

08

A TRAGEDY DOOMED TO REPEAT ITSELF TIME AND AGAIN: MONSTROUS REPRESENTATIONS IN GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S *THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE* (2001)¹

Gabriel da Fonseca Mayer
Claudio Vescia Zanini

Recebido em 10 abr 2021.

Aprovado em 08 set 2022.

Gabriel Mayer

Bacharel em Letras, Tradução Português e Inglês, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2022.

Membro do grupo de pesquisa Estudos do Gótico (CNPq); membro do núcleo de estudos G.H.O.S.T. – Gótico, Horror, Onírico, Sobrenatural, Terror (UFRGS).

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3611193880300788>

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7047-9526>

Email: fmayergabriel@gmail.com

Claudio Zanini

Doutorado em Letras, Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2011.

Professor da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Membro do grupo de pesquisa Estudos do Gótico (CNPq); pesquisador do grupo de pesquisa Vertentes do Fantástico na Literatura; membro do Grupo de Trabalho ANPOLL Vertentes do Insólito Ficcional; líder do núcleo de estudos G.H.O.S.T. – Gótico, Horror, Onírico, Sobrenatural, Terror (UFRGS)

1 Título em português: “Uma tragédia fadada a se repetir com o tempo: representações monstruosas em *A Espinha do diabo* (2001), de Guillermo del Toro”.

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9472841676415837>
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3688-324X>
Email: claudio.zanini@ufrgs.br

Resumo: Este artigo analisa representações de monstrosidade no filme *A Espinha do Diabo* (direção de Guillermo del Toro, 2001). Os principais suportes teóricos contemplam questões relacionadas à monstrosidade (ASMA, 2009; COHEN, 1996) e ao mal (CALDER, 2020). A análise aponta a presença de um movimento que veio a tornar-se típico na obra de del Toro, qual seja, a identificação do espectador com personagens de aparência monstruosa e o distanciamento de personagens de aparência humana em vista da monstrosidade maléfica que apresentam ao longo da narrativa. Partimos da hipótese que a personagem de forma não-convencional é humanizada e ganha relevância narrativa, enquanto a figura de forma humana é monstrificada devido a seu comportamento sombrio. Tal dinâmica está ancorada à presença de tropos recorrentes na ficção gótica e no contexto da guerra civil espanhola em que o filme se passa. As complexas relações entre humanidade e monstrosidade presentes na trama forçam o público espectador a questionar e compreender a essência da monstrosidade e ressignificar a humanidade.

Palavras-chave: Guillermo del Toro. Cinema. Monstro. Mal. ficção gótica. *El Espinazo del Diablo*.

Abstract: This article analyzes representations of monstrosity in the film *The Devil's Backbone* (directed by Guillermo del Toro, 2001). The main theoretical support approaches issues related to monstrosity (ASMA, 2009; COHEN, 1996) and evil (CALDER, 2020). The analysis points to the presence of a movement that eventually became typical in del Toro's oeuvre, namely, the viewer's empathic identification with characters that display a monstrous appearance, and a simultaneous detachment from characters

depicted with a human appearance in view of the evil monstrosity they display throughout the narrative. Our hypothesis is that the character whose shape is unconventional is humanized and gains narrative prominence, whereas the human figure undergoes a monstrification process due to its somber behavior. Such dynamic is anchored to the presence of tropes that are recurrent in gothic fiction and to the war context presented in the film. The complex relations between humanity and monstrosity in the plot drive the audience to question and understand the essence of monstrosity and to resignify humanity.

Keywords: Guillermo del Toro. Cinema. Monster. Evil. Gothic fiction. *The Devil's Backbone*.

INTRODUCTION

Monsters have populated the human mind since the dawn of times. Dragons and other tyrannical beasts can be seen in writings as early as the Bible or even drawn on maps to represent the danger of certain sea travels. In his discussion on the development of the concept of “monster” throughout history, Asma (2009) describes how the discovery of ancient fossils of gigantic creatures such as dinosaurs would make people think that beings like those could still exist in some remote corner of the world; after all, unlike today, there was no sense of completion regarding mapping our environment, and in a world that seemed infinite – similar to what outer space seems to us right now –, how could one be certain that a place where monsters dwell did not exist? As soon as monsters became part of fiction, especially in gothic, horror and fantasy stories, they gradually became more popular, particularly due to their presence in mass readings such as Penny Dreadfuls and Pulp Magazines. The

popularity of monsters became evident in cinema as well, and over one hundred and twenty years countless monstrous creatures of all kinds and times have been seen on the screen.

One of the most prominent film directors to delve into the monster subject is Guillermo del Toro. His first feature film, a vampire story called *Cronos* (1993), exploits some of the existentialist potential of vampirism while developing interesting discussions regarding death and family and focusing on the relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter; the film delivers some violent action, but focuses on complex relationships between the characters, which makes *Cronos* a quite dramatic vampire film.

Del Toro's solid connection to monsters is notable throughout his filmography: all of the eleven films directed by him somehow focus on monsters, be it in regular horror, drama or even a love story – his latest film, *Nightmare Alley* (2021) takes place in a freak show, a space where creatures often seen as monstrous abound. If one of the monster's main functions is to highlight difference (COHEN, 1996, p. 7), then it seems del Toro has a keen interest in the different ones, the outcasts, outsiders, and underdogs. This fascination may be connected to del Toro's own feelings of displacement, an aspect of his life which he has made public in interviews and speeches. The experience of being a Mexican immigrant in the United States has probably directed part of his work as a filmmaker towards discussing bigotry, intolerance and prejudice against differences. In his acceptance speech of the 2018 Academy Award as best film director for *The Shape of Water* – a film which approaches these issues openly, xenophobia included – his first words were, "I am an immigrant" (SAYER; MARTÍNEZ-PRIETO; CRUZ, 2019) discuss the

characteristics and consequences of the emergence of the White nationalist xenophobia in the context of Mexican teachers living in the United States, also describing how Donald Trump's electoral campaign and subsequent federal government underscored such preexistent tension. The presence of strong negative claims against Mexican immigrants in Trump's political discourse is a depiction of a social barrier: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best [...] They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists..." (LEE, 2015).

The second point to be discussed regarding Guillermo del Toro's feeling of displacement is that of fat phobia, a term that has been used to describe a social phenomenon as encompassing "negative attitudes toward and stereotypes about fat people" (BACON; SCHELTEMA; ROBINSON, 2001, p.252). Among some of the negative effects such social behavior may cause, the authors mention the placement of restrictions "on important aspects of their lives, such as going to school, changing jobs, buying stylish clothes, dating or enjoying a sexual relationship, or even seeking medical care" (p. 252). The authors describe how critical attitudes toward plus-sized people can lead to isolation, like in cases in which they are left out of social relations at school, because "other children are less likely to want them as friends" (p. 252), and can "affect their employment opportunities" (BACON; SCHELTEMA; ROBINSON; 2001, p. 252).

Considering these points and having in mind that the director is a Mexican plus-sized man, possible intersections of interest in discussing the topic of marginalization may be pointed out; another factor to be considered is del Toro's attachment to fantastic narratives, a genre that has been historically marginalized. These

biographical data, easily available on internet movie databases or fan-made websites, are being used here as a means to introduce the presence of monsters and differences in his work through a critical analysis based on theoretical and philosophical texts. It is not our aim to try to prove that del Toro necessarily thought X just because Y happened in his life, but at times in which different social agendas have been given much needed prominence around the world, it seems fair to consider that del Toro's potential social displacement may have contributed to shaping his work, and that significant part of his audience – if not all of it – might be able to connect to del Toro's filmic narratives via their own experiences of displacement.

In view of these preliminary considerations, we will analyze the depictions of monstrosity in del Toro's 2001 film *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), aiming at an understanding of the roles of monsters in this narrative. The film is set in a very specific historical context (the beginning of the Spanish Civil War), just like 2006 *Pan's Labyrinth* (the Spanish Civil War itself) and *The Shape of Water* (the Cold War). Coincidentally or not, these three films with strong historical marks have had remarkably positive reception and critical acclaim. They also share the presence of remarkable monstrous figures, beings whose existences are closely connected to the supernatural, like ghosts, mythical creatures and new species, and also human characters whose monstrosity is moral rather than physical.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster culture (seven theses)* provides the main theoretical background for the analysis of monstrous characters, whereas Stephen Asma's *On Monsters: An Unnatural*

History of Our Worst Fears will inform our understanding of the monsters' forms of interaction with their respective social and cultural environments. Incidentally, Asma addresses notions concerning moral, humanity and corruption, especially when discussing what he calls "criminal monsters," which is a particularly relevant category for the present study. In this sense, Calder's *The Concept of Evil* will provide support to a better understanding of the concept from which those seem to originate: evil.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of monster has changed alongside humankind's view of the environment (ASMA, 2009, p. 123); such changes are reflected not only in the way we see the world, but also in how we see each other, thus interfering with how humanity and inhumanity are perceived. This contributes to explain the historical interest of humankind in teratology, the study of abnormalities in human physiological development. If on the one hand teratological images entail different sorts of repulsion, on the other hand so-called malformations are fascinating and intriguing. The liminal characteristics often linked to monstrous characters seem to engage the human mind in a paradoxical state of simultaneous repulsion and attraction that emulates the Freudian idea of the uncanny; in other terms, the duality of what is familiar and what is not seems to be part of a process that eventually reached the comparison between repulsion and attraction. Cohen (1996) discusses the connection between what he calls "ambient fear" to the popular manifestation of such anxiety in the form of a fascination with monsters; according to him, this interest deals

with “the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens,” (p. viii) and the author illustrates such paradox as a dinosaur that simultaneously resembles “[a] velociraptor and Barney” (COHEN, 1996, p. viii). By pointing out such paradox Cohen reinforces how cognitively challenging monsters are, inasmuch as they pose a challenge to categorization.

Cohen postulates that the monster’s unfitness to categories is a sort of freedom, and that maybe, in spite of fearing them, we also envy monsters for being free (1996, p. 17). Either way, monsters have had a central role in representing the fear of the unknown, a way of giving an image to hypothetical creatures our primitive ancestors thought to exist due to traces like fossils and oral traditions being transformed and exaggerated over the years. Asma calls such an image the “ancient monster” (2009, p. 17), and this concept is also aligned to a reality in which humankind struggled to conquer the environment, just as it is the case in examples of explorations of exotic lands, in which people are set in a scenario of survival, of a predator-prey dualism. Asma points out that, in this sense, the exaggeration of oral tradition is useful to the human species for keeping people away from dangerous areas (2009, p. 20): maybe the first time a hunter faced a crocodile, he went back home and told stories about the newly discovered creature; as time went by, the crocodile became larger and more dangerous in each retelling of the story, and, as a consequence, the risk of such predator was underscored, driving those who heard the story away from the location where it took place. The crocodile in the given example fits what Cohen describes as the

“monster of prohibition”, whose existence “demarcate[s] the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed” (COHEN, 1996, p. 13). The natural narrative structure that surrounds this kind of monster and the monstrous figure produced in it were factors in shaping what would, one day, become the modern concept of monster.

The example above also hints at a possible connection between the monster and masculinity, an element to be explored in the analysis of *The Devil’s Backbone* presented here; in that regard, Asma argues that “[m]onsters, both real and imagined, are bound up with our feelings of insecurity and our responses to those anxieties. Masculine audacity and bravado is the reflex response to vulnerability.” (2009, p. 25) In this sense, one must remember that, in spite of being evolutionarily successful, before developing traits that favored the survival in the environment, humankind was hardly a predator (EHRENREICH, 1997), being fragile when compared to other animals; such characteristics can be understood as possible sources for feelings of vulnerability, which, by extent, may arouse aggression in response. With this in mind, the tendency toward a reaffirmation of manliness through violence becomes more evident.

Glimpses of the etymology of the word “monster” also illuminate the discussion. The origin of ‘monster’ in the French word ‘monstre’, used in the beginning of the 14th century to describe creatures with congenital deformities (ZANINI, 2019), aligns with the aforementioned notion of teratology and Asma’s concept of “scientific monster” (2009, p. 121), which will be presented further ahead. ‘Monster’ is also connected to the Latin

word “monstrum”, which means “a divine omen,” specially an ill one; “monstrum” is derived from “monere,” which means “to teach,” “to remind of,” “to warn” (HARPER, [c. 2010a]); Cohen agrees with such idea and expands it by claiming that a monster is “that which reveals,” and that “the monster exists only to be read: [...] a glyph that seeks a hierophant” (1996, p. 4).

Accordingly, Asma discusses how non-Christian peoples suffered a monsterring process in the eyes of those who practiced this religion, such as the Persians and the Muslims. The Christian view toward these peoples could be considered a sort of “spiritual deformity” (ASMA, 2009, p. 234), similarly to how Barbarians were seen by the ancient Romans. Therefore, Barbarians embodied spiritual difference, the unknown, and the exotic, which necessarily made them outsiders, thus bad. These are some of the core features of what Cohen calls “monsterizing depiction”, or “normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity [that] slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram”. Cohen goes further and sustains that such process states a logic of master/slave dialectic that defends the subjugation of the monster “by writing the body excluded from *personhood* and agency as in every way different” (COHEN, p. 11, our emphasis). Cohen’s use of the term “personhood” is particularly interesting, for it suggests the human being as a member of an organized society.

The process of depersonalizing a monster via the exacerbation of physical or psychological traits is connected to dehumanization, a recurrent feature in del Toro’s fiction, be it through monstrification ou objectification. As evidenced by works such as *Pan’s Labyrinth* and *The Devil’s Backbone*, del Toro seems

to believe that war contexts are particularly appropriate for the unfolding of such processes. Asma echoes such belief, as he aptly points out how the Vietnamese, Iraqis and Afghanis have become monsters in the eyes of the US soldiers, and, similarly, how the Nazis did the same to Jews. As the author argues about, such a tactic is a tool to make violence used against the enemy more tolerable to the perpetrators (ASMA, 2009, p. 37). Cohen's related postulate that "[r]epresenting an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic" (COHEN, 1996, p. 7) allows us to recover the teratological interest in human non-normative shapes, which, more often than not, arouse feelings of fear that instigate the observer to judge the observed as some sort of monster. This is in tune with del Toro's favorite imagery, as the analysis presented further ahead intends to make clear.

Studies of the human body eventually revealed the nature of its form. If the Roman Laws said that newborns with congenital deformities had to be sacrificed (ASMA, 2009, p. 41), and people thought that those represented divine punishment or portents of evil, eventually science became able to understand these cases as eventual anomalies of human physiological development. However, even though the diversity in shapes of the human body could now be scientifically explained, it still aroused the curiosity of mass culture, which is evidenced by the interest in forms of entertainment like freak shows, carnivals, and cabinets of curiosities. The dualist notion of a human being born with congenital deformities and the possibility of seeing such a being as human, and yet attributing to them monstrous characteristics due

to their unexpected difference, is what Asma calls the “scientific monster”. An example of this concept is Victor Frankenstein’s creature, which represents the feeling of anxiety regarding the progress of science. Asma calls Shelley’s novel “the principal cautionary tale warning us that science can go too far” (2009, p. 152), and such description echoes the Counter-Enlightenment perspective that questioned excessive rationalism. On the one hand, Frankenstein’s creature can be seen as a human being through the notions of biology because his body comprises the same structures as regular human beings; on the other hand, he can also be seen as monstrous due to his unprecedented unnatural origins and non-normative proportions. Asma sustains that *Frankenstein* is responsible for giving us the “tragic archetype of the misunderstood outcast” (ASMA, 2009, p. 12): the creature is born neither good nor evil, but is treated with so much hostility and prejudice due to his appearance, which ensues a lack of social bonds and aggressive, uncivil actions as a response.

Conversely, in spite of his regular shape and normal proportions, Victor Frankenstein pursues forbidden knowledge, “plays God” by creating life from pieces of dead bodies, and abandons his offspring. Such a combination has led to a cliché, albeit necessary, critical questioning of Victor Frankenstein’s status as a monster in opposition or comparison to his creature. The use of the term “monster” in this case relies on the understanding of Victor Frankenstein’s wrongful actions as expressions of his moral corruption. Seeing those who followed different faiths or failed to act in accordance with God’s will as spiritually deformed associates monstrosity to culpable actions,

thus leading us to the notion of a “criminal monster” (ASMA, 2009, p. 212).

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

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

Such a process can explain evolutionarily the so frequent hesitation one may feel when facing unknown beings. The experiment conducted with chimps and snakes revealed that these apes, even when exposed to those reptiles for the first time, were extremely afraid of them, but how could they, since it was the first time they saw one? According to the study, the chimp would have been exposed to different animals for some time, internalizing the differences seen in their day-to-day basis and creating a way of classifying them, but eventually such a way of classifying would become crystallized and, from that moment on, any received stimulus that failed to fall into this classification would produce fear. Nonetheless, fear never comes alone in monstrosity. The

monster is abject, that is, it simultaneously inspires repulsion and attraction. Kristeva describes “abjection” as an intermediary level that stands between the notions of objective and subjective: the former is a point of view dissociated from the observer, whereas the latter is a form of addressing viewpoints intimately connected to the personal view of the observer – for the author, abjection is a way of projecting to outside the inner perceptions of the self (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 3). According to Harper ([c. 2010b]), the term is connected to the notions of ‘casting off’ and ‘throwing away,’ and the particle ‘ab’ is related to its Latin meaning as a preposition, that stands to ‘off’ and ‘away from.’, which is in tune with Kristeva’s contention that abjection is a feeling of disturbance of units like identity, order, system, which she describes through the recurrent movement of ‘casting off’ the abject (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 4).

According to this perspective, monstrosity is in the eyes of the beholder. When one individual perceives another as a monster, a process starts that involves the former projecting on the latter their subjectivity while passing judgement. The monster thus becomes an ‘object’, which results in the feeling of abjection; as a consequence, the monster is ‘cast off’. When one is monstrified, one arouses in one’s judging observer a sense of impurity, a core aspect in the monster’s interstitiality (CARROLL, 1990, p. 32) Carroll’s view, which is based on Mary Douglas’ famous treaty entitled *Purity and Danger* (1966), echoes Kristeva’s notion of abjection, since interstitial entities fail to fall into categories and therefore become repellent and fascinating outcasts.

When discussing the criminal monster, Asma sustains that the shocking acts performed by those labeled “monster”

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

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

Here, Asma discusses Freud's notion that every living being follows the pursuit of pleasure due to their narcissistic impulse (FREUD, 1922). When a child is born, it will have the urge of wanting and having everything that seems to provide pleasure. Freud calls such drive the "Id", and it represents our instinctual force of survival, the same that makes one who is hungry look for food or one who feels threatened to produce an aggressive response as a form of defense. According to Freud, a child is born dominated by the Id, impetuously looking for pleasure; however, as the infant faces parental reprimands and prohibitions, that instills in them both the fear of parental authority and the fear of losing parental love, thus leading the desires from the Id suffer to a process of repression, becoming internalized and eventually submerging into the subconscious: as the Id is internalized, gradually two other facets appear, the Ego and the Superego (FREUD, 1999). The Superego is a

force that controls the impulses of the Id, and its existence seems to be related to the logic pattern followed by the reprimands of the parents and the experiences of the individual in the environment. The Ego, on the other hand, represents the conscious individuality of the person, the will responsible for making choices and the part of the personality that seems accessible to be understood.

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

However, there are factors that may hinder the activity of the Superego, like having the individual in scenarios in which rage or humiliation are present. We can consider this perspective by analyzing the following: a mass murder at a high school is surely a monstrous action, there is no doubt about that; but then, why

are narratives like *Carrie* (1976) so appealing? Brian De Palma's adaptation of Stephen King's novel sets as one of its main goals to make the audience emphasize with Carrie, the main character, and struggle alongside her through all her ordeals, and as a prelude to the climax, we witness Carrie being victim of some bullies in a revolting prank, as she is crowned queen of the prom just to have pig blood spilled all over her, thus facing an audience that laughs at her. After the humiliation, Carrie falls under a state of surge and goes on a killing spree, and even though we then witness a mass murder, it also feels comforting. Following Asma's and Freud's theories, this strange feeling of relief when Carrie takes her revenge may be explained by a way of the audience to identify with the humiliation, and subsequent rage, of the character. This example elucidates the process described by Freud in which the restraints of the Id are hindered: even a reasonable person when subjected to a higher level of this kind of stress may end up releasing impulses from the Id in the form of violent behavior. Besides, those around the individual also serve as prospective targets for aggression (FREUD, 1961).

Freud's ideas regarding the constitution of the psyche may explain how a person could end up releasing the Id and performing acts that are not in accordance with social conventions or laws, thus making a person a criminal. This poses a dichotomy that is oftentimes overlooked, namely, that of being human and being a person: "since *human* is a zoological term, the real question is: What are the defining traits of a *person*? And what are the entitlements or rights that *personhood* entails?" (ASMA, 2009, p. 221, emphasis in original). By bringing up this inquiry, Asma

proceeds to discuss possible causes of psychopathology and further considerations on the relationship between empathy and personhood, but a definitive answer is never reached, and it is an understandable fact given the complexity of such an inquiry. In the end, Asma proceeds to analyze how the criminal monster is, in reality, dealt with by bringing up reports from Judge Brodsky (2009, p. 226), who is frequently involved in cases like those which, in the newspapers, are presented with monstrous epithets in the headlines.

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

them; considering the great effort involved in trying to understand a complex topic, it is natural to expect most of the people to follow the easier path.

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

The tendency of the human mind to interpret the world in terms of 'us versus them' and the ensuing monsterization of the other results in civilizations that ultimately give rise to ominous aspects of humanity. There are places in our world where people lack basic needs like food and shelter, and such a scenario is a consequence of the social inequality produced by capitalist societies. On the other hand, there are places where the environment has too much wealth, which results in a population too attached to pleasure and appearance. Asma highlights how both scenarios

are embedded in dehumanization (2009, p. 241), and in the latter case George Romero's 2004 *Dawn of the Dead* provides an ideal example, inasmuch as it depicts a group of people trying to survive a zombie apocalypse by taking refuge in a shopping mall, all the while criticizing consumer's society and displaying the pointlessness of the glorification of consumerism. Likewise, the same macrostructural phenomenon can be seen in practices like torture, which entails a relationship where the perpetrator hardly sees his/her target as human anymore, in a logic quite similar to that underlying acts of terrorism and genocide. The recurrent processes in the described scenarios are large groups of people that share perverted notions of others and banalized practices that involve humiliating and dehumanizing. Zimbardo (2007) offers us an elucidating example of the functioning of these macrostructures by comparing them to a "bad barrel" that produces "bad apples" – it is not an individual that passes on the own monsterized view to another until it eventually reach an entire community; instead, it is an entire "corrupted community" that contaminates each new member.

The concept of monstrous societies, however, may imply that, to some extent, every one of us is a monster. Ultimately, the concept of monster is a way of trying to celebrate and understand difference, and each time a monster is subjected to an analysis, the differences identified in his or her essence are what makes them monstrous, but the attempt to understand those, on the other hand, are what makes them human. In fact, if everyone is different, everyone is a monster; but, as Asma puts it: "When everyone is a monster, there will be no monsters" (p. 253), which leads to an idea that will be

paramount for the discussion of *The Devil's Backbone* proposed in the following section, namely, that we are not just concerned with what makes a person be a monster, but rather with what makes one seem a monster (ASMA, 2009, p. 252); by extent, we may say that monstrosity is a point of view.

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

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

The author goes further by arguing there are reasons to believe that the concept of evil may be the only form capable of properly addressing such atrocities. Similarly to Asma's articulation, Calder

mentions that the word ‘evil’ can be used to mean ‘something that cannot be explained,’ which could imply that such concept may not be beneficial to the understanding of this phenomenon; however, Asma suggests that the idea of ‘monster,’ which we are presently connecting to that of ‘evil,’ can serve as a “conceptual place-holder” (2009, p. 253), which makes it an effective tool in the process of understanding a complex aspect of the world. Calder also proposes a differentiation between evil in broader and narrower senses, stating that his discussion is focused on the latter, which is characterized by “only the most morally despicable sorts of actions, characters, events” (2020, p. 1). According to the author, such form of evil is involved with moral condemnation, and therefore it is “ascribed only to moral agents and their actions” (p. 1). Also, Calder argues that the described form of evil seems to be the one meant when the word is used contemporarily, also specifically mentioning the legal context. This points out that, probably, the evil described by Calder here is connected to what Judge Brodsky called “malignant heart” and that Asma articulates with chronic forms of expression, those that eventually result in monstrous societies, a concept that is aligned with Calder’s discussion on “evil institutions”, which recovers the notions of a ‘bad barrel’ that produces ‘bad apples’.

ANALYSIS

Set in 1939 Spain, *The Devil’s Backbone* tells the story of a young boy called Carlos as he arrives at an orphanage. Ayala, the man who brings him there, asks Carmen, the institution’s headmistress, to take care of the boy, since his father died fighting

for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Carmen accepts, despite the institution's alleged financial problems. Carlos then gets to know his new home and the people who live there – his fellow orphans Jaime, Gálvez and 'Owl', and staff members like Dr. Casares, the medical doctor, Conchita, the teacher, and Jacinto, the groundskeeper. In a typical Gothic fashion, the building is secluded, with the nearest town said to be one day away, and the surrounding landscape conveys an arid and relentless atmosphere. In the middle of the courtyard there is a bomb which had been dropped not long before and which never exploded; the children say it has been defused, but they also claim to be able to hear beatings from its inside, like those of a heart. The kids talk about comics, drawings, adventures, and eventually Carlos hears rumors about a ghost they call 'the one who sighs.' Also, when Carlos is assigned to his bed – which, in this orphanage, is numbered –, he learns that that bed used to belong to a boy named Santi, who has recently disappeared.

Carmen is a widow, and her late husband used to be the orphanage's headmaster, an intellectual who defended progressive and democratic ideas; she states that, after dying, he had left her to stand for his ideals by herself. Carmen's past provides background to explain why she and Dr. Casares seem to be favoring the Republican side of the Civil War, and such political position is reinforced by their relation of friendship with Ayala, who is openly fighting for the Republicans and is eventually executed for it; also, we learn that Carmen keeps gold ingots in a safe, and that those are used to finance the Republican cause; these factors imply the possibility that maybe the bomb in the courtyard was a failed

Nationalist attack to the institution motivated by suspicions of an alliance with the Republicans.

In his first night there, Carlos spills the dormitory water. Then Jaime challenges him to go to the kitchen to get a refill, even though leaving the bed during the night is not allowed; Carlos accepts the challenge, but teases Jaime to join him. The two boys sneak through the area in order to reach the kitchen and feel Jacinto is around, which arouses in them the fear of the potential punishment for breaking the rules. As they reach the kitchen, however, Jaime fills his jug of water first and tells Carlos he would be waiting outside; in the meantime, Carlos is alone in the room, and suddenly some metallic objects fall to the ground, causing noise and drawing Jacinto's attention. In spite of almost being caught, Carlos manages to hide and witnesses Jacinto trying to open a safe in the room without success. After Jacinto leaves, Carlos stops hiding and is attracted by sighs that had seemed to draw the caretaker away; the boy is led to a basement where there is a large cistern filled with dirty water, and there he hears steps. Judging it to be the ghost he had heard about, Carlos tries to communicate with him. The ghost's existence is then confirmed through a brief apparition to the audience and away from Carlos' gaze; curiously, Santi, the ghost boy, seems to be hiding from Carlos, trembling, inverting the expectation that Carlos should be afraid of Santi, and not the other way around (Image 1). Eventually it becomes clear that Santi's initial fear derives from his belief that the noise had been caused by Jacinto, his murderer. Such construction gives Santi a frail, vulnerable aura, thus confirming the reversal of expectations: the ghost feels just like regular human

beings do, and regular human beings are capable of posing threats and hurting. Despite its interstitiality, deformities and monstrous essence, Santi inspires empathy. By adding these complex layers of humanity, *The Devil's Backbone* presents us a monster who is somehow de-monsterized from the very beginning.

Image 1 – Santi, a ghost who fears the living



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

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

Santi is the ghost the kids call ‘the one who sighs’, and eventually Carlos becomes aware of the connection between the kid who disappeared on the same day that the bomb was dropped and the mysterious lingering presence in the basement. Santi is a visual representation of the blurred boundaries between life and death, and his paradoxical state of simultaneous death and existence qualifies him as an interstitial entity; this tableau entails a combination of three core factors in the establishment of Gothic fiction (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 117-118): “the haunting return of the past”, “the locus horribilis” and “the monstrous character”. In *The Devil’s Backbone*, the past returns through a ghost, a classic Gothic trope to mark such return; the old building and the bomb lying outside it are also reminders of a haunting past. As far as the “locus horribilis” goes, the orphanage is a large, isolated building whose very essence is one of abandonment and loneliness; on a grander scale, Spain itself is a “locus horribilis,” a place of destruction and ill-doings, since it is at war. Lastly, the monsters in this story are Santi and Jacinto, as the analysis intends to show.

The visual emphasis to the bloody wound on Santi’s forehead (Image 1) serves multiple purposes: besides calling attention to the fact that he is a ghost, it also marks an inadequacy, given that blood is something that is supposed to remain inside our bodies, when it flows out of one’s body it signals that something is wrong; but above all, Santi being a bleeding ghost is the ultimate challenge to categorization – after all, ghosts are immaterial and are not supposed to bleed. Asma’s (2009) panorama of the concept of ‘monster’ through time offers possibilities of reading Santi as a monstrous figure, especially when he is deemed an expression of

the unknown nature of death. Deformation is a way of corrupting the image of an ordinary body (MAYER, 2020, p. 215), and in that sense the wound on Santi's forehead is one of many uncommon elements that extract him from a 'natural' configuration and move him to that of 'different,' similarly to what Asma (2009, p. 40) describes in regard to the Roman Laws, in which it was said that a father should 'put to death' a newborn who had a form that was different from that of 'members of the human race,' which pointed out the connection between monstrosity and deformity, be it a congenital characteristic, like in the case of a hermaphrodite, or that of an acquired disability, like a severed limb.

The contrast between normality and monstrosity through normative body shapes may also be linked to the revival of Greco-Roman views of body perfection in the arts during the Enlightenment. Carmen, the orphanage headmistress in the film, does not enjoy such "perfection" anymore, as we learn she has lost a leg and uses a prosthesis to be able to walk. Most of the time, Carmen wears a dress that hides her disability, so the only hint of it is the fact that she also uses a cane. This seems to be an important feature in the character, considering that it is revealed in her first apparition: she is sitting while talking to Dr. Casares, who is standing; Carmen is initially captured by a close-up shot, and right afterwards there is a shot of her hand moving towards her prosthetic leg in order to unlock a mechanism; then, she stands up and the scene ends. Besides hinting at a Gothic traumatic past, this scene may be an allegory to the hardships of a lonely woman being in a position of authority, an issue tackled in another scene when she discusses with Ayala the possibility of accepting Carlos

in the orphanage. Ayala affirms that her deceased spouse was a man who supported the Republican cause and that he was a brave man; as an answer, she tells him “Oh, no! I am the brave one!” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:09:04) which reassures her independence and assertiveness being in a position that once belonged to a man. Therefore, if women in positions of authority have been historically deemed dangerous and were thus monsterized (particularly during witch hunts), having a female disabled character in this context is certainly not arbitrary. Just like women struggle to stand for gender equality, Carmen needs the support of her prosthetic leg and her cane in order to exert her functions as headmistress. A psychoanalytical reading allows us to see the prosthesis and the cane as two phallic symbols, which would be fitting here, seeing that Carmen is a female in a position of authority but, due to her gender, stands as a symbolically emasculated individual; however, as the character arms herself with her phallic symbols, two objects that enable her to physically stand up, she defies that status of emasculation, fitting the role of authority that she needs to play, succeeding her deceased male spouse.

The phallic connotations of authority are also present in Dr. Casares. There is a scene in which he is treating a cut in Carlos’ face, and the two characters are in a place that seems to be Casares’ office. As Casares treats him, they talk, and among the topics discussed by them is that of the Devil’s backbone, from where the film derives its title. Dr. Casares shows Carlos some jars in which there are fetuses stored, and these fetuses display a specific type of malformation that projects the baby’s spine outward of the body, in a way that makes it visible for an outside observer. According to

Casares, those fetuses have what is called the ‘Devil’s backbone,’ a type of congenital condition that, rumors say, occurs to those that should never had been born; since the story takes place in times of conflict due to political tensions, the ongoing Spanish Civil War, it is natural to think that, maybe, the way the concept of the Devil’s backbone is introduced in the narrative is a form of talking about how, frequently, children are born in threatening, oppressive environments, just like that one in which Carlos is spending his childhood throughout the narrative. The malformation named Devil’s backbone evokes gloomy aspects of childhood: in practical terms, it makes Casares’ office a cemetery of infants; metaphorically speaking, it symbolizes the realization of Santi’s prediction early in the film, as indeed many children die at the end of the film; finally, both practice and metaphor explore the notion that some children should not be born, be it because they will become monsters with their spines outside their bodies, be it because there will be no one to look after them and they will end up in an orphanage.

However, the conversation about the fetuses and the liquid they are preserved in ends up having extra implications from a psychoanalytical perspective: Casares explains that the liquid in which the fetuses are submerged is called ‘limbo water’, and that it contains rum and spices in its composition; the doctor affirms that people believe that drinking limbo water may help curing illnesses, like blindness, kidney ailments and, above all, sexual impotence. He sells it, taking advantage of such belief in order to earn money to provide for the orphanage. Casares discusses how so much tension and fear all over Spain due to the conflicts are constant sources of uncertainty, making people risk trying so debateful alternatives

such as a miraculous liquid like 'limbo water.' The scene ends with Casares sipping from the water himself. The described rumor of limbo water curing sexual impotence underlines the connection of monstrosity to ways of dealing with authority, as described by Asma (2009, p. 25). Some time later in the story it is revealed that Casares and Carmen have a relationship, but he is incapable of performing sexually due to his impotence, which explains Casares drinking limbo water. Jacinto is aware of Casares' impotence since he and Carmen have an affair, and he eventually teases the doctor by saying that he is the one who has to satisfy Carmen, which puts Casares in a position of symbolic emasculation and humiliation.

The scene described displays how nasty Jacinto can be, but in fact the evil he perpetrates is way more serious than a joke on someone's sexual impotence. He is initially depicted as merely unpleasant. However, as the story goes by, we learn how resentful he is about the orphanage, that he hates that place. Still in the beginning of the film, he tells Conchita that he is ashamed of the 15 years he spent there and that, when he was still a kid, he would stare at the sky and dream of becoming rich and buying the orphanage, just so he could tear it all down. If some kind of authority was expected from him because he is the caretaker of the place, being one of those responsible for maintaining the order in the institution, after some time it is possible to realize that he goes well beyond that when using his power, abusing it. There are two major turns in the way this character is depicted on the screen: first, it is when we learn that he was the one responsible for the death of Santi; and second, it is when it becomes clear that he wants to steal the gold from the orphanage and that he

will do whatever it takes to achieve that, which includes killing people, including children, and setting the place where he grew up on fire. Jacinto may be pointed out as a way of symbolizing the unmeasured use of authority, like what we see in dictatorial governments like the one that would be declared in Spain in the same year the story of the film takes place. A major element that contributes to such an analogy is a photograph that Jacinto keeps of his family, where it is possible to see him still a baby alongside his mother and father; he became an orphan not much longer after that. In this photo, baby Jacinto is seen blurred: according to him, he is blurred in the picture because he could not stay still; such a characteristic, of movement in opposition to stillness, can be a hint that, being with his family, Jacinto was excited, happy. This photo echoes a line from a narration that is presented both in the beginning and ending of the film, one that starts with “What is a ghost?” and discusses possible definitions to this kind of supernatural entity; one of the concepts discussed in this narration is that a ghost could be seen as “An emotion, suspended in time. Like a blurred photograph” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:01:39), which could imply that, symbolically, Jacinto could be seen as a ghost, an embittered shadow of the happiness he once had and lost along with his parents. Moreover, another point regarding ‘ghosts’ addressed in the narration is that it could be seen as “A tragedy doomed to repeat itself time and again” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:00:55), which could be referring to dictatorial regimes, violence and wars, and Jacinto serves as a character that embodies the representation of such conflicts, and, as I stated elsewhere (2020), fitting Cohen’s (1996) postulate that says that the monster can serve as “an

embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place” (p. 4).

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

own authority toward Conchita, who is defying him. Realizing that she will not obey him anymore, Jacinto stabs her with a knife, which results in her death; however, Conchita struggles to utter her last words to him: “You’re an animal” (THE DEVIL’S, 01:24:58). This is a way of dehumanizing Jacinto, comparing him to a beast and underlining his lack of personhood as a result.

The discussions of Asma (2009) and Cohen (1996) of the monster as a portent, a divine or ill omen, as the etymology of the word hints, find a great example in Santi, since one of the most relevant actions of the character to the story is, indeed, to bring Carlos an alert to possible dangers: “Many of you will die” (THE DEVIL’S, 00:29:50). Besides, the name ‘Santi’ is an acronym of the word ‘saint,’ which suggests possible readings of this character as a divine entity, like a guardian angel, for instance. As we learn more about the ghost throughout the narrative, we discover that, on the day in which the bomb was dropped, a stormy evening, Santi – who was still alive – and Jaime were in the basement looking for snails, and hearing noises from upstairs, Santi decides to go check, which resulted in him witnessing Jacinto trying to open the safe in the kitchen, just like what happened to Carlos – however, unlike Carlos, Santi was spotted by Jacinto; Santi tried to run away, going back to the basement and telling Jaime to hide, but is ultimately caught by Jacinto. Trying to intimidate Santi for fear that he could reveal his secret, the caretaker beats the boy, accidentally pushing him against a stone wall, and the impact injures badly his head; Santi falls to the ground in convulsions, and even though Jacinto appears to be slightly regretful of what he has done, he decides to tie the boy up and throw him into the cistern,

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

Even though the narrative of *The Devil's Backbone* happens almost entirely restricted to the orphanage building, the way such environment is composed on the screen suggests strong comparisons to the reality of Spain at the time, not exactly to the historical facts per se, but to the clashing tensions of the individual-centered autocracy – the Nationalist, fascist side – versus the ideal of nation as a community in which each individual plays a smaller but equally relevant part in political decisions – the Republican side, in defense of the democratic Constitutional-based regime that was in operation until the coup that started the Civil War in 1936. In many occasions, the orphanage proposes a symbol of a

community living in an oasis in the middle of the desert, a safe haven of democracy in opposition to the fascism that is taking over Spain, and that, still in the year of 1939, would establish definitely a nondemocratic regime that would only be surmounted in 1975, with the death of Francisco Franco, the dictator. Such a symbol of community, in spite of being addressed as expressions of communism by antagonist characters throughout the narrative, seems to represent democracy.

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

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

Even though the Spanish Civil War is often said to have presented a dispute between fascism and communism, *The Devil's Backbone* does not seem to look for a way of polarizing these political views, choosing instead to create a complex and plural panorama of tensions; this narrative does not try to depict neither fascism or communism as inherently good or bad – in accordance with reality, in which there is no black or white, only grayish

areas. However, the opposition of community versus individual is, indeed, much developed, and it seems to imply a commendation to constitutional democracy as opposed to dictatorial regimes, a vision aligned to the contemporary progressive notions of human rights. As a result, the narrative establishes an axis of morality that seems to comprise a spectrum with a community working together at one end, and, at the other, an individual overpowering others for self-interest; the latter, then, acts as a representation of the oppressive authority presented by the war, whereas the former stands for a population trying to survive this conflict. As a way of representing that, we have two mirroring scenes throughout the film: while the orphanage slowly transforms into an ally for Carlos and his friends, we witness as they have a class about prehistory, in which Carmen tells them that in ancient times humankind needed to work together, organizing and collaborating, in order to be able to overcome animals like mammoths, which were much stronger than them; Carmen shows them an illustration in which a group of primitive humans, using spears, hunt a mammoth; the prehistoric scenario described in this class emulates what Asma (2009) says about humankind trying to conquer the environment in a dualism of predator and prey; in such a logic, the mammoth can be seen as an “ancient monster”. Furthermore, the class scene is recovered later in the narrative, when Jacinto invades the orphanage again, which is now destroyed, in order to steal the gold; this time, however, Carmen and Dr. Casares are already dead, so the children have to face him themselves. Santi, of whom they had been afraid of until then, is now an ally, just like the orphanage, and the ghost asks the children to bring Jacinto down to the cistern so he can have his

revenge. The kids lure Jacinto to the basement and arm themselves with handmade spears, engaging in a fight with him. Carlos and his friends manage to pierce Jacinto many times, wounding him, just like the primitive humans would do to the mammoths; as they reproduce what they learned in class, Jacinto is put in the position of the ancient monster they are facing. Besides, the use of spears, phallic symbols, is a form of losing the status of symbolic emasculation the kids had throughout the narrative for being weaker and younger than Jacinto, and penetrating him with their spears is a way of, also, symbolically emasculating and deforming him. After wounding Jacinto, the children push him into the cistern, where Santi embraces him to his death. Regarding the cistern, it is yet interesting to notice the similarity between the color of the water and the 'limbo water,' as if the cistern were a form of mirroring the deformed fetuses that are kept in jars; as a result, Jacinto and Santi become symbolically equals to the children who had the Devil's backbone type of deformity, and therefore, "should never had been born."

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the representations of monsters in *The Devil's Backbone*, it is possible to identify two recurrent tropes: Visual Monstrosity and Behavioral Monstrosity. The former refers to physical traits identified in characters whose bodies are non-normative. The main example here is Santi, a ghost with a supernatural essence, pale skin, and a bleeding wound on his forehead. Behavioral monstrosity, on the other hand, is depicted through the perpetration of evil or immoral actions; Jacinto is, without a doubt, the behavioral monster in the story.

Throughout cinema history, monstrous characters are often endowed with easily recognizable visual and behavioral monstrosities. Freddy Krueger, Michael Myers, the Cenobites, Regan MacNeil possessed by Pazuzu, the extraterrestrial creature in *Alien*, the Count Dracula renditions of Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, and Sadako/Samara are only a few examples. In these films, monster characters display visual abnormalities that reflect the evil that guides their actions. However, there have always been some exceptions, cases in which a character whose form is non-normative (thus more liable to be pinned a monster) does not present a monstrous behavior, or eventually loses such a trait, like in *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), *The Elephant Man* (1980) or *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), for instance. The narrative structure in *The Devil's Backbone* is similar to those, for it presents us a vulnerable, fearful and delicate ghost. As the story progresses, the other characters stop fearing him and he becomes an ally in the confrontation to the real threat. Jacinto, a behavioral monster with a human appearance, suffers injuries towards the end of the film – he is shot and pierced by spears –, having his body deformed. This device, which del Toro employs in *The Shape of Water* and *Pan's Labyrinth* as well, serves a two-fold purpose, namely, to punish behavioral monsters with a matching appearance by turning them into visual monsters as well, and to invite audiences to reflect, perhaps Frankenstein-style, on the need – or lack thereof – of deformity within the construction of a monstrous character.

Considering the historical background for *The Devil's Backbone*, even though Jacinto is presented as selfish and authoritarian and such traits are related to him as an individual, he seems to provide

within the narrative a symbolic representation of immoral political notions that gained prominence during those times, which allows us to see Jacinto as an embodiment of a cultural moment, thus an apt monster for the Civil War context. The evil depicted in Jacinto – and his behavioral monstrosity, as a result – is a form of portraying non-democratic ideals, such as fascism in Francoist Spain. Therefore, Jacinto symbolizes what Scarre and Calder (2020) call “evil institutions,” social structures that disseminate and support conceptions that unfavor human rights and egalitarian societies. When Jacinto behaves as if he was superior to others and violates human rights, he is, in fact, demonstrating his own lack of empathy and, as a consequence, weakening his status of personhood.

However, it is imperative to highlight that Jacinto is not entirely monstrous, given that there are storytelling efforts to compose humanized dimensions for him. Such choices are coherent when considering the idea that monstrosity equals segregating rather than understanding them (ASMA, 2009, p. 226). Therefore, if there were no means to humanize Jacinto, ending his threats in the film narrative would have no purpose but to purge him. What we see, then, is different: he is evil, but we are presented to scenes that give possible explanations to why he is like that; in addition, we witness moments in which this character is in positions of weakness. A good example of that is the scene in which Jacinto is talking about the photograph he has with his family. The balance between monstrosity and humanity is critical: if characters have too much behavioral monstrosity, they become Manichaeistic; and if they behave monstrously but are depicted with too much humanity, they become victims. However, such a balance in this film seems to be appropriate.

Santi and Jacinto are bound by a complex paradox in the construction of their monstrosities, insofar as their appearances might elicit initial expectations that are not confirmed by their acts and behaviors. Santi's monstrous status is confirmed from the very beginning – he makes Carlos afraid initially due to his being dead, immaterial, pale, and wounded; however, the narrative provides information about his death and insights about his decent nature even after becoming a ghost; despite his eerie appearance, Santi easily inspires empathy – he is gradually de-monstrified, and has his human status reinforced. Conversely, Jacinto initially displays a wound-free body, is definitely human from a biological perspective, and even handsome to a certain extent. As the narrative unfolds and we learn he is a bully, a murderer, an arsonist and a thief; in addition, by stealing the orphanage money that contributes to finance the Republican cause, Jacinto aligns himself with the francoists, thus reinforcing his status as a behavioral monster and becoming a perfect example of the notion of criminal monster defined by Asma. Jacinto's monstrification process is a symbolic one: firstly, he is given wounds by his former victims, thus making his monstrosity visual; secondly, he dies by drowning in the cistern carrying the weight of the gold he had stolen; finally, he is dragged down by Santi, in a movement that resembles a forced descent to hell. All about his monstrosity and death is embedded in symbolisms of punishment, and maybe therein lies Jacinto's de-monstrification and consequent re-humanization – in the hopes that he will somehow suffer the consequences for his evil deeds.

Despite its supernatural tones, *The Devil's Backbone* depicts actual, mundane violence, particularly at times of war, during

which civilians and children alike perish alongside soldiers. Fiction such as *The Devil's Backbone* emulates real-life monstrosity – a present example of such interface between fact and fiction is the 2022 Ukrainian-Russian war, which has led to the destruction of families and houses, as well as to pain that spares no one, not even children. Monster fiction plays an important social role, inasmuch as it evidences the human potential for the perpetration of harmful actions. Such awareness turns out to be paramount, for if it does not prevent evil from repeating itself throughout history, at least it serves as a painful – and much needed – reminder.

REFERENCES

- ASMA, Stephen. *On monsters: an unnatural history of our worst fears*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- BACON, Jane; SCHELTEMA, Karen; ROBINSON, Beatrice. Fat phobia scale revisited: the short form. *International Journal of Obesity*, [s. l.], v. 25, n. 2, p. 252–257, 2001. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ijo.0801537>. Accessed on: 5th Mar. 2021.
- CALDER, Todd. The concept of evil. In: ZALTA, Edward N. (Org.). *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Summer 2020ed, [S.l.], Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020. [E-book].
- CARROLL, Noël. *The philosophy of horror, or, Paradoxes of the heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome. Monster culture (seven theses). In: COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome. (Ed.). *Monster theory: reading culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 3–25, 1996.
- COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome. Preface: in a time of monsters. In: COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome (Ed.). *Monster theory: reading culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. vii-xiii, 1996.
- EHRENREICH, Barbara. *Blood rites: origins and history of the passions of war*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997.

FRANÇA, Júlio. O sequestro do gótico no Brasil. In: FRANÇA, Júlio. COLUCCI, Luciana (Org.). *As Nuances do Gótico: do Setecentos à atualidade*. Bonecker, p. 111-124, 2017.

FREUD, Sigmund. *Beyond the pleasure principle*. London: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/11189-000>. Accessed on: 8th March 2021.

FREUD, Sigmund. *Civilization and its discontents*. New York: Norton, 1961.

FREUD, Sigmund. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. Repred. London: Hogarth Press, 1999.

HARPER, Douglas. *Monster*. [S.l.], [c.2010a]. Available at: https://www.etymonline.com/word/monster#etymonline_v_17474. Accessed on: 5th Mar. 2021.

HARPER, Douglas. *Abjection*. [S.l.], [c. 2010b]. Available at: https://www.etymonline.com/word/abjection#etymonline_v_39078. Accessed on: 5th Mar. 2021.

KRISTEVA, Julia. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. (European perspectives).

LEE, Ye Hee. Donald Trump's false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime. *The Washington Post*. United States, 2015. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>. Accessed on: 25th Feb. 2021.

MAYER, Gabriel da Fonseca. As monstruosidades de Guillermo del Toro. In: ROSSI, Cido; ZANINI, Claudio; MARKENDORF, Marcio (Orgs.). *Monstars: monstruosidades e horror audiovisual*. Rio de Janeiro: Dialogarts, p. 215–225, 2020. [E-book].

PAN'S LABYRINTH. Directed: Guillermo del Toro. [S.l.]: Wild Bunch, 2006. 1 DVD (118 min).

SAYER, Peter; MARTÍNEZ-PRIETO, David; CRUZ, Brenda. Discourses of White nationalism and xenophobia in the United States and their Effect on TESOL professionals in Mexico. *TESOL Quarterly*, [S.l.], v. 53, n. 3, p. 835–844, 2019. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.492>. Accessed on: 25th Feb. 2021.

SCARRE, Geoffrey. Evil collectives. *Midwest studies in philosophy*, [S.l.], v. 36, n. 1, p. 74–92, 2012. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2012.00235.x>. Accessed on: 25th Feb. 2021.

THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE. Directed: Guillermo del Toro. [S.l.]: El Deseo, Tequila Gang, 2001. 1 DVD (106 min).

THE SHAPE OF WATER. Directed: Guillermo del Toro. [S.l.]: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017. 1 Blu-ray (123 min).

ZANINI, Claudio. Monstro. *Dicionário Digital do Insólito Ficcional*. [S.l.], 2019. Available at: <http://www.insolitificcional.uerj.br/site/m/monstro/>. Accessed on: 5th Mar. 2021.

ZIMBARDO, Philip G. *The Lucifer effect: understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House, 2007.