

FROM FANTASY TO REALISTIC DEPICTIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF DWARFISM IN CINEMA¹

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Abstract: This article presents the main characteristics of the representation of dwarfism in Western audiovisuals. For this purpose, in addition to listing and commenting some of the most relevant films since German Expressionism, basic theoretical texts on disability studies have been employed, such as those by Tobin Siebers, and studies that deal with real experiences of people with dwarfism, like Erin Pritchard's books. The typical characteristics range from aspects of marvelous "dwarfs" that are occur in representations of people with dwarfism, to the presence of people with dwarfism as a composition of circus scenery, cripface - when people with no disability play the role of those with dwarfism - and what I define as "society on a reduced scale", that is, audiovisual narratives with entire communities formed by little people. The research also verifies that advances have begun to take place in the 21st century, but they are still sporadic or very much centered on the figure of a single actor. In conclusion, the survey of these characteristics aims to contribute to a better understanding of such patterns and the avoidance of their pejorative effects.

Keywords: dwarfism; cinema; fantasy; disability studies.

DAS REPRESENTAÇÕES FANTÁSTICAS ÀS REALISTAS: UM PANORAMA DO NANISMO NO CINEMA

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta as principais características da representação do nanismo no audiovisual ocidental. Para tal, além de elencar e comentar alguns dos filmes mais relevantes desde o expressionismo alemão, foi feito uso de textos de teoria básica dos estudos da deficiência, como de Tobin Siebers, e estudos que se ocupam da vivência real de pessoas com nanismo, como os livros de Erin Pritchard. As características típicas abordadas vão desde aspectos de “anões” maravilhosos que se repetem em representações de pessoas com nanismo, à presença de pessoas com nanismo como composição de cenário circense, o *cripface* – quando pessoas sem deficiência fazem o papel de pessoas com nanismo – e o que eu defino como “sociedade em escala reduzida”, ou seja, narrativas audiovisuais com comunidades inteiras compostas por pessoas pequenas. A pesquisa também verifica que avanços começaram a ocorrer no século XXI, mas eles ainda são pontuais ou centrados na figura de um único ator. Em conclusão, o levantamento dessas características pretende contribuir para uma melhor compreensão de padrões e para que se evitem seus efeitos pejorativos.

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Palavras-chave: nanismo; cinema; fantasia; estudos da deficiência.

DEL FANTÁSTICO A LA REPRESENTACIÓN REALISTA: PANORAMA DEL ENANISMO EN EL CINE

Resumen: Este trabajo presenta las principales características de la representación del enanismo en el audiovisual occidental. Para hacerlo, además de enumerar y comentar algunas de las películas más relevantes desde el expresionismo alemán, se han utilizado textos de la teoría básica de los estudios de discapacidad, como los de Tobin Siebers, y estudios que abordan experiencias reales de personas con enanismo, como los libros de Erin Pritchard. Las características típicas tratadas van desde aspectos de "enanos" maravillosos que se reproducen de forma recurrente en las representaciones de personas con enanismo, hasta la presencia de personas con enanismo como composición de la escenografía circense, el *crippface* - cuando personas sin discapacidad interpretan el papel de personas con enanismo - y lo que yo defino como "sociedad a pequeña escala", esto es, narraciones audiovisuales con comunidades enteras formadas por pequeños. La investigación también comprueba que se han empezado a producir avances en el siglo XXI, pero siguen siendo puntuales o muy centrados en la figura de un único actor. Se concluye que el estudio de estas características contribuye a una mejor comprensión de los patrones y a que se puedan evitar sus efectos peyorativos.

Palavras chave: enanismo; cine; fantasía; estudio de la discapacidad.

1. Introduction

Disability studies were founded in the 1980s by Michael Oliver (WALDSCHMIDT, 2000, p. 17). Besides being quite recent, they cover a wide variety of groups. From physical to intellectual disabilities, from genetic to acquired, there are too many particularities to allow us to discuss en bloc. While certain disabilities, such as blindness, have strong representation in the field, others, due to their rarity, have limited representation. Dwarfism is one of them.

While it is true that it is not uncommon for disabilities to be related to some kind of greater or supernatural ability, such as blindness, which is often associated with wisdom or the gift of prophecy (SIEBERS, 2008, p. 48), no disability is as intrinsically linked to the mythical as dwarfism (PRITCHARD, 2021, p. 81; 93). Furthermore, it is not uncommon that some people only have had contact with "dwarfism" through fantastic or children's stories. These representations are so present in the popular imaginary that it is impossible to make a complete analysis of dwarfism depictions without going through this issue. Massie and Mayer (apud PRITCHARD, 2022, p. 1) even state that dwarfism usually is not recognized as a physical condition, but much more as a social metaphor. It is therefore necessary to discuss dwarfs to get a complete picture of the fictional representation of dwarfism. It should be noted that when referring to dwarfs it will always be addressing mythical and marvelous figures, while persons with the disability will be referred to as people with dwarfism. This is one of the main concerns of this study, the interference of the marvelous in the representation and perception of real people, and vice versa.

This article aims to present an overview of dwarfism in western audiovisual fiction. The proposed selection includes mainly US productions and some specific examples of European and Brazilian films. As this is a study about audiovisual media, we must consider that dwarfism is an umbrella term for a wide range of disabilities. So, this introduction will also present some peculiarities and relevant terms.

The broad selection made by this article aims to address exclusively representations of dwarfism, or those that have directly influenced them, so that political - as well as other - issues, such as German Nazism, which had strong influences from the movie *The Nibelungs*, will not be addressed, even though this indeed is linked to the central issue, due to the strict correlation of Nazism and eugenics.

Unfortunately, a comprehensive approach to such aspects also present in the discussed movies is not possible due to the limitations of an article.

When it comes to dwarfism, it is common to think of achondroplasia, which is the most common bone dysplasia, responsible for around 70% of dwarfism cases. Achondroplasia (Peter Dinklage's dwarfism) causes malformation and shortening of the bones, while all other organs develop normally. When compared to other types of bone dysplasia, achondroplasia tends to cause the shortening of the bones. It may seem frivolous to discuss height within the framework of dwarfism, but the acting opportunities of a 1,35 m tall person like Peter Dinklage are different from those of a 1,07 m tall person like Warwick Davis, who is one of the most productive actors with dwarfism in cinema, but whose face is not always remembered because many of his roles involved costumes, such as when he played an ewok in *Star Wars*.

Achondroplasia is also probably responsible for one of the myths surrounding dwarfism, which is the idea of a big male genitalia. Since it only affects the bones and maintains the normal development of other organs, the genitalia tend to be disproportional to the body.

Another aspect that may seem less important today, but was crucial a century ago, is the difference between bone dysplasia dwarfism, such as achondroplasia, and hormonal dwarfism. The latter case is referred to as pituitary dwarfism, which means the person is proportionally small, without malformation of the bones or limbs, and often (but not always) has physical features that we consider childlike. This distinction was especially important in the field of freak shows, whose influence on cinema and entertainment history is undeniable.

2. Founding movies: the 1920s and 1930s

Since most characteristics addressed in this study are present in the earliest film productions, this discussion will start with the presentation of what is here defined as the founding movies.

The Nibelungs: Siegfried's Death (1924), by Fritz Lang

Coincidentally, one of the first movies to feature actors with dwarfism in the history of cinema is a movie that harks back to the Middle Ages and thus to the origins of Western culture's depictions of mythological dwarfs. The epic poem adapted by Fritz Lang, with a screenplay by Thea von Harbou, is a peculiar case of medieval literature. Unlike King Arthur's narratives, the manuscripts of *The Song of the Nibelungs* date back to the 12th century, but refer to earlier oral narratives, that date to about half a millennium before they were written. Because the epic had its roots in a period prior to the complete Christianization of the continent, many of its characters, such as Attila, king of the Huns, had characteristics that were not desirable in a Christian community. The result, contrary to the Scandinavian tradition, was an erasure of various characteristics from what is believed to have been the original version of the oral story (PEREIRA, 2006). Attila remains pagan, but his manners are courteous. Brünhild, the amazon, loses her powers together with her virginity, and the entire previous history of the hero Siegfried, when he roamed among marvelous figures, is reduced to a few stanzas recounted by a minstrel.

Although Thea von Harbou's screenplay recovers the marvelous aspect presenting Siegfried's formative years, it does not undo the divide between the marvelous and the Christianized world, or, in the film, between the wilderness and the civilization. The blond Germanic hero initially lives in caves in the forest with the savages and, like them, he wears only a fur loincloth. Despite the similar clothing, Siegfried is strikingly different of his companionship. He is handsome and imposing, while the others are old, paunchy, and stooped. They teach Siegfried to forge iron and, when he produces the perfect sword, he decides to set out to win the heart of the most beautiful of all women, Kriemhild, which can be understood as an impulse towards civilization. On the way, Siegfried kills a dragon,

becomes invincible, acquires a treasure and, as result, various kingdoms. Once this process of formation is complete, she will appear in beautiful clothes, with nothing reminiscent of his time in an uncivilized world. Our interest, however, is precisely the journey he underwent in the marvelous world.

After killing the dragon, Siegfried is attacked by the dwarf Alberich, who is wearing an invisibility cloak. Despite this advantage, Siegfried rends him. Defeated, Alberich bargains for his life and offers the treasure of the Nibelungs. The dwarf is performed by an actor of standard height, who walks crouching and wears a padding that simulates a hunchback. As is common for dwarfs, he has treasures and magical powers that are crucial to the hero's development. Within the scheme of the hero's journey, dwarfs can be understood as "guardians of the threshold", granting that only the chosen ones will have access to the wonders (VOGLER, 2015). The encounter of the hero with the guardian is essential for him to complete the journey. Dwarfs do not necessarily have a good character,³ and the treasure or prize they guard can be either handed over or taken by force. Point is that the hero proves himself worthy. In the case of an encounter with good dwarfs, the access is granted when the hero proves to be kind and honest. Bad dwarfs, otherwise, are defeated through physical or mental prowess. Siegfried stands out for his physical prowess.

Alberich is a recurring character in medieval narratives. As Jacob Grimm (1968, p. 375) states in *Deutsche Mythologie* (German Mythology), Alberich is portrayed in other stories as king of the dwarfs, as his name indicates (in Old German, *alb* meant dwarf, and *rich*, king). His status as king is ignored in the medieval epic, but not in the movie. Once Siegfried accepts the bargain, Alberich leads him to a cave where his dwarfs are working. Part of them is assembling a crown for the king of the giants, the other ones are chained together and hold an immense plate with the treasure of the Nibelungs on their back. The entire cast of Alberich's servants is formed of people with dwarfism. A whole cast of people with dwarfism, such a rare condition, causes amazement, bringing the spectator to a world of magic, but the fact that a person of standard height was chosen to play Alberich's role, even having access to so many people with dwarfism, is even more impressive. The choice is not a random one. Dwarfism is presented as something that belongs not only to the magical, but also to the grotesque. By casting a person of standard height to play the superior dwarf, the prejudice against dwarfism is highlighted: the most powerful character is not played by someone with a disability, for it is understood as a marker of inferiority.

The plot signals that physical difference and dwarfism cannot belong to the civilized world. After presenting the treasure, Alberich attacks Siegfried once again, and as Alberich is surrendered, he puts a curse on the treasure and orders: "Let that which I have created from stone be hardened into stone!" (*The Nibelungs*, my translation)⁴, and not only do his servants turn to stone, similar to gargoyles, but Alberich himself is transformed. With this scene, the movie leaves the uncivilized world behind and moves on to the court. The dwarfs function, therefore, as a symbol of the fantastic that must be abandoned in favor of the arrival of the civilization.

The hardening of the dwarfs is a reference to Germanic mythology, specifically Scandinavian mythology, according to which they were skilled blacksmiths who lived in caves, condemned to become stone if exposed to the sun. The curse was related to their physical appearance. While German mythology had not kept this specific trait, Jacob Grimm (1968, p. 383) lists dwarfs' ability to become invisible (see Alberich's cape) as a recurring characteristic. Thus, in the first film, we identify dwarfs as a representation of a grotesque marvel that, ideally, should be banished from human eyes and civilization.

Snow White and the seven dwarfs (1937), by Walt Disney

³ Jacob Grimm (1968, p. 364) refers to them as spirits who can be both good and bad.

⁴ "Zum Stein erstarre, was aus Stein ich schuf!"

More appealing than Lang's dwarfs, but not less problematic, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is often the first thing that comes to mind, when the subject is people of short stature. Just as the internet has often problematized Disney princesses, the problematization of the respective dwarfs is also necessary – and, in fact, is already happening. When Disney announced the filming of the live-action *Snow White*, it received a lot of criticism, especially from the actor Peter Dinklage (SHOARD, 2022), who understood that a remake with the seven dwarfs as setback.

The main problem in this case is the infantilization of people with disabilities. As Bruno Bettelheim (2023, p. 279; 292) observes, it is characteristic for fairy tales that dwarfs are stuck in a stage prior to sexual development, which can be recognized by the fact that they are exclusively male figures, with no father or mother. In Grimm's "Snow White", the dwarfs even play the role of guarding the purity of the protagonist, whose departure from home is linked to sexual maturity (BETTELHEIM, 2023, p. 296). As usual in fairy tales, they play the role of guardians. Even if the absence of sexuality can be associated with an earlier stage of development, this does not indicate a lack of maturity and responsibility. Furthermore, Bettelheim (2023, p. 291) states that "[a]s all dwarfs, even the unpleasant ones, they are hardworking and skillful in their occupations. Work is the essence of their lives: they know nothing of rest and recreation."⁵

In the tale and its adaptation, Snow White's arrival at the dwarfs' house is marked by enchantment due to the small size of the objects. In the tale, the house is described as follows: "there was a little table, with seven little plates, seven little spoons, seven little knives and forks, seven little cups and seven little beds by the wall, one next to the other, neatly arranged"⁶ (Grimm, 2012, p. 249). In the cartoon, Snow White squeals with delight and comments: "What a cute little chair! There are seven little chairs! There must be seven little children. And by the look of this table... seven untidy little children!" (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Not only are the dwarfs immediately identified as children, but they are also not as responsible as in the Grimms' version. Although Snow White herself is a child, as a person of standard height, she hastens to define the little ones as children.

In the tale, the dwarfs agree to host the princess in their home on the condition that she works: "If you want to look after our house and cook, sew, make the beds, wash and darn and also tidy and clean everything properly, you can live with us and you will not lack anything. We come home in the evening, so the food must be ready by then"⁷ (GRIMM, 2012, p. 250). In the movie, Snow White cleans the whole house with the help of wild animals before meeting the owners, and the offer to cook comes from her. Moreover, she makes them show their hands before the meal and bathe. In both narratives, what is being presented is a girl's coming of age, but the roles of the seven are massively altered from one story to the other. While the dwarfs in the tale teach Snow White to be responsible and to work, performing tasks that they also master, in the cartoon Snow White has a doll's house experience. She practices to be a mother with the little people, as she cooks, cleans and looks after a large number of "children". Despite being an outsider, she imposes her rules even before their first meeting. It must be stressed once again: the dwarfs are adults and Snow White is the child. But the roles are switched, and even the physical representation of the "dwarfs" points to this, see Dopey, a beardless dwarf who cannot speak: in other words, a real baby.⁸

Much like *The Nibelungs*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* approaches the literary tradition on the subject, but the classic dwarf element of responsibility and work is completely erased, leaving only the infantilization related to people of short height.

⁵ “[c]omo todos os anões, mesmo os desagradáveis, são trabalhadores e hábeis em suas ocupações. O trabalho é a essência de suas vidas: nada sabem a respeito de descanso e recreação.”

⁶ “havia uma mesinha, com sete pratinhos, sete colherinhas, sete faquinhas e garfinhos, sete copinhos e sete caminhas junto à parede, uma ao lado da outra, bem arrumadas”

⁷ “Se quiser cuidar da nossa casa e cozinhar, costurar, arrumar as camas, lavar e cerzir e também arrumar e limpar tudo direitinho, pode morar com a gente que nada lhe faltará. Nós voltamos para casa à noite, então até lá a comida tem de estar pronta.”

⁸ The childish aspect of Dopey is also highlighted in Gary Cross's (2021, p. 6-7) study, *Freak Show Legacy*.

Freaks (1932), by Tod Browning

Freaks is a paradoxical work: while it preaches acceptance of the marginalized group, it also explores the repulsion towards deviant bodies as a source of terror⁹. To discuss the representation of disabilities in *Freaks*, however, we should start with an excerpt about freak shows.

Freak shows are an important part of the history of entertainment in the USA, where they had a golden phase that lasted a full century, from 1840 to 1940 (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 2). Contrary to what might be expected, the decay of these shows was not linked to any popular awareness; on the contrary, it was due to the spread of eugenicist ideas and the resulting fear of contamination. The freaks were no longer the "others", but a possibility immanent to humans which should therefore be avoided.

In 1870, most circuses featured freak shows as sideshows (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 47). They were the only possible work for many people with visible disabilities. Furthermore, in the USA, starting with Chicago in 1881, several cities imposed the so-called "Ugly Laws", which prohibited people with visible disabilities from appearing in public, with the aim of limiting begging and, consequently, affecting their right to come and go and to work (SCHWEIK, 2009).

Although dwarfism is a rare disability, it was widespread in freak shows. For this reason, there was a distinction between types of dwarfism: people with bone dysplasia dwarfism, which was more common, were selected for less important performances, such as clowns in the circus; for freak shows, there was a clear preference for people with pituitary dwarfism (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 167). The expression "midget", one of the pejorative ways of referring to dwarfism today, was born within this context, it was used to denote people with pituitary dwarfism, preferred by the sideshows because they were "pleasing to the eye" (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 149). Their performances had a family-oriented tone. They sang and danced or, in large troupes, reproduced major historical events, such as the Napoleonic wars (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 165).

It was not uncommon for men with dwarfism to venture into the business as entrepreneurs (ADELSON, 2005: 26). One of the leading men in this business started out as a very successful attraction: Charles Sherwood Stratton, stage name General Tom Thumb. Stratton grew up in the environment of freak shows: at the age of four, he was sold to the mega-entrepreneur P.T. Barnum, who taught him to sing and play the piano. A prodigy, he performed in Europe at the age of six and, as an adult, made such a fortune that he was able to help Barnum financially (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 151). His own personal life had its moments of staging, such as his wedding, where not only the bride, but also the groomsmen and various people involved had pituitary dwarfism. The event was attended by thousands of people.

The movie *Freaks* is set in a circus with a freak show troupe. People with and without disabilities live together. In the opening scene, a man introduces a freak with a speech to the effect that we could all be like them "by default of birth". The speech, consistent with the new knowledge about genetics at the time and the reason for the decline of the shows, seems to remind the viewer to have compassion. At the same time, it is this proximity that produces the intended horror.¹⁰

This polarity persists through the whole movie. At the very beginning of the narrative, an outraged man leads another man to see something "terrible": disabled people playing near a lake. The first man shouts, saying, "Freaks! Don't you know that trespassing is the same as stealing?" (*Freaks*) The troupe runs to take refuge with a middle-aged woman, who takes them into her arms. She introduces herself and explains that these are the "children" of her circus, whom she takes out to sunbathe whenever possible. Afterwards, she concludes, "I like to let them play like children. That's what most of them

⁹ Joan Hawkings (1996, p. 265-277) dedicates a whole chapter, "One of Us", to this subject.

¹⁰ The opening scene, however, is not part of the original work. The film, a box office flop at first, was bought by a grindhouse production company, who added the introduction in 1947, a moralistic speech to avoid censorship, as was usual at the time. (CROSS, 2001, p.8)

are: children." (*Freaks*) The second man reacts in surprise, whispering the word "children". The camera then focuses first on the ones under the woman's arms, all of whom have obvious mental disabilities, such as microcephaly, and then moves down to the other members of the group: two people with bone dysplasia dwarfism, one of whom has no legs, and a black man with no limbs, a shaved head and a moustache, the latter with an exaggeratedly manly appearance, contrary to any expectation of childlike docility.

The reference to "Ugly Laws" is clear. They are not wanted in open places. Like the Nordic dwarfs, they should not come out into the sunlight. Compassion for people with mental disabilities is made easy, as they think and act in a childlike manner, but horror is invoked when mature people are presented as children. By including them in the same group, horror arises from the assumption of intellectual limitation unassociated with docility. Even so, the owner of the venue is compassionate. He apologizes and says they are welcome.

The plot of the movie can be summarized as follows: Hans and Frida are an engaged couple with pituitary dwarfism. Hans falls in love with the trapezist Cleopatra, a beautiful woman whom he calls "big woman". When Cleopatra overhears a conversation about the fortune Hans has inherited, she decides to marry him and kill him with the help of her lover. Once her plan is discovered, the disabled artists ambush Cleopatra and turn her into a freak: a woman with the body of a duck.

A relevant feature of this movie, which was completely lost with the end of the freak show era, is the differentiation between pituitary and dysplastic dwarfism. Although the movie presents all of them as freaks, the ones with pituitary dwarfism are closer to the universe of those without disabilities. As mentioned above, the ones with bone dysplasia follow the other "freaks" on outings, while the couple with pituitary dwarfism interact mainly with people without disabilities. Hans and Frida present themselves as a kind of link between those two universes. On the one hand, they have a body closer to standard and circulate mainly among those without disabilities. Frida is friends with the tamer. Hans falls in love with the "big woman". On the other hand, their physiognomy resembles that of infants, and they are identified with the group of freaks.

Since the story focuses mainly on the couple Hans and Frida, it is no exaggeration to say that identification with them is desired. Viewers should put themselves in the shoes of the "freaks" through the identification with people with dwarfism who seem like children and are intellectually well-developed, realizing the difficulties of a life marked by prejudice. If the experience of being repulsed by occupying an open space, such as the freaks on the lake, is not recurring to everyone, rejection in love is commonplace. We feel for Frida, who is abandoned for a supposedly prettier woman, and even for Hans, when he asks Cleopatra if she is not making fun of him because "big people" tend to do that. Being bullied by people of standard beauty is the main theme of teen movies to this day. But despite the attempt to generate compassion, the distinction made between the couple with pituitary dwarfism and the other freaks is just a reproduction of prejudice based on physical characteristics on a different scale.

Hans becomes the target of Cleopatra's interest because of an inheritance. People like Stratton, "General Tom Thumb", may have spawned an imaginary of extremely wealthy people with pituitary dwarfism. But on a metaphorical level, Hans is a dwarf in possession of the treasure. And the narrative unfolds along the lines of a fairy tale. As already mentioned, dwarfs are usually guardians of treasures and other wonders. They can be acquired by physical prowess, as we saw in *The Nibelungs*, but also by proof of good character. Hans, however, is blinded by the beauty of the trapezist, and the guardian status is transferred to the other characters with disabilities.

In the wedding scene, the freak show colleagues celebrate with a song that welcomes Cleopatra: "We accept her as one of us. Gubo, gaba. Gubo, gaba." (*Freaks*) As they sing, the man with bone dysplasia dwarfism dances across the table, carrying a huge cup that is shared by everyone. The idea of being part of the group infuriates Cleopatra, who casts them out. She then insults her husband, asking him if he is "a man or a baby", and makes fun of him by giving him a piggyback ride. In this scene,

Cleopatra's fate is sealed. Through marriage, she would have to become one of them. This would happen for better or for worse. However, the way they are presented, neither option is appealing. The celebration, accompanied by a primitive chant "Gubo, gaba", emphasizes that the group is not civilized. It is a primitivist staging. Furthermore, in the later scenes, when they attack Cleopatra, they can be recognized as genuine wild creatures: in the pouring rain, they drag themselves through the mud to reach the trapezist. There is something beastly about the troupe, pre-civilizational, but it is only put into practice against people of bad character. Cleopatra finally becomes one of them, but without the "privileges". More beastly than them, in her duck body, she loses her ability to speak and is put in a box: the former trapezist is not worthy of the circus companionship and now lives in a cage.

In the form of horror, *Freaks* communicates the reality of disabilities, which has been preached since the opening speech: unlike other minority groups, we are all subject to becoming disabled, whether through an accident or ageing (SIEBERS, 2008, p. 26). *Freaks*, however, maintains that certain people do not even deserve to be treated in the same way as other disabled people; a separate category is reserved for them.

The Terror of Tiny Town (1938), by Sam Newfield

The Terror of Tiny Town, a box office success in its day, is a vivid depiction of the activities of troupes of artists with pituitary dwarfism. At the opening, we are told that this is the first movie with an "all midget" cast, i.e. completely formed by actors with pituitary dwarfism. And this is, in fact, its great singularity. *The Terror of Tiny Town* is an ordinary western comedy. The saloon scenes feature lots of music, singing and dancing. Despite being a comedy, there are few scenes where the height of the performers can be read as a source of comedy, such as when a man drinks a disproportionate glass of beer at once or when the lady protagonist holds a gun that is too big for her – scenes that would also be possible and funny in a movie with people of standard height. The whole set is proportional. The appeal is caused by the diminished size of the objects and the actors.

What we see is close to what is reported as the activities of freak shows in their golden age: a representation of something known to the public, in this case the Wild West, only in smaller dimensions. The movie features artists from the Singer's Midgets troupe, who were active in sideshows.

I consider this movie to be a founding work because it presents what I will call from here on "society on a reduced scale", in other words, an audiovisual work whose main interest lies in the presentation of a large number of people with dwarfism in the same environment, often adapted, where everything and everyone is on a smaller scale than the standard one. This genre will be discussed further in the next session.

3. Recurring characteristics

a. Dwarfs and associated traits in realistic characters

This list must inevitably begin with the dwarf. This is not only because they are the oldest fictional representation of little people, but also because their characteristics are so widespread that they inadvertently infiltrate the construction of characters with dwarfism. This should come as no surprise, since real people with dwarfism are also very often compared to dwarfs (SHAKESPEARE; THOMPSON; WRIGHT, 2010, p. 24), yet we will see that fiction not only reproduces prejudices, but even common narrative schemes.

The discussion should begin with the mythological tradition, kept alive through fantasy. Mythological dwarfs present themselves as another race, a non-human race¹¹. Although problematic in terms of the representation of little people, they are still recurrent in fantasy narratives, video games and RPGs. The reason for it is that fantasy as a genre was developed from the novels of the medievalists J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (JAMES, 2012). Fantasy is an immersive genre, in other words, it presents universes that are different from our own, with a great deal of detail. This universe is usually developed from a neo-medieval imaginary, and revisits remote mythologies¹².

Peter Jackson's adaptation of *Lord of the Rings* (2001) was responsible for giving fantasy a new stimulus in the cinema. Passionate about Norse mythology, Tolkien developed his characters based on it. As we saw in the exemplary cases of *The Nibelungs* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the characteristics of dwarfs include a serious work ethic, skill as miners and being exclusively male. All these characteristics are present in Peter Jackson's film. Because it is an adventure story, they are also warriors. If we recall Jacob Grimm and the information that dwarfs can be good or bad, we see that the film works with both characteristics: the ethics of good workers become tainted and the mines of Moria, exploited by the dwarfs, become a cursed place, the tomb of an entire race, because they dug "too greedily and too deep", thus awakening demonic creatures. On the other hand, Gimli, the dwarf protagonist, is not terrifying at all and reminds us of characters from children's stories: likeable, trustworthy and unintentionally funny. Despite the terrors surrounding Moria, the "dwarves" never seem fearsome. The ill-temper of a character of short stature is always perceived as amusing, as was the case with the character Grumpy in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Because of their height, they are mostly perceived as harmless.

Of course, C.S. Lewis' novels also include dwarfs. In *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), adapted by Andrew Adamson, the dwarf is a sort of agent of evil, an assistant to the witch. His performance is reminiscent of fairy-tale figures such as Rumpelstilzchen, whose evilness is associated with a strong impetus for mischief. The role of dwarfs, however, is expanded in *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (2008), where they are presented as individuals with personal values and interests, and can be associated with both good and evil. Peter Dinklage's character Trumpkin is the dwarf who helps the heroes on their journey. While his personal values differ from others of the same race, they share a common characteristic of short-temperedness. This bad temper is also associated with the demand for dignified treatment. When one of the children decides to call Trumpkin "DLF - dear little friend", Trumpkin warns that this is condescending and, at another point, he has to remind the children that he is an adult. Thus, the narrative reinforces prejudices, as the complaints are easily dismissed for the assumption that they reflect a problem that lies only in the dwarf himself.

Another recurring characteristic is that they are magical guardians, determining who gets access to the treasure. This is what we see in Mel Stuart's *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), with the Oompa Loompas assistants, represented by people with dwarfism with green hair and orange skin. More than just workers in the enchanted factory, the helpers perform the important function of keeping the children away from the ultimate prize, the factory itself, whenever they misbehave. Their song opens with the stanza "Oompa Loompa, doom-pa-dee-do. I've got a perfect puzzle for you." As in fairy tales, bad acts are punished, and each song by the Oompa Loompas contains a lesson that must be learned, whether it is good manners, eating properly or not watching too much television. After singing the riddle that explains what has led each child to failure - usually in terrible ways, such as turning the child into a purple ball - they are responsible for escorting the parents and the child

¹¹ According to Wilde (apud PRITCHARD, 2021, p.84) there is a tendency to perceive people with dwarfism as a distinct race which is reinforced by the media. In the Victorian era, people with dwarfism were often perceived as a separate race, with the focus on pygmies (TROMP, 2008, p. 169). Still in 1978, Leslie Fiedler (1978, p. 40) wrote about pygmies as a genuine dwarf race.

¹² Not all fantasy narratives retrace the Middle Ages, but variations often develop a magical world based on past mythologies, as is the case with Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, which explores Greek mythology.

out. There is no mistake in painting the friendly Oompa Loompas as characters with a dark side: at the beginning of the movie, when the boy Charlie looks longingly at the chocolate factory, a stranger warns him: "Fear the little men" (*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*).

Another guardian is the eponymous protagonist of *Willow* (1988), by Ron Howard. Willow lives in a community of nelwyns, who are little people. They differ from dwarfs particularly because they are a complete community, with men and women, who have all kinds of professions. They also have their own personal desires and interests. As the title suggests, Willow will not be forgotten at the end of the journey: this is his journey. The personal goal of Willow, a young family man, is to qualify to be the apprentice of the local wizard. This goal will be achieved once he manages to complete his journey, namely, to bring a daikini baby, as they call people of average height, who has appeared in his village, back to his own people and to safety. The baby is predestined to become the next queen. Therefore, it is persecuted by the current queen, resulting in its abandonment in the river by her mother to save her life – a clear reference to Moses.

Willow can be considered a guardian: he is guarding a baby who will save an entire nation, whose future is of no concern to him as this nation is of a different race. What makes Willow special is not just the narrative focus on him, but how he performs compared to the daikini. On his journey, Willow meets Madmartigan, a mercenary played by Val Kilmer. While humor is generated by the fact that neither of them performs their duties to the full – Willow gets his spells wrong and Madmartigan is not the most sagacious warrior – the fact that their personalities are opposites stands out: the mercenary is irresponsible and a womanizer, and Willow is first and foremost a family man, who demands care for the baby's safety. Willow is more responsible than his partner, and his superiority is recognized when the mercenary declares: "I serve the newlyn." (*Willow*) Thus, we see that the issue of height does not generate any reproduction of prejudices.

In the outline of the hero's journey, another function frequently occupied by dwarfs is the role of mentor, that is, a figure responsible for training the hero so that he can follow the journey to the end. Vogler (2015) also defines these characters as wise old men and, in some cases, we can see that these characteristics overlap: Yoda, from the *Star Wars* franchise, as well as being of advanced age, is short in stature; the same can be said of the emblematic Dungeon Master, from the cartoon *Dungeons and Dragons*. Recent versions of the master role do not limit the mentor's age to the elderly, but only to the more experienced, as is the case with the heroes with dwarfism in Tarsem Singh's *Mirror, Mirror* (2012). In this version of "Snow White", the seven mentors are not of a different race, but people with dwarfism who originally worked in different professions and were expelled from the village by the queen, in a reference to the US "Ugly Laws". Excluded from society, they steal to survive and make it a condition that Snow White steals with them so that she can be welcomed under their roof. Unlike *Snow White and the seven dwarfs*, they are self-sufficient and do not lose their autonomy with Snow White's arrival, but teach her to be self-confident and to fight for her goals. (PEREIRA; AMARAL DE OLIVEIRA, 2023, p. 305).

People with dwarfism in *Mirror, Mirror* also stand out because they do not disappear once the protagonist has completed her journey. On the contrary, the film ends with individual photos of the former members of the gang, showing how each one has moved on with their lives, some of them returning to their original occupation. It is thus clear that simply conforming to the typical standards of the hero's journey is not a problem for the representation of dwarfism, but much more the insistence on a standardization in which figures of short stature only serve as means to the ends of others, without any interests of their own.

Another typical role of dwarfs, as shown in the study about medieval narratives by Isabel Habicht (2010), is metafictional discourse. Because they are of a different race, they would have a broader perspective and superior knowledge of the events. While in the Middle Ages this action was carried out by dwarfs, in contemporary narratives it is carried out by characters with dwarfism. Our first example is provided by Habicht (2010, p. 11-12) in an introduction that seeks to present the relevance of her subject: David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990). In the series, Agent Cooper has strange dreams in

which the so-called "little man from another place" speaks enigmatically, often giving him clues about the crime he is investigating. The connection between people with dwarfism and the supernatural is highlighted in these narratives, giving the idea that they are not really part of the human universe, or that there is a certain distance from it. Two decades later, the role of metafictional commentator was once again exercised by the same actor, Michael J. Anderson, in Daniel Knauf's series *Carnivàle* (2003-2005), where, as well as playing the role of a carnival manager, the actor opens the two seasons of the series with a speech about the battles between good and evil that will be staged. Unlike his character, this narrator is aware of the scope of the actions that will take place in the series.

It is not necessary to have such a distance from the facts to be a metafictional commentator. In Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), Linda Hunt plays the photographer Billy Kwan, an Austrian-Chinese who works in Indonesia with the newly arrived Australian correspondent, Guy Hamilton, covering the events that led to the fall of President Sukarno. Billy is in love with the British embassy assistant, Jill Bryant, but was rejected by her, so he introduces Guy and Jill and hopes to see his dream of a romantic relationship come true through his colleague. As soon as they meet, Jill talks to Guy about the photographer and says: "You are everything he would like to be. [...] He is a strange little guy you know." (*The Year of Living Dangerously*) Billy's strangeness is associated with his height, which is why he mirrors his desires in others. Thus, Billy is part of the story, but also remains on the margin. This is reflected in how he acts in the narration of the story. Shortly after introducing the couple, Billy looks at a photo of the couple and states, "And so it begins" (*The Year of Living Dangerously*), like a narrator capable of predicting and controlling how the story will develop. Billy emulates the abilities of a mentor and a guardian, which becomes clear when he is disappointed by Guy's actions¹³ and, in a discussion, Billy does not only state that he gave the stories to Guy to publish, as in fact he did, but also adds "I created you" (*The Year of Living Dangerously*). Regarding the couple's relationship, broken by Guy's breach of trust, Billy sees himself as responsible for the course of events: "You don't understand. You have lost Jill. I gave her to you and now I'm taking her back." (*The Year of Living Dangerously*) As the supposed guardian of the treasure that is the woman he loves, Billy believes he can control the access to her.

But *The Year of Living Dangerously* is a realistic movie, Billy is a person with dwarfism without any of the powers he claims. Once Billy realizes his limitations, he commits suicide. In Guy's dreams, however, he is still present, acting as a metafictional commentator. The couple, as expected, end up together. Billy is gone, but his disability remains, manifesting itself when Guy loses an eye in the Indonesian conflicts.

As we have seen so far, the typical characteristics of marvelous entities tend to overflow into the depiction of characters with dwarfism. This is no different when we take Tyrion Lannister, from the series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), praised precisely for being different from typical fantastic figures, such as the dwarf (GROSSMANN, 2011). The fact that the character is a person with dwarfism does not exempt the series from repeating patterns. Luxury¹⁴, including the typical indication of a large male genitalia, for example, are present from the very first episode. A high consumption of alcohol is another characteristic often attributed to people with dwarfism, as can be seen in the example of the legend about the court dwarf Perkeo (1702-1735), who was said to have drunk an entire barrel of aging wine by himself (GRITLER, 1993, p. 22). Furthermore, wisdom was also seen as a quality of the little ones who lived at court (GRITLER, 1993, p. 21), who could perform various activities, such as court jesters or companions, but who, because they were seen as people out of the ordinary, had greater freedom to offer their vision of events. This broader view of events

¹³ The breach of trust was an article written with secret information that could lead to civil war, which was obtained in conversations with Jill. Other journalists got envious of the breaking news, as believing Billy was the source, they started calling him "the black dwarf", a direct quotation of one of Walter Scott's Waverly novels.

¹⁴ As an example of the myth of luxury, we can mention the legend that Stratton, "General Tom Thumb", kissed thousands of women on his trip to England (BAßLER, 2004, p. 202), or the myth mentioned by Fiedler (1978, p. 51) that people with dwarfism were sexually very active but sterile.

through the eyes of people with dwarfism within the court is exactly the theme of Per Lägerqvist's novel *The Dwarf* (1944). Finally, wisdom is also linked to a whole tradition of dwarf guardians and mentors.

Tyrion is a character built on these foundations and became famous with the catchphrase "That's what I do. I drink and I know things." Several times during the series, including at its conclusion, he occupies the position of Hand of the King, a prominent advisor who even takes decisions for the king or queen themselves. Although he never considered having a chance to the throne due to his dwarfism, as is discussed with Lord Varys in episode 1 of season 5, Tyrion is responsible for the outcome of the narrative in the final season: he leads Daenerys' army and allies to Westeros and, after seeing the city decimated, he is dissatisfied with her decisions and convinces John Snow to murder her. Finally, he even gives a speech in front of the surviving regents about choosing Bran as the next king. This speech is particularly emblematic:

What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There is nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No man can defeat it. And who has a better story than Bran the Broken? [...] He is our memory. The keeper of all our stories. [...] Who better to lead us into the future? [...] For now on rulers will not be born, they will be chosen, on this spot by the Lords and Ladies of Westeros to serve to realm. (*Game of Thrones*, Season 8, Episode 6)

Tyrion discourses on "story", not "history". Even though he is talking about Bran's personal life story, the development of a paralyzed boy into a person with the paranormal powers to recover past events and thus history, the speech is not really about that, but about the power of a well-told story. Bran may have the knowledge, but he is a taciturn man. Tyrion is the one who masters oratory, to the point where he practically becomes a master of ceremonies, performing a declarative illocutionary speech act that defines the future system of government of the kingdoms - even if this power has not previously been delegated by the sovereigns he addresses.

If, on the one hand, we follow the narrative arc of Tyrion's individual development until almost the last scene, on the other hand, the history book that recounts the events of the series is written in its final chapter, and Tyrion is informed that his name is missing. As far as the historical narrative is concerned, the series had pointed out that nothing had changed: his dwarfism would be enough to exclude him from the records. From another point of view, this exclusion resembles the fairy tales, where the guardian or master fades away once the journey is complete.

b. Circus and freak show

Circus settings often feature at least one person with dwarfism. Take, for example, the Brazilian series *The king of TV* (*O rei da TV*, 2022), which portrays the life of television host Silvio Santos. In the short segment about his time working in a circus, he appears paying his employees, including a person with dwarfism who asks for an early payment to solve family problems, which is granted. The scene embodies the circus and highlights the protagonist's good heart.

As in the case of the Brazilian series, it is common for people with dwarfism to serve the setting and to not have a narrative arc of their own. In Francis Lawrence's *Water for Elephants* (2011), Jacob Jankowski, after being evicted from his late parents' house, embarks on an adventure working as a circus animal caretaker. After arriving at the circus, he is placed in the same cabin as Kinko, a person with dwarfism. Kinko is initially unwelcoming. Their friendship only develops after Jakob takes care of Kinko's dog, highlighting his skills as a veterinarian. Kinko appears only a few times.

Although *Water for Elephants* does not deal extensively with the hierarchical structure of a circus, Jacob's journey clearly leads to the top. The young man, who had been a student at Cornell University, finds himself forced into a humble existence to survive and, once he proves his worth as a veterinarian, he attracts the attention of the producer, August, and is constantly invited to dinners with him and his wife. Jacob gradually gains the right to move around in environments that differ from those of the other employees. When Jacob's involvement with August's wife becomes apparent, he flees with the help of his colleagues. In retaliation, Kinko is murdered. His death is avenged by other employees in a fire that destroys the circus and ends August's life. Jacob and his beloved thrive in the circus business after the incident.

Within the hierarchy presented in the film, Kinko is a person of enormous value to his colleagues, who had already been silent witnesses to the disappearance of other colleagues. As far as the protagonist is concerned, his death is much more of a narrative tool that allows for his own happy ending. Not only Kinko, but also the other circus colleagues, only ensure that Jacob maintains a high social status, none of them being portrayed in the final scenes of the happy couple enjoying a thriving circus business.

Tim Burton's *Big Fish* (2003) is another movie in which the circus plays a crucial role, being the environment where the protagonist and storyteller Edward Bloom has his first professional experiences, more specifically, being exploited by the businessman Amos Calloway. Amos has as his assistant, lawyer and clown the inseparable Mr. Soggybottom. Played by Deep Roy, a 1,32m person with pituitary dwarfism, Mr. Soggybottom appears in most scenes alongside Amos, played by Danny de Vito, who is 1,47m. Without people around them, the effect of wonder here is contrary to any expectation: as Danny de Vito is the main height referential, a person of short stature, but about whom we know he does not have any dwarfism, Mr. Soggybottom's dwarfism practically disappears. It is only in the final scene, Edward's funeral, when we see all the characters for what they really are, and not through the lens of the storyteller's exaggerations, that the framing does not reconcile Soggybottom's height and we can clearly recognize his dwarfism.

The musical *The Greatest Showman* (2017), by Michael Gracey, is based on the life of P.T. Barnum, mentioned earlier in this article, but it can be understood more as a tribute to the circus than to Barnum, with whom the character bears little resemblance. It is undeniable that Barnum was the main entrepreneur in the circus business at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, and the main investor in freak shows. *The Greatest Showman*, however, presents him as the creator of this type of show. In the film, the ones he hires are excluded and ridiculed by society and they can only find their self-esteem through Barnum, whose enterprise gives them a sense of community. The narrative, however, never really focuses on the actual variant bodies. It addresses prejudice only through the love story of the trapezist, played by Zendaya, who is a woman of color.

As mentioned earlier, Charles Sherwood Stratton, known as General Tom Thumb, was one of Barnum's main attractions, to the point of making a fortune and saving Barnum from bankruptcy. He does appear in the film, but is faded and stripped of his character. When it comes to narrative arc, Stratton's story would certainly be worth its own movie, so much so that he was one of the celebrities most written about in the 19th century (BOGDAN, 1988, p. 151). However, Stratton is secondary in *The Greatest Showman*. A grumpy man, following the pattern previously seen in dwarfs, he is discovered and formally hired by Barnum at the age of 21 - and not bought from his mother at the age of 4 as it actually happened. His stage name is never mentioned except for an easter egg which is the cover of the book *Tom Thumb*, that appears fleetingly. Stratton is not developed as a character and Barnum maintains a superior role to those with disabilities, as a benefactor to people who supposedly could never have achieved success independently, as pointed out by Pritchard (2021, p. 108).

If the relationship between dwarfism and the entrepreneurial aspect of circuses is erased in *The Greatest Showman*, the same cannot be said of the previously mentioned series, *Carnivàle*. *Carnivàle* is the name of a traveling show that tours the USA during the Great Depression. With a wide range of activities, such as a Ferris wheel, fortune tellers, burlesque dancers and Siamese sisters, Samson,

an elderly man with dwarfism, runs the show. We understand right from the first episode, from the way he claims to have traveled all over the country, that he is experienced and cannot be easily fooled. It is very likely that he has already acted as an attraction in the business, but this only indicates his experience to occupy the current position. Respected by everyone in the show, Samson's seriousness is not only perceived by those who already know him. In scenes in which he talks to or negotiates with townspeople, he is always treated with respect and without bias. It is only in the second season, when an adversary, Varlyn Stroud, seeks him out, that we see him referred to by pejorative expressions concerning his height. This, however, only serves to characterize Stroud as a scoundrel, that is, the use of these expressions does not reinforce prejudices against dwarfism, but rather affects our perception of the character who utters them.

Dwarfism in freak shows and circuses is first and foremost a question of setting aesthetics. Emphasis on their personal interests is not common, nor are issues specific to the living with dwarfism addressed. Although they are not guardians or masters as in fairy tales, people with dwarfism also tend to have the function of highlighting the characteristics of others or serving their development, disappearing at the conclusion of the narratives, so that the final effect in terms of the construction and development of the characters is similar in a certain degree.

c. "Society on a reduced scale"

Moving away from the depiction of the circus arena, but still strongly influenced by it in its genesis, society on a reduced scale is how I define movies that cause wonder due to the presentation of an entire community composed of little people. Some of these works are completely constituted by a cast of little people, others not, but once this group is introduced, they always form a complete community. The impression is of life presented on a reduced scale, providing a fascination similar to that of a scale model¹⁵.

The Terror of Tiny Town was presented at the beginning of this article as the founding work. The next example of this type was released the following year and featured many actors from the same cast: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), by Victor Fleming. After her house was swept away by a tornado into a colorful new universe, Dorothy lands in Munchkinland, a community inhabited by munchkins, little people in colorful clothes who live in a place that looks just like it was made of doll's houses. The impression we get is of an immersive introduction to a fairy tale: in a village of dwarfs, Dorothy is celebrated as the heroine who killed the Witch of the East. The typical sideshow activities of people with pituitary dwarfism are the highlight here: to celebrate Dorothy, they do a parade, sing and dance.

The next movie in this genre was released only three decades later. Werner Herzog's *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970) is a movie with a cast completely formed by people with dwarfism. Set in Mexico, which gives the German feature an exotic feel, the film presents a rebellion inside a mental institution. There is no precise narrative development, just scenes of rioting and destruction as the director tries to regain control. The narrative can be read as an attempt to address rebellious acts that developed from 1968 onwards in Germany. While the inmates destroy the entire institution, the director locks himself in a room and makes useless calls to the police. The film opens with the interrogation of one of the inmates, a scene that should be read as the conclusion of the rebellion, but which does not indicate any real control of the situation, and closes with the same inmate laughing senselessly at the destruction created. What we see is a metaphor for a government that can no longer control things and an inefficient police force in the face of rebels who also have no clear plan of action beyond the complete destruction of the current social structure. The revolution is presented as inefficient, a kind of "man eat man", echoed in a central scene where a chicken feeds on another dead chicken. The setting in a mental institution would be sufficient for such a metaphor. The choice of a

¹⁵ Regarding the fascination for people with dwarfism, especially several together, due to the rarity of the disability, Pritchard (2021, p. 84) states: "Seeing one person with dwarfism is enough to evoke fascination, however, several together is even more of a spectacle."

society on a reduced scale, where everyone has dwarfism but the structures around them have not been adapted to their size, amplifies the impression of the inadequacy of the entire social structure and the impossibility of success when nothing around fits them. This aspect, however, is not a criticism of accessibility issues, but just another feature of the grotesque that is the dominant theme. *Even dwarfs started small* is a metaphor of an outburst of everything society would prefer not to see, but which, instead of repelling, catches the eye.

Another movie that explores society on a reduced scale is the previously mentioned *Willow*. As it has already been discussed, by presenting an entire social structure, the fantasy movie distances itself from some typical aspects of the representation of the dwarf, such as the absence of women and an existence governed by the journey of another hero, at the same time it maintains a sense of wonder.

The effect of society on a reduced scale is also present in *The Lord of the Rings: The Society of the Ring* through the hobbits, a race of slightly smaller height than the dwarfs. The scene depicting the wizard Gandalf visiting his friend Bilbo, right at the beginning of the film, is cute due to the small size of the shire and the hobbit's house, in which Gandalf moves with some difficulty, banging his head on the chandelier, for example. The wonder generated in the spectators, as well as the presentation of the house itself, is reminiscent of Snow White's arrival at the house of the dwarfs in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, when she is enchanted by the proportion of the utensils. It is important to note that there is no similar effect in Moria, the mine of the dwarfs. Although the races are of similar heights, the issue of the size of the objects they use is only a theme with the hobbits and is something that reinforces the idea of innocence: the pure heart of the hobbits, almost childlike innocence, is reflected in the dimensions of their shire.

Finally, *Tiptoes* (2002), a film that buried the career of the first-time director Mathew Bright (FALK, 2016), presents the story of Steve and Carol, who face an unplanned pregnancy. When Carol announces her pregnancy, Steve reacts negatively, because there is a hitherto unshared secret: Steve is the only child of standard height in a family of people with dwarfism. The story will show Steve's hidden prejudices – he has a good relationship with his family but hides it from his girlfriend –, and how Carol goes through stages of learning, especially when her son is also diagnosed with dwarfism, which is the reason the couple eventually breaks up. *Tiptoes* can be classified as a society on a reduced scale movie not only because of Steve's family, but also because of the Little People of America parties they attend. Despite being a movie that tries to raise awareness about dwarfism issues, such as the typical spinal injuries, or the prejudice that parents themselves can have against their own children – as Mathew against his newborn –, the society on a reduced scale here tends towards the grotesque. In addition, there is a strong focus on sex, where sexual relationships are usually between people with dwarfism and people of standard height¹⁶ – there is even a scene of a woman with dwarfism having sex with the musician hired for the party, during the party, on the kitchen table.

Tiptoes fetishizes the community of people with dwarfism. It evokes wonder through the representation of a whole community of people with dwarfism, almost as if they were another race, like the dwarfs in fairy tales. Furthermore, by encapsulating dwarfism in a bubble and bursting it repeatedly through sexual relations with people outside the group, a fetish is created, as if it were the mixing of two distinct worlds. In addition, Carol's story reflects the *Freaks'* wedding song, when they chant "We accept her as one of us." By getting pregnant with Steve and giving birth to a child with dwarfism, Carol becomes closer and closer to the community of little people and ends up together with her ex-partner's brother. Carol now belongs to the community. Hell is full of good intentions, and *Tiptoes* is a movie that has more value as a trashy picture, in other words, due to its unintentional humor, than in representing and raising awareness about dwarfism.

The genre of society on a reduced scale can be positive, as seen in *Willow's* case, demonstrating how little people can perform the same functions as anyone else, especially due to accessibility. On its own, however, it is not possible to define whether this type of representation is good or bad, especially

¹⁶ Clifton (2018, p. 170) points out that when disability is not considered repugnant, it is often fetishized.

since the fetishist effect is recurrent, as can be seen from the success of US reality series on the subject, such as *The Little Big Family* (since 2006), *The Little Johnsons* (since 2015), *The Hamill Family* (2015), *Little Big Women* (2015-2026), to name but a few.¹⁷

d. Cripface

Cripface is a new expression for an old phenomenon. Inspired by the term blackface, the word is applied to refer to the acting of people without disability in the roles of people with disability. As seen above, cripface has been present since the beginning of cinema history, such as in the expressionist film *The Nibelungs*, where the dwarf Alberich stands out from his servants for being played by a person of standard height. The choice of casting in this and many other cases is no coincidence, as we shall learn below.

The casting in Peter Jackson's work is especially significant in *The Hobbit* trilogy (2012-2014). Despite the title, the movies tell an "dwarves'" adventure. While the characterization of the majority follows the pattern of *The Lord of the Rings* – burly actors, to simulate achondroplasia, with long beards – there are a few who deviate from this standard: Thorin II and Kili. Both actors are slender and their beards are short. As far as their general physical presentation is concerned, unless they are close to other characters, such as the wizard, where there is a slight difference in stature, there is nothing to indicate that they are "dwarves". They could be the "humans", causing the audience to identify with them more. Thorin II is the dwarf heir who leads the whole troupe. His proximity to the "humans" underlines his noble characteristics. Like Alberich, from *The Nibelungs*, the king of the dwarfs is not identified as a person with dwarfism. The characterization of Kili, on the other hand, corresponds to changes in the original narrative. It is well known that women are practically absent from Tolkien's sagas, just as there are no dwarf-women in the medieval tradition. Peter Jackson includes an elf, Tauriel, in the trilogy, who serves mainly as Kili's love interest. Thus, in addition to the thick beard, Kili loses physical characteristics that could be identified as a disability in order to present himself as worthy of a love story. Even though cripface is practiced by the entire cast, prejudice is reinforced through the individual characterization of these figures.

Peter Jackson made history in fantasy cinema, and his choices are reflected in movies such as *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2021), by Rupert Sanders, an action film in which the dwarfs are played by people of standard height, reduced by computer graphics programs. However, the prejudice is openly manifested in its sequel, *The Huntsman and the Ice Queen* (2016), by Cedric Nicolas-Troyan. In this film, the dwarfs are the comic relief, which is also achieved by criticizing their own race, specifically dwarf-women. At the beginning of the film, a dwarf is rejected by a woman in the tavern, to which the Hunter asks why he does not get involved with women of his own kind, indicating that they should only have relationships with each other. He responds by insulting dwarf-women, saying they are "horrible" and that the copulation necessary to bear children would only be possible under the strong influence of alcohol. During the movie, they meet dwarf-women who become their partners, reaffirming the Hunter's thesis that "interspecies" relationships should be avoided. All the reasoning involved in this plot is especially problematic, but it seems that there is greater freedom to do this, since the actors are performing cripface and are not people with disabilities, thus camouflaging these prejudices.

Tiptoes commits practically all possible errors involving cripface. Despite being a movie of society on a reduced scale, with a great cast, such as the experienced Michael J. Anderson and the young Peter Dinklage and Mark Povinelli, this did not prevent the casting of Gary Oldman as the main role of person with dwarfism, the one who would end up together with the female protagonist. This casting guarantees that the lead role will be played by an actor who is as well-known as the main couple,

¹⁷ These series can raise awareness about the various problems experienced by people with dwarfism, as well as normalizing their presence in our society (SOLOMON, 2016), but some of them, such as *Little Big Women*, are particularly dedicated to spectacularizing the disability, and physical fights between the cast easily become circus-like.

Matthew McCounaghey and Kate Beckinsale, but it also perpetuates the idea that this character would be naturally superior to the others, played by persons with dwarfism. What is more, in a work with so many relationships between people with dwarfism and people without, it is more than notable that the only balanced relationship is played by two actors without disabilities, almost as if there was no real possibility of contamination here. Moreover, the portrayal of Gary Oldman as a person with dwarfism is not ennobling: the film uses no special effects, Gary Oldman walks on his knees and has padding on his back, reproducing a hunchback. In scenes where he is sitting, his body is inserted into the sofa and the legs displayed are stuffed legs, resembling performances from comedy shows from half a century ago.

The use of computer graphics may have a less embarrassing final effect, but it is still a disservice in romantic comedies that insist on casting well-known stars in the roles of people with dwarfism, such as the Argentinian *Lion's Heart* (*Coração de leão*, 2013), by Marcos Carnevale, which has had several adaptations, including the Brazilian *Just Short of Perfect* (*Amor sem medida*, 2021), by Ale McHaddo, with Leandro Hassum in the role of a person with dwarfism. While the Argentinian movie features a successful businessman and only deals with insecurities faced by the couple, the Brazilian adaptation is full of jokes about dwarfism, such as when the successful doctor is mistaken for a comedian to perform at his girlfriend's family party and is celebrated by his future mother-in-law with the words: "He's a dwarf! Oh, I love dwarfs! What a cute little thing!" The film generated a reaction from actors such as Juliana Caldas and Giovanni Venturini due to not hiring a person with dwarfism (GOES, 2021), but what is clear is that the target audience for a work with an actor with dwarfism would be different, as this movie only pretends to deal with the prejudice, something that can be completely ignored once the film is over, since it is nothing more than make-believe and we know that Leandro Hassum has never had or will ever have to deal with the situations portrayed.

Cripface often reinforces prejudices by breaking the fourth wall, because it does not involve total immersion in the fictional narrative, but rather the audience's awareness that the character in question is played by a person of standard height and should therefore be "superior", or the awareness that the real person does not have to deal with the problems being tackled.

4. Contemporary trends

While the various characteristics outlined in this article are still very much present, the advances in the representation of people with dwarfism today are notorious. The success of the *Game of Thrones* series has made this shift possible, and it has been reflected in productions in different countries, such as the Brazilian *Altas expectativas* (*High expectations*, 2017), by Álvaro Campos and Pedro Antônio Paes, but Peter Dinklage has carried this role almost single-handedly in the USA.

Although *Game of Thrones* was the main driving force behind this shift, the movie that brought about this re-thinking of dwarfism representation was released almost a decade earlier. In Tom McCarthy's *The Station Agent* (2003), we follow the story of a withdrawn man with dwarfism who moves from the big city to the countryside after the death of his best friend. It is a movie about adjustment and the development of new friendships. The dwarfism of the protagonist, Finbar McBride, is not ignored, people stare at him in the street in the big city and there is a visible anxiety due to the disability when making new acquaintances, but this is just one of several characteristics that shape the protagonist, and this is the movie that comes closest to a realistic representation of life with dwarfism.

With the success of *Game of Thrones*, its lead actors were cast in various movies as a means of drawing audiences. It was not different with Peter Dinklage, who, at the time, acted in roles that made no mention to the dwarfism, such as Phil Alden Robinson's *The Angriest Man in Brooklyn* (2014), Bryan Singer's *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) and Mark Palansky's *Rememory* (2017). Anyone could have played these roles. It is possible that they were not even written for the actor, but it must also be considered that his casting was due to the success of the show, and the repetition of dwarfism as a main theme could be redundant, after all, it was already extensively explored by the television

series, and Dinklage's dwarfism was nothing new to his fans. In other words, casting an actor with a disability in these roles, without causing any major strangeness, was only possible because of Dinklage's success.

After the end of the series, the actor continued to land relevant leading roles such as Reed Morano's post-apocalyptic *I Think We're Alone Now* (2018), J. Blakeson's thriller *I Care a Lot* (2020) and Joe Wright's musical *Cyrano* (2021). While this reflects mostly the visibility and success of Peter Dinklage, an actor who is perceived beyond dwarfism, his flexibility in choosing roles is nonetheless an inspiration, indicating that there are still many doors to be opened for other actors with dwarfism.

5. Conclusions

This article provides an overview of recurring characteristics in the representation of dwarfism in audiovisuals. The study is not complete or definitive, but seeks to form an overview of the narrative tradition and how it is articulated in Western culture. Although the raised characteristics are diverse, it can be said that many of them share a common quality: the consistent denial of the leading role for people with dwarfism. The consequences are diverse and affect different aspects of the lives of those with dwarfism. With no protagonist roles or even any attention to individual needs and interests, they tend to be objectified. Almost literally objectified when we think of ornaments such as garden dwarfs, which reflect how many deal with people with dwarfism, defining them as "cute", in other words, as objects of adornment. The ridicule of their physical condition is still accepted in many countries, and they are present on TV shows such as the Brazilian show *Vai dar namoro*, or in the mockumentary *Life is too short* (2011), by Rick Gervais and Stephan Merchant.

Although the issue of their rejection and oppression by society is often thematized, as in *Game of Thrones* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the fact is that issues specific to dwarfism are usually not presented, so these narratives do not serve to raise real awareness. Their depiction continues to serve others: the audience can enjoy the cathartic effect of identification without actually focusing on the portrayed disability. Dwarfism thus remains alien to their perception.

This article should not, however, be understood as a list of prohibitions. Reflecting on what is typical serves to develop this tradition further. Reinterpretations can have a positive effect, as was seen in the case of the fantasy movies *Willow* and *Mirror, Mirror*. In other cases, it is also possible to play with clichés, producing the unexpected, as David Lynch did in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), in the brief appearance of Mr. Roque, played by Michael J. Anderson, within a tall body. The uncanny in this case is created by a reverse cripface. The strangeness occurs through a self-referential intertext: it happens as the audience recognizes the actor from his roles in other works by the same director.

In conclusion, a greater presence of actors with dwarfism in audiovisuals is the goal, especially avoiding the repetition of clichés, not only as we see in many of Dinklage's films, but their presence is also desired in occasional secondary roles such as in Lisa McGee's *Derry Girls* (2018-2022), normalizing their presence in ordinary life. What is also necessary is an approach to the specific issues of dwarfism, as a way of raising awareness, rather than a generic discourse about prejudice. A better development of empathy is one of the roles played by fiction, and its possibilities regarding dwarfism have not yet been properly explored in popular culture. There is plenty of room for new and interesting narratives.

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