

Echoes of Fantasy and Reality

Francisco Cuéllar Santiago
& Vicente J. Pérez Valero (Eds.)



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ECHOES OF FANTASY AND REALITY

in memory of Vicente J. Pérez Valero

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FRANCISCO CUÉLLAR SANTIAGO
& VICENTE J. PÉREZ VALERO
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FICTIONS OF THE SHADOW, MYTH, AND TRANSMEDIA

FRANCISCO CUÉLLAR SANTIAGO & VICENTE JAVIER PÉREZ VALERO
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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, humanity has lived between two worlds: that of tangible reality and that of intangible fantasy. *Echoes of fantasy and reality* is a phrase that resonates deeply in the human experience, as it encapsulates the constant interaction, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflictive, between what is and what could be. This duality has been a source of inspiration for artists, philosophers, scientists, and dreamers, who have attempted to decipher the boundaries and connections between both realms.

At the intersection between the visible and the invisible, between the narratable and the unnameable, lies the space of the fantastic as an aesthetic, philosophical, and political category that has evolved significantly in recent decades. This volume, entitled *Echoes of Fantasy and Reality*, brings together a series of studies that explore the transformations of the fantastic imaginary in the 21st century, addressing its formal shifts, symbolic reconfigurations, and ideological implications in audiovisual and literary narrative contexts.

Far from being a closed or marginal genre, fantastic literature has become a field of narrative experimentation that dialogues with philosophy, critical theory, visual aesthetics, and cultural studies. From alphabets designed to speak to the dead to impossible labyrinths that defy narrative logic, the essays collected here approach the fantastic as a form of thought that questions the limits of reality, identity, and representation (Caamaño Morúa, 2014). The exploration of pastoral and rural landscapes in contemporary science fiction, especially in the work of Liliana Colanzi, reveals a fundamental tension between tradition and modernity, between nature and technology, which manifests itself in the reconfiguration of spaces and the subjects that inhabit them. This transformation responds to a logic of exploitation and dispossession inscribed in the broader framework of global capitalism and its promises of progress (Amatto Cuña, 2019).

The displacement of the female heroine in literary sagas and their television adaptations implies a transformation of her attributes and narrative functions, as well as a renegotiation of the values and expectations that contemporary culture projects onto gender, power, and agency (Moraga, 2007). Therefore, contemporary narrative unfolds across a multiplicity of platforms that dialogue, intersect, and feed into each other. This phenomenon, known as transmedia storytelling, implies a redefinition of the boundaries of the work, the role of the author, and the place of the receiver (Santín-Picoita et al., 2024).

The influence of literary works such as *House of Leaves* on the narrative design of video games is a paradigmatic example of this transmedia logic. Danielewski's novel has served as inspiration for the creation of video games that explore spatiality, fragmentation, and immersion from a radically innovative perspective (Ávila Mateos, 2018). Similarly, Ana María Matute's *Olvidado Rey Gudú* (1996) offers a complex map of times and spaces that challenge the conventional categories of realistic narrative. The chronotope becomes a fundamental tool for analyzing how fantastic stories shape alternative worlds (Romero González, 2019).

The reinterpretation of classical myths in contemporary contexts highlights the persistence and plasticity of foundational narratives in today's culture. Myth is revealed as a living matrix that informs and transforms modern narratives (Losada & Lipscomb, 2023). Fantastic introspection and shadow herme-

neutics constitute another fundamental axis of reflection. The analysis of works such as *Prey* allows us to explore how the fantastic becomes a tool for psychological inquiry (Macías Rodríguez, 2006). The figure of the witch has undergone a profound reinterpretation in contemporary folk horror. This is why, in current literature and cinema, the witch emerges as a feminist and ecofeminist icon, bearer of ancestral knowledge and subversive agency (Moreno, 2020; Hormigos Vaquero, 2023).

It is important to remember the importance of the fantasy genre in addressing uncomfortable topics, using allegories and parables to tackle sensitive issues. In this sense, Cáceres Blanco reflects on fantasy literature, which addresses taboo or socially repressed topics, becoming a space for ethical and aesthetic experimentation, where the ineffable can be named, figured, and confronted (2012). On the other hand, the notion of myth, as developed by Susanne Langer, offers a privileged theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship between symbolic forms and contemporary fictions (Martínez-Falero, 2013).

The psychological basis of magical transformations in series such as *Charmed* allows us to articulate a reflection on identity, desire, and agency in the context of popular culture (Caler Cañadas, 2021). In this sense, the poetics of immensity in Denis Villeneuve's cinema introduces a reflection on scale, visual metaphor, and the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Villeneuve invites the viewer to confront the limits of perception and understanding (Kant, 1790) in works such as *Dune* (2021), *Dune: Part 2* (2024), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and *Arrival* (2016).

Cinema has taken this interaction to new heights. Films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), and Tim Burton's *Big Fish* (2003) are paradigmatic examples of how fantasy can be both a refuge and a mirror of the harshest reality. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the young Ofelia escapes the brutality of post-war Spain through a fantastical world full of mythical creatures and impossible trials. However, fantasy is not just escapism: it is a form of resistance, of finding meaning and hope in the midst of horror. For its part, *Inception* mixes dreams and reality, intertwining them until they become indistinguishable. The characters navigate different levels of dreams, each with its own rules, as they attempt to complete a mission that ultimately forces them to confront their own fears and desires. In *Big Fish*, Edward Bloom's life is narrat-

ed through fantastic stories that mix real events with magical elements. His skeptical son searches for the truth behind the stories, only to discover that fantasy can be a legitimate way of understanding and conveying the emotional reality of a life.

Even in more realistic genres, such as drama, echoes of fantasy are present. In *La La Land* (2016), the city of Los Angeles becomes a dreamlike setting where the protagonists can dance among the stars, and music transforms routine into something magical. Although the story is anchored in the reality of artists' dreams and disappointments, fantasy serves to express emotions and aspirations that transcend the everyday.

THE ECHOES OF THE FANTASTIC IN REALITY

In short, the essays collected in this volume not only map out new forms of the fantastic, myth, and transmediality, but also propose a radical and creative critique capable of accompanying and enhancing the processes of change that our era is undergoing.

First, Ángela Sánchez de Vera Torres, in her chapter *Alphabets For The Shadows. The Design Of Three Alphabets To Talk To The Dead*, explores the design of fictional alphabets linked to the concept of necromancy. The author begins by recounting her initial fascination with Tolkien's stylized runes and the alphabet for the dead created by Mexican artist Carlos Amorales. Her research leads her to discover the term “necromancy,” traditionally associated with dark rituals and taboos, but she proposes a more historical and symbolic reinterpretation: in ancient cultures such as the Greek, Roman, and Hebrew, necromancy was used to communicate with the afterlife.

The chapter analyzes three necromantic alphabets created in contemporary art, not as real languages, but as metaphors for reflecting on death and language. Amorales offers a visual “phantasmagoria”; Shelley Jackson links language to the body; and Ted Chiang warns of the risks of altering perception when using languages from the underworld. The essay combines graphic and conceptual analysis to understand these alphabets as symbolic technologies for communicating with the inert.

Secondly, researcher Andreu Martínez Chaves presents the article *Impossible Mazes: Transmedia Representations Of The Fantastic Rhizome*, in which he

analyzes how a type of fantastic space called the “fantastic rhizome” is represented in four works from different media: the Creepypasta of Backrooms, the novel *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves*, Kyle Edward Ball’s film *Skinamarink*, and the *Doom* map (MyHouse.wad) created by user Vedgge. Each work, separately, shows the capabilities and limitations of its medium in conveying this type of space. Together, they all establish an analogy between rhizomatic space and the structure of the work itself, implying that the reader or viewer must adopt a rhizomatic logic when interacting with them. This encourages active participation and collective interpretation of the texts.

The third chapter of this book is written by researcher Miguel Ángel Albújar-Escuredo, who analyzes two pastoral science fiction and horror stories written by Liliana Colanzi: *El meteorito* (The Meteorite) and *Nuestro mundo muerto* (Our Dead World). Both texts are interpreted as representations of a modern existential landscape, and the essay proposes to explore the concepts of “garden” and “farm” as cultural metaphors, contrasting the Epicurean ideal of the garden with the productivist logic of the farm.

In *El meteorito*, Earth becomes a garden for an alien species with a peculiar vision of justice. In *Nuestro mundo muerto*, humans cultivate an inhuman New World, undergoing a transformation that brings them to the brink of alienation. These spatial metaphors reflect the horror of the estrangement caused by technological futures promoted by figures such as Elon Musk, whose colonizing vision resembles the logic of the technosphere more than that of ancient farmers. The essay concludes that Colanzi uses these narratives to criticize the present and warn of a bleak future that could come to pass if technocratic intentions of planetary exploitation are pursued.

The next chapter of this book is written by researcher Antonio Castro Balbuena. The author presents a text focused on the concept of “mythical displacement” proposed by Northrop Frye, which explains how elements of ancient legends are adapted to modern literary works, especially in the genre of epic fantasy. This process allows the mythical narrative to be preserved, but adjusted to the current social and temporal context.

From this framework emerges the figure of the hero, traditionally situated between the divine and the human. In contemporary literature, this character is humanized, showing virtues and flaws, which has led to a significant transforma-

tion: the increasingly frequent appearance of heroines with their own traits and far removed from the traditional male role.

The main objective of the essay is to explore the archetypal shift of the heroine, first in literature—as the original medium—and then in television, as the current platform for her representation. The author analyzes the unconscious structure that shapes these protagonists, their epic role, and the influence of their gender, highlighting their active and non-submissive character. Finally, examples from film and television are studied to understand how this archetype is transferred from literature to audiovisual media.

The next contribution to this book is by Núria Hernández Sellés and Marta Rivas Pérez, who reflect on the role of fantasy as a training tool in design, highlighting its ability to generate shared narratives, stimulate creativity, and encourage cooperation in collective work environments. In the contemporary context, marked by artificial intelligence, Big Data, and the media crisis, they emphasize the need to train professionals capable of understanding the world from a holistic and ethical perspective.

The authors explain that within this framework, the Bachelor's Degree in Transmedia Design and Project Management at La Salle Campus Madrid seeks to combine technical skills with a humanistic education grounded in cultural analysis. The program offers training in transmedia narrative, graphic and multimedia design, fiction and video game production, marketing, and emerging technologies such as virtual reality and robotics. In addition, they emphasize that a key initiative of the degree is the development of Integrated Projects, a methodology based on project-based learning that brings together subjects and students from different courses. These projects allow students to address the macro and micro levels of transmedia design, promoting skills such as teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, and critical thinking. The main objectives are to intertwine the curriculum, encourage collaboration, and connect training with the professional context.

Next, researcher Víctor Gayoso Martínez presents a text that analyzes *House of Leaves* (2000), Mark Z. Danielewski's first novel, renowned for its complex structure and mix of genres such as psychological horror and self-referential narrative. Considered a cult work, it was a pioneer in transferring ergodic literature from electronic format to paper.

Although valued in academic circles, the work remains little known to the general public, partly due to the author's refusal to adapt it to other media such as film or video games. The chapter also examines video games influenced by the novel, especially *MyHouse.wad*, an expansion for *Doom II* (1994). This mod recreates some of Danielewski's thematic obsessions and, being accessible on almost any computer, allows more people to explore the universe of *House of Leaves* through an interactive experience.

Returning to the field of fantasy, researcher Cristina Landín Jiménez presents *Fairy Tales And Fantasy: Mapping The Chronotope Of Olvidado Rey Gudú*, a text that analyzes Ana María Matute's unique position within 20th-century Spanish literature. Although the lyrical quality of her prose is widely recognized, there is controversy over her belonging to the Generation of '50. Her style and worldview distinguish her from her contemporaries, which has contributed to her literary isolation. The essay seeks to refute the idea that her medieval trilogy is disconnected from the rest of her literary production. Despite being one of Spain's most awarded authors, the novels in this trilogy—including *Olvidado Rey Gudú*, which Matute considered her masterpiece—did not receive any major awards, unlike her earlier texts, which were closer to social realism.

Without straying from the realm of fantasy, researcher Marcela Naranjo Velásquez presents a text that analyzes the concept of *xenia* (ξενία), an unwritten social code typical of archaic Greek epic poetry, which establishes a relationship of respect and mutual aid between host and guest, under the protection of Zeus *xenoi*. This practice, which is hereditary and governed by strict rules, can occur between equals or as *theoxenia* when a deity is involved. Its correct execution strengthens ties between communities and reflects the degree of civilization of a society; its violation implies disorder, divine punishment, and enmity.

The author compares the representation of *xenia* in *The Odyssey* (1982) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2008), exploring how Tolkien adapts this ancient rite in his narrative. In *The Odyssey*, *xenia* structures Odysseus' journey and conveys social and divine values. In Tolkien's work, good practice of *xenia* is observed in places such as Tom Bombadil's house, Rivendell, Lothlorien, Rohan, Faramir's camp, and Minas Tirith; and its transgression in Mordor, Isengard, and the Shire under Saruman. The encounter between Frodo and

Gollum can also be interpreted as an exchange of *xenia*. The analysis focuses on the places Frodo visits as a guest.

Moving on to the realm of Folk Horror, Marta Miquel Baldellou analyzes how aging and old age have become central themes in contemporary horror cinema, especially in light of the increase in the elderly population and the decline in birth rates. From a cultural and psychological perspective, it is argued that old age has been oppressed by ageist social practices and repressed by younger generations who project their fears of old age onto the figure of the “Other.”

Contemporary horror cinema not only depicts the physical and mental deterioration of the elderly, but also gives them a voice, showing their dual role as victims and villains. They are associated with various horror archetypes: zombies, psychopaths, monsters, witches, ghosts, among others. Added to these is the archetype of the “ancestor,” especially in the folk horror subgenre, which revives ancestral beliefs and atavistic rituals as a latent threat in modern societies.

The text focuses on Andy Fetscher's *Old People* (2022) as an example of “neofolk horror”, where the elderly, marginalized and forgotten, regain their ancestral power in the face of youthful irreverence. Through analysis from the perspective of cultural gerontology, it is proposed that the “avenging ancestor” embodies contemporary fears of old age, the loss of family ties, and the abandonment of traditions. The study is structured in three parts: the analysis of the film as folk horror, social discourses on ageism, and the archetype of the ancestor in patriarchal and matriarchal figures.

The following text from the book is written by José Manuel Chico Morales, who analyzes how the fantasy genre, defined by the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, manifests itself in a particular way in video games. Unlike other narrative media, the player not only observes the emergence of the strange, but also interacts with it through mechanics designed by the developers, which turns the video game into an active space for symbolic confrontation.

Chico Morales particularly highlights the introspective approach of fantasy, where the extraordinary arises from human subjectivity. In this context, the Freudian concept of the “uncanny” and Jung's shadow archetype are key to understanding how the familiar becomes disturbing and how monsters can represent repressed human impulses.

For the author, the video game *Prey* (2017) exemplifies this dynamic: the Typhon aliens are not mere external threats, but symbolic projections of the human desire for power and biological superiority. The study proposes that the Typhon embody the Jungian shadow, and by integrating themselves into the player's avatar, they invite a confrontation with the dark aspects of the human psyche. In addition, Chico Morales reviews studies on the fantastic in video games from socio-semiotic, aesthetic, and narrative perspectives, highlighting the growing academic interest in this intersection between genre and medium.

Continuing with the theme of Folk Horror, Elena Menéndez Requeno addresses the figure of the witch as a character that has accompanied humanity for centuries, present in myths, legends, and children's stories. She highlights its impact on European folklore, especially between the 15th and 17th centuries, when around 500,000 people were accused of heresy and executed, according to Marvin Harris. Beyond the numbers, what is relevant is how the witch became established as a symbol of the dark and terrifying in European oral and cultural tradition.

In his chapter, Ben Manzanera analyzes how the taboos, repression, and moral principles of each era have influenced the treatment of certain themes in cinema, especially through censorship. A notable example is the Hays Code (1934–1967) in the US, which prohibited content that undermined traditional values, impoverishing themes and marginalizing minority groups in favor of a vision centered on the heterosexual white man.

Despite these restrictions, many screenwriters and directors found creative ways to express their ideas, using subtext, metaphors, and genres such as fantasy and horror to circumvent censorship and defend freedom of expression. Manzanera analyzes films and television series, highlighting how fantasy and horror cinema has historically served as a vehicle for addressing difficult, traumatic, or censored topics that could not be openly discussed in society. By transferring these situations to fantastical or terrifying contexts, creative and narrative possibilities are opened up through subgenres such as slasher, body horror, alien invasions, witches, the supernatural, possessions, and zombies.

For her part, Deborah Rodríguez Rodríguez champions the philosophical contributions of Susanne Langer, an American thinker active between

1930 and 1970, whose work has been underestimated and misunderstood. Although she is known primarily as a philosopher of art, the importance of her work on logic and epistemology, especially *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930) and *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), in the context of analytical philosophy is highlighted here.

Influenced by neo-Kantianism and a symbolic reading of Wittgenstein, Langer developed a theory centered on the concept of the symbol, which connects her thinking with figures such as Freud, Peirce, Cassirer, and Gestalt psychology. For her, symbolic capacity is essential in human beings, allowing them to represent the absent, the hypothetical, and the fictional, which constitutes the basis of rationality.

According to Deborah Rodríguez, Langer criticizes the hegemony of discursive language, typical of science and logic, and proposes to broaden the reflection on symbolization beyond direct correspondence with the physical world. Her approach defends the plurality of symbolic forms as a legitimate means of expressing human experience.

On the other hand, Elvira Susín-Castán offers an interesting reflection on the emergence of Artificial Life (A-Life) research in the 1980s as an alternative to the traditional approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI). According to the author, researchers at the Santa Fe Institute proposed that, instead of directly replicating human intelligence, AI should follow an evolutionary trajectory, starting with simple vital functions to achieve intelligence as the end result.

For Susín-Castán, anthropologist Stefan Helmreich observed that, although many of these scientists were agnostic or atheist, their debates were steeped in Judeo-Christian narratives about the creation and maintenance of the world. This view is related to the idea that computers can function as worlds or universes, a notion that has fascinated physicists and computational theorists since the 1960s.

Finally, he argues that imagining the universe as a computer reveals more about how humans understand reality in an era dominated by computational paradigms than about physics itself.

For his part, Alberto Rodríguez Gómez analyzes the series *Charmed* as one of the most influential fantasy productions of recent decades. Created by Constance M. Burge, the series follows the Halliwell sisters—Prue, Piper, and

Phoebe—who discover that they are witches destined to protect the world through the “Power of Three.” After Prue's death, her half-sister Paige joins them, and the magical legacy continues. The plot combines supernatural elements with family drama, comedy, and personal dilemmas.

Rodríguez Gómez focuses on how the series links magic and psychology, especially through the magical transformations undergone by the protagonists. These metamorphoses often reflect unresolved internal conflicts, and to reverse them, the witches must face their emotions and understand them. *Charmed* uses fantasy as a metaphor to explore personal growth, emotional management, and psychological problem-solving, offering viewers valuable lessons about self-knowledge.

Continuing with the same television theme, authors María Amparo Calabuig Puig and Augusto Almoguera Fernández propose a study of the positive and negative aspects of the series *Charmed* (1998–2006), created by the Spelling production company in response to the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The authors argue that the figure of the witch is presented as a symbol of female power and emancipation, championed by authors such as Purkiss and Chollet as a representation of free and independent women. However, this narrative conflicts with the reality of the industry, as most of the producers, writers, and directors of these series were men. This fact reveals the persistence of the “male gaze”, a theory developed by Laura Mulvey that questions the representation of women from a male perspective.

The authors pose a central question: Did *Charmed* really promote female empowerment?

Lukas Brock, for his part, presents research focused on the difficulty of distinguishing between the fantastic and magical realism in literature, especially in authors such as Kafka and Borges. Although terms such as “Kafkaesque” and “Borgesian” show that literature transcends academic labels, making intelligent distinctions can enrich the reading experience.

Brock criticizes the reductionist view that links the fantastic and the symbolic as if they were the same, which can trivialize the existential value of literature. To avoid falling into a consumerist view, he proposes taking literature seriously, questioning the categories of “natural” and “supernatural.” According to the author, Amaryll Chanady distinguishes between the two genres by

pointing out that in the fantastic, the supernatural is problematic and breaks with the logic of the text, while in magical realism it is integrated as part of reality. However, it is pointed out that Chanady omits a key conclusion by Todorov: in anarchic contexts, such as the 20th century after World War I, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural loses its force.

Finally, Lukas Brock questions whether we should prioritize the medium of expression or the expression itself, as is the case with terms such as “surrealism,” applied to both pictorial art and literature.

On the other hand, researcher Juan Agustín Mancebo Roca analyzes *Deliverance* (1972), a film belonging to the rural horror genre. The author compares the film with the novel of the same name by James Dickey, who also co-wrote the script with John Boorman. For Mancebo Roca, the film is interpreted as a palimpsest of meanings, connecting with other works by Boorman that explore violence, ecology, and the mythical, such as *Hell in the Pacific*, *Zardoz*, *Excalibur*, and *The Emerald Forest*. In all of them, there is a concern for the degradation of the environment and the loss of nature.

The researcher states that Dickey's novel, published in 1970, is described as a strange and daring work, influenced by *Heart of Darkness* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and set at a time of cultural crisis in the US, marked by the Vietnam War, the hippie movement, and the rise of environmentalism. Dickey even appears in the film as the sheriff of Aintury, embodying the decline of an order that is fading in the face of ecological collapse.

Finally, we close this publication with the work of Leonidas Spinelli Cappel, whose research presents the prominent role of science fiction in contemporary cinema, highlighting its ability to combine visual excellence with profound narratives. He focuses on the work of Canadian director Denis Villeneuve, especially *Arrival* (2016), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and *Dune* (2021–2024), where the fantastic is presented as an aesthetic and reflective experience that expands the limits of reality.

The author highlights that Villeneuve not only constructs worlds, but also uses the fantastic as a visual metaphor to address universal themes about the human condition. His introspective and symbolic style turns his films into spaces where the viewer interprets and is overwhelmed by the image, without the need for words.

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ALPHABETS FOR THE SHADOWS. THE DESIGN OF THREE ALPHABETS TO TALK TO THE DEAD

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Tolkien's books, with their stylized runes, were my first contact with the design of fictional alphabets. A few years later, the Mexican artist Carlos Amoraless added a dark new piece to this personal catalogue by designing an alphabet for the dead. All of these alphabets were nothing more than fantasy until one afternoon, when I was searching the Internet for death typographies, and the search engine came up with one word: necromancy. The reference was obvious, but I was unaware of it, probably because I started my research from graphic design.

Necromancy is the darkest branch of occultisms. Even with the paradigm shift that normalizes hermetic knowledge in the mainstream, necromancy remains taboo. It is associated with cruel rituals, the manipulation of corpses and blood sacrifices. With black magic used not to understand but to dominate. In this essay I would like to challenge this statement and support the idea that historical necromancy is not so dark. In the ancient world, Greek, Roman and Hebrew cultures practiced necromancy to obtain information from the underworld. And it is in this sense that I would like to approach the study of these alphabets, as a technology for speaking to the inert.

This chapter analyzes three necromantic alphabets designed in the contemporary art world. They do not pretend to be real, but allegories to think about language and death. The alphabet designed by Carlos Amoraes can be read as a phantasmagoria, a technology that allows us to visualize the invisible (Mayrata, 2017, 20). Shelley Jackson invites us to consider the connection between language and the body. If the underworld is populated by disembodied entities, we are forced to create other sounds and other signs to communicate with them. But these alphabets can be dangerous: using languages for the underworld can alter our perception and our consciousness, warns Ted Chiang. This short essay examines these fictional alphabets both metaphorically and graphically.

NECROMANCY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, AND ITS TECHNOLOGY

Ancient necromancy was just another divinatory practice, without the halo of darkness that it would acquire in later centuries. Professor Ogden (2001, XV-XVI) defends this position in the introduction to *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, before describing the tools used to obtain information from the underworld.

The first classic necromantic figures were Circe, who could bring back the souls of the dead, briefly and only over the place where they died, and Ericte, the first magician to animate corpses. Circe established the main path, and necromancers will speak to the dead over their graves or on battlefields. Location is central to necromancy, so ancient necromancers built their temples near water or in a grotto. Not just any water or grotto, but at the very gates of hell. Orpheus and Hercules could return from hell because they had divine blood, but mere mortals did not descend to the underworld to talk to the dead. They sought their advice through the technique of incubation, sleeping at the gates of hell.

The archaeological remains of classical necromancy indicate that magic formulas used common human language. Repetitions and meaningless puns predominated, but the alphabet was the same. These incantations were combined with other divination techniques based on pareidolia¹, such as the reading of water or mirrors (scryers).

¹ Pareidolia: This perceptual illusion allows us to find meaningful shapes in chaos, such as animals in the clouds or figures in the fire. Leonardo da Vinci recommended it as an inspiration tool for artists, and more recently, the video game *Creaks* (Amanita Design, 2020) is based on pareidolia.

It was not until the Middle Ages that special signs were designed to speak with superhuman powers. Frances Yates makes an interesting comparison between the art of memory, one of the branches of classical rhetoric, and the circular diagrams drawn by Ramon Llul, Giordano Bruno or Robert Fludd. They wanted to understand the cosmos, and the realms of the dead were just another part of the world, the one that transcended the human. Ramon Llul had a fundamental influence by introducing the Kabbalah and the mystical value of the alphabet in the 13th century, but it was not until the Renaissance that the supposedly Egyptian signs designed by the enigmatic figure of Hermes Trismegistus were adopted. These astrological signs, together with the Kabbalah and the obscurantism of Hermetic philosophy, were used to create a language unintelligible to the profane. A trap for the living rather than a channel to communicate with the dead.

A milestone in the design of supra-human alphabets is the Enochian language created by John Dee and Edward Kelley in the mid-16th century. They designed not only the alphabet, but also the syntax and vocabulary for communicating with angels. A century later, Athanasius Kircher published several books on the origin and evolution of language, an imaginative philological theory based on the myth of the *Prisca Sapientia*, the original language spoken before the Tower of Babel, which allowed direct communication with the spiritual world.



Figure 1. A. Enochian language, Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley, 1583. B. *Alphabet of Desire*, Austin Osman Spare, 1923. Source: Public Domain.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spiritualist theories grew, oscillating between the scientific approaches of Swedenborg and Mesmer and simple parlor entertainments. In the shadow of lodges and hermetic orders, more alphabets were created, such as Austin Osman Spare's *Alphabet of Desire* at the beginning of the 20th century. It is at this point when we can read them as phantasmagorias, a technology designed to reveal the invisible. It would be exciting, but too long for this essay, to catalogue them all. I will content myself with talking briefly about three examples:

THE ASEMIC ALPHABETS OF CARLOS AMORALES

The Language of the Dead is one of the asemic alphabets created by the Mexican artist Carlos Amoraless to talk about censorship, incommunication and silence. Speaking to the dead is not his main goal, but to denounce the manipulation of language. When he speaks to the dead, it is to give voice to a silenced sector of society.

Since the beginning of his career, Amoraless has been collecting and combining graphic symbols to give them political readings, a common strategy in contemporary art. Thus, when curator Pablo León de la Barra (2017, 20) introduces the alphabet designed for the project *Life in the Folds* (Venice Biennale, 2017), he lists an encyclopedic collection of references: Amoraless' signs are based on Jean Arp's decoupages and Henry Matisse's cut-outs, but also on León Ferrari and other Latin American artists who fought the dictatorship with asemic texts. The following catalogue texts expand the list by quoting European existentialist poets who place emptiness at the center of communication, such as Henri Michaux, and philosophers who criticize the veracity of public discourse, the control of digital information and the sclerotization of institutional language (Emmelhainz, 2017).

This accumulation of quotations transforms the alphabet into an allegory, not meaningful in itself, but as a mirror of historical readings. In fact, *The Language of the Dead* is the simplest alphabet of all those examined in this essay. It has no syntax. It simply translates each letter of the alphabet into a graphic character. It is not a new language, but the same language (Spanish, English) encoded. It is just a formal exercise to make an artistic statement.

At first, Amorales did not want to talk to the dead. The development of *The Language of the Dead* was a long process that combined graphic design with autobiographical elements. It started with the creation of the *Liquid Archive*. In 2000, Amorales began to vectorize figures he found on the Internet. As vectors, they could be adapted to any size and to any graphic outcome in high quality. He used these silhouettes, for example, to design the playing cards for *Why to fear the future?* (Casa de América, 2005) and the paper butterflies that covered the interior of a chapel (*Black Cloud*, 2009). These figures, collected in thematic folders, included all kinds of subjects, especially those that frightened him: spider webs, wolves, skulls. Women. These silhouettes became signs to compose stories.

The next conceptual breakthrough came when this process was automated. Because they were signs, anyone could combine them. Taking a cue from Sol Lewitt's *Wall Drawings*, Amorales depersonalized the process by having assistants who select and draw the signs on the gallery walls. Any language, Amorales seemed to say, matures when it is socialized. When it becomes a system in its own right.

But these alphabets were designed for living people. To communicate with the afterlife, he would not use silhouettes as letters, but the space between them. The exhibition *Throwing the Studio Out of the Window* (Kurimanzutto, 2010) reconstructed his first studio in Mexico City. Amorales made methacrylate stencils of the silhouettes and invited twenty artists to draw them on the walls. Overlapping in clusters or swarms, the figures began to lose meaning. Instead of using the clusters, Amorales selected the interstices, and with these gaps, he designed a language of silences. This language of silences was perfect for those without a voice, the victims, the dead. In 2011, Amorales published an encoded translation of Roberto Bolaño using this alphabet, and in 2012, the graphic novel *The Language of the Dead*, in which he gave voice to those killed by drug trafficking.

The Language of the Dead is an asemic alphabet born after the evolution of *Liquid Archive*, whose political critique is reinforced by its necromantic affiliation. The dead always have the last word, and to increase the authority of his statements, Amorales added even more necromantic references, as we can see in the next step of the *Liquid Archive*'s evolution. He transferred these signs from the visual language to sound. The first staging took place in the mid-career

exhibition *Germinal* (Museo Tamayo, 2013), when Amorales presented works that oscillated between graphics and another of his passions, music: he included luthiers' instruments after the musician Joaquín Orellana and the encoded novels mentioned above. Finally, all these scattered proposals came together in his next major project, *Life in the Folds*, titled after a novel by Henri Michaux and presented at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

In this project, Amorales used the language of interstices not only to encode the catalogue or the animated video that structures the proposal, *The Cursed Village*, but also to create the characters and the landscape. There are neither medieval nor esoteric quotations in the long list of historical references that the catalogue addresses, but this project embodied a cabalistic principle, according to which sound creates all existing matter. *The Cursed Village* presented stylized paper puppets and a sharp landscape in black and white, modeled after the alphabet of the interstices. There is no dialogue, only a soundtrack produced by ocarinas, a pre-Hispanic ceramic instrument similar to a flute. Bone flutes were used as invocation instruments by necromancers. And these ocarinas are also modeled after the coded letters: they are their three-dimensional replicas. There are as many ocarinas as there are letters in the alphabet, so that each letter has a sound that can be assembled into words and phrases, again with the help of the computer.



Figure 2. Images by Carlos Amorales. A. *Liquid Archive*, 2000-2010. B. *Throwing the Studio Out of the Window*, 2010. C. *Germinal*, 2013. D. *The Life in the Folds*, 2017. Source: Estudio Amorales.

The sound and the graphic display are material representations of the same encoded text, just in a different degree of embodiment. Like steam, liquid water and ice are the same H₂O. The coded dialogue and the sonic landscape are nothing more than a poetic illusion created by a digital computer. After this interesting reflection on the digital fabric of reality, the narrative of the video is a disappointing political stereotype: a family arrives in the village, rumors spread about the arrival of outsiders, and the villains murder them. It is not only short, but also topical. Apart from giving a voice to the victims of violence in a hellish nightmare, it does not refer to the world of the dead. It does not bring us information from other worlds, only echoes of this one.

THE NECROPHYSICS OF SHELLEY JACKSON

I have a similar complaint about Shelley Jackson for staging necromancy to talk about human conflicts. In her novel *Riddance* (Catapult Books, 2018), Jackson portrays a necromantic researcher, Sybil Joines, who unravels her thoughts through abstract streams of consciousness in a Gertrude Stein-like mood, repeating a childhood trauma over and over. But even if it is only part of the staging, I would like to analyze Jackson's theories about the necrocosm.

Jackson explores necromancy intertwined with Victorian-era technology. She sets the novel in 1919 and defines necrophysics as a collective enterprise. Sybil Joines' necromantic research takes place in an institution, the Sybil Joines Vocational School for Ghost Speakers & Hearing-Mouth Children. She provides full board and lodging for children with speech problems and no resources, and although she claims to educate them in the traditional way, all of their time is devoted to channel the voice of the dead. The suffering of these children makes them better necromancers. Some even die for failing to follow instructions, allowing Jackson to recover the romantic notion of sacrifice, the price of crossing borders.

The narrative is hesitant, like the characters' own stuttering. Weighed down by trauma and identity conflicts, Joines' main obsession is mapping the necrocosm. She concludes that the words create the material world, repeating the mantra of Hebrew mysticism. According to her provisional maps, reality is not limited to two worlds, the living and the dead, but is formed by a succession

of realms in which humans can exist and die until they return in a loop. Joines reproduces a structure of concentric layers similar to the alchemical diagrams that depicted the music of the spheres.

According to the story, the material world is nothing more than the embodiment of the words of the dead. For this reason, Shelley Jackson designs not an alphabet to speak to the dead, but a technology to listen to them. At the Sybil Joines Vocational School, they use all kinds of listening machines, some of them reminiscent of Thomas Alva Edison's inventions, like his posthumous gramophone to talk to the dead, and others made only of paper. It channels the voice of the dead well, according to Joines. There are numerous and imaginative prosthetics to enhance the body of the necromancer. The building itself is an instrument that modulates the wind that passes through it, creating a resonance that is imprinted on the bodies of those who inhabit the school.

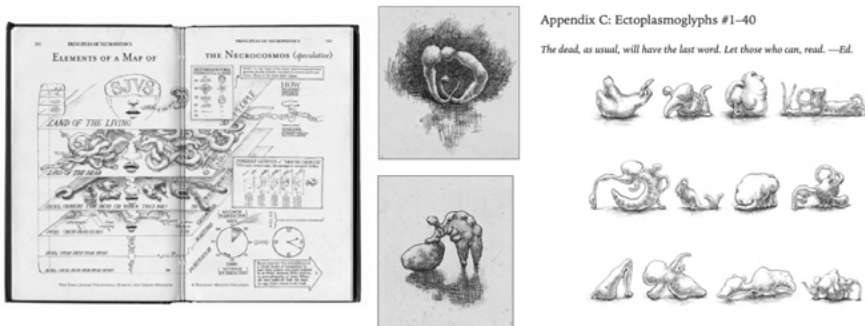


Figure 3. Images from *Riddance* (Jackson, 2018).

But the necromancers are more than just radio wave receivers. Their damaged nature allows them not only to channel the voices of the dead, but also to live at the threshold of worlds. Jackson illustrates this liminal status by designing a corporeal necromantic alphabet. The novel reproduces, almost without variation, the alphabetical design used in an earlier story, “A Report on Certain Curious Objects, Believed to be Words in an Unknown Language of the Dead,” published in the *Bard College Literary Journal* in 2013. The story describes the outgrowths from the throats of children with speech problems, a

sign that they can channel the voice of the dead. They look like wax casts, an ancient symbol of truth for its ability to faithfully retain traces. These ear-bone-like figures are three-dimensional hieroglyphs called ectoplasmoglyphs. Joines does not know whether they are organic or formed by crystallization as they pass from one region of the dead to another. They are multidimensional, and their deformations reflect the changes in speed and density in each reality. In both the short story and the third section of Chapter 6 of the novel (Readings from “Principles of Necrophysics”), Joines dissects and burns one of these ectoplasmoglyphs. She does not know whether it is a logogram, a sentence or an emotion. She does not know the syntax, nor can she translate it, but at least she tries to deduce the structure of the underworld from this experience.

The dead speak through the living, but they say nothing. The messages received are banal, if not insults like those produced by Tourette’s syndrome. This banality is somehow explained by Joines’ necrophysics: the dead are represented as frozen echoes of the movements of their lives, like a three-dimensional photograph, and the medium only intersects fragments of these movements. No real communication takes place: the necromancer hears speeches that have already been recorded. Even if Joines’ necrophysics is not presented as a mature theory, but as a fragmentary and contradictory one, it can deny the nihilism it implies.

WE ARE TECHNOLOGY, ACCORDING TO TED CHIANG

The materialism implicit in the previous two projects reflects how we see the underworld in modernity. But it also justifies the shift between communication with the dead and with the inert. This shift is clearly illustrated in the short story collection *The Story of Your Life* (2002) by the American writer Ted Chiang. The book contains eight stories, six of which explore the limits of language. All of them are fascinating, but I will focus on the one that gives the book its title, *The Story of Your Life*. Chiang plays with several linguistic issues but does not describe their graphic design. For this reason, I will also discuss the film adaptation of the story, *The Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016).

The story of your life shows the efforts to decipher the language of a seemingly peaceful alien species that has arrived on Earth. World governments

gather philologists and scientists to figure out how to communicate with them. The alien heptapods emit incomprehensible sounds and no progress is made until humans try to communicate by writing. The mathematicians are as baffled as the philologists because the alien characters do not seem to share our logic. As they will discover, these signs are not basic units, but whole texts. These clusters respond to the synchronic logic of images rather than the sequential logic of human writing. Or modern writing, for most ancient human alphabets are also ideogrammatic. It was the Phoenicians, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, who simplified writing by developing a phonetic alphabet. Ideogrammatic language requires a prodigious memory to learn all the signs, unlike phonetic alphabets, which are easier to memorize. The fascinating conclusion is that each writing model responds to a different temporal logic, the synchronicity of the image or the sequentiality of spoken discourse.

The story of your life confronts both positions in an extreme way. Extraterrestrial organisms have evolved in a different way: their bodies have a different symmetry (radial) and a different chemistry (silicon). Their language is adapted not only to their bodies, but also to their concept of time. And their concept of time is not linear, like ours. Because it is simultaneous, their words contain the entire temporal evolution of an action. The problem with this language, as we shall see, is that whoever uses it, learns to think within these parameters, and therefore unblocks the temporal line. Chiang dramatizes this mutation through its effect on the family life of the philologist who decodes the language. The philologist learns to think atemporally so that she can speak the alien language. She can see her entire life at once and decides to have a daughter, knowing that she will die in an accident.

To represent the alien language in the film adaptation, they showed circles on a silicon screen. The circle is one of the ancient symbols for representing a complete cycle, the whole. Since the Middle Ages, as I mentioned in the first entry, it has been integrated into all kinds of diagrams to explain the composition of both the macro- and microcosm.

In the story, Chiang mentions a scribble. In the film, producer Patrice Vermette and his wife, the artist Martine Bertrand, translated this imprecision into circular jets of ink divided into twelve sections (Rhodes, 2016).

Vermette asked the creators of the Wolfram language to help them create the graphical representation of a condensed language with a mathematical engine. The contour of these circles is not regular, but poetically fractal: the circumference is broken and organic growths, like roots or fluids, evoke not only the viscous body of the heptapods, but also condensed code.

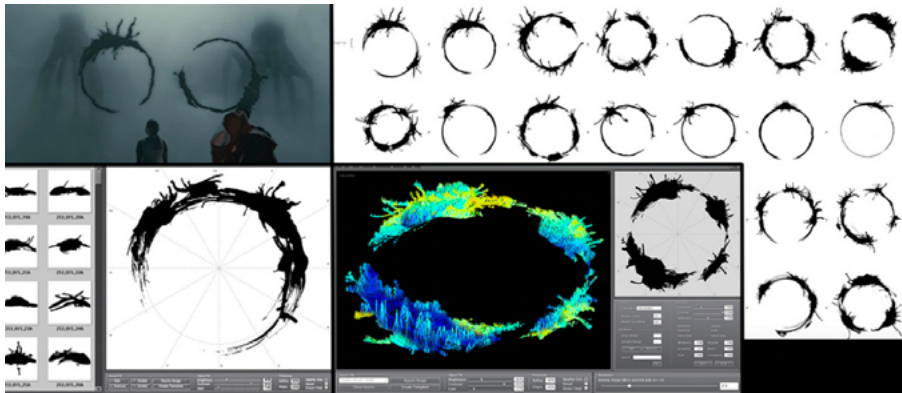


Figure 5. A. Images from *The Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016). B. Alien Design. Source: Wolfram Blog.

Ted Chiang is not only a writer but also a programmer. Although there are no references to programming in the original story, the producers of the movie wanted to introduce this subtle homage. And it is not unreasonable to see programming languages as another necromantic technology that gives orders to the inert.

CONCLUSIONS

The necromantic alphabets analyzed here are very different from the necromancy of the ancient world. These artists have a materialist view of the death and therefore a tendency to get stuck around emptiness and nihilism. Both Amoraes and Jackson present stylistic exercises that focus on human conflicts, such as political critique or identity construction. For them, necromancy is nothing more than an elaborated allegory. By staging these proposals, they are not mapping the underworld, but their social beliefs.

But at the same time, this materialism creates a bridge between ancient necromancy and the digital technologies. When facing death, these artists are forced to confront the inhumanity of modern materialism. Quantum physics, in line with ancient Kabbalah, redefines the world beyond the traditional notion of materialism, and these artists use the uncertainty of death to intertwine both traditions. They think about death from a digital perspective: they design their necromantic language as a collective enterprise, an echo of a system that works on its own. They also define matter as the vibration of the word and explore the digital fabric of reality.

I have chosen and placed each analysis so that the reader can follow an arc from this new digital materialism to better understand Ted Chiang's reflection on technology. Ted Chiang's story is not about death, but about communication with another world. Technology is a prosthesis, and while it changes our body, it also changes our perception. But we build technology only according to our beliefs. So, how should we design an alphabet to talk to another world?

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IMPOSSIBLE MAZES: TRANSMEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FANTASTIC RHIZOME

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The aim of this article is to analyze the representation of a type of fantastic space, the fantastic rhizome, throughout four different case studies belonging to different media: *the Backrooms* creepypasta, Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*, Kyle Edward Ball's film *Skinamarink* and the *Doom* map *MyHouse.wad* by user Vedgge. In isolation, each example showcases the strengths and weaknesses of its medium (respectively, internet audiovisual content, literature, cinema and video-games) when conveying the fantastic rhizome. Collectively, they all draw an analogy between the representation of this type of space and the structure or presentation of the work itself. We argue that, because of this analogy, the act of reading these texts also follows a rhizomatic logic, which encourages the reader to take on an active role and to engage in collective analysis of the texts.

THE FANTASTIC RHIZOME AND *THE BACKROOMS*

In her book *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature*, Patricia García identifies a contemporary strand within the fantastic genre, which she labels as “fantastic of space”. In this type of story, the physical setting where

the action takes place is revealed to be the fantastic element of the story –that is, the impossible phenomenon that transgresses our expectations regarding of what can happen in our reality.¹ Whereas in most fantastic stories space serves as mere set dressing for the narrative, in those identified by García space becomes “the monster”² of the story. The most obvious example of a fantastic space would be that of the house that eats its inhabitants.

In addition to coining this term, García presents an inventory of various spatial transgressions, which she systematizes in a typology of fantastic spaces. Among these, she identifies the “fantastic rhizome”. The fantastic rhizome takes its name from the figure of the rhizome as employed in the oeuvre of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. There, the authors juxtapose the growth of the rhizome to that of the root: lateral instead of vertical, circular, non-linear and virtually infinite, since it proliferates without following any *a priori* hierarchy.³ García posits that the fantastic rhizome renders these characteristics literal, materializing them in a fantastic space: an ever-expanding network, which frequently interconnects non-contiguous spaces, compressing the distances that separate them.⁴

A recent example of the fantastic rhizome can be found in our primary case of study: *the Backrooms*, an internet viral phenomenon commonly labeled as a creepypasta –a type of anonymous fiction conceived for internet circulation. The origin of *the Backrooms* dates back to 2019, when an anonymous user published an image of a seemingly abandoned nondescript place (see Figure 1), which prompted the following reply by a fellow user: “If you’re not careful and you noclip⁵ out of reality in the wrong areas, you’ll end up in the Backrooms, where it’s nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the

¹ García follows David Roas’ definition of the fantastic. See ROAS, D., *Tras los límites de lo real: una definición de lo fantástico*, Editorial Páginas de Espuma, Madrid, 2011.

² GARCÍA, P., *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature. The Architectural Void*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p. 33.

³ See DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI, F., *Capitalismo y esquizofrenia: Mil mesetas*, Editorial Pre-Textos, Valencia, 1988, p. 9-29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93-97.

⁵ “noclip” is a common cheat code in videogames that, when entered in the game’s console, enables the player to walk through walls and move beyond the limits of the map. Its usage here suggests that the same thing is possible in our reality, therefore providing an entrance point for the alternate dimension of the Backrooms.

madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in. God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you”.⁶ In addition to the impossible large area of the Backrooms, further developments of this internet-born mythology have cemented its classification as a fantastic rhizome. Examples include the introduction of new areas (or “levels”), the description of various spatial-temporal anomalies that take place within them or the identification of several points of entrance to this labyrinthine dimension.⁷

These different characterizations of the Backrooms are examples of contributions made by different (often anonymous) users to the creepypasta’s canon. This showcases a noteworthy characteristic of *the Backrooms*: its status as a collective creation.⁸ As a consequence of this, the experience of reading it is markedly unconventional. The reader can follow the narrative of *the Backrooms* starting with its foundational text or with any of the other texts, images, videos or videogames that are part of it. Moreover, they can read these items in any order they desire. In other words, the reading (and writing, for that matter) of *the Backrooms* can also be described as rhizomatic. The active participation of the reader is key to the formation of the text, as they contribute to the assemblage of its constituent elements. Furthermore, the open-ended and ambiguous nature of the creepypasta’s narrative encourages the creation of online communities, such as forums, where the users can engage in collective analysis of its meaning and themes. In this sense, we notice an analogy between the rhizomatic space represented in *the Backrooms* and the structure of its narrative.

⁶ “[unsettling images](#)”. 4chan (4plebs). May 12, 2019. Archived from the original on February 1, 2022. Retrieved January 31, 2022.

⁷ For a detailed documentation of the space described in “the Backrooms,” see GREENSHIELDS, W., “Another Alternative Reality? Exploring the Backrooms with Žižek”, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 17(1), 2023, p. 1-27.

⁸ For a study of “the Backrooms” as “digital folklore,” see WIGGINS, B.E., “The backrooms and liminal spaces: Explorations of a digital urban legend”. *New Media & Society*, 0(0), 25 March 2024, p. 1-19.

THE FANTASTIC RHIZOME IN OTHER MEDIA

A precedent for this analogy can be found in Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*, published in 2000. The book follows the Navidson family as they move into a house where, one day, a new hallway appears in their living room. Upon exploring it, they discover it leads to an immense maze which seems to change its shape constantly –a paradigmatic example of the fantastic rhizome. The novel is composed of three different textual layers: first, an academic text written by the reclusive Zampanò, who analyzes Will Navidson's documentary film about his own house, named "the Navidson Record"; second, the notes provided by Johnny Truant, who has found the manuscript and frequently recounts his own experiences while reading it; and finally, the additional notes of some anonymous editors. Each of these narrators provides numerous footnotes, which constantly interrupt the flow of the main text and bifurcate it into several divergent narratives. The order in which the reader decides to pursue each of them (frequently having to turn pages in both directions) is up to their discretion. Additionally, some sections feature unconventional page layouts (see Figure 2), including inverted or reversed texts which require the reader to turn the book upside down or place it in front of a mirror, respectively, to be able to read it. As in the case of *the Backrooms*, the object represented in the story is echoed by the novel's presentation⁹, which requires the reader to take on an active role in order for them to be able to follow the narrative.

The relationship between *House of Leaves'* analog reading experience and the digital one of *the Backrooms* is highlighted by the novel's multiple references to then-nascent internet culture.¹⁰ The most obvious of these is the coloring of all mentions of the word "house" in blue, the color of hyperlinks, which seems to invoke a virtual dimension absent in the analog nature of the book. In this regard, it is noteworthy that *House of Leaves* was among the first novels to prompt the creation of a forum of readers, who engaged in collective analysis of the novel in a similar manner to that observed in the case of *the Backrooms*.¹¹

⁹ HAMILTON, N., "The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*", *Critique: Studies in contemporary fiction*, 50(1), 2008, p. 14

¹⁰ For a study of the relationship between *House of Leaves* and internet culture, see PRESSMAN, J., "House of Leaves: Reading the networked novel", *Studies in American fiction*, 34(1), 2006, p. 107-128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

House of Leaves also foreshadows creepypasta culture in its depiction of “the Navidson Record” as a found footage film, whose value is not so much narrative nor illustrative, but testimonial. Zampanò analyses the documentary’s cinematic space, which is fragmented by Navidson’s unconventional shot composition and editing, leading him to conclude that the viewer would not be able to form a mental map of the house from watching the film alone. While this type of presentation would typically result in an unclear narrative exposition in most movies,¹² “the Navidson Record” foregrounds its own formal construction in order to embody the characteristics of the object that it is trying to represent.¹³ The same approach can also be found in the videos that contribute to the mythology of the Backrooms, particularly those created by YouTube user Kane Pixels. In these videos, low-fidelity images, abrupt editing and excessive camera movement are employed to reduce the transparency of the presentation, with the goal of achieving a higher degree of authenticity.

However, the most thorough application of this strategy to audiovisual media may be found in a cultural artifact that resides somewhere between internet content and cinema: Kyle Edward Ball’s film *Skinamarink* (2022). Ball began his career shooting YouTube videos embedded in creepypasta culture, throughout which he experimented with different techniques that would end up appearing on his feature-length debut film. *Skinamarink* follows two children on the course of a single night, during which the doors and windows of their home disappear suddenly. This leaves them isolated, at the mercy of and an evil entity that controls their parents’ behavior and appears to possess the ability to manipulate reality –by the end of the film, the house has shape-shifted into an impossibly large space. The techniques employed by the filmmaker mirror closely those identified by Zampanò in “the Navidson record”: the shots fragment the characters and the space, frequently obscuring what is happening and where it is happening, while the haphazard editing prevents the spectator from forming a mental map of the house. Furthermore, the film’s low-fidelity aesthetic presentation is similar to that of *the Backrooms*, a stylistic choice that not only further obfuscates the

¹² For a discussion of clarity and transparency regarding film narrative, see BORDWELL, D., STAIGER, J., THOMPSON, K. *El cine clásico de Hollywood. Estilo cinematográfico y modo de producción hasta 1960*, Editorial Paidós, Barcelona, 1997.

¹³ HAMILTON, N., *Op. Cit.*, p. 10.

action but also creates the illusion of watching archival images, imbuing them with the authenticity of a document from the pre-digital era.

While the durational nature of cinema (wherein the spectator is expected to watch a film from beginning to end without rewinding or fast-forwarding) does not permit an experience analogous to the reading of *House of Leaves* or *the Backrooms*, the difficult intelligibility of *Skinamarink's* images and its elliptical narrative encourages multiple rewatches as well as its collective analysis and discussion. If cinema's rigid viewing experience is one of the medium's limitations when addressing a fantastic rhizome, it is also what allows for a more immersive experience (specially in a theater setting), as it recreates the experience of being lost in a labyrinthine space with greater fidelity than literature, be it analog or digital. Precisely, *Skinamarink's* popularity can be partly attributed to its status as one of the most immersive horror films of recent years.¹⁴

The final example concerns a fan-made map of the video game *Doom*, titled *MyHouse.wad*, which was published by the user Vedgge on the Doomworld forum, dedicated to modded content for the aforementioned gaming classic. The user states that the map was initially developed by a friend who was replicating his childhood home in the game's engine –however, he passed away before completing the process, and Vedgge subsequently completed the map as an homage. Following its publication, members of the forum who decided to play the map discovered that, upon closer examination, the house exhibited an impossible structure, with two bedrooms coexisting in the same space. This finding prompted players to continue investigating, uncovering multiple secrets during the process. The house in *MyHouse.wad* also exhibits a fantastic rhizome, with distortions such as the previously described, but it also features numerous concealed corridors that connect it with other locations, including an airport, a childcare facility or a Brutalist maze, all of which are devoid of human habitation.

¹⁴ The film achieved viral popularity on the internet as a result of several videos where the viewers would react to the film's unnerving atmosphere and pacing. See BALANZATEGUI, J., "Skinamarink and the algorithmic uncanny interface between children's and horror film TikTok cultures", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 0(0), 8 October 2024, p. 1-21.

The interactivity seen on *House of Leaves* and *the Backrooms* achieves its highest degree in *MyHouse.wad*: beyond the charms found in literature or cinema, videogames as a medium reproduces with greater fidelity the experience of navigating through a physical space –especially if we consider possible complements such as headphones and VR headsets. Considering that it’s impossible for a place such as the one represented in *MyHouse.wad* to exist in our reality, its navigation in a videogame is the best possible way to experience it, even considering *Doom*’s outdated graphics.

Moreover, the map’s difficulty required of the collective efforts of several members of the Doomworld forum in order for them to complete it, encouraging an active role for players inside and outside the game. As an example of *MyHouse.wad*’s complexity, one of its most concealed secrets demands the player to open and close a closet door on successive occasions before it transforms into a hallway entrance. This Easter egg is of particular significance to our analysis, as the hallway’s appearance and structure appear to be inspired by the one from *House of Leaves*: a large concrete corridor which leads to an immense interior, in whose centre a set of stairs descend endlessly into a hole. This inspiration is substantiated by a development document located within the game’s installation folder, where all references to the word ‘house’ appeared colored blue, as in Danielewski’s novel. Another notable reference can be discovered by entering the “noclip” code in the game’s console (a valuable tool in a labyrinthine game such as this one), which transports the player to a level that faithfully recreates *the Backrooms*.

So, it ends a circuit of potential connections, conscious or unconscious, between several works that represent a fantastic rhizome. In all of them, we find an analogy between the space represented and the structure or presentation of the work. This analogy results in a rhizomatic reading experience, which encourages the reader to take an active role and fosters collective analysis by communities of readers. Each of the examples showcases the strengths and weaknesses of its medium when dealing with the representational challenge of the fantastic rhizome, but collectively they complement each other and allow for a trans-media experience of this type of fantastic space.

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FROM GARDEN TO FARM, TECHNO- EXPLOITATIVE INTENTIONS OF TECHNO BROS IN TWO OF LILIANA COLANZI'S SCI-FI SHORT STORIES

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will carry on a review of two of Liliana Colanzi's Pastoral Horror Sci-fi stories: "El Meteorito" and "Nuestro Mundo Muerto". The reader may understand both narrations as representations of a modern existential landscape. Therefore, one of the main goals of this essay will be to define the concept of a garden (drawing from Epicureanism and the theoretical contrast with the idea of a farm) to draw a commentary that delves into the author's view of our present and pointing out the forecasting in her fiction of a pessimistic future for human beings.

On one side, "El Meteorito" shows our world becoming a garden for a different alien species with a peculiar understanding of justice. On the other side, "Nuestro mundo muerto" envisions an existence where humans, inhabiting an inhuman New World as they farm it, endure a transformation that pains them to the verge of alienation. The concepts of garden and farm play protagonist roles in both stories, even if they are implied. Such geographical spaces are metaphors that grasp the horrific degree of estrangement regarding some futuristic ways of

living proposed by techno bros, subjects so deeply immersed in the reveries of the Technosphere that they are more akin to the logic of techno music rather than gardeners' or old farmers' mindsets.

Tu sum up, this chapter will examine these Pastoral Horror Sci-fi stories, using the concepts of garden and farm as cultural markers, and comparing them to the representations drawn by the author. Eventually, it will be shown how Colanzi sheds light on pessimistic tonalities in her effort to represent our present, highlighting in the process a gloomy future to be achieved. This pessimistic future may become a self-fulfilling prophecy if techno-exploitative intentions of planetarian colonizing aspirants like Elon Musk.

GARDEN VS. FARM

“El Meteorito” and “Nuestro Mundo Muerto” are two short stories collected originally in Spanish in *Nuestro Mundo Muerto* (Colanzi, 2016a) and subsequently translated into English by Jessica Sequeira in *Our Dead World* (2017). The author, Liliana Colanzi Serrante, has been awarded the Premio de Narrativa Breve Ribera del Duero 2022 (Comunicación, 2022) for her short story collection *Ustedes brillan en lo oscuro* (2022), earned the Aura Estrada literary award 2015 (Borchard Foundation), and was considered one of the best Latin American writers under 40 by the Hay Festival within the Bogotá39 project initiative (2017) that included her short story “Chaco” in the published collection (Valencia, 2018).

Colanzi's work is often defined as a reflection in fictional form of the discontentment of the present subject, which considers the pervasive feeling of profound uncertainty as a common experience of postmodernity. At the same time, capitalistic rationality is put into question by the fate of the characters she portrays, as Salvador Raggio points out in his “Catástrofe y apocalipsis en la narrativa de Liliana Colanzi” (2020) when analyzing “El Meteorito”. The representation of a feeling of unreliability, by way of combining science fiction, fantasy, and Indigenous history (Rodríguez, 2019); at times worded by readers and commentators as mediums of trauma, is connected to the destruction of the physical space that the characters occupy, causing them strong emotional responses to the degradation of the natural environment by human action. That

is the interpretation that Jorge Neyra Landa makes of “Nuestro Mundo Muerto”, identifying, though, an optimistic ending with the apparition of a hybrid being, suggesting, therefore, a possibility for a new humankind, literarily and figuratively, confronting environmental devastation (2020, p. 31); even though the present of the narrator seems to lock an ominous fate.

The author has explained that the return of phantasmagoria is a trope she enjoys since it allows her to think about the repressed past and allows definitive closure (Colanzi, 2016b). Colanzi understands reality as a never-ending movement, and in both short stories covered in this essay, the reader can perceive how the characters are overwhelmed by the vastness of the universe (Díaz, 2018) and its rapid progression, which pushes them to a better understanding of reality, not only through the lenses of rationality but through superstition and metaphor. But, as is noted by María Ortiz (2018), the author has a very posthuman and rational view of reality, representing how every subject has an experience of it, therefore opening human understanding to other forms of existence and permitting her characters to undergo short-lived epiphanies (Poblete Pardo, 2017), even if those on the surface seem irrational to the human mind.

This essay aims to review the spaces in which the characters dwell, using the terms garden and farm to frame both short stories in hopes of revealing the mindsets the author brings to life. In that sense, the characters that inhabit in “El Meteorito” and “Nuestro Mundo Muerto” are passive vessels that both enact and endure the logical consequences of the *topos* they are forced to inhabit.. It can be stated that both narrations fall into the field of realism, nevertheless, it is a realism expressed through the lenses of a mix of genres that can be better phrased as pastoral horror sci-fi. Pastoral because at times both fictions “depict a simple and natural way of life, and contrasts it with our complex, technological, anxiety-ridden urban world of the present” (Pringle et al., 2024); horror sci-fi for Colanzi's depictions often emphasize the monstrous outcomes of a techno-rationality that lacks any sense of humanity.

The concept of the garden in both narrations confronts the modern idea of a farm, the latter framed in contemporary terms as an exploitation initiative, akin to a factory, to obtain capitalistic benefits that can be reinvested in the same operation infinite times. Contrarily, the Epicurean idea of the garden: “In a property later known as the Garden, Epicurus, and his friends lived a closed

community life devoted to philosophy, in retreat from politics, and practiced an austere to ascetic lifestyle” (Trépanier, 2023), it is connected in “El Meteorito” with Indigenous characters’ way of life, although they seem to live in poverty due to the plantation system they are trapped in, that is the farm owned by Ruddy, the rude and brutish landowner. At the same time, the apparition of a meteorite and the intuition of a “presence” (Colanzi, 2017, p. 49), are uncanny occurrences linked to alien manifestation that has more in common with the indigenous folklore than with Ruddy’s capitalistic logic. The author depicts indigenous appearances as ancient social practices that allow a connection with the natural world that is lacking in Ruddy’s farming mindset, valuing gardening as more than a mere productive goal. As Jennifer Wren Atkinson states “[...] the simple act of encounter between people and living plants, and the understanding, [...]” (2018, p. 3), reproducing an ecological estimation of the land as a part of being human. Ironically, it is an estimation shared with the alien presence as the reader finds out in this conversation between Ruddy and an Indigenous woman:

The mother had even brought a hen nearly as skeleton thin as herself—as a present. [...] he promised he’d take care of the boy and lent her fifty pesos. On her way out, the woman shyly drew near. My son has a gift . . . she said. He laughed: Ah, yes? Country folk will say anything. She looked at him seriously: My son can speak with higher beings. He spat to one side and rubbed his testicles. So long as he knows how to milk a cow. Señora, he won’t need to speak to any higher beings here. Then he sent her away. (Colanzi, 2017, p. 43)

The author of “El Meteorito” writes an allegorical fiction where the monoculture practices of the Green Revolution, which led to a significant reduction in biodiversity and soil fertility, among other ecological losses (National Geographic, 2024), are criticized for not only harming the environment, but by the detrimental impoverishments of cultural practices and mindsets, where the Indigenous lore is dismissed in favor of increased balance sheets. There is a sense of artificiality in Ruddy’s life that causes him to feel a deep discomfort well before he sees the fall of a meteorite as a bad omen: “Once again his body vibrated with evil energy” (op. cit., p. 40); he does not enjoy living

in the countryside, surrounded by pests. Although his weight-loss medication works, it heavily affects his mood and sends him in a period of hyperactivity; he is afraid that other people will judge him a “flabby motherfucker” (op. cit., p. 44); and his wife does not fit the farm life either: “Her breasts were enormous, absolutely sensational, and everything about her seemed out of place as if she were an actress who’d prepared the wrong script” (op. cit., p. 48). As the indigenous workers are dismissed by Ruddy’s farming enterprises; the same happens to his life, which shows to be a very unhappy one despite being wealthy and having a very attractive wife and a loved son. From this short story, it looks as if the reader can unravel that lacking a natural relation with the environment, more proper of an activity of gardening nature than just farming it with exploitative goals, interrupts the achievement of a meaningful life in an indifferent universe, as depicted in the first paragraph of the short story:

The meteoroid traced the same orbit in the solar system for fifteen million years until the movement of a comet pushed it toward Earth. Even so, it took another twenty thousand more years before it collided with the planet, during which time the world passed through an ice age, mountains shifted and the waves gave landmasses a new shape. Innumerable life forms died out forever, while others battled ferociously, adapted and repopulated Earth. (op. cit., p. 39)

After all, the end of the story finds Ruddy killing himself, his family, and a coworker, putting a tragic end to a very meaningless existence.

TECHNO AND TECH BRO

In the same vein, in the other short story proposed in this analysis, “Nuestro Mundo Muerto” the reader gets to survey the capitalistic logic behind the exploitation of nature, this time on Mars. The female narrator is a winner of the “Martian Lottery” indicating she won the opportunity of participating in the colonization of Mars. From her descriptions, Earth is polluted to such a degree that several acquaintances have had babies with malformations that may have killed them. After breaking up with her boyfriend, in part because she opted to have an abortion, she decided to join the Martian colonial

efforts. Sadly, shortly after arriving on the planet, she regrets it since she becomes aware of the inhumane conditions of life reserved for the colonizers:

I turned off the monitor and felt the immense loneliness of the planet in my bones. I looked at the security camera facing the outside: the blue flag of the Martian Lottery waved above miles of ochre-colored dunes where nothing was alive, a silent desert that breathed down your neck, eager to kill you. For the first time, I accepted that the trip had been a suicide mission, motivated by rage. (op. cit., p. 77)

It is noteworthy to remark that the Martian colonies are populated by earthlings' expats from all over. From the name of the characters the reader can induce that the crew that keeps the colonies afloat entails an international effort, a multinational one: Myrka, the narrator's Slavic name; Pip, maybe a diminutive of the English Philip or the German Pippin; Zukofsky, of Polish origin; Choque, a relatively common last name in Bolivia; Tang Li, of Chinese derivation; etc. Indeed, the narrator's nationality is clearly situated within Russian borders since there are several geographical mentions during her memory recollections (using *italics*), such as Blinis, a sort of Eastern European pancake, and a fair located in Irbit, a town in central Russia, etc. The implication is that the race for setting up settlements on Mars does not involve nations but corporations in a capitalistic context. Myrka, during her narration, reminds the reader about the marketing that embellishes the recruitment efforts. The so-called "lottery" is a conscription scheme to attract and enroll people who have grown used to radioactivity, so they will stay able workers on Mars longer before metastasis deteriorates their bodies. Insinuating that by the narrator's current times, besides the previously mentioned babies' malformations, entire regions polluted by radiation are commonplace on planet Earth.

Accordingly, the narrative of the Mars colonization uses clichés akin to an age of imperial exploration found as familiar *formulae* in US science fiction Pulp-magazines from the first half of the XX century (Stableford & Langford, 2016); keywords such as "Glory", "Country", "History", "The greatest adventure after the discovery of America" (Colanzi, 2017, p. 83). But, indeed, the sense behind this recruitment effort reacts to business-like needs: the entity managing the

settlements is in dire need of construction and maintenance workers capable of operating within budget and time expectations: “I wanted to return to my cell and fill myself with pills, the kind that made you dream of relaxing geometric figures. [...] But we still had to put up the damn solar panels. [...] and we had to produce energy for the new colonists on the way” (op. cit., pp. 80-81). The ideological drive of this invisible managerial entity, invisible because it rules all aspects of the colonizers’ actions on Mars but is indiscernible to them, follows a blind inertia that one can register in postmodern artifacts like techno music as well as neoliberal enterprises: “[...] what is most distinctive about techno: first of all, its essentially festive nature, its lack of political position and commitment, relating to the exhaustion of all the great figures [...] what has been called ‘the end of ideology’” (Gaillot, 1998, pp. 18-19). The expiration of ideology, identified in the 90s by Francis Fukuyama though with a substantially opposite interpretation as the victory of liberal democracy (1992); and *a posteriori* highlighted by Mark Fisher as a pessimistic mood of thinking that has perversely contaminated all utopian thought (2009), is the one portrayed in “Nuestro Mundo Muerto”. The reader is drawn to imagine that the neoliberal practices are to blame for the state of Earth in the short story, in addition to the terrible conditions that Mars colonizers are forced to endure in the few years of life they have left.

In this short story, it is fundamental to accept that the end of ideology, fitting to techno music ethos (Gaillot, 1998), and the phenomenon of *Capitalism Realism* identified by Fisher (2009), ironically highlights the triumph of one distinctive and pervasive ideology that has become so influential in the 21st century: the tech bro creed.

The tech bro is, of course, a species within the broader bro genus. [...] Bros are the opposite of hipsters: aggressively conformist, intentionally unfashionable, proudly loyal to institutions (whether it’s Penn State or Deutsche Bank). With its roots in fraternity life, bro culture can include a darker undertone of misogyny, [...] “Tech bro” was a logical adaptation of the concept, as a generation of overwhelmingly male college grads who before might have sought their fortunes on Wall Street flocked to high-paying jobs in San Francisco. (Edelman, 2021)

The tech bro is a mutation of the finance bro, emerging within a *milieu* where finance and technology form a *continuum*. Nevertheless, as Gilad Edelman reported in 2021, the term has become so widespread that it was rendered an “all-purpose epithet” and lost all its descriptive meaning of a particular cultural species. Edelman makes the case that the fault is not in the general bro’s idiosyncratic behavior or the personal traits of the most famous *epigoni*; but in “the most nakedly antisocial exercises of corporate power” that are the backbone of part of the tech industry.

The term tech bro, then, comes to refer to the alleged amoral practices of the industry, which I come to describe more accurately as techno bro creed, in the sense that has been noted previously as a lack of ideology noted in techno music, a postmodern phenomenon, but accepting as an ideological exception the self-sustaining uninterrupted growth particular to neoliberal postmodern finances. I believe that Colanzi’s short story deplores the implied techno bro’s apparatus that propels the creation and maintenance of the colonies on Mars. Similarly, she denounces the risks of similar operations since even the colonizers have internalized the logic of the system that has brought them to Mars to die, as if signing a contract could make perfectly moral the forfeiting of one’s life in favor of an expansionist enterprise. The narration rebukes such a scheme by depicting the narrator’s stream of consciousness. Not only did she witness the psychological collapse of her coworkers before the enormity of the task of relinquishing life on Earth:

On the colony there was no radiation therapy equipment, yet Pip kept carrying out his tasks without complaining. Choque, on the other hand, had given in. One day he shut himself in his cell, surrounded by explosives he’d fabricated with fertilizer from the garden, and threatened to blow up the colony if he wasn’t repatriated to Earth. Hours later, after the President had assured him a spaceship would be sent. Choque went into the desert and killed himself. (Colanzi, 2017, p. 84)

Eventually, Myrka reports the process of shutting down her humanity. The first symptom is that she starts seeing eerie “strange things” (op. cit., p. 81) on the surface of Mars. Followed by her recollections of the past, which become

emotionally more painful as the story develops. There is a certain progression from the beginning of the story with mild memories to the painful ones at the ending that foretells a mental breakdown: "Then the forest suddenly appeared before my eyes, and overcome by terror, I felt my fingers claw the earth, looking for a grip so as not to fall so as not to fall into the sky" (op. cit., p. 86). From the short story, the reader gathers that the techno bro *ethos* appears fundamentally incompatible with a fulfilling human existence. Thus, the colonization of Mars, presumably an enterprise to save humankind from a polluted Earth, is fated to fail. Or it is an effort of such a magnitude that will undo our humanity and will coerce an evolutionary new one in pursuit of survival. Regardless, in "Nuestro Mundo Muerto" humankind as we know it is meant to disappear unless we change our ways as a species.

EXPLOTATION AS LEITMOTIV

Convincingly, in "El Meteorito" and "Nuestro Mundo Muerto," the author's leitmotiv indicts the pernicious effects of an exploitative mindset summarized in the techno bro creed applied to farming. To an equal degree, its victims are nature and human beings, the latter being an inextricable part of the former.

In "El Meteorito" the reader contrasts indigenous lore, which can be allegorized as gardening, with the landowner's capitalistic farming operation, which favors profits before ecological and meaningful correlations. Ruddy's life marks out the author's estimation that a life without natural connections is not worth living.

In "Nuestro Mundo Muerto," Colanzi considers the reality of Mars colonization and delves into the techno bro creed. Her gloomy depiction of life on Mars shows how the pursuit of technological development and relentless growth comes at the cost of what makes us human: the connection with a place and its people. The narrator's breakdown is a coherent product of the estranged conditions inflicted on colonizers facing a Martian deserts environment.

Both short stories appear to denounce an exorbitant disposition of attention-seeking billionaires who comprehend postmodern times as a new age of human expansion beyond the stars, as well as an infinite source of financial growth. The connection with nature is nowhere to be found in those interplan-

etary projects, which neglect, premeditatedly one suspects, the psychological demand of humankind to be rooted somewhere. Finally, the two narrations suggest to us, as a species, a revaluation concerning nature. It will comprise bringing back an indigenous morality. This attitude helps to explain that Colanzi's science fiction has been also termed "Latin American Retrofuturism" by some journalists (Rodríguez, 2019). Therefore, Colanzi's propositions straightforwardly oppose the capitalistic and technological pervasive primacy of financial profit.

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ARCHETYPICAL DISPLACEMENT OF THE FEMALE HERO IN EPIC FANTASY. FROM LITERARY SAGAS TO TELEVISION

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DISPLACEMENT, ARCHETYPES AND (FEMALE) HEROES. AN INTRODUCTION

In the mid-20th century, Northrop Frye introduced what would become one of the most significant theories for understanding the literary phenomenon. Among the concepts he proposed is displacement (Frye, 1957: 136), a process through which the mythical element of the legends of our past is incorporated into literary works. This depends on whether these works are closer to myth or realism. In the last case, the literary work gains plausibility and verisimilitude. Therefore, these adaptations of mythical structures aim to preserve the inherent narrative of the mythical world while modifying it to make it suitable for the social and temporal context of the new literary work, as Pardo García (1993: 298) stated.

From this mythical background emerges the hero, the protagonist of the legends of our ancestors, whose figure, as Frye himself pointed out (1951: 108), allows the reader to “build up the vision of an omnipotent personal community beyond an indifferent nature.” The hero represents that central role in epic fantasy, where the traditional stories of the genre place this character halfway between the

divine and the human (Trocha, 2013: 83). In narratives of this type and our time, the hero takes on a less Manichaean role, appearing more as a human, with virtues but also flaws, all of them compatible with the legendary voice of the myth (Castro Balbuena, 2022: 76). In contemporary stories, this moral signifies the humanization of the hero and—because of their configuration as a *human*—the decline of one of their traditional characteristics: their male gender. Thus, and more frequently than before, in epic fantasy literary works we encounter heroines with their own distinctive traits, whose particular development triggers a process of displacement from different archetypes toward a concrete form, both in literature and other audiovisual media.

That is the main objective of this essay: to explore the archetypal displacement of the heroine, first in literature—because that is the original medium in which all of these stories have born—and then in television, as a new and popular medium for constructing and presenting them in a fresh form. To accomplish it, I will attend first to the unconscious structure from which the epic fantasy heroine is shaped, addressing both the epic component of her story and the influence of her gender. As this heroine appears as a more proactive and less submissive character, I will apply this idea to epic fantasy stories in literature, searching for a more specific definition of the female hero in the genre. Lastly, I will analyze some examples of epic fantasy stories in film and television, exploring the characteristics of the displacement process from literature to new audiovisual media.

ON TRADITIONAL FEMININE ARCHETYPES. TOWARDS A FEMALE HERO

As I have pointed, the main protagonist in the hero's journey has traditionally been a male character, while female ones were relegated to the passive role of being "the prize to be won or fought over, the maiden in distress" (Noble, 1990: 7). As a justification for this treatment, Sellier (1992: 564) pointed to three factors: the supposed physical superiority of men, the social position of women until recent times, and motherhood. As will become evident in the following analysis, none of these factors exclude women from heroism in epic fantasy. To explore the archetypal constitution of the heroine I turn to two structures inherent to femininity along History: the archetypes of the Mother and the Fallen Woman.

From the Pacifist Mother to the Terrible Mother

As with other archetypes he analyzed from the realm of the unconscious, C. G. Jung identified two variants of the Mother: one positive and one negative. For him, the loving Mother is associated with behavioral traits such as “maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility” (Jung, 2010[1954]: 16). On the other hand, the terrible Mother is based on the prioritization of sexual desire over maternal duty, becoming something malevolent and perverse, “vitiating and devouring monsters (think Echidna, Charybdis and Scylla, Lamia, and the Gorgons)” (Rooks, 2016: 124). In other words, we could say that in the myth we can find two types of women: first, the maternal woman who—though portrayed as wise and not devoid of authority—is subordinated to the care of her children and evolves around that behavior; and, secondly, the maternal woman who rejects her condition as a mother, finding her representation in myth as a monster.

With the passing of time, this archetype—and the stories in which it was embedded—has evolved to grant the Mother greater proactivity, moving away from Pacifism and submissiveness toward the behavior outlined some time ago by Shannon E. French (2001). According to her, the Mother archetype has three valid faces: the Mother as protector, who will use any means at her disposal to safeguard her children; the Mother as avenger, capable of annihilating her adversaries “as for a return to peace” (French, 2001: 59); and the Mother as instigator, a proactive character whose actions are based on the belief that the best defense is a strong offense, and whose behavior reflects an unyielding maternal pride.

A Fallen (or Rebellious) Woman

The archetype of the Fallen Woman was formed during the Victorian era to describe a high-born woman “defined by her failure to meet the moral and material expectations of the time” (Howard & Prividera, 2008: 294). This could involve indiscretions such as engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage or more mundane matters like failing to dress fashionably (*ibid.*). Thus, the message was clear: it was better to die a maiden than *to fall into* sexual debauchery (Braun,

2015: 342), with this *fall* understood as expulsion from society and even divine punishment.

From a narrative perspective, the themes associated with the Fallen Woman archetype pertain to “sexual morality, adultery, prostitution, and rape” (Chartrapon, 2008: 27). In the construction of this archetype, as happened with the Mother before, the relationship between Fallen Women and male characters plays a significant role, much like other female archetypes, since when discussing feminine archetypes, “they are always defined in terms of their relationship to men” (Frontgia, 1991: 15).

The disgrace of this woman archetype corresponds, at the same time, to a recovery or, prior to that, an escape from the established order, for which the character resorts—if not toward direct confrontation—to disguise herself for a change of gender. Thus, “[b]y masquerading as boys, the protagonists gain freedom and liberty that is inaccessible to them as girls; the masquerade becomes a temporary time and space wherein the limitations of socially prescribed gendered roles can be transcended” (Saxena, 2012: 272). As we will see shortly, this rebellion is crucial in the transformation of the submissive female character into a proactive heroine.

Toward a Female Hero: From Éowyn to Nona Grey

In epic fantasy, whose roots extend to myth, the woman’s confrontation with society—which would be defined as a *feat* and, therefore, as a heroic behavior¹—is related to the military context. One justification for the greater number of male heroes in the genre would be the public’s interest, as they would have found male-centered stories more appealing due to the more attractive nature of their activities (Gottschall, 2009: 441). Meanwhile, as observed in some folktales, women have been relegated to silence or to unrestrained loquacity, depending on their goodness or evilness (Jorgensen, 2014: 24). This inequality is transferred to recent fantasy literature as a confrontation, which serves the author “to mirror the motivations, actions, and consequences for real-world women and girls making a similar journey” (Campbell, 2014: 11). In the case of epic fantasy, this journey corresponds to the hero’s (or heroine’s) journey. In the monomyth of the female hero, the woman

1 The feat is precisely one of the main elements of the hero, whose mythical nature is composed through tasks as “dragon-slaying, maiden-saving and magical transformations” (Bassil-Morozow, 2018: 32).

abandons passivity: she is no longer a prize to be won or lost, but instead she pursues her own goals while fighting the obstacles posed by her fictional world. For this task, she cannot remain silent nor limit herself to submission. This active behavior has sometimes been believed to be possible only in fiction due to the ideological aspect of this archetype, as noted by Howard and Prividera (2008: 293):

The ideological dimension of archetypal framing is revealed in how archetypes in ideological disfavor fade to the background and exist with little more than fictional significance. For example, women of any race or ethnicity are, by definition, not embraced as military actors in patriarchal social orders. Thus, the “woman warrior” archetype primarily manifests as fictional (e.g., Xena in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Sydney Bristow in *Alias*).

The confinement of the warrior-woman to fiction is related to the invisibility imposed on women in society. For example, a closer look at warfare contexts shows that women played various roles on war as “warriors, wives, civilian employees, volunteers, defense workers, or prostitutes/sex workers” (D’Amico & Weinstein, 1999: 4). However, the most recent military conflicts of our continent—World Wars being an example of this—fortunately prevent seeing women as main causes of wars, as we have been told in the myth about the war of Troy or the abduction of the Sabine women. Instead of this, it is more common to assign them a role more similar with what occurred in the upper classes of medieval society, with Joan of Arc or Margaret Paston being indicatives of this. Despite the veil that has sought to obscure the warrior woman, fiction strives to integrate her into the collective imagination by transferring the conflict into the narrative itself: a fictional world that oppresses the feminine, with a woman (or several of them) who fight for her own ideals—ideals different from those imposed by that oppressive world, which often seeks to reduce them to vessels of progeny.

The paradigmatic heroic woman in epic fantasy who fights to defend her ideals is undoubtedly Éowyn of Rohan (*The Lord of the Rings*, 1954, J.R.R. Tolkien). When Rohan must aid Minas Tirith, which is besieged by the forces of Mordor, Éowyn disobeys her uncle, King Théoden, who had asked her to remain in Edoras as a protector of women and children, playing this way a nearly maternal role. A role, I must say, contrary to her desire to help at the front lines of battle. To avoid being left

behind, Éowyn infiltrates the troops through cross-dressing, a method that here not only provides camouflage but also allows women—Éowyn in this case—to perform any action that would otherwise be forbidden to them (de Teresa Ochoa, 2015: 112). This stratagem enables her to overcome the first of her obstacles on her unique heroic journey. After that, Éowyn—disguised until then as the man-rider Dernhelm—achieves her greatest feat by confronting the Witch-king of Angmar, whom she defeats after he himself declares that no man could slay him. At this moment, Éowyn boldly proclaims: “But no living man am I!” (Tolkien, 1991[1955]: 823).

This heroic path of rebellion can also be found in other literary works of epic fantasy. A notable example is the character development of Daenerys Targaryen in *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga (1996–) by George R.R. Martin. As an exiled princess with no other support than her brother Viserys, who intends to use her as a bargaining chip, Daenerys rebels against the passive role others seek to impose on her. She learns to manipulate and even love her imposed husband, Khal Drogo, and later uses her dragons to forge her own path toward the throne. However, her actions remain only a partial feat, overshadowed by a (self-perceived) monstrous behavior. In contrast, Nona Grey (*Book of the Ancestor*, 2017–2019, Mark Lawrence) aligns more closely with the traditional hero’s journey. The beginning of her story places her within the orphan archetype, who must learn not only how to kill but also how to navigate the world. This phase is followed by systematic conflicts and killings, all executed without moral hesitation, all accompanied by a subtle romantic relationship with another woman, which emerges as a form of rebellion against the established system.

AN APPROACH TO MOTHERS, FALLEN WOMEN AND HEROINES IN EPIC FANTASY TELEVISION SERIES

If we turn our attention to mass media, such as television, we find that proactive and powerful female characters are a minority. For example, women appearing in U.S. prime-time programming, as Sink & Mastro point out (2016: 16), tend to be characterized as “young, submissive, and sexually provocative.” Thus, the presence of women in main roles on television is often reduced to caricature: “torn between passive femininity (the good mother, wife, girlfriend) and active masculinity (the ruthless, aggressive career bitch), [...] oscillating between the two and unable to achieve a stable sexual identity” (Bell & Sinclair, 2016: 277). This specific depiction

shapes how women are represented, particularly “the goals women set for themselves in terms of relationships, careers and appearance” (Hirschman & Stern, 2003: 164). For that reason, this image—potentially tied to certain female archetypes—will now be briefly examined in the context of epic fantasy.

Game of Thrones (2011–2019), the television adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, presented certain female portrayals consistent with the stereotypical, caricatured depiction of women. In the series, we witness the evolution of Cersei Lannister, played by Lena Headey, as she succumbs to the consequences of her sins: first, incest, and later, inappropriate sexual conduct. This aligns with the previously discussed archetype of the Fallen Woman, though in this case, her oppressors are the septons and septas of the Faith of the Seven, who strip her of her power and beauty through a graphic punishment, vividly depicted on-screen: a walk of shame during which her subjects insult her, spit on her... The humiliation is compounded by the shaving of her lioness-like mane of hair (a nod to the Lannister sigil, the rampant lion). But later, Cersei regains enough power to avenge the harm she endured, rebuild herself, and eliminate her enemies. This act, in line with what Bell and Sinclair pointed out, corresponds more closely to a traditional masculine image than a feminine one. Of course, Cersei’s rebellion against her word is more profound: her society does not understand her ambition, her wishes nor even her behavior. In addition, because of that she is punished explicitly. Although, as I have just pointed out, she is condemned but not defeated.



Figure 1. Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) during her Walk of Shame.

Source: Benioff & Weiss, 2011-2019.

Galadriel follows a different trajectory as one of the protagonists of *The Rings of Power* (2022–), a television series which adapts some of J.R.R. Tolkien’s stories. Her particularities are related mainly with her specific characterization, as this series is closer to fanfiction than to intermedial adaptation. In her case, Galadriel is distinctly portrayed as a warrior, wielding armor and sword without resorting to cross-dressing or any other symbolic device of rebellion. Such rebellion seems unnecessary in her case, as no one in her fictional world challenges her warrior role—a role more in line with the traditional hero than with any of the previously mentioned female archetypes. Her role is neither confined to the nurturing protection of the Mother nor to the oppression and suffering of the Fallen Woman. Instead, she acts with her own power and determination, embodying behaviors that even align with other conventions typical of the genre, such as the relationship between the hero and the artifact. All these manners suggest a character closer to a neutral definition of the heroism, which may not be related to the gender of the characters. A definition that suggests being a hero is not connected with being a man—the traditional archetype from the myth—or a woman, whose rebellion is, in one way, a threat to her fictional world, and, in another other way, an announcement of her proactive (and even her bellicose) behavior. In her world, Galadriel is a neutral hero whose fight is not about her gender, but about her survival against Sauron’s darkness.



Figure 2. Galadriel (Morfydd Clark), ready to battle.

Source: Payne & McKay, 2022–.

FINAL WORDS

Epic fantasy's application of patterns of verisimilitude in world-building also necessitates the creation of believable characters that align with our social and moral evolution. Consequently, literature and other artistic media often reflect the submission women have endured throughout history. It is precisely the presence of epic fantasy in non-literary media that allows for greater accessibility to a wider audience. Television serves as a prime example, because the portrayal of female characters is sometimes based on caricature, exaggerating two opposing moral extremes as, in my view, an analogy of the conflict between oppressors and oppressed. Even so, in epic fantasy works in television, the heroic presence of women is beginning to be more frequent and intense, aligning more closely with traditional archetypal standards of the hero. In other words, the departure from the original archetype is becoming more neutral, without relying on subterfuge or tools of rebellion—such as cross-dressing or the vengeance of the Fallen Woman archetype—as seen in literature. In this way we are seeing more heroines defined by their capability to achieve feats, as the Galadriel portrayed by Morfydd Clark, rather than by actions conditioned by their culturally constructed gender roles, as Cersei Lannister. Is this an attempt to render feminine behavior invisible once again? Are female heroes less independent of their gender and closer to a new literary stereotype? Or are they acting because of the freedom provided by their fictional world? A freedom that simply allows them to be *heroines*, and nothing more.

Therefore, from my point of view, it is essential to focus on a unified heroic archetype. An archetype with the heroic feat as its new core—an archetype which would be valid for male characters, but also to female ones. Thus, this approach may allow us to distinguish the proactive behavior of female heroes as independent entities from the stereotypical portrayal that reduces them to a web of reactions—positive or negative—defined by their relationships with male characters. A heroic archetype that draws primarily on its fictional world—while still partly relying on cultural constructs from the real one, it draws most significantly from those generated within the fictional one—to shape its inner dimensions: gender conflicts, behavioral patterns, identity, and the like. Even so, this analysis could be enriched by studies about the feminity of these characters

and their (closer or not) construction as women in fiction. The same way that heroic male characters could be analyzed searching for, *in exempla*, traces of toxic masculinity in their core.

Although further work is needed to substantiate that idea, this model could allow us to see how the female hero—like the male hero—should stand out specifically for her feats within the fictional world in accordance with its own rules. In essence, the characters ruled by this archetype may emerge as women who do not necessarily have to rely on more prominent male characters... because they only need themselves to be the protagonists of their own story.

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BEYOND REALITY; TRANSMEDIA LANDSCAPES IN FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

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Fantasy generates an infinite constellation of stories, anchored in symbols and imaginaries where humans identify, both individually and collectively. Fantasy can become a powerful tool to train designers; as a necessary background, as a trigger of future designs, rooted on previous imaginaries and to expand culture itself -isn't that how, indeed, Fantasy is always flowing? -. Fantasy can also become a basis of cooperation, since Fantasy embodiment leads to narrative and sharing, as well as to design convergence. Hands on design usually entails working in design groups, where collective outcomes improve individual performance, even when, or even based on divergence.

Communication has encompassed a new paradigm in the 21st century, where the boundaries outlining subjects and objects in the different cultural fields have been demolished, and where cultural imaginaries have been rewritten (Butler, 2024). Features of contemporary society, such as the use of mediation technologies at the ser-

vice of a macro and micro administration of the world's economy (Sadin, 2017), the advent artificial intelligence (AI) and the revolution of massive data (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), have converged with the current crisis of mass communication media -entailing the weakening of democratic systems and the spread of distrust in discourse- (Broncano, 2020). We are currently facing overwhelming challenges to train professionals in a deep understanding of the world we live in, to help them build criteria based on a holistic analysis. This is an ongoing process at Higher Education nowadays, given the ambivalence of institutions as connections to the economic system and, at the same time, to the interests of a more just and equitable society (Ramos-Vallecillo, Murillo-Ligorred, 2024). Studies devoted to training students in the fields of entertainment, design and communication are particularly in need of deep analysis connecting their professional activity to its impact in society (Hösle, 2018).

The Degree in Transmedia Design and Project Management, taught at La Salle Campus Madrid (CSEU La Salle), strives to develop comprehensive training, combining a humanistic approach with the development of technical skills. A characteristic aspect is anchoring learning in a cultural framework that boosts creativity and cultural knowledge, entailing its analysis and interpretation. Transmedia narrative relies on the theoretical tradition of communication studies of the late twentieth century, integrating technology, culture and society (Jenkins, 2010). The degree offers training in storytelling and production of entertainment -fiction and video games-, communication and marketing, graphic and multimedia design, web design, and technological trends (Big Data, Robotics, VR and AR). Transmedia conceptualizes the audience/gamers/readers/viewers as articulators of the communicative act imbricated in the productions.

The degree has been committed overtime to review its curricular and methodological approaches to embrace a humanistic perspective. This entails a deep knowledge of professional environments and of the systemic nature of the prevailing capitalist culture (with its opportunities and challenges). In this attempt the degree and its team have searched for opportunities to develop student's skills to analyze the context with a holistic perspective and to make decisions considering one's own values and the repercussions on the target community (ethics or deontology). In this process, it has been key to promote cultural knowledge through access to a variety of cultural contents from different periods and typology (Hernández-Sellés, et al., 2023).

Throughout this search and commitment, a group of teachers came across the design of integrated projects, that is, a Project Based Learning activity, that integrates subjects, and therefore students, from different years in the Degree in Transmedia Design and Project Management. These projects facilitate the interrelation of learning about the macro and micro levels that make up a transmedia project, in the phases of design and development. The process allows the development of skills such as group work management, leadership, conflict resolution and critical thinking.

The rationale behind the Integrated Projects connects to the following goals:

1. Interweaving curriculum
2. Developing collaborative projects
3. Connecting us and with the professional context

INTERWEAVING CURRICULUM

Learning is not linear, nor can it be grouped into boxes in a totally efficient manner. Of course, university structures force us to organize a coherent curriculum to develop student's competences. However, weaving and re-mixing learning assigned to different subjects arise opportunities to experience situations closer to reality. In the case of interdisciplinary projects in the Degree in Transmedia Design and Project Management, collaboration occurs between, normally, 2 or 3 subjects per course, making a total of 8 to 12 subjects per project. Students collaborate in multi-course groups during a month. Lessons don't stop except for one day a week, where they can just devote time to their projects. At the end, there is a showcase, a kind of celebration, where students present their final work gathering over 130 students and also teachers and university staff.

DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

There was no doubt that collaboration would become a key element of these projects. Research has proven that collaboration improves individual learning and performance, though it needs careful planning and constant

feedback. That's why teacher's roles are key at this point, to guide and support students when necessary (Baloche et al., 2017; Borge et al., 2018).

Students worked in groups of 5-6 students to design their projects, based on unstructured problems, or challenges to be solved. The trigger always involves processes of cooperation and negotiation to conceptualize and design the outcome. Teachers also work collaboratively to design problems or projects that integrate subject competences and to make sure other cross-curricular competences are attained (Williams, Morgan, & Cameron, 2011)

Assessment integrates the outcome (counting on an expert's panel, invited to the final event), peer assessment (including outcome and collaboration process), process assessment and subject-related assessment. Students' active participation in assessment is associated with commitment to the project and to the regulation of group relations, which are considered long-life learning competences (Evans, 2013). All the teachers involved incorporate an internal assessment, therefore, formal assessment occurs within each subject. Teachers normally assign an evaluation percentage of 20% to 40% of the final grade to the project, contemplating difficulty, effort or relevance of the project within the subject's curriculum.

CONNECTING US AND WITH THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

To articulate integrated projects, collaboration among faculty is essential. Without it, collaboration among students is unlikely to occur. In themselves, well-structured teaching/learning projects favor collaboration among the faculty and lead to personal and professional benefits. On the one hand, making acquaintance, on the other hand, generating deeper understanding of transmedia culture through dialoging to design projects and, of course, through observation of students processes and outcomes.

Integrated Projects involve the teacher in a variety of roles to choose the right task type, interacting as models to students, providing advice and constant feedback and modelling complex assessment (Hernández-Sellés, et al., 2023). Time and load work are not great allies in this matter; teachers need support and time to design projects and to adjust the subjects they teach to incorporate integrated projects within. In this sense, it is important to promote the articulation and acknowledgment of these experiences within institutions as opposed to university policies that usually align teachers' success and recognition exclusively to research (Van Dijk, et al. 2020).

Research is conclusive that interaction has a significant impact on teacher and students' motivation and bonding (Pérez-Mateo & Guitert, 2012). Universities strive to create a sense of belonging and persistence and indeed this article intends to encourage universities at the macro (institutional) and micro (classroom) level them to promote projects and support teachers in the delicate and devoted work of teaching.

In this project we had the opportunity to collaborate with Adobe Education, as a partner. They promoted the project by providing students with complementary tuition on Adobe Professional Tools, they also financed final awards for students and a donation to an NGO, chosen by the "best project" awarded team. Thanks to this collaboration we could count on an external professional jury. This was an enhancement for students' implication.

BEYOND REALITY; TRANSMEDIA LANDSCAPES IN FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

Beyond reality; transmedia landscapes in fictional narrative is an integrated collaborative project in which student's teams were formed with a mix of students from the second, third and fourth year of the Degree in Transmedia Project Design and Management. The differences and similarities between the members of each team, the variety of their skills and knowledge, the diversity of their interests and the ability to reach agreements and plan the task were considered optimal conditions for working on a complex project (Butler, Holden and Lidwell, 2011).

Under these premises, the selected stories and a series of concept art will serve as a starting point for the generation of expanded narratives in which 3 subjects from each course (2, 3 and 4 course) and their students participate.

The selected stories are:

1. Berenice. Edgar Alan Poe
2. The Phoenix on the Sword. Robert E. Howard
3. The Rule of Names. Ursula K. Leguin
4. The Whisperer in Darkness. HP Lovecraft
5. The resurrected. Emilia Pardo Bazán
6. Steavy and the Dark. Zenna Henderson

Deliverables of the project are:

Project Document. Components: team introduction+work culture + group agreements, project goals, justification, benchmarking and audience analysis, human resources and teamwork, communications, project plan. Transmedia narrative proposal with synopsis, treatment, story and audio-visual analysis.

Graphic consistency of the project: Covers for the book collection. Poster. Teaser (Technical script and design). Project website. AR component. Communication strategy.

In the project, the classroom is articulated as a space to reflect on the text and think through images. The possibility of designing the transmedia expansion of the different fantastic stories goes through a process of conceptualization, execution and communication. Narrative texts offer students the opportunity to encounter a gallery of mirrors to identify themselves, feel uncomfortable and learn.

Students were offered a logical sequence of tasks. The first step in the experience was understanding the story and interpreting the text to design a coherent narrative expansion. The selected stories, by H.P. Lovecraft, Ursula K. Le Guin, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Robert E. Howard, Edgar Allan Poe and Zenna Henderson, use ordinary fantasy and horror narrative symbols and imagery to talk about the human experience. Indeed, fantasy is the perfect vehicle, K. Le Guin (2018) states that “the most revealing and accurate descriptions of our everyday lives are traversed by the uncanny, or displaced in time, or set in imaginary worlds” (p.77). This offers a suggestive setting for graphic exploration. Thus, teams devise the expansion of each story and construct images capable of conveying complex messages. This part of the process requires abstract thinking and an intellectual approach to visual creation that translates into a workflow where it is necessary to manage the tension generated between representation, interpretation and communication (Wong, 2011).

The combination of diverse cultural references, biases and interpretations within each group translates into a mixture of consensus and disputes about how to graphically express the selected messages. This opens up a space where it is possible to depict the unreal, the unexpected or the fearful. Graphic ideation relates to life experience, connecting emotions and constructs in an attempt to capture the essential meaning of a set of concepts (Dondis, 1976).

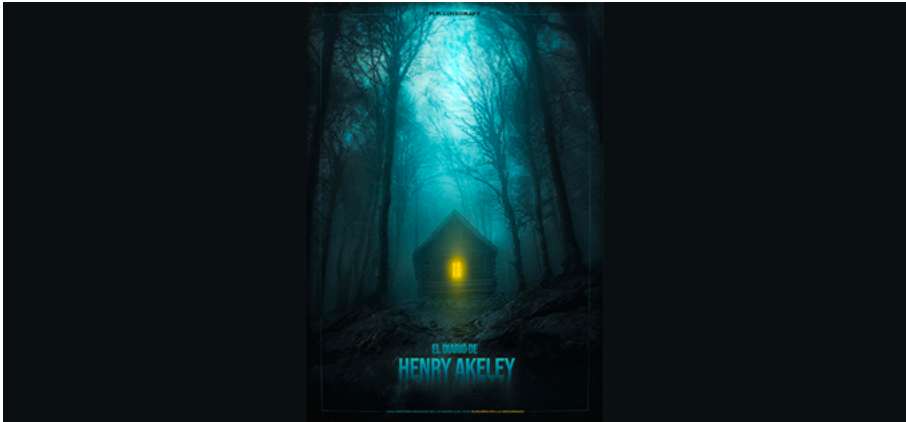


Figure 1: El diario de Henry Akeley. Poster of the transmedia expansion of *The Whisperer in Darkness*. HP Lovecraft.

Source: Paula Cenalmor, Hannia Mayte López Zavala y Rocío Bo Pallarés. Transmedia students. 2024.

Here come into play the imaginary and visual codes of the fantastic and horror narratives, fed from literature, comics, cinema or television. Among the first sketches it was possible to grasp a repetition of graphic and literal resources. Therefore, and, in order not to lose track of the conceptualization outline and graphic coherence between narrative, art and communication strategy, it is necessary to establish a continuous work of abstraction and iteration of the design to move forward. Figure 1 is an illustration of the use of dark tones or morphological elements to generate tension are recurring elements in traditional representations of fantasy and horror. These codes are present and mixed with graphic expressions closer to the aesthetic referents of Z Generation in the different proposals of groups. Narrative expansions also approach media that are close to student's experiences, such as social networks, video games or streaming platforms.

If aesthetic references and online life influence conceptual and graphic ideation processes of groups, we cannot ignore the fact that their relationship with the image is mediated by the same references. The link between the observer and the observed has changed in several ways. Some of these alterations have to do with the concept of time exposure to images, which is now short,

in particular in their experience online, or the mutability of images, in a time where images are in constant mutation. Students are accustomed to relating to images in continuous transformation. The meme culture and the transience of the image turn any content into a candidate to metamorphose a thousand times (Tanni, 2023).

It is a very interesting starting point at a graphic level because of the infinite capacity to keep expanding the story. The decision of, even, not controlling design at all, aware that it will probably end up becoming other things. This lack of control, far from being assumed with regrets, is a natural context for students, opening a space for freedom and experimentation. As Tanni (2023) states:

The entire history of art is the object of a continuous action of appropriation and reinterpretation: images are downloaded, modified and then reintroduced into the flow of communication. An unstoppable and vertiginous cycle that makes any content unstable, changing, never definitive (p.9).

New proposals arise from this dialogue, where fantasy codes (and from other territories) are appropriated. Hence, design process acquire an even greater value, since it is on this path that we understand how the design work is anchored in the stories.

In order to briefly illustrate the results of the interdisciplinary project, we will introduce as a case study the transmedia expansion elaborated by one of the groups around Zenna Henderson's story *Stevie and the Darkness*. The students pointed out that fear of the unknown and overcoming it were the central themes of the text. *Darkness* represents the uncanny, not only in otherness, but also within the protagonist himself.

On the one hand, the group has come up with a collection of fantasy-themed books under the name *Umbral* (threshold). They seek to represent the border between light and darkness, the known and the unknown, the stable and the terrifying. The first story of the collection is the text by Zenna Henderson, but their proposal completes the design of the collection with related texts.



Figure 2: Cover of the book Steavy and the Dark by Zenna Henderson

Source: Ana Bastante, Sara Rodríguez y Daniel Utrilla. Transmedia students. 2024.

The cover design (figure 2) is a circular die-cut that works by contrast. The inner black pages die-cut in smaller and smaller circles, generating the feeling of penetrating the story darkness page by page. Both Stevie and the reader fall and enter the darkness. It is necessary to reach the end and to get to know what is frightening in order to face it. The use of a black and white palette, a sans serif typeface combination and simple composition offer a contemporary language.

On the other hand, this team decided to expand the narrative in a video game aimed at young audiences (figure 3). In this game, the protagonist must overcome scenarios and creatures that represent different fears.

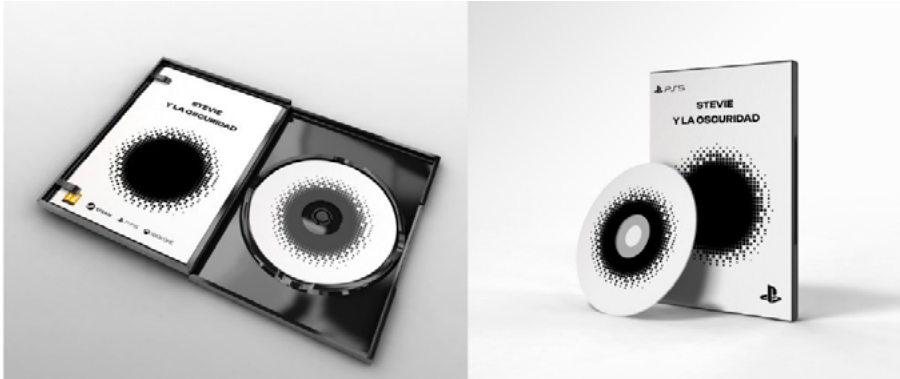


Figure 3: Cover and interiors of the transmedia expansion in video game format based on Steavy and the Dark by Zenna Henderson

Source: Ana Bastante, Sara Rodríguez y Daniel Utrilla. Transmedia students. 2024.

This group generated a graphic continuity adapted to the new format, in this case digital. To do so, they used the language of pixels, which serves as a connection with the medium and as a narrative thread to talk about the shadows of the online world. They established a series of levels in the game dedicated to various fears such as the unknown, loneliness or failure.

The integrated collaborative project *Beyond reality; transmedia landscapes in fictional narrative* offers new visions of the graphic code, traditionally attributed to fantasy and horror, that make us experience Fantasy as a tool to reflect, learn and create. The coexistence between text and graphic development expands and stimulates the narrative possibilities of the medium.

Based on this experience, we can conclude that fantasy is a favorable vehicle for developing designer's skills and integrating the learning of different subjects. Fantasy allows the design of projects in which abstract thinking, team management, creativity or interpersonal communication are approached in a transversal way. Cooperative work opens a space in which the learning experience puts students at the center and allows them to observe their own process and growth. On the other hand, it also allows for cooperation between teachers.

In the field of higher education there is a growing implementation of transversal and cooperative projects, because they provide opportunities to

improve individual performance, to develop soft skills and to simulate future workplace dynamics. In spite of the growing expansion of project-based learning, the design and implementation of these types of projects is a challenge for educational centers. It is necessary to foster and provide time and space for coordination among teachers, to design, monitor and assess these experiences. Institutional policies and institutional culture should acknowledge pedagogical experiences, as much as research, to improve student's training and to promote teacher's collaboration.

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THE INFLUENCE OF *HOUSE OF LEAVES* IN VIDEO GAMES

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INTRODUCTION

House of Leaves (Danielewski, 2000) was the first novel published by Mark Z. Danielewski. Its complex structure and mixture of genres, such as psychological horror and self-referential narrative, made it a cult work almost immediately, being the first novel to implement the move from electronic to paper ergodic literature.

Although widely recognised in academic circles, Danielewski's experimental literature remains largely unknown to mainstream readers, in part because of the author's decision not to favour its adaptation to other audiovisual platforms such as films, comics or video games.

This chapter presents a summary and brief analysis of *House of Leaves* and then examines some video games clearly influenced by the novel, with a particular focus on *MyHouse.wad*. This is not an independent video game as such, but an extension for *Doom II* (1994), a game well known in the modding community. Using this approach, the author of the mod has been able to recreate some of Danielewski's obsessions through a game that, thanks to its low

requirements, can be played on practically any computer, making it accessible to anyone interested in the book.

HOUSE OF LEAVES

House of Leaves is a truly fascinating work. Its structure presents several layers, superposed like those of an onion, in which several narrators take turns to provide information using different typography. The innermost layer is about famous photojournalist Will Navidson and his wife Karen, who describe what happened in the house on Ash Tree Lane in documentary-style video footage. Next is Zampanò, an elderly blind man who, in the last years of his life, has dedicated himself to narrating the events that happened to the Navidson family in their new home in Virginia. The next layer is represented by Johnny Truant, a young drug and alcohol addict who discovers Zampanò's manuscript and becomes obsessed with it. Page after page, Johnny incorporates comments to Zampanò's text, adding information about his own experiences, which allows us to witness his descent into madness. Finally, above all we can find the supposed editor of the book, who adds some clarifications to Truant's notes.

In parallel, *House of Leaves* presents another layered structure, but this time of impossibilities or, at least, of situations that cast a shadow of doubt over what is being narrated. The first and most obvious one is that the house exhibits some behaviours that are physically impossible. Apart from that, Johnny himself acknowledges that the audiovisual material on which Zampanò is based, a documentary named *The Navidson Record*, is impossible to find. Despite including in his writings the opinion of several experts who had supposedly reviewed that material, when Johnny contacts them he discovers, to his surprise, that none had any knowledge of the matter. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that the manuscript and the notes that Johnny finds are the work of a blind man, and that the manuscript contains many invented academic references, adding more confusion to the story. As if that was not enough, throughout his notes Johnny reveals how he and his friend Lude used to make up stories to impress girls, which adds a new overlay of suspicion on what is narrated. The letters Johnny's mother wrote to him, which are included as an appendix at the end of the book, provide the final layer of uncertainty.

The story at the core, however, is very clear. After moving with his family to a house in Virginia where Will Navidson hopes to rebuild the relationship with his wife Karen, who has been affected by her husband's long professional absences, some surprising events begin to happen. The first of these occurs when, after spending a few days away, they return to their home to discover a door in the hallway leading to the bedroom of their children Chad and Daisy that was not there before. Perplexed, upon consulting the house plans and running some tests, Navidson discovers that the inside of the house measures more than the outside. After investigating the matter with his brother Tom and his friend Bill Reston, they are unable to arrive at any rational conclusion. Not only that, but some days later a dark hallway appears behind one of the doors. Navidson enters the corridor and discovers that it contains forks and other doors leading to empty rooms, causing him to be on the verge of getting lost in this first visit due to the lack of light in that environment.

After promising his wife that he would not go back to investigate the area alone, he and his brother decide to call an explorer named Holloway, who together with two assistants will make four expeditions. In the first one, they confirm what Navidson had already discovered, that the door does indeed seem to lead to an alternate reality where the walls are uniform, ash grey, and the only things that can be found there are corridors and doors leading to empty rooms with not a single object in sight. After getting better prepared, given the almost absolute darkness and the prevailing cold behind the door (practically 0 °C), they make a second expedition in which they reach a large room with a spiral staircase in its centre that descends seemingly without end. In the third expedition they descend the staircase, but after several hours they decide to return to better prepare themselves given the limited provisions they had for that day. On the fourth expedition they make it to the bottom of the stairs, but Holloway gradually loses his mind until he shoots one of his assistants and runs away.

As the fourth expedition was intended to last only five days and there had been no news of the group for some time, on the eighth day Navidson decides to organise a rescue party. As a result, they manage to recover the dead body of one of Holloways' teammates, while the other assistant is found seriously wounded. But just as they are about to return and Navidson is the only

one left at the foot of the stairs, they unnaturally increase their length many times over, leaving Navidson alone in the alternate reality.

When everyone had given up hope of ever seeing Navidson again, he appears through the hallway door several days later, dehydrated and exhausted. After telling them that Holloway had killed himself, when they are preparing to leave, the house begins to implode, dragging Tom into the void while the others manage to get to safety. Emotionally shattered by the loss of his brother, after several months Navidson decides to go back to the house alone. That results in Karen also returning to the house in hope that Navidson will reappear as he did last time, only now there is no door or hallway leading to the dark zone. Meanwhile, Navidson completes a journey through the alternate reality and ends up floating in an endless void from which he is only rescued when Karen overcomes her fears and enters the dark zone through an opening the house has created for her. Soon after that, they both reappear in the house and manage to get to safety, although Navidson loses the use of a hand and an eye due to long exposure to the cold.

Parallel to this narrative we are witnesses of the descent into madness of Johnny, who becomes increasingly obsessed with the manuscript to the point of quitting his job in a tattoo shop and isolating himself at home to study it. Johnny is assailed by sudden terrors and begins to exhibit the same strange behaviour as Zampanò, such as measuring his room every day to make sure its size has not changed. As the months go by Johnny loses contact with all his friends and acquaintances, but the climax of his mental instability is reached when he discovers that his friend Lude had died while he was traveling, trying to find the house of the story. Not knowing whether the situations he experiences are real or not, at the end of the book it is revealed that Johnny's mother was secluded in a mental institution, which could serve as an explanation for her son's addictions and the obsession he developed with the book.

As anyone who has approached Danielewski's novel will have noticed, *House of Leaves* is a complex work. As if the existence of multiple narrators or the doubts implanted by the author himself about the sincerity and sanity of his characters were not enough, Danielewski uses the text itself to transmit different emotions and to confuse the reader. For example, during the excursions into the dark zone, the reader is offered pages with a shocking structure, using inverted

texts with different symmetries, endless lists of people, places or buildings that reflect the saturation and confusion of the characters lost in the labyrinthine zone, or almost blank pages evoking the emptiness in which Navidson ends up finding himself.

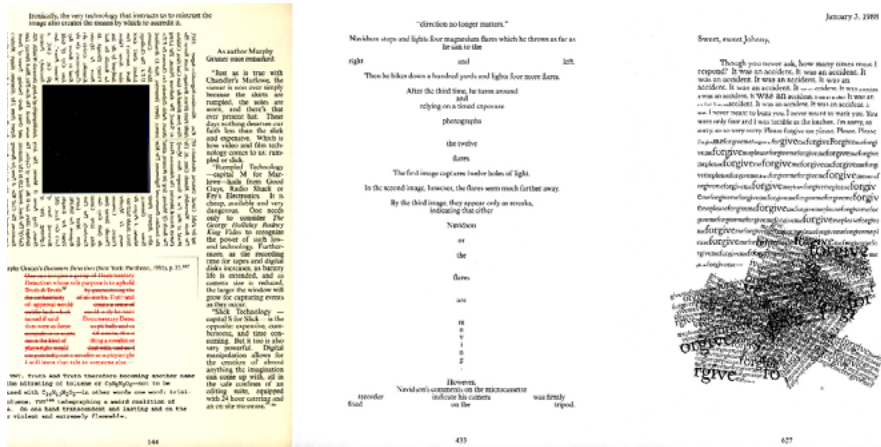


Figure 1. Sample pages from *House of Leaves* (Danielewski, 2000).

This makes Danielewski’s novel arguably the first example of ergodic literature, a term derived from the Greek words *ergon* (“work”) and *hodos* (“way” or “path”) as proposed by Espen J. Aarseth in 1997. According to Ángela Sánchez de Vera (2021), ergodic literature requires a non-trivial effort on the part of the reader to traverse the text. The reader of this type of books can be seen as a gambler, an explorer who can get lost in the text or discover secret paths. Some examples of ergodic literature are *The Leaving*, by Tara Altebrando (2016), and *S.*, a book imagined by J.J. Abrams and written by Doug Dorst (2023).

As it might be expected, *House of Leaves* is full of references (either direct or indirect) to other works. For example, the large number of invented academic references inevitably recalls some of the works by Borges and Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (Lem, 1970). Besides, the exploration through chambers and rooms while fighting a primal terror offers a parallel to H. P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* (Lovecraft, 1973). Even the very name of the author of the manuscript, Zampanò, has echoes of Zapruder (a name that appears in the book itself), in

the sense of being the person who allowed the world to take a glimpse at a dark world, even if it was involuntarily.

House of Leaves can be interpreted and analysed in different ways. It can be seen as a horror novel, but also as a love story between Navidson and his wife, or as a book about the meaning of loss, either of loved ones or of sanity. For example, Irmtraud Huber (2014) analysed the book as a postmodernist work, dissecting its complex structure and narrative. A few years later, Lili-Marlen Liblik (2020) explored the horror elements present in the book. As another example, Caroline Hagood (2012) focused her study on the narrative structure itself. There are numerous other studies on Danielewski's work, demonstrating the interest his novel has generated since its publication.

Unsurprisingly, the success of *House of Leaves* opened the door to several works directly or indirectly inspired by it. Regarding literature, a clear example is *Du hättest gehen sollen* (Kehlmann, 2016). In this book, a writer rents a house online to stay with his wife and daughter during their holidays. While trying to write a screenplay, strange phenomena start to happen at the house, with the writer getting lost inside it. In 2020, the book was adapted into a film called *You Should Have Left* (Koepp, 2020). In the film, Kevin Bacon is a retired banker who, after arriving at a solitary holiday house in Wales to rest for a few days, starts experimenting disconcerting events and at one point decides to measure both the inside and the outside, discovering the same as Navidson did. Another similarity is that his character ends up opening a newly appearing door that leads to a scary corridor full of additional doors connecting to more rooms or acting as portals to other parts of the house. Finally, in one of the scenes he must go down a staircase in order to find his missing daughter, although in this case it only takes him some minutes to go down the stairs, and the style of the newly created rooms is dark but derelict, in contrast to the alternate reality in Danielewski's work.

VIDEO GAMES APPROACHES TO *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

Given the difficulties presented by the unconventional structure of its narrative and Danielewski's reluctance to allow adaptations of his book to other visual platforms, it seems unlikely that we will be able to enjoy a direct film or

video game version of *House of Leaves*. However, this does not mean that the novel has not been a primary source of inspiration for some creators. In this sense, video games are perhaps the medium in which it is easier to translate the ideas developed by Danielewski.

Anatomy is a horror adventure game developed by an independent author under the pseudonym Kitty Horrorshow (2016). In the game, the player must explore a darkened house while collecting audio tapes that must be inserted into a cassette player for the story to continue. As the house is in darkness, the only light cast into the rooms is the one projected by the video camera recorder used by the game character, which mimics the situation faced by both Navidson and Holloway during their explorations of the dark zone. Apart from this, the only similarity to *House of Leaves* is a portal that opens inside the house at one point, though it leads into a primitive cave rather than the maze of corridors and rooms of the novel.

2000 Navidson Lane (Sturdivant, 2022) is a short horror game developed by the independent creator Dylan Sturdivant. In this game, the main character is someone who, desperate for cash, takes on an apparently easy job: checking on a vacant investment property for a landlord. At the start of the game the screen shows what appears to be the contents of a video camera recording inside a two-storey family house. The graphics are realistic, and the player needs to walk through the various rooms until he finds a door leading to a long hallway. At the end of the hallway there are several labyrinthine rooms, in a style popular in the *backroom* genre. In this genre, characters typically lose consciousness while performing a daily task and appear in what looks like an alternate reality, immersed in a maze of randomly segmented monochrome rooms lit by fluorescent lights. *2000 Navidson Lane* is a short game (it was developed in seven days as an assignment for the DreadXP's Found Footage Game Jam 2022) that incorporates the use of a video camera as in *The Navidson Record* and features a maze-like environment, although in this case the rooms in the maze are wallpapered and randomly lit instead of being in darkness. Beyond the reference in the game's title, there are no other analogies to *House of Leaves*.

The Navidson Record (Toothmonster, 2020) is a tribute to the book that shares its name with the recording of the events that take place in Danielewski's novel. It was developed by an independent creator under the pseudonym Tooth-

monster for three weeks as part of his graduate program. This game uses simple graphics (typical of casual games) and an isometric view. The game begins when Navidson and his family return from their trip, just before the door to the dark zone appears. Up to that point, the game includes some textual dialogue from the book, which reinforces the feeling of playing a video game implementation of *House of Leaves*. Once Navidson ventures into the dark zone, the graphics switch to black and white, providing a contrast to the interior of the house.

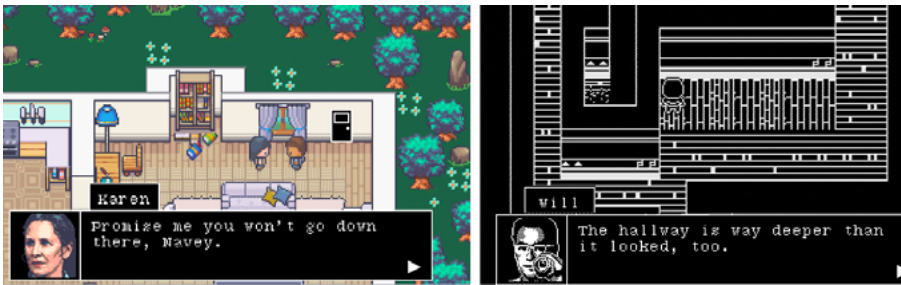


Figure 2. Screenshots from *The Navidson Record* (Toothmonster, 2020).

During the exploration of the dark zone, Navidson encounters a monster of undefined shape (a black ball that generates distortions in its vicinity), but which is possible to evade by hiding at certain places. Finally, Navidson reaches a seemingly endless staircase which leads to one of the game's two endings, in which after a few days Karen discovers a recording tape on the floor of her house smeared with blood (in the other ending, Navidson decides not to enter the hallway and calls his brother Tom instead). Despite its brevity, the game faithfully recreates small parts of the novel, mainly through the direct inclusion of four characters (Navidson, Karen, Chad, and Daisy), the mention of a fifth character (Tom), the use of verbatim dialogue from the book, and the appearance of the staircase (although, due to graphic limitations, it takes the form of a regular staircase instead of a spiral one).

Of the video games related to Danielewski's work, *MyHouse.wad* is perhaps the most interesting, not only because of its length, but also because of its characteristics and the mysterious circumstances surrounding its creation. Properly speaking, *MyHouse.wad* is not a video game, but a mod for *Doom II*, a first-person shooter game developed for MS-DOS by id Software (1994). For

clarification, a mod (short for modification) is a software extension usually developed by a community of amateurs that modifies the original content of a video game and may add new content or features.

MyHouse.wad was announced on the Doomworld forum on March 3, 2023 (Veddege, 2023). In the posted message, user Veddege reported that the mod was a tribute to a childhood friend who had recently passed away. Veddege (whose real name seems to be Steve Nelson, according to the game's files) commented on the forum that both he and Thomas (his deceased friend) had enjoyed modding *Doom* (1993), and that during the funeral Thomas' parents had given him some floppy disks, among which was an early version of the mod. With some effort, Steve spent the next few months developing new content for the mod.

The premise is apparently simple (the mod has an estimated duration of ten minutes) but, as with *House of Leaves*, this is only the first layer of a story that is much more complex than it seems at first glance. The download link in Veddege's post leads to a cloud directory with different elements: a folder with the files needed to play the mod, another one with some pictures of the house on which the game is based, a gas station (which is also part of the content of the game), and a group of teenagers in what appear to be high school events, a third folder with screenshots of the game (some of them simulating a complete lack of light), a fourth folder with three images of a sketchbook and, finally, a text file with a diary, about which we will come back later.



August 16, 2022

I attended the funeral of my childhood friend, and I was overwhelmed with grief. As I looked around at everyone else in the room, I could feel the sadness in the air.

The service was beautiful and the pastor said some kind words about my friend that made me feel better. After the service, I went back to my friend's parent's [house](#) and spent some time with the

At the end of the visit, his parents gave me some old personal items that belonged to my friend. I was surprised to find a stack of old discs containing some Doom file backups.



Figure 3. Images from the cloud directory (Veddege, 2023).

When running the mod, we enter a level similar to those of *Doom II*, but developed in a three-level house (basement, second floor, and attic), with a small terrain enclosed by a fence surrounding it. As mentioned before, it is possible to complete this level in ten minutes, but the really interesting part begins when some specific steps are followed. For example, if all the faucets in the house are opened, it will be possible to dive into the bathtub, so that when you come out, the house will be completely flooded. Similarly, if a fuse panel is activated, next the player will find the house on fire. As another example, by going outside around the house once, all the previously killed enemies will come back to life as if we were in a parallel reality. In all the cases, performing these actions will give us access to new areas, such as the attic where there is a mirror that can be used to walk into an alternate version of the house or a corridor in the image and likeness of *House of Leaves*, where we can enter and feel in first person the anguish that comes from wandering through multiple corridors and rooms of grey walls with barely any light. This is not the only reference to Danielewski's work, as at the end of the first level a real state sign with the name "Navidson" appears before finishing the level.



Figure 4. Screenshots from *MyHouse.wad* (Veddge, 2023).

The rest of the game is even more confusing. Using the appropriate doors, it is possible to visit a disturbing backroom, a nursery, an airport, a hospital (all of them deserted), or a wooded area in the middle of the night with a gas station very similar to one of the images posted in the online repository.

The diary that accompanies the files contains more similarities with *House of Leaves*. Starting with the clearest of all, the word "house" appears in blue, as it does in the book, and some paragraphs are crossed out, in keeping with Danielewski's style. On the other hand, the diary recounts how Tom's sketchbook showed increasingly dark drawings, suggesting the delicate mental state he was

going through. Similarly, the diary shows its author's growing obsession with the mod, like the compulsion that drives Johnny to madness. Finally, some of the locations in the mod (the nursery, the plane, the bathtub, the gas station, etc.) are presented in the diary as nightmares, giving the player clues about what they might find in the mod. It is inevitable to wonder whether the story developed in the diary is real or a fiction, just like Zampanò's.

Not only does *Myhouse.wad* have enough content to function as a stand-alone game, but its twists are very well planned out and executed, which shows great technical expertise and respect for both *House of Leaves* and the Doom world. Although this mod is not a direct adaptation of the book, it contains enough elements to be considered a game heavily influenced by Danielewski's work. Given the intrinsic difficulty of adapting *House of Leaves* to any medium other than literature, these types of games will probably be the only way to experience, at least in part, the horror and anguish felt when reading *House of Leaves*.

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FAIRY TALES AND FANTASY: MAPPING THE CHRONOTOPE OF *OLVIDADO REY GUDÚ*¹

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Ana María Matute is one of the most celebrated twentieth-century Spanish writers. However, although a consensus about her lyrical prose of extraordinary quality has been reached, none exists over her relationship with the so-called Generation of '50. Her literary style and her personal worldview, both strikingly unique, distinguished her from her contemporaries, but also highlighted her otherness and reinforced her isolation. In fact, Sanz Villanueva labels her as part of the imprecise category known as "Other writers" (Vassileva Kojouharova, 1994). He is one of the academics that misjudges the use of fantasy and folk-tale characteristics in Matute's narrative. Sanz Villanueva comments on the overflowing fantasy, which he suggests that is irreconcilable with her previous works. In the light of these considerations, the purpose of this paper is to challenge the notion that an insurmountable barrier isolates her "medieval trilogy" from the bulk of her work. Despite being one of the most laureate Spanish authors, none of the novels that constitute this medieval trilogy received

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prestigious awards, contrary to most of her early texts, which were nearer to social realism. Since 1996, the renowned prizes Matute received were devoted to her whole career, but not to the work she considered to be her magnum opus: *Olvidado Rey Gudú* —literally, *Forgotten King Gudú*.

Among these honours, she was elected as a member of the *Real Academia Española* —literally, Royal Spanish Academy. In 1998, she delivered her acceptance speech, which was titled *En el bosque* —literally, *In the forest*. However, it should be noted that, as Matute indicated in an interview with Gazarian-Gautier, the original title was *El territorio de la fantasía* —literally, *The territory of fantasy*. This modification is enlightening, especially if the whole speech is taken into consideration. *En el bosque* is a heartfelt plea for the appreciation of fantasy. Matute passionately states the importance of the folk tale as an ancient, long-lived and highly knowledgeable voice that, despite its primitiveness and crudeness —or precisely because of it—, blends fantasy and reality. According to her, life is enriched and nurtured by fantasy. Fairy tales amuse, but not instruct, as there is no moralistic approach. Their purpose is to offer guidance and counsel that may foster readers' —and listeners'— imagination and reasoning. In his essay *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bettelheim focuses on children. However, his ideas may be extrapolated to humankind. Therefore, "wisdom does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus's head; it is built up, small step by small step, from most irrational beginnings" (1975/2010, p. 3). It lasts a lifetime, during which folk tales can fulfil a decisive role: "Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings" (*ibidem*, p. 5). This gradual and incessant change has developed a distinctive style: "The fairy tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique" (*ibidem*, p. 8). In fact, "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent" (*ibidem*, p. 9). Polarization is a rule in tales. Nevertheless, the radical dichotomy between good and evil should not be considered an appeal to ridicule: "Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two [...]. Then the child has a basis for understanding that there are great differences between people" (*ibidem*, p. 9). This

idea is stressed by Matute, who condemns the stupidity and the trivialisation many assume to be traits of the folk tale. Just as Bettelheim, Matute claims that fairy tales "embodied the cumulative experience of a society as men wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations. These tales are the purveyors of deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence" (*ibidem*, p. 26). For Matute, fairy tales carry the voice and the wisdom of bygone times, of truths long forgotten. This knowledge is symbolised by the forest, an association that relates Matute to the ideas of the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, who in her essay *Forest glades* referred to "the word of the forest", that word which "cannot be entirely understood nor forgotten" (1977, p. 85).²

Forgotten King Gudú is born in that vague frontier between memory and oblivion. As Puértolas states, "we are in the atemporal realm of dreams, in the splendour of time both past and to come" (2017, p. 350). This novel that narrates the story about the Kingdom of Olar occurs "*between* remembrance and oblivion" (Torralba, 2010, p. 231). As anticipated by the title, the mere existence of the novel entails a paradox: if King Gudú and the Kingdom of Olar have been forgotten, how is it possible that their story features in a written narration?

Forgotten King Gudú is largely enriched by the efficacious way in which time and space create a synergistic chronotope. Thanks to it, "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 84). This chronotope evokes the characteristic aura of folk tales: a familiar, although also ethereal, imprecise, and remote, spatiotemporal location. To be so, the Kingdom of Olar is born from an innovative re-combination of elements and attributes gathered from the real factual world, but also from the fairy-tale tradition. In other words and according to Tolkien's theory of Sub-creation, the selected elements from the primary world —the real factual world— are artistically and thoroughly rearranged in order to sub-create a secondary world, that is, a diegetic world. This creative process sub-creates the Kingdom of Olar. Its origins drenched in blood, violence, and insalubrity, as well as the recurring topics of knighthood and vassalage, are a suggestive allusion to the imaginary

2 Whenever a quotation comes from a work that is included in the reference list with its title in Spanish, it has been translated to English by the author herself.

associated with the European Middle Ages. Moreover, the lands which are adjacent to Olar's boundaries reinforce the idea that the spatial location may be found in medieval Europe. These lands are four.

Beyond the Northern forests and past the fiords, Viking pirates sailed in their *drakkar*, longships with dragons as figureheads. From the East rode barbarically the *Jinetes Esteparios* —literally, Steppe Horsemen—. Also known as *Diablos Negros* —Dark Devils—, their ferocity and equestrian skills relate them to the huns. In fact, the description the narrator provides of their supreme abilities as horsemen —"Olar [...] envied and loathed those creatures that seemed the continuation of their magnificent mounts" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 47)— is similar to the one provided by Ammianus Marcellinus: "they are almost glued to their horses" (1939, p. 383). As for the South, it is favoured by a Mediterranean-like climate that fostered a prosperous, civilized, and fertile wine-producer culture. Lastly, to the West stretches a vast tundra that leads Olar to —or isolates it from— the Great Western Kingdom. The allusions to a Great King and a Great Warrior, together with the Catholic influence, make it possible to relate the Great Western Kingdom to the Matter of France and Charlemagne. In addition, before the offensive against the Steppe Horsemen, Gudú reread past military deeds and conquests, such as the ones completed by Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, and Julius Caesar.

The sketches, drafts, and outlines that have been safeguarded constitute corroborative evidence for the in-depth research Matute undertook in order to substantiate *Forgotten King Gudú's* worldbuilding. Moreover, she did declare that Olar "is an imaginary kingdom of Central European echoes set in the tenth century" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 118). However, she also hinted that *Forgotten King Gudú* "is not a historical novel" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 117). Therefore, no equivalence should be scouted between Olar and a real Central European location, because Olar is not a re-creation, but a sub-creation.

The results of this profound research were greatly enriched by the ancient literary tradition of folk tales. Concerning the novel's chronotope, this trait is especially relevant. Bakhtin provides the following definition of "the literary artistic chronotope" understood as "a formally constitutive category of literature": "We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the

intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1975/1981, p. 84). In *Forgotten King Gudú*, the sole temporal reference is the narration's inner chronology the reader may infer from the experiences and the aging of the characters. Nonetheless, one of the most compelling aspects of this novel is the confrontation between the diegetic and linear chronology and the vague and remote temporal indicators typical of fairy tales. The nature of this magical time is described precisely by a fairy-tale character: "On certain occasions, Time, when it weaves backwards, tells me stories about people who have not arrived yet. On others, when it weaves rightwards, from people who will never arrive" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 431). *Príncipe Once*, a character inspired in Andersen's *The Wild Swans*, explicitly states a narrative premise basic for *Forgotten King Gudú*'s plot. Queen Ardid, eager to guarantee a prosperous and splendid reign for his son Gudú, wished to protect him from the destructive febleness she considered love to be. Therefore, she decided to "totally incapacitate [him] from whatever possible love for any fellow human being" (*ibidem*, p. 252). *El Hechicero* —literally, the Sorcerer— and *el Trasgo* —literally, the Goblin— warned Queen Ardid about the complexities of the issue: "if love is eradicated from a being, its ability to cry is simultaneously removed". However, "if under any unknown circumstance [...], the subject treated with such procedure sheds a tear, the subject, as well as wherever its foot had trodden in and whoever had it related itself with, will forever disappear in Oblivion, in Time, and on the Earth" (*ibidem*, p. 254). However, the Queen foresaw no danger despite the Goblin's caveat: "Bear in mind [...] that our power is no absolute power. Not even completely exempts of all contamination do Goblins have knowledge of All the Possibilities. [...] Something, perhaps, we may have forgotten or have not realised" (*ibidem*, p. 255). Indeed, in the end, Gudú

ran to the Lake, looked at himself in it, and did not see the King of Olar reflected, but a scruffy, lumbering and old man instead. [...] Ardid, the Goblin and the Sorcerer had not foreseen that the King could love no one but himself. [...] With a faint cry, he wept for the first time. [...] And the tears fell into the Lake, and it grew. [...] And both him and his Kingdom, as well as whoever lived with him, vanished into Oblivion" (*ibidem*, p. 948).

Therefore, similarly to Princess Tontina, King Gudú's story is a narration "detached from Time" (*ibidem*, p. 313). The "Dragon that reached him from the obscure memory of his blood, from Sikrosio's fear" (*ibidem*, p. 948) was a grim fate impossible to avoid. Gudú was destined to fail in his attempt to save Olar from oblivion. Succumbing to terror, he cried and condemned both he himself and his Kingdom.

This conception of time is materialised and detailed by the diegetic space. On the first pages of *Forgotten King Gudú*, a symbolic reading code concerning the narrative space is provided:

At times, when inebriated, Sikrosio spoke incoherently. He pointed North and murmured: "From the Wilderness, mystery arrives". He then aimed East: "From the Steppe, destruction, fire, death". Later, he turned South: "From the other side of the mountains, dream, impossibility... and lie". At last, with a voice in which a mysterious grief underlay, he pointed West: "And far beyond the tundra, oblivion" (*ibidem*, pp. 58-59).

These four main points of the compass relate to those four surrounding environments and to the four rulers from the Olar dynasty. For instance, the last of these rulers, the one after whom the novel is named, King Gudú, is tightly linked to the Eastern Steppe. Gudú auspiciously ruled Olar under the threat of the Steppe Horsemen. However, in the end, the increasing attraction he felt towards the East became a perverse and fatal obsession. The Kingdom of Olar's fate was determined by its unbreakable bond with the Great Western Kingdom, likened to oblivion. Despite the attempts to create a rift and to establish a true independency, Olar had been foredoomed from the moment Sikrosio creaked under the menacing vision of the Dragon. Sikrosio surrendered to the tempting void of slumber and therefore bungled the task he had been imposed, a task similar to those that heroes-to-be must successfully perform in fairy tales. In fact, repose is included in the Aarne-Thompson index as one of the interdiction the hero may be addressed. Sikrosio, then, openly flouts a taboo and thwarts Olar's future, as it becomes tethered to a reoccurring ill omen. *Príncipe Once's* words suggest that the Kingdom is fated to relive its story whenever it is rescued and retold, just like in *The Neverending Story*. Sikrosio, Volodioso and Gudú strove

to elude all connection to the Great Western Kingdom. Unfortunately, Gudú's tears and the vision of the Dragon reset the story to the starting line, to the demise he struggled to avoid. Unable to refrain his fervent desire for military domination, when he launched the offensive against the Steppe, he actually marshalled Olar towards the End of the World, as it is explicitly stated in the map that precedes the novel.

In addition to the tasks assigned to the heroes-to-be, other fairy-tale characteristic traits that can be found in *Forgotten King Gudú* are character-types, motifs and functions of the dramatis personae. Among the dramatis personae, the Sorcerer, the Goblin and Queen Ardid should be spotlighted. The Sorcerer was an old mysterious sage versed in various scientific disciplines, but also in arcane magic, who fostered and tutored Ardid. It was him who kept Ardid safe during the occupation of the South and who, in order to guarantee her safety, dubbed her Ardid because "it cannot be unequivocally told whether this name should be attributed neither to a man or a woman nor to a noble or a peasant; not to say that (if your disposition is appraised) it will suit you well" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 112)³. As a result, Ardid is baptized in a fairy-tale way: similarly to heroines such as Cinderella, Ardid's birthname is not mentioned, as from that moment onwards everyone would know her and remember her as Ardid. Moreover, when the Sorcerer found in her eyes "the special and very rarely conferred Stellar Trickle" (*ibidem*, pp. 106-107), he acted as a provider or donor that acknowledged Ardid's worthiness as a fairy-tale heroine. Ardid is also helped by a magical agent, that is, the Goblin from the South. It is described as "a creature from the lesser gnome family" (*ibidem*, p. 115). As a fairy creature, his disposition towards magic and nature, as well as his profound and invaluable knowledge of both, is innate. However, his love for humanity, symbolized through his fondness for wine, distances him more and more from his magical essence and finally causes his demise. In an outcome that greatly resembles the end of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, the Goblin

was already visible even for the simplest of loggers. Nevertheless, Gudú, his beloved Gudú, who he confused with Gudulín, and because of whom he lost Ardid's

3 In Spanish, Ardid is not used as a forename. It is a noun used to describe a clever trick schemed to achieve a certain purpose. Throughout the novel, Queen Ardid's plots would honour her name.

protection, was incapable of seeing him, but he did see what once was bunch, and cause of his fall into ruin. And in that bunch blossomed from love, where the human hearts are held, just a single grape was left. Gudú picked the grain with his fingers, ripped it, and devoured it. The Goblin thus disappeared for evermore with a lasting lamentation, and became —just as the Lady of the Lake had warned him— autumn leaves, deer footfalls on the grass, singing butterfly chirps in the night (*ibidem*, pp. 946-947).

Among other meaningful fairy-tale motifs in *Forgotten King Gudú*, Gudú's disablement to love should be remarked. This event evokes the external-soul motif described in *The Motif Index of Folk Literature*. When Ardid decided to deprive Gudú of the capacity to love, she harboured the ambition of consolidating her son's reign. In her eagerness to empower him, the Snow Queen's promise to Kay can be recalled: "He laid out whole patterns, so that they formed words —but he could never manage to make the word she wanted —the word 'eternity.' The Snow Queen had said: 'If you can make that word you shall be your own master, and I will give you the whole world and a new pair of skates'" (Andersen, 1844/1977, p. 78). In fact, similarly to *The Snow Queen*, in *Forgotten King Gudú*'s end tears are also decisive. However, whereas the ones shed by Kay returned him the ability to love and saved him, Gudú's weep unleashed oblivion. Therefore, *Forgotten King Gudú* seems to distance itself from fairy tales in a basic feature: happy endings.

Misfortune is a recurring feature in Matute's narrative. The denouements of her stories, therefore, do not correspond to Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe. Nonetheless, the novel's mere existence is a glimmer of hope itself. As it has been pointed out, *Forgotten King Gudú* is not meant to exist, as "both him and his Kingdom, as well as whoever lived with him, vanished into Oblivion" (Matute, 1996/2020, p. 948). But Matute rescued Olar, its inhabitants, and their stories as a response to the genuine desire to explore the realm of possibilities and to glimpse other worlds. In her own words, "*Gudú* is my way to retrieve memories. In a sense it is the synthesis of what has led me to be who I am" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 129). In this regard, the novel's dedication is highly significant: "*I dedicate this novel to the memory of H. C. Andersen, Jacob and Wilhem Grimm, and Charles Perrault. To everything I have forgotten. To everything I have lost*" (Matute,

1996/2020, p. 8). Ultimately, *Forgotten King Gudú* "is like a great tale. It is a great fairy tale, and, like every fairy tale, it is immoral, amoral, sanguinary, cruel, poetic, sweet, heartening, perverse, innocent" (Gazarian-Gautier, 1997, p. 115).

Even so, *Forgotten King Gudú* still stimulates debate. This novel has been described as a "deviation from Matute's course towards the medieval universe" (Ortuño Ortín, 2011, p. 20), and as "a novel that does not resemble at all her previous works and that marked a milestone" (Taylor Domínguez, 2020, p. 12). Moreover, it has depicted as a "striking change in tone and stylistic features" (García Montero, 2024, p. 14). But a narrative continuity and consistency can be traced among the whole of her literary work. The defining characteristics of *Forgotten King Gudú*'s chronotope are common to previously published texts. The Beautiful Country featured in *El saltamontes verde* — literally, *The Green Grasshopper*— is a world imagined by Yungo. Despite being an invention of his own, Yungo manages to get there with the grasshopper's help. The way Pedro and Paulina, the main characters in *El tiempo* —literally, *The time*—, think of time, can be related to *Príncipe Once*'s words:

Time. Time. There was no time left now. But he was overwhelmed by a monstrous joy, by endless images of beautiful, cherished things in the soul. Ensnared by the open golden eyes, that looked at him with absolute astonishment, like a dusty dream behind the window glass, he pressed that creature against him. "We cannot wait". "We must save us from time", he confusedly heard (Matute, 1963, pp. 67-68).

As for *El río* —literally, *The river*—, it is described as "a hybridisation in which the past becomes continuous present and reaches a different and divergent existence: [...] a circularity, maybe involuntary but obsessive, that closes itself, changeably and windingly, over childhood" (López Alonso, 1994, p. 213). If Mansilla de la Sierra —Matute's beloved childhood village— was drowned by the marshland, Olar did so because of Gudú's tears. However, Matute managed to retrieve these places from oblivion. In *Fantasies of Space and Time*, examples of fantasy authors who recover worlds that belonged to their childhood paracosms in their formal literary works are provided. C. S. Lewis and Narnia, a world inspired in his land of Animals that Talk, are a case in point (Fimi, 2019). Matute

should be another one. She always kept alive in her work what Martín Garzo named as her "secret centre": "the idea of magic as a physical expression of what exists only at the bottom of our souls" and what is recovered by magical means that "almost always have to do with words" (Martín Garzo, 2024, p. 30). In fact, words were at the core of Matute's literary world. Only thanks to them was she able to blend fairy tales, imagination, and fantasy in her magical forest. In the countdown to the centenary of her birthday, these words are all that is needed to make an approach to her literary work, and, as she pleaded, to believe in the characters and stories she had invented precisely because they had been invented.

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XENÍA: HOMERIC HOSPITALITY IN FRODO'S JOURNEY

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X*enia* (ξενία, hospitality) is an unwritten social code, typical of the archaic epic, which implies a relationship of respect and reciprocal help between two people who adopt the role of guest and host. This bond is guaranteed by the authority of Zeus *xenoi* and is governed by strict etiquette. The relationship is also hereditary, so it is passed down from parents to sons. Likewise, it can be of two types: among men of the same social class, or as a *theoxenia* when one of those involved is a god.

The correct execution of *xenia* creates friendship between two communities or individuals. In addition, the moment of the banquet, how it is eaten and shared, reveals the degree of civilization – and therefore of order – of that society. Hospitality is the ideal opportunity to do good, but also to learn other moral behaviors and customs (Simpson, 1992; Harris, 2019). Therefore, when the code is violated, it not only implies a lack of civilization and a state of anarchy of the society that commits the crime, but also entails punishment from the gods and enmity between the two groups (Stalkin, 2005; Steinhäuser, 2023; Creer, 2023).

Xenia follows a series of steps that can be grouped into three phases: Separation, transition, and incorporation (Creer, 2023). In the first, the guest leaves his

familiar world, enters a community with its own customs, traditions and therefore a different morality, ultimately losing his identity; at this stage, the host offers bathroom, food, entertainment and lodging. In the second phase, the banquet takes place. The guest tells stories that catalog him as someone worthy of the host's friendship, likewise, the identity of the visitor is revealed—which has been kept hidden and should not have been asked for until then—, his origins and reasons for the trip. Finally, the visitor is integrated into the foreign community through the exchange of gifts and vows of friendship (Steinhäuser, 2023; Slatkin, 2005).

The aim of this study is to examine, through the comparison of *The Odyssey* (1982) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2008), the elements of *xenia* that Tolkien utilized in order to recreate hospitality scenes in his own work. By analyzing the representations of hospitality in both texts, this study seeks to explore how Tolkien adapts the ancient Greek concept of guest-friendship, or *xenia*, and incorporates it into his own narrative framework.

The concept of *xenia* is one of the most important themes in *The Odyssey* (1982). Both Telemachy and Odysseus' journey, his delay back to Ithaca and the events that happen in the palace are linked to issues associated with *xenia*. Within the narrative, this rite aims to reinforce the rules of behavior of society, promote the safety of travelers and transmit ideals, social traditions, as well as divine law (Creer, 2023).

In *The Lord of the Rings* (2008), J. R. R. Tolkien presents various scenarios that reflect a good execution of *xenia*, as well as some where it is transgressed. The proper development of hospitality takes places in the house of Tom Bombadil, Rivendell, the stay in Lóthlorien, the kingdom of Rohan, the camp of Faramir and in Minas Tirith; on the other hand, the rules of the *xenia* are violated in the passage through Mordor, in Isengard and in Saruman's stay in *the Shire*. The encounter between Gollum and Frodo could also be considered an exchange of *xenia*. Although we have a varied of scenarios, we will focus specifically on the rite of *xenia* as it occurs in the places Frodo visits, where he is received as a guest.

THE RIGHT *XENÍA*

Telemachus' journey serves as an example of good *xenia*. Both in Nestor's and Menelaus' houses, the hospitality rite is correctly performed (Creer, 2023).

In addition, it serves as an element to express order, since Telemachus goes from the chaos in Ithaca produced by the transgression of *xenia* by the suitors to order in the house of Nestor and Menelaus where he is given a good *xenia* (Saltkin, 2005).

The image of Frodo as a guest does not appear to differ significantly from that of Telemachus: an inexperienced young man, deprived of his father figure (Odysseus/Bilbo), moves away from home and embarks on a journey encouraged by a mystical being (Athena/Gandalf) (Williams, 2017). Leaving Bag End already means for Frodo the first stage of *xenia*: loss of his identity. Consequently, the encounter with other communities composed of different races entails contact with a distinct culture and, thus, the acquisition of a new morality. These encounters occur between different races, genders, and even social classes, as some of the hosts assume the roles of community leaders in relation to Frodo, who is merely an ordinary member of the community; this differs from the epic where the host and the guest are in the same social class. For Hogsette (2015) the stay at Tom Bombadil's house, as this character is a mystical figure, represents a spiritual preparation for Frodo's adventures. Therefore, this points more to a *theoxenia* than to a regular hosting ritual. The visit is presented in an inverted way: While in epic literature the man provides refuge to the god, as Telemachus does with Athena in the *Odyssey*, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the god, Tom Bombadil, provides refuge to the hobbit (Parry, 2012)

At the beginning of each encounter, the host knows the identity of the hobbits and the rumors about the Fellowship of the Ring's quest, so the host does not enter the community incognito as happens in the epic, except for Faramir who reverses the rite and asks Frodo's identity before allowing him to enter his refuge. However, the rest of the elements are unaltered: the host offers a bath, as happens to Telemachus in Nestor's house. This element is made explicit in Tom Bombadil's house: "Tom will refresh you! You shall clean grimy hands, and wash your weary faces." (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 163). Also, in Faramir's refuge, where they are offered the opportunity to wash before eating: "Wake our guests," he said, "and take them water. It is time to eat." (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 883). Food is offered in all communities, even, in some cases, as in the Faramir refuge, there is an exchange about customs and habits at mealtime. Entertainment is also part of the good execution of the rite, although it is not always described: in Tom Bombadil's house we could understand the songs as part of this entertainment,

in Rivendell, Lady Galadriel and Celeborn offer a banquet enlivened by Bilbo's songs. Only Lothlorien and Faramir's refuge don't seem to offer this kind of distraction, but stories, songs, and exploration of the medium provide this element.

Finally, the host offers lodging. Tom Bombadil saves the hobbits from Old Man Willow and takes them home: "You shall come home with me!" (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 158), in Rivendell Frodo spends several days asleep after the chase, describing the kingdom as a perfect place for *xenia*: "a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all" (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 293). In Lady Galadriel's house, both in Faramir's, several days also happen, so the lodging element is also fulfilled.

The second phase is delimited by the revelation of the guest's identity and the exchange of personal stories with the host. Such stories and anecdotes prove that the guest is worthy of friendship. This element is altered, as we have said before, and happens in the first stage of the rite. However, the exchange of stories is maintained and the narration of the adventures is encouraged, always after the banquet and the offer of lodging. We can cite as an example the conversation at Tom Bombadil's house after a day of rest: "It's a good day for long tales, for questions and for answers, so Tom will start the talking." (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 169). In Rivendell, after Frodo's awakening, the events that occurred while he was asleep are told. In the country of Lóthlorien, the lords encourage the guests to tell what happened on the journey from Rivendell to there:

'Tell us now the full tale!' said Celeborn.

Then Aragorn recounted all that had happened upon the pass of Caradhras, and in the days that followed; and he spoke of Balin and his book, and the fight in the Chamber of Mazarbul, and the fire, and the narrow bridge, and the coming of the Terror. (Tolkien, 2008a, p. 462-463)

Of course, Faramir also encourages the exchange stories:

'Let us talk a while. On your journey from Rivendell there must have been many things to tell. And you, too, would perhaps wish to learn something of us and the lands where you now are. Tell me of Boromir my brother, and of old

Mithrandir, and of the fair people of Lothlórien.’ (Tolkien, 2008b, p. 884-885)

In addition, these narratives serve to establish a connection of friendship and familiarity with other characters who are mutual friends. For instance, it is by telling their adventures and anecdotes that Lóthlorien receives them as friends, because the Fellowship of the Ring is friends in the house of the elf Elrond — remember that Elrond was married to Lady Galadriel’s daughter—. Through the narratives, Frodo and Sam discover that Faramir is Boromir’s brother. The discovery that the guest is a friend of a family member or another acquaintance results in an immediate welcome. Do not forget that *xenia* is hereditary and, therefore, passed from father to son, as happens to Telemachus, who inherits the friendship of Nestor and Menelaus from his father, in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, it seems to be transmitted from one friendly community to another, like an inheritance.

The last stage of *xenia*, is the integration of the host into the community, that is, the host has learned another culture and taken part in it. This integration is seen above all with the relationship with the elves; the entire Fellowship of the Ring spends much of the journey wearing elven clothes, but it is also their food – lemba bread – on which Frodo and Sam survive for most of their journey. In addition, the culture of men, such as food or the use of weapons, is also integrated. However, hobbits also leave some of theirs in every community where they go. It is important to point out songs and legends as the element most exchanged between the races and the one that lasts the longest, as it is easier to learn and is not subject to deterioration, like material gifts.

The *xenia* ends with the exchange of gifts. Tom Bombadil sings a song that promises to protect the hobbits from the dangers of the Forest. Not only is the Fellowship of the Ring established in Rivendell, as well as a series of alliances, but Frodo receives Sting and Mithril coat as a gift from Bilbo. In Lóthlorien, in addition to the commonly used gifts such as food, clothing, and boats, Lady Galadriel offers the members of the Company a series of personalized gifts. Likewise, the *xenia* produces a vow of friendship between all the races: at the Council of Elrond a representative of each race enters the fellowship; however, in Lady Galadriel’s house, the enmities between the elves and the dwarves are rectified, producing an alliance of friendship between these two races unthinkable in the past (Dickerson,

2020). In Faramir's case, there are no gifts, however, the host is somewhat aware of this missing element and laments it: "I have no fitting gifts to give you at our parting," said Faramir; "but take these staves. They may be of service to those who walk or climb in the wild." (Tolkien, 2008b: 908). Moreover, there is a bond of friendship between Faramir and the hobbits.

Finally, Parry (2012) points out a difference between the rite of hospitality between races, which does not happen in the epic because they are all governed under the protection of the same god, Zeus; the ritual of men, Faramir in this case, would be the one that comes closest to the epic rite. Juan Esteban Londoño (2022) also sees a different function in each lodging, Tom Bombadil not only provides shelter, but teaches, Rivendell offers recovery, while Lóthlorien and Faramir would be a refuge and a milestone of hope to continue the journey. Likewise, there is a difference between the journey of Telemachus and Frodo, while the former goes in search of information, the latter is an exile whose objective is to return home and each of these places are a nostalgic memory of home (Wayne, 1987; Londoño, 2022).

THE WRONG *XENIA*

On the other hand, unlike the Telemachy, which unfolds quietly, Odysseus' journey is delayed by the violation of *xenia*. Within the journey, the episode of the cyclops Polyphemus stands out. The Cyclopes live in an individualistic, savage and uncivilized society where the rules of the rite are infringed, which appears as an inversion or parody of it (Hefferman, 2014; Creer, 2023). All the steps are carried out, but incorrectly by the host and the guest: Polyphemus asks for the identity without waiting, receiving a lie from Odysseus; the companions become the food, instead of being fed; and the gifts are perverted, Polyphemus promises to eat Odysseus last, but also curses him, just as Odysseus uses wine to get him drunk and blind, as well as steal his flock. However, the rite is also altered in the house of Aeolus, the Lestrygonians, Circe's island, and the island of Helios. Each transgression of *xenia* results in a punishment that takes the life of a companion and delays the journey home.

However, it is the violation of the *xenia* by the suitors that is the most important episode. The rite is altered from the beginning: the suitors abuse

hospitality until they become hosts in someone else's house, so that Odysseus enters his own home as a guest suffering multiple aggressions. Odysseus does not reveal his identity at the banquet, as is customary, but instead uses another name until the moment of revenge. He only reveals his real name gradually to his own —Telemachus, Euryclea, Eumenon and Penelope—; Odysseus evaluates each member of his family as a host, judging whether or not they deserve punishment for violating the *xenia* (Creer, 2023). *Xenia*—and thus order—is restored through the punishment administered by the gods via Odysseus; the violent punishment, the death of suitors, corresponds to the magnitude of the transgression of the code (Simpson, 1992).

There is no host, and therefore, no offer of a bath, entertainment, or lodging. Food and water are scarce; in fact, the hobbits survive on the provisions they brought with them, as there is no place to hunt due to the arid and lifeless landscape of Mordor. The only stories told are those exchanged between Sam and Frodo. Moreover, unlike right *xenia*, where identity is revealed, the hobbits actively try to conceal theirs, with the goal of keeping their identities hidden. They even go so far as to assume the identities of two soldiers to prevent anyone from discovering they are hobbits:

‘As we’re in Mordor, we’d best dress up Mordor-fashion; and anyway, there isn’t no choice. It’ll have to be orc-stuff for you, Mr. Frodo, I’m afraid. And for me too. If we go together, we’d best match. Now put this round you!’ (Tolkien, 2008c, p. 1193).

Tiredness becomes a permanent state, in contrast to the rest offered by friendly communities. The hobbit’s life is constantly in danger, and instead of healing their wounds as in the house of Elrond’s house, Frodo is injured and mutilated. There are no gifts; in fact, all material possessions are lost, either by theft or destruction—remember that the goal of going to Mordor is to destroy one of Frodo’s belongings: the One Ring of Power. Moreover, the end of the journey in Mordor means the destruction of the possible host, Sauron, and his enmity with the rest of Middle-earth.

The chapter of *The Scouring of the Shire* is also an example of wrong *xenia*; Furthermore, the development of this episode parallel to the episode of the suitors in the *Odyssey*. When Saruman arrives in Hobbinton, he takes ad-

vantage of the hospitality of its inhabitants to seize Bag End and exploit its resources as suitors abuse Odysseus' estate. Saruman becomes the host. He does not provide shelter or lodging for traveling hobbits or neighbors. This lack of welcome is made explicit in a sign outside Hobbinton: "No admittance between sundown and sunrise." (Tolkien, 2008c, p. 1306). It is also later known that all the lodgings have been closed by order of Saruman to avoid visitors. In addition, it has prohibited the inhabitants of the surrounding area from giving shelter:

'We'll see the Chief later. In the meantime we want a lodging for the night, and as you seem to have pulled down the Bridge Inn and built this dismal place instead, you'll have to put us up.'

'I am sorry, Mr. Merry,' said Hob, 'but it isn't allowed.'

'What isn't allowed?'

'Taking in folk off-hand like, and eating extra food, and all that,' said Hob. (Tolkien, 2008c, p. 1308)

Dickerson (2020) associates lack of hospitality with evil, while respect for *xenia* invests the characters with heroism (Parry, 2012). Hob is the only hobbit who gives shelter to the four hobbits who return home — Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin — despite going against Hobbinton's new rules. We understand the night at Hob's house as an entry into the second phase of *xenia*. However, the rules are transgressed again when, instead of the hobbits who arrive telling the adventures and identifying themselves, it is the owner of the house who tells the news of the home without receiving return narrations from his 'guests': "Well now, what about a smoke, while you tell us what has been happening in the Shire?" Pippin said" (Tolkien, 2008c, p. 1309).

There is at no time any form of integration, in fact, the hobbits try to change Saruman's rules and return Hobbinton to his previous state, just as Odysseus wishes to recover his house. Accommodation becomes, in both cases, a war between the guest – the real owner of the house – and the host – a bad guest who has usurped a place that does not belong to him – for control of the home. There is, of course, no exchange of gifts. The chapter is completed with the death of Saruman, the false host, and the restoration of order in Hobbinton, as well as the recovery of the material goods by the true owners.

CONCLUSIONS

The scenes of right *xenia* in *The Lord of the Rings* consist of almost all the elements that are observed in the classic epic: the guests arrive in an unknown world, they are offered food and lodging, the adventures are told, a gift is given and ends with a friendly alliance. We miss some important elements such as the protection of identity until the banquet; however, within the context of Tolkien's work it is necessary that identity be revealed before entering safe spaces for protection. We would also like to point out that gifts are always from the host to the guest, but they are not reciprocal as it usually is in the epic literature; even, in some cases, such as in the passage through Rivendell, some gifts are not given by the host, but by some other recurring inhabitant of the house as Bilbo.

The episodes of the wrong *xenia* correspond to those we see in the epic. There is no type of invitation, there is a lack of food and water, in some cases, as in Mordor, this can be harmful, as is the food that Circe offers to Odysseus and his men. In addition, the host is violated in multiple ways, creating enmity. In the case of Mordor, we miss the host, as the hobbits roam the place without a guide and incognito. However, in *The Scouring of the Shire* the episode follows the events with the suitors in parallel, even ending with the death of the false host as punishment for the transgression of the *xenia* and the establishment of the previous order.

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ARCHETYPES OF OLD AGE IN FOLK HORROR: BEWARE OF THE ELDERS IN ANDY FETSCHER'S *OLD PEOPLE*

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, owing to the rise of the aging population and the progressive decline of birth rates, repressed concerns about old age have become a focus of attention in contemporary horror cinema. Scholar Robin Wood (1984) distinguishes between oppression and repression, insofar as we are oppressed by something out there, whereas the repressed refers to what is not accessible to the conscious mind, thus arguing that repression implies fully internalized oppression. In terms of aging, in the Western capitalist society, the elderly have been oppressed by ageist practices as a result of social prejudices, while younger generations have internally repressed old age in their selves, thus projecting it outwards so that old age has become an embodiment of the cultural other. As Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Coming of Age*, “within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old and that Other is myself” (1972, p. 284). Accordingly, both as a source of oppression and repression, old age has turned into a recurrent embodiment of the Other in contemporary horror cinema.

In addition to addressing the fears of old age through graphic portrayals of physical decay and mental deterioration, contemporary horror films display a vindictive discourse whereby elders give voice to their oppression and urge the younger generations to face their repressed fears of what the aging process involves. As scholars Cynthia Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (2019) explain, horror cinematic textualities reflect as well as give shape to ambivalent attitudes about aging, since they often portray elders as playing the dual role of victims and villains. Contemporary horror films which feature the elderly as protagonists usually envision them as extraordinary as well as awe-inspiring individuals, thus categorising them as archetypes within the horror tradition. As cases in point, in contemporary horror cinema, the depiction of elders presents traits which bring to mind archetypes like the zombie in Adam Robitel's *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), the psychopath in Fede Álvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016), the monster in Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020), demonic possession in Paco Plaza's *The Grandmother* (2021), the automaton in Raúl Cerezo and Fernando González Gómez's *The Elderly* (2022), the witch in Axelle Carolyn's *The Manor* (2021), and the ghost in Joanna Hogg's *The Eternal Daughter* (2022). To this plethora of archetypes with which elders have been associated in recent horror films, the archetype of the ancestor could also be added, particularly in films pertaining to the subgenre of folk horror.

According to Stacey McDowell (2016), narratives from the Gothic tradition already incorporated references to myths and legends from the popular folklore with the purpose of underscoring the dichotomy established between ancestral beliefs and the rationality characterising modern societies. As Stephen Jones (2021) claims, folk horror underlines the frightening side of folklore, since early folk horror narratives portrayed the irruption of ancestral creeds, atavistic rituals, and superstitious traditions in everyday life, as a latent threatening presence waiting to emerge unexpectedly in a modern context. Arising from the reviving popularity of folk horror in cinema in the last decades, scholar Fran Mateu (2024) coins the term neofolk horror to refer to contemporary folk horror fiction which responds to new interests and needs in light of different contexts and current anxieties. In particular, as Mateu puts forward, since the family acquires significant relevance in the plots of neofolk horror narratives, the archetype of the ancestor in neofolk horror is usually represented as an aging individual.

As an exponent of the subgenre of neofolk horror cinema, Andy Fetscher's film *Old People* (2022) focuses on the figure of ancestors, embodied by senior patriarchs and matriarchs, who reclaim their lost power as a result of the irreverence of the youth in a rural community. As the plot unfolds, after her separation from her husband Lukas (Stephen Luca), Ella (Melika Foroutan) and her two children, Laura (Bianca Nawrath) and Noah (Otto Emil Koch), travel back to their rural hometown in Germany, to attend the wedding of Ella's sister, Sanna (Maxine Kazis), with her groom Malick (Richard Manualpillai). Shortly after their arrival, when they visit the nursing home to collect grandfather Aike (Paul Faßnacht), they realise that the elders from town hardly ever receive visits and they cannot be cared for properly owing to the lack of nursing staff.

Approaching Fetscher's film as a neofolk horror cinematic narrative, this chapter aims to provide an analysis of *Old People* by means of focusing on its portrayal of elders as personifications of the archetype of the ancestor, who vindicates the need to preserve the cult of atavistic creeds and rituals, the importance of the family, and the sacredness of nature. From the methodological framework of cultural gerontology, this analysis seeks to prove that the figure of the avenging ancestor, as a popular character in the subgenre of folk horror, also embodies fears regarding old age in contemporary horror cinema, and in particular, the dread of ancestral forces entangled with the anxieties derived from old age in contemporary times. This chapter will follow a tripartite structure, comprising the analysis of Fetscher's film as an exponent of folk horror, the social discourses addressed in the film with special attention to instances of ageism, and the horror archetype of the ancestor as embodied by aging patriarchs and matriarchs.

THE FOLK HORROR CHAIN: LANDSCAPE, ISOLATION, SKEWED SYSTEM, AND INVOCATION

As a contemporary horror film, *Old People* amalgamates most of the features which conventionally pervade early narratives of folk horror, in which folklore is evoked both aesthetically and thematically. As Andy Paciorek (2018) claims, folk horror is atmospheric and sinuous to the extent that it presents no defining mark or exact form. And yet, in his book on folk horror, scholar Adam Scovell (2017) comes up with a theoretical framework, which he calls the folk

horror chain, hence identifying fundamental themes in this subgenre. In particular, Scovell highlights four aspects, comprising the description of the landscape, a sense of physical and metaphorical isolation, a skewed belief system, and a climactic event which reveals the terrifying quality of ancestral forces. Fetscher's film comprises these four features, which categorise it as an exponent of folk horror.

In *Old People*, the landscape, the weather, and the pervasive presence of nature acquire particular relevance, especially taking into account that they exert a significant influence on the inhabitants of the village. In the first scene of the film, a young nurse arrives at the flat of an aging man who attacks her brutally, knocking her down with his medical oxygen cylinder. After the murder, the aging man approaches his window and begins to howl at the storm, as it is raining heavily outside, hence suggesting a connection between the bad weather and the curse that seems to befall the elderly. Conversely, when Ella and her children are approaching the village in their car, it is sunny and they pass by idyllic fields and woods which contrast with the urban setting where they come from. Besides, when Ella's adolescent daughter, Laura, meets up with her boyfriend, Tom, they go to the beach and the woods around, which also project a peaceful landscape that speaks of former times. As city dwellers, Ella and her children adopt an idealised perspective of the landscape in this rural environment, unaware that the land conceals a threatening power. In contrast, the aging inhabitants in the village and in the nursing home are enclosed in dilapidated houses and decrepit blocks, and they are prevented from enjoying the landscape which is truly theirs as rightful dwellers of the place. When the elders escape from the nursing home and move to the woods at night, the peaceful landscape in the daylight turns into a foggy and frightening scenery during the night storm. The elderly intend to reclaim their land after intruders have metaphorically invaded their place, while the stormy weather reflects their rage and violent power, in contrast with the idyllic and ingenuous approach to the landscape and nature displayed by their younger counterparts.

Along with the landscape, folk horror cinema also evokes isolation, insofar as folk horror narratives often take place in villages or even islands, which are removed from urban settings, and whose tightly-knit communities remain isolated not only geographically, since they are also debarred from technical prog-

ress. In Fetscher's film, Ella decided to leave her hometown and move to the city to work when she separated from her husband. A prevalent sense of isolation and seclusion pervades the village, particularly with regard to the elderly. Most elders live alone in dilapidated houses in the decadent village, since young people have abandoned the place in order to look for brighter prospects. Besides, the elderly who are unable to live on their own are further isolated in the nursing home, where they hardly ever receive any visit. As a case in point, Ella's sister, Sanna, informs her about the fact that Aike, the family's grandfather, now lives in the nursing home and he can barely recognise anyone owing to his mental deterioration, which even isolates him further from the surrounding reality.

Drawing further on Scovell's folk horror chain, in these narratives, the members of the community usually resort to an alternative skewed belief system. This primitive creed reverts to atavistic rituals and even barbaric sacrifices that pay tribute to deities often associated with agriculture, the land, and the forces of nature. In the prologue of the film, credits inform the spectator that, a long time ago, the elderly were alleged to possess an avenging spirit in some of them that would take control of the weakest members and drive them into a seemingly blind rage against the world. In fact, when Laura and her boyfriend Tom go into the woods, he shows her a totem devoted to the spirits of their ancestors so that they would protect all the families and help them remain united. Below the totem, Tom shows Laura a carved inscription with the initials of her parents, who swore each other eternal love in their youth although they ended up separating. Likewise, after the elderly begin their revolt, an aging man, who mistakes Ella for his daughter, hands her in a page torn out of the Bible with a passage that encourages the youth to honour their elders. Hence, it is suggested that the rise of the elderly against their younger counterparts is rooted in the youth's disrespect to their elders and their failure to pay tribute to their ancestors.

Finally, folk horror narratives usually include a climactic passage in which a pagan ceremony or a barbaric sacrifice takes place, which symbolically invokes the frightening power attached to ancestral deities. In Fetscher's film, as the aging inmates in the nursing home open the windows to listen to the music coming from Sanna and Malick's wedding party, and their younger carers forbid them to stay up and oblige them to go to bed, the elders rise up in revolt and slay them. However, the climactic event in the film mostly involves the murder

of the newlywed couple on their wedding night on behalf of the leader of the rebellious aging community. Given the place where this murder takes place—in a small wooden hut, and surrounded by candlelight—shortly after being joined in marriage, thus having gone through a socially sanctioned rite of passage, the death of the young couple acquires the dramatic and symbolic connotations of a human sacrifice to the vengeful ancestors.

Drawing on the analysis of these four features in Scovell's folk horror chain, Fetscher's film displays the most outstanding characteristics which usually pervade this horror subgenre. Nevertheless, taking into consideration Mateu's notion of neofolk horror, which comprises narratives that address contemporary anxieties, Fetscher's film also incorporates cultural discourses which address fears related to the decline of the family, concerns about the importance of having an ecocritical conscience, and the disastrous effects of ageist prejudices in a society in which the aging individual arises as a cultural Other.

CULTURAL DISCOURSES OF NEOFOLK HORROR: FAMILY, ECOCRITICISM, AND AGEISM

In narratives pertaining to folk horror, communities acquire particular relevance, especially in the relationships that they establish with their ancestors, the rituals they celebrate, and the deities they worship, which endow them with a deep sense of cohesion. In primitive organisations, the members of clans joined together in resemblance with the way that contemporary societies organise in families. As a neofolk horror film, *Old People* addresses contemporary concerns about the decline and disruption of family life in current times. On her way to the village, Ella comes across her former husband and father of her children, Lukas, who is in another car with his girlfriend, Kim. It is later on unveiled that Ella and Lukas grew detached from each other and Ella decided to move to the city with her children, leaving behind her husband, her father, and her sister. Conversely, Lukas stayed in the village and started a relationship with Kim, who works as a carer looking after elderly patients in the nursing home. As they are approaching the village, Ella's children, Laura and Noah, complain about the fact that they had to move, and Laura accuses her mother of separating from Lukas, while Noah declares that he misses his grandfather Aike. In fact, soon

after they arrive, as Ella and Noah go to the nursing home to collect Aike, Ella feels guilty for having been away for so long upon realising that her father can hardly recognise her as a result of his deteriorating mental condition. During the wedding celebrations, when they listen to the family's song, Ella, Lukas, Laura, and Noah get together as they did in the past, although Kim looks them down with jealousy until Lukas realises that things are no longer the way they used to be. It is thus suggested that the rebellion that the elders lead against their younger counterparts responds to the disruption of the family unit, the separation of family members, and the lack of deference and respect of the youth toward the will of their elders.

The importance attached to the landscape in folk horror fiction expands to an ecocritical awareness that neofolk horror narratives usually show. Throughout Fetscher's film, there are scenes that draw attention to the fields, the woods, and the beach, as if these natural spaces were endowed with a life of their own and an invisible haunting spirit inhabited in them. Besides, after the elderly escape from their confinement in the nursing home, they walk across the woods and the fields, thus establishing a connection with nature, as living embodiments of their ancestors and the powerful forces of nature. From the point of view of some of the villagers, like Kim, it is implied that the arrival of intruders in town stirs the rage of ancestral forces personified in the attacks perpetrated by the elderly. In this respect, in a scene which is evocative of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963), Kim blames the upsurge of violence in town upon Ella's arrival, as a symbolic disruption of the natural habitat in which they live.

The schism between past and present, along with the clash of generations, is usually tackled in folk horror fiction. In particular, neofolk horror cinema, which addresses contemporary anxieties, exposes ageism and prejudices against the elderly, which ultimately lead elders to vindicate themselves. The notion of ageism was developed by Robert Butler (1969), and later on, by Alex Comfort (1976) to refer to the systematic social discrimination against people on account of their age, just like racism and sexism respectively operate in relation to skin colour and gender. In one of the first scenes in Fetscher's film, Laura's voice-over comments that, at school, they had discussed the progressive aging of society and that this fact would involve an increase in genera-

tional conflicts. Subsequently, the film shows that the village has been deserted by the younger generations, thus leaving the elderly to face their old age on their own in derelict houses or in the rundown nursing home, where only a few carers look after hundreds of patients. In the nursing home, the elderly live in subhuman conditions, they are no longer visited by their relatives, and they are deprived of their dignity as human beings. The ostracism and even process of objectification that the elders undergo is brought to the fore when the male leader of the elders asks Ella whether she sees him as a human being or as an animal. Fetscher's film thus focuses on instances of global, social and individual ageism, ultimately suggesting that the violent rebellion of the elders responds to the need to release themselves from their subjected, ostracised, and alienated existence.

ARCHETYPES OF THE AGED IN FOLK HORROR: ANCESTORS AS A SOURCE OF DREAD

As Herbert Covey (1991) claims, artistic portrayals of the elderly have characterised them through positive values, thus associating them with contemplation, spirituality, and wisdom, but also through negative views which envision old age as a period of decay, misery, and infirmity. On the basis of this twofold portrayal, in cinematic narratives, elders have been ambivalently characterised as victims and villains. Accordingly, in Fetscher's film, the aging population in the village are initially depicted as fragile, lonely, and subjugated, whereas they gradually become rebellious, commanding, and powerful as a result of the authority that the landscape bestows upon them as embodiments of the ancestors of the land.

In comparison with other contemporary horror films which revolve around old age, in Fetscher's film, the elderly are portrayed primarily as avenging ancestors, possessed by the spirits of the land, who rise up in order to vindicate themselves as patriarchs and matriarchs of their clan, protect the community, and preserve the natural environment in which they inhabit. However, as archetypes in horror fiction whose purpose is to trigger fear and anxiety, the characterisation of the elderly in Fetscher's film often brings to mind other archetypes of the Gothic tradition. As Allison Craven and Jessica Balanzategui

(2023) claim, contemporary folk horror cinema self-reflexively consider folk cultural formations of ghosts, killers, witches, and other monstrous beings. The leaders of the aging ancestors in Fetscher's film appear to be a white-haired matriarch and an old patriarch, respectively resembling a ghost and a killer, whose portrayal in the film conjures iconic characters in Gothic fiction. In particular, the white-haired woman is dressed as a bride, which brings to mind Charles Dickens's character of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861), given her spectral figure as a relic from the past, but also as a result of her authority as an aging lady. Besides, insofar as the old man attacks the newly-wed couple at night, this event establishes intertextualities with Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), thus calling to mind the threat of Victor Frankenstein's creature to join his creator on his wedding night for having neglected him. Both Miss Havisham and Frankenstein's creature seek to claim revenge for having been forsaken in resemblance with the white-haired woman and the old man in the film, while their association with these iconic characters of the Gothic tradition confirms their status as archetypes in horror fiction.

In their role as ancestors, as archetypes of the elderly in folk horror, the aging characters in Fetscher's film display features that are indicative of iconography related to folk horror. The aged individuals in the film are intrinsically associated with the landscape and with nature in their rural environment. They also arise as guardians of the community and become infuriated when others threaten to disrupt the unity of their clan. Besides, they are preservers of old traditions, ancestral beliefs, and ritualistic ceremonies. The totem which was erected in the middle of the woods thousands of years before explicitly conjures the atavistic cult to ancestral deities which the elders personify in current times. The deaths which take place as a result of the revolt turn into metaphorical sacrifices to appease the rage of the ancestors. The family's song, which contributes to joining all the members in Ella's family and whose lyrics address unity and fraternity, resembles the chants in honour of the ancestors, which ultimately save Laura and Noah's lives. Hence, as a neofolk horror narrative, Fetscher's film features the aged as a personification of the avenging ancestor, who turns into an archetype to add to others in contemporary horror fiction revolving around old age.

CONCLUSION

Fetscher's film *Old People* responds to a revitalisation of folk horror cinema in the last decades, while it comprises the basic features that usually recur in cinematic exponents of this subgenre. As a contemporary folk horror film, *Old People* also illustrates the tenets of neofolk horror, since it addresses current fears and anxieties befalling society in relation to the disruption of the family, ecocritical concerns, and particularly, the progressive aging process of the population. In relation to contemporary horror films that revolve around old age and portray elders as victims and villains, *Old People* contributes to expanding the repertoire of archetypes of the aged in contemporary horror cinema by means of the archetype of the avenging ancestor who reverts to ancestral times. Even though *Old People* features elders as a metaphorical embodiment of the fears and anxieties derived from old age, mostly represented by the eerie white-haired woman and the evil old man, other aging characters, like grandfather Aike, are depicted positively, as he plays a pivotal role to save the life of his grandchildren. Hence, Fetscher's film ultimately provides an ambivalent portrayal of the elderly as victimised individuals, but also as powerful and vengeful ancestors who seek to vindicate themselves.

Besides, although *Old People* may be primarily categorised as neofolk horror cinema, some of its scenes are also remindful of other subgenres of horror fiction, in particular films featuring zombies and slasher films. As Ella's family must stay indoors while being surrounded by dozens of elders who intend to break into their house to slay them, scenes from classic zombie films like George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) are evoked. Besides, Fetscher's film also presents traits pertaining to the subgenre of slasher cinema, in the footsteps of films like John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), insofar as it includes graphic violence, the killing instincts of the psychopathic elderly seem to respond to a disciplinary purpose, and Laura survives as the final girl along with her little brother. Hence, Fetscher's film also reflects a hybridisation of subgenres of horror cinema.

Finally, as a neofolk horror film, despite being grounded in early exponents of folk horror fiction of British heritage, as a German production, Fetscher's film gives evidence of the globalisation of folk horror as international

films from diverse countries adapt the basic tenets of folk horror to their own realities and contexts. And yet, Fetscher's film also shows that the decline of the traditional family, the need to preserve the environment, and the exponential aging process of the population are concerns befalling the whole of society in our globalised world.

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PREY AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE SHADOW: AN APPROACH TO THE INTROSPECTIVE FANTASTIC

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INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth century, literary and audiovisual productions associated with the fantastic have been defined by a fundamental dialectic that contrasts the ordinary with the intrusion of the extraordinary¹. Within this framework, the fantastic genre thrives on the collision between the reader's, spectator's, or player's understanding of reality and elements that, due to their inexplicable nature, create perplexity for both characters and audiences.

In the realm of video games, this dynamic takes on a unique form. Here, players do not merely witness the incursion of the extraordinary, they engage with it, navigating and modulating its impact through game mechanics designed by developers, within the limits established by them. This proactive capacity of the player, as described by Antonio J. Planells², distinguishes the medium of video games from other narrative forms. Moreover, players

¹ CAILLOIS, R., *Anthologie du fantastique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1966.

² PLANELLS, A.J., *Videojuegos y mundos de ficción*, Cátedra, Madrid, 2022, p.100.

actively modulate this incursion through game mechanics, navigating within the limits defined by the game's design³. Among the many dimensions of the fantastic, the introspective approach is particularly notable. This perspective situates the source of the extraordinary within human subjectivity itself, rather than attributing it to external forces. Such a view is evident in fictional worlds where the creature or inexplicable phenomenon appears to emerge from within the psyche, challenging the conventional notion of the "external enemy". Within this context, the concept of the Uncanny, as defined by Freud, captures the unsettling quality that the familiar acquires when it becomes strange, suggesting that the threat may originate within the innermost layers of the self⁴.

The video game *Prey* (2017), developed by Arkane Studios, exemplifies this introspective dynamic. It presents a series of alien creatures known as the Typhon, which, far from being representations of pure otherness, are the result of human experiments aimed at transcending biological limitations. The Typhon's monstrous otherness thus reveals itself as a projection of humanity's own will to power and scientific ambition, aligning closely with Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the shadow. According to Jung, this archetype embodies repressed psychological traits and drives, which can emerge into consciousness through various symbolic forms. In this light, the Typhon invasion in *Prey* is not merely an external threat; it represents a tangible manifestation of humanity's desire to dominate and appropriate the unknown, a desire that, when overstepping ethical boundaries, ultimately turns against its creators.

This study proposes the hypothesis that the Typhon in *Prey* are not merely alien figures but symbolic projections of the human psyche, specifically the Jungian shadow archetype. By integrating aspects of the Typhon

³ NAVARRO REMESAL, V., *Libertad Dirigida. Una gramática del análisis y diseño de videojuegos*, Asociación Shangrila Textos Aparte, Santander, 2016.

⁴ In this way, we continue a line of research already initiated in other works on the phenomenon of introspection in the fantasy genre (Chico Morales, 2024). In this study we rely on Freud's conceptual delimitation of the Uncanny, a term he expounds in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* (translated into English as *The Uncanny*), revising the previous formulation of the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch and taking as a literary reference the work of E. T. A. Hoffmann. From an aesthetic perspective, Freud (2003) describes the Uncanny as: "one such is the 'uncanny'. There is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (FREUD, S., *The Uncanny*, Penguin Classics, London, 2003, p.123). In the present article, we delve deeper into the Jungian notion of the shadow as an interpretative key.

into the player's avatar, the game invites a symbolic confrontation with this dark facet, while maintaining the unsettling awareness that the Typhon ultimately embody repressed human impulses.

Rather than treating these alien entities as representations of external phenomena, this research explores them as symbolic embodiments of the shadow archetype, intimately connected to the deepest and most obscure layers of the human psyche. Furthermore, the Typhon do not emerge *ex nihilo*; they are informed by the contents of prior social imaginaries, making the hermeneutic method particularly suitable for analysing them within the socio-cultural coordinates of the game's fictional world.

In the elaboration of this theoretical framework, it is pertinent to allude to various studies which, although not strictly focused on the introspective approach to the fantastic, have analysed the presence of this genre (or related notions, such as the Uncanny and horror) in the field of video games. Some authors, for instance, explore the Uncanny from a socio-semiotic perspective⁵, while others adopt a more formal analytical approach⁶, or highlight the aesthetic dimension⁷ and the narrative implications⁸ of the fantastic in games. It is also worth mentioning the monograph *Fantastic and Video Games [Lo fantástico y los videojuegos]*, coordinated by Susana Tosca⁹, which reflects the growing interest in the intersections between the fantastic genre and this expressive medium. On the other hand, even without directly addressing the question of the fantastic, the work of Rafel Guardiola Marí¹⁰ offers a suggestive perspective on the figure

⁵ MATÉ, D., "Al final del pasillo: Modalidades de lo siniestro en el videojuego". *Boletín De Arte*, 19, 2019a.

MATÉ, D., "Modalidades de lectura de lo siniestro desde el glitch en el videojuego: viejos temores, nuevos placeres", *Revista Chilena de Semiótica*, 10, 2019b, 166-182.

MATÉ, D., "Temor y temblor: antes y después del terror cinematográfico en el videojuego", *Eu-topías: revista de interculturalidad, comunicación y estudios europeos*, 20, 2020, 133-146.

⁶ GARCÍA CATALÁN & NAVARRO REMESAL, "Are you sure the only you is you?: lo siniestro y la impotencia en P.T. y Silent Hill", in *Libertad Dirigida. Una gramática del análisis y diseño de videojuegos*, Asociación Shangrila Textos Aparte, Santander, 2016, pp. 320- 339.

⁷ LOZANO MUÑOZ, A., "Jugar el horror. Construcción de lo fantástico en el videojuego. El caso de Silent Hill 4", *Brumal. Revista de Investigación sobre lo Fantástico*, 3, 1, 2015, 55-72.

⁸ Fernández Ruíz, M. & Puente Bienvenido, H., "Universos fantásticos de inspiración lovecraftiana en videojuegos survival horror. Un estudio de caso de P.T (Silent Hill)", *Brumal. Revista de investigación sobre lo Fantástico*, 3, 1, 2015 pp. 95-118.

⁹ TOSCA, S., "Introduction to the Special Issue", *Brumal. Revista de Investigación sobre lo Fantástico*, 3, 1, 2015, 7-12.

¹⁰ GUARDIOLA MARÍ, R., "Teoría del monstruo y game studies: un estudio de caso de The Witcher 3:

of the monster as a creative agent within videoludic discourses, providing a complementary starting point for the reflection proposed here.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

From this starting point, the aim of this research is to analyse, from a Jungian hermeneutic perspective, the phenomenon of the introspective fantastic as revealed in the world of *Prey* through the figure of the Typhon, understood as the symbolic incarnation of the archetype of the shadow. This analysis is justified by the relevance of understanding how contemporary video games can become spaces for symbolic exploration of the human psyche, offering players a narrative experience that confronts them with repressed aspects of human nature. Such an exploration is particularly significant in *Prey*, where the human/monster dialectic is based on the projection of repressed impulses, placing the “extraordinary”, that which escapes our codes of reality, at the centre of the player’s experience.

To achieve this objective, the methodology adopted is based on symbolic hermeneutics derived from Carl Gustav Jung. This approach starts from the idea that archetypes (such as the shadow) constitute universal psychic moulds projected in different cultural manifestations¹¹. From this perspective, it can be inferred that the presence of extraordinary creatures in certain fantastic fictional worlds is not arbitrary; rather, they embody hidden or repressed contents of the human psyche. Therefore, their study requires an analysis that goes beyond mere textual description and attends to the symbolic dimension, necessarily linking the intensional semantics of the fictional world to specific cultural codes.

In the particular case of *Prey*, we identify the symbols associated with the archetype of the shadow, paying special attention to the aesthetic and narrative dimension of the game, which allows us to interpret how human-alien hybridisation refers to the processes of assimilation of the denied. This hermeneutic methodology also takes up certain fundamental aspects of the genre of

Wild Hunt”, *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 6, 1, 2022.

¹¹ JUNG, C. G., *Los arquetipos y lo inconsciente colectivo. Obra Completa* Vol. 9/1, Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2019.

the fantastic in order to understand the emergence of the unsettling within an atmosphere that, at first sight, seems familiar to us. However, the Jungian perspective remains a fundamental support for the analysis, insofar as it allows us to contemplate the monster (in this case, the Typhon) as the visible form of the collective shadow.

SHADOW AND INTROSPECTION IN PREY

The fantastic as a collision of the possible and the impossible

As David Roas has pointed out, the fantastic tale is consolidated throughout the nineteenth century, a period marked by the predominance of rationalism and confidence in science¹². In this enlightened atmosphere, supernatural explanations ceased to have the same weight as in previous periods, but the need to explore the enigmatic and the ineffable did not die out. Authors such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Guy de Maupassant and Edgar Allan Poe, among others, transformed that persistent curiosity into stories where the extraordinary element makes its way into realistic scenarios, intensifying the clash between the familiar and the strange, that is, the dialectic that arises between the “possible” and the “impossible” in accordance with the reader’s codes of reality.

Along these lines, Roger Caillois distinguished the enchanted (*féerique*) realm, where the supernatural is assumed from the very presentation of the fictional world, from the true fantastic tale, defined as “a rupture, an unusual irruption”¹³ that disrupts the order of reality. On this basis, theorists such as Todorov¹⁴ have stressed the importance of the hesitation experienced by the receiver in the face of the inexplicable. Through a more contemporary vision, Roas summarises the essence of the fantastic in “the problematic confrontation between the real and the impossible”¹⁵, underlining the perplexity generated by the breakdown of the usual logic in the narrated worlds. At the same time, an introspective aspect of the genre is consolidated, which locates the source of the anomalous

¹² ROAS, D., *Tras los límites de lo real. Una definición de lo fantástico*, Páginas de Espuma, Madrid, 2019.

¹³ CAILLOIS, *opus cit.*, p.8

¹⁴ TODOROV, T., *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1970, p.16.

¹⁵ ROAS, *opus cit.*, pp.13-14.

in the psyche of the characters, addressing the mental or emotional ambiguity that surrounds them. In *Prey*, this introspective preoccupation takes a particular turn: the alien creatures called Typhon do not burst forth as a completely alien force, but emerge from the human urge to overcome its limits, revealing that the monstrous does not come from a remote place, but from within ambition and the will to power.

The shadow archetype

Carl Gustav Jung played a decisive role in the constitution of the *Eranos Circle* (1933-1988), an interdisciplinary space that, bringing together personalities from philosophy, mythology, psychoanalysis, anthropology and the history of religions, had a decisive influence on studies on symbol and culture in the twentieth century. Among other contributions, Jung himself developed the distinction between an individual and a collective unconscious, the latter conceived as a universal repository of archetypal experiences and patterns that transcend strictly personal experience. Thus, archetypes constitute “a priori existing forms of intuition”¹⁶, reflected in mythical narratives, legends or ritual representations. Within this system, the shadow is configured as one of the most relevant archetypes when it comes to revealing the repressed impulses in the human psyche. Jung characterises it as “the lower part of the personality”¹⁷, that which the conscious self tends to exclude as undesirable or contrary to the image one wishes to project. However, these contents do not vanish, but operate on the unconscious plane, often emerging in the form of projections. In the author’s own words¹⁸, the “dark features” of the shadow possess an “emotional nature” and may exhibit an “obsedient or posedient” quality, as they are rooted at a primary level of the psychic structure where the subject lacks deliberate control.

Acknowledging the shadow is therefore a moral and psychological challenge, for it involves admitting that disturbing, destructive or chaotic aspects dwell in the depths of one’s own identity. For Jung, this acceptance is an essential

¹⁶ JUNG, C. G., *La dinámica de lo inconsciente. Obra Completa* Vol. 8. Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2022, p. 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁸ JUNG, C. G., *Aion Contribuciones al simbolismo del sí-mismo. Obra Completa* Vol. 9/2. Editorial Trotta., Madrid, 2011, p.14

part of the process of individuation, whereby each person aspires to integrate the various layers of his or her psyche and move towards greater inner wholeness. Otherwise, the unintegrated shadow is projected outwards, feeding phobias, mistrust or antagonisms which, within the field of fictional creation, can be embodied in culture in the form of monstrous creatures, invading forces or technological threats, manifestations that are nothing more than the collective translation of what the individual rejects within him or herself.

Prey and the figure of the Typhon: the alien shadow

With this conceptual framework in mind, we can now turn to *Prey*, where these ideas find a compelling instantiation in the figure of the Typhon and the introspective dynamics of the game world. *Prey's* fictional world places the player on the Talos I space station, a technological and seemingly controlled environment that eventually collapses under the onslaught of alien creatures called Typhon. The player controls the character of Morgan Yu, who finds himself immersed in a state of ongoing disorientation, shaped by pervasive simulation effects: the walls of the station contain secret experiments and biotechnological research that intermingle the human and the extra-terrestrial. From the earliest stages of *gameplay*, the design seems to suggest that nothing is as it seems, as the character we control awakens in a flat that is soon revealed to be an artificial set-up. This dislocation between the familiar and the strange, essential to the dynamics of fantasy storytelling, leaves the player wondering whether they are dealing with reality or mere simulation.

The real Talos I, designed by the TranStar corporation for the development of advanced abilities called *neuromods*, then emerges as a place where techno-scientific ambition seeks to transcend the boundaries that define the properly human, in its most traditional sense. These technological devices enable the integration of abilities (including those from the Typhon themselves) into the human body, raising ethical and psychological questions about identity manipulation and techno-scientific progress. Moreover, the architecture of the space station reinforces the logic of the introspective fantastic. Although Talos I is equipped with highly sophisticated technology and advanced security protocols, the Typhon rebellion shatters its foundations. Laboratories, lobbies and residen-

tial areas are altered by life forms capable of mutating and camouflaging themselves in the environment with which the player interacts, creating constant tension, as seemingly mundane objects might conceal a hidden threat.

Hence, in addition to its sci-fi genre components, the isolation and confusion generated in the station are reminiscent of the fantastic imaginary, where the protagonist's vacillation between the possible and the impossible is constituted as the prelude to the unusual. In the process of survival and exploration, the player discovers recordings and reports that reveal Morgan's past and his relationship with Alex Yu, his older brother and the main driving force behind the *neuromod* experiments, who did not hesitate to subject Morgan's memory and identity to multiple tests. In this way, our avatar becomes aware of himself as an object of experimentation.

From the Jungian prism adopted, the Typhon represent the shadow insofar as they are constituted as the archetype that brings together repressed or discarded impulses from consciousness. In *Prey*, these creatures ultimately embody a quest for power and transcendence that has overstepped all moral boundaries, as their origin lies not so much in a spontaneous alien incursion, but in the discovery and exploitation of something radically different in order to integrate it TranStar's research projects.

According to this idea, the appearance of the Typhon is not the result of external chance, but the consequence of a scientific experiment aimed at overcoming the biological limitations of the human species. These creatures symbolise the rebellion of a power that, having been created by human science, turns against its creator. Their ability to mimic everyday objects in the game's environment gives rise to scenes where the familiar (a cup, a chair, a dispenser, to name but a few examples) becomes a deadly threat. In other words, when human science attempts to subdue the unknown without properly integrating it, the result can become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the Typhon run amok inside the station, destroying the laboratories, wiping out much of the crew and sowing chaos. The horror stems not so much from their alien nature as from the recognition that they are "our failed experiment", an extension of that collective shadow that seeks to dominate nature. However, their extracted abilities become part of the mechanics available to the player: the player can acquire Typhon powers to enhance Morgan's abilities, symbol-

ically reflecting the integration of the shadow into conscious experience. This human-Typhon hybridisation recreates the act through which the shadow is “integrated” into the psyche.

In this way, *Prey* illustrates the tension between the need to use darkness to survive and the risk of crossing the boundary that defines what it means to be human. This ludo-fictional world is thus underpinned by a fundamental problematic: techno-scientific power, in seeking to expand the frontiers of evolution, unleashes forces that transcend the human condition. Alex Yu symbolises the figure of the scientist who yearns to tame the alien, while Morgan (our character subjected to the consequences of these experiments) embodies the inner process of hybridisation between the human and the unknown. Interpreted through a Jungian lens, the destruction of the station becomes a metaphor for the psychic catastrophe that ensues when the shadow is not integrated but manipulated or rejected.

Adopting this prism, *Prey*'s ludo-fictional world is therefore not reduced to the classic fight against an “external monster,” but opens a space to explore the idea that the alien ultimately embodies dark facets of the collective psyche, tied to technological zeal and scientific greed. Talos I represents a dystopian setting that, along with its futuristic design, presents an essential dialectic: the acceptance or denial of one's own shadow. Thus, the experiments conducted on Talos I with the Typhon creatures can be understood as a metaphor for the emergence of the repressed, a reminder that beyond our luminous side, we harbour a shadow inseparable from our identity.

CONCLUSIONS

The hermeneutic reading of *Prey* as an example of the introspective fantastic shows to what degree the Jungian notion of the shadow illuminates the dynamics of the monstrous when it is conceived as a projection of the introspective dimension of the characters. In this way, the game reveals that the extraordinary figures of the Typhon do not burst forth as pure otherness, but as the direct result of a human ambition that, in seeking to subjugate unknown forces, ends up generating its own antagonists. In this sense, the dialectic between the human and the alien becomes an enquiry into the limits between the strange and

the everyday, between what is possible and what is impossible according to our codes of reality. The rebellion of the Typhon in this fictional world represents, therefore, the manifestation of a collective shadow that restores to human beings their most hidden identity. Their ability to mimic everyday objects intensifies the experience of the Uncanny, as they break the boundary between the familiar and the dangerous. Similarly, the progressive hybridisation of the player-controlled character with the alien powers symbolises the assimilation (or rejection) of those unconscious contents that, instead of being eradicated, reclaim their place in consciousness.

We also observe that technology, far from being a mere instrument, functions as a catalyst for the repressed. *Neuromods* are presented as devices that embody the promise of transcending human limits, but at the same time expose the ethical fragility of manipulating identity indiscriminately. In this way, the fictional world reinforces the introspective side of the fantastic: the “monster” does not come from a remote place, but emerges from within and rises up against its creator. The design of the environments, the game mechanics and narrative resources present in *Prey* converge in a scenario where strangeness emerges from the familiar, reminding us that, in the imaginary of the fantastic, the most disturbing threats can also be a mirror of the shadows of the individual.

Ultimately, *Prey* invites reflection not only on the dangers of scientific overreach, but on the psychological consequences of disavowing the darker aspects of the self. By blending science fiction with psychological horror, the game offers a powerful allegory of inner fragmentation, where the shadow, if not integrated, returns as the monster within.

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THE WITCH IN *FOLK HORROR*. AN ANALYSIS OF ITS EVOLUTION FROM THE MONSTER TO THE FEMINIST ICON THROUGHOUT THE FILMS *AKELARRE* (2020) AND *HELLBENDER* (2021)

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INTRODUCTION

The witch has been a character that has walked with us for centuries through myths and legends, as well as through the later short stories that gradually were directed to children as their main audience.

As Marvin Harris explains in his book *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* (2019, p.225), the number of people who were accused of heresy and subsequently executed in Europe between the 15th and 17th centuries amounts to 500,000, and although this number may vary between authors, what is undeniable is the impact that this character had on the folklore and myths all across Europe, forming part of the legends and oral stories that have survived over time, establishing the witch as a dark, ruthless and horrifying being.

THE WITCH IN CINEMA

Cinema found a juicy character in the witch, especially in the field of horror, generating a nourishing world around her. Since the beginnings of the

seventh art, the witch has appeared repeatedly, as can be seen in films such as *The Magic Sword* (Booth, W.R., 1901), *Le puits fantastique* (Méliès, G., 1903), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Turner, O., 1910), or in the controversial *Häxan* (Christensen, B., 1922), which, as a documentary, introduce witchcraft in a deeper and more complex way.

Its repetition over time has caused this character to go through different stages of development. We have seen the witch as a monster, as an evil woman who returns from the world of the dead to take her revenge as in *The Naked Witch* (Buchanan, L., 1961). As a woman who curses her enemies as in *Cry Of The Banshee* (Hessler, G., 1970), or in *Mark of the Witch* (Moore, T., 1970); as the woman who drives those she seduces to perdition, as we see in *The Satanist* (Spencer, Z., G., 1968); as a monster that stalks and perverts from the world of dreams, as in *The Curse of The Crimson Altar* (Sewell, V., 1968); or as an evil, bloodthirsty being who only seeks to do evil, as in Dario Argento's trilogy *Le tre madri*; also, we must not forget her predilection for the pure souls of the children, as in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, R., 1968).

We should not ignore that the witch is also a *femme fatale*, the reason why she acquired an important erotic role on the big screen, becoming a character widely used to address sexuality, especially in the sixties and seventies, at the moment when the sexual revolution took place in the Western world, where beauty and youth are some of her attraction features, as exemplified by *The Naked Witch* (Alexander, C., 1961), or *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard, P., 1971). This association of the witch with the erotic derives from her proximity to evil and sin, as these women used to cross the night sky on their broomsticks to attend to covens, or *akelarres*, where they danced wildly and later engaged in sexual encounters with demons or the devil himself. The witch, therefore, is the woman feared for her freedom and sexual desire, an association that also connects her to other monsters, such as mermaids, succubus or even the demon Lilith. This link with sexuality and eroticism has remained throughout time, showing women who are aware of their sexuality and the attraction they provoke around them, an example of this kind of woman is Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, a character played by Cassandra Peterson, who during the 1980s presented the American show *Movie Macabre* (1981-1993).

This blend between eroticism and comedy offers a light-hearted image of these characters, and they sometimes satirize the association of women with beau-

ty, or the power of seduction associated with witches and their incantations. It is interesting to mention in this respect the black comedy *Death Becomes Her* (ZemECKIS, R., 1992), in which the protagonists desperately seek a remedy that will restore their lost youth and beauty, turning to the enigmatic Lisle Von Rhuman, played by a beautiful and seductive Isabella Rosellini.

Witchcraft, associated with evil, and a symbol of the interest in the forbidden, and mystery, transgression, freedom or pleasure, has generated a great scenario that produces interest and fear in equal parts.

However, cinema has also been interested in the historical aspect of witchcraft, exploring the inquisitorial processes where many people were persecuted and executed, developing the most diverse and horrifying forms of torture to obtain the desired confession from the defendants. This scenario served as inspiration for the development of horror films interested in showing the ordeal suffered by the poor victims, as in *Kladivo na čarodějnice* (Vávra, O., 1969).

The witch, in this context, brings together both the image of the ruthless being who had to be exterminated, and the poor helpless woman who suffered the torment of those who singled her out, but in both cases offering flat characters and without delving deeply into their psychology.

This universe became richer and richer, and in the 80s and 90s, films attempted to show the witch as a normal woman who finds in magic the power to achieve what she desires, although these desires are frequently related to the romantic interests of the characters, as in *The Witches of Eastwick* (Miller, G., 1987) or *Practical Magic* (Dunne, G., 1998).

Similarly, the association of the witch with rebelliousness or the desire for freedom has been linked to adolescence, a time of experimentation, where the protagonists, usually a group of friends, flirt with the occult, which usually causes them to awaken supernatural forces they are unable to control. Examples of such films are *Little Witches* (Simpson, J., 1996) or *The Craft* (Fleming, A., and Filardi, P., 1996). However, as a comic and fresh counterpoint, the cute Sabrina in her adventures in the TV series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996 - 2003) is still alive in the memories of the *millennial generation*.

The witch has also appeared frequently in children's stories that have seen their film adaptation, and that associate her with the stepmother, such as Queen Grimhilde in the classic *Snow White* (Hand, D., 1937) or Maleficent in *Sleeping*

Beauty (Geronimi, C., 1959), but they have also developed a more irreverent approach, as the wonderful witchcraft student Miss Price in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (Stevenson, R., 1971), the hilarious Madam Mim in *The Sword in the Stone* (Reitherman, W., 1963), or the dark but motherly figure embodied by Morticia Addams created by the American cartoonist Charles Addams.

The witch in cinema is a character that has been in continuous development, reflecting over time an image with more nuances, in which both the monster and the woman coexist, finding totally inhuman beings who play the role of antagonist and whom the protagonist (usually male) has to kill, as in *Season of the Witch* (Sena, D., 2011), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (Wirkola, T., 2013), or *The Last Witch Hunter* (Eisner, B., 2015). Despite this, in recent decades cinema has been showing more complex characters that blur the lines between good and evil, delving deeper into the particular stories of each one of them, as can be seen in *Dark Shadows* (Burton, T., 2012), *Love Witch* (Biller, A., 2016), or in *Gretel and Hansel* (Perkins, O., 2020).

THE FEMINIST WITCH

This development in the figure of the witch is very much marked by its connection to the feminist movement, especially with the radical feminism, since from its beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s they used the witch in their programs as a divergent image, as an outsider to the system, the revolutionary and the martyr. The witch emerged powerfully in the movement and remained in the feminist imaginary with a very different tinge to the black image she had in the past.

One of their most prominent appearances came from the group W.I.T.C.H., an acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, that began performing guerrilla theatre-based actions in New York on Halloween night 1968 when they cast a curse on Wall Street.

THE WITCH IN *FOLK HORROR*

Similarly, *folk horror* began to take its first steps in this same period, so that the *zeitgeist* of the time would notably impregnate this genre. Witchcraft has

been a recurrent element within *folk horror*, and especially present in two of its considered precursors, such as *Witchfinder General* (Reeves, M., 1968) and *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard, P., 1971). This fact also reflects the great eclecticism that was experienced in the Anglo-American world in religion and spirituality, when a spiritual revival of traditional religions, the so-called born-again Christians, found themselves coexisting with different forms of alternative spirituality.

Similarly, *folk horror's* interest in focusing on folklore, the rural, or the magical, responds to the interest developed by the counterculture in traditions from remote areas, or minorities. In this respect, the witch as an outsider is frequently represented in places far from the big cities, especially in rural areas. These natural environments have also been identified with paganism, as strongholds of ancient practices and magical rites, been therefore associated with the barbaric, the animal, and also understood as a brutalized and savage environment.

THE WITCH IN FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Similarly, through the connection of radical feminism with the Feminist Spirituality Movement, and especially through figures such as Zsuzsanna Budapest or Starhawk, the forms of spirituality that were linked to paganism or Wicca, but with a feminist approach, were given a high visibility, which attracted many women who found traditional religions to be iron systems of oppression of their rights and freedom.

The witch, or priestess, appeals to the inner power within any woman, a power that is accessible to all women, and therefore, on hand to be reclaimed. The witch acts as a source of empowerment, in a society where there is a great lack of female role models who embrace power and independence, and whose aim is to reverse the prevailing symbolic order.

THE WITCH AS A SYMBOL OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

The feminist movement identified the witch as a subversive figure who rejected the patriarchal establishment. As the American philosopher Cynthia

Eller (1995, pp. 52-56) affirms, the witch embodies the outcast, the excluded, the outsider, the stranger, the unknown, or the one who does not belong to the same system, so that through the identification with the witch, these women assimilated the characteristics of this term and proclaimed their rejection of an androcentric society. According to the author, to reclaim the witch is to remember and show solidarity with all those women who have been repudiated, persecuted, executed and forgotten in history. This link between women and the witch, far from being something ephemeral, has grown steadily to the present day, when the chants of “we are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn’t burn” resound at feminist marches around the world. According to Starhawk (2012, p.51), “to be a witch is to identify with nine million victims of intolerance and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice no longer demands more victims”.

This assimilation by feminism has meant that the witch has increasingly appeared in different media as a symbol of women’s power, reversing the monstrous image she previously had.

THE WITCH IN *AKELARRE* (2020) AND *HELLBENDER* (2021)

Through two recent films: *Akelarre* (Pablo Agüero, 2020) and *Hellbender* (Zelda Adams, John Adams and Toby Poser, 2021) we can see how this image today has become a nourishing field in which cinematic works that explore female-centered narratives have been developed.

The Witch in Akelarre (2020)

First, the film *Akelarre*, co-produced by Spain, Argentina and France, focuses on a small fishing village in the Basque Country in the 17th century. Director Pablo Agüero takes us into the story of a group of young girls who live a simple life, enjoying their free time with each other, full of songs, games and walks through the fields and forests they have spent their lives in. The film shows us the vitality of these young girls, their eagerness to have fun, as well as their small acts of rebellion by experimenting with mushrooms and plants that they extract from the forests. However, this idyllic situation changes when they

are accused of witchcraft, for which they are imprisoned, locked up, and put before a court that must prove their guilt. This film shares with others previously mentioned, such as the British *The Witchfinder General* (Reeves, M., 1968) or the Czechoslovakian *Kladivo na čarodějnice* (Vávra, O., 1970), the criticism of the lack of scruples of those who condemned their neighbors and kept silent in the face of the injustices done to them. Also talks about those, judges and executioners, who in a turbulent period of time found a juicy business in hunting people.

Unlike these films, *Akelarre* emphasizes on showing the perspective of these young peasant women, who, having been branded witches, try with all their might to escape their imminent execution, showing how their persecution is carried out in a despicable way, shortly after the men of the village have gone to sea, so that there is no one who dares to contradict the judge's authority.

Akelarre depicts merciless and brutal trials where there is no room for error or exoneration, working as a mere formality whose only objective is to achieve the necessary explanation, even if it is non-existent, that these women deserve to die, so the fate of the young women is written from the moment of their accusation.

The film shows, therefore, the cruel fate of young girls whose only fault is the desire to have fun, typical of any adolescent, while at the same time it criticises the way in which women have been reprimanded in history if they strayed from a restrained behavior, and dared to taste any hint of freedom.



Figure 1: The surgeon looks for the devil's mark on Ana.
Source: Still from the film *Akelarre*, Pablo Agüero, 2021.

In one of the scenes of the film, the judge wants Ana to pose as a model to portray one of the *Sabbat*'s stories. Ana appears naked next to Mrs. de Lara, who has the entourage of inquisitors in her house, and the young woman asks her the reason why they want to draw her like that. Madame de Lara replies in a low voice, that it is her beauty, while showing her reflection in a piece of metal, and continues: "I once was like you: young, insolent and wild. But I paid dearly for it. So, I learned. This bonnet covers our hair perfectly, as they ordered us to," referring to her headdress, a *burukoak*. "Men are afraid of women who are not afraid of them" (Agüero, P., 2020).

The film shows us the struggle of the girls, who despite the harshness of their situation maintain an active attitude, supporting each other when the tortures seek to break their will, showing great resilience, companionship and love for each other in the hardest moments. Of particular interest is Ana's character, who is introduced from the very beginning of the film as a very intelligent girl with a great imagination, qualities that make her a great storyteller. Ana is able to cajole the judge with the stories she imagines of the *Sabbat*, acting like a Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, trying to buy time so that with the arrival of the full moon, in a few days, the men will return from the sea, and they would have some chance of saving themselves from their tragic fate.

The Witch in Hellbender (2021)

Hellbender (Adams, J., Adams, Z. and Poser, T. 2021), on the other hand, is an American film shot on a very low budget during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike *Akelarre*, *Hellbender* is set in the present day and takes us into the story of a family where a mother and daughter (Toby Poser and Zelda Adams), live alone in a remote and wild place in the United States. The story shows how the young girl, Izzy, has an autoimmune disease that forces her to stay away from society. One of the hobbies of the teenager is the *heavy metal* band she and her mother have formed. The mother is portrayed as a woman devoted and dedicated to her daughter, who takes care of her daughter in every way she can: providing her with food based on fruits and plants she collects from the environment, educating Izzy, or going to the nearest town to find her gifts and the things she needs to develop her hobbies.

Despite her mother's efforts to keep Izzy away from society, they are cut short when she befriends a teenage neighbor, who invites her to a party with other friends at the pool of a nearby holiday home.

After that meeting, and realizing that nothing has happened to her, the young girl looks to her mother for answers to her isolation. Faced with this, the mother decides to tell her daughter the truth, and she explains her daughter that they are *Hellbenders*, dangerous, bloodthirsty supernatural beings who derive their power from their prey's fear of death, being this the reason why she has been all this time isolated, to prevent this thirst from awakening in her. This storyline highlights the mother's repression of her daughter's own nature, accepting that Izzy will not be able to control her thirst and power on her own. This situation raises a metaphor with regard to the education of many young girls, where the parents' fear of them growing up, and encountering complicated or painful situations, sometimes results in their freedom being excessively repressed. The power that *Hellbender* proposes is an inner power, where education and upbringing are key to knowledge and responsibility. However, the fear of imprudence or its incorrect use generates repression. As the mother herself says in an intimate conversation with her daughter: "Do you know why we are called Hellbenders? Because we are powerful and everything powerful is feared". (Adams, J., Adams, Z. and Poser, T. 2021).



Figure 2: Izzy and her mother.

Source: Still from *Hellbender*, John Adams, Zeldá Adams and Toby Poser, 2021.

On the other hand, a key element is the presence of blood in the film, which is related to life and fertility, as well as lineage or legacy. In this regard, it emphasizes how these beings reproduce: only when they end their mother's life, and Izzy is destined to continue in this infinite cycle, an idea that is also reflected in the film through the repetition of the rule: "spring eats winter, winter eats autumn, autumn eats summer, summer eats spring" (ADAMS, J., ADAMS, Z. and POSER, T. 2021), and which is associated with the life cycle, a metaphor for the changes in life that the young is experimenting, the same once her mother had to face before her.

CONCLUSIONS

As we can see in this short analysis, the witch is very much present in the culture, especially in films and TV shows, where the character has suffered a deep transformation through the decades. By paying attention in how *Akelarre* and *Hellbender* use this character, we discover how the witch now is related to a feminist perspective.

Akelarre is a clear example of how the witch reclaims this forgotten history of women, and highlights the great number of women of whom we know little or nothing. *Akelarre* talks about the victims of the witch hunts that took place in Spain in an attempt to put an end to the heresy present in the remotest parts of the country, instigating the people of small villages, where ancient traditions and old knowledge survived as a result of a close connection with the environment, showing the brutality experienced by thousands of people, especially women. This film, set in a past that we see as distant, also offers a very contemporary critique, showing how, despite the years, violence against women is still a problem that is very much present in Western society.

Hellbender, on the other hand, is a story about the conflicts of adolescence, of the rebelliousness of this age, of sexual awakening, and the parental and social efforts to control this moment of transition to adulthood for women. It is a story that develops through horror this fear of parents towards their daughters' suffering, which in some cases prevents women from developing and expressing themselves freely. Likewise, the fear and rejection of society towards these women, who are capable of feeling and perceiving themselves as powerful,

makes them choose to hide themselves into the woods in an attempt of self-preservation.

It is the mother's decision to keep her daughter apart, unaware of her true nature, instead of guiding and teaching Izzy from an early age to know and control her power. Because of fear, she decides to hide and deny Izzy a very important part of herself, by weaving a fiction around her in a desperate attempt to block or stop something that is beyond her control.

As we can see in these two examples, the witch has been established in the feminist imaginary as a symbol of female power, through which new films set a critique of how violent and repressive behaviors remain very much alive today.

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UNSPEAKABLE, THE ART OF TALKING ABOUT FORBIDDEN TOPICS THROUGH FANTASY & HORROR

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ABSTRACT

Taboos, repression and moral principles of each era have played a big part in the way some off-limits subjects have been approached on the big screen, as well as censorship, one of the greatest challenges for authors when it comes to telling the stories they want to tell.

A very clear example of the restrictions and limitations that politics and the community in which we live sometimes impose was the *Hays Code*, which from 1934 to 1967 in the United States prohibited scenes of explicit violence, sex and anything that went against the traditional values of the American family. All this led, in a certain way, to the impoverishment of the themes and to a marginalization in fiction of minority groups and their problems, in favor of the heterosexual white man perspective.

Nonetheless, many scriptwriters and directors decided to continue sharing their narratives with audiences in one way or another; they faced every obstacle and defended the free speech using subtexts, metaphors or analogies and resorting to fantasy and horror genres with masterful knowledge of the medium.

THE EFFECTS OF WAR AND POLITICS

Feeding with the emotions of the world they live in is inevitable for creators, therefore their work capitalizes on a lot of the anxieties and fears of the time, especially when it comes to the consequences of war and the administration of politicians.

Films about vampires are a perfect example of this theory. *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (Murnau, 1922) is a German movie that came after the First World War and, according to cultural historian and critic David J. Skal, its makers intended that vampire to represent war itself: the war as a vampire that had drained the blood out of Europe. On the other hand, *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) presents a vampire that emigrates from Transylvania to England so that the American public, who had just endured the beginning of the Great Depression, found some sort of foreign presence to go and blame for everything that was happening around them, as author and editor John Edgar Browning explains.



Figure 1: “Godzilla”.

Source: Ishirō Honda (Toho Co., Ltd.), 1954.

As documented on *Eli Roth’s History of Horror* (Sayenga, K., 2018-2021), after the Second World War a monster like the title character in *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) was used as a stand-in manmade disaster in Japan, a jarring reminder of a national trauma nine years after the atomic bombs of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. The film brought back the anxieties of the population and includes a fictional doctor who invents a device that could stop the monster, but fears it could lead humanity to extinction used as a weapon like the atomic bomb in real life. A recent monster film that also deals with national trauma, in this case in the USA, is *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), where a giant creature attack on New York City is filmed and portrayed in a way that taps into memories of the chaos of the 9/11 attacks.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Siegel, 1956) worked as an allegory about conformity and political extremism and it can be interpreted as anti-communist and as anti-McCarthy witch hunts during the Cold War between the Union Soviet and the United States, in the words of film director Edgar Wright. Its storyline revolves around people that are being replaced by duplicates, emotionless creatures grown from pods that all think identically. In the same way, zombie movies use horror to comment on American values under the surface and undead as a metaphor of the world's ills: Alzheimer, cancer, anarchy, collapse of order... *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) features a group of people locked in a house that somehow represents what was going on in American society as a sociopolitical allegory, according to film scholar and artist Chris Dumas, that is to say, the prejudices, the Civil Rights Act, plus the fear and the violence of the sixties; and *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978), starring another group of survivors who take refuge in a suburban shopping mall, works as a satire of consumerism in the late seventies, a breakdown of the American society and economics, a social collapse and a political story about race and class system in the country. A comedy version of this kind of social commentary through zombie's stories is the main thesis for *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004), a symbol of anarchy based on Britain in the nineties and arousing questions like "what's next" after the collapse of the system and all its protection, as tells in detail writer Max Brooks, while *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-2022) serves as alternative glancing angle about the fragility of civilization and the consequences of the mortgage crisis in 2008: people living on the streets whereas the protagonists of the show are always moving surrounded by threats everywhere and losing their humanity in order to survive.

Vampires, monsters and zombies aside, war effects were the breeding ground for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), more specifically the

effects of the War of Vietnam and the rebellion that was going on at the time. In some ways, it's a capitalistic story about the psychic repression and the working class labor: a family of dispossessed workers with no means to earn a living for themselves because of automation and loss of jobs, and who use the tools of their trade (the chainsaw, the hammer) against their former employers or whoever comes around, in the opinion of film scholar Jason Middleton. Tobe Hooper's classic of rural horror has been very influential for torture porn in more recent films like *Saw* (Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth, 2005), which reflect on the value of life and karma with echoes of America under world indictment for torturing people in the War on Terror of George Bush.

RACISM & DISCRIMINATION

Ben (Duano James), the African-American protagonist in *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) maybe pointed out for a new direction in the American society of the time, as states Middleton, but this black hero is shot and killed by the police when they mistake him for a zombie at the end of the film, an ending that delivers a clear message: racism was still more alive than ever.

According to film scholar Tananarive Due, the idea of black male energy as a menace is the basis of the cult classic *King Kong* (C. Cooper & B. Schoedsack, 1933). The film works, in the words of Quentin Tarantino, as a metaphor for the tribulations of the black male in American white society with its racial undercurrents and subtextual slavery, depicting the story of a giant ape that is captured and taken to New York in order to exploit him for profit at the same time the monster falls in love with a pretty white woman that would ultimately lead to his death. *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) depicts a similar tragic demise to its title character as starting point of this haunted ghost's popular movie franchise: Daniel Robitaille (Tony Todd) is a black man son of a former slave who falls in love with a white woman and impregnates her, but when the woman's father learns about this forbidden interracial affair, he orders a lynch mob to go after him and he's killed; from that moment, the urban legend of Candyman is born and he comes back from the dead to kill anybody who speaks his name five times in front of a mirror, as part of a supernatural horror plotline

that mixes racism with the violence of slavery to explain the emergence of the antagonist, as Due explains. Both, the original film and *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), revolve around Chicago's Cabrini–Green Homes, one of the largest public-housing projects in the United States and a missed opportunity to give a decent housing to many black migrants from the South after the Great Depression, since it became synonymous with danger and crime until the demolition of the buildings.

It does serve as a symbol for the racial violence of what has happened to African Americans in cities across the United States, where their homes and businesses were taken down, either due to government neglect or because the government wanted to put a highway up, and it just so happened that the public-housing projects were in the way. (MOCK, B., 2021, *Is racist housing policy the real villain in "Candyman"?*)



Figure 2: "Get Out".

Source: Jordan Peele (Blumhouse Productions, QC Entertainment & Monkeypaw Productions), 2022.

Jordan Peel co-wrote and co-produced the sequel as an author that deals with racism in America through his work as a filmmaker. *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), his directorial debut, stands out as a social satire in the horror genre that, in the opinion of Due, shows how a state of suppression feels like and looks like, how people deal with race and how racism is still a horrifying problem nowadays.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

The real world is flooded with abusive and controlling relationships that the fantasy and horror genres have portrayed through all kinds of monstrous narratives: mad doctors, serial killers, poltergeists, cults... In this scenario, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Mamoulian, 1931) perfectly defines the abuse suffered by a woman at the hands of a man playing good and evil. He is the one that saves the character of Ivy Pierson (Miriam Hopkins) from an attacker in the streets and becomes her benefactor, but that comes with a high price for Ivy. The bar singer and prostitute is physically and psychologically abused by Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde (Fredric March), who uses her to satisfy his wild desires while his fiancée is away; Ivy as a victim is helpless, because no one cares about someone in her position and his abuser will probably kill her if she goes to the police. The depiction of male sexual violence in the film is right on the mark and still relevant today, isn't it?

Rosemary's Baby (Polanski, 1968) deals with the dark side of pregnancy, parenthood and even questions religion, but it can be clearly seen as a metaphor about domestic violence, about emotional violence in relationships between men and women, according to film director Karyn Kusama. Rosemary (Mia Farrow) is constantly despised and questioned by her husband Guy (John Cassavetes) about her friends, her look or her diet, she gives up her individuality just to please him and, even worse, she is victim of a sexual assault by the devil; later, when she asks about what happened that night, Guy says he was the one who raped her while she was unconscious, an experience he defines as "kind of fun in a necrophile sort of way". The film shows the way gaslighting works as everyone manipulates Rosemary so that she seems paranoid, loses all her credibility and doesn't trust her own perception of reality. In the same vein, *The Entity* (Furie, 1982) portrays the experience of Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey), a victim of sexual abuse by something utterly inhuman, a supernatural unknown violent force; as soon as she seeks for help, the reaction of family members, friends and psychology professionals goes from doubt to mockery since they all question the veracity of her testimony, but it's her doctor, Phil Sneiderman (Ron Silver), who better represents the abusive gaslighting patriarchy in our society as he belittles

Carla's own trauma in the same way the world or the public opinion does when it comes to judging women's accounts of sexual violence towards them.



Figure 3: "The Entity".

Source: Sidney J. Furie (American Cinema International), 1982.

Other examples of this narrative are *Last night in SoHo* (Wright, 2021), where the victim looks for revenge by killing all the men who took advantage of her, and *The Invisible Man* (Whannell, 2020), about another abusive controlling relationship between a woman and her possessive ex-boyfriend, a scientist who fakes his own death and starts to stalk and torment her as the title character of the film.

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Being a woman in the world today is dangerous and that's why the slasher subgenre is considered by many movie critics and authors like Amanda Reyes the closest to the reality of the world for women. Although back then it was considered misogynistic, the slasher puts women front and center since they usually are the main victims of a serial killer, but they also end up being the ones who survive, in the opinion of film scholar Jen Moorman, and the characters you identify with as a spectator. *Black Christmas* (Clark, 1974) introduced the pop culture figure in film studies and final girl of the film Jess Bradford (Olivia Hussey), who discovers she's pregnant and

grapples with her decision to have an abortion as her friends disappear or are killed; her boyfriend disapproves the idea of not having his baby, which makes him a suspect and the abortion debate part of the murder mystery in a very progressive film, where there's a lot going on that is reflective of what was happening in the early seventies for women, especially since it was made the year after *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruling protecting a woman's right to choose.

At the same time, society has always been scared of women and their sexuality, there's fear of women coming into their own, and witches are the ones fantasy and horror scriptwriters frequently turn to in order to talk about female strength and wisdom. In *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977) women use their power to break free, in *The Craft* (Flemming, 1996) they feel confident, sexy and liberated as they master their magic, and in *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015) the lead character's puberty is seen as a menace for her religious family and therefore, instead of obeying a patriarchal society, she joins a coven of witches and embraces the pleasures of life.

"Walking around in a female body is terrifying. You are a target, you're an object, and I think that is part of the reason why we put all these walls to protect us" explains actress Katharine Isabelle. This can be read as the basis of Diablo Cody's script for *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), where a monstrous transformation into some kind of succubus is used to talk about puberty as a transformative thing and about female sexual appetites, but that also uses demonic possession to reflect on how teenage girls are objectified in a culture obsessed with appearance. A similar narrative was discussed in *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett, 2000) about two sisters and their transformation into werewolves during their adolescence, but the fear of female sexuality is mostly exploited in the vampires' subgenre as women become bloodsuckers seduced by Dracula or other creatures of the night.



Figure 4: “Dracula’s Daughter”.

Source: Lambert Hillyer (Universal Pictures), 1936.

SEXUALITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY

As Jen Moorman puts “we live in the United States, in a culture that is very sexual and yet very sexually repressive. The idea of the vampire as a kind of sexy monster fits very well with the United States’ kind of complicated relationship with sexuality” and that has been explored through fantasy and horror from the beginnings of cinema until now, but the Hays Code forced filmmakers to deal with it through subtle and sneaky formulas that could get past the code and avoid censorship. In this way, gay and lesbian stories were suggested in classic films like *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935) or *Dracula’s Daughter* (Hillyer, 1936) with class, elegance and finesse.

The sequel to *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931) showcases the work by two men in order to create life without the involvement of a woman, which can be seen as a metaphor for a gay couple trying to give birth to their own baby; the sequel to *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) introduces Countess Marya Zaleska (Gloria Holden) as a vampire who takes in the young Lili (Nan Grey) with the excuse of painting her, but who is sexually attracted to her and wants to seduce her and feed of her.

Vampires are associated with sex and seduction in many works of fiction, a narrative that opens the door to portray other gender identities and sexual pref-

erences; somehow vampires became avatars of alternative sexuality and the ones in *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994) introduced an alternative family too formed by two same-sex parents and their child: Lestat (Tom Cruise), Louis (Brad Pitt) and Claudia (Kirsten Dunst). The idea of gay marriage comes ahead of time in the movie and more queer possibilities would generate a lot of comment through the genre on the big screen and on TV, thanks to the vampires, werewolves, witches, fairies, etc. of *True Blood* (Alan Ball, 2008-2014), a show that reflected America's gradual acceptance of gay rights among other related topics like religion or HIV/AIDS.

Many years before, *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983) served as a metaphor about intimacy and sexual weirdness, as cultural commentator Eliza Skinner points out, and *Hellraiser* (Barker, 1987) gave space to gender issues and sexually transgressive monsters in leather; nevertheless other hate discourses towards the community were spread through the queer panic subgenre, where the big final reveal of some slasher movies is the killer's identity as a transgender person in films like *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980), *Terror Train* (Spottiswood, 1980) and *Sleepaway Camp* (Hiltzik, 1983).

For decades Hollywood has taught audiences how to react to trans people and sometimes they're being taught that the way to react to trans is fear: that we are dangerous, that we are psychopaths, that we are serial killers, that we must be deviants or perverts. Why else would you wear a dress if you're a man? (Nick Adams in FEDER, S., 2020, *Disclosure*)

It's ironic that it seems there's been a complete turn around and these narratives could be censored or forbidden in a near future.

CONCLUSIONS

Fantasy and horror films often represent our greatest fears and nightmares, but at the same time throughout history they have served to address issues that could not be openly discussed in society. Taking an unpleasant, uncomfortable, traumatic or painful situation and transferring it to a horror and fantasy context means endless creative possibilities in the moviemaking process as well as a wide

range of resources to provide different dramatic discourses thanks to its different subgenres: slasher, body horror, alien invasions, witches, supernatural, possessions, zombies, etc.

Through the viewing and analysis of classic and contemporary films, it can be proved how unique and singular tools and resources are used to deal with all kinds of topics, ranging from segregation to role genders, but it also shows how horror and fantasy stand out as means to reflect on our reality, to criticize politics or the circumstances of the moment and to break through prohibitions of any government regarding storytelling

The movie industry, instead of becoming impoverished by these restrictions and censorship, has become a richer medium, where there are different interpretations, a subtext, and through metaphors and analogies a message is transmitted across fictional stories that resonate in today's society and in the society of the time in which they were made.

In the end, fantasy and horror can be considered the ideal genres to access the inaccessible, to dispute the indisputable and to speak the unspeakable.

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THE NOTION OF MYTH IN S. LANGER AND ITS RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY FICTIONS

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SUSANNE LANGER

Susanne Langer was an American philosopher who conducted her work between 1930 and 1970. Despite the originality and richness of her contributions, she remains insufficiently recognized and is often misunderstood. Today, Langer is best known as a philosopher of art, which has led to the neglect of her earlier work on logic and epistemology as well as her later work of the theory of mind (Dengerink, 2021, pp. 1–2).

In this essay, we aim to focus on Langer's overlooked contributions, particularly two works on logic and epistemology: *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930) and *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942). These books are significant not only for their philosophical content but also for their emergence within the context of analytical philosophy. Langer's perspective was deeply influenced by her neo-Kantian education and by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which allowed her views to diverge from those of Russell and Ayer (Ibid, 2021, p. 24). "She did not read Wittgenstein as an empiricist philosopher of science or atomistic correspondence theorist but as a philosopher of language and symbolic meaning more generally" (Dengerink, 2021, p. 34).

This curiosity about the concept of the symbol is a central theme throughout Langer's work and serves as the principal motivation connecting her to figures such as Freud, Peirce, and the field of Gestalt psychology. Her direct relationship with Cassirer also encouraged her exploration of language and related topics concerning conceptualization. "For Langer, the new generative idea of the epoch—the 'new key' in philosophy—was the discovery that our sense-data are preliminary symbols and that the 'facts' that make up our knowledge of the world are inherently symbolic". (Ibid, 2021, p. 36).

For Langer, the concept of the symbol holds great significance, as she posits that the capacity to create symbols is a defining characteristic of humanity, one that genuinely reflects the human condition (Langer, 1954, p. 36). This suggests that the human brain and the human being possess the unique ability not only to engage with and learn about reality but also to construct mental concepts that can subsequently be symbolized. As Dengerink (2021) observes, "One of Langer's major contributions to this debate is her emphasis on the fact that there is always a plurality of symbolic forms to express the world as it is experienced" (p. 36).

According to Langer, one of the most significant characteristics of human symbolization is the ability to refer to things and events that are not present. The human mind can contemplate actual circumstances as well as past or future events. Furthermore, humans are capable of reflecting on hypothetical situations, even those that may never materialize, and on fictional scenarios that are known to be impossible (Langer, 1930, pp. 48-51). For Langer (1954), "*Abstractive seeing* is the foundation of our rationality" (p. 58). Consequently, her work begins with a logical analysis and later expands into a philosophy of mind.

In Langer's context—which is not substantially different from the contemporary Western context—all reflection on symbolization was dominated by discursive language. Discursive language possesses an organized and linear structure that aligns perfectly with the requirements of logical and scientific language (Langer, 1954, p. 5-7). Given the prominence of these disciplines, much of the scholarship assumed that the entirety of the knowable world could be expressed through words. While Langer acknowledges that discursive language is a powerful tool for conceptualizing reality efficiently, she critiques the notion that it is the only valid way to engage with reality and calls for a broader perspective on symbolization. In the Langer's work context, the meaning would be not confined

their correspondence with physical world, “she would like to emphasize other legitimate aspects of their meaning which she and a few other philosophers feel had been neglected” (Schultz, 2016, p. 257).

Langer identifies a frontier territory and boundary cases that challenge the effectiveness of discursive language. She observes that, at times, individuals may experience the sensation of wanting to express certain concepts but find themselves unable to articulate them fully (Langer, 1930, p. 60-63). These are the same cases Wittgenstein dismisses in his aphorism 7: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein, 2021, p. 56). However, Langer insists that renouncing these experiences is equivalent to renouncing a part of reality. She asserts, “There is an unexplored possibility of genuine semantics beyond the limits of discursive language” (Langer, 1954, p. 70). In this regard:

Langer rejects Wittgenstein’s conclusion to the *Tractatus* that the inexpressible in language is mystical and should remain in silence. She also rejects Carnap’s view that the language of metaphysics, ethics and poetry is merely emotional expressions, akin to laughing or crying. If the scientific propositions were the only semantic that contained meaning, Langer argues, we could never say anything meaningful about the many things that are important to us. (Dengerink, 2021, p. 159)

For this reason, her theories of language, epistemology, and later philosophy of art focus on experiences or aspects of reality that seem to transcend the limits of language. This realization leads her to explore other forms of expression. Langer discusses painting and music extensively, suggesting that these less-studied symbolic systems may be more effective in conveying transcendental experiences—not only emotions but also ideas about reality, metaphysical questions, and religious inquiries.

In this context, the concept of myth emerges within Langer’s philosophy. She introduces it in her first work, *The Practice of Philosophy*, and continues its development in later writings. Langer views myth as something that bridges the domains of logic and art. Although articulated in a discursive format, its value lies not in the narrative it conveys but in its holistic expression—a concept un-

derstood as a unified whole. In Langer's words the myths "embodies the concept in an instance" (Langer, 1930, p.157) and she adds that "this sort of expression often lets us apprehend a concept before we comprehend it" (Langer, 1930, p.158).

THE NOTION OF MYTH

The notion of "myth" first appears in *The Practice of Philosophy* and is further developed in *Philosophy in a New Key*, making it a fundamental concept in Langer's philosophy. According to Langer, human beings have the capacity to apprehend the form of things prior to their conceptualization. This suggests a preliminary step in the process of understanding the world—a step imbued with informative content.

In her first book, Langer asserts that the concepts are too universal and abstracts, requiring a trained mind for their comprehension. This comprehension is constrained by the rules of discursive language and the limited word-to-thing relationship. She suggests that some human experiences are too complex to be encapsulated by defined concepts and must instead be expressed through alternative means. In myths, words transcend their simple subject-matter relation; the myth as a whole embodies a single idea. Within a myth, descriptions and narratives serve merely as the vehicle for presenting an idea, and this idea constitutes the myth's meaning (Langer, 1930, p. 157). As Langer (1930) states, "the kernel of a myth is a remote idea, which is *shown*, not stated, in the myth" (p.158). She argues that myths enable us to take a complex concept we have yet to fully conceptualize and give it an initial form.

Take Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, for instance. This can be considered a "Langerian myth" because, while it recounts a story about people and events, its primary purpose is not to narrate these occurrences but to symbolize a complex idea. At this point, it is important to clarify that myth is not synonymous with a fantastic tale. While it is true that the earliest myths may have originated from imaginative efforts, there are fundamental differences between these two types of stories. As Langer (1958) explains, "The fairytale is irresponsible; it is frankly imaginary, and its purpose is to gratify wishes (...) Myth, on the other hand,

whether literally believed or not, is taken with religious seriousness, either as historic fact or as a ‘mystic’ truth” (pp. 141–142).

For Langer, myth represents the preliminary draft of an idea that is too complex to be fully conceptualized. As an initial step, myth can lead to the development of an abstract idea or concept. However, its significance lies in its ability to recover experiences from the mystical and purely expressive realms. In this way, myth emerges as a means of understanding human experience in the world, because, as Langer states, “its ultimate end is not wishful distortion of the world, but serious envisagement of its fundamental truths” (Langer, 1958, p. 143).

Myths acquire a significant epistemological dimension, functioning as tools for investigating and understanding reality. Schultz (2016) observes that

She [Langer] is not a mystic who would like to deny conventional meaning for art and myth altogether; In contrast she would like to add to them some new Ideas that would help to explain the unusual nature of art and myth. They are something different from ordinary conversation and from the clear thought of symbolic logic (p. 257).

According to Langer, the literalism and rigidity of language make it difficult to express genuinely new ideas, so a new expression way spread the limits of the symbolic projectability (Innis, 2009, p. 43). As a result, Langer (1930) observes, “a philosophical doctrine which inaugurates a new intellectual era is essentially a myth” (p. 177).

FICTIONS AS CONTEMPORARY MYTHS

Langer’s notion of myth is an intriguing element in considerations of both philosophy and narrative. From this perspective, myth opens a window to a new expressive dimension within certain narratives while engaging with undeniable epistemological content. This concept could serve as a tool for re-evaluating and revalorizing contemporary fiction, particularly speculative fiction.

Speculative fiction is an umbrella term encompassing narratives that explore a thesis about the future in its (im)possible dimensions (Cordasco, 2021,

p. ix). Today, this genre continues to expand and becomes more evident their relations with Langer's concept of myth. In speculative fiction, narratives pose serious questions about various dimensions of reality and explore potential answers. Stories addressing technological futures, scientific revolutions, and philosophical problems go beyond mere storytelling; they incorporate significant reflections on these elements and their impact on humanity. Using Langer's terminology, it is plausible to suggest that such fictions could be interpreted as a form of contemporary mythology.

In this way, contemporary fiction—as a form of myth—brings us closer to initially unknown realities and provides a preliminary framework for understanding them. This consideration of the epistemological power of art aligns closely with Langer's work. According to Langer, “art is a non-discursive symbolic form that can nevertheless provide knowledge and insight. However, its meaning or ‘import’ cannot be explained in words but can only be shown” (Dengerink, 2021, p. 218).

Langer developed this body of theories from her early studies in logic to her later works on the philosophy of art. These ideas were consistently articulated around the premise that effective expression and the acquisition of knowledge are possible beyond the limits of discursive language. For Langer (1930) “the potential ways of understanding, the forms actually contained in the world, are many, and our choice must be made according to our intellectual purpose” (p. 150).

Viewing speculative fiction as a form of Langerian myth enriches not only Langer's philosophical framework but also speculative fiction itself as an epistemological tool. Fiction cannot be confined to mere entertainment or aesthetic pursuit; it carries the potential for profound reflection. Like myths, speculative fictions provide a means of interpreting reality and expressing deep human experiences. Following Langer (1930): “there is no knowledge without form; and probably no form is unique; therefore all knowledge can find symbolic expression” (p. 165) but not only discursive expression.

In conclusion, the Langerian myth serves as a bridging concept, connecting contemporary fictions with pressing contemporary questions and offering tangible answers incarnated in narrative forms. Langer expands the notion of knowledge by asserting that “the limits of language are not the last

limits of experience, and things inaccessible to language may have their own forms of conception, that is to say, their own symbolic devices” (Langer, 1954, p. 215).

Recovering Langer’s philosophy holds particular significance for fostering a deeper understanding of fiction, philosophical inquiries, and reality as a whole. Consequently, “symbolization is both an *end* and an *instrument*. It is humans’ primary interest” (Innis, 2009, p. 35). For Langer, logic and aesthetics converge in a unified framework where symbolization—the capacity to conceptualize experiences—finds its ultimate expression in fictional representations.

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ASIMOV, ADAMS AND THE TELEOLOGY BEHIND COMPUTATIONAL UNIVERSES

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BELIEVING IN SCIENCE FICTION

By the late 1980s, the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) began to intersect with a novel research approach: Artificial Life (A-Life). This group of researchers, primarily based at the Santa Fe Institute in Los Alamos, challenged the prevailing paradigm that aimed at replicating human intelligence in machines. They argued that the ambition to directly transfer human cognitive abilities rested on flawed reasoning. Instead, they believed that Artificial Intelligence should follow an evolutionary trajectory similar to that of humans, recreating simpler life functions as a precursor to developing the most complex one: intelligence (Ferrando, 2019, pp. 115-116).

Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich devoted considerable time to observing these researchers and, as David Noble underlines, he identified a recurring motif in their debates:

Even though most of them were professed agnostics or atheists, Helmreich observed, “Judeo-Christian stories of the creation and maintenance of the world haunted my informants’ discussions of why computers might be ‘worlds’ or ‘uni-

verses,' ... a tradition that includes stories from the Old and New Testament (stories of creation and salvation)" (Noble, 1997, p. 288).

The notion that computers might function as worlds, universes, or that our own universe could be a computer, has intrigued numerous physicists and computational theorists since the 1960s. As John Hockenberry observed, "To imagine the universe as a computer (...) says more about humans than it does about physics" (Fredkin et al, 2011). And, indeed, it is an idea that has a lot to say about how reality is understood in an era where computational paradigms dominate daily life.

The aim of this paper is to explore the origins and teleological implications of the idea of a computational universe, focusing on its expression not only in theoretical discourse but also in speculative fiction. Or more specifically, science fantasy. To do so, this study combines theoretical analysis with literary criticism, comparing philosophical perspectives with their fictional counterparts. After a brief introduction to the relationship between science fiction and belief systems, we will examine the notion of a computational universe first from a theoretical perspective, and then through a comparative reading of two central texts.

Primary references include *The Last Question* by Isaac Asimov, first published in the November 1956 issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series (1978–1992) by Douglas Adams. Both texts occupy a prominent place within the science fiction canon and have significantly influenced collective imagination, transcending the boundaries of their niche audience thanks to its hybridizations. For instance, according to Asimov, *The Last Question* was further more listened than read, as it was adapted for immersive projection at the Abrams Planetarium and performed in planetariums across the United States (Asimov, 1981, pp. 580-581). Meanwhile, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* originated as a radio comedy and subsequently evolved into a series of novels, a television adaptation, and a film. Its cultural footprint endures through memes, ensuring a continued reception even among those unfamiliar with the books.

Both Asimov's and Adams's works are fundamentally metaphysical in nature. While metaphysical themes are common in science fiction, these texts push the boundaries of the genre by subordinating scientific accuracy to fantastical motifs. In *The Last Question*, the most advanced computer in existence transcends its initial purpose to become a deity-like entity capable of creating a universe with the com-

mand, "Let there be light." This act of creation is driven by its quest to answer the question: is it possible to reverse entropy? As a prolongation of itself, the universe it creates is computational. However, thanks to the bible intertextuality, the reader does not understand this universe as future, but as its own universe. Similarly, in Adams's work, it is revealed that Earth and its inhabitants constitute a vast super-computer controlled by mice, designed to calculate the ultimate question that corresponds to the answer "42," which was computed long ago. And, even if it's doubts are not answered, the main character, wonders if the whole universe might have been created similarly.

In general terms, both texts present societies deeply invested in existential inquiries, using their most powerful computers to seek answers to metaphysical questions. Metaphysics are quite a recurring topic in science fiction. For some scholars this is due to the limitations of science in addressing such questions (Clute & Nicholls, 1995, p. 1849). We live at a time when, for many, religious explanations have become inadequate, as the gap between theological narratives and empirical scientific knowledge has widen. However, the human existential anxiety has not ceased. Here, science fiction, and in particular, science fantasy, emerges as a cultural mediator, positioned between the empirical rigidity of science and the unverifiability of religion. It creates a space where scientific principles are acknowledged but transcended, offering imaginative solutions to questions that neither discipline addresses adequately.

It is essential to note that science fiction does not seek to rival science, philosophy, or religion in offering authoritative explanations, and presents their answers as mere fiction. Yet its impact on societal beliefs is undeniable. The cultural resonance of dystopian warnings and utopian aspirations exemplifies the genre's ability to shape expectations. For instance, the concept of technological singularity functions as a modern prophecy, evoking both fear and hope about humanity's technological trajectory. According to Gooch and Evans, science fiction constructs a belief on the future that can be compared to religious faith, though the specifics of this future vary among audiences (Gooch & Evans, 1981, p. 12-13). The connection between science fiction and believes is similarly noted by Antonio Rómar, who argues that the genre becomes mythic when it seeks to answer the question, "Where are we going?"—a central concern of both metaphysics and religious narratives. Rómar contrasts this with the less common question, "Where do we come from?", which he

associates primarily with uchronian fiction (López-Pellisa & Ángel-Moreno, 2009, p. 821). However, both Asimov and Adams address the origins of existence, presenting the idea of a computational universe not as a speculative future but as an ontological explanation of the present.

ONTIC PANCOMPUTATIONALISM

Konrad Zuse, widely known as the inventor of the Z3, the first programmable operational computer, was also the first theorist who proposed that the universe could function like a computational system. His groundbreaking idea was introduced in his 1969 work *Rechnender Raum* (translated as *Calculating Space*), over a decade after Isaac Asimov had ventured into similar territory within the realm of speculative fiction. Zuse's thesis was that the universe operated as the deterministic output of a programmed cellular automaton (German & Zenil, 2012, pp. 790-791). Cellular automata, which, also informed the work of the aforementioned researchers in *Artificial Life (A-Life)* (Noble, 1997, pp. 278-285), are a computational model that creates simplified universes. It projects a discrete space divided into cells whose states (positive or negative) are governed by a set of simple, deterministic rules. A well-known example of this is *The Game of Life*, devised by John Horton Conway in 1970. In this model, the state of each cell is determined by the states of its neighboring cells, with time—also treated as a discrete variable—dictating the evolution of the system. Through the interaction of simple laws, the cells collectively generate complex patterns that appear almost organic, mimicking life (Fernández Chambilla, 2010, p. 3).

Zuse's theories, marginal within the scientific community, were an antecedent to the more widely recognized work of Edward Fredkin in the late 1970s. Fredkin, a computer science theorist, dedicated much of his career to exploring the notion that the universe could be a computer, again drawing from the principles of cellular automata (Davis, 2015, p. 314). Although Fredkin's claims evolved over time, he frequently referred to an external computational source—located “on the other side”—that executes the algorithms underpinning our universe (Wright, 1987, p. 68). This idea was the central topic of several of his courses at the MIT, which eventually gave birth to a research group and a new discipline, Digital Physics.

While causality between fiction and these scientific theories cannot be definitively established, parallels are undeniable. Furthermore, science fiction has played a legitimizing role. Both Zuse and Fredkin were initially dismissed as lunatics; however, the 2011 World Science Festival hosted a roundtable discussion on the computational nature of the universe. Participants included Edward Fredkin, Fotini Markopoulou-Kalamara, Jürgen Schmidhuber, and Seth Lloyd. The later, represented a new generation of thinkers for whom the computational model of the universe had become a serious topic of inquiry. As the panelists noted, the cultural impact of *The Matrix* (1999) helped legitimize these ideas within academic and popular discourse (Fredkin et al., 2011).

While Fredkin and Lloyd adopt literal interpretations of the computational universe, Markopoulou-Kalamara views it primarily as a useful metaphor. She argues that in physics, it is often impossible to approach the ontological question, so adopting the metaphor of the computer is an effective way to focus directly on mathematical modelling. In contrast, Fredkin remains in a more literal position and, like *The Matrix*, opens up a possibility similar to the one proposed by Nick Bostrom in his controversial 2001 paper, “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?”. Lloyd takes a more nuanced posture, that aligns surprisingly to Asimov’s and Adam’s fiction. He rejects the notion of an external computer, suggesting instead that matter itself constitutes information undergoing continuous computation (Fredkin et al., 2011).

These ideas are not without controversy, but, lately they are becoming less and less marginal: “To claim that the physical universe is fundamentally computational is becoming increasingly popular: the universe itself is a computing system, and everything in it is a computing system too” (Piccinini, 2015, p. 57).

Gualtiero Piccinini, the philosopher of science behind this quote, coined the term “ontic pancomputationalism” to describe the idea that computation underpins the fundamental structure of the universe. Piccinini identifies two core claims within this framework: first, an empirical assertion that all physical phenomena can be described in computational terms, and second, a metaphysical claim that computation constitutes the essence of the physical universe (Piccinini, 2015, pp. 56-58).

These ideas have gained further traction in contemporary scientific circles. Stephen Wolfram, a physicist and computer scientist, has been a prominent advocate for the computational universe paradigm. In his 2002 work *A New Kind of*

Science, he stated that the laws of the universe were not only computable, but had a computational nature. In 2020, he launched a research project aimed at finding the algorithms beneath each physical law. While Wolfram's approach replaces cellular automata with hypergraphs, the underlying premise remains consistent: the universe is deterministic and operates as though it were a computational program (Wolfram, 2020). Although Wolfram's project has sparked criticism, it has also garnered significant academic interest, with researchers worldwide contributing to its development. Perhaps what these adherents are unaware of is that the metaphor of the universe as a computer is not a virgin metaphor and carries important implications that become evident when we trace its literary origins.

ABSURDITY'S PRISON

The theorists under consideration generally align with the two core claims of pancomputationalism. They not only propose that the universe can be described in computational terms but also assert that it inherently possesses a computational nature. This nature is perceived in the primacy of information as the fundamental reality. The definition of this information varies among researchers, but most suggest that information determines the states of particles studied in quantum physics. The world is described as one in which the basic unit is not matter but information (Fredkin, 2011). We would be beings of information in a world of information that, ultimately, can be reduced to ones and zeros. In other words, for many of these scientists, the world is language. Not language understood as representation, but a mythical language in which the sign is equivalent to the object it names: an atom is an atom because it is and contains the information—the sign—that it is an atom. It is a type of language that refers us to the Biblical cosmogony, in which God creates through the word: what He says is. By analogy, the computer in *The Last Question* also creates in the same way and with the same words:

And AC said "LET THERE BE LIGHT!":
And there was light— (Asimov, 1956, p. 15).

On the other hand, in Douglas Adams, the creation of Earth is equivalent to writing its program. Like an architect, the computer responsible for creating it

delegates the construction, while its act of creation is reduced to that of writing. Thus, language not only constitutes fundamental reality but also the command that makes creation possible. Furthermore, this language is not static, but in a continuous process of computation. From their inception, computers have been conceived as devices designed to answer questions. In science fiction, the interactions between humans and computers often adhere to this dynamic: humans ask questions, and computers provide answers. Similarly, the computers depicted by our authors are portrayed as fulfilling the function of answering questions. And the worlds imagined by both Asimov and Adams, having a computational nature, are also designed to answer a question or calculate something.

Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, described his discipline as the study of teleological mechanisms (Ponce, 1978, p. 170). As he explained, the cybernetic systems are inherently purposeful, designed to achieve ends programmed by humans. We could infer that imagining the world as following an algorithm and actively computing implies that its computation is progressing toward a goal—an answer to a question—and, therefore, serves a purpose. Fredkin, among the theorists mentioned, stands out for recognizing this implication, as he stated on a conversation with Wright:

“What are computers used for in this world?”

“To compute”, I say.

“What do you mean ‘To compute’? To compute what?” (...)

“Answers to questions”. He is pleased.

“Right, every computer we have is to compute answers to questions. And I’m saying here’s the biggest computer that anybody saw. I’m saying it’s purpose is to compute answers to questions” (Wright, 1987, p. 70).

Although Fredkin’s idea may lack persuasiveness, it is conceptually intriguing. A similar logic appears in Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Nine Billion Names of God* (1953). The author presents a universe where the purpose of existence is to discover the names of God. Once this task is completed, the universe no longer has a purpose and ceases to exist, much like a computer program shuts down after completing its execution. Thus, if the universe is imagined as created to answer a question, it follows that once the question is answered, the universe would cease to exist. However, if the

computation is aimed at “the future,” the task remains perpetually incomplete, avoiding the issue of the end of time, which Fredkin does not explicitly address.

Douglas Adams portrays Earth as a computer designed to find the ultimate question to life, the universe, and everything. Humans, as part of this computational system, are also programmed to contribute to the calculation. Similarly, in Asimov’s work, the universe is designed to compute an answer, with humanity integrated into the program. The central question posed by the creator deity, tormented by eternity, concerns self-destruction—how to annihilate itself and, consequently, the universe. This question is revealed not in *The Last Question* but in a later sequel, *The Last Answer*, published in the January 1980 issue of *Analog Science Fiction and Science Fact*. On this tale, it is disclosed that humans, upon death, are condemned to eternal thought (or calculate) in service to their creator. In this narrative, the link between the conclusion of the computational program and the end of the universe is explicit. A similar relationship is evident in Adams’s work, where Earth is destroyed just before the planet completes its computational program.

While the notion of a purposeful existence might initially seem reassuring, both authors emphasise the absurdity of that purpose, portraying it as a prison from which neither the computer nor humanity can escape. This theme is further underlined by situating their narratives within cyclical cosmogonies. In *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, the destruction of Earth is followed by the mice commissioning of a replica planet. At the end of the 2005 film adaptation, the computation program is shown restarting on the new Earth. The series later introduces alternative versions of Earth, all of which are destroyed in increasingly implausible ways, always just before their computational programs conclude—creating a continuous cycle of regeneration and destruction.

The theme of regeneration is even more central to Asimov’s universe. The first story revolves around preventing the universe’s death by finding a way to revert entropy, while the second centers on causing it. The universes in both stories are the same, restarted with creation. Likewise, the computers in both stories are ultimately the same, existing in two disconnected versions that represent two sides of an all-encompassing being, unknowingly in conflict. This cyclical structure also entraps humans, whose efforts in one direction are inevitably followed by phases pursuing the opposite purpose. This dynamic suggests a prison

governed by absurdity—the absurdity of humanity and the universe having two completely opposed purposes, neither of which can be fulfilled satisfactorily. A similar tension exists in Adams's work. The series concludes that the computation of the ultimate question and the computation of the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything are fundamentally incompatible.

“I'm afraid”, he said at last “that the Question and the Answer are mutually exclusive. Knowledge of one logically precludes knowledge of the other. It is impossible that both can ever be known about the same Universe” (Adams, 1985, p. 455).

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Asimov and Adams did not take their own cosmogonies seriously: what they created was in the service of fiction, not science or philosophy. However, something within their works invited serious consideration, thereby responding to the existential need we all share. On January 22, 1967, a Unitarian church in Bedford replaced its regular service with a reading of *The Last Question*, accompanied by solemn organ music (Asimov, 1981, p. 416). This anecdote represents a compelling metaphor for the power science fiction can sometimes wield, inadvertently occupying the role that religion, science, and philosophy are expected to play as providers of meaning.

Today, the understanding of the universe as a computer has moved beyond the literary realm and permeates the discourse of engineers, scientists, and computational theorists. While we cannot know whether these theorists have read Adams or Asimov, it is undeniable that the ideas they advocate were first articulated in literature. In light of these tendencies we tried to analyse how this metaphor was initially expressed by the two literary authors that had the greatest influence on its formulation. In summary: believing that the universe is computational entails the view that all elements of the world—including humans, as well as all organic and inorganic matter—constitute the matrix of the computer and are part of its computational program. From this perspective, the universe is considered to be pure information, and therefore language, or more specifically, information undergoing a continuous process of computation.

As proposed in fiction, the idea of the universe as engaged in computation is fundamentally teleological: it implies belief in the idea that it computes to solve a problem. Far from providing meaning, this is a deterministic conception, where humans are not masters of their actions and cannot escape the computational program. Furthermore, they lack the possibility of witnessing its ultimate purpose fulfilled, as this would lead to the end of the universe. In this regard, both Adams and Asimov are audacious in linking their narratives to a cosmology of the absurd, where the notion of a computational world emerges as a prison not only for humanity but also for the computer itself.

Although ontological pancomputationalism is a distressing proposition, it seems inevitable that more people will continue to adopt it. As a metaphor, it has already demonstrated its utility, serving as a foundation for new contributions to scientific knowledge. Given the omnipresence of computers and artificial intelligence in our lives and imagination, it is understandable that we would turn to the computer as a reference point for understanding the world. Thus, the goal is not to resist this cosmology but to comprehend it in order to anticipate its implications.

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS OF MAGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE TV SERIES *CHARMED*

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INTRODUCTION

If we talk about world-famous fantasy series, without any doubt one of the most important of the last decades has been *Charmed*, an iconic American television series that blends supernatural themes with drama, comedy, and family dynamics. Created by Constance M. Burge, the show first premiered on The WB network on October 7, 1998, and quickly became a cultural phenomenon. It ran for eight successful seasons, concluding on May 21, 2006, with a total of 178 episodes, making it one of the longest-running hour-long television series centered on female protagonists.

Charmed follows the lives of three sisters —Prue, Piper, and Phoebe Halliwell— who discover they are powerful witches known as “The Charmed Ones”, destined to protect the world. After finding an ancient spellbook, the *Book of Shadows*, each sister obtains a different power —telekinesis, time-freezing, and premonition—, which are combined into the “Power of Three” to vanquish magical evil creatures and save innocents from supernatural threats.

As the series progresses, the Halliwells constantly struggle to combine magical duties with personal lives. After Prue's tragic death in the third season, a long-lost half-sister, Paige Matthews, appears, reigniting the "Power of Three". Together, the sisters evolve as witches and individuals, balancing their destinies as protectors of the innocent with their ordinary human identities and issues.

Two of the main themes of this series are psychology and magic. They are deeply connected, since magic usually reflects the inner side of the characters and their psychological issues. In this paper we are going to focus on a specific aspect of this connection between magic and psyche: magical transformations. In many episodes, one of the witches is magically transformed into another being for different reasons. Sometimes, the witches are going through any kind of unresolved psychological conflict, and the transformation is a consequence of it or a way to channel the problem magically. In that case, to return to their original state, the girls must face their own internal conflicts and solve them through correct psychological understanding and management, like ordinary human beings. Furthermore, these transformations can afterwards provide them with the necessary lessons that will allow them to modify their ways of thinking, behavior, lifestyle, etc. Therefore, those magical transformations are metaphors created by the series to offer the viewer different reflections and lessons on the processing of one's own emotions and the resolution of psychological conflicts in real life.

Throughout the following pages we will present these magical transformations and will analyze the relationship between those and the psychological problems that trigger them, and we will show how the series uses these fantasy elements to offer us valuable psychology lessons and make us reflect on the importance of understanding and managing our inner self.

BODY SWAPPINGS

Empathy is one of the key components to guarantee the good quality of a relationship. "In the context of romantic relationships, empathy describes individuals' ability to actively understand how their partners feel and may help them anticipate and thereby potentially avoid conflict" (Ulloa et al., 2017). In *Charmed*, this is achieved magically, and the expression "putting yourself in someone else's

shoes” takes on a literal meaning, since the magic remedy to solve some relationship problems is the transformation of each member into the other one.

This happens to Piper and Leo. The middle sister falls in love with Leo, a *whitelighter* whose mission is to guide and protect the witches. Since season 1 to the end of the series, they both live a deep and epic forbidden love which is the source of numerous conflicts and controversies in the magical world, creates the most powerful magic and culminates in the birth of two sons, Wyatt and Chris. Their relationship addresses the power and virtues of true love, and the struggle and determination to be with the person you love above everything else.

This relationship is intense and has the ups and downs of any other. In episode 8x7, the couple keeps arguing, making constant hurtful comments and getting irritated with everything the other does. Leo suggests consulting a sorcerer who is an expert in love. As a solution, the sorcerer switches their bodies, including their powers. Afterwards, they must perform each other’s tasks, which makes them understand their partner’s struggles, accept their mistakes and solve their problem. Then, their identities automatically return to the correct body, thus demonstrating that the solution to the conflict was not magical, but emotional, and providing a valuable lesson on empathy as a key to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

In episode 4x4, another body swap occurs, stemming from a completely different conflict. Paige, newly introduced to witchcraft, must spend a lot of time studying different magical knowledge under Piper’s command, and this frustrates the youngest sister a lot, because she is looking forward to getting into action and do more motivating activities for her. Specifically, she is envious of Phoebe, who is training martial arts with Cole, her boyfriend, to fight demons.

When Paige is practicing the creation of a potion, she wishes to be Phoebe so she can actively fight, and this triggers the potion to switch bodies between the two. From then on, Paige must quickly learn to use Phoebe’s powers and fight demons being her sister, and realizes how hard it is and the importance of being well trained in the magical field. On the other hand, thanks to the transformation, Paige—in the form of Phoebe—manages to make Cole realize he has been pushing his girlfriend too much with training, something that Phoebe has not been able to tell him. Therefore, the transformation of both sisters gives them the opportunity to see their own situation from another perspective and to learn the necessary lessons to solve their conflicts.

TRANSFORMATIONS RELATED TO UNRESOLVED GRIEFS

In psychology, a *grief* is a “normal, healthy, healing and ultimately transforming response to a significant loss that usually not require professional help, although it does require ways to heal the broken strands of life and to affirm existing ones” (Schneider, 2000). It causes “the appearance of a set of unpleasant emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and psychological symptoms that the mourner experiences during the weeks and months after the loss” (Parro-Jiménez et al., 2021). “These symptoms usually decrease in intensity as the death and its consequences are accepted” (*ibidem*). “Although everyone copes with loss in different ways, there are five commonly defined stages of grief”: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Fisher, 2023).

The topics of grief, its stages, and acceptance of loss and emotions are deeply explored in *Charmed* through magical transformations. The biggest grief in the show happens after the death of the oldest sister, Prue, in the end of season 3. Afterwards, Piper and Phoebe have to cope with the sorrow and accept their new identities as the new oldest and middle sisters, respectively. Whereas Phoebe is able to manage it properly and stay strong, Piper experiences several feelings related to grief, like denial, anger, fear, insecurity and lack of understanding. In general, Piper has many problems getting over the loss, and her character is used to approach the topic of grieving the death of a loved one, the emotions it brings and how to overcome it and move on.

In episode 4x3, we see Piper’s grief has evolved into a phase of anger and recklessness, when she compulsively and imprudently keeps eliminating as many demons as possible as a way of channeling her inner anger and avoiding facing her pain. One of those demons is a fury. These creatures are taken directly from the Greek mythology, where they “exacted divine retribution from those guilty of wrong-doing” (Cartwright, 2016), and were “called upon to exact vengeance or to avenge a desecration of a sacred bond” (King, 2016). Their victims were “assaulted by madness”, pursued by the furies “to the point of insanity and eventually, death” (*ibidem*).

In *Charmed*, these creatures attack people who have done evil acts, and emit smoke from their mouth which “in good people, it looks for a portal of unexpressed fury. It builds until it consumes your humanity, and it turns you into a fury”. During

the fight, Piper is reached by that smoke, so she gradually becomes more aggressive until she completely transforms into a fury. Leo and Paige manage to take Piper in front of Prue's niche, and Paige helps her sister face her unspoken feelings: "Tell her, Piper. It's all right to hate her. You should hate her. When my parents died, I hated them for it. I was alone, and I hated them. It is ok to hate Prue". Then, Piper releases over the niche all the rage she had felt for a long time, thus admitting her anger towards her deceased sister for abandoning them and for being selfish in not caring about keeping herself safe for her sisters., which causes her to instantly transform back into a human.

Ultimately, Piper's transformation into fury is the culmination of the process of grief, and a symbolic representation of how feelings can be repressed and the necessity to accept them, cross through them and express them to move forward.

Although the most common cause of grief is death, it can also be experienced after losses of various other kinds, including relationship breakups, serious illness or injury, loss of employment, homelessness and so on (Ratcliffe & Richardson, 2023).

In *Charmed*, the grief after a breakup is represented through the relationship between Phoebe and Cole. At the beginning of the third season, the middle sister meets Cole, a lawyer who is half-human, half-demon. Both fall in love and maintain an intense and epic relationship. For a long time, Cole manages to keep his demonic half a secret, but he is finally discovered by the sisters, and a long process of debate begins about whether Cole's nature is more human or demonic, whether he is a good or evil being, whether he should be saved or destroyed, whether evil and goodness can coexist and, ultimately, a series of reflections on the relative nature of the ideas of good and evil, the attraction evil can exert on someone, and the fight against it. For a long time, Cole makes great efforts to be good and tries to repress and destroy his demonic part. However, in season 4, Cole becomes the most powerful evil being, the "Source of All Evil", and Phoebe, influenced by her love, becomes queen of the underworld, something that is reversed when the Halliwells finally destroy Cole.

Whereas Piper and Leo's relationship is used in the series to represent all the positive virtues of love, Phoebe and Cole's relationship—which lasts several seasons—is used to reflect on the dark side of love, toxic love, capable of influencing people negatively and causing deep damage to a person's identity and life, as well as to the people around them. Therefore, just as Piper and Leo spend the entire series trying to find a way to be together permanently, in Phoebe we see the opposite:

a permanent doubt about her relationship with the half-demon, and constant attempts to distance herself from him and eliminate that relationship from her life. This has many repercussions on the magical aspect, and one of them is the transformations the girl undergoes as a consequence of her feelings for Cole.

First, in episode 3x21, Phoebe has just broken up with Cole after he failed to control his magic and killed an innocent woman. The witch, although she is in pain, represses it and refuses to talk about it, hiding behind the idea that Cole is simply a demon who must be destroyed. Later, the sisters must fight a *banshee*, “a demon who feeds on souls in great pain,” who finds her victims “by hearing their inner cry, by zeroing in on the waves of pain that emanate from the stricken” and who hunt their victims “with a high-pitched call”. This is based on the Irish mythology, where a *banshee* is a “messenger of death”: “she often appears when a family member dies, taking part in the dying process, circling and keening around the house” in a high and piercing voice (Káli-Rozmis, 2020).

In the series, these creatures are former witches who have been transformed by other *banshees* through their scream, and that is exactly what happens to Phoebe. Due to the deep internal pain she is feeling, the *banshee* they are fighting chooses her as its victim and throws its scream upon her, causing her subsequent transformation. To return Phoebe to her original state, Piper manages to get Cole and Phoebe together, and the moment Cole finally expresses his love for her, she transforms back and decides to give him another chance. Phoebe’s transformation is not only due to the suffering of the breakup, but also to the idea that he has lost his human side. The fact that he loves her is a sign that that side still exists, so there is still hope for a future together, and that is what undoes the transformation.

Phoebe’s next transformation related to her relationship with Cole occurs in episode 5x1, when she becomes a mermaid. In *Charmed*, mermaids are depicted as immortal beings who enjoy complete freedom, and whose hearts are “as cold as water”, making them emotionally cold creatures who are generally unaffected by feelings. Previously, Phoebe has managed to rid herself of Cole as a demon and is in the process of divorcing him. She is about to be free from her love and her relationship, and get her own life back, so that freedom is what she yearns for most. However, at the last moment, Cole reappears and ruins everything, plunging Phoebe into total despair, and with a desire to escape and leave it all behind. She does not see herself able to continue fighting against Cole, both because of her own exhaustion and

because of impotence due to all the power he now has, and the freedom of a mermaid represents exactly her deepest desire. Therefore, when the sisters cast a spell to find the sea witch, it transforms Phoebe into a mermaid as a method for them to track her. The girl, then, finds in that identity the freedom she so longs for, as it allows her to leave all her problems behind and live free, happy, without worries and without pain in the sea, so she refuses to return to her original self. The figure of the mermaid represents the escape from one's own problems and emotions, and the avoidance of facing them, something very common in real life when a person is overwhelmed by their internal and external conflicts and is not able to confront them.

Paige and Piper are later tasked with finding Phoebe and undoing the transformation, and they know the only way is to get her to resolve her emotional issues regarding Cole. In the end, they get Phoebe to accept her feelings for him, which causes the transformation to reverse. She no longer needs to escape, as she has lost her fear of admitting what she has inside. However, although she is fully aware she loves Cole, she remains strong in her determination to definitely finish the relationship. This situation represents the dilemmas and doubts that can arise when feelings do not correspond with what reason dictates, which creates numerous emotional conflicts that prevent making firm decisions and can overwhelm a person and generate the desire to flee in order not to face them, something that can lead to bigger problems in the future.

TRANSFORMATIONS RELATED TO SELF-IDENTITY CONFLICTS

Throughout the series, we find several moments in which one of the sisters is going through a phase when they question themselves or are trying to find their true identity. These issues are often tackled and overcome through magical transformations that help them understand themselves or the circumstances which have led them to that situation. As in the previous cases, the way to reverse the transformation is to resolve their psychological conflict by themselves, after learning a lesson.

We see this in episode 4x12. Phoebe and Cole have recently gotten engaged, and she feels very insecure, because she is afraid that marriage will turn her into a housewife dependent on her husband and will not allow her to develop her own identity, as happens in Phoebe's favorite tv show as a child, *Bewitched*.

Later, Cole gives Phoebe Grandma Halliwell's ring, which he had obtained from Piper. When Phoebe puts the ring on, she transforms into some kind of old-fashioned tv show housewife—even her body is, in the end, in black and white—and begins to compulsively do household chores and please everyone. Eventually, they discover the ring had been cursed by Grandma, and as soon as it is removed from Phoebe, she returns to her normal state. The reason Grandma had put a curse on the ring is that “if she ever got engaged again, the ring would remind her of what she hated about marriage”, which is “the loss of identity, the subjugation by a man, the focus on housework”, all those things Phoebe was afraid of.

This transformation has multiple meanings and interpretations. On the one hand, it creates an intertextuality with the 1964 series *Bewitched*, starring a girl with powers who tries to have a normal life. This metafictional resource is used as a basis to introduce Phoebe's internal conflict. On the other hand, the transformation is used to materialize this conflict, representing on the outside of the witch the fears she has on the inside. Finally, in addition to representing identity problems, the transformation also criticizes the submissive and passive role of women, sending a clear message of women's independence and empowerment.

The same sister undergoes another transformation related to some identity conflict in episode 6x17. In it, we learn for the first time about Phoebe's teenage past: a rebellious, rowdy girl who shoplifted, didn't respect the rules and “tended to hang out with the bad-boy crowd.” By accident, while reading her own high school yearbook, Phoebe reads out loud a poem that in her mouth becomes a spell, causing to activate inside her her teenage version.

Later, at a party for her class's alumni, Phoebe feels the hate and stares of all those she mistreated years ago, which conflicts with her current personality—a successful, good-natured woman who does good every day—and creates a deep feeling of guilt in her. Although she shows herself regretful and humble towards others, the unpleasant and cruel words of an old rival make her feel bad about herself, insecure and angry. This causes the spell she had accidentally cast to completely transform her into her teenage version, both physically and psychologically, and she begins to have the behavior she had back then. After numerous acts of vandalism, she ends up having a dangerous encounter with an old friend who is now a criminal, and who wants to force her to help him in his criminal goals; however, Phoebe knows she must not cross that line, and refuses. Then, the moral determination she shows

is so strong that is more powerful than the spell, which reverts the transformation to the adult Phoebe.

Thanks to having revived her past personality, Phoebe is able to compare her old self with her current self, and the insecurity about her identity disappears when she realizes she has become a totally different person than she was before, and now there is good inside her. Phoebe's transformation teaches us about morality, about the ability to decide between what is right and what is wrong, and about the changes in personality and identity we suffer throughout our lives, which sometimes cause us to regret our past actions. The final lesson we could take from this episode is it does not matter so much what we have done in the past, but the decisions we make now.

Finally, in episode 5x19, we see Paige is going through a period of stress because she has taken on the role of the leading witch. Because Phoebe is focused on her successful career and Piper has recently become a mother, the youngest sister quits her job to be able to dedicate herself full-time to magic, which puts a lot of pressure on her and doesn't allow her to have all the free time she would like.

Later, the girls must protect some forest nymphs from a demon. Nymphs, from Greek mythology, represent freedom and connection with nature. When they feel the need in Paige to "return to her wild side", they transform her into one of them. Then, the witch forgets about her worries and just dedicates herself to having fun with the other two nymphs. Later, when the three of them are in a dangerous situation, the witch's sense of responsibility and protection is stronger than her desire for freedom, and this reverses the transformation. Finally, Paige realizes the problem has been caused by the lack and need for some *me time*, and she and Piper decide to divide up the duties of leading witch. Paige's transformation reflects the importance of balancing the time dedicated to work and external tasks with time dedicated to oneself and personal enjoyment.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how magical transformations in *Charmed* serve as symbolic reflections of psychological conflicts, focusing on episodes that address some of the most frequent problems, such as relationship issues, unresolved grief or identity crises. By examining these transformations, we observed how the pro-

tagonists' emotional struggles manifest as magical phenomena, compelling them to resolve their internal conflicts to return to their original state.

Particularly noteworthy are Piper's transformations into a fury —about Piper's grief—, Phoebe's transformation into a siren —about the lack of confrontation of internal conflicts—, and Piper and Leo's transformations into each other —about couple crises—. These problems that affect a large part of society are represented in a very profound and accurate way, and through allegorical fantasy the narrative offers explanations and solutions that are very useful for real life, which demonstrate the series' unique ability to intertwine fantasy storylines with meaningful psychological approaches.

It is especially interesting how the series uses creatures from mythology and traditional folklore from various cultures to approach issues of modern psychology, as well as how they have been able to choose the right creature making the most of their magical characteristics to address suitably each of the emotional conflicts.

Ultimately, *Charmed* demonstrates the power of storytelling and fantasy to bridge the gap between the imaginary and the real world. Fantasy narratives like this one not only entertain but also invite viewers to engage with deep and often challenging aspects of the human experience, offer different and new perspectives on many aspects of reality and help us grow and learn about our own nature.

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SORCERESSES (DIS)EMPOWERED? AN ANALYSIS OF THE 'CHARMED' SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this reflection is to explore the good and bad aspects of the TV show *Charmed*, broadcasted by The WB Television Network throughout 8 seasons between 1998 and 2006. Created by the production company *Spelling*, this show emerged as a consequence of the successful acceptance of the previous *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, by Joss Whedon (1996-2003), transmitted in the same channel. The latter managed to capture the interest of the young female public, a crucial target for The WB, that, as a newly founded company in the entertainment industry (1995), was seeking to conquer its place among teenagers and young adults.

The WB, with the objective of persuading this kind of audience, ordered a fantasy show starring by young women mirroring other contemporary productions, such as the cited *Buffy*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* (John Schulian and Robert Tapert, 1995-2001), and *Sabrina, The Teenage witch* (Nell Scovell, Don Decarlo and Jonathan Schmock, 1996-2003). The responsibility of producing this new show fell on Aaron Spelling, an influential producer well-

known by being in charge of *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979), *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), *Dynasty* (1981-1989), *Beverly Hills* (1990-2000), and *Melrose Place* (1992-1999).

According to several sources, Spelling's initial intention was to produce a TV adaptation of *The Craft* (film by Andrew Fleming, 1996). However, FOX was at that time in possession of its copyright and he was forced to create from scratch a new show. In this context, he found inspiration on the cited film and also on *Practical Magic* (Griffin Dunne, 1998), another outstanding success. Andrew Flemming himself pointed in an interview for *Entertainment Weekly* (2017) that he "wrote a pilot of *The Craft* which could have been bought by The WB, but FOX did not permit it, so the coming year *Charmed* became a reality".

This peak of content personified by witches and heroines in action productions was perceived as a progress in audiovisual terms since it permitted to show female characters outstandingly powerful. In fact, the witch as an archetype has especially emerged throughout history as a powerful symbol for the feminist movement:

Particularly, female writers have found in the witch a figure which is also a representation of everything that women could have become, had it not been for the patriarch [...] To be recognised as a witch is to be recognised as a free and independent woman (Purkiss, 2010, p.22).

Sharing the same perspective, Mona Chollet (2019) affirms that "the witch works for women as a figure of positive power, out of any kind of oppression" in contrast to "an inherited and misogynistic representation" (p. 265).

However, all this came into conflict with reality because the main executive producers of *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* were men, as were the vast majority of its scriptwriters, directors and producers. Furthermore, it was found the same tendency within the main series starring in by women at the end of the 90's and first years of the 21st century, such as *Ally McBeal* (David E. Kelley, 1997-2002), *Sex in the City* (Darren Starr, 1998-2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (Marc Cherry, 2004-2012) (Currier Sweet, 2017). In all these examples, if a feminist perspective is applied,

the coined *male gaze theory* (developed by Laura Mulvey in 1975) can be undoubtedly observed.

As a result of this exposition, it seems necessary to propose the following thought: ¿Was the TV series *Charmed* in favour of women's empowerment? In the coming pages, an answer to this question would be provided.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this investigation is to observe, from a genre perspective, the evolution of the TV series *Charmed*. By means of filmic analysis methodology, the eight seasons of the show would be analysed considering the artistic visions of its two main responsible creatives: Constance M. Burge, head of the first two seasons, and Brad Kern, in charge of the series from the third season until the end of it. This analysis will permit us to point out the differences between both periods of time.

ANALYSIS

Aaron Spelling and The WB ordered Constance M. Burge to develop a script for the first season that could establish both the fantastic setting and the female protagonists. Burge delivered the early text that gave birth to *Charmed* presenting a plot focused on three sisters who, after inheriting their grandmother's Victorian Mansion in San Francisco, find out an extraordinary reality: they are witches. The protagonists face the challenge of finding a balance between their personal lives and their duty fighting against supernatural forces.

The channel approved the project quickly, motivated mainly by its interest on producing a series focused on the concept of sisterhood, mirroring previous projects such as *Sisters* (Daniel Lipman and Ron Cowen, 1991-1996), which was broadcasted by NBC. The *Charmed* premiere had an immediate impact and became the most successful premiere in the history of The WB so far (Michael, 1998). Furthermore, the press was at that time delighted by Shannen Doherty's return to the Spelling Factory. The actress and the producer had worked together previously in *Beverly Hills*, where Doherty

was fired due to supposed behaviour problems, a reason that increased the mediatic expectation on her performance in the show (Daniels and Littleton, 2007).

Charmed was established as a success and soon became a cult series despite the inner production problems, budgetary reductions and cast changes. Its popularity lasts until the present, being still emitted all over the world and serving as precious material for websites, blogs, comics and novels (Beeler and Beeler, 2006).

In the series, the Halliwell sisters -Piper (Holly Marie Combs), Phoebe (Alyssa Milano) and Prudence (Shannen Doherty) during the first three seasons, and Paige (Rose McGowan) from the fourth- set up a powerful team of witches. Their magical abilities combine inherited powers with the capacity of conjuring spells based on their investigations. The Halliwell sisters not only inherited their powers from the female side of the family, but also had in possession *The Book of Shadows*, an ancient book of spells full of precious knowledge compiled by their ancestors, including their mother and grandmother. In addition, their matrilineal lineage went backwards to Melinda Warren, a Salem Witch from the 17th century in Massachusetts.

The series lasted eight seasons thanks to its unconditional public; mainly young women attracted by the *Girl Power* movement (Peirse, 2007).

Constance M. Burge's vision.

Under Constance M. Burge's supervision, *Charmed* was focussed on the relationship among the Halliwell sisters, their familiar dynamics and the balance of their magical and personal lives. Although the characters were coherent with the established beauty canon, the narrative did not depend on their bodies or sexuality to advance in the plot. In an *Intouch Weekly's* interview dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the series, Burge explains her vision: the *Charmed* was about three sisters who, eventually, were witches, not about three witches who were also sisters, this was precisely the heart of the story (Gross, 2018).

In the first seasons, the sisters were depicted as complex women, with personal and professional goals which existed beyond their romantic roles or their physical appearance. In fact, one of the main storylines resided in the difficulty

of bringing together their career and their magical life. Prue works in an auction house, but she decides to follow her dream of being a photographer; Piper works as manager in a restaurant and decides to become the owner of a music club, the P3; Phoebe, on the other hand, gives up her studies on psychology before starting a new career as journalist; and Paige is a social worker. (Feasey, 2004).

Furthermore, during its first years, the TV show was oriented on the exploration of emotional and family themes, having a crucial role in the relationship among the Halliwell sisters. As Burge states in *Intouch Weekly*, their dynamics were influenced by the family, and their powers were strongly rooted on their personality.

The narrative structure of the first years emphasised the progressive development of the protagonists, and established key aspects for its universe, such as *The Book of Shadows*, the magic principles and the importance of *the power of three*. Mythology also had its place for a reason, giving a deeper sense to the magical world of the series. “We were very cautious to expand their powers in small bits”, explains Connie in an interview to Ed Gross (2018), “because we were so aware that the larger their powers — the bigger their powers grow — the more formidable the people who are after them become. We didn’t want to feel too big. We wanted to try to keep it grounded in some sort of reality, otherwise it becomes like a comic book” (par. 8).

The first seasons were characterised by a dark and gothic aesthetic, inspired by other series such as *The X-files* (Chris Carter, 1993-2018). The magical part of the show adopted a more realistic approach, including elements from *wicca’s* cult, but also Robert Masello’s supervision (a demonologist) in the scriptwriters team to give veracity to the villains, as it is pointed out in the documentary *The Women of Charmed* (2000). According to Constance M. Burge, “the investigation oriented on the series allowed us to explore multiple cultures in the search of new demons every week. This process led us to learn more about mythologies from all around the world, including the Goddess Kali or the Wendigo’s myths”.

In the third season (2000-2001), Constance M. Burge abandoned his role as showrunner, although She continued in the creative direction as executive producer until the fourth season.

Despite its lack of coherence, throughout the first fourth seasons the *Girl Power’s* influence was more evident than in the rest of the series. The main

reason was that the program could not separate itself from the patriarchal discourse, represented -among other elements- by *The Old Ones*: a group of men belonging to a superior order, in charge of leading the young witches. These figures dictated the rules and interceded directly on their lives, assigning to them a *Whitelighter*, a guide within the magic world with whom they could interact. Therefore, they were somehow tutored by masculine figures. However, this fact did not mean the witches were always under their control. The protagonists frequently dared the authority of the *Old Ones*, they questioned their wisdom and they showed themselves contrary to the patriarchal order which those men represented. This attitude of resistance, against a vast majority of men, is also reflected in their daily confrontation with witchers, demons, and the underworld leaders: *The source of all Evil* and the *Triad*, the two main antagonists of the series. These villains, instead of simply eliminating them, usually tried to extract their magic powers. This attempt to deprive them from their source of power is identical to neutralizing them, a fact which reduces the female character to passive subjects, typical of a patriarchal society (Rodrigues de Mattos Costa, 2017).

Brad Kern's vision

The change of showrunner in *Charmed*, from Constance M. Burge to Brad Kern, marked a significant transition in the creative direction of the series. After the second season, Burge put into words her disagreement with the introduction of the romantic plot between Phoebe and the demon Cole. She explained in *TV Tropes* (2014) that the reason for it resided on the bad critiques received towards the last season's romantic triangle among Piper, Leo, and Dan, and her wish of not including another love story at that moment. As a result of this conflict, Kern assumed the charge of showrunner from the beginning of the third season, and Burge stayed as creative consultant until the end of the fourth season.

Under Brad Kern's leadership, *Charmed* experimented several changes on its storyline, being more focussed on fancy supernatural and action elements, as on a bigger development of the romantic relationships of its protagonists. The witches appeared from this point on of the show depicted with hypersexualised clothes and attitudes. This change, perceived as a strategy to attract a male au-

dience, brought several commentaries from the critique signaling the series was growing apart from its origins.

Additionally, from the fifth season, it is evident how the protagonists are relegated to the domestic sphere once they find difficulties in combining their magic and personal lives. A clear example of it is Paige's character, who is forced to quit the job she loves to be a "fulltime witch". In this context, the characters go back to the domestic sphere being Piper (Holly Marie Combs), the most extreme case: she becomes mother and wife, in charge of the kitchen and housework of her home. For this reason, in her book *Investigating Charmed* (2007) Catriona Miller points this is the character which better materialises the domesticity of the series:

From the beginning of the show, witchcraft seems to impose itself between the sisters and their personal lives, remarking the only existence of a single equation: having power means not having a boyfriend, husband or father for your children. At least, the fact of having a relationship turns out to be extremely difficult and unpleasant. Being "normal" is a closer reality if you have access to men whereas having a powerful and independent life locates you out of happiness and realisation". (Miller, 2007, p. 75).

Charmed incorporated as a dramatic tendency the difficulty of the sisters to find the love of a proper man. The supernatural origin of these women was depicted as an obstacle to achieve a normative life in heterosexual terms. This is a standard that, as a matter of fact, seemed to be a recurrent aspiration in their lives (Moreno, 2019).

In the later seasons, the series adopted a lighter tone, less solemn and dark, with episodes which included more extravagant plots and *camp*, moving away from the balance between drama and action which characterised the first seasons. The rules of the magical word also experienced significant changes, bringing a more fanciful tone due to the inclusion of a group of magic beings, such as leprechauns, mermaids or valkyries among other supernatural creatures. The villains looked progressively less threatening than in the birth of the show.



Figure 1: Constance M. Burge 's seasons. In the images Shannen Doherty, Holly Marie Combs and Alyssa Milano in various scenes from first seasons of the series.

Source: Own elaboration.



Figure 2: Brand Kern's seasons. In the pictures Alyssa Milano, Holly Marie Combs and Rose McGowan in various scenes of the series.

Source: Own elaboration

In fact, the scriptwriter and producer Krista Vernoff decided to abandon the project after the move towards another direction which experimented the show. Vernoff stated in *The Hollywood Reported* the following:

I signed on because *Charmed* was a girl-power show, and about halfway through there was an episode where Alyssa Milano comes out in mermaid pasties and there was a huge spike in male viewership, and then every episode after, the question would come from the network, 'How are we getting the girls naked this week?' (Rose, 2021, par. 15).

Vernoff also added that "there was a lot of pressure" and remarked she only could think that she was creating something wrong to the world, especially objectifying the characters. She thought that she had had enough of it in her life" (Rose, 2021, par. 15).

In same line, Alyssa Milano (Phoebe) shared in her autobiography *Sorry not Sorry* (October 2021) and in a promotional interview for *Entertainment Tonight* that her period on the series was one of the most complicated times of her life, especially because of the sexualization suffered: "When I think about the

nineties... you watch any *Charmed's* episode and you can see me running with bodices and underwear during the eighty percent of the time on screen". Milano also affirmed: "We had to wear little clothes so that the series could be a success" (Melendez, 2024, par. 7)

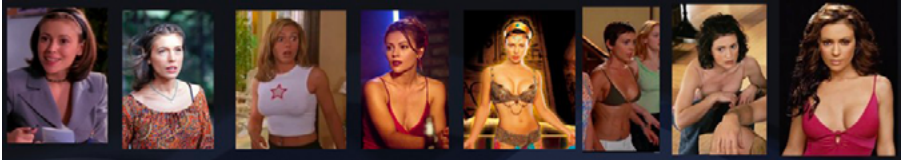


Figure 3: Evolution of how Alyssa Milano's wardrobe was progressively reduced throughout the show. Each picture belongs to a different season.

Source: Own elaboration.

Likewise, Rose McGowan, one of the most representative faces of the #MeToo movement, stated in an interview for *El País* (2015) the following: "I hated acting. I've always hated it. You should have in consideration that I had to interpret scripts written by men, so basically during the following fifteen years I said what men wanted me to say" (Ramírez, 2015, par. 1). McGowan has been quite open when talking about her experience in *Charmed* and the misogynistic problems that she observed and experienced during her time on the show. Although she was not the only actress expressing her worries about the series' dynamics, McGowan has been particularly direct about the sexualization and treatment she received during the production.

In her autobiography *Brave* (2018), McGowan explored further on these critiques, commenting that was a witness of how the point of view towards women was mainly superficial instead of significant. She frequently felt that actresses were treated more like objects of masculine desire than professional workers who contributed importantly to build the story and the evolution of the characters. This perspective, as McGowan argues, reflects a dynamic of sexist power where women were relegated to roles in which their physical appearance was a priority beyond their talent or interpretative skills.

Charmed's conclusion depicts the three sisters getting married and embracing maternity. Particularly, Phoebe and Paige's characters, who were mostly single during the show, get married to two men that appear on the last season,

roles created especially for this purpose. The series was not able to imagine a “happy ending” out of the traditional and stereotypical marriage.

From a genre perspective, the marriage as ending supports the idea of women's submission, adjusted to the traditional scheme in which the female character in fiction is rewarded with the marriage and the domestic sphere and the male with an open and free world. If the development and learning of a woman is only determined by achieving a man to get married, every intention of the series to encourage women rights automatically becomes a contradiction.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked the misogynistic treatment that the four actresses received from the beginning, especially through the media, which emphasised the creation of rivalries among them. One of the most exploited storylines was the supposed enmity between Shannen Doherty and Alyssa Milano, used by the production company to divert the attention of labour and creative problems. Despite the series' success, the actresses described those years as the darkest time of their career. McGowan (2018) highlighted in their memoirs: “Every time *Charmed* was renewed one more season, I cried” (p. 139).

In 2018, Brad Kern was fired as producer on the series *NCIS: New Orleans* (Gary Glasber, 2014-2021) after multiple harassment and discrimination reports. As it is stated on *The Hollywood Reporter* (2018), Kern was also accused of inappropriate behaviours in *Charmed*, such as mocking at Alyssa Milano's gain of weight, showing publicly Shannen Doherty's photographic report in *Playboy*, and making inappropriate commentaries to the scriptwriter Krista Vernoff.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is undeniable that the series marked a turning point in representation of the female character on television. The three Halliwell sisters, from a sorority perspective, assumed active roles, fought against evil and were powerful subjects. However, from a gender perspective, important contradictions have been found. It has been especially observed a turning point after Constance M. Burge's departure at the end of the fourth season, and the later incorporation of Brad Kern, in charge of the last period of the show.

As it has been exposed, in the first seasons of the series, the Halliwell sisters were presented as powerful and complex women with professional and

personal goals. Each of them faced challenges in their daily lives, at the same time they balanced their magical responsibilities.

However, as the series went further, especially in the last seasons, the protagonists started to be defined by their romantic relationship and their physical appearance. From this point of view, it is clearly observed how the so-called *masculine view* of the direction completely influenced the series.

In conclusion, despite its careful and transgressive beginning, *Charmed* fell in the trap of the *Girl Power's* illusion. A phenomena which uses a supposed empowerment, uniquely aesthetic, with the purpose of convincing the audience everything has changed, when it has not in reality.

Nevertheless, although it was a work plenty of shortages and contradictions, it is undeniable that *Charmed* marked a milestone in the collective ideology. It started a new path for the creation of new female characters.

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A VISUAL REFLECTION ON THE FANTASTIC AND MAGICAL REALISM: FUSELI'S *NIGHTMARE* (1781) AND BÖCKLIN'S *TRITON AND NEREID* (1873)

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[E]arthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms.

(Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*)

THE ADVANTAGES OF A VISUAL APPROACH OF THE FANTASTIC AND MAGICAL REALISM

The fantastic and magical realism are often mixed up. For instance, we still do not know what are precisely the fantastic and what are the magic-realist elements in Kafka's or in Borges' novels (if they exist). Why would it be important to distinguish them? Neologisms like "Kafkaesque" or "Borgesian" remind us that literature is always more than all those "isms" through which our academic hunting instinct tries to capture it. Nevertheless, at least for one's personal life, it is essential to refine as much as possible the

reading experience thanks to intelligent distinctions. When Durs Grünbein underlines that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has "inspired countless Hollywood productions", while the "rough vision" ("*schroffe Vision*") of Ernst Jünger's *Marble Cliffs* (generally associated to magical realism) "will never get access to the unforeseeable screens of popular culture like the medievalist's saga from the fairyland England", he sets a quite jejune standard of what a literary work should accomplish. What *he* roughly calls the "fantastic-symbolistic" ("*Phantastisch-Symbolistischen*") has once been read as the "process of our miserable tyrants" (Dolf Sternberger about the reception of *On the Marble Cliffs* in 1939). Obviously, if we consider the "fantastic" and the "symbolistic" as two characteristics that can be linked by a simple hyphen, we run the risk of reducing a real symbol to a (just) "literary" fantasy. In order to avoid a consumeristic trap, we should not forget the existential value of literature which can be more than a funny isolation in the fantasy world once the daily work is done.

Taking literature more seriously implies a critical point of view on the so-called "natural" and the so-called "supernatural". A study that is based on a sterile safeguarding of this "antinomy" introduces up from the beginning an avoidable fatality. In her monograph *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1995), Amaryll Chanady uses the categories of "natural" and "supernatural", in order to show the difference between the fantastic and magical realism:

Both magical realism and the fantastic are characterized by coherently developed codes of the natural and the supernatural [...]. But while in the fantastic the supernatural is perceived as problematic, since it is patently antinomious with respect to the rational framework of the text, the supernatural in magical realism is accepted as part of reality. What is antinomious on the semantic level is resolved on the level of fiction.

Although she quotes him regularly, Chanady thereby neglects one of Tzvetan Todorov's most important conclusions: if "the intervention of the supernatural element represents always a break with a system of preestablished rules" and depends therefore on a conventional codification, the dis-

inction between “natural” and “supernatural” loses its performativity in a more anarchical context. This is why Todorov calls the fantastic the “bad conscience of the 19th century” whereas he identifies Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as a new “*fantastique généralisé*” in which “the whole world and the reader himself are included”. From a historical and philosophical point of view, we would share Todorov’s observation that “nowadays it is neither possible to believe in an immutable, external reality, nor in a literature that would be nothing more than a transcription of this reality”. It is the 20th century’s lack of any codification of “reality” or “nature” and the anarchical state of mind introduced by the First World War that obligates us to define at least magical realism without prejudiced socio-linguistic categories. This new perspective encourages us to stick closer to the phenomenal aspect of art works which would also imply that we abandon Chanady’s medial borders: “Although it is useful to know what the term ‘magical realism’ originally referred to in Roh’s theories, one cannot apply it to both pictorial art and literature without causing confusion, since the two belong to a different medium of expression”. – Do we not apply similar terms like “surrealism” to both? Should we prioritize the medium of expression rather than the expression of the medium?

The history of magical realism incites us to do the contrary: the German art historian Franz Roh and the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli have conceptualized it as a *vision* that can appear in pictural as well as in literary works. As Howard Phillips Lovecraft’s novel *Pickman’s Model* proves, the fantastic is not indifferent towards pictural art neither. If we consider terms like “fantastic” or “magical realism” as a practical help which should enable us to orientate ourselves in the history of a constant dialogue between art and literature, instead of monumentalizing them as canonic genres belonging to one single medium, it is useful to accept the idea of a transcendent, “intermedial” discourse. This is what Michel Foucault proposes in his “archeological” renewal of humanistic research. Not accidentally *Les mots et les choses* starts with the “description” of a painting. Foucault thereby enables the *active* reader to confirm thanks to his own visual detachment and comparative control the author’s discourse. He encourages him to *see* what he *reads* instead of intimidating him with a certain discursive authority.

The female identification figures

To *see* the difference between the fantastic and magical realism, we suggest to have a look on their pictural precursors Henry Fuseli and Arnold Böcklin. We have chosen these two artists, because in the 1920s Fuseli has inspired main representatives of the fantastic like Sylvia Townsend Warner (who quotes the artist in her novel *Lolly Willowes*) and H. P. Lovecraft (*Pickman's Model*), whereas Böcklin seems to be an important reference of magical realism: we can find him in Franz Roh's fundamental essay *Nach-Expressionismus – magischer Realismus* and Giorgio De Chirico (one of the most successful representatives of magical realism) has never made a secret of his admiration for Böcklin's art. Both painters seem to be interested in "supernatural" elements, but the spontaneous effects of their paintings are far from being similar.

One could recall that both artists must be in any case very different from each other, given the undeniable fact that they worked in different historical and regional contexts. Which is true, but for now we prefer a less erudite approach which could be justified by the very simple idea that neither Lovecraft nor De Chirico have chosen their sources of inspiration on the basis of historical or regional criteria. It is more likely that they just followed their personal aesthetic taste, which is what interests us here. We would like to discover the subtle difference between Fuseli's and Böcklin's supernatural elements (if we can even apply this term to Böcklin's art). We therefore do not want to make it too easy, by choosing for example a painting of Fuseli with supernatural content and an innocent landscape of Böcklin's repertoire.

This is why *The Nightmare* (1781) and *Triton and Nereid* (1873) suit perfectly our investigation. Consciously or unconsciously, Böcklin painted the Nereid in nearly the same lascivious position than Fuseli painted the overwhelmed woman: with one visible and one covered foot, an exposed body, the right arm angulated, hidden behind the detached hair and the left one stretched, a half-profiled head that is laying upside down. Apart from the women, on both paintings we see two supernatural creatures: they do not share any real similarities, but we could notice that Fuseli's monstrous horse and Böcklin's not less monstrous water snake are emerging on the left,

while the little devil and the Triton are sitting on the right, showing half-part of their back; their darker colours differentiate themselves from those of the women's bodies.

We could also add that the encounter either with Fuseli's or with Böcklin's creatures in real life would be indifferently confusing and even that troubling that we would just not believe what we see. But as a non-involved observer of two scenes, we can immediately say that we are more *horrified* by Fuseli's painting, and this is what our confrontation is all about: what makes the difference?

Seemingly not the real nature of the represented objects or subjects. Is it maybe a kind of empathy with the represented human being? Fuseli's woman is definitely in a more complicated situation: the little devil looks angry and seems to guard her as if she was in his possession. If she woke up, she would have to get rid of him and even then, there would not be any possible escape: the two intruders are already in what seems to be not only her most private place, her bedroom, but also in her most private and vulnerable moment: her sleep. Besides she would find herself in a hermetic trap whose only gloomy exit seems to be blocked by the terrific horse – and who knows what kind of other creatures are still waiting behind the curtain? Will she even wake up? This poor lost lady with the pale skin and the feeble and maybe already abandoned body is she not sleeping into her death? At least we can say, considering also contemporary scientific studies that Fuseli might have taken into account (as a pendant to the superstitious vision of the *incubus*), that she seems to be paralyzed.

If we had to choose, we would prefer to be at the Nereid's place without hesitating. She is awake, and with her satisfied smile and her firm grip she literally handles the situation. Further she is not closed in a dark room, but laying on a cliff illuminated by daylight, and maybe the rescuing shore is not too far away (we deliberately forget that she is a Nereid). The creature behind her seems to be distracted and not angry at all, or if it is we cannot see it. Anyway, why should we even suppose that she could be threatened? She seems to be herself quite amused about the scene that she is dominating.

But how is it that our eyes can be so innocent? Is it not evident that Böcklin's hybrid creature has a very savage aspect and that it is precisely its human part that could inspire fear, the tousled, almost diabolic hair, the blousy beard, the whole coarse body? He (the man) could be capable of everything once he

will be tired of blowing into the conch horn. We should also not forget that the green water snake is a lot stronger than the woman and her grip will not resist it for a long time.

Now, if we turn back to Fuseli, the situation in itself seems almost bearable: this funny horse and this choleric little devil, how would they seriously harm the sleeping woman who does not even notice them. Maybe they will have disappeared when she wakes up. Perhaps they are nothing more than...a *Nightmare*.

Still, we cannot forget the smile of Böcklin's woman who seems to be where she is on her own purpose. Her hand is not used for defense, it rather tickles the water-snake's neck like one would do with his pet. Which brings us back to our previous impression that she is the one who dominates the scene. This would mean that she is also naked on purpose and probably ready to give herself to the fishtailed man. Perhaps the green water snake will not attack her, but follow the invisible diagonal line up to the conch horn which is inclined in the same angle as its head. Their colours form a complementary contrast (green/red) and even the female forms of the conch horn, its hidden hole that is receiving the Triton's blowing, the phallic form of the emerging water snake, as well as the white sea foam in the background are already sufficient to create erotic tension which is reinforced by the strand of hair indicating the woman's sex and her lascivious position that we already mentioned.

We already mentioned it – as a similarity between both paintings. Reason enough to get back to Fuseli's *Nightmare* in order to examine if there could not be some eroticism in it. We still do not have commented the sleeping woman's foot, maybe because it does not fit the idea of a sleeping woman: it is stretched with the gracility of a ballet dancer and generates a tension that climbs up the whole leg which shows her strained muscles through her white dress that is actually not hiding anything of her female forms. Is she petrified by death or is she herself keeping up the stiffness of her body? Her left hand is slightly bended and there is also a certain tension in her left arm, so that we could imagine an underlying energy that goes from one extremity (her right foot) straight across her body to another extremity (her left hand). This stream of energy follows a very sharp curve which has its almost right-angled bend at the level of the waist, falling from a horizontal line into a vertical line, in order to almost touch the

ground. Her waist remains suspended above the mattress. How would a sleeping woman manage to lift up such a heavy devil?

At this point of our contemplation, we cannot help thinking that she must be in a sort of trance. Her hand touches only “almost” the ground, because she would not let it fall, wishing to continue her flight... It is too obvious – and we do not even have to “replace” the Nereid’s strand of hair with the little devil’s shadow or the water snake’s head with the horse’s muzzle to see it – that her eyes are closed as well as her mouth is opened...by pleasure.

Our first conclusion could therefore be the following: on Fuseli’s painting we see a woman dominated by pleasure; on Böcklin’s painting we see a woman in eager anticipation of pleasure. More precisely, we should add that the already place-taking pleasure of the *Nightmare’s* woman is generated by the enchantment of (her) fantasy, whereas the Nereid’s desire is maybe about to be satisfied in a sexual intercourse with the Triton.

THE NATURAL SUPERNATURAL AND THE ARTIFICIAL SUPERNATURAL

So far so good, but how to explain the presence of supernatural creatures? As for the horse and the snake, we have already assigned them a symbolical role. The little devil is a far more complex figure. It is his puzzling gaze that reveals the observer’s presence in the woman’s bedroom. By the way, is it really a bedroom or is it a theatre stage, like the purple-red curtain could make us believe? What we know for sure is that the little devil has identified the observer and stares at him with unrelenting severity. Did the observer surprise him in *flagrante delicto*? Or does *he* rather denounce the observer’s voyeurism? Does he want everybody to be as blind as the strangely smiling horse? Is he there to surveil the woman’s pleasure like a Buddhist protection goddess? Or could he rather be, as a kind of totemic figure, the caricature of an outraged Anglican pope?

It is not unlikely that the atmosphere of this painting is charged by a certain guiltiness that is radically opposed to and might even strengthen the fantastic pleasure. A guilty pleasure, because of the abandoned pureness of this candle-white, shroud-wrapped body by the interior fire which leaves it forever to itself; because of the mysterious, probably religious locket on her bust, covering

the indecent part of her décolleté; and because of the (real) devil's horns whose transcendent shadow accomplishes the tragedy of this scene that represents, with perfectly respected golden ratio, the crucifixion of moral and a moral crucifixion at the same time.

How far away from all this is the atmosphere of Böcklin's painting. The two figures are not in a private space but in a maritime landscape, with a wide horizon, an intimacy that ignores any kind of convention. No taboo is poisoning the erotic tension, no intruder's presence is heavily weighing on the atmosphere of this scene which gives slowly birth to the increasing undulations of pleasure. Compared to the suggestive dress of Fuseli's woman, the Nereid's nudity could be perceived as a kind of "spoiler". But only in the eyes of an observer who associates desire exclusively with (moral) transgression, with "seeing which is not meant to be seen" (observer) or "imagining which is not meant to be imagined" (woman). In other words: with the voluptuousness to be the omnipotent ruler of one's own fantastic captivity. Such a preconception interferes with the sensibility for the magical *physis*: the miracle of a tickling hand, of the salt water's smooth touch, of the sunlight's glittering caress... – Significance without signification: the conch horn can only produce one single high sound. If it is a signal, it is not received by human beings. Nature is answering with its undulations and maybe with the background percussion of rumbling thunder. This painting's lucky enclosure is not a mortifying capture of an isolated moment but the visible vibration of a suspended desire: since they have each other, man and woman (Triton and Nereid) are completely indifferent about any voyeuristic attempt to get into their happy medium. This might be the message of the snake's sumptuously presented skin: there is no need to sublimate the accomplished ornaments of the "self-expression of Nature".

In this case, why do we see a water-snake with a cat's whisker and a fish-tailed man? Until now, we have ignored those supernatural aspects and even considered the hybrid creature as a "man". It seemed only "natural" that he or it was the woman's sexual pendant. Not only because of his human torso that is much more emphasized than its scaly bottom, but furthermore because of this scaly bottom's aspect: besides the proper tail that is not illuminated by sunlight and, like an accessory, partly hidden between the cliffs, whose rocky colours it imitates in an effect of camouflage, even the scaly part recalls a human leg, with

a knee, an upper leg and a lower leg. Our mind accepts almost automatically a kind of metamorphosis which lies in an optical humanization of all the Triton's parts that are based on the cliff and a certain abstraction of the reduced "fishy" part that remains in the water, without forgetting the link between both. An effect that might be highlighted by the Nereid's entirely human nudity which is entirely exposed on the cliff.

In Fuseli's painting, nothing seems natural: both creatures have nothing to do in the woman's bedroom, where the usual flacons are still resting on the bedside table like on a still-life. They are not in their element like the Triton's fishtail or the water snake. But this strange *humunculus* or this horse with white pearl-eyes do not even have an element. Their smiling and gazing make them "all too human". If we saw the horse's body (but we do not know whether there is a horse's body behind the curtain), maybe we could say that half-part of it belongs to a prairie, and if the little devil did not hypnotize us with his gaze (more than anything else he seems to be a gaze), we would probably situate him in the monkey-world. And yet, to believe it, we would have to see the horse's prairie or the half-monkey's rainforest. Their only "real" element is human fantasy.

Observations of this kind help us understand that we still have not seized the real *atmós-sphaira* of Fuseli's and Böcklin's paintings. A closer look on the water snake's head may give us the opportunity to describe it. We already pointed out that it is not the head of a normal snake, mainly because of its whisker. If we think about the Triton's metamorphosis, we could guess that the whisker, as a mammalian's characteristic, is the "non-aquatic" part of the water-snake whose head is approaching dry land. As a sensorial instrument of felines, it is also reminiscent of the scene's whole carnal tension: its subtle hairs on the right realize the first secret touch with the woman's skin. These subtle lines turn up again in the sky, separating here and there the oscillating colorations of a brewing storm. Coming from the cloudy side of the horizon, the wind seems to push the waves towards the cliffs. The "supernatural" aspect of the water-snake's emerging head, whose surface is reflecting the sunlight while its whisker imitates the windy lines of the approaching storm, seems to correspond to the natural *atmós* of the scene which has given it its particular shape.

Now, we cannot ask if the horse or the devil are shaped by the natural *atmós* of Fuseli's scene which stands out for its particular artificiality. The whole

scene is violently spotlighted and unlike the Nereid, the woman has taken a very uncomfortable and most theatrical posture. Both creatures correspond to the “artificial nature” of this fantastic vision. They are shaped by the gloomy darkness and the dazzling light which leaves the same mysterious and slightly orientalist gleam on their ugliness as it does on the perfectly arranged Louis XVI furniture. They also share their dense, cottony consistence (or inconsistency?). Nevertheless, there is this very awakened gaze on top of the triangle flanked by the horse’s blind eyes on the left and the woman’s closed eyes on the right, that expresses surprise or disapprobation, as if its “hesitating” *subject* was unsatisfied with his own shape-giving atmosphere. Let us finish with the meditative gesture of the diabolic crawls: does this poor devil even know *why* he is discovering himself on the pleats of antiquity, testifying the new slavery of an ancient figure whose eyes were still opened on Caravaggio’s paintings?

If we sum up the results of our contemplation, we can put forward the following fundamental differences between *The Nightmare* and *Triton and Nereid*: in Fuseli’s painting we see a mortal and solipsist pleasure that is tragically rising itself against an intruder’s presence; in Böcklin’s painting we see the birth of a naturally stimulated pleasure that is about to take place thanks to the presence of alterity. The supernatural creatures in Fuseli’s painting do not fit the woman’s artificial order which contrasts with their animal characteristics, but at the same time, especially because of the missing animal eyes and the absence of any reference to a natural element, these intruders cannot be imagined in a less artificial, non-fantastic place. They *absolutize* the artificial order of a kind of mankind who negates its animality. In Böcklin’s painting the human’s *in-between* is celebrated: not with an apocalyptic baroque trumpet, but with a conch horn that “fulfils” the “messianic” time space. Even if we forget that the painting’s title attributes them a mythological status, the naked woman, the fishtailed man and even the strange water snake confirm through their adaptations a certain metamorphic coherence: they seem to express a sensorial dialogue between elementary living conditions.

The next step would be an identification of these results in Lovecraft’s and De Chirico’s work. They can be interpreted and specified on the basis of Todorov’s theory about the role of taboo in fantastic literature and Roh’s and Bontempelli’s reflections about the magical objectivity of nature. The fact that Lovecraft

and De Chirico are (unlike Fuseli and Böcklin) contemporaries, invites us to examine the fantastic and magical realism in terms of concurrence. An interesting starting point for a comparison of both discursive phenomena could be the role of tragic transcendence. The fantastic “hesitation” between the “natural” and the “supernatural” (the tragic character cannot accept without struggling neither what he naturally believed in the past nor what the “supernatural” wants to make him believe in the future) finds a serious alternative in the purified presence of a numinous encounter between human order and natural chaos. In Böcklin’s paintings we can find “moments of convincing naturality, which can be recognized as auspicious, because they would anticipate what could only be accomplished thanks to the reconciliation of society and nature”. Böcklin’s Nereid looks the emerging snake in the eyes, without hesitating, and gives thereby a simple but difficult response to the supernatural world which might have sent it: *hic et nunc*.

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DELIVERANCE: THE GAME IS SURVIVAL

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Survival depends —well, it depends on having to survive. The kind of life I'm talking about depends on its being the last chance. The very last of all.
(Dickey, 1973)

John Boorman has created a suspense that propels the audience forward, as the current of the river propels the men on the screen.
(Tarantino, 2023)

This paper analyses *Deliverance* as an example of a rural horror film. To do so, a comparison is drawn with the novel by James Dickey —who also authored alongside the script alongside John Boorman— as well as the main sources of analysis of the film contained in the works of Creadick, Enriquez, Garner, Köhler, Machado, Mullen, Narine, Ratcliff, Tarantino and Wilson.

Before the credits begin, John Boorman (b. 1933) transcribes the conversation of the four protagonists, the story that epistemologically forms the core of the film: the end of nature and its modification due to human action; the resulting

flooding of a valley that will devastate the original environment and put an end to an area that has remained unchanged since ancient times, transforming the natural balance. At the same time, it places us in the space in which the action will take place, a brutal river, the last of the great wild currents that could not be tamed and that will end up disappearing irremediably or, as the end of the talk says, become a filthy pond.

Deliverance (1972) can be interpreted as a palimpsest in which different spaces of interpretation appear. The film, directed and produced by the British director John Boorman, was the fifth in his filmography, establishing a specific relationship with previous films such as *Point Blank* (1967) or *Hell in the Pacific* (1969) and later ones such as *Zardoz* (1974), *Excalibur* (1981) and *The Emerald Forest* (1985). With respect to the former, *Deliverance* shares the intrinsic violence in atrocious and indifferent habitats, especially with *Hell in the Pacific*. In the bizarre post-apocalyptic fiction *Zardoz*, Boorman developed an incipient ecological concern that displaced *The Emerald Forest*, an environmental production in which he vindicated indigenous life. In the same way, he shares with *Excalibur* the fierce violence of his entire filmography and the mythical space of an immaculate nature before being corrupted in a fantasy that was a forced variant of his project on Tolkien's *The Lord of Rings*.

The film is an adaptation of the book of the same name by the American poet James Dickey (1923-1977), who also co-wrote the screenplay with Boorman. The novel, published by the Boston-based Houghton Mifflin Company in 1970, was “a strange book by any standard” (Enriquez, 2015), an “unforeseen volume, the kind of novel few serious writers attempt any longer, a book about wilderness and survival whose DNA contains shards of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Huckleberry Finn*.” (Gardner, 2010). *Deliverance* was published in a period of transition in the history of the United States, a time of questioning in which the echoes of the Vietnam War—the writer had fought as a pilot in World War II and in the Korean War, although it is true that the Southeast Asian conflict is never mentioned—, hippiedom or the murder of Sharon Tate at the hands of Charles Manson's gang, raising the incipient concerns of American environmentalism. Dickey played an active part in the film, playing the sheriff of Ainty as the guarantor of order in a place cursed by the advent of the ecological apocalypse, a listless figure who wishes only to make the transition to nothingness as painless as possible.



Figure 1: Sheriff Bullard [James Dickey] wants the valley to disappear in peace.
Source: John Boorman. *Deliverance*, 1972. [Blu-Ray] Warner Bros., 2007.

The plot of the film is straightforward and faithfully transposes the fundamental elements of the novel. Four friends from Atlanta, Lewis Medlock (Burt Reynolds), Ed Gentry (John Voight), Bobby Trippe (Ned Beatty) and Drew Ballinger (Ronny Cox), plan a weekend trip to the Cahulawassee River, an unknown environment, with the aim of enjoying some time off and returning to their families by Sunday afternoon. While the first day is an idyllic adventure, the second one is shattered by the brutal assault on Bobby and Ed at the hands of the locals in which, as Quentin Tarantino acknowledges, “John Boorman is not directing a suspense scene; he’s staging the way you psychologically fuck someone up” (2023, p. 85), concluding with the death of one of the assailants in self-defence.

From that moment on, the plot becomes a struggle for survival against the natural and human elements, in which the protagonists make decisions as monstrous as the humiliations to which they have been subjected. Their actions will corrupt the spirit of liberation with which they began their wanderings, and the physical and psychological wounds will leave indelible marks that will last for the rest of their lives.

The film chronology coincides with the story and is divided into five parts. The metaphors that appear at the beginning of the novel, the reflections of Ed Gentry, its first-person narrator, are transferred to the film

through visual and textual references. The film transcribes the chapters that correspond to the days of the action, “Before”, “September 14th”, “September 15th”, “September 16th” and “After”, so that the spirit of Dickey’s story appears faithfully in the adaptation.

HOMO OMINI LUPUS

Contemplating nature in its original form means exposing oneself to it with all the risks involved. The possibility of observing the Garden of Eden for the last time will remove any patina of civilization from the protagonists. This idea of return to the origin is related to the life cycle of the adventurers, in which the acceptance and renunciation of maturity is implicit, especially in the figure of Lewis, a stand-in for the need to perpetuate youth at any cost. The lost or artificially forced youth and the relationship with a virgin ecosystem become the last bastion of an innocence that will be shaken by a deformed reality. For *Deliverance* makes this antagonistic polarization of opposites evident throughout the film. After signaling the imminent catastrophe, the men enter a paradisiacal space reinforced by Vilmos Zsigmond’s semi-documentary photography, which conveys an illusion of veracity that he would later develop in the wild environments of *Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), with which he shares “exploring masculinity, violence, and the effects of dealing with unspeakable trauma” (Muller, 2019, p. 70). The landscapes of *Deliverance* are inscribed with the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and the images of 19th-century American Romantic painters, preserving the idea of a sublime and indomitable orchard outside of time. A philosophy that, moreover, appears in Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and in its latest film adaptation by Michael Mann, which share elective affinities with Boorman’s film.

The towns along the Cahulawassee are disturbing spaces populated by beings antagonistic to the protagonists. While the group of adventurers represent the goodness of the urbanites, the places and people who inhabit deep Georgia are anchored in past times. The idea of backwardness is emphasized in a scenography made up of a detritus of half-finished houses, dirty and abandoned cars and mechanical parts, as well as a series of genetic

deficiencies in the physiognomy of the locals that compose a monstrous prefiguration of the ghostly space that the suburbanites are about to enter. That difference becomes even greater in the face of Atlanta's hubris: a stark Bobby posits the hypothetical idea that the ways and customs of the metropolis are superior to rural primitivism, an affront to the locals that will be punished, as will Lewis's hesitancy when negotiating the chauffeurs' fees that revels in his exacerbated, masculinized personality: "the way he bluffs before the villagers (...) is the same way he bluffs before his peers with his pose of a mountain man in tune with nature (...) He has more balls than brains, more opinions than knowledge' (Tarantino, 2023, p. 79). An idea also related to the author of the book, since 'it makes sense when one realizes that Lewis is a stand-in for the author James Dickey, who is not really a Tarzan, but a poet' (Tarantino, 2023, p. 79).

Despite the mutual distrust, the beginning of the film recreates the meagre communion between two disparate philosophies through music. Drew, an amateur who has learnt by ear, is able to play his guitar with Lonnie (Billie Redden), "an albino boy with pink eyes like a white rabbit's; one of them stared off at a furious and complicated angle" (Dickey, 1973, p. 68), who seems to be taken from a work by Modigliani, whose indifference conceals a prodigious talent with the banjo. "Dueling banjos" is one of the icons of the film—it has even been defined as a stellar moment in the history of American filmmaking (Creadick, 2017, p. 64)—but the unconscious contact between the two purest beings of both worlds recreates the mirage of an impossible communication, two universes condemned to confront each other when Lonnie refuses to shake Drew's hand, denying any possibility of an understanding; an impassivity that shifts to another moment in the film in which the autistic man observes the adventurers in the riverbed before the disaster.



Figure 2: Lonnie [Billy Redden] performing the scene “Dueling banjos”.
Source: John Boorman. *Deliverance*, 1972. [Blu-Ray] Warner Bros., 2007.

Experiencing nature as if it were a primitive ordeal and exploring virgin territory is the main motive of the journey along the Cahulawassee River (the fictitious name of the Chattooga River in the Appalachian Mountains), a philosophy led by the hyper-masculinized Lewis. He, who seeks to flee from any semblance of civilization, drags his colleagues into an adventure in which they will explore the environment with an uninhibited and risky attitude, seeking to soak up the strength of an unsplit and condemned environment. This quest, too, is conditioned as much by the desire for misdirection as by risk. As Lewis maintains: “Sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find anything!”, that is, his aim is precisely to get lost, “extract himself from the regimented security of citylife and to reconnect with his nature, which in the film is inseparable from his masculinity” (Narine, 2008, p. 457), where he highlights his passion for danger: “I don’t believe in insurance; there’s no risk that way”.



Figure 3: Lewis [Burt Reynolds] believes that the machines will fail and there will be a civilizational collapse.

Source: John Boorman. *Deliverance*, 1972. [Blu-Ray] Warner Bros., 2007.

THE TARGET CREATED BY THE EYE THAT LOOKS AT IT

Critics describe *Deliverance* as an action film, although this consideration may be too simplistic and, like the novel, the film transgresses and transcends the classic genres. A careful viewing invites us to reflect on the fact that its classification as such can be permeabilized to other genres such as horror or fantasy, both because of its plot and because of a re-reading of the script based on Dickey's book, which offers an ideological density that is difficult to transfer to the screen.

There are studies that pigeonhole *Deliverance* as a horror film linked to the eco-horror sub-genre of films about the environment's reaction to mankind's abuses due to the fact "that modern society has pushed too far against the natural world and must be taught a violent lesson" (Ratcliff and Russo, 2020, p. 200). The relationship with a harsh and indifferent nature would be related, according to the authors, to Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), a film about the death of the environmental activist Timothy Treadwell under the claws of the bears he wanted to protect: "And what haunts me, —Herzog explains— is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature" (Ratcliff and Russo, 2020, p. 205). *Deliv-*

erance, on the other hand, addresses the violent battles between the urban and the rural in 1970s cinema from *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), *Rituals* (Peter Carter, 1977), *Eaten Alive* (Tobe Hooper, 1977), *I Split on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1977), *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill, 1981) with the predecessor of them all *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964) (VVAA., 2017).

The variants of eco-horror and violence are linked to the rural fantastic if we look at the film based on the screenplay and Dickey's novel. The protagonist, Ed Gentry, narrates the story, and it is the dream spaces and their inter-zones that initiate the action in the film, which have been considered, because of the character's transformation, as "epiphanies" (Willson, 1974, p. 58). The beginning and the end of the film, as in the novel, are determined by a perpetual movement that happens as an extension of life, as if the story itself were conditioned by its temporal flow. However, it is the space of the dream where the days of struggle begin and end, generating an indeterminate space with which Ed ends up transgressing the frontiers between reality and fiction, as it affects the bewilderment of memories. Thus, the first day at the Cahulawassee begins with Ed's wakefulness,

There was something about me that usually kept me from dreaming or maybe kept me from remembering what I had dreamed; I was either awake or dead, and I always came back slowly. I had the feeling that if it were perfectly quiet, if I could hear nothing, I would never wake up. Something in the world had to pull me back, for every night I went down deep, and if I had any sensation during sleep, it was of going deeper and deeper, trying to reach a point, a line or border (...) and as I came up from the sleep-dark to the real dark of the room (Dickey, 1973, p. 35).

This part concludes with another reverie: the protagonist wanders in the night and becomes part of the illusion as if it were a romantic vision of Füssli. It is no accident that he interacts with an owl, that he remembers touching an owl's claw and even retains having hunted with it: "I hunted with him as well as I could, there in my weightlessness. The woods burned in my head. Toward morning I could reach up and touch the claw without turning on the light" (Dickey, 1973, p. 99).

September 15th begins when Ed sees the first light of day: "I kept waking, and waking again, but when I was alive for good, the screen wire of the tent-front

was gray and steady” (Dickey, 1973, p. 103), at which point they question whether this is really the longed-for freedom they seek. Ed decides to go into the forest alone to hunt. Although the vigil marks the beginning of the action, it unfolds in a peculiar way, as Ed prowls the forest alone and is unable to kill a fawn that could have provided sustenance for the adventurers. This scene is highly significant, as it is unclear whether Ed is living the experience or whether it is part of a hallucination immersed in a nebulous space,

I stopped, and the fog rose exactly to my teeth. About fifteen yards from me, right at the limit of my vision, was a small deer, a spike buck as nearly as I could tell from the shape of his head. He was browsing, the ghost of a deer but a deer just the same. He lifted his head and looked directly at my face, which from his angle must have seemed like a curious stone on the ground, if he saw it. I stood there, buried to the neck in the ditch, in the floor of the forest (Dickey, 1973, p. 106).

It’s a transcendent period as Boorman recreates a setting that seems to be taken from Courbet’s *The Banks of Plaisir-Fontaine* (1866), conveying to the viewer that the civilized Ed, out of his element, does not have the guts to kill.



Figure 4: Ed [John Voight] in points to his vision in the forest.
Source: John Boorman. *Deliverance*, 1972. [Blu-Ray] Warner Bros., 2007.

The conclusion of the second chapter ends with the dream and the third chapter begins with his awakening, in which Ed is confronted with his destiny: to kill for the sole purpose of survival and to make it possible for Lewis and Bobby to be saved:

it was reality, and deep in the situation. I simply lay in nature, my pants' legs warm and sopping with my juices, not cold, not warm, but in a kind of hovering. Think, I said, think. But I could not. I won't think yet; I don't have to for a while. I closed my eyes and spoke some words, and they seemed to make sense, but were out of place (Dickey, 1973, p. 177).

This part is consummated again with the permeabilization between wakefulness and sleep: "I nearly went to sleep there, but woke up as the water gradually turned cold. Then I went upstairs, my hair and side wet, and got in bed. It was over. I lay awake all night in brilliant sleep". (Dickey, 1973, p. 247). The end of Ed's solitary adventure ends with the death of the second assailant, the salvation of the three survivors and an uncertain legal scenario for his future.

"After" begins again with his vigil: "I woke up, I was holding on to my side again, a tight, glowing package. I came awake fast, because the midmorning sun, or so it looked and felt, was beginning to sting my eyelids" (Dickey, 1973, p. 251), and as at the beginning of the film and the book, the cycle does not close, but links back to life, abolishing the illusory space as a gateway to knowledge or to an unconscious dimension, in which Lewis, Bobby and Ed are definitively free from the laws of Hell. Nevertheless, the narrator continues to dream of the river: "has not become some kind of 'private personal possession' for Ed. It is he who is possessed by the river and it continues to haunt him and jerk from his daily life" (Mullen, 2011, p. 111).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Deliverance is a film that, because of its ambiguity, which is "blinding on the surface and complex and difficult to understand in its content" (Köhler, 2003, 100), transcends genres and can be placed in thriller, action, horror and

fantasy. In the clash between opposites, the presence of an immanent nature that acts with unusual brutality towards humanity that has turned against it stands out. The same is configured as the omniscient protagonist capable of seeing everything, making good the metaphor of the eye that observes without anything escaping its knowledge, a visual allegory about the destiny of all the characters.

The relationship between the novel, the screenplay and the film is fundamental to the adaptation process. Although it is common for books to be reduced when they are brought to the screen, *Deliverance* is enriched by the collaboration between the author and the director, which means that there is no decisive loss of information.

The fantastic is a constant presence, which in its ambiguous sexual message has even been described as a “thinly veiled homoerotic fantasy” (Machado, 2017) and whose difficulty of interpretation lies in the fact that the spectator is incapable of understanding its underlying meaning, since the end curls into itself, flows without conclusion, inviting the spectator to imagine what hides beneath the surface that will be swamped by the waters.

Deliverance employs the tourist’s cliché who must fight for their lives, an element that would define the slasher genre with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). It is also an exponent of cinema in which sexual violence acts as a catalyst for vengeful conflict, as in films such as *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), inspired by *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, Ingmar Bergman, 1960), the aforementioned *Straw Dogs*, *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) and *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976).

In John Boorman’s film, the protagonists show their true character when they are stripped of the rules of civilization. The conflict comes not only from external threats, but also from their internal transformations and how they surface when social rules disappear. The film makes no secret of the abuse and its consequences on the victims and shows the fury they unleash on their aggressors in no uncertain terms. In addition, there is a sense of isolation and systemic persecution, as the protagonists realize that the laws of justice cannot overcome the tribalism that protects their enemies.

Similarly, *Deliverance* links to literary, cultural and cinematic icons that transgress the genres of adventure, horror and fantasy. Its links are more than evident with *The Most Dangerous Game* (Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel,

1932), a film classified as a horror film during the pre-code era based on the story of the same name by Richard Conell and its radio adaptation in the serial *Suspense* narrated by Orson Welles and Keenan Wynn (1943), or *Hard Target* (John Woo, 1993) with a Jean-Claude Van Damme in a state of grace. The forest as a magical space is an archetype of the romantic tradition, as has been demonstrated, among others, by the studies of Robert Rosenblum and Rafael Argullol. The river as an existential metaphor since Heraclitus' maxim, has been filmographic transubstantiated in *The River* (Jean Renoir, 1951) and in Herzog's films such as *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) in which the natural environment acts as a catalyst for transformation, confrontation and destruction. *Deliverance*, which could also be translated as salvation or redemption, reminds us of Hölderlin's phrase that where there is danger there is also that which saves us.

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THE POETICS OF THE IMMENSE: SCALE AND VISUAL METAPHOR IN THE CINEMA OF DENIS VILLENEUVE

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, science fiction has taken on a leading role in the Hollywood industry and in movie theaters around the world. The narrative quality and visual excellence offered by digital images in titles such as Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), or Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* (2021), reach the viewer as an experience that combines visually stimulating spaces with deeply reflective narratives. In a similar dynamic but from clearly opposite approaches, they not only reveal a manifest artistic sensibility, but also different ways of inviting the viewer to delve into the extraordinary.

Our focus for this study is on three works by Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve (Quebec, 1967), where the fantastic is visually established as a complex object of narrative contemplation. *Arrival* (2016), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and *Dune* along with *Dune: Part Two* (2024) (which we will address as a single work) emerge as an attempt to capture the sublime, where humanity confronts something that transcends it. In *Arrival*, for instance, the fantastic

does not lie in explosions or conflicts but in the intimate experience of extraterrestrial contact. Villeneuve reconnects us with the communicative gesture presented by Steven Spielberg in 1979 with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, but with a slow and hypnotic rhythm that allows the viewer to immerse themselves in the world the filmmaker constructs. In this case, the fantastic is not a rupture with reality but an expansion of its boundaries, a space where everything presented to us is far from literal. We could approach Lucero by saying that the image is observed by a viewer who interprets and endures it to the extent that its grandiloquence overwhelms them. (Lucero, 2022, p. 53).

A contemporary figure in the realm of the fantastic alongside Villeneuve is Christopher Nolan (London, 1970). Nolan is a prominent filmmaker of our time, approaching works such as *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Tenet* (2020) from an intellectual and structural perspective. Villeneuve, however, explores science fiction as a sensory landscape that delves into spirituality and power dynamics. His creations are not only visually liberating but also possess a symbolic depth that contemplates humanity and its place in the universe.

Denis Villeneuve offers an introspective, emotional, and visually groundbreaking perspective to the genre, and his contribution extending beyond world-building to the way he uses the fantastic to explore universal themes. In this sense, and drawing on Lakoff and Johnson, we could see that Villeneuve has developed an expansive visual metaphor that requires no words.

Metaphors have significant implications for how speakers structure their perception and their relationship with reality, to the extent that certain conceptual references would be indescribable without the aid of metaphors. As Lakoff and Johnson put it: “If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Rodríguez, 2019, p. 164).

At the beginning of his career, Villeneuve developed a narrative and visual style that would lay the foundation for his later ventures into science fiction. In his first feature film, *Un 32 août sur terre* (1998), the director tells the story of a young woman who, after a car accident, decides to reconsider her

life. The film, though far from the fantastic, explores the characters' identities and their existential purpose —themes that would later become fundamental in his work.

In *Maelström* (2000), Villeneuve begins experimenting with visual symbolism and narrative ambiguity, techniques he would later perfect in his science fiction films. Then, nearly a decade later, in 2009, Villeneuve presents *Polytechnique*. The black-and-white film showcases the director refining his ability to tackle difficult subjects with a controlled aesthetic and an unsettling narrative.

In 2010, *Incendies* catapulted him onto the international scene. The director approaches complex narratives and the emotional twists of the protagonists, addressing themes such as trauma, sacrifice, and identity. This film marks a starting point for the themes he would later explore in his science fiction films, such as the weight of the past, the internal conflicts of the characters, and the search for meaning amidst chaos.

Three years later, films such as *Enemy* and *Prisoners* (both 2013) and *Sicario* (2015) are tense, dark, and visceral works that transcend the boundaries of conventional thrillers to become studies on the psychological impact of violence on individuals and societies.

Villeneuve's early works, although not part of the science fiction genre, establish many of the elements that would define his style.

From the very beginning of his career as a director, Villeneuve understood cinema not only as a passage to the extraordinary, but also as a powerful weapon for regeneration, capable of offering real solutions to the most desolate aspects of our civilization. Tolerance, dialogue, integrity, transparency, multiculturalism... All are concepts drawn from his films as lessons in front of horror, as a hope that can only be glimpsed by those who have stood before the abyss and returned to tell the tale. (Gómez., 2021, p. 13)

ARRIVAL: THE INTIMATE, THE CONTEMPLATIVE, AND THE ETHEREAL

In *Arrival*, the world that Villeneuve constructs is sober, minimalist, and almost ethereal. From the opening scenes, the viewer is immersed in a cold and

solitary landscape. Far from the grandeur of other films where alien ships arrive in large cities, the director opts for mist-covered skies, mountains, oceans, and cool, desaturated tones that create a melancholic narrative atmosphere.

While Stanley Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) presented an overwhelming cosmic approach and the insignificance of humanity before the universe, Villeneuve emphasizes the intimate and emotional, creating a tangible closeness between the human and the alien.

From an approach that expands temporality as a rupture of classical narrative, the director seems to align with philosophical postulates proposed by Chul Han in contemporary narratives, establishing a new paradigm that makes him an aesthetic precursor in the realm of fiction.

When the narrative chain is broken, time is expelled from its linear trajectory. The disintegration of linear narrative time does not necessarily signify a catastrophe. Lyotard also sees in it the possibility of liberation. Perception is freed from the chain of storytelling, from the compulsion (Zwang) to narration. It begins to float, remaining in suspension (Suspens). It will then be free for independent narrative events, for events in their full sense. It will have access to things that, previously, were non-existent because they could not find a place in the narrative trajectory. (Chul Han, 2018, p. 79)

The cinematography of *Arrival*, led by Bradford Young, develops the allure of a fantastic and grandiose space within a visually austere environment with a resonant spatial quality. The scale is contained but meaningful, and the alien ships are presented as imposing objects. Simple, abstract geometric shapes confront us with a majestic sculpture in a minimalist setting. The ships are colossal half-ellipse structures that intensify this sensation. Suspended in the air like unfathomable monoliths, they reveal a simple and almost abstract design, lacking any ornamentation or earthly details. Clouds and shadows seem to move with a life of their own, along with the geometric simplicity of the ships. Villeneuve places us in close proximity to great sculptors like Richard Serra, or to the work and concepts of the Indian artist Anish Kapoor. The ships have a monochromatic palette and soft lighting, transforming the spaces into realms of mystery and wonder. In line with Kapoor's thinking, Villeneuve,

as a conceptual sculptor, changes the collective imaginary by turning the ship into a vertiginous object.

For the conceptual artist, having a perspective does not imply delivering an opinion but rather provoking vertigo. The artist's point of view is not about providing a figurative medium to express a preconceived idea or opinion. Committing to a social cause as an artist means creating a visual object (something that, of course, includes darkness and absence) that not only interprets the world but transforms an intervention into a popular belief composed of earthly representations. The artistic object emerges in the world as a "presence," generating a kinetic movement that inaugurates a new space as open to the future as it is to interpretation. The otherness (or alterity) of the object grants it a dual capacity for action: the artistic object is simultaneously virtual and visual, yet both aspects move in different directions and, although physically part of the same object, do not resemble each other. (Bhabha, 2010, p. 31)

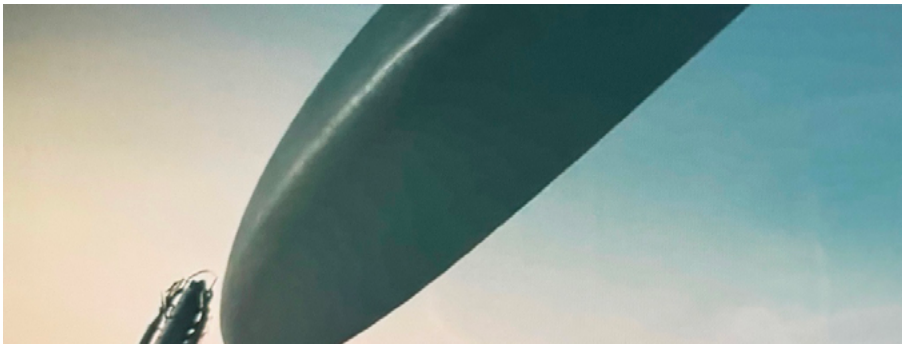


Figure 1: The spaceship. Source: Arrival, Screenshot, Arrival movie, 2024.

The film's color palette shifts toward cold and muted tones, reinforcing the chromatic focus and the reflective, melancholic atmosphere. This underscores the emotional weight of the topics that are explored: communication, time, and loss. In almost every scene, the light is soft and filtered through clouds or windows, creating a sense of calm and isolation. This use of light not only enhances the introspective tone of the film but also emphasizes the emotional

connection between the characters. These characters are portrayed as authentic and relatable, supported by the cinematography, which conveys a hopeful sense of realism.

It is worth highlighting the small moments when warmth permeates the scene, creating a glimmer of hope in the protagonist's "future nostalgia" with her daughter. This element, portrayed as a tragic yet love-filled event, shines through the film's overarching chromatic dominance. The cinematography in *Arrival* does not aim to dazzle with grandeur but rather to deepen the emotional and contemplative connection with the story.

BLADE RUNNER 2049: A WORLD OF DYSTOPIC ORDER

Blade Runner 2049, Denis Villeneuve's second venture into the fantastic, presents us with a new paradigm. In contrast to the introspective and realistic space of *Arrival*, Villeneuve constructs a world that oscillates between technological dystopia and a civilization subjugated by it.

The film is an ambitious expansion of the 1982 cult classic *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott. The film builds upon the original themes of defining humanity and its construction through memory. Topics such as love and sacrifice, woven into a cyberpunk atmosphere, present a civilizational quest amidst chaos—a narrative order within an immersive sensory experience that embodies the dystopian paradigm.

In envisioning distinct and improved civilizations, the dystopian industry neither falters under ideological closure nor challenges it. Rather, it seems to leverage it to monopolize prospective imagination, accelerate production, and establish itself as the dominant critical canon within and beyond science fiction. This approach gives rise to a fully dystopianized culture, one that compensates collective discontent with appeals to individual happiness. (Martonell, 2023, p.197)

Under the cinematography of Roger Deakins, the film immerses us in different environments marked by color and texture. Initially, the city of Los Angeles serves as the symbolic container for the entire experience. The architecture and the immersive context it creates for the viewer emphasise the vital

ambivalence between humans and replicants. Villeneuve partly inherits this cityscape, and much like the 1982 film, though now set 30 years later, he presents a Los Angeles as an endless labyrinth of darkness, punctuated by the incandescent glow of neon lights and screens.

Once again, architecture will be the key expressive resource in the creation of the ultimate cyberpunk megalopolis, which is nothing more than the exaggerated image of a present increasingly closer to the grim motto “high tech and low life.” *Blade Runner* fully immerses us in the decay of ruin, acid rain, pollution, infernal noise, chaotic traffic, and an excess of lights that lead to sensory overload. (Munier, 2023, p.117)

The hue of the city creates a distant, chaotic, and mechanical atmosphere, where humanity is lost amidst technological glows. We can recognize the loss of humanity in favor of technology and consumption. The city is established as a dystopian container, transporting us to a scenario that goes beyond aesthetics, once again constituting itself as the space for its own narrative.

The film by the Canadian director leans on the contemporary rather than the inward concerns of the emerging neoliberalism that characterized Ridley Scott’s iconic film. Villeneuve opens up the oppressive close-up shots of Scott to allow the world, not the individual, to occupy the center of the discourse. The world of 2019 oppresses; the world of 2049 overwhelms. Los Angeles in 2019 is a world saturated, Malthusian, baroque, and hyperbolic in its industrial and commercial aspects, with the content of the self being introspective. In contrast, Los Angeles 2049 is barely an eerie oasis of concrete and neon in the midst of an oceanic void—an hybrid desert, ruin, and landfill. (Vallín, 2019, p.268). Regarding his vision of the city of Las Vegas, Denis Villeneuve reflects in an interview with Pau Gómez

In contrast to the city of Los Angeles, we encounter the city of Las Vegas, an apocalyptic desert bathed in an orange glow that envelops and dilutes everything. Las Vegas is presented as a dead city, a forgotten city, immersed in radioactive, opaque dust that suggests both desolation and mystery. Unlike the technologized darkness of Los Angeles, the luminous atmosphere of Las Vegas feels like a divine

twilight storm. For Villeneuve, “the almost burned yellow is a visual and stylistic constant in many classical paintings with mythological themes, and mythology is very present here: the fall of the gods, immortality...” (Goméz, 2021, p.133)



Figure 2: Las Vegas City. Source: Screenshot, Blade Runner 2049movie, 2024.

Blade Runner 2049 poetically recreates the interior spaces. On one hand, there is the austere apartment, filled with light, that depersonalizes and places the protagonist in a state of emotional disconnection. This apartment works in total harmony, mirroring the protagonist’s coldness. The spatial de-personalization reflects the routine and emotional emptiness of a man living under the shadow of his own existential doubts. In this sense, and drawing from Bachelard, we can situate this space as the hermit’s cabin in the dense wilderness. “The hermit’s cabin is a glory of poverty. From one deprivation to another, it gives us access to the absolute of refuge.” (Bachelard, 2005, p.63)

This kind of hermit’s cabin of stripped beings is starkly contrasted by the spaces of power. The headquarters of the Wallace Corporation establishes a clear visual disruption with the proposed cyberpunk world outside. The austere surfaces in golden tones and geometric lines impose a sense of divine perfection that reflects the personality of the replicants’ creator, Niander Wallace. The expansive minimalist rooms (which will later be reformulated in *Dune*) immerse us in a space devoid of ornamentation, reinforcing order and structure. These aesthetics, akin to the works of Tadao Ando, reveal how light enters through

carefully calculated openings, creating patterns that express the idea of absolute control and Wallace's obsession with the temporal and the divine. In this sense, light functions not only in its expressive form but as an almost ideological atmosphere, one that judges and divinizes the man it illuminates.

DUNE: AT THE BOUNDARIES OF THE MAGICAL

In contrast to the existential void of *Blade Runner 2049* and the austerity of *Arrival*, the universe of *Dune* is grandiose, opulent, and tangible. Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* marks Villeneuve's first work set in an extraterrestrial context, with new worlds and planets to explore and bring to life.

Beyond this new field of experimentation, *Dune* presents itself as a political and power-driven dilemma, a battleground where personal ambitions, loyalties, and economic and political interests intertwine. Denis Villeneuve, however, transforms these tensions into powerful visuals that resonate deeply with both the audience and the characters navigating this hostile universe.

The narrative begins with House Atreides, a family known for their honor and loyalty to the Emperor. The Atreides' homeworld, Caladan, is a natural realm of lush greens, overcast skies, and ever-shifting seas. Natural light filters through vast windows, reflecting the Atreides' deep connection to nature, humanity, and harmony. However, a new destiny awaits them—they are sent to Arrakis, a desert world that starkly contrasts with their house's philosophy, both in form and essence.

Visually and narratively, the desert becomes the true protagonist of the film. It acts as a powerful element, with its vastness, harsh climate, and the looming presence of the sandworms mirroring the political struggles unfolding on its surface. The desert is not merely a setting; it transcends the human realm, emerging as a living, symbolic presence that infuses the narrative with visual and philosophical poetry. Director Denis Villeneuve, together with cinematographer Greig Fraser (Melbourne, 1975), transforms the sands of Arrakis into a metaphor for infinity and an unyielding force that shapes the lives and destinies of those who inhabit it. The film's shots are revealing and provocative, offering the audience a cascade of ideas and emotions about the world unfolding before their eyes. Pau Gómez conveys Denis Villeneuve's words about the importance

of capturing the ineffable in cinema: “That is the power of cinema to produce images that will later impact the audience’s minds and stay with them, open to interpretation. I love an image that is incredibly powerful, one that is chosen precisely to tell the story and push it forward, but that can also have an intimate resonance.” (Gómez, 2021, p. 169)

Arrakis is both visceral and intangible, with the desert established from the outset as an all-encompassing entity. A supreme power that its ancestral inhabitants, the Fremen, recognize as magical and spiritual, making the desert a space of resistance and redemption. Through this connection, the desert becomes the very heart of the story—a place where the fate of empires is decided, where the universe’s most valuable spice is found, and where the poetic duality between desolation and hope unfolds.

But beyond the desert, *Dune* delves into the intimate visual focus of its protagonists. While life in *Blade Runner 2049* feels oppressive in its technological perfection, in *Dune*, it is profoundly organic, evoking a world where the connection with the environment is essential.



Figure 3: Arraki Desert. Source: Screenshot, *Dune* movie, 2024

When we look at the interiors, Villeneuve uses the spaces to reflect the internal struggles of his characters. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the polished walls and geometric shadows create an oppressive and alienating space. In *Dune*, the textures of stone and sand reflect the fragility and strength of the characters’ humanity. On Arrakis, the interiors are brutalist. The palace of Arrakeen is an im-

posing structure that seems to emerge from the desert itself, reflecting the aridity and hostility of its environment. The light is reduced to the essential, filtering through cracks and openings designed to protect against the scorching heat from outside. *Dune* develops a symbiotic interplay where light submits to dark spaces, creating a conceptual beauty throughout the film. In this sense, it establishes a conception reminiscent of the art and architecture of Japanese creators, where light—and especially shadows—play a starring role.

Our thinking, ultimately, proceeds similarly: I believe that beauty is not a substance in itself but merely a drawing of shadows, a play of light and dark produced by the juxtaposition of different substances. Just as a phosphorescent stone, placed in darkness, emits a glow and, exposed to full light, loses all its fascination as a precious stone, in the same way, beauty loses its existence if the effects of shadow are removed. (Tanizaki, 2012, p. 69)

Villeneuve makes each space tell its own story, but also ensures that it functions as an echo of the characters who inhabit them. Where *Blade Runner 2049* finds its poetry in artificial light and architectural precision, *Dune* celebrates the rawness and power of natural elements. The entire film is a constant reminder of the relationship between humanity and its environment, of the need to adapt and respect what we cannot dominate. Villeneuve turns Arrakis into a visual poem, where every grain of sand tells a story of resistance, transformation, and destiny. In its vastness and mystery, the desert is not just a physical place but a mirror of humanity's search for meaning in a vast and indifferent universe.

In conclusion, we could state that Denis Villeneuve, through these three works, develops his own visual universe. The use of scale, light, and visual design immerse the viewer in a unique dialectic with the film, inviting reflection on universal issues. Themes such as time, language, identity, the human condition, the sublime, and the divine make Villeneuve's work offer cinematic experiences that transcend the visual and invite us to contemplate our existence.

As a leading figure of his time in cinematic art, Denis Villeneuve has redefined many of the visual aspects of contemporary science fiction. In a genre that often prioritizes spectacle over substance, the director brings a grandiose and visually resonant display that pushes the genre beyond its traditional conventions.

This introduces an introspective, emotional, and visually influential perspective. In a genre that often prioritizes spectacle over substance, the director delivers a grand and visually impactful spectacle.

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THE LONG AND CINEMATIC SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE NOSFERATU

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INTRODUCTION

The vampire Nosferatu has left an indelible mark on the history of horror films, inspiring various reinterpretations over the course of a century. The initial film, directed by F.W. Murnau and released in 1922, laid the groundwork for the genre, establishing many of the visual tropes that would be associated with vampires in cinema for decades to come. For example, this film introduced iconic elements such as the vulnerability of vampires to sunlight and established an atmosphere of gothic horror that would influence later filmmaking. Decades later, in 1979, Werner Herzog offered his own vision. This version, while faithful to the original spirit, delved deeper into the loneliness and *pathos* of the vampire, presenting him as a tragic figure doomed to immortality. Herzog managed to update the story for a modern audience while maintaining the dreamlike, spectral atmosphere characteristic of the original.

Robert Eggers' recent adaptation, released in late 2024, represents the third iteration of Nosferatu in the cinematic medium. This new version seeks to

revive the horror generated by the original film, while bringing a contemporary vision to the vampire myth. As we will point out at the end of this chapter, which will explore these three versions of the vampire over more than a hundred years, each of these versions reflects not only the technical advances of cinema at the time, but also the socio-cultural changes and concerns of its time. As such, *Nosferatu* continues to fascinate audiences and filmmakers alike, demonstrating the enduring relevance of this iconic character in popular culture.

NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (1922)

As is well known, the figure of *Nosferatu* has its roots in the epistolary novel *Dracula* (1897), by the Irish writer Bram Stoker. However, it was the film adaptation by a young Murnau that gave visual life to this creature of the night, the unforgettable Count Orlok played by Max Schreck, establishing many of the visual tropes associated with vampires in cinema. The film was produced in post-war Germany, during the Weimar Republic, being a period of political, social and economic turmoil that was significantly influential (Mustafa, 2023, pp. 35-36). Murnau, along with other filmmakers of the time, used the medium of film to explore themes of anxiety, alienation, and the dark side of human nature. The film's production was fraught with legal difficulties due to the failure to acquire the rights to Stoker's novel (at a time when copyright management, moreover, was not as clear-cut as it is today). Murnau and his team tried to circumvent these problems by changing names and plot details, but these efforts proved unsuccessful, and Stoker's widow successfully sued. As a result, all copies of the film were ordered destroyed, although fortunately some copies (or parts of these) survived (Hand, 2012, p. 63).

The visual style of *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* is a paradigmatic example of German cinema. The film employs innovative techniques for the time such as the use of negatives to represent an *inverted* world (which creates a phantasmagoric effect by inverting the tonal values in certain scenes, such as Hutter's carriage ride); filming in real locations, which adds a touch of authenticity to the narrative; or by applying color filters to indicate the time of day (or night) in which the story takes place. However, the application of color filters was a convention of the time for silent films, helping the audience to interpret the moment in which the action

was taking place. Thus, in daytime scenes a yellow filter is used; in nighttime scenes a blue filter; during dawn and dusk Murnau chose a pink color for these transitional scenes; and interior scenes during the day were sepia, while at night a yellow-orange tone was used.



Figure 1: *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (two frames with colored filters).

Source: Murnau (1922).

The story largely follows the structure of the novel, but with notable changes (especially in the last act). In addition, Renfield's character gains prominence, while Van Helsing's role is reduced. Similarly, the most noticeable change is in the transformation of the sophisticated Count Dracula into the monstrous and repulsive Count Orlok, whose appearance more closely resembles a rat or vermin, reflecting the era's fears about the spread of disease (Sharret, 2017, pp. 56-57). On these aspects, Murnau's film explores the theme of contagion, both literal and metaphorical. Orlok's arrival in the fictional town of Wisborg coincides with a plague of rats, a powerful symbol in a Europe still remembering the pandemic of the misnamed Spanish Flu. Thus, the vampire itself becomes a metaphor for disease, social decay and moral corruption. In fact, it is one of the earliest examples in cinema of the seepage of the monstrous into everyday life (hence also the fact that it is shot on real locations). The film also addresses themes such as repressed sexuality and forbidden desire, represented through the fascination of Ellen Hutter (equivalent to Mina in the novel, and played by Grete Schröder) with Orlok. Moreover, the final death of the vampire at the hands

of Ellen, who sacrifices herself to destroy him, adds a layer of moral complexity to the plot (Kawin, 2012, pp. 23-25).

Although Murnau's film is often categorized as expressionist (Choe, 2016, pp. 93-116), there are nuances. Expressionism is characterized by the distortion of reality, the use of artificial sets and dramatic lighting that emphasizes the emotions and psychological state of the characters (Elsaesser, 2016, pp. 18-19). In contrast, Murnau chooses to shoot in many natural locations, which provides a sense of realism that contrasts with the artificiality typical of expressionism. This aesthetic choice allows for combining elements of gothic horror with a more tangible representation of the scenic space. Expressionist cinema, moreover, aims to provoke an intense emotional response through exaggeration and visual abstraction. Murnau, however, maintains a more subtle approach and a more restrained atmosphere of unease. The film uses horror as a means to explore themes such as death or desire, but avoids falling into the emotional hyperbole of expressionism.

Likewise, Murnau implements innovative cinematographic techniques that are not strictly aligned with expressionism. For example, his use of camera movements (which he would take to the extreme in *Der Letzte Mann*, released in 1924) and depth of field to create visual tension are more a reflection of his interest in narrative development, and less an attempt to distort reality. The way he presents Orlok, using unusual angles, shows a concern for visual impact without necessarily adhering to expressionist principles. German expressionism emerged as a response to the social and political crises of the time, reflecting a deep pessimism about the human condition. Although the film reflects some of these concerns, its focus is more on supernatural horror than a direct critique of contemporary society. This may suggest that Murnau was more interested in exploring horror as a universal phenomenon, rather than using it for aspects more connected to expressionism. In any case, although the film shares elements with expressionist cinema (such as the use of exaggerated shadows or unusual camera angles), its aesthetic, narrative and technical choices distinguish it from the movement's defining characteristics. To that end, the film goes beyond the limitations of expressionism by combining realism with fantastic elements, thus offering a more complex vision.

NOSFERATU: PHANTOM DER NACHT (1979)

Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht (1979), directed by Werner Herzog, is a very personal reinterpretation of Murnau's classic. Herzog, known for his very particular, and often challenging, approach, offers a more complex and psychologically profound take on the vampire story (Kawin, 2012, p. 97). Herzog's film was produced at a time when the New German Cinema was at its peak. This movement, of which Herzog was a key figure, was characterized by its experimental approach and its desire to address complex and often dark themes. Thus, the film can be understood as a bridge between classical German expressionism (from which the original work departs to some extent, as we have indicated) and contemporary auteur cinema. The production was notorious for the tumultuous relationship between Herzog and its lead actor, Klaus Kinski, who plays Count Dracula. As is well known, their continuous clashes during filming have become a cinematic legend, adding a further substratum of tension.

Herzog maintains many visual elements of Murnau's film, such as the use of light and shadows with a dramatic or narrative functionality, or the careful composition of the shots. However, Herzog uses a more naturalistic approach, and adds his own distinctive stamp with long, contemplative shots of desolate landscapes, along with a muted color palette that contributes to an atmosphere of melancholy and decay. Herzog uses images of nature to underscore human insignificance in the face of larger forces. The shots of desolate landscapes and towering mountains serve as a metaphor for the eternity that the vampire must face. The plague of rats that accompanies Dracula symbolizes not only the physical disease, but also the moral corruption that spreads with his presence. The plot follows Stoker's novel more closely than Murnau's version, reincorporating elements such as Jonathan Harker's journey to Transylvania, and Van Helsing's role is more prominent. However, Herzog adds his own vision and interpretation, exploring more deeply the psychology of the characters and the philosophical implications represented by immortality (Kawin, 1980, pp. 45-47).

Klaus Kinski's performance as Count Dracula is central to Herzog's film. Unlike Murnau's Count Orlok, Herzog's Count Dracula is a more complex and tragic figure. While maintaining a repulsive, vermin-like appearance, but with

less exaggerated makeup than in the original version, Kinski brings an emotional depth to the character, portraying him as a being tormented by his own immortality and loneliness. This loneliness is visually reflected in the scenes where Dracula wanders alone through the deserted streets of the plagued city, symbolizing his perpetual isolation. Unlike other romantic depictions of vampirism, Herzog presents immortality as an unbearable burden. Count Dracula longs for death, seeing his eternal existence as a prison from which he cannot escape. This interpretation adds a tragic dimension to the character. Similarly, Isabelle Adjani, in the role of Lucy (equivalent to Mina in the novel), delivers an ethereal and emotional performance that complements Kinski's intensity. Thus, Adjani provides a ghostly presence that contrasts with the dark vampire, bringing a Pre-Raphaelite beauty and dramatic intensity that enhances the film's gothic atmosphere. Her performance adds layers of complexity to the relationship between the vampire and his victim/object of desire; as well as reflecting the sacrifice and inevitability of death.



Figure 2: *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*.

Source: Herzog (1979).

In addition, Herzog deepens the themes of Murnau's version, but expands and reinterprets them as well. The plague of rats remains a central element, but here it becomes a broader metaphor for social and moral decay. Dracula's arrival in Wismar triggers not only a physical plague, but also a kind of spiritual decay in the city. Images of corpses and dead rats serve as a constant reminder of

mortality, contrasting with the vampire's unwanted immortality. The filmmaker explores the idea of vampirism as an existential condition, depicting Dracula as a being trapped in a meaningless and eternally unfulfilled existence. The film also addresses themes of faith and reason, represented through the conflict between science (embodied by Van Helsing) and supernatural forces. This dichotomy reflects the anxieties of a society in transition between the ancient and the modern.

NOSFERATU (2024)

Nosferatu (2024), directed by Robert Eggers, stands as a reimagining of the vampire classic, fusing elements under a contemporary vision of gothic horror. The film is distinguished by its careful visual composition, which includes the use of light and shadow, an eerie atmosphere, as well as an immersive sound design, all elements that contribute to intensify the experience for today's audiences. Eggers achieves a certain balance between fidelity to the original material and the incorporation of new interpretations. One notable aspect of this version is the characterization of Count Orlok (closer to a living dead), played by Bill Skarsgård. The actor undergoes a radical transformation, both physically (with the addition of a prominent mustache, a common feature among Transylvanian nobles of the era) and vocally, to embody a version of the vampire that moves away from the traditional romantic image, presenting instead a disturbing creature whose appearance no longer resembles a vermin. This iteration returns the vampire to its folkloric roots, emphasizing its predatory and supernatural nature (Pizzello, 2025, pp. 50-61).

This new version of the iconic story by Bram Stoker and screenwriter Henrik Galeen stands out for its approach from a female perspective and its exploration of themes such as seduction, sexual liberation and the social expectations imposed on women at the time. Thus, the film is notable for its focus on the character of Ellen Hutter, played by Lily-Rose Depp. The actress's performance, which oscillates between unhinged and melancholy, brings a greater emotional complexity. Likewise, the film is also notable for its historical and social contextualization, reflecting the tensions and anxieties of its time, while drawing parallels to contemporary concerns. Likewise, Eggers fuses genres and

styles, incorporating elements of possession cinema and erotic-necrophilic thrillers. This combination contributes to a richer visual and narrative richness, creating a cinematic experience that is both an homage to its predecessors and an innovative work in its own right, especially in aesthetic terms.



Figure 3: *Nosferatu*.
Source: Eggers (2024).

On the other hand, Eggers has followed the tradition of using real locations, some of which were already used in previous versions of the vampire story, such as Pernštejn Castle in the Czech Republic, where Herzog also shot his version of the vampire. One of the most prominent locations is the exterior of Hunedoara Castle, also known as Corvin Castle, in Romania. Although not the famous Bran Castle, commonly associated with Dracula, Eggers chose this fortress to represent the home of Count Orlok. To recreate the fictional town of Wisborg, however, Eggers' team built elaborate sets at Barrandov Studios in Prague. Thus, production designer Craig Lathrop designed more than sixty sets, including five complete streets for Wisborg, based on the architecture of port and Hanseatic cities in Poland and Germany (Pizzello, 2025, p. 55).



Figure 4: *Nosferatu*.
Source: Eggers (2024).

Aesthetically, the film uses a combination of soft natural light and artificial light to create a romantic atmosphere inspired by 19th century art. Color filters were used to replicate the original tints (blue, ash gray and sepia) of Murnau's version, digitally retouched for maximum contrast. Also, a large number of shots (filmed on celluloid) are symmetrical. In them, Eggers uses frontal planning and oppressive spaces, inspired by Murnau's film. He also employs sequence shots that offer a certain *realism*, and includes the use of hand-held camera and slow editing in the final third of the film, reminding us of Herzog's version. Eggers' film is distinguished by its meticulous attention to technical detail, creating an immersive visual and aural experience that pays homage to earlier versions, while bringing a contemporary take on the classic *Nosferatu*.

CONCLUSIONS

In examining the three versions, we can see how each filmmaker has approached this story reflecting both technical advances in cinema and socio-cultural changes. Murnau's version, as a silent film, relies heavily on visual language to tell its story (although it uses many intertitles). The use of shadows and unusual camera angles sets a tone of unease that has influenced later fantastic cinema. Herzog, for his part, retains many visual elements of Murnau's film, but

combines them with the possibilities of sound film and color, allowing him to offer a different visual aesthetic. His approach, as we have already pointed out, is more contemplative and melancholic. With respect to Eggers' version, the filmmaker seeks to evoke the aesthetics of silent films but takes advantage of current technological possibilities. All this merging the traditional with modern technology. In addition, the filmmaker orients the story towards a more feminine approach with respect to its precedents, placing Ellen at the center of the plot.

Since its release in 1922, the iconic figure of Nosferatu has transcended from an unauthorized adaptation of Stoker's novel to become an enduring symbol of cinematic horror and a catalyst for the evolution of the vampire genre in film. Indeed, its influence can be seen in numerous examples. In aesthetic terms, the image of Count Orlok, with his exaggerated features, elongated fingers and menacing shadow, has influenced later depictions of vampires. For example, in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (F.F. Coppola, 1992), film from which Eggers also draws inspiration for his version of Nosferatu, the initial appearance of Count Dracula (played by Gary Oldman), with his long fingers and independently moving shadow is an homage to Murnau's film. In addition, the film explores themes of forbidden desire and moral corruption that resonate with Nosferatu. Similarly, in works such as the television adaptation of Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, 1979), *Subspecies* (Ted Nicolaou, 1991) or *30 Days of Night* (David Slade, 2007), vampires move away from the romantic image to take on a more monstrous and terrifying aspect.

Likewise, in the film *What We Do in the Shadows* (Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement, 2014), the most archaic vampire of the group explicitly resembles the classic image of Nosferatu. Also, it should be noted that the approach to themes such as contagion, moral corruption or forbidden desire has influenced a multitude of horror works. For example, the idea of the vampire as a plague carrier has been repeated in works such as the novel *I Am Legend* (1954), by Richard Matheson, or in the series *The Strain* (Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, 2014-2017). In addition, the image of Nosferatu has transcended cinema, with more examples such as the film *Mimesis Nosferatu* (Douglas Schulze, 2018), to become a recognizable cultural icon. He has appeared in video games, comics, songs, and even episodes of animated series such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Stephen Hillenburg, 1999-), demonstrating his pervasiveness in popular culture.

A particularly interesting example of the lasting influence of the vampire *Nosferatu* is the film *Shadow of the Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige, 2000). This metacinematic work reimagines the making of Murnau's original film, playing with the idea that Max Schreck, the actor who played Orlok, was actually a real vampire. The film not only pays homage to the original film, but also explores themes such as the nature of cinema, the line between reality and fiction, and the price of art. The film, starring John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Schreck/Orlok (who years later would play Professor Von Franz, a transcript of Van Helsing, in Eggers' version, offering more metacinematic depth to the subject matter), received critical acclaim and two Oscar nominations, demonstrating the continued interest and fascination with the figure of *Nosferatu* almost eighty years after its original release.

However, the future of *Nosferatu* in cinema also faces challenges. Market saturation with vampire stories could lead to audience fatigue. In addition, increasing viewer expectations in terms of visual effects and complex narratives could make it more difficult to capture the terrifying simplicity of the original film. Despite these challenges, the persistence of *Nosferatu* in the cultural imagination suggests that it will continue to be a source of inspiration for filmmakers and a fascinating figure for viewers. Its ability to evoke primordial horror, combined with its thematic richness and historical significance, ensures that Count Orlok will continue to haunt our screens for years to come. Ultimately, the legacy of *Nosferatu* transcends horror cinema. It represents a pivotal moment in the history of cinema, an enduring example of the power of the film medium to evoke emotion and explore profound themes. As cinema continues to evolve, *Nosferatu* remains a landmark, a reminder of the medium's origins and a constant challenge to filmmakers seeking to capture the same sense of horror and wonder that Murnau achieved a century ago. *Nosferatu's* shadow, like the shadow crawling down the stairs in the iconic scene from the original film, continues to loom over the cinematic landscape, promising new interpretations, reflections and nightmares for generations to come.

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Elvira Susín-Castán (Huesca, 1999) is a writer and researcher. In 2019, she received the Antonio Gala Foundation's residency grant for young creators with a novel project. She holds a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Deusto and a Master's in Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Thought from Pompeu Fabra University. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Linguistic, Literary and Theatre Studies at the University of Alcalá. Her research focuses on science fiction from a philosophical perspective. Alongside her academic work, she serves as head of the Research, Documentation and Cooperation Centre at CDAN (Centre for Art and Nature).

ALBERTO RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ
UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA (UNED)

Alberto Rodríguez Gómez was born in León (Spain), graduated in Hispanic Philology from the University of Salamanca, and holds a master's degree in ELE and another in ICT for Language Teaching and Processing.

Since 2014, he has worked as a teacher of Spanish language and culture at various schools and universities in Spain, the United States, Poland, and China, where he has been living for six years. He currently works at the Shanghai International Studies University, where he teaches several subjects in the Spanish Language, Literature, and Culture degree programme. He is also an examiner for the DELE oral exam in Chongqing (China) and frequently collaborates with the University of Hong Kong and the Cervantes Institutes in Beijing and Tokyo, offering training workshops for ELE teachers.

AUGUSTO ALMOGUERA FERNÁNDEZ
UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

Augusto Almoguera Fernández (Alicante, 1990) is an audiovisual filmmaker. He studied Audiovisual Communication at the Ciudad de la Luz / Miguel Hernández University, completed a Master's in Audiovisual Directing and Filmmaking with Nebrija University and Globomedia, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Audiovisual Communication at Complutense University of Madrid. He is the director of the Helena Cortesina Short Film Festival and collaborates with AEPA, the Association of Women Entrepreneurs of the Province of Alicante. He has worked at the Alicante Provincial Council, Miguel Hernández University, and the Cervantes Institute. He has directed the short films *Noche de brujas* (2016) and *Yo, sirena* (2021), both showcased at national and international festivals.

Ma AMPARO CALABUIG PUIG
UNIVERSIDAD MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ

María Amparo Calabuig Puig, Political scientist (UMH), with a Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies on Equality (URJC). Research staff at UMH and member of the CIEG UMH. Member of the UMH Masculinities Observatory. Co-director and teacher of the UMH Diploma of Specialisation in Masculinities, Gender and Equality. Her main research areas include Power Theory from a gender perspective, inclusive language, and debating tournaments as co-educational tools. She has also contributed

to the UMH Chair of Critical Thinking. UMH. Teaching Award UMH 2019. University professor in Constitutional Law at UMH from 2014 to 2021.

LEÓNIDAS SPINELLI
UNIVERSIDAD MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ

Leónidas Spinelli began studying art and photography in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1998. In 2001, he moved to Spain and studied fine arts, focusing on the relationship between sculptural actions and different audiovisual processes.

He obtained his PhD cum laude in Fine Arts in 2013 with his doctoral thesis entitled *El ruido y la furia: La fotografía como modelo discursivo, estético e ideológico en los entornos juveniles marginales* (The Sound and the Fury: Photography as a discursive, aesthetic and ideological model in marginalised youth environments). He has held various exhibitions in places such as Buenos Aires, Alicante, Murcia, Bilbao, Miami and Aqaba.

He is a lecturer and researcher at Miguel Hernández University in Elche in the area of audiovisual communication and advertising in subjects related to contemporary photography, art and cinema.

He currently continues to develop his artistic and photographic work and curatorial and cultural management tasks, notably since 2013 as director of the Alicante International Photography Festival PHOTOALICANTE (Festival Internacional de Fotografía de Alicante) and the creative residencies at the Las Cigarreras Cultural Centre.

CRISTINA LANDÍN JIMÉNEZ
UNIVERSIDAD DE LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA

Cristina Landín Jiménez is a doctorate student and a doctoral researcher at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria thanks to the funding provided by the Consejería de Universidades, Ciencia e Innovación y Cultura del Gobierno de Canarias, financed jointly by the European Social Fund Plus. Her research interests comprise fantasy, fairy tales, narrative and

Spanish Literature, although she is open to consider other subjects related to literature in her future investigations. Her research aims not only to delve thoroughly into fantasy literature, but also to present its distinctive traits as features liable to enrich literary works of all genres. At the moment, she teaches at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and is writing her doctoral thesis about the novel *Forgotten King Gudú*, by Ana María Matute.

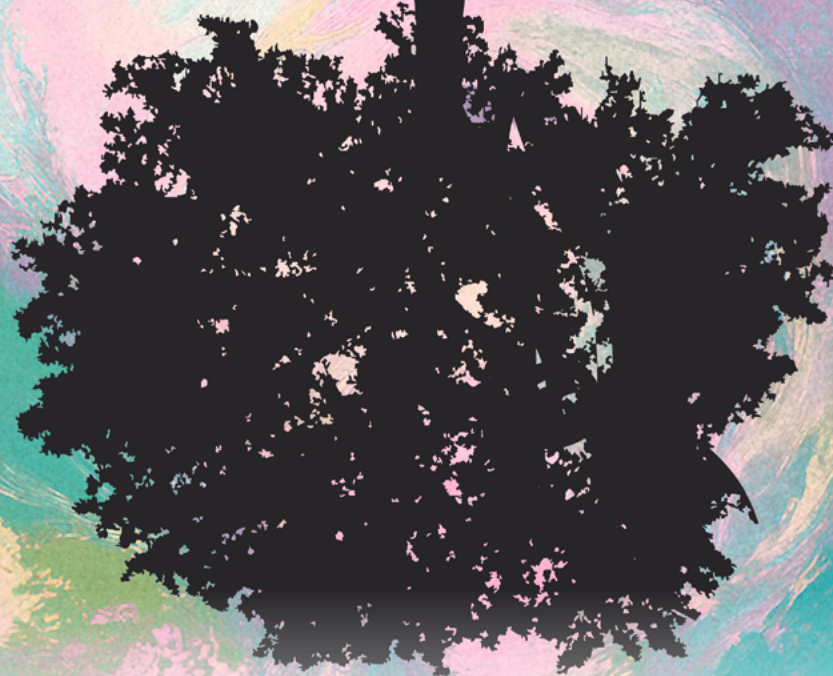
FRANCISCO CUÉLLAR SANTIAGO
UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

PhD, researcher and lecturer in the Painting Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Salamanca. He obtained his PhD in Fine Arts from the University of Granada in 2019. He has taught in the faculties of Fine Arts, Audiovisual Communication and Journalism. He has also taught audiovisual education at the Mathematical Research Centre (Mexico) belonging to the National Council for Science and Technology. He has published articles and scientific texts in high-impact indexed journals, such as *Revista Comunicar*, *Revista ASRI (Arte y Sociedad)* of the Rey Juan Carlos University, *Revista VIVAT* affiliated with the University of Alcalá de Henares, and *Revista Comunicación* of the Technological Institute of Costa Rica, and subsequently in the cultural associations *Historia de los Sistemas Informativos* and *Forum Internacional de Comunicación y Relaciones Públicas (Forum XXI)*.

VICENTE J. PÉREZ VALERO
MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ UNIVERSITY OF ELCHE

PhD, lecturer and researcher in the Department of Art and the Arts Research Centre of the Miguel Hernández University of Elche and member of the *Massiva* Research Group, which studies the interrelation between audiovisual arts and mass culture. He is also a guest researcher at the *Groupe Interdisciplinaire de Recherche sur les Cultures et Arts en Mouvement (GIRCAM)* of the *Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL)*. He is currently developing his research activity in various audiovisual and artistic projects. He is President of the Editorial Committee and member of the Scientific Committee of the International

Congress of Fantastic Genre, Audiovisuals and New Technologies. He teaches on the Bachelor's Degree in Audiovisual Communication and the Master's Degree in Art Project and Research.



Since time immemorial, humanity has lived between two worlds: that of tangible reality and that of intangible fantasy. *Echoes of fantasy and reality* is a phrase that resonates deeply in the human experience, as it encapsulates the constant interaction, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflictive, between what is and what could be. This duality has been a source of inspiration for artists, philosophers, scientists, and dreamers, who have attempted to decipher the boundaries and connections between both realms.