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Between Reality and Fantasy: The Narrative Strategies of the Horror Genre in Productions by Laika Studios (2009-2015)

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the narrative strategies used to communicate the horror genre in the scripts of Laika studios and to investigate both the extent to which they contribute to imbuing the genre with a unique character in aesthetic and dramatic terms within mainstream animation cinema and the role they fulfil within the framework of their thematic approaches. To this end, a textual analysis of the studio's productions was conducted for *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009), *ParaNorman* (Chris Butler & Sam Fell, 2012), *The Boxtrolls* (Graham Annable & Anthony Stacchi, 2014) and *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Travis Knight, 2016). The analysis was based on the knowledge categories proposed by Jule Selbo's (2010) study on the creation of a mental space for the genre. The categories are divided into schematic, specific, and relevant knowledge. Finally, this study demonstrates how the tactics of the horror genre used in these films have enabled a different view of common themes in family-oriented Hollywood animation by communicating a stark image of the family and growing up. Although this image is not transgressive, it is certainly innovative by virtue of its thematic content, in which warnings against romanticising reality abound.

Keywords
Laika, children's horror, animation, family movies, narrative strategies, fairy tales.

1. Introduction

Since its creation in 2005, Laika studios has distinguished itself with the fanciful, somewhat spooky style of its stop-motion productions for children and families. This style is the prevailing characteristic of a studio that defines its mission in terms of innovating upon existing filmmaking techniques and creating exciting and stimulating stories (Watercutter, 2015). The dark patina of the studio's films is derived from the use of horror genre strategies typical of fairy tales and Gothic stories that have also been adopted in the production of films for family audiences, such as *Monster House* (Gil Kenan, 2006) and *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012). The studio's approach has provided a measure of box-office and critical success.

No academic studies have focused on Laika itself. However, Laika has served as a case study for subjects related to 3D technology, stop-motion animation (Priebe, 2011), and

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processes such as storyboarding (Pallant & Price, 2015). In addition, some reference books on animation include a brief mention of the studio's position in the industry (Bendazzi, 2016). The publications that discuss Laika's productions have focused on the technical and cultural aspects of its first two films. *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) is the film that is the most often cited (Myers, 2012; Howarth, 2014; Short, 2015; Campbell, 2014), perhaps because it is the studio's most complex film to date, while *ParaNorman* (Chris Butler & Sam Fell, 2012) has been analysed by scholars of children's horror films (Lester, 2016; Estes & Kelp-Stebbins, 2016).

Laika has undeniably found its niche in an industry of global influence and economic, social and cultural importance –that is, the U.S. family entertainment industry, so studying it is at least interesting in terms of the style of storytelling it contributes to the industry, which, compared to the styles of Disney or Pixar, represents an infrequently seen business risk. Therefore, this study aims to explore the narrative strategies used to communicate the horror genre in the studio's scripts, to examine the extent to which they contribute to developing a unique character in aesthetic and dramatic terms within mainstream animation film and to determine the role that they fulfil within the framework of their thematic proposals. This approach applies the knowledge categories proposed by Selbo (2010) for the creation of a mental space for the horror genre.

The films under analysis are *Coraline*, a fantasy framed in the children's horror genre; *ParaNorman*, a film that, although less frightening than *Coraline* because of its parodic qualities, remains firmly ensconced in the same genre; and *The Boxtrolls* (Graham Annable & Anthony Stacchi, 2014) and *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Travis Knight, 2016), films in the fairy-tale and fantasy/adventure genres, respectively.

First, this study focuses on the idea of children's horror films and their strategies as key elements in writing family-oriented content. This focus will facilitate the identification of terminology and conventions that constitute Laika's style. Next, the narrative possibilities that stop-motion animation offers to the genre are discussed based on the studio's predilection for this technique. Once these questions have been raised, the analytical instrument chosen for the textual study of the cases is described, beginning with aspects of the narrative structure and genre-related conventions that influence Laika's storytelling and convey its perspective on the topics of their films. Finally, the main horror genre narrative strategies are examined to determine their formal and thematic contributions to the unique and original character of the subject films.

2. Children's horror films and their narrative strategies

2.1. *Towards a concept of children's horror films*

The horror film genre explores the deepest human fears, seeking to provoke emotions in its audience related to the fear of the unknown, to a natural or supernatural threat, and to the "disgust over its potential aftermath" (Tamborini & Weaver, 1996, p. 2) arising from the consummation of that threat. Some films focus on taboos and others on specific historical and cultural fears (Grant, 2013). In this sense, the genre addresses the social anomalies embodied in the monster figure, whose unpredictable nature arouses the fear of being under its control and that is supposed or known to be evil.

Thus, "horror is one of the few genres that are defined in terms of their intended effect" (Grant, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, when considering its use in the subgenre category of children's cinema, the task of conceptualising this narrative becomes somewhat problematic, since the public's requirements become a key factor in shaping the narrative and modifying the emotional intensity of these stories to adapt them to an audience that demands special treatment because of its young developmental stage (Dorr, 1986).

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Terrifying stories intended for the youngest audiences, especially audio-visual stories, are often "ghostly rather than horrific" (Smith, 1996, p. 88), and they tend to sugar-coat certain situations or treat some of their more intense moments comedically. This approach softens both the impact of the violence and those elements that define the genre as such, which is how its fans prefer it (Antunes, 2014). For this reason, some academics of children's films have classified the subgenre as "impossible" (Lester, 2016, p. 25), while almost none of the horror genre scholars include it in their studies (Antunes, 2015).

Despite these issues, the popularity of horror films among children has been undeniable since the birth of the seventh art, and it has been subject to numerous regulations to prevent this audience from seeing the genre's more extreme adult content, thus contributing to the emergence of films that explore horror from the perspective of children and youth, along with the configuration of the current form of the subgenre (Smith, 2005; Antunes, 2014, 2015).

Furthermore, children's film has its own conventions that influence the creation of terrifying content for this audience. According to Bazzalgette and Staples, children's films must engage "the interests, fears, misunderstandings and anxieties of children on their own terms" (1995, p. 96). Therefore, their stories are aimed at children under twelve and focus on topics such as friendship, family, and the problems of growing up, covering a broad spectrum of genres. It should be noted that the tone of these films is usually kind and optimistic, since the plots usually impart a moral lesson that shows the possibility of good triumphing over evil.

These characteristics are somewhat different because in mainstream cinema, children's content and family-oriented content have become synonymous, although there are substantial differences among them, especially in terms of thematic treatment. Content directed at the family nucleus must attract both adults and children (Addison, 2000), which implies more complex storytelling and usually features adult protagonists. This content is attractive enough for a heterogeneous audience, as issues that are not unique to children are addressed, and narrative strategies such as intertextuality and "double-entendre" are often employed to provide more entertainment for older viewers.

Considering all of the above, one can define children's horror films as films aimed at an audience under twelve years old, with plots that feature a child during different periods of childhood (especially early puberty), in which the deepest fears of growing up are explored. These fears are represented by different types of monsters: supernatural apparitions, zombies, power-hungry men, mad scientists, witches, and classic horror-film and fairy-tale characters appearing in the framework of adventure- and fantasy-filled stories that seek to create tension and provoke emotional reactions such as fright, but without terrifying their audiences. These films offer the possibility of vicariously confronting specific fears about one's maturation process from a perspective that heightens that which is disturbing and terrifying.

2.2. *Adapting the narrative strategies of horror for children*

"The audience of the horror genre is fascinated with the exploration of the idea that 'evil' is present all around us, [...] [and] gives the audience a chance to experience the emotional and physical reactions to their deepest fears in a 'safe' environment" (Selbo, 2015, p. 124). To that end, this narrative "handles a complex machinery [...] [that generates] a special atmosphere that must envelop the story in a certain way" (Lema, 2015, p. 17), creating a tone and style that distinguishes the genre from others in the realm of cinema and addressing issues connected to human needs as one of the key aspects of its execution (Martínez, 2004, p. 20, cited in Lema, 2015, p. 17-18). As such, the horror genre, like other genres, frequently explores the hierarchy of human needs defined by Maslow in 1943[1] and in the case of content for children, has been

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[1] On the importance of taking emotional risks based on human needs, see Seger (1987).

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called "the eternal subject of childhood" (Carey *et al.*, 2002): the search for independence, the need for empowerment, the need for satisfying social interaction, and the need to master ordinary adult tasks and other tasks such as dancing, excelling in sports and correctly learning what one is taught in school.

All these issues are usually linked to a core topic: the relationship between children and their parents or any authority figure. Indeed, as Bentley (2002) notes, heroes and monsters are often incarnated by parents, although it should be noted that malevolent figures are also impostors or characters who want to usurp good parents such as the despotic stepmothers of fairy tales.

In Carroll's words, the horror story is made up of "complex discovery plots" that include four phases: the existence of the monster is revealed to the audience but not to the protagonists; the monster is discovered by the protagonists; the evil presence is confirmed and shown to the authorities by the main character; and the protagonists battle the monster, which may or may not be defeated (1990, p. 99-103). In the case of children's horror stories, the confirmation phase often unfolds in a manner such that only children can resolve the plot conflict because the authorities frequently cannot or do not want to help them (Lester, 2016). However, it is not uncommon for the hero of the story to get help from peers, such as the elderly and the insane, who have also been denied a voice by the authorities (Bentley, 2002).

The urgency of the action is sometimes driven by the need to save one's own life or rescue the main character's parents or others. After achieving these objectives, a transformational arc ensues either in those who benefitted from the heroic action or in the one who executed it. This subject matter is why many productions in the children's horror subgenre combine the coming-of-age and quest themes that are so conducive to the fantasy and adventure genres.

Furthermore, the battle against the monster justifies violent acts by the child protagonists without the need to portray them as the acts of one possessed, as would occur in a horror movie for adults (Troutman, 2015). In addition, the main character is generally much more active and is closer to the heroic archetypes of the adventure stories upon which the subgenre is usually hybridised than to the narrative designs of horror. Even so, it is common to find some degree of alienation in the portrayal of the main character, as in the case of *Vincent* (Tim Burton, 1982).

As for the antagonistic forces in these stories, in addition to being embodied by adults, they can be represented by humans: monsters recycled from classic horror films by direct or indirect reference and domestic monsters such as family members who, because of a supernatural element, introduce an evil presence into the home (Troutman, 2015) and create the horrifying feeling that the world may not be a safe place (Robin Wood, 2003).

The figure of a monster personified by a child is infrequent in the subgenre because it is problematic from a narrative and commercial standpoint. On one hand, its malevolent nature can set a bad example for children in the audience. On the other hand, the annihilation of the monster for the triumph of good over evil would be a disturbing image (Troutman, 2015).

With respect to other iconological strategies, these films resort to genre conventions such as the use of haunted houses, villages inhabited by soulless or sinister beings or simply by victims of social paranoias, along with action scenes that take place in the dim corners of forests and other gloomy places. Such films also employ other resources for inducing psychological terror that do not require seeing blood but merely intuiting it, thus arousing one's imagination about the events that are being narrated.

3. Animation as an ideal strategy for communicating horror in children's films

For years, animation has been viewed by the general public as synonymous with a genre and with children's film. Although this article does not support that position, it does affirm that the medium provides a certain distancing and a feeling of "safety, fun, nostalgia, and

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childishness [...]. At the same time, the fantastic and transformative aspects of animation can be a powerful tool for telling stories that are dark, surprising or somehow subversive" (Hawley, 2015, p. 2). Perhaps for this reason, in the context of mainstream cinema, the relationship between animation, horror, and an audience of children has been long-lived and strong. For example, think not only of terrifying short films such as *The Skeleton Dance* (W. Disney, 1929) but also of the constant presentation of terrifying scenes in children's productions, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (W. Cottrell *et al.*, 1937) to *Night on Bald Mountain* in *Fantasia* (Samuel Armstrong *et al.*, 1940) to contemporary productions such as *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995).

The language of animation enables the enhancement of plastic and formal aspects such as the design of characters and scenes and the creation of the rules of the universe based on the emotion-stirring techniques used in the production. All this can contribute to creating the disturbing atmosphere that we have been discussing and that must viewed as beginning with writing the script.

The most distinctive element of stop-motion animation is found in how such films are made. Authors such as Jan Svankmajer and the Quay brothers have found an ideal way to tell stories with surreal characteristics using this technique, which exploits the capacity to generate familiarity through the realistic vitality of the objects and characters created. At the same time, the technique arouses feelings of strangeness and unease due to the breakdown of predictable or routine elements, which can be seen in the small imperfections in movements, design, and lighting. This feature of stop-motion animation is very effective in horror stories because it suggests that sinister space explored by Freud (1919) in which the lines between reality and fiction are blurred.

Finally, a more playful aspect of stop-motion animation is that it creates distance from the most violent or arresting action through the design of the characters' actions and reactions. Thus, we can see the disturbed imagination of the protagonist of *Vincent* or one of Emily's eyes falling out in *Corpse Bride* (Tim Burton, 2005) without experiencing it as we might upon seeing the same in live action.

4. The genre's mental space: a proposed methodology for analysis

The appreciation of any aspect of a genre implies the study not only of the genre's conventions but also of how they interact with the elements of other genres with which they are combined, with the story that is told, and with the concepts that are conveyed in the story to fulfil the emotional expectations created by what is presented on the screen. In this sense, the idea of mental space –a concept adopted by Selbo (2010) as the creative foundation of the genre– can be very helpful.

Mental space is a concept first created by Facunnier (1987), which he further developed with Lakoff in the 1990s. This concept consists of building hypothetical worlds that do not represent exact replicas of reality but rather represent how one imagines these worlds should be (Facunnier, 1994). In other words, they present an **idealised cognitive model** (ICM) of stable and collective mental representations of the world that do not need to be rigid because they can vary depending on temporal (diachronic) or cultural issues (Evans & Green, 2006).

For Selbo, a diegesis constitutes an ICM because the elements that comprise it are designed for specific characters adapted to embody a specific story and do not distract from its plot or theme, and thus, other possible worlds are discarded (2010). Thus, the elements of an ICM communicated by a genre are based on an audience's emotional and cognitive expectations regarding conventions such as tone, style, and scenes, and they take the form of the following three types of knowledge.

Schematic knowledge is the knowledge category that alludes to the elements that enable the audience to recognise the predominant genre in a story through its narrative structure, especially in the first and third dramatic acts. It has been stated that the initial action or beat

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contains the "genetic code for the complete script" (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2007, p. 186) and introduces the principles of the genre, which must be coherently resolved with these same elements in the final phase of the story. Similarly, schematic knowledge is identified in the internal device that frames the scenes and facilitates the fulfilment or disappointment of the audience's expectations.

Specific knowledge is made up of the iconological and narrative features of each genre, such as the use of certain archetypes, styles, and tones that have been established in the audience's memory and that facilitate the recognition of their emotional features.

Finally, **relevant knowledge** is the manner in which the genre becomes an appropriate vehicle for communicating themes and ways of seeing the world. This knowledge is used to reach specific groups through the author's self-reflection –his or her perspective on society's moral standards and the use of symbols embedded in the culture in which the production occurs.

Although Selbo's approach is not intended to be a methodology for analysis, it is certainly useful for this study's purposes, since it facilitates the examination of a genre even when it is not the predominant one in a film, such as in some of Laika's productions. Similarly, it enables the recognition of the semantic-syntactic interaction that Altman (2000) emphasises for the study of genres and that, in short, give the work its peculiar features as discourse and place it within a specific category of film genre.

5. Laika's composition of horror

5.1. *The road travelled in a horror adventure*

The narrative structure as a unifying and organising principle of the events of the plot results from various aspects that include a genre-based communicative and emotional strategy. In this sense, fantasy and horror create worlds and promise their audience an inner journey in which secondary genres tend to "elevate" the story in terms of the schematic knowledge (Selbo, 2014, p. 120). For example, in a hybrid such as adventure/fantasy, the genre to which *Kubo* belongs, fantasy contributes the "structure of the story (the *journey*), and adventure contributes to the growth experienced by the protagonists (the *inner exploration*)" (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2009, p. 111). In the other films studied here, the basic plots are those of search (*Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, *Kubo*) and rescue (*Boxtrolls*). Those that depict the internal journey of the characters include themes of maturation (*Coraline*) and discovery (*ParaNorman*, *Kubo*, *Boxtrolls*). They are constructs similar to any type of fantasy and adventure, while the internal changes in the protagonists or in others teach valuable lessons.

With regard to the basic plots, the initial minutes of each Laika story, moving through its structural peripeteia (catalyst, turning points and climax), present events that are not conventionally seen in the most recent mainstream animated films, even in those that incorporate the children's horror subgenre. Not only do the Laika productions convey a disturbing atmosphere, they also convey a sinister theme that evokes the abject quality of horror, or in Krsiteva's terms, "that which does not respect borders, positions, rules, that which disturbs identity, system, order" (1982, p. 4).

The doll replica of Coraline that catalyses the girl's adventure and that presages the fate of the youngsters who have lost their eyes and lives at the hands of a witch whose nature was revealed in the images of the opening credits in *Coraline*; the kidnapping of a baby by monsters lurking in a village in *The Boxtrolls*; the child who watches B-movies with the ghost of his grandmother in *ParaNorman*; the wounded mother who escapes with her baby so that his grandfather cannot tear out his only remaining eye: all these scenes evoke the terror of fairy tales in which the young protagonists face hostile forces of unbounded dangerousness, although the movie versions of these stories move away from the characteristic sugar-coating

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of these cinematographic contents. However, some parts of these films do resort to this device and have an underlying comedic tone, as befits children's stories.

The narrative design of each film analysed here identifies the phases of the complex plot of discovery, regardless of whether it is a parody, horror, or adventure/fantasy and regardless of whether the fantasy worlds are distinguished from the real world. Coraline, Norman, and Eggs and Winnie (*The Boxtrolls*) all face threats that were previously anticipated by the viewer. When the protagonists discover the threat and their efforts to prove its existence to others fail, they must face their antagonists either alone or with minimal support. In addition, anti-climax is used in the case of *Coraline*, a frequent device in the horror and thriller genres that is used to demonstrate the almost invincible nature of the monster. The threat of the witch remains even in the film's conclusion because her now-destroyed hand that has previously come to life on its own is tied to the only key that opens the door to the fantasy world and has been thrown into a well.

Kubo is the exception to this tendency, acting more on the requirements of its predominant genre, although its plot includes horror strategies during times of danger in the story. Therefore, it can be acknowledged that the events in these Laika stories lead the protagonists to adventures in which the tension comes from the threat of the monster and in which some devices of interest are used to provoke fear, although the battle is presented as a game and laughter is sometimes sought to relieve the tension.

During the third act and climax, when the protagonists must face their antagonists, they demonstrate an even greater virulence than anticipated in the first act and in the ups and downs of the second act so that the little hero is faced with the task of saving his parents and loved ones (*Coraline*, *Boxtrolls*), his community (*ParaNorman*), or himself (*Kubo*) without the help of any powerful personage. At this point, the strategy closest to horror used in these stories is the revelation of the true and evil nature of the monster, emphasised by a metamorphosis that displays the magnitude of its power and its evil and that is manifested by a visibly ugly appearance.

Here, in this section, it is necessary to refer to the protagonists of the stories, after all, it is they who experience an arc of transformation that reveals their true character as their commitment to the adventure grows, drawing from a dramatic question that gives significance to the story. From this perspective, "seeing the characters' positions in a plot is more important than their dependency on certain genres" (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 162), and not all conflicts have the same dramatic impact on audiences. In the first act, all the Laika characters display conditions of helplessness resulting from some form of parental neglect. Although this characteristic is common in any type of children's narrative, its use in the design of a horror story should be noted, since it highlights the danger to the child posed by the monster, along with the possibility of change and empowerment at the end of the narrative.

Furthermore, the inner journeys of the Laika characters studied here raise fundamental questions about identity and maturity. Coraline must leave childhood fantasies behind to open herself to the reality of adult life. Kubo and Norman help others discover beauty among differences and pain, while Eggs discovers who he truly is to lead a fuller life. In summary, the process leading to these story arcs is the fruit of a communicative and emotional strategy centred on the threat of the monster, in which the character is a key element in the connection between the audience and the story and between the subject matter and the audience, and it is based on the classic, universal issues of children's stories.

5.2. *Laika's composition of horror*

Horror is characterised by being highly identifiable to the audience and its "high degree of semantic reconcilability and a high level of syntactic consistency" (Altman, 2000, p. 90). In this sense, Laika's productions employ classic elements of the genre to develop a disturbing atmosphere that from the psychological and physical points of view are sometimes close to

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what Lovecraft described as the key element of a supernatural horror story, in which the fear of the "certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present" (2014), although some of the plots do not include a supernatural element.

The viewer's insertion into this atmosphere occurs in autumnal settings with cloudy skies and sometimes amidst strong storms. This approach is consistent throughout stories with numerous nocturnal scenes and daytime scenes without the overt presence of the sun, which usually appears towards the end, when the difficulties have been resolved. Similarly, the action takes place in forests with fallen leaves and twisted branches, over which skies full of clouds can transform into unnatural, threatening shapes. This design contrasts with other, alternative worlds or much more colourful fantasy spaces such as the underground homes of the Boxtrolls, the magical recreation of the adventures of Hanzo, and the Other Mother's house in *Coraline*, in which case the aura of danger is not lost.

The places in which the stories unfold are based on real places that have some connection to the horror or that provide a credible environment for the atmosphere of the stories, such as the Pacific Northwest of *Coraline*, the New England town where the infamy of *ParaNorman* at some point reigned, the legendary and mysterious Japan of *Kubo* (a propitious backdrop to address the ancestral wisdom in these stories), and unknown towns that echo Victorian tales (*The Boxtrolls*). In addition, the architectural design of these spaces comes from the Gothic and horror imaginary expressed by old Victorian or post-Victorian houses. There are places with extravagant neighbours and towns inhabited by oblivious and sometimes despicable human beings who can act as opponents (*ParaNorman* and *The Boxtrolls*). Still others, despite their peculiarity or minor roles in the plot, eventually come to the aid of the protagonist (*Coraline* and *Kubo*).

In this context, the inclusion of a large number of impressive scenes that repulse the viewer is notorious: the unpleasant food served to Coraline by her real parents; Norman's interaction with the ghost of a dog split in half or the scene in which his uncle's dead body falls on top of him; and Snatcher's allergic reaction in *The Boxtrolls* that deforms him and that subsequently heals from an attack by a cluster of leeches. Even in *Kubo*, some injuries from accidents or battles are presented crudely, such as the hook that tears Monkey's skin and leaves a large, open wound.

Similarly, one can recognise in the unfolding of these stories the mixture of iconographic motifs of horror and fantasy: ghosts, murdered children, objects used as portals that lead to supernatural and unknown worlds such as mirrors (*Coraline*) and books (*ParaNorman*), which evoke classics such as *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alicia Found There* (Carroll, 1871). Similarly, protection amulets and old legends (*Kubo*) are used to introduce macabre elements that can be highlighted by the inclusion of references to iconic films of the genre such as *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960).

The same happens in the development of its protagonists, who display classic motifs of children's narratives, giving it resonance and universality: all are entering puberty; Kubo is a boy who has lost all that he cares about in life, as did Harry Potter (J. K. Rowling, 1997-2007); Coraline rebels against her new surroundings, as did Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden* (Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1910), although the *Coraline* plot is, in the words of Henry Selick, "a delicious combination between *Alice in Wonderland* and *Hansel and Gretel*" (Cohen, 2009, p. 42). Only Norman has a clear cinematic reference point in a child character from adult cinema –Cole Sear of *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), who can also see dead people, a strategy congruent with the parodic character of *ParaNorman*.

Similarly, the treatment of the monster, in which all the fears addressed in the exploration of the theme are assembled, is evidence of how these films resort to the classic children's narrative of fear by using traditional characters: power-hungry adults (*The Boxtrolls*); recycled monsters (*ParaNorman*); wicked sorcerers (*Kubo*); and witches like the Other Mother in *Coraline*, which is more reminiscent of Hoffmann's *Sandman* (1817) and the

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blindness imposed as punishment on Cinderella's stepsisters (in the Grimm brothers' version) than it is of Queen Grimhilde from Disney's *Snow White*. Further, contrary to what usually happens in other mainstream animated productions, these beings come to represent abnormal, evil, or sinister aspects of society. Thus, it can be said that the narrative function of the beings in the films studied here is a terrifying rather than a fantastical one[2].

Special mention must be given to the originality of the treatment of the monster in *ParaNorman*, in which the antagonist is personified in a small, 11-year-old girl considered to be an evil being –a witch sentenced to death– in circumstances that evoke *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller, 1953). This approach is also a plausible way to resolve her annihilation by transforming her into a victim who is justified in accepting that revenge and resentment will not free her from the anger that consumes her, thereby making a positive argument about how to face the incomprehensible nature of the violence. Similarly, we must note the classic device of employing this archetype to illuminate the perversity of human actions motivated by vain ambitions and the stupidity of class struggle and paranoia represented by the people of Cheesebridge in *The Boxtrolls*, in which the real monster of the story is a man, not the trolls.

The topics addressed in these stories are related to children's anxieties such as identity (*Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, *The Boxtrolls*, *Kubo*), maturation (*Coraline*), acceptance by peers and family (*ParaNorman*), parental love (*Kubo*, *Coraline*), loss, loneliness, death, and bullying. However, a differentiator is the use of the thematic motifs of horror, similar to that of the slasher, in which the protagonists run the risk of becoming monster food or being mutilated by it, as in *Coraline* and *Kubo*, in which the terrible fears of childhood are also addressed: "Hurting one's eyes or losing one's sight" (Freud, 1909, p. 7); the possibility of being "tortured" or enslaved as happens to the Other Wybie and the other children in *Coraline*; or the fear of dying violently like Agatha in *ParaNorman*.

Finally, for an audience of children, the most terrifying situation presented on the screen is abandonment and loneliness in the absence of a father figure, which is one of the most common and greatest fears for a child. This fear is further emphasised by the representation of adults and parents who do not help resolve conflicts and even make it more difficult or frustrating for the children to overcome their obstacles (*Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, *and The Boxtrolls*). This situation creates a helplessness that worsens when the monster is introduced into the bosom of its innermost circle.

5.3. *Reality in Laika's dark fantasies*

The horror genre is "the barometer for measuring an era's cultural anxieties" (Magistrale, 2005, p. xiii). Therefore, it is not by chance that this genre's strategies are the ideal mechanism for Laika to capture its audience's imagination, just as some fantasy stories, fairy tales, and more classic Gothic stories have done. For Laika, they serve as a channel for presenting a disturbing vision of the dangers that spring from superficiality, from the idealisation of man's realities, and from not recognising the value of the past and the value of that which is authentically human –all very common in a society that offers false models of happiness through various media.

The recognition of these cross-cutting themes in each story studied, channelled through the conventions of the horror genre that shapes contexts, sometimes contemporary ones, have high levels of conflict in which the biggest problem lies in the monstrous attitudes of the antagonist force that prevents their main characters from having somewhat "normal" families in which they can feel accepted and loved and in which their personalities are appreciated.

In this sense, horror as a narrative that is inclined to tackle taboos promotes the review of the recurrent issues in the children's cinema of today, such as family, identity, and

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[2] Carroll distinguishes the fantastical monster from the terrifying one in that the former is an ordinary being from an extraordinary world, while in the horror genre this archetype represents the abnormality of society (1990).

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friendship. In Laika's case, this approach offers an unconventional prism that shapes a stark representation of the adult world with somewhat subversive themes.

5.3.1. True reality versus an idealised reality

The stories studied here take advantage of the horror genre's capacity to involve the viewer psychologically and symbolically through the oxymoron, exploring "the possible and the impossible, the regressive and the progressive, the didactic and the subversive, the child as a symbol of both innocence and anarchy" (Lester, 2016b, p. 270). The stories use the genre's presuppositions to confront ideas not usually seen in a politically correct society, in which intolerance towards whoever is considered different hinders the possibilities of coexistence and understanding and the lines between what is false and what is true are becoming increasingly blurred. Thus, these stories highlight the urgency of being able to recognise reality and accept it as a starting point for changing the environment, fighting chimaeras that distract attention from the authentic.

In this sense, the protagonists of these films go through processes and crises that challenge their expectations of life and happiness with the reality that surrounds them: Coraline wants a different, perfect life that, once she explores it a bit, exacts a macabre price. Eggs discovers that the real monsters are human, while Norman and Kubo, the children who suffer the most in these four films, try to make others see the beauty in the imperfection of life. The attitudes exhibited in the two types of characters represent a source of pain and conflict for them.

Laika's world reflects the bewilderment of children and adults when facing the discrepancy between what they have been told is happiness and what it truly means to live when confronted by reality. Coraline does not have the option of changing parents, as did the protagonist of *Matilda* (Danny DeVito, 1996) both because there is no Miss Honey and because she already has a family, even with all its flaws. Eggs cannot help but express his confusion when he reproaches Winnie for her father's behaviour, after believing what she had claimed –"the fathers were supposed to help. That they took care of kids" (Brignull & Pava, 2014, p. 89)–while the wise little girl does not know what to say. The importance of this lesson is added to another key issue of growing up: nothing comes easily; you must first walk down a dark path and, as in *Coraline*, "through intelligent decisions and positive actions" (Howarth, 2014, p. 90). Norman will always talk to the dead, and Kubo's parents will not come back from the dead. However, both are capable of using reason and the power of truth to transform the monsters that threaten them.

Nevertheless, the adults in these movies more or less suffer the tensions of a paradoxical life that requires an alignment of reality with expectations: April and Miriam (*Coraline*) live on the glories of days gone by, Bobinski (*Coraline*) and Snatcher (*The Boxtrolls*) dwell in the reverie of an elusive success, and the Jones couple works all day, giving advice to others about how keep a garden when they do not have time for a garden themselves or even to care for their daughter, Coraline. These are examples that contrast with more approachable characters such as the mothers of Kubo and Norman, who, in their own way, guide them on how to face the circumstances of their lives. Thus, narcissism, a contemporary feature of our society, is depicted as a defect that prevents the recognition of what is real.

5.3.2. The family as an essential model for the child

The family has always been a central theme of children's cinema, often providing an idealised perspective that springs from its image of being a community based on unconditional love and respect among its members. Meanwhile, horror films have a more dysfunctional view of this nucleus and explore its less flattering aspects by embodying the monster in a family member or presenting an external force that threatens family unity and harmony. Thus, the

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films analysed here harvest some aspects of fairy tales, a genre that over the years has effectively combined the topic of family with images of horror aimed at children.

Laika's adoption of this strategy is seen in its representation of imperfect families that in some cases, are caricatures far from the model families seen in other stories of mainstream children's cinema in the U.S. Their purpose is to express on the screen current parental fears, such as the inability to support their children or to achieve a work-life balance (*Coraline*), the fear that the children will see how difficult life truly is (*Kubo*), or the fear that their children will be rejected for their idiosyncrasies (*ParaNorman*).

Despite these underlying currents, the overarching theme of the four films analysed here is radically pro-family. Indeed, the protagonists' triumphs over evil are linked to the restoration of familial relationships and a feeling of belonging to that nucleus. The parental abandonment mentioned above is not positively represented, and when the children must face the disappearance of their family history, it is shown as a very significant loss (*Kubo*, *The Boxtrolls*).

Similarly, parental attitudes such as the inability to pay attention to children are portrayed in a ridiculous and exaggerated manner, often because the parents are pursuing a certain status or lifestyle. However, they are then redeemed through a transformational arc in which their imperfect love is somewhat commended. In this way, Laika does not contravene the conventional boundaries of children's cinema, although the studio's portrayal of the parents, brothers, uncles and grandparents of the protagonists continues to be disturbing.

In this sense, it is alarming to recall that Kubo's relatives are not an impersonation of his real family: it is his grandfather who intentionally almost blinds him and it is his aunts who murdered their parents, just as Scar murdered Mufasa in *The Lion King* (Rob Minkoff & Roger Allers, 1994). However, in Laika's film, the motivations of the Moon King and his daughters are disguised as a misunderstood love for the boy, and they are expressed as a desire to shield him from seeing the pain of the real world. The theme of "a cosmetic reality for children" has preoccupied authors from other countries such as Miyazaki, who in *Spirited Away* (2001) used an approach that was more fantastical than horrifying to address the topic of identity and noted the trap of wanting a conflict-free life for children, since such a life would compromise the future of the family and society (Pérez-Guerrero, 2013).

Of the films studied, the plotline for the Other Mother in *Coraline* is the one that most strongly warns of this danger to children and adults while harshly criticising society's image of motherhood. As Short (2015) explains, this character represents the impossibility of attaining the maternal ideal presented in some children's stories, including horror stories, a genre that has been especially hard on progenitors. They reflect the dominant cultural expectations that frequently highlight their flaws and that condemn both excessive interference in the lives of their children and neglect of their children. Additionally, the character's perfect and complacent disposition is a deception that threatens to destroy Coraline as it has destroyed others, so that the real mother becomes preferable since her cluelessness and irritability do not come from something bad or a lack of love for her daughter.

This complexity is how Laika employs the narrative strategies of horror to warn that the possibility of evil taking root in the home does not stem from the family as an institution, nor from aspiring to the values that society ascribes to the family such as love, support and respect, but from a powerful attitude that can affect family members and that pushes them to look for something that is not authentic. As such, the Laika message is considered praiseworthy.

5.3.3. Friendship and identity

Friendship is one of the most common topics in children's cinema today. Its undeniable importance in life has become a sort of substitute for or extension of the family, something

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that seems to be a product of the crisis in the institution and that is increasingly reflected in many U.S. productions. However, in the films that interest us here, it is the most infrequent theme. Their protagonists are loners who are misunderstood, and for this reason, they are sometimes feared and harassed. Indeed, these stories are populated more by adults than by children, which is why the victim's isolation, a prototypical feature of the horror genre, is manifested in children who are growing up in a world mainly populated by grown-ups.

Wybie (*Coraline*), Neil (*ParaNorman*) and Winnie (*The Boxtrolls*) are the friends who accompany the main characters in these stories, performing an essential task: that of the assistant. In all three films, they are solitary children who are adamant about befriending the protagonists of the stories, since they are the same. They represent a complement to the character of the heroes while reflecting their noble traits or their shortcomings. Such is Wybie, who looks like a terrifying, masked man and who is too talkative and annoying for Coraline. However, thanks to his help and the existence of his double in the Other Mother's world, the girl learns to value his friendship. Thus, friendship is seen as something positive, a relationship in which differences must be accepted and in which there are no signs of friendship substituting for family, a notion mentioned at the beginning of this subsection.

Greater weight is given in these productions to the knowledge and appreciation of one's own identity, an issue that has also been addressed by films such as *Wreck-It Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2012) and Pixar's productions (Pérez-Guerrero, 2013b). However, Laika's originality in addressing this issue lies in the adoption of a fundamental strategy of the horror genre: its distinctive view of the monsters that are antagonising the protagonists and the narrative's indulgence or lack thereof given to them.

The evil figures in the four films present a duality that in some sense demonstrates their fraudulent nature, as they pretend to be something they are not to do harm. The protagonists must be alert to this quality to successfully challenge them. These productions thereby emphasise that abnormality is not found on the surface but underneath it, in motives and behaviours.

The manifestation of the grotesque is also an example of what was missing from the monster: an embrace of reality that would enable them to love themselves and others. The Other Mother becomes Beldam because of her need to have someone to love or eat; Snatcher violates his own nature by hoping to belong to a group; Agatha turns into a vengeful witch when other people's fear hurts her; Norman's bullies at school are fools trying to survive, as Neil will tell him, and the Moon King and Agatha are defeated when faced with reality.

6. Conclusions

This study of the narrative strategies found in productions by Laika studios up to 2016 has determined that these strategies have made a significant contribution to differentiating this company's style from those of other film studios. This differentiation goes beyond the obvious aesthetic and technical aspects of Laika's productions compared to franchised studio productions, especially when they deal with scary subjects or with creative styles that are similar in their Gothic or technical qualities. Laika's concept of dark fantasies played out in stop motion seems consistent with an understanding of its main audience, not only because of the previously mentioned characteristics of animation and the horror genre but also because of the value that this genre's exploratory perspective contributes to children's stories.

In this sense, the combination of the narrative strategies of the horror genre and the classic conventions of the child character becomes the key element of Laika's productions and the source of their audience's acclaim. On one hand, it facilitates the exploration of the youngsters' real fears, offering them ways out that are full of ingenuity and in which fidelity to human values is necessary. On the other hand, the monster figure as an embodiment of social ills enables their stories to transcend the "boundaries" of horror stories for children by introducing taboo themes and serious, real, and more adult issues, creating a second plane

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for interpreting the stories. This strategy starkly contrasts with those used by other family-focused studios that attempt to attract a heterogeneous audience and feature an adult protagonist. As such, a study that examines audience response to and comprehension of these films would be interesting.

Furthermore, the monster figure in these films is key in the development of Laika's discourse on the subjects of tolerance, the richness of diversity, and unconventional beauty. This discourse supports two aspects of the topic: the person who regards someone else as being different and the person who is considered to be socially different or strange.

Similarly, fear as a fundamental human emotion of the horror genre emphasises the seriousness of the issues addressed in the stories, in which the comedic tone, which is typical of the subgenre of children's horror films, helps shed light on the less positive aspects of society today and stresses its encouraging aspects, which aligns with Laika's stated purpose of creating significant and classic stories.

Finally, the vision that emerges from the films is stark without being cynical. Although it is not transgressive, it is innovative by virtue of the thematic content of the films discussed in this study. This vision favours connections with reality, a subject that must be addressed in these times of ours.

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