



Guillermo Del Toro's Multiple Masculinities

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This video essay traces the thematic and aesthetic links between Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *The Shape of Water* (2017), and *Pinocchio* (2022). Using audiovisual techniques, I show that the throughline spanning a twenty-year period involves a critique of the relationship between militarism, masculinity, and violence.





Creator's Statement

This video essay was produced at the Scholarship in Sound & Image Workshop on Videographic Criticism at Middlebury College in Summer 2023. Through the audiovisual form, I trace the thematic and aesthetic links between four of Guillermo del Toro's films and how they provoke thought on the relationship between militarism, gender, and violence. Spanning a twenty-year period, I specifically shed light on the connections between Guillermo del Toro's representations of masculinity in *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *The Shape of Water* (2017), and *Pinocchio* (2022). These films are set during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the postwar Franco dictatorship (1940s), the 1960s Cold War era in the United States, and Fascist Italy (1922–1943). By using techniques such as juxtaposition, split screen, multiscreen, strategic sequencing, and the repetition of images, words, and sounds, I render visible how del Toro denaturalizes the structures of power and histories of violent masculinities underpinning these rightwing regimes. I define two contrasting forms of masculinity, namely “militarized masculinity” and “resistant masculinity,” and show how Guillermo del Toro's main characters enact the behaviors related to these types.

In all four films, the director subverts the myth that militarization provides security and unmask the human cost of embracing militarized masculinity. This juxtaposition makes clear Guillermo del Toro's critique of the pervasiveness of acts like interrogation, humiliation, and torture, and how such acts were positioned on a continuum of violence. Viewers are prompted to see such acts anew and consider how they are part and parcel of a broader ideology that glorifies aggressive masculinity, justifies military intervention, protects heteronormativity, and presumes the subjugation of women, children, and non-conforming males. The unmasking of male brutality, however, is not the whole

picture. This video essay shows the similarities between resistant masculinities and how the director weaves hope through complex stories of defiance.

Viewed together, these films reframe the idea of courage through non-violent boys and girls, black and deaf women, and an amphibian-humanoid creature. These characters, considered to be “affronts” by the regimes that repress them, are models of integrity and bravery. This comparative audiovisual approach allows me to bring out the uncharted throughlines in the director’s highly celebrated work. It also allows me to put forward the argument that if war continues to be narrated through the myopic lens of heroic bravery, then militarized masculinity will continue to shape men’s lives and perpetuate the notion that dominance over others is a true sign of masculinity. Until we tune into patterns of gender socialization and imagine alternative notions of bravery, as Guillermo del Toro does in these films, our understanding of the continuum of violence will remain incomplete.

Biography

Dr. Lisa DiGiovanni holds a split appointment in the Department of Modern Languages and in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College. Her interdisciplinary research centers on representations of war, dictatorial violence, and genocide in 20th–21st century Spain and Latin America. She explores how film and literature renders visible the multiple traumas related to state repression and militaristic culture. She takes an intersectional approach, examining how gender, class, and sexuality shape both the enactment of militaristic violence as well as the experience of subjugation and resistance. In *Unsettling Nostalgia*, she traces how authors and filmmakers represent memories of the pre-dictatorial pasts in Spain and Chile, as well as the anti-fascist resistance to the military regimes of Franco (1939–1975) and Pinochet (1973–1990). Her second book, *Militarized Masculinity*, argues that until we connect the dots between masculinity, militarism, and violence, we cannot fully comprehend the causes and consequences of mass atrocity crimes.

Review by Keith McDonald, York St John University

The video essay “Guillermo del Toro’s Multiple Masculinities” presents a nuanced and thought-provoking meditation on the ways in which del Toro presents, deconstructs and re-imagines conflict, tension and trauma in four of his most powerful works. The simple, segmented, four screen presentation of selected clips from the films (sometimes with dialogue, sometimes without), is a subtle and elegant way in which to provide juxtaposition which allows the viewer to draw parallels for themselves. There is also a clear narrative which is interwoven in the films, beginning with modes

of masculine aggression, its painful and futile consequences, and alternative modes of communication and inter-connectivity.

This is accompanied by some sparse but extremely effective animation in the spaces between the four-screen presentation and a score which complements the imagery. What is also illuminated is the ways in which del Toro used radically different genres (magic realism, horror, science-fiction, animated fairy-tale) to communicate his overarching artistic vision of trauma, victimization, and alternative “heroisms,” and the simple experience of seeing these juxtaposed on screen is, in itself, striking.

In an interview in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2006, del Toro stated that “pain should not be sought, but, by the same token, it should never be avoided, because there is a lesson in facing adversity. Having gone through that experience, I can attest, in a non-masochistic way, that pain is a great teacher.” This belief is highlighted and explored in multiple ways in DiGiovanni’s eloquent and potent composition.

Works Cited

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Review by Jacqueline Sheean, University of Utah

Lisa DiGiovanni’s perceptive videographic essay draws attention to the latent theme of militarized masculinity across the transnational oeuvre of the Mexican film director Guillermo del Toro. Del Toro is well-known for his meticulous attention to detail and his intricately crafted mise-en-scène that engages with popular fantasy and horror genres. So much so in fact, that the phantasmagoric curiosities and film props from the director’s private collection inspired a large international museum exhibition in 2016, “Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters.” Yet his films leverage their distinctive style and genre in the service of a clear political stance, as the horror is invariably derived from nefarious forms of institutionalized violence and state power. In this context, del Toro’s transnational engagement with horror cinema becomes, in the words of film scholar Dolores Tierney, “a challenge to psychic and political repression inflicted on society’s ‘others’” (112). The films analyzed by DiGiovanni, *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), *The Shape of Water* (2017), and *Pinocchio* (2022), are set against the bleak political backdrops of the Spanish Civil War, the Francisco Franco dictatorship, Cold War-era USA, and Fascist Italy, respectively. Staging resistance to these repressive regimes, del Toro’s films feature non-normative characters that could be variously categorized as “other.” Children, minorities, the elderly, the disabled, the deformed, and the monstrous are cast as empathetic heroes against cruel,

fascistic villains and the machinations of the state. Through a comparative analysis of the villains and heroes in this set of films, DiGiovanni's work emphasizes the way in which militarized forms of masculinity produce violent outcomes, providing a new perspective on the politics undergirding del Toro's work. The videographic essay subtly constructs its argument through the sparse but effective use of text together with a compelling set of visual juxtapositions achieved through split screen and multiscreen techniques. The repetition of key images and soundbites encourages the viewer to draw connections between the behaviors, actions, and gestures of several of del Toro's main characters. Ultimately, the essay reveals the central yet under analyzed role played by gender, violence, and militarization in del Toro's films.

Building on the writings of feminist thinkers such as Cynthia Enloe, whose pioneering research showed how militarization takes root in the public and private realms of civil society, DiGiovanni develops a helpful definition of "militarized masculinity" as "a form of masculinity associated with military values such as physical strength, dominance and aggression." Such gendered ways of thinking have been central to the power of the authoritarian regimes that frame del Toro's films. For, as historian Ruth Ben Ghat has shown, "strongmen" figures such as Benito Mussolini or Francisco Franco used masculinity as a symbol of strength and a political tool. Using a multiscreen technique that juxtaposes previously unstudied similarities in the gendered construction of the films' main characters, DiGiovanni shows how all four del Toro films lens their powerful villains through nearly identical shots and gestures that emphasize the characters' masculine dominance. Each of the characters is shot from a low angle as they cast a commanding gaze across their visual field. This nearly identical gesture embodies authority and control and can be read within the hegemonic "complexes of visuality" that the theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff links to militarized forms of perception and heroic military leaders (124–25). Furthermore, each character is shown wielding traditionally masculine accessories (weapons, fedoras, and a pocket watch) that symbolize their power. In a particularly illuminating multiscreen sequence that relies on repetition and slow motion, DiGiovanni skillfully demonstrates how all four villains react violently to perceived threats or "affronts." In each of the scenes DiGiovanni presents, violence is a tool for the villains to reassert their dominance over others. As the violent gestures echo each other across four screens, the exquisitely timed sequence illustrates how "strongmen give violence an instrumental as well as absolute value" (Ben Ghat, 166). That is, for those who ascribe to ideologies of militarized masculinity, violence is both a constitutive element of their power and a means to retain that power.

DiGiovanni also proposes alternative, "resistant masculinities," which she defines as "forms of masculinity that challenge the use of violence as a solution to conflict."

In the examples put forward in the video essay, resistance is primarily enacted through looking—or not looking—thus offering a counterpoint to the authoritative gaze of the militarized villain. Indeed, resistant masculinity is cannily introduced in the video essay as a deliberate turning away from military violence and values through a clip of Giles, a gay character from *The Shape of Water*, exclaiming “I do not want to see it.” However, DiGiovanni’s video essay maintains that in addition to the turn away from violence, resistant forms of masculinity also involve an empathetic turn toward the other, poignantly exemplified by the deep, expressive eyes of the monster from the same film. The monster’s thoughtful look into the camera could be read in opposition to the visuality of militarized masculinity, as a claim to “the right to look,” or the right to political subjectivity and collectivity (Mirzoeff, 1). Similarly, the examples of “empathetic bravery” that DiGiovanni stitches into the following multiscreen sequences emphasize gestures of connection between characters as a form of resistance. The sequences illustrate how the heroes in del Toro’s films are not singular but a collective whose heroism is built on friendship, solidarity, and love. In doing so, she critiques the persistent and pervasive tenet of militarized masculinity that construes dominance over others as a sign of individual, heroic bravery.

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