another to Sir Robert Cargrave asking for his fee, which the latter refuses. When the lovers are ready to leave on a train, the Baron loses the ability to speak, unable to move his lips or jaw. At that moment, the neurosurgeon reveals that the injection contained only water, being a placebo, as he considered the Baron's affliction to be purely psychosomatic.

Before the film began, people who had entered the cinema theater had been given a cardboard thumbs-up/thumbs-down glow-in-the-dark; and

in the third act of the story, Castle himself appears punctually for a moment in the film itself, addressing the audience in the cinema theater to ask them whether the protagonist should be punished or not. He called this new *gimmick* the *Punishment Poll* (Leeder, 2018, p. 6). Castle would then begin to tally the number of cardboards raised by the audience itself.[5] Although a sense of audience participation was created, the result of the tally was always the same; that is, there was only a single ending, where the protagonist was punished, resulting in the audience finally realizing the trick (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).

Figure 3.

Scene from *Mr. Sardonicus* (left) and the film pressbook (right).



Source: Castle (1961); and Columbia Pictures (1961).

Castle is considered the inventor of interactive horror cinema (Lozano Delmar, 2015, p. 129). However, in relation to the innovative *gimmick* of this film, and applying, for example, Murray's (1997) aesthetic principles of interactivity, i.e. immersion, performance and transformation,[6] the

[5] When the film was released in drive-in theatres, this voting system was replaced by the lights in the spectators' cars (Cuevas, 2017).

[6] For Murray (1997), immersion focuses on the pleasurable experience of being transported into a highly elaborate and plausible fictional space, regardless of what the fantasy is like; performance is about being able to perform meaningful actions and see the results of our choices; and transformation is understood as the ability to modify the environment and the characters, being able to shape the play.

interactivity of *Mr. Sardonicus* is unreal, since, for all practical purposes, the spectators had no decision-making power, always triggering the same outcome. That is, if the film had been screened in a completely empty cinema theater, it would have ended in the same way. Moreover, the supposed moment of interactivity occurs punctually during an instant of the film, without any major transcendence. Nevertheless, and despite the lack of verifiable data regarding the film's budget and box office, today it has become a B-movie classic. In this sense, although Castle would continue to present new *gimmicks* throughout its career, the examples given above are some of the most outstanding cases of this particular type of film promotion.

CONCLUSIONS

Castle was a pioneer in the study of advertising strategies to promote his films through ingenious *gimmicks*, all in a context prior to the arrival of the Internet. His films are framed in low-budget cinema, but he had numerous successes thanks to his promotional approaches with the added value of trying to interact with the audience, which is why, today, he is part of the history of cinema. Regarded as «the other Hitchcock», Castle was a contemporary of the master of suspense and, although a friendship developed between them, there was always the inevitable comparison in the way they both promoted their films. For this reason, and for all his legacy, Castle's figure, sometimes more unknown than Hitchcock's to the general public, should be made more visible.

Similarly, Castle's influence reached other directors such as John Waters,[7] Frank Henenlotter[8] and the master of horror Wes Craven, whose debut film *The Last House on the Left* (1972) —produced by Sean S. Cunningham, another of the genre's key figures— was promoted under the tagline: «To avoid fainting,

[7] In addition to playing Castle himself in the TV series *Feud* (Murphy et al., 2017), John Waters created a card called *Odorama*, which contained different smells and was given to spectators when they entered the cinema theater to watch his film *Polyester* (1981), having to smell it at certain points during the screening (Cuevas, 2017).

[8] In his film *Basket Case* (1982), spectators entering the cinema theater were given a mask to supposedly avoid being splashed with blood from the film (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).

keep repeating, It's only a movie… Only a movie… Only a movie…», taken from the film *Strait-Jacket* (Castle, 1964), starring Joan Crawford. Another well-known influence is that carried out by Robert Zemeckis, Joel Silver and Gilbert Adler, who at the turn of the last century created the production company Dark Castle Entertainment, with the intention, in part, of producing several remakes of Castle's legacy.

We find ourselves, therefore, with a figure whose influence continues to be felt in contemporary horror cinema, both within the independent circuit and the more mainstream —Anna Biller, Christian Mielmann, Jason Blum, Mike Flanagan, James Wan, etc.—. Beyond his talent as a filmmaker, debatable on certain occasions, it is also undeniable that Castle was a master of *gimmick*, which led him to enjoy a prolific and lengthy film career. Likewise, his visionary nature allowed him to approach in greater detail —and much more than most directors of that time— the relationships that could be established between the spectators and the films that were going to be screened, turning B horror into an experience to be enjoyed, necessarily, collectively in a cinema theater.

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VIOLENCE, IMPERFECTION AND VENGEANCE OF FEMALE BODIES IN THE NEW FRENCH AND CANADIAN CINEMAS

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INTRODUCTION

We inhabit the society of the image, so immersed in the videosphere, as correctly observed by Debray (1994)[1], that we become deeply submerged in the liquid reality surrounding us. Despite the kaleidoscopic and postmodern nature of the concept of Bauman (2000)[2], Debray accurately forecasted the expansionary nature of television as opposed to cinema[3] and to the future narratives that could emerge alongside rapidly evolving technological developments, and even more the assimilative capacity of the generations viewing the images themselves. The high level of iconicity and impact of the still images, but above all of the audiovisual content surrounding us, shape the perception and the continuous reality presented as intermediated. On one hand, because of the sensorial limits themselves; and on the other, through the symbolic coding that is at the heart of the images consumed to the point of suffocation.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is not to make abstract metaphysical digressions, as it has a concrete focus: analysing the cutting of female bodies in

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[1] Treated as an evolution of the earlier stages of the gaze (Graphosphere and Logosphere) in *Life and Death of Image. A History of the Gaze in the West,* Debray, Règis, 1994.

[2] The concept of liquid reality, understood as a direct consequence of the reflections on *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman, 2000.

[3] Ibid., Debray, Règis, 1994, p. 257-269.

filmmaking. But how can we rationalise and simplify a concept as broad and diffuse? Through the theory of the Triple Cut, which although it is a doctoral research in progress, in this text will focus on the cutting of flesh and its physical and explicit representation of violence on the female body.

In this case, it will focus on two different but directly related cinematographies, such as the French case and its Canadian equivalent, where in recent years there has been a huge amount of horror productions, made by female directors and whose characteristics will be defined as we go along.

In filmmaking and its own universe of constellations of images, the human body— in addition to its almost exclusive leading role —has received a specific treatment that is different from the rest of filmed reality. This gestalt game proposed by Arheim (1990) of form-background and figure-field, when extrapolated to the case of film, deliberately lies at the origin of the gaze within an anthropocentric vision. As a result of this characteristic of constructing the gaze through the camera, even the classic nomenclature of filmmaking shots uses the scale of the human body in relation to the size of the field covered or of the fragment of one of its parts as a reference.

The sample of the filmmaking universe we are going to analyse will be based on the cutting of female bodies with a specific intention, as they are observed —and therefore fragmented— with a specific treatment. This reflection is largely based on concepts drawn from feminist filmmaking theory, such as the male gaze and the theories of the dichotomous gaze of Mulvey (1999), the sexual capital of Illouz and Kaplan (2000) or the analysis of the dead female body by Pedraza (2004)[4].

This paper is a starting point for a broader study that is intended to be critically reflective about the very nature of the audiovisual image. A methodological tool of theoretic analysis on the cutting of the female body in cinema, in particular on the multiple ways of destroying and fragmenting it on the screen through the aforementioned theory of the Triple Cut. Nevertheless, this paper aims to enable this reflection to be extrapolated and applied in a systematic way beyond the chosen

[4] The reading of the image on the basis of feminist filmmaking theory is present throughout the text, although for the sake of its length, the idea is not to go into definitions of concepts, but its presence is the backbone of the whole theory of cuts presented here and necessary for its own existence.

film selection, opening up the possibility of analysing different materials in the field of filmmaking. For this purpose, it starts from a double analytical character, which decomposes the images by using information and the shot as a basic unit and, at the same time, exhibits a structural character in order to analyse the code of the images themselves, the relationships between the elements that compose them and their dominant models.

Once the research framework, the object of study and the methodological structure used have been established, it is necessary to delve into the internal organisation of the Triple Cut. It is self-reflective: Reality Cut, Shot Cut (between shots, absence of the same or internal fragmented presentation of this minimal entity of the audiovisual narrative) and, lastly, the Flesh Cut, where finally the bodies are cut live in front the camera lens, pouncing like pieces of meat on top of the (reluctant or disinclined) audience.

Nevertheless, purely for the sake of the length of the text, and as has already been discussed, the focus will be on the last of these categories, the top level, the explicit.

It must not be forgotten that, despite the violent topics, the body must under no circumstances be mutilated in the first two categories, which are not included here, or it would belong to the last of the cuts presented. In the exemplification of the other previous cuts (reality and shot), if the audience were asked after the viewing, they would categorically state that they saw the brutality of the wound in the explicitness of the shot, which is never the case, in its physical non-existence.

THE FLESH CUT

The third cut of this structure is the flesh cut: the upper level, the explicit, the violently mutilated body in the field. At a certain point in history, films can begin to depict violence in a graphic, overt way: cutting the flesh recreating the gaze through different cathartic mechanisms. This evolution, linked to the crisis of American filmmaking classicism, the new narratives and waves coming from European cinemas, the renewal of technique, the struggle with television, etc., directly affects the very essence of horror cinema, abandoning the Hays Code and the banishment of bodily

violence off-camera (Sánchez-Biosca, Despedazar un cuerpo. De una cierta tendencia en el cine de terror posmoderno, 1995, p. 62). The levels of censorship, self-imposed and imposed by others, diminished, but even so, American independent production soon suffered another moralistic and Judeo-Christian twist: that of the discipline of female bodies, which we would connect with the Reagan era in the eighties (Wood, 1986), as opposed to the revulsive concept and revolutionary connotations of the previous decade.

Whether it is the first or the second historical condition, and extending the geographical origin of the film exhibition, several distancing devices are necessary, whose function towards the public is to avoid the crudeness of the images; devices that are still active in the present time.

The *Verfremdungseffekt*, or detachment effect translated from original German, is a theatre mechanism created and developed by Bertolt Brecht which avoids immersing the audience in the illusory, thus avoiding emotional catharsis. According to Mitry, this circumstance does not benefit filmmaking at all: for him (Brecht), theatre is not a manner of suggesting, expressing or meaning ideas through a dramatic action pursued for its own sake, but a tribune. […] "This is not theatre, it is social didacticism on stage" (Mitry, 2002, pp. 64-65).

This practice assimilated to filmmaking expression could be reflected in Godard's jump cuts, or also, although with a much less revolutionary intentionality in a political sense, in the mechanisms of distancing from the violence of the images identified here: the emotional, the hyperbolic and the surgical.

DETACHMENT MECHANISMS

The emotional

With regards to emotional distancing, in horror film tradition, it is commonplace to revel more crudely in the death of the supporting character, or with the less empathetic supporting performances in the plot, which, after all, are nothing more than bodycounts. Requoting Wood (Hollywood from Viertan to Reagan, 1986) or Clover (Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film,

1993), it is impossible to understand this statement without linking it to the gear of moralistic punishment and cathartic voyeurism.

The big studios' absorption of the aesthetics, plots and characters typical of this new horror of the late 1970s, and the decade that followed, led to a marked ethical shift. Big industry set new standards for stories and archetypes by reducing them to mere clichés, eliminating the caustic and radical sense of the previous decade. The existence of a traditionalist moral course in underhanded subtext will lead the characters, especially in the female case, to a clumsy and morbidly terrible death. This will be caused by an inadequate sexuality according to a conservative moralistic concept; by a body that does not conform to the desirable normativity or by other aesthetic or ideological causes, linked without concealment to openly patriarchal concepts. Eliminating the sadly famous Hays Code of its role in the cinema, many psychos of the time are nothing more than hired killers and knights-errant, direct heirs of its corpse.

The irruption in recent decades of new women directors and other imaginaries of justice will generate a re-evolution and openness, breaking and blowing up the reactionary morality that prevailed in previous decades. A perfect example of this are the the new women directors under the umbrella of the New French Extremism[5] .

In *Titane* (Ducournau, 2021), the director exaggeratedly sexualises the female main character, who works as a dancer in a car showroom, through the intelligent use of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999), constructed as a simply handbook device. In this scene, as the camera pans across Alexia's half-naked body, it perversely prepares the audience for what follows.

It's night, she leaves work and walks towards her car. A man follows her, we can see his shadow, his silhouette and hear his footsteps echoing like a threat in the empty street[6]. The protagonist runs towards her car and he follows her; then, he puts his head through the window and forces her to kiss him. Alexia's reaction to the sexual agression is to stab him with a hair accessory, piercing his head (see Figure 1).

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[5] Term coined by the critic James Quandt in the magazine *Artforum* to encompass the new film universe produced by French directors at the beginning of the 21st century (Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in recent French cinema, 2004).

[6] Ordinary and public spaces as sites of sexual terror deserve special mention since the emergence of new narratives generated by contemporary female directors.

Figure 1

Titane (Ducournau, 2021)

Emotional detachment. Sexual agression scene with murder in *Titane* (Ducournau, 2021)

It is a raw scene beyond exception, in which the mutilation of flesh and death are perfectly visible in the field. The flesh cut in this case is of a man, but the choice of this example as an emotional distancing mechanism is, therefore, intentional and representative of these new narratives. Until later in the film, the game Ducournau plays works —as spectators we absolve Alexia of the violence exercised as self-defence. Subsequently, this house of cards that is built around the character will collapse as the film develops.

The hyperbolic

Secondly, there is hyperbole, the exaggeration, the distancing of the gaze through baroque excess. This mechanism can be found in abundance in sub-genres such as gore and, in general, in exploitation films. It detaches the audience from the explicit, as mangled bodies, the entrails still beating after being ripped out of the thorax, the amputated limbs and the spurts of blood reaching the ceiling and spilling out onto the floor, do not correspond to what is understood to be a human physical and bodily reality.

However, in some sub-categorical strata of the more graphic cinema, such as those already mentioned, alongside the violence and the cutting of the body in the

cinematographic frame, comedy and black humour are widely present, coexisting in synchrony with the hyperbolic perspective itself.

In *Slaxx* (Kephart, 2020), all these devices intertwine, giving rise to an unusual film about a pair of trousers, the result of neoliberal child slavery relocated to India, who decide to take revenge on their arrival in Canada. Death and comedy weave this hyperbole proposed by the Canadian director. The plot is bloody, critical of the unrealistic canons of beauty of fashion, multinational corporations, green and ecological capitalism, the system of consumption and messianic CEOs.

In the first murder of the film, the trousers rip one of the shop employees in half (see Figure 2). Despite the explicity of the scene, the sensation is unreal, comic, and sets the audience up for a caustic, bloody, hyperbolic, postmodern madness. The rest of the murders of the trousers work in the same style, provoking a bodycount with the employees, influencers and shop managers, who are locked up in the store for the launch of these trousers that are valid for all sexes and sizes, but whose cotton is cursed by the blood of a dead girl who made some of them.

Figure 2
Slaxx (Kephart, 2020)

Hyperbolic distancing: moment in which some homicidal trousers split one of the female employees of the eco-friendly shop that lives from child exploitation offshored to India.

The surgical

This last device corresponds to the surgical, the medical, the aseptic social imaginary of iconography and the filter of the clinic, inherited in turn from the pictorial and photographic tradition of the treatment of death. It is a mechanisim that we find in Debray (1994), Mitry (2002) but also in Pedraza (Pedraza, 2004) or Didi-Huberman (2005), dealing exclusively with the dead female body and a powerful historical revision of it in different visual arts.

This mechanism is a kind of plot excuse to present the open and explicitly mutilated body in the operating room. The mix in postmodern horror films of the mad doctor, body modification and so-called body horror gives rise to new, fleshy and complex narrative devices that repeat patterns handed down from previous visual arts. In turn, it is linked to different film authors that distance the audience from the horrors of the open, ripped flesh in front of their eyes.

Rabid (Cronenberg, 1977) has all the aforementioned elements. After a motorbike accident, Rose, the main character, is taken to an operating theatre to receive an experimental plastic surgery that modifies her body, growing as a result a new organ and transforming her into a kind of postmodern vampire with a thirst for human blood.

Her flesh is mutilated with great rawness; the strips of skin cut shearer-like device can be seen hanging behind the medical staff. In this scene, the surgeon explains to his team while operating in the surgery room the procedures he is going to perform. That diegetic voice —which could well be an informative voiceover— causes an estranging sensation, a feeling of visualizing a clinical documentary[7] that almost crosses the aesthetic boundaries of fiction and non-fiction.

Notwithstanding, the remake made in 2019 by the Canadian directors Jen and Sylvia Soska (Rabid, 2019), aka the Soska Sisters, resolves this sequence also with a surgical detachment of a very different nature. The plot is quite similar, Rose is disfigured, in this case on her face, by the accident and also offers herself for an experimental aesthetic treatment.

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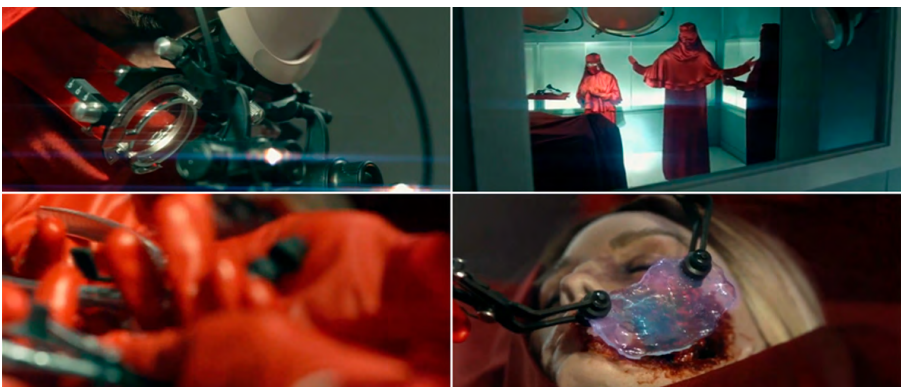
[7] It cannot be ignored the parallels in the resolution of the scene with *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (Franju, 1960), where the *mad doctor* explains the procedure to the assistant nurse while he rips his victim's face off in the operating room with the aim of restoring beauty to his mutilated daughter.

The Soskas´ tribute to the green and red colours of Cronenberg's original sequence is magnified. The extreme proximity to surgical elements and wounds provokes a pictorial, highly aesthetic, nineteenth-century medical documentary vision interspersed with soothing Classical music, which the sisters have already used in violent resolutions in previous works[8]. Also, the large general introductory shots generate a synergy with the lights intersecting the rhythmic movements of the medical staff. All of this, generating a non-fictional, highly aesthetic and precious ballet, which distances the audience from any horror seen in the frame on the body of Rose.

Figure 3
Rabid (Soska, Rabid, 2019)



Surgical distancing

As Pedraza reflects on Cronenberg previous version, weaving the fine irony against the misogyny of the generation of monstrous female characters in *Rabid*. In her book *Espectra*, in the subchapter *Carne nueva para la perra de siempre* (Pedraza, 2004, pp. 356-364), Pedraza states: "Muerta la perra, se acabó la rabia" [Dead dogs don't bite][9].

[8] Resource used, for example, in the surgical secuences in *American Mary* (Soska, 2012).

[9] Not to take the sentence as literal, a play on words translated as "Dead the bitch, gone the rage". Because that's how the Cronenberg film ends.

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SLASHER, HEAVY METAL, AND DIGITAL GAMES. THE EXEMPLARY PRODUCTIONS THAT INAUGURATED THE HORROR GENRE IN *VIDEOGAME CINEMA*

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INTRUSIONS OF VIRTUALITY

In 1982, Steven Lisberger's emblematic film *Tron*, inaugurated one of the most solvent and interesting film genres in current fiction: *films about videogames*. A typology of films that departs from the big screen adaptations of successful platforms in the gaming market (such as *Super Mario Bros, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, etc.), to focus on cyberspace under its own conditions. That is, under the protection of an original narrative and aesthetics, whose guidelines, in general, do not specifically refer to any commercialized game[1].

The particular fable of *Tron* and its virtual game universes, as well as its powerful aesthetics of synthesized images combined with celluloid filming and rotoscoping, drew a determining look for cinema and its technical history. Their influence, over more than five decades, can be seen in *films about videogames* such as *eXistenZ* (David Cronnenberg, 1999), *Avalon* (Mamuro Oshii, 2001), *Wreck-It Ralph!* (Rich Moore, 2012), etc. as in films subjugated by the digital and its virtual spaces -and not connected with digital playfulness- such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995), *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995) or *The Matrix* (Wachowski's, 1999), among others. And in them, two of the main themes that would take over this kind of *movies about videogames* could already be sensed: the immersive adventures in their virtual universes; and the tribute to their culture

[1] (rather than to the videoludic world itself).

around the social problems in which, in one way or another, the phenomenon ends up being involved. In this sense, we refer, in this sense, to films whose subject matter is based on the interweaving of their virtual universe and its correspondence and effects with the real world; and to films that approach digital games from a social approach, more connected to the "real" everyday space, and to the issues raised by its web of relationships from its consumption and market.

From these aspects, *Tron* presents a story about videogame programmers who must recover the patents of their own products, confronting in virtuality an evil entity such as the "Master Control Program" (MCP)[2]. Thus, establishing the cinematographic bridge to a type of film that, within the video game and fantasy genre (especially *science fiction*), focuses its main theme on the dichotomies and connections between virtual space and the real: its protagonists, in one way or another, will be transformed by the transition to the digital universe, or will witness, in an inverse approach, how virtuality —and its monsters— invade the known reality.

> In the first case, the transition to new horizons is equivalent to a rewriting in a "digital key" of a topic common to narrative: the adventure in the face of the unknown (or, if you prefer, the "hero's journey"). In the second case, the digital game is presented as a social affection or as an intrusive force that turns the (formerly) everyday into a matter of survival. In any case, "starting the game" will be equivalent in all these films to the unleashing of an experience that, regardless of its theme, typology or style, will present three common factors as far as the video game is concerned: the treatment of virtuality as a transformative phenomenon; the transposition of the rules of the game on the structures of the film; and the reproduction of the aesthetic models of the game on the film screen (Martinez, p. 357, 2020).

The "ludic evil", the intrusive force that lies in the video game lurking in the player, or as a portal to the perverse, will then be the dark back of the film *Tron* (and of the "Master Control Program"). And the perfect excuse, not

[2] Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) is sent to a digital universe by the "Master Control Program" (MCP), trying to recover the patents for his own platforms. There, with the help of the programs Tron (Bruce Boxleitner) and Lora (Cindy Morgan), he will confront the MCP government to free the system and return to "real" space.

without some moralizing, to raise the "dangers and dependencies" of digital gaming on the big screen: at times, this "evil" will awaken a strong dependence among the protagonists (to the game, to virtual experiences, etc.), to then go on to invade their reality and ruin their vital spectrum. At other times, it will be the game itself that, incarnated in physical reality by an entity, will take over or destroy the players under the dilemmas of the *horror movie* and the "video game and suspense" cocktail (what is or is not real? what rules to follow for survival? must we follow the game's orders? etc.).

Three releases, approximately ten years apart, can be used to trace a cinematographic panorama of the videoludic horrors that started this particular trend in *video game cinema*: *Nightmares* (with its episode *The Game Master*, Joseph Sargent, 1983), *Brainscan* (John Flynn, 1994), and *Stay Alive* (William Brent Bell, 2006). In all of these films, the protagonists will have to defeat an entity from the virtual space of the video game (the Game Master, Trickster, and Elizabeth Bathory, in each of the films mentioned above) in order to free themselves from its harmful influence, and to stop the destruction of their own reality. And in all of them, the cultural problems of the video game and ethical or moral issues will be the object of the prejudices that, on many occasions, have hindered its development[3].

ARCADE MODE NIGHTMARE

Barely a year after the release of *Tron*, in 1983, Joseph Sargent would release *Nightmares*, a film made up of four horror episodes, including *The Game Master.* This fragment tells how a teenager gifted for arcade machines (Emilio Estevez) will have to struggle to survive in front of a video game capable of invading reality. Neither parents nor friends will be able to stop the protagonist from his obsession to overcome the complicated "level 13" of the game. But when he achieves it, it will be he himself who will have to survive, "in the flesh", the onslaught of the Master of the game throughout the arcade.

[3] Since 1977, when the National Security Council of the United States confronted the creators of the video game *Death Race*, the company Exidy, over issues of representation of violence on their screens, many controversies have accompanied the trajectory of the digital game. An example of this in Spain is the case of the "katana killer": https://bit.ly/3NdiR9O.

If *The Game Master* has some affinities with the approaches of *Tron*, such as the confrontation between the protagonist-program, the social problems derived from the video game, or its aesthetic aspect (fluorescent graphics on a black background), it also presents an opposite discourse, much more negative with respect to the phenomenon, than the example produced by Disney. The vast universe of possibilities of *Tron*, open to the adventures and self-discovery of the *Campbellian* "hero's path", is presented in *The Game Master* as a closed space of setbacks and alienation, where the suffocating atmosphere of the arcade and the game screen in question are only surpassed by the acute obsession of the protagonist.

From the very beginning of the episode, the character played by Estevez risks his physical integrity by gambling against the local players of an "unhealthy" arcade: a noisy joint full of young people in the latest 80's fashion, which exemplifies the vision of these places presented in the filmography of the time[4]. As we advance in the story, the "negative influence" of the video game will increase the pressure on the protagonist, and his anxiety to complete the levels of the game will awaken in him an irascible character that will also confront him with his relatives (parents, friends, or the owner of the arcade he frequents). This growing uneasiness produced by the game is translated into a series of sequences and reiterative resources such as, for example, the close-ups of the concentrated and sweaty player in front of the game, and the rhythmic combinations of the strident sounds of the arcade with the heavy metal music that the protagonist listens to on his walkman (another connection between socially "discordant" elements that, especially in the 80s, and as we will see in the following case, were branded as amoral and harmful to youth). We will also appreciate inserted among these resources, the critical discourse against the prevailing video game in the North American society of the time, translated -without much decorum- into a series of narrative connotations about the pernicious aspects of digital playfulness such as addiction, autism, dehumanization, etc. A stance contrary to these forms of entertainment that we will also find in other contemporary films within *the video game cinema* such as *Joysticks* or *The Wizard* (Todd

[4] This approach also affects films such as *Joysticks* (Greydon Clark, 1983), although from the parodic aspects of teenage comedy.

Holland, 1989) and also in films outside this typology such as *Death Justice 2* or *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance*[5]. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the video game is presented as an "invading" entity of physical reality; easily understood as an object of "social contamination" or, as Blanchet (2012: 45) points out, as "a cold and dehumanized threat towards the integrity of known society". Let us recall that, at the end of the story, J.J. succumbs to the forces of the Master of the game (he dies in front of the video game) and, as his friend testifies the next day, he ends up absorbed by it and turned into another virtual character of the arcade machine (Fig.1).

Figura 1.
Frame from *The Master of the Game* (Joseph Sargent, 1983).

NIGHTMARE AND HEAVY METAL

The next combination of cinematic horror and digital ludic would take eleven years to be released in theaters but, in essence, it would maintain the bases established by its predecessor in terms of the "pernicious" approach of the video game, and in terms of the use of the latest digital techniques as the film's aesthetic appeal.

Brainscan, by John Flynn, was released in 1994 along the lines of the story of the "troubled" teenager and heavy metal fan (now also a fan of gore cinema),

[5] Directed by Michale Winner in 1982 and Godfrey Reggio in 1983, respectively.

whose obsession with a digital game and the entity enclosed in it (Trickster), will rebel as the new origin of all his problems. The proposal, from these aspects, resembles *The Game Master*, but from the expanded margins of the feature film, and towards a more equanimous mixture between the video game and the clichés of horror cinema, this time of *slasher* tendency (cinema of psychopaths and adolescent victims).

The synopsis of the film places us in front of Michael (Edward Furlong) and the new game he has acquired, which not only deceives him by twisting the appearances of virtuality and reality and superimposing the game over the latter, but, in these schemes, induces him to murder a hostile neighbor. Trickster (T. Ryder Smith), the video game's flamboyant master of ceremonies, is the one who twists his opinions and his perception of the real, and who pressures him to reach the final screen, eliminating the traces and witnesses of the crime. The story will not end well for Michael or his friends, and as in the case of *The Game Master*, the film has a final surprise that warns us that the game is not over yet: Trickster will still be alive and with no intention of leaving his machinations on reality.

If *Nightmares* owed much of its ideology and aesthetic resources to *Tron*, *Brainscan*, although it does not completely dissociate itself from these "eighties" influences in its aesthetic translation to the style of the 90s, is on the contrary directly related to a precedent outside video game cinema: the film *Trick or Treat* (Charles Martin Smith, 1984). This film, released ten years before *Brainscan*, narrates the problems of a heavy teenager, also marginalized and antisocial, who struggles between the real and the fictitious at the expense, this time, of a vinyl record and the malevolent entity that emerges from it (the singer Sammi Curr, played by Tony Fields). The wave of crimes that mortify the protagonist and undermine his vital and moral perspective, will be a consequence —again— of these bad company of the evil entity and of these musical "vices" that, as in the case of the video game, divert teenagers towards the wrong path (not in vain, emblematic heavy metal stars like Ozzy Osbourne or Gene Simmons, whose reputation and turbulent career have often been the subject of the tabloids, intervene as secondary characters in the film).

As can be read, the plot structure and the critical manifestations against heavy rock music and against video games are practically similar in both films.

The replacement of the vinyl record by the video game, as well as the replacement of Sammi Curr's character by Trickster's, only underline the copying/homage and self-referentiality exercise that, years later, *Brainscan* performs: heavy music is still playing, and the precepts of the slasher genre and the rebellious teenager continue, only in front of the video game screen. It is precisely this prototypical condition within cinematic horror, so attached to the canons (and chewing gum) of the genre, which together with the discreet direction of the film and the simplicity of the plot (the script is in charge of an incipient Andrew Kevin Walker)[6], end up relegating it to a second plane of cinematography that not even the Trickster himself (too histrionic and not terrifying enough to emulate slasher icons like Freddy Krueger, Michael Myers or Jason)[7], manages to sustain.

In this aspect, *Brainscan* is a film that detracts from the schemes and discourses of its predecessors —"the perniciousness" of being rebellious or different; "the danger" of heavy music or digital games—, and forgets more interesting contributions regarding the specific space of the video game (not to mention the omission of more positive facets). In this sense, there are no allegories or direct representations (as in *Tron* or other films such as *eXistenZ* or *Avalon*) of the *video game's own conditions*, such as its algorithmic nature, its interactive narrative, its looped modes of operation, etc. Nor are there any narrative or visual intentions of real interest or, at least, with an innovative or transgressive spirit regarding the representation of the digital game. Some passages of the film offer certain allusions related to this type of platforms (such as the *interface* on the TV from which the game begins, or the different game menus/screens that appear in the film); there are also allusions to the effects of digital virtuality (such as Trickster's transformations, or the "teleportations" of the protagonist into the game dimension, Fig. 2). But these are not enough reasons to sustain a discourse on the space of the video game that is represented, beyond this as an "alienating" or "negative" product. When, paradoxically, it is a film whose discourse is based, in large doses, on terror and violence.

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[6] He would later surprise with better scripts in films such as *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995) or *Sleepy Hollow* (Tim Burton, 1999).

[7] *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Friday the 13Th* (Sean S. Cunningham,1980), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), respectively.

Figura 2.
Frame from *Brainscan* (John Flynn, 1994).

ONLINE NIGHTMARE

Again, and in another approximate leap of a decade, *Stay Alive* directed by William Brent Bell in 2006, confronts a group of young people on the movie screen against a "malevolent" video game whose network game affects their existence: if the character they play with perishes during its course, they will also die in real life. The blame for this deadly game falls this time on Countess Elizabeth Bathory (Fig. 3), a historical figure of the sixteenth century shrouded in the legend of numerous crimes motivated by her obsession with beauty, and now reconverted into a bloody digital avatar[8]. She is the one who dominates the video game -as did The Game Master and Triscker-, and she is the one who stalks, also in slasher mode (updated from the precepts of the online video game), this prototypical youth miscellany of the genre: the handsome boy, the screaming girl, the geeky friend, the "wonk", and other stereotypes.

[8] According to some opinions, the crimes attributed to the "bloody countess" could have been inventions of her enemies in a very complex political context to seek her overthrow and death (Thorn's, 1998, *Countess Dracula: the life and times of Elizabeth Bathory, the Blood Countess*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London).

Figura 3.
Frame from *Stay Alive* (William Brent Bell, 2006).

With a discreet box office of $21 million (compared to the $9 million cost)[9], and without ever making it beyond the ranks of "B series" products, the film once again updates the model (slasher + videogames) already analyzed in the cases of previous studios, without contributing much in terms of artistic and narrative quality. From the generic script, which is maintained without major surprises between sequences of tension and grotesque murders, it is worth noting this time -and perhaps as an evolutionary glimpse of the game on the big screen- a more neutral perspective on the video game that leaves behind previous moralizing, and assumes it as a more "integrated" element in society (and in the viewer's vision). That is, as the entertainment product that, already in the 2000s, begins to be accepted, socially and culturally, by a larger generation of gamers and moviegoers, more accustomed to coexistence with digital platforms.

Taking advantage of this impulse of generational updating, *Stay Alive* applies to a greater extent issues related to the aforementioned *conditions of the video game*, being this, if possible, the greatest attraction of the film (from the point of view of this model analysis). It is therefore interesting to note how in the film efforts are made to compile hybrid sequences between the game scenes and the real footage (through editing, through the choice of framing and optics, inserting captures of the video game in question, etc.), where, for example, interactions

[9] Information extracted from https://acortar.link/WcOKcJ and from https://acortar.link/6YNyrh

between both realities occur when one of the young people shares from the game space a lever with a character in real life; or as when this same character opens a door in virtuality so that his companion can go through it in the real context. We could also mention the "out-of-field" comments of the protagonists while they play, a moment in which the *diegetic and non-diegetic* spaces of the virtuality and the film exchange not only actions, but also visual perspectives of the game (in 3D space) with camera movements of the real filming[10].

It could also be noted that, from a narrative point of view, the script of *Stay Alive* pays tribute to video games by adopting the (brief, simple) logic that many of them use to pose and solve the problems of their gameplay. Having to get three nails scattered throughout the virtual world, to insert them in three specific places in the body of Countess Bathory, for example, has more of a video game narrative than a cinematic plot. Granted, this narrative approach to video game simplicity is no excuse for the flimsy script signed by Matthew Peterman and Bell himself. As described by *Variety* magazine critic John Anderson, *Stay Alive* reworks together the approaches of films like *Harry Potter* and the discourses of Wes Craven's filmography, "with no greater interest than the approach given through the video game"[11]. This leads us to point out that *Stay Alive* not only continues the *self-reiterative* recipes practiced by *Trick or Treat* and *Brainscan* (and other films close to the slasher) but also systematically embellishes them with the fashion and trends of the moment. It is, after all, and as has been pointed out, a revisitation of the ideas behind heavy rock music, video games, and youth fashions, according to the keys of the present imposed on the film.

IN THE CURRENT NIGHTMARE. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the temporal distance between their premieres, the technical differences resulting from the computerized advances used in their cinematography, and the sociocultural and industrial evolution of video games in the plurality of their subjects and themes (from sexual diversity to issues of politics, economics,

[10] It is, moreover, the film's characters themselves who allude to the vicissitudes of "perceptual reality" (on the other hand, a central theme in *Brainscan*), and how it can allow Bathory to exist in both realities.

[11] https://acortar.link/2UKtqX

ecology, etc. brought by new market releases), the three case studies analyzed compose a generic model of *horror video game cinema* that, even today, continues to influence related recordings.

Recent productions such as *Bandersnatch* (David Slade, 2018) or *Choose or Die* (Toby Meakins, 2022), among other cases circulating in today's cinema, but also among serialized formats or among releases on digital platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.), follow in the wake originated by the three films analyzed, reiterating the combination of horror/slasher with digital game that worked on previous occasions: the video game, in these new examples, continues to behave as the refuge of the teenage outsider, and as a portal to evil that disfigures reality thanks to the entity that governs it. Only the soundtrack has been modified (or relaxed), which now moves away from heavy rock, to enter the more atmospheric terrain of 80's synthesizer music (Synth Pop music). In fact, the influence and the (still) powerful aesthetic imprint generated by *The Game Master*, *Brainscan* and *Stay Alive*, seem to originate a re-reading of them from the most forced of tributes, where the stylistic imprint of the 80s/90s is a fundamental part of the discourse and the advertising appeal of these new productions that: (a) do not fail to include a props and art direction inspired by these periods (with costumes and scenery typical of these periods), (b) boast a series of visual effects that enjoy the obsolete technology of the time (on-screen interferences that mimic VHS videotapes, white noise phosphorescence of cathode tube televisions, sounds of cassette tapes, etc.), and c) they apply a soundtrack that, as mentioned above, is still based on the 80's, now changing *hard rock* for electronic themes of the same era.

In them, the initiation model of *films about videogames* that embrace horror (not those that adapt successful horror games[12]) survives, without major changes other than those that update it in their respective times of release -from arcade to online gameplay, from heavy to synth music, etc.- and only advancing, significantly, in a greater interest in applying the *conditions of the videogame* to the cinematographic. Perhaps, as mentioned above, due to the generational change and the maturity of an audience that, in these videoludic fields, understands

[12] Such as *Silent Hill* (Christophe Gans, 2006), *Alone in the Dark* (Uwe Boll, 2005) or *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002).

much better the language of the videogame and its adaptations on the big screen. Or perhaps, and in a similar way to the previous idea, because other *video game films* outside the horror genre, such as the aforementioned *eXistenz, Avalon*, etc., have opened a path of experimentation with still much to contribute to this branch of cinema.

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Miscellaneous

SCIENCE FICTION: CRITICAL AND CREATIVE COGNITION OF THE WORLD TO COME

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WHEN SCIENCE FICTION TAKES UP THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

Through the lens of cognitive psychology as well as education and training sciences, we present the pedagogical role that science fiction could have in the development of creative and critical future thinking. Science fiction seems to be able to contribute to take up the challenge of the many global educational reference systems. Especially, it can be useful to favor the development of skills to envision the future in its alternative forms and to adapt to the evolving environment of the 21st century. A consensus seems to define the "4Cs", i.e. creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication, as the skills required for this adaptation (OECD, 2019; P21, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). In this chapter, we focus on creativity and critical thinking, which are crucial both in individual and collective situations. Creativity aims to propose ideas and productions that are innovative, unexpected, and appropriate to the considered context (Bonnardel, 2002; Lubart et al., 2015). Critical thinking allows individuals to carefully evaluate and judge information in order to reach an informed viewpoint for the purpose of a specific action (Ennis, 1993). Future thinking, on the other hand, allows for imagining and pre-experiencing futures situations (Atance & O'Neill, 2001). In this chapter, we explore how science fiction tools use three modes of thought to facilitate temporal travel, potentiate our imagination, and guide our mind towards reflexive paths. After defining

the notion of potential futures, we will describe how science fiction fosters creative thinking by acting as a constraint (Tromp & Baer, 2022; Bonnardel & Lellouche-Gounon, in press), and how it takes on the function of a thought experiment to foster critical thinking (Arcangeli, 2017; Rumpala, 2018). Finally, we will conclude by proposing to leverage the qualities of science fiction in an educational setting using the Design Fiction approach (Bleecker, 2010).

AN INFINITE VARIETY OF POTENTIAL FUTURES ACCESSIBLE THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

Future thinking allows us to imagine, simulate, and experience future situations through our ability to predict consequences, both temporally and spatially. To envision the future, we produce mental simulations of futures that are likely to occur in the near future. We often face difficulties in envisioning the full range of potential futures, because our mental simulations are informed by our knowledge and experience. Indeed, individuals tend to remain fixed on unoriginal ideas, based on knowledge easily accessible in memory, without managing to overcome them to generate more creative idea (Camarda et al., 2018), which corresponds to a phenomenon of fixation (or "design fixation"). The way we think about the future leads us to three types of futures (Henchey, 1978): probable futures (what is likely to be), preferable futures (what should be), and plausible futures (what could be). Probable futures explore possible developments and consequences of current trends. Emphasizing the importance of emotions in our simulations, preferable futures are more normative, encouraging us to express our desires for the future in line with our individual values and socially shared values in search of conformity (Filion-Mallette, 2019), a kind of normative injunction. As probable and preferable futures become clearer, plausible futures become accessible. They reflect what we consider to be reasonable and are influenced by our current understanding of how the world works. These three types of futures are referred to as "conventional" futures (Voros, 2006) and, according to much research in cognitive psychology, are spontaneously influenced by biases toward positivity and optimism about the future (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Sjåstad & Baumeister, 2020). Beyond these conventional futures are "potential futures". The latter are conceivable by extending our reflective and imaginative exercise

to the limits of normality and normativity (Voros, 2006). They are cognitively costlier, and their access seems to be facilitated by science fiction imaginaries thanks to the particular cognitive value of this literature through its inscription in a time that does not (yet) exist (Stroud, 2008).

THE IMAGINARY OF SCIENCE FICTION, AGITATORS OF KNOWLEDGE

Science fiction offers a wide range of visualizations of unreal worlds that are difficult to represent or to access without its use. These worlds can be physically very different from the world we know, such as planetary systems for which the space opera, a sub-genre of science fiction, takes on an educational role by familiarizing "whole generations of readers with the fundamental cosmological notions of galaxies" (Bellagamba, 2009). These worlds may also be conceptually very different from our current world, such as Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer,* where nature and life are replaced by the Matrix. The use of these imaginaries is possible thanks to processes of meaning-making and integration of new concepts they involve. Bonoli's (2004) work on fictional narratives emphasizes the formation of a mental representation based on our experience and knowledge ("constructive dimension") following a "negotiation" between these and the fiction ("interpretative dimension"). This representation seeks to satisfy a partial truth by producing a possible and comprehensible image (dimensions of alethic partiality and imagination). On a cognitive level, this allows the resolution of a failure of referential representation through the search of an interpretative framework to conceiving a new mental representation based on the modification of existing concepts (Ward, 1994). This new construction is incorporated as an alternative within the existing information in our memory (Green & Brock, 2000). Suvin (1979, p.63-84) calls "novum" this cognitive construction intended to link the fictional world to the real world, which prompts one to imagine another way of seeing the world (Picholle, 2018). This strange newness leads to a feeling of *cognitive estrangement* or *distancing* (Suvin, 1979, p.4-15) allowing the "suspension of disbelief" to favor the projection in the science fictional universe. This cognitive displacement is not far from the one used by Montesquieu (1721) to set a distance to allow to see the French society

from another point of view, and it's not a surprise that his two main characters, *Usbek and Rica*, are now the name of a journal about societal future thinking (https://usbeketrica.com/fr). Let us emphasize that these cognitive mechanisms echo those of the learning process (i.e., general theory of schemas, Rumelhart & Norman, 1976), and of the adaptation process (Piaget, 1992), involving the formation of new schemas as soon as the existing ones are no longer sufficient for comprehension, in other words, new mental models (Nersessian, 2018). Then, these new schemas are added to our knowledge and adjusted to ensure assimilation and accommodation for cognitive balance.

SCIENCE FICTION TOOLS: CREATIVE THINKING, CRITICAL THINKING AND FUTURE THINKING

Science fiction allows one to project "into a future far enough away to allow for strategic inflections and close enough to mobilize individuals" (Saives et al., 2019, p.160). Literary narrative holds the power to move individuals to thought, reflection, action, and belief (Stroud, 2008). This power, accentuated by the literary genre of science fiction through the novum, reinforces this "literary acumen". Picholle (2018, p.208) cites the example of the fictitious device, the ansible proposed by Le Guin in the Dispossessed solving the problem of interstellar distances and allowing galactic societies to communicate with each other. This device is then taken up by a number of science fiction universes. Thus, science fiction enables the elaboration and maintenance of a shared hypothetical representation, while allowing to go beyond the logics of normative constraints, which makes it an asset not only for future thinking but also for creativity and critical thinking. As a result, science fiction imaginaries provide a fertile ground for problem-solving activities in which our creative thinking is solicited, as well as for thought experiments in which our critical thinking is activated.

In cognitive psychology, creative thinking is often associated with the intellectual activity of problem solving, in which solutions are devised to allow the passage from an initial state to a final state involving the generation and introduction of new constraints (Chevalier & Bonnardel, 2003). According to Tromp and Baer (2022), constraints can have two functions. The first is the function of focusing by anchoring the search by providing specific concepts as the

starting point. The second is the exclusionary function, promoting a move away from known concepts to engage in a flexible search of the constraints' potential (Tromp, 2022). We argue that science fiction imaginaries will act as constraints that promote forward-looking creative cognition by simultaneously endorsing both functions of constraints. On the one hand, the function of exclusion can be fulfilled by the nature of science fiction described as a literature of distancing (Suvin, 1979). On the other hand, science fiction offers the possibility of several anchoring, either in a present starting situation leading to the examination of possible paths towards a future situation (i.e., forecasting scenario), which solicits our divergent thinking and mental flexibility. A future starting situation allows us to imagine the consequences and potential circumstances of a present situation that could have led to this future situation (i.e., backcasting scenarios), soliciting our counterfactual thinking. Let's take the example of the series *Black Mirror*, which invites us to question the circumstances that could have led to the considered situation. In the episode *Nosedive* (2016), where a mobile application makes every human interaction potentially risky since any interaction is noted, which can lead, as it does for the protagonist, to turn her life into hell. The viewer is invited to take an introspective look at his/her personal actions (i.e., personal use of social networks), and more globally to reflect on the social and societal significance of collective actions (i.e., the use of social networks by others). This is in line with Rumpala's (2018) idea that showing a common future engenders a transgenerational collective responsibility and encourages certain issues to become a collective and justiciable matter for discussion (see also Demarque & Suchier, 2022).

While science fiction was originally thought of as a literature of exploration (Convert & Demailly, 2012), it soon takes on a more experimental role, to extrapolate possible consequences or events through hypothesis testing in the form of "What if..." (Rumpala, 2018). This is particularly the case in uchronies, a popular genre in science fiction, such as in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), a fictional case in which the United States would have finally surrendered to the Japanese Empire and the Third Reich. Currie (2020) argues that the cognitive value of science fiction leads to "imaginative tests of values and ways of life". Science fiction, furthermore, promotes detachment from

our beliefs and value judgments to allow us to interrogate a kind of contesting counterculture (Convert & Demailly, 2012). Especially, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) attacks a robust cognitive and social construct, the binary representation of gender (masculinity *vs.* femininity). The author not only disrupts the binary representation of gender but also our patriarchal values and sexual morals, by presenting Gethen, an Earth-like planet populated by most of the time asexual inhabitants, taking one or the other sex once a month to reproduce before becoming asexual again. This is like thought experiments, which are considered reasoning about an imaginary case for the purpose of increasing our knowledge or understanding of the world (Arcangeli, 2017) and serve as a basis for exploring the possible (Murzilli, 2022; Rumpala, 2018). The science fiction imaginary can be used as a pedagogical basis, as Bellagamba, (2022) points out citing the example of the fictional trial of *The Ring of Ritornel* of Harness (1968) used to observe the mechanisms of justice, or the famous laws of robotics enacted by Asimov in *Robot Series* used as a reference model to think the regulation of artificial intelligence.

ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE TO PROMOTE A REFLECTIVE OR CREATIVE PROCESS IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Given the heuristic power of science fiction on creative and critical thinking, the use of science fiction in an educational setting could be used to favour the macro-processes common to creative and critical thinking modes, i.e., seeking, imagining, doing and reflecting (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2020). To enable and facilitate the use of science fiction in educational contexts, we propose the Design Fiction approach, which seems to require the qualities of a constructivist learning environment that promotes experimentation, conceptualization, analysis, and application of knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015) while fostering a proximal zone of development as defined by Vygotski (2014). Design Fiction is a prospective method that wields science fiction imaginaries and uses a diegetic object to explore alternative futures (Bleecker, 2010; Kirby, 2010).

Like prospective methods using narrative and fiction, such as *future literacy* (Miller, 2007), the Design Fiction method is a means of apprehending the future both individually and collectively. The role of science fiction goes well

beyond the development of prospective skills. For example, it allows the teaching of science through a process of investigation and questioning of concepts by the learners. Blanquet and Picholle (2011, p.131-133) point out that these approaches give teachers a way to assess understanding of a problem and allow for formative assessment of students on the conceptual tools abused by the story. Furthermore, Pardede (2019, p.172) advocates that the use of fiction allows for the practice of critical thinking skills, since "the reader must reflect, infer, analyze, and synthesize the information presented" in order to make sense of the story. Thus, the impact of science fiction is far more important than just anticipating the future; it can be considered as a tool for creation and reflection.

The specificity of the Design Fiction approach is that it proposes to the novum to materialize into a diegetic and fictional artifact. The fictional artifact, as defined by Renauld (2013), is a shift "from an ontological (it doesn't exist) or semantic (it isn't true) qualification, to a more psychological specificity [...], 'pretending to believe' that this proposition is true..." (Renauld, 2013, p.18). It favors a kind of voluntary belief that deliberately suspends disbelief: *"one accepts, so to speak, that one is willing to believe"* (*ibid.*, p. 162). Thus, artifacts are objects from the world of fiction that take the form of real, manipulable objects, which are intended to resonate with the fiction to enhance the fictional immersion and stimulate inferential activity (Bréan, 2020; Kirby, 2010). The materialization of the artifact returns the dual nature to the latter, namely a physical object and a functional object (Kroes & Meijers, 2006) thus justifying an ontological and/or semantic nature. Studies on the use of artifacts in co-design sessions have shown that the artifact does not only stimulate the imagination and support the narrative form of the scenario, but also favors the creation of a shared language between the future users and the designers (Dindler, 2010).

Science fiction imaginaries, and more specifically the method of Design fiction, through the resolutely concrete, visual, and physical anchoring, offer "a neutral and sanitized space, a veritable virtual laboratory that allows experimentation to fully unfold" (Armand, 2018). Within this virtual laboratory, empirical studies seem to be able to address the interpretative plurality, the mechanisms of complexification and understanding of action, or even the effects of our knowledge and moral judgments on the scenarios of potential

futures. Indeed, decontextualization in a science fiction universe seems to allow the engagement of our creative and critical capacities and to favor reflection, in particular on the uncertainties of action and the heterogeneity of initial knowledge. This engagement, in turn, fosters our socialization, in line with Petitat's (2012, p.8) idea that the most important aspect of our socialization is "the gradual entry into the complexification of understanding and action and into the concomitant plurality of worlds."

Thus, the Design fiction method can be both a pedagogical and experimental tool for stimulating the heterogeneity, variety, and complexity of ideas and reasoning, by allowing us to mobilize our creative and reflective capacities. It then has a positive effect on our motivations and transformative efforts, by allowing us to "use futures" (Jonassen et al., 1993) and "play with futures" (Minvielle et al., 2016) to shape a vision of the world to come and question its boundaries (Petitat, 2012).

To conclude this chapter, let's use a literary analogy to more precisely explain the concept of diegetic elements. In *His Dark Material trilogy* (Pullman, 1995-2000), Pullman use the alethiometer as a symbol of the ability to travel between possible worlds.. The alethiometer corresponds to the diegetic element : an opening towards possibilities, towards different worlds which offers to mind an exploration of all their variations and richness. This is exactly the purpose of the literature of the imaginary, and its perfect incarnation in the Design fiction, which suggests that we now build these alethiometers to imagine the *world to come*.

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"MEANWHILE…" MULTIPLICITY OF PLOTS IN VR EXPERIENCES

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CHOICE IN AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

One of the joys of reading a well-constructed novel such as *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954-1955) is the immersion the reader experiences —living vicariously through the exploits of the characters in the novel—. We identify closely with the protagonists, we identify with their emotions and dilemmas in their narrative journey, and those imaginative bonds continue to dwell in our minds long after we finish and put down the book.

But one of the necessary constrictions of a literary novel is that the reader must follow the narrative as designed by the author —we break from one storyline at the point the author chooses, and move to another, perhaps equally important subplot— but several times when I am reading such novels, I want to make that choice myself. When Frodo and Sam leave the Fellowship and set off towards Mordor, instead of continuing with their story, Tolkien instead moves to the narrative of Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas following the captured Merry and Pippin. While I am reasonably engaged with that part of the story, I have always wanted instead at that point to stay with Frodo.

This desire to have more control over the storyline we experience in an immersive experience is not just limited to reading novels- when watching the 3D IMAX film *Across the Sea of Time* (Low, 1995), Murray (1997

p. 47) observed, "A couple in what would ordinarily be the background crosses the street. But there is no background. I am there. My attention is caught and I want to follow that couple and see what *their* story is." It is no surprise then that there have been attempts to compensate for this restriction in various media forms for several decades since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* —in written form, the adventure gamebook affords the reader a method of making their own choices to choose how the plot develops—. In the United Kingdom, a well-known series of such gamebooks started with *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* by Jackson and Livingstone (Jackson & Livingstone, 1982), combining elements of reader choice and randomised game-playing. The idea of role-playing, identifying extremely strongly with an imagined character, adventure and the ability to influence the direction of an experienced narrative became the inspiration of the role-playing game genre, kick-started in the mid-1970s by Gygax and Arneson with *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974). This combination of elements of wargaming rules with fantasy adventure narrative has engaged the imagination of countless players over the last half a century.

With the rapid development of the video game industry, the opportunities for engaging with your own pathway through the role-playing game have become even more immersive. Role playing computer games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) and the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (Ubisoft, 2007-2020) afford the player the opportunity to create their own fantasy character (within predefined limits) and explore a multi-faceted set of plotlines, where their choices have a real influence on the outcome. In these instances, the narrative has been pre-set to a large extent, but within these confines, the player is allowed a great latitude of choice.

INTERACTIVE AND PASSIVE IMMERSION

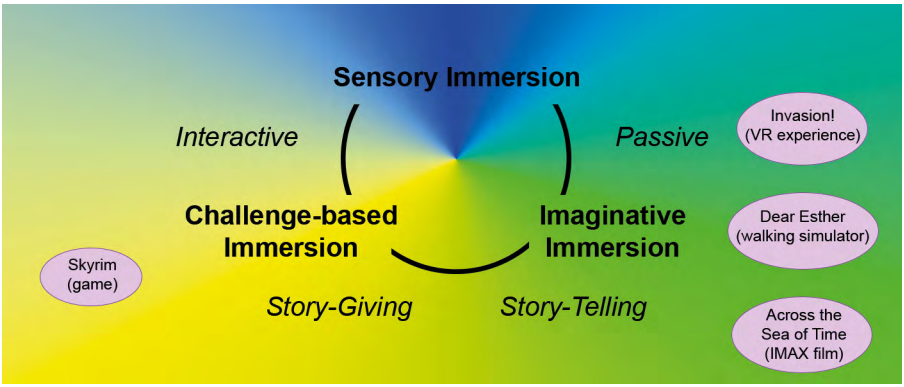
Looking at the possibilities that can be afforded by Virtual Reality (VR) technology, this highly interactive method of creating your own personalised version of a storyline has immediate appeal —however, although this technology is improving at a rapid rate, there are still limitations,

particularly in real-time rendering of complex 3D environments—. Pre-rendered animation overcomes this limitation, giving a much more immediately immersive experience, but this approach then limits the agency the participant has to make choices. I would refer to this as a difference between an *interactive* experience and a *passive* experience – though in both cases, the participant can still feel very immersed within the virtual space.

Hodgkinson (2016, p. 11) posits two approaches a storyteller can take to providing a narrative in a novel, game, or other media – *Story Giving* would correspond to the 'classical' role playing game, where the story is presented to the participant, but they have a great deal of freedom as to how they experience it unfolding. *Story Telling* on the other hand retains much more control by the storyteller – in purest form, this corresponds to the absolute control of narrative that authors like Tolkien have in taking their reader along on the journey.

In its current form, VR offers an opportunity to thread a path between Story Giving and Story Telling – the core experience of entering a virtual world immediately immerses the participant in the story space. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) discuss three aspects to immersion in the virtual space – the space itself leads to *sensory immersion*, priming the participant to concentrate on this constructed world. Their second aspect is *challenge-based immersion*, where the actions the participant take in the space also adds to that sense of immersion. This would more closely correspond to the more interactive form of VR experience, or Story Giving, where game choices strongly engage the participant. Their third aspect, *imaginative immersion*, corresponds more closely with the way a novel can spark the reader's imagination – becoming absorbed into the world conjured by the author's words. This correlates then to Story Telling, where the imagined world is actually created around the participant, and they follow along as the story unfolds.

Figure 1.
Immersion, Experience and Narrative



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ENGAGING THE PARTICIPANT

The immersive nature inherent to VR encourages the participant to enjoy a feeling of presence within the virtual space. As Slater (2018, p. 432) notes, the "whole point of presence is that it is the illusion of being there, notwithstanding that you know for sure that you are not." A VR headset is an intrusive object – you are always aware that you are in a virtual world, but the ideal of the designer creating the VR experience for you is the willing suspension of disbelief – you know you're not in a real place, but you are quite willing to react to it as if it were, Sounds will capture your attention, you will look all around you to explore your surroundings.

The act of engaging with the VR space is an acceptance of the virtual world as having significance in itself. However, this is not completely dependent on a high level of detailed design of the virtual world – Bowman (2018, p. 385) notes, "a realistic world is not always sufficient to generate a sense of immersion in players, although it can help facilitate the transition from the mundane frame of reality to the frame of the game". Lee et al. (2018, p. 271) also concur that sophistication is not necessarily the most important aspect of an immersive game or experience – "[s]ometimes good narratives can induce stronger feelings of

presence than a highly sophisticated 3-D virtual world". In addition to the design of the virtual space itself, the participant's engagement with the experience is also dependent on elements of presence, agency, capturing attention, and narrative.

ACHIEVING PRESENCE

An interactive VR space generates a greater sense of presence, as your ability to act on the world and see the results of those actions feeds that sense of significance, of autonomous agency within this world. There is then a challenge for the VR designer in creating a more passive experience —while there is the advantage of being able to pre-render a much more convincingly detailed environment, the flipside of this is the lack of agency the participant will experience. This is an issue that has been noted by the VR filmmaker Celine Tricart (2018, p. 97), who observes when "reading a book, watching a movie or a play, one almost never questions his/her involvement in the story. We know we are outsiders." Tricart continues on to observe this is why many VR films are created from a first person perspective, to enforce a feeling of presence and immersion.

The challenge of creating that sense of presence while enjoying a relatively small amount of agency has also been explored within the genre of games known as 'walking simulators'. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2008) established this genre with an atmospheric recreation of a remote Hebridean island, where a ghost story unravels as the player explores the island and its subterranean cavern network. Initially developed as a research project, the story was created by Dan Pinchbeck as an exploration of narrative in a game setting. Contrary to most expectations of a game, there is very little agency offered to the player —the experience is structured in four sections, each of which can be explored to build up an idea of the overall story. Pinchbeck (2008, p. 54) notes that *Dear Esther* "requires a different attitude to a game system". The game does make use of the first person perspective and movements common to this sort of game environment, but there are very few actions the player can take other than exploring. The immersion and sense of presence within the game itself comes from the atmosphere conveyed by the poetic phrases randomly uttered by the game narrator, and

the environment - the windswept beaches, scrubby heather covered hills, and the mysterious dimly lit caves. Pinchbeck (2008, p. 54) notes that players "describe the experience as eerie, moving and very sad. These last two are emotions that normally fall beyond the affective range of games, especially first-person games". *Dear Esther* engages the attention of the player through the *imaginative immersion* that comes from a story telling approach rather than a story giving one.

AGENCY WITHIN A SET NARRATIVE EXPERIENCE

As noted above, a normal expectation of video games, and the VR games that have been produced so far, is the ability of the participant to interact with elements within the game itself. Murray (1997, p. 126) defines this sense of agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices". Role-playing games engage the player precisely through this ability to enact a meaningful change, and immediately see the results of their choices. This poses a problem when creating a passive VR experience. The story is being told to the participant, there is therefore no opportunity for agency within the experience as it unfolds. Even within the game experience of *Dear Esther*, this is a limiting factor. It is offset by the agency the player has to explore the island, and the random nature of the narration one hears during the exploration, but there comes a point in each section where there is only one choice to be made, to continue on to the next chapter.

Recent VR experiences have taken a similar 'walking simulator' approach. *Gloomy Eyes* (ARTE France, 2020) garnered quite a bit of publicity due to the narration being provided by the well-known actor Colin Farrell, but the experience itself is also inherently linear. The participant observes the actions of Gloomy and Nena as they try to maintain their love in a dark fantastical world. The narrative unwinds across a series of dioramas, with the participant a passive observer. The animation is very well observed, and the storyline is engaging for the most part. However, there is no choice afforded to the participant – reminiscent of Murray's observation concerning *Across the Sea of Time*, at several points in the experience I wanted to stop, look around the space, and perhaps follow a slightly different path to see what was happening

with a secondary character. There is some element of agency, in that the story is told in three chapters and the participant has to choose the next chapter from the main menu when each one is experienced in turn. This is similar in structure to *Dear Esther* but there is effectively little agency inherent in the experience, and the engagement comes solely from the imaginative immersion in the storyline itself.

ATTENTION AND SALIENCE

This approach of using a series of dioramas followed by the participant as a passive observer is also utilised in *Paper Birds part 1* (3DAR, 2020). The narrative follows the protagonist, a short-sighted child called Toto, as he searches for his sister. There is limited interactivity, for the most part the participant is again mainly an observer. As with *Gloomy Eyes*, the characters and animation are all very well observed, and the use of sound and motion throughout the experience encourages the participant to move through the world with Toto, walking along rickety bridges that emerge from another darkened world. There is a similarity here to experiencing theatre, particularly theatre in the round, where the movements between scenes are achieved by taking the audience with one particular character, captivating the attention while the other cast and stage properties are arranged to form the next scene.

The attention required from the participant to follow along with the action encourages an immersion and sense of presence, at least in an active participation in following along with the characters as they move through this created world. The techniques used here by the VR storytellers rely on attentional capture. Jerald (2016 p. 148) notes this a key element to creating a VR experience - "Attentional capture is a sudden involuntary shift of attention due to salience. Salience is the property of a stimulus that causes it to stick out from its neighbors and grab one›s attention, such as a sudden flash of light, a bright color, or a loud sound." Within the limited visibility of a dark gloomy space, as experienced in *Gloomy Eyes* and *Paper Birds*, the motion of the main characters, and the sound of their voices and their movements, are the salient factors that command our attention and make use follow along with that linear narrative. These techniques are essential in VR as, opposed to the directorial

use of framing and cuts in film, there are very limited methods to ensure the participant will look at the 'right' place, move in the 'right' direction (if they have freedom of movement). However, again there are moments where I wanted to stop moving, to follow a different path.

Both *Gloomy Eyes* and *Paper Birds* are linear narratives, in essence an immersive 3D animation where you are within the scene rather than looking at it through the frame as determined by a director's vision. Single linear narratives are at one extreme of a spectrum extending onto the very interactive experience of a first player perspective VR video game. There are points in between on this spectrum, and these are worth examining as an avenue to allow a balance of agency and choice to the participant, while preserving the higher definition and craft of a well-designed, fully rendered 3D environment.

MULTIPLICITY OF NARRATIVE STREAMS

One of the similarities between the walking simulator *Dear Esther* and the VR experience *Gloomy Eyes* is that they are structured in sections – you need to complete one section before moving to the next. The points at which one section ends and you either automatically go to the next section, or select that next section from a main menu, can be seen as nodes along the linear storyline being explored in these narratives. This is a development from the single animated experience, running just from start to end, as seen in earlier VR experiences such as *Invasion!* (Baobab Studios Inc., 2016). This sectional or nodal structure is now a familiar format within digital media – we are familiar with the use of hypertext in websites, where we move between different information elements ('lexias') by clicking on links, without any stricture of necessarily conforming to a linear path. The adventure gamebooks mentioned earlier use a similar method of hypertext linkages – creating a *hyperfiction* (Jara & Torner 2018, p. 268) which can encompass branching storylines with several alternative endings, based on the decisions the participant makes when selecting which link to follow next.

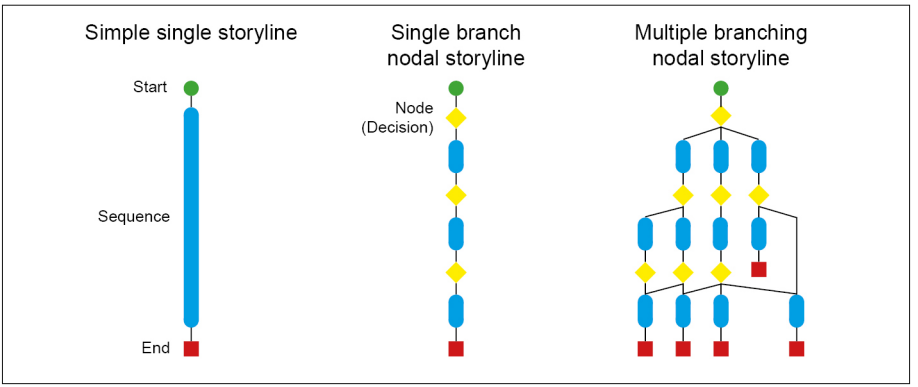
These decision nodes then could instead offer a set of choices to the participant – continue following the story of the main protagonist, or select

an option to follow the storyline of another character, or to explore another location. The nodes also do not need to be exclusionary – you could choose to view each of the ongoing segments in turn, to build up an encompassing understanding of all aspects of the main story and subplots. Or, as per the adventure gamebook model, the choices made by the participant of what to view next can open up different selections of onward narratives, ending up with different endings based on those nodal choices. Adams et al. (2019) examined a popular series of adventure gamebooks using graph theory, and have created examples of nodal graphs outlining the potential pathways the reader can follow to discrete endings – at present, these would be overly complex for a VR experience, but point towards a schema which can be used to plot such branching story pathways.

Video game players are familiar with the concept of cut scene animations as an intrinsic part of adventure and role-playing games. Generally located at the end of a gameplay sequence, these animations unfold the next important plot points in the form of an animated narrative. These animations can, as in *The Last of Us* (2013) become a talking (and selling) point of the game itself. In these games, the balance is of mainly intense periods of player-directed interactions (challenged-based immersion), interspersed with a few narrative-driven cut scene animations (imaginative immersion). In the case of a branching multi-narrative animated VR experience, we can consider this to be at the other end of the spectrum – the majority of the experience will be the pre-rendered animations, interspersed with the occasional interaction – but where these single interactions are pivotal in how the experience unfolds, imbuing a high level of agency within the experience.

Figure 2.

Simple and Nodal Branching Storylines



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MULTIPLICITY OF NARRATIVES AND PLOT

With the potential for a rich, immersive narrative experience in VR made possible with the branching nodal story structure described above, a key consideration then must be how the narrative holds together, as a coherent experience, no matter which route the participant takes to move through the story. The decision of which path to follow next will be determined by the participant's own interests, and the options can be signalled using attentional capture, but, as with the most engaging of novels, the plot —and sub-plots— are critical in crafting a rewarding experience.

At the point of moving from a simple single short narrative, such as *Invasion!* and *Gloomy Eyes*, a narrative can greatly benefit from the inclusion of one or more sub plots – in the case of a branching multi-narrative storyline, these sub-plots can in themselves rise to the prominence of the main plot, depending on the choices made by the participant. In his discussions about story and film, McKee (1999, p. 226) notes that "often it's the invention of a subplot that lifts a troubled screenplay to a film worth making."

McKee's observations on the role of the sub-plot within film-making is also relevant when creating immersive VR narrative experiences. He observes that there

are four main purposes for the sub-plot —it must contradict the main plot (enriching it with irony), resonate with the main plot (variations on a theme), delay the onset of the main plot (creating a set-up), or complicate the main plot. Any other use of a subplot can confuse the participant and collapse the immersion of the experience. (McKee 1999 pp. 227-229). While a film is inherently a linear experience in itself, many successful films make use of complex multi-branching plots and sub-plots, and so also provide a fertile ground for inspiration while working in this new medium.

EARLY DAYS OF A NEW MEDIUM

The very start of the cinema saw simple short sequences, with no camera movements and no editing, captivate and enthral early audiences. The simple scene of workers leaving a factory engaged the audience's interest as one of the first short films ever shown in public (Lumière, 1895). We are at a similar, if more informed, stage in creating immersive narrative VR experiences, moving from the short animated sequences of *Invasion!*, *Gloomy Eyes*, and *Paper Birds* to consider more complex, intricate multi-narrative storylines to fully engage the participant. Looking at how far cinema has developed over the past 130 years, we are clearly still only peering at the possibilities offered in this new medium.

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THE FRITZ LANG'S FANTASTIC TERRITORIES

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When people face difficulties in the real world, they turn to popular means of entertainment. Germans took refuge in worlds outside their own, and films dealing with fantasy and the supernatural, powerful criminals and adventures in remote places were especially popular.
Fritz Lang (Jensen, 1990)

As Juan Manuel de Prada pointed out in the prologue to *Spiders from Mars*, for there to be artisans who projected and directed film sub-genres, there were princes of cinema such as Friedrich Murnau and Fritz Lang. Both made films with unlimited budgets in inter-war Germany and, through a culture determined by their humanistic studies, developed projects in which fantasy was the nexus of the plot, relating visions of the future and the past, recreating the myths of German culture and the unknown spaces of the beyond.

Among other lines, Fritz Lang's filmography is determined by the fantastic or, as the director called it, by the fairy tales that were, in turn, related to his biography. His reading of Emilio Salgari and Karl May during his early years would punctuate his imagination of exotic worlds and models of interpretation he would transfer to his personal experience. His love of knowledge and adventure would lead him in his youth to travel through Europe, Africa, and the Orient, discovering cultures that he would incorporate into his films.

Lang constructed a filmography of the fantastic *ex novo*, as there were no previous elements on which to build it. These contents were developed in the two phases of his German period, from his beginnings until his escape

from the Nazi regime, and when he returned to Germany in the late 1950s to rediscover his language and close the circle of his career.

Lang's fantasy fled from narrative conventions to compose open-ended works that the director or his producers reinterpreted as they saw fit, so that the imaginaries of his beginnings articulated his cinematic chronology and were projected at the end of it. His films were influenced by the serials of the time, but the ultimate revision establishes parameters like cinematic post-classicism (González Requena, 2008). His American period, considered by Peter Bogdanovich as his best, is left out of this account, as the Austrian director forced to adapt to reduced budgets determined by production possibilities. Lang moved on to American cinema but harbored the idea of returning to the themes and stories of his origins.

Fritz Lang was one of the greatest creators in the history of cinema and his filmography was linked to the fantastic. His films are cinematic and cultural archetypes that have left a mark on the science fiction of the last two centuries and are permanently relevant to contemporary visual culture.

ART, TRAVELS, AND EARLY FILM PROJECTS

During his adolescence, Fritz Lang defied family dictates that would condition his biography. His father, Anton Lang, was a renowned architect who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. His mother, Paula Schlesinger, was of Jewish origin, which determined her exile in the early 1930s and, consequently, her filmography in the wake of National Socialism. Lang was attracted to the visual arts from childhood and studied at the *Realschule*, an artistic technical school, and, to please his father, he enrolled at the *Techische Hochschule* in Vienna, where he studied architecture. Without his family's consent, he abandoned his studies to devote himself to painting while frequenting cabarets and enjoying the bohemian lifestyle. When his father found out, he decided to sanction his attitude, which led to a rupture in their relationship and the beginning of the nomadic itinerary of the future filmmaker.

Lang continued his artistic studies in Nuremberg and at the *Staatliche Kunstgewerbeschule* in Munich, the nerve center of European art at the time. In

the Bavarian capital he conceived an extraordinary journey around the world that would take him from Germany to Belgium and from there to the Netherlands, Russia, Asia Minor (Méndez Leite, 1980 pp. 19-20), North Africa, China, and Japan, as well as the island of Bali. After settling in Paris to live as a painter in Montmartre, he travelled to Morocco, Egypt, and Asia Minor. Lang financed his travels as Albrecht Dürer had done four centuries earlier, by selling drawings and small-format works. He also sent illustrations to European newspapers and magazines to supplement his income.

Lang first encountered film in Belgium in 1909, and in Paris he continued to observe the phenomenon with interest. The medium had been perfected since the fairground exhibitions and Lang understood its possibilities as an evolution of painting, "the film as a living picture" (Eibel, 1968 p. 10). In the last years of the Great War, he conceived scripts for the producer Joe May and would work as an actor to learn all about the medium. Erich Pommer noted that he had no film experience and advised him to familiarize himself with the camera, which led to a period of tireless work that characterized him for life. One skill that fascinated Pommer was his painterly eye: "Lang saw with a painter's eye that the photographic lens should serve, with the help of the effects of light and shadow, and of the story and its background, to create a filmic tonality" (Eibel, 1968, p. 237).

In 1919 Otto Rippert filmed two of his plots, *Die Pest in Florenz* (*The Plague in Florence*) and *Der Totentanz* (*The Dance of Death*), which would signal his deterministic pessimism. That year, Lang directed *Halbblut* and *Der Herr der Liebe* (*Master of Love*), as well as his first major work, *Die Spinnen* (*The Spiders*). His acquired taste for orientalism after his travels resulted in a version of *Madame Butterfly* entitled *Harakiri*. Pommer commissioned him to direct *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919) and worked on the script and its structure, although the project was carried out by Robert Wiene. Lang rejected it because of *The Spiders* and the expressionist tendencies that the producer wanted to emphasize in the film. It was the director's first dissent with the expressionism in vogue. Despite belonging to its current, Lang kept a prudent distance from expressionism, which he judged to be a visual game, as the character of Dr. Mabuse stated: "Expressionism is a game. Why not? Nowadays everything is a game" (Lang, 1922).

THE TRANSCENDENT FANTASTIC

Never was there an age more troubled by despair and by the horror of death, never has such a sepulchral silence reigned in the world, never was man so small, never more restless.

Hermann Barr, 1916 (Latorre, 1995 p. 275).

Since the dawn of civilization, the ultimate journey has been a foundation of storytelling.. In Western culture, Homer's Odyssey, Dante Alighieri's Comedy[1] and Emanuel Swedenborg's prodigious journey, *De caelo et ejus mirabilibus et de inferno, ex auditis et visis* (*Heaven and its Wonders and Hell: From Things Heard and Seen*), also known as *Heaven and Hell* (1758), stand out (Sánchez, 2021 pp. 79-91).

This tradition of the afterlife would shape the plot of two fictions about the journey beyond the grave which, due to their conceptual density and iconographic richness, would become decisive films in the history of cinema: *Der Müde Tod* (*Destiny*, Fritz Lang, 1920) and *Körkarlen* (*The Phantom Carriage*, Victor Sjöström, 1920). Associated with Central European idiosyncrasies about death, the latter was a version of Selma Lagerlöf's novel of the same name, and both were made in a period that reacted against the wartime excesses of the Great War by reclaiming the sacredness of the human condition.

Figure 1.

Destiny, Decla, 1921

Source: Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung, Wiesbaden

[1] According to the title of José María Micó's edition. ALIGHIERI, D., *Comedia*, Acantilado, Barcelona, 2018.

Destiny was Lang's eighth film and the first of his masterpieces. The theme of love and death stemmed from the appearance the latter in a fever dream the director had had. Also, Lisa Rosenthal, his first wife, had committed suicide that year (Sánchez, 2016, p. 46). Death was the protagonist of the film, in which love was the only way to overcome the inexorability of time, something that had been hatched in Rippert's screenplays. As Lang recounted, death would lead him to the creation of other fantastic plots,

> [...] it interested me, as death itself has always interested me. It was also the first of a series of films I wanted to make, centered on the German man: the romantic German in *Destiny*, the post-war man in Mabuse, the man in the course of time in *The Nibelungenlied*, the technical man of the future in *Woman in the Moon* (Eibel, 1968, p. 237).

Fritz Lang started from the romantic concept in the narrative and scenography of the film. Its structure consisted of a prologue, three chapters and an epilogue set in indeterminate times and exotic settings. The story recreated the *deutsches romantik* inherited from Friedrich's paintings. The Gothic spirit, on the other hand, would constitute one of the essential lines in his work, which passed from Romanticism to Expressionism and, through the American interpretation, would have a decisive influence up to the present day. Later, he would insert the oriental stories of the episodes of 17th-century Venice, 9th-century Baghdad and prehistoric China, a chapter that developed the fantastic through the miniature army and the flying carpet. Essential to its recreation was the collaboration of the set designers Herlth and Warm, who drew on popular painting to bring their universe to the screen.

Fatality, the attraction to the abyss and the tenebrous zone of the soul forms the nexus of the plot of *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried Tod*/*Die Nibelungen: Kriemhilds Rache* (*The Nibelungen: Siegfried/Kriemhild's Revenge,* 1924), in which the director conceived a timeless universe reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Based on the novel *Das Nibelungenbuch* (Drei Masken, Munich, 1924) by his wife, the writer Thea von Harbou, it was an excerpt from the *Nibelungenlied* (*Song of the Nibelungs*), a 13th-century Germanic chant de geste written in the 13th century. Lang confessed that the subject matter interested him as

purely decorative, so that the aesthetics of the film were subordinated to its geometric spatiality. Lang observed the relationship between the body and architecture, creating a visual totality related to the work of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon-Craig in shaping Teutonic mythology. The set designs by Erich Kettelhut and Karl Vollbrech were based on Arnold Böcklin's paintings and Carl Otto Czeschka's illustrations for the book in 1920. The first part is conditioned by geometry, while the second establishes an imbalance that transfers emotional instability to the viewer (Ortíz y Piqueras, 2003, p.123). This asynchronous use of contemporary forms to construct the past "does not diminish its fidelity" (Ortíz y Piqueras, 2003, p. 67).

Lang acknowledged that the impossibility of filming in natural settings meant that Siegfried's Ride was influenced by the pictorial. In any case, symbolism operated as the constructive core of his fantastic models, a problematic on which the director intended to emphasize the contrast of "four worlds completely enclosed within themselves, and almost antagonistic; and to bring each of them to a maximum of intensity" : the world of Worms; the world of Siegfried; the world of Brunhild; and the world of the Huns (Eibel, 1968, p. 76). *The Nibelungenlied* was one of the first mythological recreations determined by the relationship of the characters with the architecture and, like the films inspired by Caligari, the sets were an essential part of the action.

Destiny and *The Nibelungenlied* were shot in relevant periods of German history. The former was a reaction against the barbarity of war, and the latter was made when the country was searching for cultural references, an idea that had been claimed by the UFA constitution and which contained the seeds for the catastrophe of the years to come.

ORIGINS OF SCIENCE FICTION

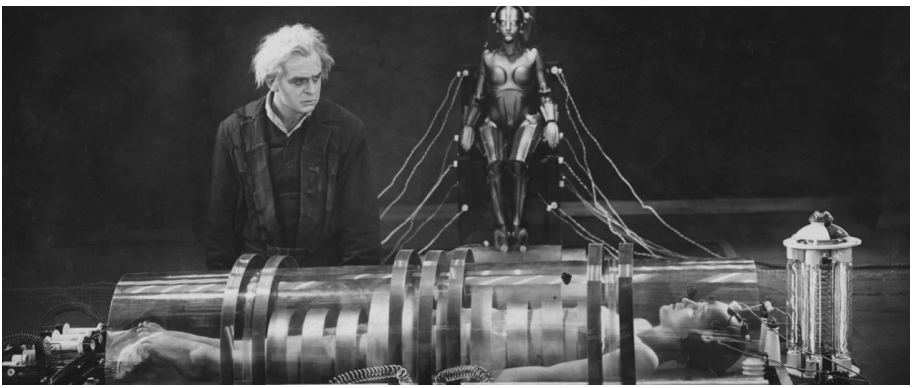
Fritz Lang established with Thea von Harbou the parameters of the future and the foundations of science fiction through *Metropolis* (1926) and *Frau in Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*, 1929).

Metropolis symbolized the creative possibilities and weaknesses of the German film industry. The film was the UFA's big gamble to compete with

American models, but with the failure of Murnau´s *Faust* (1926), it would bring about the beginning of the end of the independence of productions shot in *Neubabelsberg*. Metropolis featured two antagonistic worlds; the skyscrapers that alluded to the biblical Tower of Babel as opposed to the underground where the proletariat gave life to the gigantic city. Harbou and Lang displaced religious interpretations and class struggle to 2026, staging their eternal conflict in the futuristic city. In this sense, the aesthetic coincidences with the Italian avant-garde were evident: if the cities of Sant'Elia or Chiattone were based on the constructions of New York at the beginning of the century, the Viennese creator conceived the idea for the film during a trip to the American city.

Figure 2.

Rotwang [Rudolf Klein-Rogge] and Maria [Brigitte Helm] in *Metropolis*, UFA, 1926



Source: Public Domain

Although Metropolis was the archetypal example of a city of the future —except for the sets designed by Alexadra Exter for Аэлита (*Aelita, the Queen of Mars*, Yakov Protazanov, 1924)— the film is a convergence of the technological and the archaic, aesthetically influenced by productions such as *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem*, Paul Wegener, 1920). In *Metropolis*, in the shadow of the great skyscrapers, the house of Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), the Pentateuch of the robot who supplants Maria (Brigitte Helm) or the Gothic cathedral in which death is the main iconological

configuration. The symbolism of Maria the robot is related to the history of Central European literature, "she picks up the baton of the *Future Eve* and *Mandrake* [...] and is certainly the most human artificial being born in German cinema between the wars" (Sánchez Navarro, 2003, p. 59).

The messianic tone and simplistic approach were harshly criticized by H.G. Wells, an idea that Lang would corroborate in later opinions. Even so, there are important historical references, such as the mission of the mediating guide between "the hands and the heart", making the film a reflection of the German *zeitgeist* of the period, a speculation lucidly developed by Sigfried Kracauer (Kracauer, 1985).

The alternative ending of Metropolis shaped *Frau in Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*, 1929). As the director acknowledged to Bogdanovich: "In our final version of *Metropolis*, I wanted the master's son to leave at the end and go to the stars. This didn't work in the script, but it was the starting point *for Woman in the Moon*" (Bogdanovich, 1991, p.117). The film, like *Spione* (*The Spies*, 1928), was a Fritz Lang Gesellschaft production distributed by UFA and suffered from the usual melodramatic excess of Lang's films, situations reminiscent of *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (*Trip to the Moon*, George Méliès, 1902) and glaring scientific errors, but it had in its favor a predictive ability that would influence not only the film genre but scientific reality.

In this sense, the film was projected into the future. The space rocket launch or the moon walks foreshadow a visionary condition four decades before they became reality. The focus on scientific verisimilitude caused the film to be hijacked for showing the launch ramps for the V2 missiles that Germany would use during World War II.

Metropolis and *Woman in the Moon* are paradigmatic examples of early science fiction, and their influence has been decisive in its history. Science fiction as we know it today would be inconceivable without the fables created by the portentous imagination of the Viennese director and his collaborators.

CRIME AS A PRELUDE TO TOTALITARIANISM

From the very beginning, Lang would establish a line dedicated to the criminal world with supervillains as protagonists. In 1919 he shot *The Golden*

Sea, the first part of *The Spiders*, a film set in scenarios that reflected his own experiences: "I liked everything that was outlandish and exotic. Besides, I could use memories from my travels" (Eibel, 1968, p. 14). Lang's background was in literary fiction, as he had published the story in the Berlin magazine *Film-Kurier*, and it was subsequently published as a book with considerable success.

The Spiders consisted of four parts: *The Golden Sea*, *The Diamond Ship*, *The Secret of the Sphinx* and *For the Imperial Crown of Asin*, the first two of which were filmed in *Die Spinnen: Der Goldene See* (*The Spiders: The Golden Sea*, 1919) and *Die Spinnen: Das Brillantenschiff* (*The Spiders: The Diamond Ship*, 1920). The sets were made by the ethnographic museum J.F.C. Umlauff, which conveyed the taste for criminal organizations and adventure films that was to be continued in *The Spies*.

Figure 3.
Dr. Mabuse. The Gambler, UFA, 1922

Source: Public Domain

It is in this context that the first great character of the Languine genealogy appears, Doctor Mabuse, the protagonist of the diptych *Der große Spieler: Ein Bild der Zeit* (*Doctor Mabuse: The Gambler*, 1922) and *Inferno: Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit* (*Inferno*, 1922). The film was based on the novel by the Luxembourger Norbert Jacques, which had been published as a serial from issue 39 of the *Berliner Ilustriere Zeitung* (Jacques, 2015). The magazine was the most widely read in Germany, and its

owners, the Ullstein brothers, had a partnership with the UFA to bring its plots to the screen (Eibel, 1968, p.18). Lang based himself on the original and met with Jacques before filming. The film, on the other hand, was based on other cinematic villains such as Fantômas, adapted from the novels of the eponymous criminal created in 1911 by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre. Like Fantômas, Mabuse represents the evolved concept of the villain in Gothic literature. The first part was released on 27 April 1922, the second a month later, and both were fabulously successful. Mabuse combined three properties that seduced the audience: he was "a qualified scientist, mastered various occult disciplines and lived in a criminal environment of patent authenticity" (Eibel, 1968, p. 18), traits that aesthetically underlined the aesthetics of the film. These characteristics were aesthetically underlined by the set designs of Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut and Karl Vollbrech.

A decade later and in a very different socio-economic context, the producers saw the possibility of further exploiting the character that had made them so much money. Unlike the first film, the idea for *Das testament des dr. Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933) was not related to Jaques' novel, but was a Lang and Von Harbou's plot. Lang used the character to denounce the German political drift of the time. As he explained:

> I wanted to put some concepts of Nazi ideology into the mouth of a madman, such as this [...] "We must destroy the faith of the citizen in the government he has chosen for himself, so that he loses his confidence in the state and destroys the laws he has given himself, and so that from the ruins -from the chaos- a new social order can be born" (In the film I replaced these words with "empire of crime") (Eibel, 1968, p.89).

The film, with Fritz Lang in exile, was banned on 30 March 1933 by the Berlin censorship commission.

RETURN TO THE ORIGINS

The Jewish-born German producer Arthur Brauner suggested to Lang that he return to Germany to make films with plots linked to his early period. Brauner offered him financial guarantees that were a far cry from American bud-

gets but were significant sums for Germany at the time. Lang, who had become one of the most recognizable icons in the history of cinema, had been offered projects such as a new adaptation of *The Nibelungen* or a musical version of *Destiny*. The director admitted that he had a *Faust* film in mind. He had considered himself a foreigner in the United States, but when he returned to Germany, he confessed that, although he recognized himself in his original language, he still felt like a stranger

Figure 4.
Seetha and Maharadjaj Chandra [Debra Paget and Walther Reyner] in *The Tiger of Eschnapur*/ *The Indian Tomb*, CCC, 1959.

Source: https://mubi.com/

His last films were revisions of the origin stories: *Der Tiger von Eschnapur* (The *Tiger of Eschnapur*, 1959)/*Das Indische Grabmal* (*The Indian Tomb*, 1959) and *Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, 1960). The first film, conceived as the diptychs that had characterized so many of his masterpieces, was a chance to shoot it as he had imagined it and to avenge the disappointment of Joe May's 1921 film (de Prada, 2018, pp. 36-39). Shot in India, the film recaptures the baroque splendor of his early films and interweaves exotic adventure cinema with a stiff, kitsch spirit of charming archaism that reconstructs a filmic time that,

although it belongs to him, is no longer in keeping with the times in a time that is not his own. Despite this, it vindicated the adventure genre along the lines of European and American B-movie productions.

The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse closes the circle of his career in which the director returns to a fundamental character of his filmography in a period in which the Germany in which the events take place is no longer his own. In any case, Lang expressed his passion for these films. As he confessed: "a cycle is coming to an end: what I wanted so much forty years ago is finally being realized today, in a surprising way" (Eibel, 1968, p. 65).

CONCLUSIONS

Fritz Lang would establish patterns of the fantastic in film history and contemporary visual culture. His films about the transcendent would set trends at Universal in the 1930s and later at the British Hammer. Within its sphere of influence, the story united by a driving plot would be repeated in *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*, Paul Leni, 1923), *The Thief of Baghdad* in the versions by Raoul Walsh (1924) and Zoltan Korda (1944) and the exotic *Macario* (Roberto Gavaldón, 1960) (Mancebo, 2020 pp. 293-313). The magnitude of *Destiny* influenced Luis Buñuel who, when he saw it in the Parisian Vieux Colombier (Hidalgo, 2019 p. 41), decided to make films (Buñuel, 1998 p.100). The Teutonic myths defined by Lang are essential to understand the visuality of Eisenstein's films *Алекса́ндр Не́вский* (*Alexander Nevsky*, 1938), and *Иван Грозный* (*Ivan the Terrible*, 1944-46) and the 1966 and 1967 versions of Harald Reinl's *Die Nibelungen*. As for contemporary cinema, it is not difficult to see its associations with *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981) or in High Fantasy productions such as *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) or *The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003).

As for science fiction, Lang's films were an archetypal model that has influenced both avant-garde films such as *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt (Berlin Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927) or *Человек с киноаппаратом* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, 1929) and today's cinema. In the eighties of the last century, there were and re-appropriations of Metropolis such as the version

set to music by Giorgio Moroder that placed Lang at the epicenter of science fiction. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) pays homage to its aesthetics and the Los Angeles of 2016 was not far removed from Metropolis. Likewise, the fantastic became a reality in the countdowns of space launches.

Lang also composed supervillains and criminal organizations whose aim was to control the world and human will. Fantastic origins that took shape in the totalitarian nightmares of the 20th century and are becoming embodied in the devices promoted by the surveillance capitalism of the 21st century. Lang's fantastic fictions not only glimpsed the future, they compose models present in the hyperreal simulacra of contemporaneity.

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RETELLING: A WAY TO UNLOCK GAMEPLAY

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Storytelling has always been part of humanity. It has been an inherent quality in the human being since the dawn of time first orally, later through writing, and in recent times it has mutated into an interactive and technological system. We have movies, books and, of course, video games. But contrary to what it may seem, we have never stopped telling the same stories. Since the 19th century, many literary theorists and folklorists have dedicated themselves to studying the similarities between the different myths and legends. Scholars such as Campbell (1959) and Propp (1968) concluded that people tend to repeat the same structures at work in their myths, a practice that has reached the new narrative medium that is games.

Therefore, and given the practical impossibility of creating original ideas, the developers have found in the retelling of legends a way to reach players directly and efficiently an immersion through narration based on mythemes and basic literary formal constructions told in different ways to reach the player. Through the creation of ludo-fictional worlds in which these retellings come to life, the player can find a totally different and immersive way to experience those stories that he has known since almost before he was born. However, this makes us wonder if the adaptation of these stories to the new medium represents one more way to keep them alive, or just a new way of storytelling.

Comparing myth[1] with fantasy[2] has long been a highly controversial fact among literary theorists. Most likely this was due to the theological beginnings

[1] Wonderful narrative located outside of historical time and starring divine or heroic characters (Todorov, 2006).

[2] The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a being who knows nothing more than natural laws, in the face of a supernatural event that comes out of the human condition (Todorov, 2006).

of mythology, or because its legends began long before the term "fantastic literature" existed, but those words could not refer to more similar things. Is it truly realistic to think that Zeus creates the storms, or that there is an eternal banquet where fallen heroes wait to fight?

We can go as far as to say that to speak of mythology and fantasy is to speak of almost the same genre, for lack of a better term especially since any discourse born of the human collective imagination is fantastic in itself. It is a way of understanding reality, regardless of format. And, as said before, we can come to realize that we no longer tell original stories, we only repeat the same discourses something that Durand (1993) already advanced in his study on *myth criticism*,[3] explaining how certain frameworks are repeated regardless of cultural background, and how they are used to transmit similar ideas in order to instruct or educate, as well as transmitting knowledge.

Within these stories we find *mythemes*[4] (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) or *archetypes*[5] (Propp, 1968), i.e., small repetitions of ideas that are intermingled in a story and become easily recognized by the public. This concept explains why there are stories about a great Flood in many different cultures, for example. In all cases, a greater deity realizes that there is evil in the world and causes the earth to flood, leaving only the righteous to survive to lead humanity.

This continuous archetypal repetition with its corresponding variations could be considered a *retelling*,[6] i.e., a new way of telling an already known story, giving a spin to what everyone already recognizes or answering "what if?" questions. Although there is no specific definition, because this depends on who tells it, we could find examples in two well-known stories such as the myth of Eros and Psyche (Apuleius, 1939) and the story of the Beauty and the Beast

[3] Myth criticism is based on the idea that myths are universal cultural symbols that are present in all human societies. These myths are related to archetypes, that is, universal patterns or models of human behavior found in all cultures and times. This field analyzes such archetypes and focuses on how they can be used to express and explore universal themes, such as life, death, love, justice, and power (Durand, 1993).

[4] A mytheme can be an event, a character, an object, or an idea that is repeated in different myths and that has a symbolic or archetypal meaning (Lévi-Straus, 1955).

[5] He defined the archetype as a recurring pattern of behavior or action found in many different histories and cultures. Archetypes can be characters, situations, or events that have symbolic meaning and have been used to convey values, beliefs, and messages throughout history (Propp, 1968).

[6] Literally "new version" (Merriam-Webster).

(Leprince de Beaumont, 2013). In both, a maiden is kidnapped by a mysterious man who asks them one thing: never see him in his natural form, in the first case, and return in time as promised, in the second. And although the way to end and remedy the transgression in both stories is different, the conclusion is similar. This comparison could be considered a retelling aid.

But if these different ways of telling the same story continue to create the same effects, it is because their skeletons are structured from the same two elements (Aarseth, 2002):

The *kernel*, the tale's basic core that will tell us that the story will always be the same its mytheme. In the case of the previous example, this common core would be the prohibition; a task or request that the protagonist will fail and trigger the outcome.

The *satellite*, or secondary facts. They are all those additions that protect the kernel and whose changes do not alter its identification. As we have seen in introducing *Eros and Psyche* and *The Beauty and the Beast*, although the contexts and origins of the protagonists are completely different, those details do not alter the core mytheme.[7]

Nonetheless, changes in the original narrative must bring about changes in the transmission medium. And as we already mentioned, nowadays we have developed several such new media, including the focus of this work video games.

Among the characteristics of this medium, player immersion is one of its priorities. This goal is tackled from different fronts, such as the interactivity inherent in them, since unlike traditional literary works, they require an ergodic effort to continue the story. Along with this, the narration is another fundamental pillar to achieve immersion, be it programmed or experimental, the latter being the most difficult to achieve.

The resource of retelling stories and legends intrinsic in the human being is a great help to achieve immersion. The struggles between good and evil are not alien to us, and that is why we understand them when we wield the keyblade

[7] These diffuse details is what led to the current confusion between retelling and fanfiction. In the latter, as a rule, the names and attributes of the characters or the original setting are used and deployed in alternate scenes or universes devised by fans.

with Sora in *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix, 2002) same as we understand loss and loneliness when we start *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015). And this happens because they call upon what Jung (2004) called a transcendent function,[8] which explains that every human being has certain intrinsic knowledge, whose intensity varies depending on experience. The greater the feeling of closeness and familiarity, the easier it will be for us to recognize and assimilate something. This closeness is what video games simulate. They are an environment created so that everything makes us believe that what we are seeing is real, or at least, that we feel part of it.

To do this, the developers have resorted to emphasizing that familiarity between the created environment and what our eyes see, something that has already been seen in the theories of ludo-fictional or possible worlds. In them it is said that, among other things, appealing to the collective imagination, users can easily understand the rules that are shown to them when playing no one has ever set foot on the *Fortnite* island (Epic Games, 2017), but all players understand the rules to survive. This occurs with the phenomenon of the suppression of reality, as in traditional literature: provided it is presented in a natural and plausible way, whoever enters into that reality created by the imagination will accept that world. The only thing that will be required of you is to be consistent with your own rules, something that in a video game it have to be correctly programmed to work.

To show how these retellings have been reflected in video games, we will analyze two titles inspired by classic myths. The first of them is a very recent release *God of War: Ragnarök* (Santa Monica Studios, 2022).

As its name suggests, the video game is about the arrival of the end times of Norse mythology and the events that set it off. According to the Nordic legends, Ragnarök will happen when the god Loki, after being punished for conspiring to kill Baldur, is released from his chains, together with his lupine son Fenrir. The latter will eat the Sun, both will wake up the snake Jormungand,

[8] It is a function that goes beyond everyday experience and allows us to connect with what Jung called "the collective unconscious", a deep layer of the psyche that contains universal archetypes and symbols. It is not limited by the categories of thought, feeling, sensation and intuition, but manifests itself through all of them. It allows us to have spiritual and transcendent experiences (Jung, 2004).

and the gods will perish. With these facts at the core of the narrative, we can now look a little deeper into how the video game adaptation differs from the texts of the *Eddas* and becomes a retelling.

To begin with, the existence of the protagonist, Kratos, constitutes a retelling in its own right, since the designers gave this minor Greek god of masculine power and dominance a completely new role in the Norse pantheon.

This character is given a battle partner his own son, Atreus, who will turn out to be Loki, the one who should cause Ragnarök. And although this already implies a change in the narrative, the *kernel* is always present and the gods will disappear; the *satellite* events, however, will mutate a bit around the characters and functions laid out in the *Eddas*.

This is possible thanks to the game's own narration, but also to the actions carried out by the user. In the myths, Baldur had died due to Loki's envy and deceit, while in the video game he died in the series' previous installment, *God of War* (Santa Monica Studios, 2018), at the hands of Kratos while trying to protect his son from the fate that awaits him as the god of deceit. Likewise, Fenrir is not a great destructive wolf, but an adorable pet and companion. Nor will Thor and Jormungand die at the hands of each other during the events of the end of the world, but the player himself will be in charge of stopping these threats in the post-gameplay.

Because in the end, it all comes down to that the importance of which part of the *satellite* changes for Kratos, the user, to be included within the story, without altering the *kernel* so that the original story continues to be told in a different way. The players of this saga have always discovered that they can follow the evolution of the video game in a certain way thanks to the fact that, on many occasions, they are telling stories and myths they have already heard before.

And that is the fascinating thing about this case, about this adaptation. It shows us how the application of traditional literary themes can help the creation of content in a medium and help it establish itself in our culture.

In the second title of our analysis, the elements are much clearer, since *Kid Icarus Uprising* (Nintendo, 2012) is a literal retelling of the myth of Icarus.

As a quick recap, Icarus, son of Daedalus, used wings made of feathers glued with wax to escape from the prison of King Minos. However, he flew too close to the Sun and his wings burned. Although this myth has been used as an allegory for ambition, in this video game the *kernel* was taken literally.

The main mechanic of *Kid Icarus* is based on a flight-based gameplay whereby Pit, the protagonist, is only allowed to fly for five minutes thanks to the power of the goddess he serves. If he did it any longer, his feathers would burn. Here we have the *kernel*, and it is the only thing that has been kept from the original story. The setting, mechanics, and gameplay of this title follow virtually their own rules, which draw on ancient Greek tales and some of their gods, such as the incursion of Pandora or Hades himself as antagonists. Nonetheless, this is a simplistic view because the core is so clear that automatically, no one associates Pit with the title, but Icarus. And this example demonstrates how a retelling does not have to be complex or afraid of evading much of the original source, because if the core the mytheme survives, the story will as well.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I think we can say that the continuity of classic stories, stories and legends has been made possible thanks to their retelling. New and original stories are not necessary, they are already done, and it has been shown that even a small kernel, a basic mytheme, can evolve in different ways and most importantly, adapt to different media.

This is often described as rescuing the old folklore for the new generations, when we should say that we are trying to tell the same thing in a different way. Stories will continue to be told, many of which we have already heard hundreds of times before, but the medium will mutate and that will be what really ends up connecting different generations. After all, one of the many reasons why video games are engaging is because they allow us to be part of those legends that we know, but for once we are the ones who take action as main characters.

As Terry Pratchett said: "Over the centuries, mankind has tried many ways to combat the forces of evil... prayer, fasting, good works, etc. Until *Doom*, no one seemed to have thought of the double-barreled shotgun. Eat leaden death, demon." (The L-Space Web).

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INFLUENCE-S. ESCHER'S DRAWING

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INTRODUCTION

It would be necessary to go back to mythology to know the germ of fantasy, that innate need of the human being to imagine fictitious worlds with the intention of raising awareness, educating and moving the receiver. Mythology has had an impact on many facets of our lives: in our vocabulary, in traditional tales, in the visual arts, in science, etc. This chapter aims to give a close view of the fantasy of the artist M.C. Escher and how different authors in the arts or other disciplines, have found inspiration in Escher's art to generate new works.

To understand Escher's work, it is important to explain some notions that define his work. Firstly, fantasy, which compared to invention, creativity, and imagination, is presented as the freest activity, that is, what one thinks does not have to be done (Munari, 2018). Escher's work takes us into impossible spaces, perhaps unreal if we see them through the lens of the world we know. His images are presented as an ordered chaos, possibly attempting to understand other realities and resulting in beautiful images. As García's wrote, "order is a fantasy" (García, 2023, p. 42)[1].

Another aspect that must be considered when analysing Escher's work is his interest in incorporating and showing abstract mathematical concepts

[1] Del original: "el orden es una fantasía"

such as infinity, optical illusions, and the representation of three-dimensionality. Bearing in mind that mathematics is a science that analyses and is established on concepts of our environment and reality, do Escher's images represent fantasy or reality itself?

Based on these key concepts, this chapter aims to achieve the following objectives:

General objective

§ To find out what fields related to drawing have been influenced by Escher's fantasy. For many authors, fantasy is a benchmark in the creation of many artworks and has stimulate their distribution.

Specific goals

§ To share the work of authors who, consciously or unconsciously, use the fantasy drawn by Escher as a reference for their own creations.

§ To learn about different forms of work (visual arts, comics and videogames) that portrait the dissemination and transmission of Escher's work.

In view of these objectives, the proposed hypothesis aims to analyse to what extent the viewer of works inspired in Escher's art know and understand Escher's history and work.

Therefore, through this chapter, the authors' interest in Escher's work is once again evident. Mathematics is a primordial element in the artistic and research work of Navarro (2015), see *menudo punto* (Navarro, 2012), germ of her doctoral thesis *El laboratorio artístico-matemático a través de la literatura: una investigación de interacción hipertextual en Segundo y Tercer Ciclo de Educación Primaria* (Navarro, 2015) where, among others, the work *Metamorphosis III* (Escher, 1940) is valued.

A LOOK THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Escher's work is a reference for people working in different fields. Althoug his work as not well regarded in the art world in its early days, people from science fields (mathematicians, crystallographic, or physicians) were

always interested in and valued his works. In his book *The Magic Mirror by M.C. Escher* (2013), Bruno Ernst brings us closer to the Escher's ideas and reflections, evidencing aspects of the mathematical features of his work, the creative process of his artistic research and his idea about the reception and dissemination of his work.

The inclusion of Escher's work in the world of science, in part, favoured the dissemination of his work to a greater number of people and to a more diverse public not only from the arts field. This is what we will address in this paper. Escher's intention with his work was to attract a greater public enthusiastic about his work, but also to making a living out of it. It is known that he had to trade some of his prints for boat tickets to travel to the south of Spain, a place that was a source of inspiration for his work. This is the reason why he had to create large number of print copies in his series of printmaking works (Ernest, 2013).

This fact helps us understand the dissemination and "appropriation" of his images in the creation of new proposals. As a matter of fact, Escher's work has been present in the everyday world, for example, in functional objects and designs. Among the commissions he received we can find: books and magazine cover illustrations, designs for wrapping paper, cookie boxes, postage stamps for various countries, banknotes for the Bank of the Netherlands (although in the end it did not prosper), decoration of tiles or murals and facades. All of them, according to the author himself, were created from previous ideas, that is, from those art works that he thought freely for his most personal creations.

Before digging into the reuse of his research and "appropriation" of his images, we will explain Escher's main purpose with his art:

> What some people call mysterious is nothing but a conscious or unconscious deception. All I have wanted to do is play a game, to rush certain visual thoughts to the dregs, with the sole intention of investigating the means of pictorial representation. All I offer with my plates are the reports of my discoveries (Ernest, 2013, p. 18)[2].

[2] Del original: "Lo que cierta gente llama misterioso, no es sino un engaño consciente o inconsciente. Todo lo que he querido hacer es jugar un juego, apurar hasta las heces ciertos pensamientos visuales, con la sola

As can be seen, play is an important factor in Escher's work, not only from the point of view of his intention in the creative process, but also from the perspective or reception of the viewer. The images invite to play, since the viewer needs to decode the rules of the game that are embedded in the artwork. In Gadamer's words, "Every work gives the person who receives it a space for play that they have to fill" (1991, p. 34)[3]. Art is a dynamic and in continuous transition for both the creator and the receiver. "Culture emerges in the form of a game, that culture, at first, is played" (Huizinga, 2020, p. 67)[4].

Escher's work could be contained in two large themes: landscape and mathematics. From the mathematical point of view, we notice: the structure of space (landscapes, strange worlds and mathematical bodies), the structure of the surface (metamorphosis drawings, cycle drawings and approximations to infinity) and the projection of three-dimensional space on the flat surface (works that deal with the matters of representation, those that are concerned with perspective and those that show impossible figures). This last classification will be address in depth laten through the authors influenced by Escher's work.

Among the illustrations of impossible architectures, it is worth mentioning *Relativity* (1953). It shows a scene with several stairs and people walking. The optical game that he performs makes the surface be seen as a floor and, at the same time, as a wall or ceiling. From this work we find examples of this use in the audio-visual works: *Inside the Labyrinth* (Henson, 1986), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Columbus, 2001), *Night at the Museum* (Levy, 2014), *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1995), *Futurama* (Groening, 1999), *The Squid Game* (Dong-hyunk, 2021) etc. From the dissemination point of view, these works have contributed to popularize the legacy of this author to a larger and more diverse audience.

Due to the breadth of authors who have been inspired by Escher's work, in this chapter we will point out three artistic fields. Based on formal characteristics, we have analysed the influence in visual arts, comics, and video games. These three areas connect with a more diverse public, sometimes different, although sometimes

intención de investigar los medios de representación pictórica. Todo lo que ofrezco con mis láminas son los informes de mis descubrimientos".

3 Del original: "Toda obra deja al que la recibe un espacio de juego que tiene que rellenar".

4 Del original: "La cultura surge en forma de juego, que la cultura, al principio, se juega".

there can be some overlapping among the fields. Additionally, the interdisciplinary features in Escher's work are enhanced when incorporated into comics and video games.

The visual arts are interesting because it is the field Escher's work is framed in. Curiously, they were the ones that at first turned their backs on the work of this author, but later were able to rescue and reinvent it. On the other hand, comic is a narrative work halfway between plastic arts and literature. Escher's works, although two-dimensional and immobile, invite us to imagine worlds in motion and multidimensional. As a result, the viewer constructs the narrative in his or her imagination, something that also happens in works of comic where text and images are combined to tell the story. Video game goes a step further in the development from the still image to the moving image. It also requires the participation of the public who plays the game. In words of Huizinga (2010) and Gadamer (1991), especially in video games, we observe its presence. To carry out an analysis of Escher's work in these three areas, it seems necessary to do so in an evolutionary way. It begins by exposing examples from the world of visual arts, since it is where Escher's work is framed. We continue with examples that bring us closer to the comic where the incorporation of a sequential narrative and written language can be observed. And we end with an approach to examples of video games where, in addition to narration and written language, movement, music and play are incorporated more in the works.

ESCHER THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART

The plastic arts are received by a very specific and minority public. In this section we deal with authors that remind us of the world of *Relativity* (Escher, 1953) or directly allude to this work.

The work of the artist Cinta Vidal recreates Escher's Relativity very clearly. As an example, *Mural in Guzzo* (2015), *Eve* (2021), *Precipice* (2016) reveal Escher's aesthetics and fantasy. We observe examples of works in which the resemblance is immense. Although it introduces more contemporary characters through architecture that pass through these spaces. We also find works where this artist brings a more personal vision by adding different

elements and a new vision, such as *Airport 2* (2017), *Neighbors on White 2* (2018) or *Gatos* (2015).

Another artist who uses impossible scenery in his work is Kevin Lucbert. The series *Blue Lines* (2014-2017) presents several works that are reminiscent of Escher's work. Lucbert uses a blue pen to make his illustrations with metaphors that reflect on the human being and his relationship with the city, architecture, and nature. The title does not allude to Escher's work, although a clear influence is noticeable.

On the contrary, William Chyr, in his *Manifold Garden* (2019) series, highlights Escher's fantasy as a reference. He creates impossible architectural spaces in his digital illustrations.

Le cercle fermé is an installation by the artists Martine Feipel and Jean Bechameil presented at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The work immerses the viewer in a space that crosses the physiological limits of human perception. We could easily relate it to *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2004) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 2005), although I hope you will allow me to make a comparison with the work at hand. The different spaces through which the spectator walks are part of surreal images with a minimalist aesthetic. Among the various installations, specifically one of them, by introducing stairs and mirrors, the visitor's perception is modified, generating confusion between what the floor, the ceiling or the wall.

Unlike the previous work, *Escher-Other world* (2023) is an exhibition dedicated to and based on Escher's work at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag (The Hague). In it, Escher's prints, classified by theme, coexisted with the installations of the Belgian artist couple Gijs Van Vaerenbergh. Among the different installations made based on Escher's work, it is worth pointing out the installation dedicated to the work *Relativity*. In it, the artists recreate an architecture with a minimalist aesthetic that resembles the world of impossible stairs, thus generating a more realistic experience for the viewer.

This last exhibition leads us to talk about *Escher x Nendo*. *Between two worlds* (2018) presented at the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne, Australia) by the Nendo studio. As with the previous exhibition, this proposal generates a dialogue between Escher's graphic work and the architectural installations and

video projections generated by Nendo. In the exhibition we find Escher's work grouped by themes. One of these sections is called *Ladders, Towers and Serpents* and it is where *Relativity* (1953) is showcased. Next to the Escher's prints there is a minimalist installation of a house. The viewer does not know if the house comes out from a larger block or disappears when it integrates into it. The house creates the illusion of being a positive form or negative void space. In Nendo's words, "Both sides of the bench, as well as its front and back, are inverted and mirrored to fully represent the concept of Escher's early career" (s.f.).

THE NARRATIVE OF ESCHER'S WORLDS IN THE COMIC

In this section we focues on how Escher's legacy has been honoured by different authors in the field of comic.

Firstly, we look at *Escher. Impossible Worlds* (2022) by Lorenzo Coltellacci. In this graphic novel, Coltellacci introduces us to the life and work of Escher by reconstructing his own works. In the cover of the book, we can see one of the impossible stairs. As in the last two exhibitions mentioned, the comic book aims to honour and disseminate the work of this author.

Another comic book that finds inspiration in Escher's work is *Speciale Martin Mystère. Il mondo di Escher* (2019). As in the previous example, the cover and title are a tribute to Escher and the work *Relativity*. The authors of this comic uses Escher's fantasy to introduce the protagonists (Angie, Martin Mystere and Don Manzanera) of their stories in different dimensions.

There are several authors who have used Escher's fantasy as inspiration for their illustrations. These are small tributes that spread Escher's legacy within a larger publication. Some clear examples can be: *Amazing Spiderman #265* by Dan Sloott and Marcos Martin; *Wonder Woman #7* (1953) by George Pérez with a cover inspired by *Relativity*; or the famous Calpurnio with his work *Mundo Plasma* (2016) brings us closer to the work of impossible stairs through Mimi's pension (Jiménez, 2016).

It is also common to find cartoons whose authors use the work *Relativity* as an important part of the illustration. It is worth naming some cartoonists

who have used this work to generate metaphors with real situations. This is the case of: Bob Morán when he represented the Brexit term about to expire through the figure of Theresa May; Wuerker takes us into the Trump hotel and its new guest to whom he says "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave"; o Leighton introduces us to two workers located on an impossible construction next to the phrase "Escher! Get your ass up here".

ESCHER'S IMAGES AS SCENERY FOR VIDEOGAMES

To start this section, we focus on a cult video game that is part of the story, *La Abadía del Crimen* (1987) made by Paco Menéndez and Juan Delcá (architect). Based on the novel *The Name of the Rose* (2003) by Umberto Eco, this game was widely recognized for the great work done both in programming and graphics (Hernández, 2017). However, it must be said that the resemblance it more aesthetics and not so much on creating impossible spaces. The sets are created through isometric perspectives made with the gaze of an architect. Likewise, it is related to the former in that it received a poor response on the public, in this case the public of video games. Another feature that reminds us of the importance of this work is its recovery for merchandising, just like Escher's work, both have been used as an image as a stamp. Precisely the label that honours this video game is perhaps the one that most clearly reminds us of the work at hand, even without maintaining that optical illusion that characterizes it.

The game *Echochrome: A Brain Teaser* (SCE Japan Studios, 2022), produced by Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe, maintains a minimalist and very basic aesthetic, from the point of view of three-dimensionality. This logic game proposes a space to explore labyrinths transformed by physical laws leaning towards more optical illusions.

Monument Valley I (2014) and *Monument Valley II* (2017), developed by USTWO Games, is a puzzle game. Unlike *Echochrome*, although Escher's work is not referenced in this website game, several articles allude to Escher's world as a reference for the illustrations. They are presented in a minimalist way and it requires imagination to progress in the game.

Like the previous game, *The Bridge* (Tylor y Castañeda, 2015) is presented as a two-dimensional puzzle and a logic game where the player is "forced to revaluate their preconceived ideas about physics and perspective. It is a mix between Isaac Newton and M. C. Escher" (Playstation, s.f., paragraph 1). A video game created by designer Ty Taylor and drawn by hand as black and white images. It is very significant that the description of the official game it mentions Escher, unlike in other video games.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the work of various authors belonging to the art world, we have been able to observe how Escher's work is still very present today. To certain extent, the work of this author and specifically his work *Relativity* (1953) has become part of the collective imagination.

It is worth asking if the authors that we have named and do not allude to the figure of Escher are aware of the influence of this author in their work. Although we can deduce that it certainly is, it is worth reflecting on whether the public that receives his works will be aware of that cultural baggage. In other words, assuming that these authors are aware of Escher's contributions, there is a mistrust regarding the reception of a certain public. Sometimes the connections are not referenced, making the work and legacy of this 20th century author invisible.

Perhaps we can notice, according to the references provided in this chapter, that both in the case of comics and contemporary art there are authors who present and give prominence to the figure of Escher. Among the examples shown through contemporary art, Escher's work is shown as a dialogue between the art of the s. XX and the s. XXI. In short, they collect the legacy of this author, revealing the authorship of this type of fantasies and adapting their research to new languages or supports. This is the case of *Escher-Other world* (Vaerenbergh, 2023) and *Escher x Nendo. Between two worlds* (Nendo, 2018).

Likewise, we observed in the field of comic that the architectures illustrated by Escher are a source of inspiration for different authors. Some of these pinpoint this artist and generate a link with the story, both through

the title of the publication or with the text in the cartoons. A clear example is the graphic novel *Escher. Impossible Worlds* (Coltellacci, 2022). As mentioned before, we have noticed that some authors use Escher's images as a source, ignoring any reference to this author.

Unlike these two areas mentioned, in the video game field we noticed the influence of Escher and, on the contrary, they don't allude to the name of his referent often. As we have been able to observe, only the video game *The Bridge* (Tylor y Castañeda, 2015) mentions the inspiration source in the description of the page that advertises it.

One characteristic that has not been analysed is the degree of appropriation of the images. We are the result of our history, of the creators that precede us, and we need them to continue progressing. One might wonder if it is inappropriate to hide its referent, especially when the degree of appropriation is very high. In the aim of learning about history and providing our cultural baggage to the public, we consider a clearer presence of this influence necessary. We have observed how Escher tried to disseminate his work and we see that his work is still valid. Therefore, of this artist interest in reaching a larger audience still endures, although perhaps not in the most correct way, that is, honouring his memory.

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Focusing on the representation of fantastic and horror territories, this volume delves into the different faces of personified fears, but more specifically into the current tendency to diversify these forms of ideation through the reality and everydayness of the terrifying and imagined event.

This work aims to be a place of analysis and creation through research and dissemination. From cinema, video games, education and, in general, all the arts involved in its processes, we reveal a continuous dialogue both in the revision of what has happened and in current narrative trends. The evolution and applications of the fantasy and horror genre stimulate an increasingly broad and complex creative panorama, with innovative contributions and hybridisations, but also with a retrospective view.

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