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Celebrating Imperfection through Perfect Images: Guillermo del Toro's Work

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Abstract

This piece examines the most recent work of the acclaimed Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, focusing on his use of intertextuality, self-referentiality and subversion as stylistic elements that to simultaneously critique and celebrate cinema. Through his unique visual aesthetics and mastering of the mise-en-scène, del Toro explores themes of identity, displacement and humanity. Famed for his use of 'monster-as-metaphor' narratives, his work is rich in cinematic language and iconography that acts as both an homage to his idols and inspiration for his fans. Del Toro acts as a film historian, a bibliophile, a critic and a fan, championing those on the edges of society while rejoicing in his Mexican heritage.

Keywords: Del Toro, Guillermo, 1964-; Transnational communication and critical/cultural studies; Identity; Intertextuality; Motion pictures; Horror & supernatural fiction

Introduction

'I am a Mexican and I am an immigrant' was Guillermo del Toro's formidable statement upon the unveiling of his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. After nearly thirty years of filmmaking, with an Academy Award for Best Picture finally a part of his extensive accolades, it seems Guillermo del Toro has, at last, made it in America.¹

Born on 9 October 1964 in Guadalajara, Mexico, del Toro was raised by his devoutly Catholic grandmother. The brutal iconography of Catholicism adorned the walls of his family home, and his *abuela's* teachings of purgatory and damnation struck fear deep in the heart of a young del Toro.² Citing himself as a 'tortured soul' who 'suffered from the guilt of Catholic mythology,' his work is still littered with the idea of worlds between worlds.³

¹ Variety, 'Guillermo del Toro Supports Immigrants During Hollywood Walk of Fame Ceremony'. Video, 6:23, 6 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73KcfDnoRB4&t=242s>.

² Roger Clark and Keith McDonald, *Guillermo del Toro: Film as Alchemic Art* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 23.

³ *Ibid.* For visions of alternate reality in del Toro's filmography, see: *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001), with Santi (Junio Valverde) stuck in purgatory until his murder is avenged; *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006), in which unbearable realities drive Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) into a world of mythical creatures.

At the tender age of four, del Toro saw such classics as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939) and *Los olvidados* (*The Young and The Damned*; Luis Buñuel, 1950).⁴ Finding solace and self-identification in the classic Universal Studios horror films, del Toro observed that the creatures were often juxtaposed with images of Jesus. Notably, he mentions how, to him, Boris Karloff (as Frankenstein's monster) emerged as a 'messianic figure, one who died—and was resurrected—and died again for our sins.'⁵ Soon, those goblins and ghouls became his friends and he found a religion he could believe in: a religion of monsters.

Del Toro reports that his cinematic interests as a child were unlike those of his peers, noting that the first time he saw both *Onibaba* (Kaneto Shindo, 1964) and *Kuroneko* (Shindo, 1968), two films that explore 'Japanese folklore with a modern sensibility.'⁶ Del Toro explored similar ideas in his Spanish-language films, perhaps most notably in the haunting ghost story *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001) and later, in his Academy Award-nominated *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006). Both films, set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, use Spain's turbulent past to highlight the brutality of man through the eyes of innocent children.

Since childhood, del Toro has also been a consumer of comic books, reveling in the visceral storytelling with which whole stories could be told without the use of words. This love of comics continued into adult life, materialising later in his career with not one but two comic book adaptations. Clark and McDonald suggest that this qualifies del Toro as a 'fanboy favourite'.⁷ Niamh Thornton would argue, however, that this connection to comics has contributed to obliterating a barrier between seemingly-incompatible worlds: 'geek' culture and cinematic 'auteurship'. Del Toro's identity has been consolidated in what Thornton calls the 'geek auteur'.⁸ Deemed a master at combining a 'wealth of intertextual references and homages to [his] favourites authors, filmmakers, and genres',⁹ del Toro consistently showcases both his understanding and love of cinema through unique takes on genre films—the vampire story, the Japanese *kaiju* and forbidden romances. As argued by Glenn Ward, a critic of postmodernist visual culture, del Toro's opening titles to the 2013 *Treehouse of Horror* episode of *The Simpsons* (Rob Oliver, 2013) may serve as a 'master class in playful pastiche, quotation and self-reference.'¹⁰ Del Toro's use of intertextuality and self-referentiality consolidates him as a geek auteur, and plays a huge part in his big-budget 2013 science fiction film, *Pacific Rim*.

⁴ BFI, 'BFI Screen Talk: Guillermo del Toro | BFI London Film Festival 2017'. Video, 1:14:17, 6 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfd3OBir64&t=1120s>.

⁵ Guillermo del Toro, 'Foreword', in *At Home with Monsters; Inside his films, notebooks and collections*, ed. Britt Salvesen, Jim Shedden and Matthew Welch (London: Titan Books, 2016), 6.

⁶ Roger Clark and Keith McDonald, *Guillermo del Toro: Film as Alchemic Art* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Niamh Thornton, 'Pacific Rim: Reception, Readings and Perceptions', in *Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro*, ed. Ann Davies, Deborah Shaw and Dolores Tierney (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 121.

⁹ Anne Davies, Deborah Shaw and Dolores Tierney, 'Introduction', in *Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro*, ed. Ann Davies, Deborah Shaw and Dolores Tierney (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 4.

¹⁰ The sequence features *Simpsons* characters reimagined as del Toro characters—including Hellboy, the Pale Man from *Pan's Labyrinth*, and the device from *Cronos*—as well as classic Universal monsters like Frankenstein, Dracula, and Gill-man, and some of del Toro's heroes, including Alfred Hitchcock and Stephen King. Glenn Ward, "'There is no such thing": Del Toro's Metafictional Monster Rally', in *Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro*, ed. Ann Davies, Deborah Shaw and Dolores Tierney (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 11-12.

Of Monsters and Machines: Geek Auteurism and Fanboy Favourite

Pacific Rim (2013) is an homage to the Japanese films del Toro loved as a child. Blending the ‘*kaiju* (Japanese monster film) and *mecha* (Japanese robot film)’,¹¹ the story follows a team of highly skilled soldiers who control giant man-made robots—or ‘Jaegers’, del Toro’s version of the *mecha*—to fight the gargantuan sea monsters known as the *kaiju*. When humanity is threatened by these beasts, a retired soldier, Raleigh (Charlie Hunnam), must return to the fight to save the world. He partners with the incredibly talented Mako Mori (Rinko Kikuchi), and they must learn to work together to defeat the monster. The transnational team of elite individuals (Japanese, Russian and Australian), disrupts Hollywood’s racial and gender hierarchies, as described in Yvonne Tasker’s writings. Tasker notes that the stereotypical hero of a Hollywood-produced action film is a white, straight American male, coining the term ‘musculinity’.¹² Black characters are relegated to smaller supporting roles and are usually deemed inferior. Similarly, women are used as a reward for the hero and hold little, if any, agency of their own. *Pacific Rim* challenges these hierarchies. Pentecost, a black, British soldier, is the team’s leader. He is well-educated, well-dressed and a proficient soldier. Mako is a highly skilled pilot. Megan Fowler notes the importance of Mako’s use of her native tongue, Japanese. She writes that, departing from the language of most Hollywood cinema, which often ‘default[s] to English exclusively,’ Mako¹³’s use of Japanese establishes her authority and deconstructs the hegemonic belief that the English language is superior. Del Toro, in creating a team of international characters, simultaneously celebrates people of colour while revealing ‘how very far the genre still has to go to present consistent respectful representations’.¹⁴

Mako is perhaps the most subversive character in the film, perhaps too subversive for mainstream audiences. Aligning her with the other orphaned children of del Toro’s *oeuvre*, Mako Mori was witness, and victim, to horrifying childhood trauma. Having lost her parents in the first *kaiju* attack, Mako is now fuelled by revenge. Likened to the young Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) from *Pan’s Labyrinth* with her bob haircut, long coat and red shoes, she is defiant in her quest for a better, safer world. Del Toro actively avoids positioning her as an object to be gazed upon. Clark and McDonald argue that del Toro positions Raleigh (Charlie Hunnam), a male, as the object to be looked at instead.¹⁵ Mako does not exist to answer to a male character’s sexual desires.

Nevertheless, the film received mixed reviews. Despite the inclusion of a strong woman of colour, many critics noted that the film’s gender divide heavily favoured male characters. Mako is one of only two female characters who are given any screen time. Kyle Buchanan notes his disappointment in del Toro, considering that his previous work featured ‘strong female protagonists [...] in films like *Pan’s Labyrinth* and *Mimic*’;¹⁶ while Buchanan appreciates that del Toro appears to have had good intentions, he believes the lack of

¹¹ Thornton, “‘*Pacific Rim*’”, 121.

¹² Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

¹³ Megan Fowler, ‘A Person Not a Pin-Up: Subverting the Sexualized Asian Action Heroine with *Pacific Rim*’s Mako Mori’, *The Phoenix Papers* 2, no. 2 (2016): 13, <http://fansconf.a-kon.com/dRuZ33A/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/APersonNotAPin-UpSubvertingtheAsianActionHeroinewithPacificRimsMakoMoriByMeganFowler.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ Clark and McDonald, *Guillermo del Toro*, 205.

¹⁶ Kyle Buchanan, ‘There Isn’t Much Room for Women in the Future of *Pacific Rim*’, *Vulture*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.vulture.com/2013/07/does-pacific-rim-have-a-woman-problem.html>.

representation causes the film to suffer. Justin Chang calls the film the ‘squarest, clunkiest and certainly loudest movie’¹⁷ of del Toro’s career, citing the ‘bludgeoning’ pace at which the action unfolds, leaving little time for the film’s satirical humour to breathe.¹⁸

However, the movie has since been reclaimed by theorists, who have praised it for its use of subversion and intertextuality, and even meta-textuality, to critique but simultaneously celebrate cinema. The film features many tropes that del Toro has used throughout his filmography: the lost child searching for oneself in an adult world, humanity’s fraught relationship with technology and the idea of man as monster. Longtime friend and collaborator Ron Perlman appears as the fashion conscious Hannibal Chau, a black-market *kaiju* organ dealer who is more concerned with his gold-plated shoes than he is with the oncoming apocalypse. Perlman’s appearance in the film is a knowing nod to del Toro’s loyal fanbase who previously adored Perlman’s portrayal of Mike Mingola’s character, Hellboy, in a film adaptation of the eponymous graphic novel. His presence here not only serves as part of what Thornton describes as del Toro’s ‘recurrent, geek auteurist trope’,¹⁹ but also as comedic relief used to ‘lighten the otherwise conventionally straight heroic thrust of the narrative’.²⁰ His dialogue is camp, and acts in complete contradiction to the epic and heroic speeches delivered by Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba), the team’s leader.²¹ When describing how he got his name, Chau explains that it comes from his ‘favourite historical character and [his] second favourite Szechuan restaurant in Brooklyn’. Chau, so consumed by his obsession with the *kaiju* and his personal image, is in turn physically consumed by one of the monsters in search of a missing shoe, as Thornton notes, for comedic effect.²² Perlman’s performance is very much a part of the geek culture that del Toro’s filmography knowingly and lovingly belongs to.

Clark and McDonald write that the film is filled with homage; even the credit sequence is used to honour two film-making giants, Ray Harryhausen and Ishiro Honda. Both filmmakers are undeniable sources of inspiration for del Toro, particularly the latter. Honda’s seminal monster movie, *Godzilla* (1954), has provided possibly the most instantly recognisable figure for the genre, inaugurating ‘the *kaiju* monster tradition in Japanese film’.²³ Del Toro pays homage to Honda by calling his beasts the *kaiju*.

Clark and McDonald note that the ‘dizzily wide range of intertextual material’ extends to Ridley Scott’s classic science-fiction monster movie, *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979).²⁴ In *Pacific Rim*, the *kaiju* monsters enter Earth through the seabed of a split known as ‘The Breach’, which leads through a tubular passage into a womb-like area where the *kaiju* are bred. This imagery is in direct correlation with the reproductive subtext of the Xenomorphs of Scott’s film. Barbara Creed has written extensively on the subject, suggesting that the female form and reproductive organs are a source of male anxiety.²⁵ Drawing on the Freudian

¹⁷ Justin Chang, ‘Film Review: “Pacific Rim”’, 7 July 2013, <https://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/film-review-pacific-rim-120053526>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Thornton, ““Pacific Rim””, 133.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ According to del Toro, in DVD commentary. ‘The Director’s Notebook’, *Pacific Rim* DVD Special Edition (disc 2), Warner Bros./Legendary Pictures, 2013.

²² Thornton, ““Pacific Rim””, 134.

²³ Clark and McDonald, *Guillermo del Toro*, 196.

²⁴ Ibid., 197.

²⁵ Creed’s seminal piece discusses the role of women in horror cinema, arguing that femininity may be represented as ‘monstrous’ by drawing on Laura Mulvey’s theory that woman in cinema, as ‘bearer of the bleeding wound [...] can exist only in her relation to castration and cannot transcend it.’ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and

beliefs that the male could be castrated by the female, Creed examines the role of the feminine form across the horror genre, perhaps most famously in her dissection of *Alien*. Creed writes about the ways in which Scott uses the *mise-en-scène* to depict the reproductive organs of the female through ‘intra-uterine imagery’ to comment on the role of the mother.²⁶ To defeat the alien, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) must destroy the reproductive creature. Similarly, del Toro’s *kaiju* can only be destroyed by means of venturing through the Earth’s anatomy and obliterating the womb-like cavern from which the creatures are born. The soldiers must voyage into a tubular passage—known as ‘The Throat’—and implant an explosive inside. This process involves the characters being doused in water and rain, further adding to the ideas of birth, aligning the tumultuous sea with amniotic fluid. The intertextual references to *Alien* continue with the androgynous Mako (Rinko Kikuchi), who, not being an object for the male gaze, acts with agency and autonomy. She is a talented pilot who has fought her way out of adversity and trauma to help save the world.

Pacific Rim also draws from the *mecha*, or robot film, that gained popularity in Japan in the years following World War II. Thornton argues that while many critics judged the film’s look, aligning it more with the typical Hollywood summer blockbuster than with del Toro’s intended source material, it is more complex upon repeated viewing. Thornton notes that it ‘is not simply a film where technology saves the world; there is also a great deal of humanity, and while it ²⁷ does not radically overturn the conventions of the genre [...] it does reimagine a different, global, less triumphalist approach to the summer blockbuster’.²⁸ The film primarily takes place in Hong Kong, moving the action away from the traditional US-centric action film, once again separating itself from the standard genre fare. Thornton argues that *Pacific Rim* must be considered within the tension created between critical expectations of del Toro as an auteur and expectations of his take on the monster film. Out of this tension is where ‘del Toro as geek emerges’.²⁹

Clark and McDonald support such claims on del Toro’s subversion of the genre when writing about the ‘alchemic art’ of del Toro’s work.³⁰ They note that while traditionally the *mecha* narrative of the original Japanese genre tended to focus on a purely visual level, del Toro elevates the genre not only by hybridising it with the *kaiju* but also by delving into themes of human being’s relationship with machine, an idea that Sharalyn Orbaugh suggests comes from the technophilic response in Japan to the military defeat in the Second World War.³¹ Clark and McDonald argue that the *mecha* operates on a more thoughtful level than one would originally perceive, as the film questions the very ‘nature of humanity in a technologically advanced society’.³² This fascination between man and machine is an area of great interest for del Toro as it appears repeatedly in his work, notably in his debut film *Cronos* (1993) and later in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). They cite this fascination with machines as stemming from their ‘vast potential [...] to dominate and destroy as well as assist and enhance.’³³ The Jaegers mirror the *kaiju* in their appearance, each creature

Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-44. Qtd. in Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 126.

²⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Oxon: Routledge, 1993), 53.

²⁷ Thornton, “‘Pacific Rim’”, 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁰ Clark and MacDonald, *Guillermo del Toro*, 202.

³¹ Sharalyn Orbaugh, ‘The genealogy of the Cyborg in Japanese Popular Culture’, in *World Weavers: Globalization, Science Fiction and the Cybernetic Revolution*, ed. Kin Yuen Wong, Gary Westfahl and Amy Kit-sze Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 55-72.

³² Clark and MacDonald, *Guillermo del Toro*, 202.

³³ *Ibid.*

engineered by their respective worlds for destruction. While the Jaegers are the Earth's protectors, they hold the power to also be our damnation.

Thornton suggests that the many readings of the film, whether psycho-sexual or 'intertextual mash-up',³⁴ show that perhaps *Pacific Rim* is the film that best challenges 'how del Toro, as geek auteur making genre films, should be read'.³⁵

Gothic Ghosts and Forbidden Fruit

As with *Pacific Rim*, del Toro's follow-up film *Crimson Peak* (2015), also suffered mixed reviews. While Sheila O'Malley praised the film and noted that 'watching Del Toro's films is a pleasure because his vision is evident in every frame',³⁶ Scott Mendelson critiqued the film for the 'arbitrary supernatural elements that play no real role in the story',³⁷ noting he was tiring of the 'caveat' of citing del Toro's status as a 'gifted visionary'.³⁸

Crimson Peak tells the story of Edith (Mia Wasikowska), a budding young writer and heiress at the beginning of the twentieth century who meets and falls for the handsome, charming but secretive Sir Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston). They marry shortly after her father's gruesome death and move to the Sharpe estate, also known as 'Allerdale Hall', where his sister Lucille (Jessica Chastain), also lives. Soon Edith is visited by a series of terrifying ghosts warning her that all is not as it seems. The blood red clay beneath the house has garnered it the ominous nickname 'Crimson Peak'. However, as is expected with del Toro, the true monsters reveal themselves to be the Sharpe siblings, intent on murdering Edith for her inheritance.

Having seen Laurence Olivier in *Wuthering Heights* (1939) as a child, del Toro always had a fascination with the rich world of Gothic romance. In an interview with IGN Entertainment's Scott Collura, del Toro states that he draws inspiration from celebrated authors such as Anne Radcliffe, Joseph Sheridan le Fanu and Charles Dickens, and that he wanted to recreate the feeling of these Gothic stories for a contemporary audience.³⁹ Once again, he plays with meta-textuality, most notably in the scene in which Edith meets with her editor and explains to him that while her story features a ghost, it is categorically not a ghost story, a metatextual reference to the film itself.

However, it is perhaps because of del Toro's adherence to his personal visual aesthetic that some critics believe the film suffers. A.O. Scott argues that del Toro 'tumbles into pastiche' by 'overselling his own enthusiasm for the material in a way that compromises the audience's delight'.⁴⁰ *Crimson Peak* was released at Halloween and many expected it to feature more jump scares and traditional horror. Scott Mendelson notes that the 'specific geek-friendly components that made up *Crimson Peak* were not only not inherently

³⁴ Clark and MacDonald, *Guillermo del Toro*, 207.

³⁵ Thornton, 'Pacific Rim', 13.

³⁶ Sheila O'Malley, 'Crimson Peak', review of *Crimson Peak*, by Guillermo del Toro, *Roger Ebert*, 16 October 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/crimson-peak-2015>.

³⁷ Scott Mendelson, 'Review: "Crimson Peak" Is So Disappointing It's Scary', *Forbes*, 14 October 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/10/14/review-crimson-peak-is-so-disappointing-its-scary/#78df9f1d107b>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ IGN Entertainment, 'The Influences of *Crimson Peak*'. Video, 3:59, 16 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghLINZ-woIY>.

⁴⁰ A.O. Scott, "'Crimson Peak', a Guillermo del Toro Gothic Romance in High Bloody Style', *New York Times*, 15 October 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/16/movies/crimson-peak-a-guillermo-del-toro-gothic-romance-in-high-bloody-style.html>.

commercial but arguably somewhat of a repellent for audiences during its cinematic⁴¹ release. While del Toro's geek auteurism may make him a fanboy favourite, it is perhaps what slowed his rise to mainstream fame.

Del Toro's auteurial stamp is evident in every frame of the film. The reds are redder, the shadows are darker and the anguished cries from Lucille are more haunting with every breath. Lucille is intertwined with the house, represented through her costume and rapidly deteriorating mental state. When she is experiencing anger or jealousy 'the house responds', and as she descends further and further into madness, the house too decays into ruins. The red clay bleeding into the blinding white snow is mirrored in Lucille's blood-stained porcelain skin in the film's final act. As she dies, so does Crimson Peak. Kindinger suggests that del Toro is critiquing the 'cult of domesticity' women often become trapped in, with the home acting as a prison.⁴² Lucille cannot escape this societal incarceration and her death, as Emilia Musap would argue, serves as a 'warning for all those wishing to escape' the patriarchal confines of the domestic world.⁴³

Edith actively challenges the tropes of the genre. Though she is poised in the beginning of the film as the 'Damsel in Distress' stereotype of classical literature, she subverts the trope by fighting for survival without the assistance of a 'Knight in Shining Armour'. If anything, the sudden appearance of her supposed knight, Dr. Alan McMichael (Charlie Hunnam), is more of an hindrance than a help. Edith becomes his saviour and asserts herself as the hero of her own story. Del Toro sought to associate Edith with the great female writers such as Jane Austen, Daphne de Maurier and the Brönte Sisters, and their powerful, autonomous heroines. In the beginning of the film, Edith meets with her editor to discuss her current work. Dissatisfied that a young woman would not only enter his office with ink-stained skin, but would also do so while presenting him with a ghost story, he reduces her work to the aesthetics of her penmanship. He attempts to silence Edith's voice by encouraging her to write a love story, assuming that it is all she knows. However, Edith is more familiar with the world of ghosts than that of romance. In order to be considered with the same respect as her male counterparts, Edith types her story in her father's office to conceal, if not remove, her gender. As Kindinger writes, Edith must 'become a ghostly figure if she wishes to succeed in the literary marketplace'.⁴⁴ Edith must leave the feminine space she has created for herself and enter a masculine space to succeed.

Interestingly, Thomas also subverts gender when he finds himself enthralled by Edith's 'difference'. She is completely different from the other women he has seduced and murdered with the help of his sister, Lucille (who is later revealed to be his lover). Edith represents everything Lucille is not; she is warm, loving and sane. The consummation of their marriage marks a change in their respective journeys. For Edith, she is no longer a naïve orphan but instead a powerful woman whose intellect and integrity save her life. For Thomas, it marks his first healthy sexual experience and shows him he is worthy of romantic love. For him, Edith represents liberation from a life of lies and betrayal, the life he seems ready to leave behind.

⁴¹ Mendelson, 'Review'.

⁴² Evangelina Kindinger, 'The ghost is just a metaphor: Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*, nineteenth-century female gothic, and the slasher', *Necsus* (Autumn 2017), <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-ghost-is-just-a-metaphor-guillermo-del-toros-crimson-peak-nineteenth-century-female-gothic-and-the-slasher>.

⁴³ Emilia Musaps, 'Monstrous Domesticity—Home as a Site of Oppression in *Crimson Peak*', [sic] – a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation 8, no.1 (December 2019), doi: 10.15291/sic/1.8.lc.3.

⁴⁴ Kindinger, 'The ghost is just a metaphor'.

Khara D. Lukancic writes that Thomas ‘stands out as abject in the American form of masculinity at the brink of modernity’,⁴⁵ with his slim fitting clothing and soft-spoken lyrical voice. He is the anthesis to the ruggedly handsome, strong Alan, the more traditional suitor. At several key moments, both men are ‘feminize[d]’.⁴⁶ As an Englishman born into wealth, Thomas presents the opposite of the values American men of the twentieth century held dear. Upon meeting Carter, he is shamed for having no experience with manual labour and for having ‘the softest hands’ Carter has ever felt. His hands have only ever been used to make delicate wooden toys for his sister, with whom he has an incestuous relationship that reveals his true abjection. He is caught in the same place of desire and restriction that del Toro finds himself in as a filmmaker. Thomas, as Lucille’s submissive, attempts to break free from his troubled relationship only to have it be the thing that kills him.

Del Toro further feminises Thomas on screen by making him feature as the only character to appear nude. Laura Mulvey’s writings on the male gaze are reworked here to feature the female gaze, as it is the male form presented as for its ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.⁴⁷ In stark contrast, both Edith and Lucille are never objectified by the camera in the way audiences have come to expect. Both women subvert the gender norms and tropes associated not only with the genre but with cinema itself.

Edith and Lucille stand on opposite ends of the spectrum of traditional female tropes in horror cinema. Feminist theory would suggest that Edith fits into an ‘augmented version of Carol Clover’s Final Girl’,⁴⁸ while Lucille could be viewed through Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Edith fulfils the ‘the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero’.⁴⁹ She has experienced unbelievable trauma in her life, from the loss of her mother as a young woman to the brutal murder of her father, and now as she torture and abuse at the hands of the Sharpe siblings. The film’s third act pays homage to the slasher film from which the Final Girl theory is derived, enabling Edith to fulfil her destiny to survive. With the help of Thomas’s ghost, Edith slays the monstrous Lucille in an act of true defiance. Edith will not allow herself to fall victim to circumstance again. Having previously asserted herself as more of a Mary Shelley than a Jane Austen, Edith has assumed the role of the defiant female, finding her writing inspiration in the process.⁵⁰

In stark contrast to Edith’s Final Girl trope, it is Lucille who throughout the course of the film proves herself to fit Creed’s monstrous feminine.⁵¹ Following the death of their mother, Lucille adopts the role of ‘surrogate castrating mother’ of Thomas.⁵² He is submissive to her deviant sexual desires, desires of which she holds no shame. Lucille is the mastermind of the murderous duo’s shocking reign of terror, having slain not only their parents and Thomas’s wives, but also the child they had together. Born severely disabled, the baby is murdered by Lucille, only adding to her deteriorating mental state. After Thomas confesses that he loves Edith, a heartbroken Lucille stabs him in the face and the heart,

⁴⁵ Khara D. Lukancic, “Modifying the Gothic: Gender in *Crimson Peak*”, Paper presented at the National Conference of the Popular Culture Association National Conference, (Indianapolis, IN, March 2018). 10. https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2135&context=gs_rp

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-844.

⁴⁸ Lukancic, “Modifying,” i.

⁴⁹ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film - Updated Edition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), 17.

⁵⁰ In an early scene, Edith responds to taunts by her peers for being ‘Buffalo’s own Jane Austen’, suggesting that she would rather be a ‘Mary Shelley’, because she died a widow and not a spinster.

⁵¹ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 3.

⁵² Lukancic, ‘Modifying,’ 27.

inflicting on him the internal pain she feels. This is the film's second graphic attack on a male character. The gloved hands seen killing Edith's beloved father are revealed to belong to Lucille, 'reminiscent [...] of the Italian *giallo* genre of the 1960s and 1970s, especially [of] Dario Argento's female killers'.⁵³ These acts of violence are more commonly seen inflicted upon helpless women in the horror genre. Del Toro further subverts the norm by having this abhorrently evil woman be the antagonist of *Crimson Peak*. As is common with del Toro's work, humans (man—or, this case, woman)—are the true monsters, not the tortured ghosts of Allerdale Hall.

Beauty Seduces the Beast: Longing and Love in *The Shape of Water*

With the disappointing response to *Crimson Peak*, del Toro quickly started pre-production on his then-untitled love story between a mute woman and an amphibious creature from another world. Del Toro has said that the story has been a part of his psyche ever since he saw *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), as a young boy. Having always identified more with the Gill-man from the Universal classic, he was often disappointed that these creatures were never afforded the happy endings granted to quintessentially white, perfect humans. *The Shape of Water* (2017) was born out of this idea.⁵⁴

The Shape of Water is a fantasy love story between the mute Elisa (Sally Hawkins), currently working as a cleaner in a top-secret government facility during the Cold War, and the Amphibian Man (Doug Jones), an Amazonian god ripped from his habitat by the villainous Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon) for the purposes of war. Longing for love and acceptance from a world that has failed her, Elisa connects with the creature because of their 'otherness'.⁵⁵

The film is rich in intertextual references to the material that del Toro adores. From the obvious homage to *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* to the classic Hollywood musical, *The Shape of Water* even contains hints of Ron Howard's *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984). Del Toro weaves together several texts in a way that is entirely his own. There are flickers of classic mythology and biblical sources, as well as the work of H.P. Lovecraft (his aquatic story 'Dagon').⁵⁶ This story features a 'Fish-God' which is undoubtedly where del Toro's Amphibian Man is descended from. However, this deity is not to be feared.

Del Toro once again blurs the lines between good and evil, or at least our perceptions of those opposing forces. Cinematic history has taught audiences to fear and hate the alien creature, though it is the people we share our everyday life with who prove to be the real monsters. Colonel Richard Strickland, for his idyllic white-picket-fence life, is rotten, quite literally, to the core. He abuses the Amphibian Man daily, hoping that the creature will eventually submit and follow his orders. During one particularly brutal episode of torture, the Amphibian Man lashes out, biting off two of Strickland's fingers in the process. Though the fingers are reattached, they soon begin to decay, emanating a sickeningly pungent smell as an external representation of his rapidly disintegrating internal mental state. His sweet tooth and

⁵³ Kindinger, 'The ghost.'

⁵⁴ BFI, 'BFI Screen Talk: Guillermo del Toro'.

⁵⁵ For 'otherness' as a theory of abjection and social division in cinema history (focusing on horror, science fiction, and film noir), see Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York and London: continuum, 2010).

⁵⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, "Dagon," in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*, eds. August Derleth and S.T. Joshi, (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House Publishers, Inc., 1987), 14-19.

seemingly perfect home life are merely a disguise of white privilege, only further highlighted by his ‘successful man’ teal Cadillac.

Colonel Richard Strickland represents the larger issues in white American society, issues that, while explored in the setting of Baltimore during the Cold War, are still very present today. He is the all-American hero, a proudly Christian (though perhaps problematically so) former soldier whose square-jawed, strong physique automatically signals him for greatness. Actor Michael Shannon’s broad, uber-masculine body signals Cynthia Freeland’s ideas of the ‘monster in realist horror’.⁵⁷ While his outward appearance seemingly personifies perfection, his insatiable need for power and destruction highlights the troubling epidemic of toxic masculinity. Strickland controls everything in his life with a cavity infested smile.

Freeland’s argument suggests that within realist horror, ‘male sexuality is a ticking time bomb, a natural force that must be released’,⁵⁸ which holds true of Strickland’s actions. While his outward brutal treatment of the Amphibian Man may seem like his most disturbing display of monstrosity, it is his smaller acts of violence against women that are more chilling. When he has sex with his wife, it is violent, aggressive and solely about his pleasure. He covers her mouth with his infected, blood-soaked hand, yet another way in which he silences her. His language used towards women is abhorrent and savage too. After losing his fingers, he is thankful that he still has his trigger finger and his ‘pussy finger’. When attempting to intimidate the defiant Elisa, he expresses a desire to make her ‘scream’, a threat that is made more chilling given how he treats his wife. His rotting hand acts as his phallic weapon.

Strickland’s monstrous behaviour is juxtaposed by the empathetic and loving Amphibian Man and the kind, sweet natured Giles (Richard Jenkins), Elisa’s gay neighbour. Both characters pose a perceived threat to Strickland’s own masculinity. The Amphibian Man is stronger and more powerful than Strickland, who must then assert himself by means of torture and confinement. Similarly, Giles, cast out from the homophobic society in which he lives, is a threat to the heteronormative world Strickland is comfortable in.

Elisa is perhaps del Toro’s most subversive heroine. Wholly connected to her sexuality, Elisa is unashamed of her curated morning routine of breakfast-making, music-listening and bathtub-masturbating. Cinematic preconceptions would suggest that the doe-eyed, voiceless Elisa is nothing more than a wallflower when in fact, she is the only character in control of her sexuality. It is Elisa who initiates sex with the Amphibian Man, seducing him in the place she pleasures herself daily—her apartment bathroom. Unlike her friend Zelda (Octavia Spencer)—who holds no agency in her own love life, being married to an abusive drunk—Elisa does not suppress her desires but rather allows herself to experience them. Their love scenes are lyrical and sensual and despite all odds, they live happily ever after. For del Toro’s fans, this sweet ending couldn’t be more fitting; *The Shape of Water* finally won him his Academy Award.

However, his journey to the Academy Awards was a tumultuous one, with obstacles coming in the form of several claims of plagiarism. The first work to issue a complaint involved a 1969 play called *Let Me Hear You Whisper* by Paul Zindel.⁵⁹ The play, which later became a television movie, centres around Helen, a shy janitor at a government facility who develops a relationship with a dolphin that is being used for experimentation. The lawsuit

⁵⁷ Cynthia Freeland, ‘Realist Horror’, in *Philosophy and Film*, ed. Cynthia Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg (London: Routledge, 1995), 126-142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁹ Sam Levin, ‘Exclusive: playwright’s estate says *The Shape of Water* used his work without credit’, *Guardian*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/25/shape-of-water-oscar-paul-zindel-similarities>.

was raised by Zindel's son, David, who claimed that del Toro had stolen the story from his late father's play. Del Toro denied all allegations, claiming the inspiration had come from a conversation between him and novelist Daniel Kraus. The case was dismissed in federal court after the judge found that the similarities were too 'generic to be copyrighted'.⁶⁰ Another claim came from a group of students in The Netherlands who argued the film's plot was lifted from their short *The Space Between Us* (2015), which too featured a female janitor who saves an amphibious creature from a laboratory. This case was also quickly dismissed. *The Shape of Water* had been in production long before the short was released. These lawsuits pose an interesting question on where the line exists between homage and stealing. Director Jean-Pierre Jeunet claimed that del Toro stole a scene from his 1991 film, *Delicatessen*, in which characters perform a seated dance to a film on television. Jeunet never pressed charges but it could be argued that even his scene was not wholly original, and while del Toro never responded to the allegations, it nevertheless shrouded the film in controversy before the Academy Awards. The line between tribute and theft appears more blurred than ever. Vladimir Propp's narrative functions theory would suggest that all narrative storytelling is derived from a list of basic plots and character archetypes.⁶¹ Though originally conceived in relation to fairy tales, film theorists have adopted and adapted his writings to film. While David Bordwell highlights the problems in deconstructing film in this way, it emphasises the grey area created by the use of intertextuality and homage.⁶²

Conclusion

In his nearly thirty years as a filmmaker, del Toro has elevated himself from art-house director to fantasy visionary. Favouring physical sets and practical effects when possible, the del Toro aesthetic is undeniably that of an auteur.

Peter Brunette credits del Toro for having 'single-handedly invented [the] Spanish-language subdivision of the horror-ghost genre',⁶³ which has rapidly gained notoriety. He has influenced a new generation of filmmakers and is consistently nurturing new talent. J. A. Bayona's Spanish supernatural horror film, *El orfanato* (*The Orphanage*, 2007), was produced by del Toro and is filled with many intertextual references to his own body of work. The film's poignant ending is reminiscent of the heart-breaking conclusion to *Pan's Labyrinth* and the use of ghostly orphans is a del Toro necessity. His work as producer on the children's animated film, *The Book of Life* (Jorge Gutierrez, 2014), ensured that the visuals were rich and appetising, infusing the film with authentic Mexican heritage. As with all his work, it is a celebration of life and cinema.

With the rise of social media in recent years, del Toro has become an active member in online discourse with fans of all things 'geek'. He is as excited about new releases as the general public are and consistently engages in thought-provoking conversation not only with his fanbase, but also with his contemporaries. Del Toro does not hold himself up as some deity but considers himself 'first and foremost a geek'.⁶⁴ His bizarre and wonderful home, affectionately called 'Bleak House', is a shrine to all things nerdy. His cameo in an episode of

⁶⁰ Rory Mulholland, 'Director of Oscar favourite *The Shape of Water* accused of copying scenes from *Amelie* and *Delicatessen*', *Telegraph*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/10/director-oscar-favourite-shape-water-accused-copying-scenes>.

⁶¹ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, second edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 19-24.

⁶² David Bordwell, 'ApPropriations and ImProprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative', *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 3 (1988): 5-20. doi:10.2307/1225288.

⁶³ Peter Brunette, "'The Orphanage": A Review', review of *Crimson Peak* by Guillermo del Toro, *Screen Daily*, 29 May 2007, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-orphanage-review/4032886.article>.

⁶⁴ Guillermo del Toro, *At Home with the Monsters: Inside his films, notebooks and collections* (London: Titan Books, 2016), i.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia (Richie Keen, 2012) was as much for his own inner geek as it was for the fans. This is perhaps what makes him so unique. While he has transitioned from the art-house director of his youth into a household name, del Toro has maintained his humility and his national identity. He is a proud Mexican filmmaker, who represents entire generations of displaced youth who, through hard work and integrity, achieved greatness. His work has united people across the world as 'the patron saints of imperfection.'⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ Ibid.

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