

ABJECTION AND METAMORPHOSIS IN THE STOP-MOTION HORROR AESTHETICS OF *LA CASA LOBO/THE WOLF HOUSE*¹

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the work of Joaquín Cociña and Cristóbal León has garnered significant attention due to their unconventional approach to stop-motion animation. Deeply rooted in the political history of Chile, and particularly in the atrocities that occurred over decades in Colonia Dignidad, their debut feature film, *La Casa Lobo/The Wolf House* (2018), constructs a narrative of segregation, fear, and power through a lens of body horror. This paper analyzes the film by examining abjection and the various metamorphoses that occur within bodies, shaping the film's horror stop-motion aesthetics. In doing so, *The Wolf House* reveals a commentary embedded within its interplay of intermedial and intertextual fairy-tale imagery and characters, grotesque bodily manipulation, and transbiological transformations.

KEY WORDS: *The Wolf House*; Abjection; Metamorphosis; Body Horror; Stop-Motion Animation.

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ABYECCIÓN Y METAMORFOSIS EN LA ESTÉTICA DEL TERROR STOP-MOTION DE *LA CASA LOBO*/THE WOLF HOUSE

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, la obra de Joaquín Cociña y Cristóbal León ha llamado significativamente la atención debido a sus aproximaciones poco convencionales en la animación stop-motion. Profundamente arraigada en la historia política de Chile, y especialmente en las atrocidades que ocurrieron durante décadas en Colonia Dignidad, su primera película, *La Casa Lobo* (2018), construye una narrativa en torno a la segregación, el miedo y el poder, a través de la óptica de horror corporal. Este artículo analiza la película, examinando la abyección y las diversas metamorfosis que ocurren a los cuerpos, dando forma a una estética de horror stop-motion. Al hacerlo, la película revela un comentario político que surge de la intermediación e intertextualidad de imágenes y personajes que aluden al cuento de hadas, la manipulación grotesca del cuerpo y las transformaciones transbiológicas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *La Casa Lobo*; Abyección; Metamorfosis; Horror Corporal; Animación Stop-Motion.



Since the earliest Joaquín Cociña and Cristobal León joint short films, *Lucía* (2007) and *Luis* (2008),² the use of stop-motion handcrafted materiality as a device to unleash horror from the bodies of their characters has been a persistent motif. The latter films depict an eerie love story through fleeting, ambiguous thoughts and dialogues. Each shows a different perspective on the tale, alluding to the characters' fear as the primary device. In *La Casa Lobo / The Wolf House* (2018), although the theme moves from the eerie love stories that *Lucía* and *Luis* addressed, the formal device and the portrayal of abjection are maintained.

Tracking the pioneering work of the Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary theorist Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, abjection appears as a crucial concept that explores the unsettling and disturbing aspects of existence and identity, often focusing on bodily experiences and

2 *Lucía* and *Luis* have Niles Atallah as a part of the co-directing team as well. However, in later works Atallah separated as a co-director but continued to collaborate with Cociña and León as a director of photography in *Los Huesos* (2021) and producer in *La Casa Lobo*.

their relationship to society, culture, and the unconscious. At its core, abjection refers to the state or experience of being cast away from the boundaries of what is considered proper, acceptable, or coherent within particular social or cultural contexts. It refers to the visceral, instinctual reaction of revulsion and rejection that arises when encountering something that disrupts the conventional boundaries of the self and the familiar: bodily fluids, decay, death, and the non-human.

The seminal work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in reassessing Freudian principles has notably influenced Kristeva's work (Davis, 1995: 5), particularly with regard to abjection. Drawing from Lacan, Berressem suggests that the intensity of abjects is much stronger than that of objects, which are safely separated from the subject. Abjects are experienced in a manner akin to traumatic events, missed encounters with the real. One can think of encountering an abject as a direct encounter with the real, wherein the unbearable nearness disallows any form of distancing, a necessary prerequisite for objectification (2007: 20, 21). While objects are integrated into the subject's psychic reality, abjects resist such integration, remaining external yet profoundly intimate. Likewise, Krečič and Žižek's reading of Kristeva also encloses a Lacanian perspective emphasizing his influence on the subject's relationship with pleasure, desire, and jouissance:

Maybe we can apply here Lacan's neologism «extimate»: the abject is so thoroughly internal to the subject that this very overintimacy makes it external, uncanny, inadmissible. For this reason, the status of the abject with regard to the pleasure principle is profoundly ambiguous. It is repulsive, provoking horror and disgust, but at the same time it exerts an irresistible fascination and attracts our gaze to its very horror (2016: 69-70).

Such ambiguity aligns with Kristeva's discussion on the collapse of the border between inside and outside, where norms and boundaries are breached. And, similarly, the harrowing narrative and formal structure of *The Wolf House* blur the lines between internal and external, repulsion and fascination, recalling the destabilizing effects of abjection. Thus, this paper aims to analyze how stop-motion animation in *The Wolf House* contributes to conveying abjection in its capacity to metamorphose bodies and unsettle boundaries in the film.

The Wolf House focuses on María Wehler, a girl initially living in Colonia Dignidad (Dignity Colony), a secretive commune in the Maule Region of Chile established in 1961 by Paul Schäfer, a German child rapist and Baptist

preacher entangled with Nazi affiliations, , and followed by a group of devoted german families (Swenson, 2017). While prohibited from leaving, colony members carried out unpaid labor and followed the ideas of the notorious American preacher William M. Branham,³ as advocated by Schäfer. For decades, the sect remained secluded from the rest of the country until evidence of crimes, including child molestation, forced labor, weapons trafficking, money laundering, kidnapping, torture, and murder, were uncovered by Amnesty International and the governments of Chile, Germany, and France. Former members who managed to escape over the years also provided testimonies about these crimes that led to the imprisonment of Schäfer (Falconer, 2008). Once a secretive enclave used by Pinochet's dictatorship to suppress dissent and eliminate opposition, Colonia Dignidad has become a symbol of the horrors of Chile's regime.

Though not explicitly delving into a detailed or historical portrayal of the crimes committed at the Colony, *The Wolf House* pictures them through its stop-motion bodily manipulation of the characters and the house where they find themselves. In the film, María escapes Colonia Dignidad, and fleeing from the pursuit of a wolf, seeks sanctuary in an abandoned house within the forest. There, she finds two young pigs, Pedro and Ana, whom she begins to care for and transform into humans until they threaten to eat her.

Kristeva states, «I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me.' Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be» (1982: 10). Hence, in a Kristevan sense, María becomes an abject image, a decaying fragile body, *preceded and possessed* by an Other: The Wolf, embodied in the invisible hands that create and destroy all that is visible inside and outside of María. Throughout the film, her body, as well as those of Pedro and Ana, seem to contort, meld with the walls, and transform themselves in a constant cycle of destruction and creation. The materials from which the characters' forms and the house are made are intentionally evident to the viewer; tape, threads, clay, and paper are disfigured and twisted to develop an aesthetic of handcrafted body horror (Figures 1 and 2). The characters are engulfed by their own paper guts.

3 Branham (1909-1965) was an American evangelist and faith healer who gained notoriety for his healing revivals and assertions of divine visions. Despite his significant following, his practices were met with controversy and skepticism for inviting racism, misogyny, antisemitism, and segregation; a rejection of science, education, and modern life; and close ties to the Ku Klux Klan (Hassan, 2021).



Figure 1: María, Pedro and Ana.



Figure 2: Shattered María's Body.

By the end of the film, María finds herself tied to a bed while the now-human Pedro and Ana prepare to devour her. With no other option left, María pleads for The Wolf to come and rescue her «Lieber Wolf, ich brauche dich. Wolf ich bitte dich. Hilf mir bitte.» [Dear Wolf, I need you. Wolf, I beg you. Please help me] (1:05:11-01:05:16). And as the narrator, who turns out to be The Wolf, declaims: «Ich bin es, Ich bin hier. War die ganze Zeit hier. In dir. Ich war immer in dir» [It is me. I am here. I have been here all along. Inside of you. I was always inside of you] (1:06:35-1:06:49), a copse emerges from the house floor and walls; branches sprout from Ana and Pedro's bodies, swiftly transforming them into trees. The Wolf saves María from them.

Then, speaking Spanish but with an indulgent German-accented voice, the narrator says that María is rescued and taken back into the colony, where she dedicates herself to the care of children who come from different places in Chile to be educated and healed. Hence, María is part of a fairy-tale film the narrator uses to indoctrinate his younger followers. As observed by Erick Neher, the film begins with an introduction reminiscent of Brecht. It presents itself as a historical document produced inside Colonia Dignidad that tells the story of a defector attempting to leave. As Neher notes, *The Wolf House* is, in short, «a mock propaganda film» (2020: 468). The incorporation of found footage at the film's beginning is not arbitrary. In addition to its Brechtian functions, it also leverages the format's ability to contextualize its sociopolitical concerns. As Heller-Nicholas mentions, found footage in horror cinema has served to provide «concrete examples of narratives of national crisis» (2011: 186). The Wolf House invokes this use.

In the film, María assumes the role of an abject, positioned on the fringes of the societal border that distinguishes the living subject from the forces that threaten its very existence. As Barbara Creed points out, «Abject things are those that highlight the 'fragility of the law' and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction» (1993: 10). In this context, María's narrative function becomes intertwined with the logic of prohibition as she serves as a representation of the consequences that await those who attempt to evade the confines of the cult's expectations, in a cautionary tale that reinforces segregation while discouraging deviation from the rules. Nevertheless, María is not merely a moral identification for the colony's young viewers but rather a manifestation of an Other who supersedes her individuality. The Wolf's storytelling acts as a con-

duit through which María becomes possessed, transcending her own selfhood and assuming a role assigned by him. As such, María is subjected to a done-over abjection, ultimately causing her to exist within the confines of an alien power reenacted by The Wolf, both the teller of the cautionary tale and a character living in his own narrative.

CRAFTED HORRORS, PAPER BODIES

Although stop-motion techniques have been intertwined with horror codes since the genre's very origins, as evidenced in films such as *The Haunted Hotel* (1907), *La Maison Ensorcelée/The House of Ghosts* (1907), and *Animated Putty* (1911), the depiction of the abject is less frequent but still coherent and conscious in the exercise of its handcrafted nature to evoke power and control. Jan Švankmajer's cinema, celebrated for its pioneering contributions to stop-motion animation, emerged as a significant cornerstone in the deployment of stop-motion as a medium for political resistance as his work coincided with a period of political and social upheaval in Czechoslovakia. Drawing from the surrealist movement, Švankmajer's work demonstrated his remarkable capacity for imbuing ordinary objects with grotesque, insightful, and critical qualities. Throughout his career, he consistently explored themes centered on control, resistance, and the grotesque, often situating his characters within oppressive and disquieting settings.

However, while Švankmajer's cinema leans towards the grotesque and symbolic, Jiří Trnka's work offers a more direct approach. In his magnum opus, *Ruka/The Hand* (1965), the inherent antagonism between creator and creation within stop-motion is evident. The film's portrayal of a hand as the regime's directing force, manipulating the harlequin character and his clay, showcases the oppressive nature of authority seeking to control and shape its subjects. The harlequin's defiance and subsequent enslavement expose the destructive consequences of resistance in the face of authoritarian power. However, although close to certain formal explorations, such as the live-action hand that appears and disrupts the aesthetics of the short film, symbolizing the unavoidable power of the dictatorship (figure 3), *The Hand* partially delves into further formal implications. Even in its exploration of material characteristics, it is a primarily narrative-driven representation (rather than a formally-driven one).



Figure 3: The Hand.

In contrast, the formal use of stop-motion in *The Wolf House* plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' abjection. By enabling a heightened focus on bodily deformations, mutations, and disintegrations, the film accentuates the physicality of their beings. The deliberate manipulation of the characters' physical form, often through unsettling and grotesque imagery, induces a sense of unease and repulsion as they become subjected to the handmade transformations enacted in the stop-motion medium; their identity is then perceived as though subsumed by an Other. Such a process emphasizes their vulnerability and the loss of agency over their being. They are no longer perceived as confined to the boundaries of a self but instead as subjected to the relentless dictates of the invisible hands that create and destroy them. Without the viewer ever seeing The Wolf or how he manipulates the world, his presence is inescapable.

For a deeper examination of these formal and narrative distinctions, consider Thomas Elsaesser's definition of «the cinema of abjection». He focuses on a structural/substantive approach, where in his delineation, he characterizes the substantive as material, embodied, and with a specific referential attachment. In contrast, he describes the structural as semiotic, differential, and symbolic (2019: 136). In a general sense, the substantive refers to aspects directly tied to concrete elements. For example, substantive elements might include explicit visual representations, recognizable symbols, or narrative

events with clear implications. On the other hand, the structural pertains to a more abstract and symbolic mode, focusing on the overall form, arrangement, and conceptual aspects rather than specific, identifiable details or themes. Structural elements encompass broader frameworks, which can include narrative structures, symbolic motifs, and semiotic relationships that contribute to the overall understanding of the work. Hence, it extends beyond the explicit and identifiable components, focusing instead on how these elements are interconnected with symbolic significance.

Elsaesser also notes, «Also not surprisingly, given cinema's sensory appeal and visceral effects, the substantive version has been more prevalent than the structural one» (2019: 145). Unlike *The Hand*, *The Wolf House* operates through a structural scheme such as that described by Elsaesser, albeit without renouncing an also substantive one. *The Wolf House* is violently self-aware of its structural approach; it showcases a method deeply attached to an understanding of the filmmaking process as a physical and corporeal practice. Indeed, Cociña and León established a decalogue of guidelines mainly related to their work mode. These include, for instance, «There is painting in camera,» «Everything can be transformed as a sculpture,» and «It is a workshop, not a set» (Schroeder, 2019).

Because of the consciousness and consistency of the use of stop-motion aesthetics in the representation of the abject, *The Wolf House* appears as a distinctive case in Latin American horror cinema. Some Latin American films, however, have used stop-motion to reenact the abject. In *Los Rubios/The Blonds* (2003), Albertina Carri recreates with Playmobil toys some speculative scenes about her parents' disappearance by the Argentine Military Junta. She reveals in that process the impossibility of completely grasping memory, of apprehending it as an entity that can be (and is) molded by the powers of the state, repression, violence, and horror. In *Bestia/Beast* (2021), a Chilean stop-motion horror short film directed by Hugo Covarruvia, some formal devices, like the fractures in the porcelain head of the main character, are made to evoke a dark facet of her psychology. The character draws inspiration from Ingrid Olderöck, a Nazi sympathizer and intelligence agent in Chile's Pinochet regime accused of training dogs to rape and torture political prisoners (Guzmán, 2014: 34). Both films, despite the use of stop-motion, retain a primarily substantive mode; there are no further structural approaches. What differentiates Cociña and León's film is precisely a cinematic mode that allows for readings rooted in the formal devices of body horror and stop-motion as a portrayal of the abject body.

However, Elsaesser highlights that the structural mode features predominantly within the art world, setting it apart from cinema (2019: 137). Similarly, Kristeva suggests that the artistic experience is grounded in the idea of the abject (1982: 17). In those terms, the art world's aesthetic discourse seems to incorporate the structural mode of portraying the abject, whereas cinema's discourse does not frequently do so. Creed contends that the encounter with the abject is not limited to the realm of art but that «it is also the central ideological project of the popular horror film» (1993: 14). And many of them have done so, substantively. Therefore, *The Wolf House*'s most significant accomplishment lies in its ability to convey the abject by means of a structural interplay between matter, form, and body, all mediated by a language of time. The fantastic tale, as an aperture through which reality is revealed, is then crafted from a notably uncommon formal device.

Body horror, a subgenre within the broader realm of horror, presents definitional complexities due to the intricate taxonomy of the genre. Xavier Aldana Reyes suggests a delineation grounded in Paul Wells's framework in *Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (2000), where he describes body horror as a subgenre where physical decay, dissolution, and destruction are explicitly displayed, highlighting bodily processes and functions under threat, along with further physiological configurations and redefined anatomical forms (2014: 54). In addition to aiding in the differentiation of body horror from other subgenres, this delineation proves valuable as it captures the concept of *body* without confining it to an inherently human form. As a result, bodies depicted in *The Wolf House* find themselves within the scope of this definition, thereby affording a more diverse interpretation of the concept of *body* in the milieu of cinematic and artistic representation. Thus, without being a live-action film or one entirely made through the animated characterization of human bodies, it becomes a form of body horror.

Human and non-human animal bodies in *The Wolf House* take on body horror codes due to how they experience metamorphoses. There are different modes by which a body can undergo formal transformations in animated cinema. Wells identifies eight ways in which «the capacity and capability of the body in animation may be broadly defined» (1998: 188):

The body is malleable—it may be stretched over long distances, be compressed or extended, take the shape of another form, fit into incompatible spaces, etc. [.] fragmentary—it can be broken into parts, reassembled and conjoined with other objects and materials. [.] a contextual space—a physical environment in itself, which may be entered into and used as if it were ostensibly hollow [.] a

mechanism— it may be represented as if it was a machine. [...] [It can have] impossible abilities (i.e., it can fly, lift heavy objects, experience violence without pain, etc.) [...] [It can] directly express explicit emotions (i.e., it fragments in surprise, contorts in terror etc.) (1988: 188-189).

Further, he mentions two last ways: «Bodies of apparently incompatible humans/ animals/ creatures are equal in size, strength, ability» and «Bodies can redetermine the physical orthodoxies of gender and species» (1988: 189). However, even when these latter two are primarily physical characteristics, they are attached to substantive elements instead of formal ones.

In *The Wolf House*, bodies transform in most of those ways; they are contextual spaces, they inhabit the house but also merge with it; they are malleable, they compress and expand; they directly express explicit emotions, their bodies twist with anguish and reconfigure themselves to express it; but they also have impossible abilities, they do not even perceive most of the extreme and seemingly painful transformations. Yet even the previous transformations are primarily executed in a fragmentary way, which sets up a tone interweaving body horror codes with stop-motion techniques through which various transformations take place, each with different implications.

HUMAN/ NON-HUMAN ANIMAL METAMORPHOSES

Fairy tales, folktales, and wonder tales have long featured non-human animal characters who interact with humans and other creatures regardless of their alleged differences. These narratives often incorporate themes of metamorphosis between human and non-human forms, showcasing instances of non-human animals disguising themselves as humans and vice versa (Greenhill and Allen, 2018: 225). Not only confined to folklore but extending across diverse artistic mediums, the portrayal of human and non-human animal metamorphoses has been a recurrent theme. This enduring motif reveals a perhaps surprising yet telling parallel to *The Wolf House's* animation.

Dating back to prehistoric cave art, such as *The Birdman*⁴ (c. 15,000-13,000 BCE) (Figure 4) found in Lascaux cave, where a bird-headed ithyphallic human appears prone on the ground in front of what seems to be a bull or

4 While some scholars refer to the painting as *The Birdman*, some others also reference the same painting as *Wounded Bull*, *Man & Bird* or *Rhinoceros* (World History Encyclopedia) or *Wounded Man and Disemboweled Bison* (American Historical Association).

a buffalo, depictions of human/ non-human animal transformations and hybrids have been present since some of the oldest recorded art.



Figure 4: «The Birdman».

In their seemingly fictional nature, these pictures have contrasting conceptual readings between human bodies and non-human animal bodies representations as separate beings. Kathryn Yusoff notes that «The part-human, part-animal [non-human animal] creatures of Lascaux are sullen, and exhibit a singular dimension that is in stark contrast to the animal vibrancy» (2014: 386) of most of the paintings in the cave, which mainly portray non-human animals such as equines and deer. This duality concerning the representation of the body becomes a significant lens through which the object can be read. Indeed, in her analysis of *The Birdman*, Yusoff develops a reading profoundly interwoven with the concept of the object:

the painter hid his face in the face of a bird, and exposed himself in the vulnerable extension of his sex, and placed himself before the horns of the injured beast. This is what is called the 'Birdman' of Lascaux. I am your sacrifice, yet I am hidden, unsheathed, unable to fully see myself seeing. My eyes must become a mask; my face must be the face of another; my exposure must be tram-

pled by the energy of animal presence. I am for you, I am because of you, and yet I am divided from you (my animal), and thus I am divided from myself, and so I must hide myself from that dark secret, and become with the face of another (my animal) (2014: 392).

In near consonance with the appalling words of *The Wolf* at the end of *The Wolf House* (previously mentioned above) —«It is me. I am here. I have been here all along. Inside of you. I was always inside of you»— Yusoff's reading of *The Birdman* suggests a subtle implication that can be applied to María's character. Those words, written as if she were in *The Birdman's* body, could be replicated identically by María. She exists because of *The Wolf*, but most importantly, she must become with the face of another (*The Wolf*).

Over the course of the film, a noteworthy contrast emerges between María's transformations and those of Pedro and Ana, the pigs. Unlike María's own changes, which are solely influenced by *The Wolf's* powers as conveyed through his narration, she assumes the agency to determine the metamorphosis of Pedro and Ana. In this capacity, María also adopts the role of an agent inducing fear. She orchestrates the pigs' transition into human form, embodying a dual role, simultaneously experiencing abjection herself and imposing it on others' bodies. María relies on the assertion that all of their needs find fulfillment within the household, whereas potential danger looms beyond its walls, thus necessitating a sense of apprehension toward the external world. Not so paradoxically, in the act of making Pedro and Ana human, she makes them more abject. María exerts displaced abjection, a societal phenomenon where abject groups or individuals redirect power toward others in an already abject state, abusing and demonizing weaker, not stronger, social groups (Stallybrass & White, 1986: 19). This process can have far-reaching implications across various aspects of society. As abject groups or individuals seek to regain a semblance of power or agency, they end up resorting to the dehumanization and degradation of even more marginalized and vulnerable social groups, creating the distressing cycle of oppression and violence one notices in the film.

Depicting human/non-human animal metamorphoses could have been an attempt by prehistoric artists to capture the essence of the abject, bridging the gap between a familiar human world and an enigmatic non-human animal realm. These representations could be symbolic expressions of the human psyche's grappling with the mysteries of nature and the boundaries of identity. As noted by Kristeva, «The abject confronts us, on the one

hand, with those fragile states where man [human] strays on the territories of [non-human] animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of [non-human] animals or animalism» (1982: 12-13).

Conversely, these metamorphoses could also be seen as symbolic expressions of power and control over nature. Legends, folktales, myths, and fairy tales abound with stories of non-human animals taking on human forms and vice versa, with such transformations often accompanied by fearful attributes or offered as warnings against transgressions to power. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, the human hunter Actaeon inadvertently stumbles upon the bathing goddess Diana, provoking her wrath. In response, Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag, rendering him vulnerable and exposed to the wild. Unbeknownst to him, Actaeon's own hounds, typically loyal, turn into merciless predators and tear him apart (3.131-252).⁵ Similarly, in the Bible's Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar is turned into a non-human animal due to his arrogance and disregard for God's power (Daniel 4: 28-33).

Human/non-human animal metamorphoses and their long tradition in folklore worldwide provide a framework for analysis within the context of folk horror as well. As outlined by Scovell, folk horror often «uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes» (2017: 17). Many folk tales might have been ways of conveying aspirations for dominance and its consequences, as well as the inherent dangers of overreaching or misusing authority. Through the lens of metamorphosis, these narratives hold cautionary undertones regarding power that extend into the realm of folk art. In line with this perspective, Theodor Adorno notes, «Everything that has ever been called folk art has always reflected domination» (1995: 204). Hence, it is not arbitrary that *The Wolf House* intertextually and intermedially uses codes and characters from folk and fairy tales inside a horror angle: wolves, pigs, enchanted houses, and dark forests. They become references to ageless stories, creating layerings of significance that go beyond a mere acknowledgment of the symbols' presence. Instead, they bring forth readings steeped in cultural and historical contexts, providing insights into themes of power, domination, and abjection, like the portrayal of the tragic events within Colonia Dignidad.

5 David Raeburn's translation (2004). Quotation presented in the verse-style characteristic of this edition.

The incorporation of those intertextual and intermedial symbols is accomplished chiefly through allusion, «an implicit reference to a fairy-tale within the text» (Smith, 2007: 10). The similarity of the frame story to *Little Red Riding Hood* cannot be coincidental. A young girl flees through the woods to what seems like a haven, but where, in fact, a duplicitous wolf hides in plain sight. Nevertheless, references also appear to *Hansel and Gretel* when the pigs, «blond Aryans...want to eat their 'mother'...when they run out of food» (Zipes, n.d.), both reversing the traditional narrative (the witch wants to eat Hansel and Gretel) and echoing it (the two children seek to murder the witch). And yet, there is no fairy-tale happy ending in *The Wolf House*.

Those allusions, deeply ingrained in cultural consciousness through centuries of fairy-tale storytelling, become vehicles for exploring themes of power and abjection. In line with Cristina Bacchilega's assertion that fairy-tale adaptations ought to be read in a manner that extends beyond intended meanings but also as a means of encouraging further inquiry and commentary on historical, cultural, generic, figurative, or ideological connections within broader intertextual frameworks (2013: 19, 20), it is possible to approach the reading of allusions in *The Wolf House* similarly. They are more than mere references; they are intricate layers of meaning that evoke shared narratives, allowing a reading that draws on an unavoidably contextual and political understanding of fairy tales and their symbolic language inside the film.

Horror stories, along with fairy tales, often feature houses haunted by fears, anxieties, phobias, and dread. Much like the protagonists in the fairy tales «Little Red Riding Hood» and «Hansel and Gretel,» María encounters what initially appears to be a safe haven. However, unbeknownst to her, it conceals horrors that are gradually revealed. There, the apparent borders of the house seem to establish a safe division between an outside and an inside world, María forbids the young pigs to ever leave the house, warning them of the dangers of The Wolf outside if they were to venture forth. Building upon this process, *The Wolf House* creates a parallel with the coercive mandates in Colonia Dignidad against having contact with the outside world, even with the horrors within the confines of the colony.

However, throughout the film, the walls fail to serve their function as a border; those external dangers make their way into the house. In his examination of haunted houses in film, Curtis similarly notes that «The ghosts enter in at the most vulnerable and neglected points of houses and people and represent the anxiety that the barrier between life and death may be as porous and full of openings as the fabric of a house» (2008: 25). Thus, while

in tales like «Hansel and Gretel,» the house takes on a horrific demeanor by serving as a prison, in *The Wolf House*, it serves the same function but sets itself apart by serving as a porous prison. It is constructed around the notion of being inescapable, yet it permits the free flow of terror that appears to exist only outside its walls.

Such porous nature extends beyond the house, capturing the permeability of boundaries in the film. In parallel, the idea of fluidity and transition is reproduced in the exploration of metamorphosis and transformation. The focus on the materiality of the transformations parallels the tactile and labor-intensive process of stop-motion animation itself, where not only each scene but also each frame is a deliberate act of creation. Metamorphosis is a central and determining motif in animation (Moore, 2021: 26), body horror (Aldana Reyes, 2014: 57), and fairy tales (Tatar, 2003: 55). Thus, it serves as a potent device for depicting the complexities of abjection inside Colonia Dignidad. It mirrors power and segregation, capturing the gradual erosion of María's body and the grotesque manifestations of authority through the displaced abjection over the pigs' bodies.

At the beginning of the film, while fleeing from the cult, María arrives at the house where she finds two pigs. Right after offering them water and affirming herself as their protector, she articulates her intention, stating, «Voy a transformar a mis cerditos en criaturas hermosas que nunca me abandonarán» [I will transform my little pigs into beautiful creatures that will never leave me] (0:11:57-0:12:03). As she engages in a ball game with them, María further tells them: «Transforma tus pezuñas en manos. Transforma tus pezuñas en pies» [Change your hooves to hands. Change your hooves to feet] (0:15:56-0:16:02). A process of metamorphosis is then initiated in their bodies, leading them to start walking on two legs. However, it is met with failure as they stumble and fall, exhibiting a sense of bewilderment towards their new-found human hands and feet. Evidently, they have no agency or control over the disconcerting alterations occurring in their bodies.

Horror intensifies later on, when in a room adorned with Christmas decorations, underneath a Christmas tree, the pigs are found in a state of partial metamorphosis with their bodies exposed. María's image emerges, proclaiming herself as «Eine Mutter. Ein Engel. María ist Pflege und Liebe» [A mother. An angel. María is care and love] (0:21:15-0:21:27). It is at this moment that she presents them with human garments as Christmas gifts. Upon putting on these clothes, their physical metamorphosis finishes, and they ultimately resemble fully human figures. (Figures 5 and 6.) María's desire to cre-

ate beautiful creatures who will never leave her is fueled by her longing for companionship but also for power, exposing the pigs' abjection illustrated in a transformation that accentuates their powerlessness. Here, not only the metamorphosis but also the deliberate act of clothing pigs in human garments carries profound symbolism, becoming a metaphorical picture of socialization and assimilation inside the sectarian community. Like too many of its other victims, María has internalized the Colony's processes of domination and imposes them on others.



Figure 5: Ana with the new dress.



Figure 6: Ana finishing her metamorphosis into a human.

Metamorphoses in folktales and fairy tales highlight the divide, or lack thereof, between human and non-human animals. They serve to define what it means to be human (Seifert, 2011: 245). Thus, it invites contemplation on the abjection that emerges from the blurred, often disconcerting, boundaries between the human and the non-human. This ambiguity is illustrated in the symbolic association of pigs with notions of impurity and filth, a motif prevalent throughout Western history. Ancient English Christian illustrations, for instance, often depicted Christ's crucifixion with his tormentors as humans with pig snouts. As a parallel, in Germany, a prevalent anti-Semitic depiction known as the *Judensau* (Figure 7) illustrates Jews nursing from the udders of a big sow and eating its waste (Essig, 2015: 98). Following on the previous discussions on displaced abjection, Benton Jay Komins suggests a link between this concept and the representation of Jews as pigs. He mentions the similarity between the tortures suffered by Jews in ancient Rome and those inflicted on pigs during the carnivals in Venice, stating that it «points up a frequent association whereby the pig became a focus of what we call displaced abjection» (2001: 4).



Figure 7: *Judensau* depicted in a woodcut c. 1470.

In some fairy tales, metamorphosis moves into abjection by means of the representation of pigs being born into human families (see Seifert, 2011;

Magnanini, 2008).⁶ For example, in versions of the type «Hans My Hedgehog» (see Ashliman 1998-2018) called «King Pig», a queen gives birth to a pig, who was born «with a pig's ways and manners» and is initially rejected by his own father. The pig is married in succession to the three daughters of «a poor woman». He kills the first two, whose disgust for him leads them to plan his murder. But the third accepts him and returns his affection, finding that he becomes a handsome prince at night. She gives «birth to a fair and shapely boy. The joy of the king and queen was unbounded, especially when they found that the newborn child had the form of a human being and not that of a beast». The princess's love implicitly permanently disenchanting him, and the king «laid aside his diadem and his royal robes, and advanced to his place his son, whom he let be crowned with the greatest pomp, and who was ever afterward known as King Pig.» Human characters within these tales generally react with disgust and horror upon encountering the pig characters. The narratives employ descriptions that emphasize the unattractive and repulsive qualities of these beings, further accentuating their symbolic abjection. Ultimately, the tales feature a redemption or transformation of the pig characters into human forms, signifying a return to a more socially acceptable and less abject state.

In Fernández Martínez's study of the body in its relationship with the monstrous, it is suggested that the body «busca completarse a través de un proceso de evolución en el que se explicitan las protestas sociopolíticas del ámbito de lo real» (2023: 315). Correspondingly, the monstrous and grotesque nature of the metamorphic bodies in *The Wolf House* as a symbol of the horrors in Colonia Dignidad is presented in line with Harpham. He posits that although the grotesque itself has been complexly defined, its manifestations have in common points around bodily metamorphoses and the crossing or inhabiting of boundaries. What makes something grotesque lies «between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organising the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles» (Harpham, 2006: 3).

Whether those transformations take place in cursed princes or outcasts, their portrayals have reflected human relations with nature, identity, fear,

6 It is important to note, however, that while pigs have often been associated with impurity and abjection in folklore, these negative connotations may not always be entirely pervasive or uniform. As noted by Essig, in some cultures, particularly in Asia, pigs hold different and embracing symbolic meanings (2015: 10). However, given this paper's primary subject, the focus is placed on Western understandings and symbolic meanings of pigs.

and power by establishing borders that mark off sameness with otherness. However, not every metamorphosis is unequivocal or demarcates a clear transition from a prior state to a subsequent one. Some linger within these boundaries, blurring the distinction between inside and outside.

BORDERLAND REALMS

An essential aspect in the delineation between the Self/Other is the configuration of a boundary where these notions collapse and, from there, demarcate the abject, what is inside and what is outside. Kristeva argues that «Abject things are those (...) that exist on the other side of the border» (1982: 10) and that what causes abjection is that which «does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (1982: 4). Borders, as conceived by Kristeva, play a crucial role in defining abjection. In this framework, abjection represents the blurring of boundaries between the inner and the outer. In her feminist reading of horror cinema through the lens of abjection in Kristeva, Creed points out that horror films often use the idea of a border as a critical element in constructing monstrosity. In these films, monstrosity is created «at the border between human and inhuman (...); the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (...); at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (...); between normal and abnormal sexual desire» (1993: 11). However, these borders are in a constant process of delineation; they are fluid, porous, and elusive, and it is upon this lack of determination that power exerts its weight by dividing, separating, and differentiating.

Horror films conventionally work with the concept of boundaries. For example, in *The Babadook* (2014), directed by Jennifer Kent, the concept of borders is central to the narrative. The film tells the story of a mother, Amelia, and her young son, Samuel, who are haunted by a sinister presence known as The Babadook. It emerges from a mysterious book Samuel finds, representing the embodiment of Amelia's repressed grief and anger at the death of her husband when driving her to the hospital to give birth to Samuel. The evil, a manifestation of Amelia's internal psychological border between her conscious, socially acceptable self and her repressed emotions, is blurred, becoming a monster that threatens the good. Rodrigo Gonzalez Dinamarca has observed an embodiment of the monstrous and the abject through the maternal body in this film. With respect to fluctuations between the borders between

the inner and the outer, he mentions that «Lo abyecto designa aquello que, si bien repugna y aterroriza al yo, también lo constituye como tal, puesto que, para mantener su estatuto, el yo busca definirse por oposición a aquella entidad fronteriza» (2018: 265). When the physical border between the inside and outside of the mother, her skin, is exposed by a wound, the abject is unleashed, as Gonzalez notes, «su cuerpo deja de estar separado, se anula la frontera entre el adentro y el afuera y se entrega a la abyección» (2018: 278). Like Gonzalez, Creed also emphasizes the wound as a key element in representing the rupture of borders in horror cinema: «the wound is a sign of abjection in that it violates the skin which forms a border between the inside and outside of the body» (1993: 4).

While borders are crucial for understanding abjection in *The Babadook*, in *The Wolf House*, it is difficult to delineate borders. There is no apparent wound, and the characters constantly reshape themselves as if their entire bodies were the wound. They mutate between the inorganic nature of walls, furniture, objects, and the apparently organic nature of their bodies. They are neither human nor inhuman nor non-human. Even the film's editing does not establish borders between shots; the sequence seems to be a single long take that flows and is porous. Like the characters' bodies, it dissolves and transforms. The film, therefore, resides substantially and structurally in what Kristeva calls *the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite*. It is a film located in the borderlands of space and body. No wound reveals the ruptures of these borders because the film itself is the wound, the fracture.

Making not only their story but also their film techniques reside on the borderlands, the use of metamorphosis, occurring within spaces, among bodies, and in the continuous take editing, serves as the directors' means to establish a stance on abjection. Metamorphoses unsettle borders; they do not adhere to an established order; instead, they challenge conventional notions of identity and control. Inside and outside blur to the point where it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. By subverting traditional cinematic conventions, embracing the fluidity of the medium, and drawing upon allusions to intermedial and intertextual folk and fairy-tale imagery and characters, *The Wolf House* evokes visceral reactions and prompts viewers to confront the uncanny and disturbing legacy of trauma and horror in Colonia Dignidad.

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