

GUILLERMO DEL TORO: AT HOME WITH MONSTERS

Inspired by the extraordinary imagination of Guillermo del Toro, the Mexico-born, Los Angeles-based writer and director of *Pan's Labyrinth* and other films, the exhibition Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters showcases the many artworks, objects, and stories that inspire the filmmaker's work. Del Toro has long been a collector as well as a voracious reader of art catalogues, magazines, comics, and literature (specifically Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and Charles Dickens). He houses the majority of his diverse collection of books, art, monster memorabilia, and specimens in a second house in which he often works, called "Bleak House." This setting spurs his creativity and enables him to envision the distinctive worlds that make his films so remarkable. Bleak House is the realization of del Toro's lifelong dream to collect and surround himself with objects that inspire him, and the LACMA exhibition features many of its contents. The pieces in this curriculum packet will encourage students to look for inspiration in a variety of sources—from dreams to literature—in order to tell stories.

Bullied by his classmates and stifled by a strict Catholic upbringing, del Toro developed an early interest in monsters and fantasy. One of his first toys was a plush werewolf that his great-aunt helped him sew together, and when he was five his Christmas list included a mandrake root (a plant associated with superstitions and magic rituals because the shape of its roots often resembles human figures). At a young age, del Toro began drawing creatures inspired by comics and a medical encyclopedia he found in his father's library. To this day, he maintains his early habit of keeping a notebook nearby to record ideas, lists, and images (a sample page is included in this packet).

Del Toro's mother was charmed by his eccentric interests, but his strict Catholic grandmother was not: during his childhood she submitted him to exorcisms in hopes of erasing his love of monsters. Despite these interventions—or perhaps in part

because of them—del Toro's interests persevered and grew. He identified powerfully with monsters like the creature from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, who do not conform to conventional standards of perfection or normalcy. In del Toro's words, "[Monsters] are the ultimate outcasts. They are beyond sexism, class struggle. They are truly fringe characters." He became an early and loyal fan of horror movies, and by the age of eight he had already made his first short film.

Del Toro's films frequently feature children because he believes that young people, unlike adults, are receptive to the unknown and able to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality. He also portrays children as witnesses who expose the inhumane nature of the adult world in which people are often the true monsters. Del Toro is dismayed less by monsters than by so-called normal people who are capable of monstrous behavior toward those who are different. To del Toro, fantasy and the world of dreams and dreamscapes (like those of artist Odilon Redon, whose work is featured in this packet) are more real than the artificial constructs of money, power, and war. He has stated that he wants to be in a place "where reason sleeps," as in Francisco Goya y Lucientes's famous print, also included in this packet. In high school del Toro made a short film expressing the way he felt: it features a monster that crawls out of the toilet, and then, disgusted by humans, eagerly escapes back to the sewers. In del Toro's words, "One of the main purposes of horror movies [is] to try at least to give us a dosage of fear in a safe way. It's a vaccine against the real horrors out there."

By exhibiting the objects that nourish and inspire him at LACMA, del Toro hopes to give support and encouragement to imaginative, monster-loving young "weirdos" like himself. With the works of art, the lesson plans, and the concepts introduced in this packet, we hope to extend this message to your students.

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BLEAK HOUSE

As a child, Guillermo del Toro began collecting books and objects that intrigued him and assembling them into meticulous displays in his room, taking refuge in the intimacy of objects. Today, del Toro houses the majority of his now-expansive collection in a house in Los Angeles near the home in which he lives with his family. He calls this second house “Bleak House,” after Charles Dickens’s 1853 novel of the same name, in which Dickens describes the dwelling for which the book is named as “one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages.” The description fits; del Toro’s Bleak House is a rambling residence that now holds more than 550 artworks.

The contents of Bleak House have a spiritual hold on del Toro, but they aren’t kept as pristine collector’s items; instead, he treats the objects in his collection as items to be explored, interacted with, and enjoyed. Every aspect of Bleak House and its contents is premeditated: del Toro hangs each painting and reviews every detail himself. In his words, everything in the house “speaks to me at some level that is very intimate.” Bleak House “is the world as I understand it; as it exists in my soul.” The house functions as both his office and his sanctuary. He visits it every day for at least two hours in the morning and one hour in the evening, and when he travels for work he brings a sample of his collection with him to reconstruct this creative environment on a smaller scale; without it, he feels lost.

For del Toro, Bleak House is a religious space, and each object it contains is a talisman or relic. In this context, monsters are his “saints,” and he takes the task of creating them very seriously. When designing a monster, del Toro begins by thinking of the creature as a character rather than an assembly of parts. Once he settles on the character, he begins the physical design. The monster must be convincing

from all angles, in motion and at rest, and it needs to be grounded in research; del Toro frequently draws on books of natural history, literature, myth, and art—all of which surround him at Bleak House—as well as his own dreams, nightmares, and fears. He records ideas for distinguishing features in his notebooks, often rediscovering them years later. Del Toro also references objects from his collection: a mounted Malaysian stick bug purchased on a childhood visit to Manhattan inspired a sequence in *Pan’s Labyrinth* in which the main character, Ofelia, watches a stick bug on her bed change into a chattering pixie.

A former visual effects artist, del Toro is closely involved in the fabrication of his monsters, and he invites his collaborators to Bleak House for inspiration. After a monster has been designed, del Toro commissions maquettes (preliminary sculptures); even if the creature will be primarily computer-generated, he finds that seeing a beast in physical form helps him to detect its design flaws. As del Toro notes, “[My monsters] need to look entirely possible in their impossibility.” When the monster is finished, he wants people to say, “What specimen jar did that come from?” Many of the completed monster maquettes from his movies end up at Bleak House.

Of all the monsters in del Toro’s house, Frankenstein’s creature is the most present and the most revered. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a spiritual touchstone for del Toro, who read the 1818 novel after seeing the classic 1931 film version starring Boris Karloff as the confused and abused monster. A giant sculpture of the monster’s head hangs in the Bleak House foyer, directly above one of del Toro’s monsters from his 2004 film *Hellboy*. Full-sized wax sculptures of Frankenstein’s monster appear elsewhere in the house, along with numerous paintings and prints, including several from comic artist Bernie Wrightson’s 1983 illustrated edition of *Frankenstein*. In Frankenstein’s creature, del Toro sees an innocent

individual abandoned by an uncaring father and forced to suffer for the sins of others. As Wrightson draws him, the creature has been rudely cobbled together from several corpses, but he also possesses a certain grace and emotional power. Similarly, as a filmmaker, del Toro strives to create something noble from a variety of used and discarded source materials.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. How do you personalize your own space (i.e., your bedroom, locker, closet, backpack, etc)?
2. What is your ideal creative environment or refuge? What places and things inspire you to create?
3. What is your most treasured possession? Why do you treasure it? Where do you keep it and why?
4. What character from a book or film do you most identify with? What is it about that character that appeals to you or is familiar to you?



Foyer of Guillermo del Toro's Bleak House, photograph © Josh White/ JWPictures.com

EL SUEÑO DE LA RAZON PRODUCE MONSTRUOS (THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS)

1799

Francisco Goya y Lucientes

The artist with whose work Guillermo del Toro connects most instinctively is Francisco Goya y Lucientes, one of the most important Spanish artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Goya was painter to the king of Spain, but he is particularly known for his dark and disturbing “Black Paintings” and his paintings and prints depicting the horrors of the Peninsular War, a conflict between Napoleon’s empire and Spain and its allies.

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters is one of Goya’s most famous and influential works. It is part of his 1799 portfolio of etchings *Los Caprichos*, in which the artist set out to ridicule “the vulgar prejudices and lies authorized by custom, ignorance or interest” and advocate the values associated with the Enlightenment, whose proponents argued that without reason, evil and corruption would prevail. The portfolio was Goya’s critique of contemporary Spanish society, over which superstition and the Catholic Church loomed large. As a result of its controversial contents, *Los Caprichos* was only on sale for two days before Goya withdrew it from sale due to the threat of the Spanish Inquisition.

In this print, a man, most likely Goya himself, sleeps at a desk strewn with drawing materials. He is fully dressed and appears to have fallen into a fitful sleep while working. His face is hidden, buried in his arms, and his body slumps over the desk. Behind and above him, a swarm of bats and owls—creatures associated with the night and superstition—descend on him at a swooping diagonal while a calm lynx watches at his feet. Sinister, glowing eyes stare out at the viewer from the darkness at the man’s back.

Goya wrote the following caption for this print: “Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the

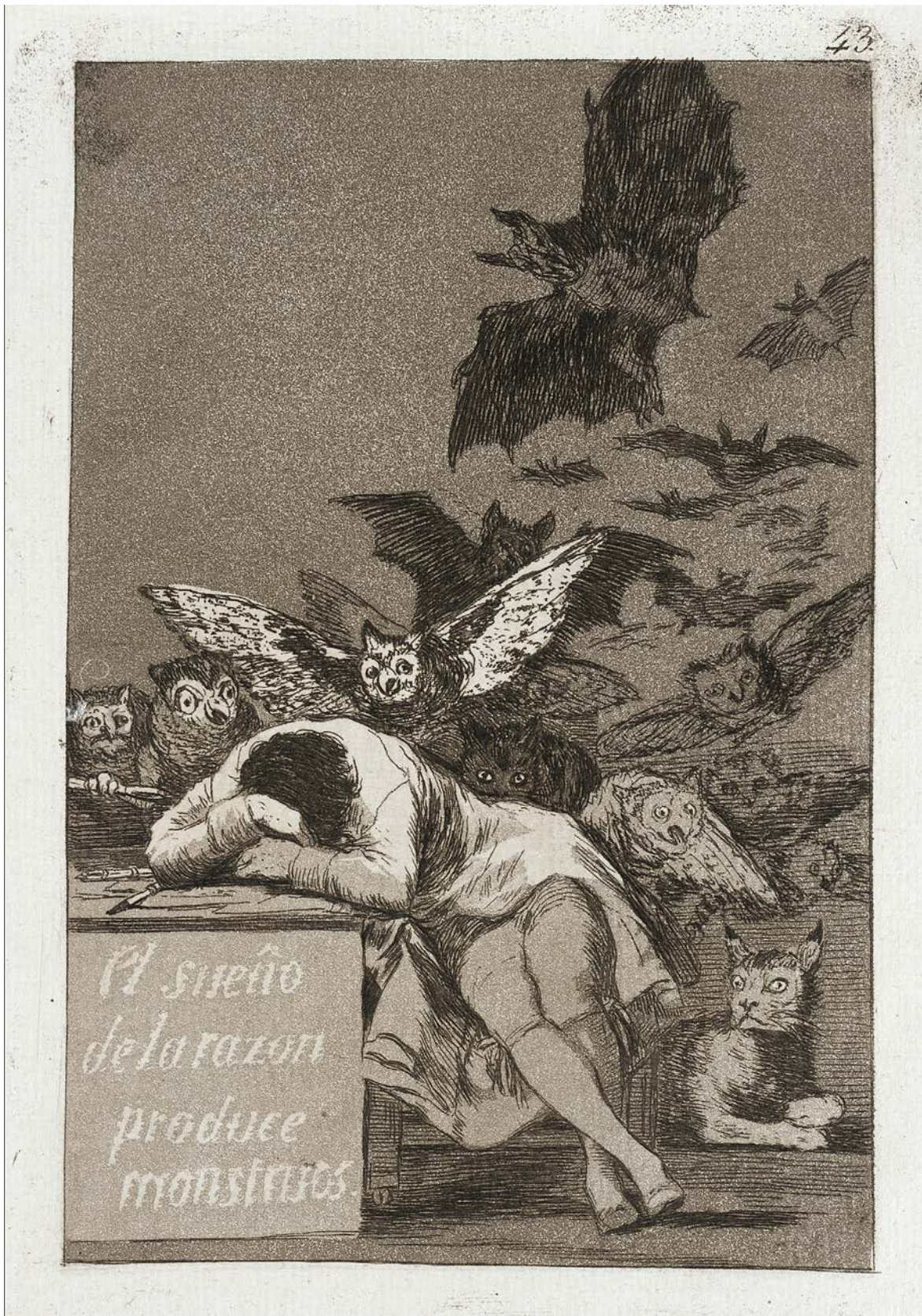
mother of the arts and source of their wonders.” In other words, unfettered imagination can lead to madness, but when joined with reason, can be harnessed to produce masterpieces. In the context of the Age of Enlightenment, in which emotion and imagination were seen as in opposition to rationality, Goya asserted that an artist should never be completely rational or irrational.

Here, the creatures in the print emerge from the darkness of the artist’s mind, as in a dream. An owl to the left of the man takes up a chalk holder (many of Goya’s preparatory drawings for *Los Caprichos* were done in chalk) and points it at the sleeping man, looking at him expectantly. Nearby, the lynx stares out through the darkness (lynxes use night vision to hunt in the dark), providing a clear-eyed and stable counterbalance to the airborne chaos above. Imagination urges the artist to create, while reason helps him make sense of his thoughts and ideas.

This vision of artistic creation, in which imagination, joined with reason, unleashes productive creativity, is in keeping with del Toro’s method. Del Toro is often inspired by his dreams, and his work certainly evokes nightmares, but he also grounds his artistic practice in the natural world; for example, he insists that his monsters not only look impressive but also make logical sense as creatures.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Goya mocked his society for their superstitions and narrow-mindedness. Can you think of ways in which people today ignore reason and let their imagined fears and prejudices dictate their behavior?
2. What are some positive and negative associations with dreams or dreamers, and how are they portrayed in popular culture (i.e., innovative, not practical, distracting, visionary, etc)? What does the way we see dreams or visions say about our society?
3. Goya felt that imagination should be paired with reason. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Should we let our imaginations run wild or should imagination always be tempered by reality? What are some potential consequences of imagination without reason, or reason without imagination?



El sueño de la razón produce monstruos (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)
1799

Francisco Goya y Lucientes

Etching and aquatint

8 3/8 × 5 15/16 in. (21.27 × 15.08 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Paul Rodman Mabury Trust Fund (63.11.43)

À EDGAR POE (UN MASQUE SONNE LE GLAS FUNÈBRE) (TO EDGAR POE [A MASK SOUNDS THE DEATH KNELL])
1882

Odilon Redon

Edgar Allan Poe has long been one of Guillermo del Toro's favorite writers, and portraits of and books by Poe appear throughout *Bleak House*. Poe was hugely popular in late nineteenth-century France and many artists were inspired by his work, including Édouard Manet, who in 1875 published a series of prints to accompany a French translation of Poe's 1845 poem "The Raven." While Manet's images are literal illustrations of Poe's text, Odilon Redon's prints from the 1882 series *À Edgar Poe* (To Edgar Poe) do not depict scenes from the author's work. Although many nineteenth-century viewers assumed Redon's captions were taken from Poe's writings, they are in fact cryptic titles made up by Redon to evoke the spirit of Poe. In fact, Redon said he only called the series *À Edgar Poe* to generate interest in his work by associating it with that of the famous writer. Nevertheless, critics had previously pointed out the similarities between Poe's and Redon's work, and, regardless of Redon's conscious intent, the prints are a natural fit for Poe's work.

A Mask Sounds the Death Knell evokes Poe's 1849 poem "The Bells," in which the word "bells" is repeated with darker and darker associations throughout the poem, in a progression that has been associated with aging and death. In Redon's print, a masked skeleton exerts a bony grasp on a hanging rope, ringing a bell that signals death (a "death knell"). The skeleton looks up at the swinging bell with wide eyes. It is unclear what lies beneath the mask: a skull? A head? A pair of eyes? Nothing? The figure defies logic; it is a creepy monster announcing death in the dark of night.

Just as Guillermo del Toro's movies often make viewers' skin crawl, Redon's macabre and cryptic images made many of his contemporaries uneasy. In an 1882 review of Redon's lithographs, Parisian

critic Emile Hennequin called the artist a purveyor of "that desolate region which exists on the borders of the real and the fantastic—a realm populated by formidable phantoms, monsters, monads, and other creatures born of human perversity." Another critic described his work as "the nightmare transported into art."

Redon was very interested in dreams and the unconscious, then a new psychoanalytic concept. He found the idea of the unconscious mind both fascinating and terrifying, thinking of it as a primitive source of inspiration, a dream state free from the strictures of civilization. Redon associated his work with dreams, and it was his hope that, without his being aware of it, his unconscious would imbue his art with additional meaning, allowing viewers to see more in his artwork than he was conscious of depicting. Redon's artist and writer friends nicknamed him "the Prince of Dreams," and his first album of prints, published in 1879, was called *In Dreams*. He even signed his more personal writings with the phrase "he dreams."

Del Toro describes Redon's appeal as otherworldly: "After I die, if there is life beyond this one and I go anywhere—either up or down—I am pretty sure that both places will be art directed by Redon," he has said.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Who is your favorite writer? What about his or her work appeals to you? Do you approve of the images chosen to illustrate the writer's books or, if there are no illustrations, the covers of his or her books? If you were to create images for the author's books, what kind of imagery and colors would you use and why? How would you visually communicate the things that you like best about this writer's work?
2. Take a moment to look at Odilon Redon's *A Mask Sounds the Death Knell*, and then read Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells". Does the poem fit your expectations based on your observation of the print? How are the poem and the print similar or dissimilar?
3. Choose an artwork from lacma.org that you think loosely fits the spirit of either your favorite poem or a poem that you've recently read in class. What made you choose that artwork? What stylistic or thematic similarities do you see between the two pieces?



À Edgar Poe (*Un masque sonne le glas funèbre*) (To Edgar Poe [A Mask Sounds the Death Knell])
1882

Odilon Redon

Lithograph

17 5/8 × 12 1/4 in. (44.77 × 31.12)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wallis Foundation Fund in memory of Hal B. Wallis (AC1997.14.1.3)

NOTEBOOK #5

2010–15

Guillermo del Toro

Guillermo del Toro always carries a notebook with him in which to record his thoughts. He reads each of these journals before he begins working on a movie, and travels with all his notebooks in tow, treating them like a catalogue of ideas and a time machine that allows him to engage with a younger version of himself. Since del Toro is usually working on about five projects at once (in the hope that one of the five will eventually get made), each notebook covers a variety of ideas for an array of projects in different stages of realization.

In addition to being important resources for his films and a record of his evolving ideas, del Toro's notebooks are his legacy. He believes that they represent a narration of his life's work as a whole. He also sees the notebooks as a gift for his daughters: he hopes that they can someday look at his journals to see who he was—and to remember that being an adult doesn't have to be boring. These myriad purposes give the notebooks added meaning and significance, and so del Toro puts the same amount of love and attention to detail into them as he does with his sanctuary, Bleak House.

Filled with drawings, captions, musings, and story ideas written in both Spanish and English, the notebooks' pages resemble a sixteenth-century Leonardo da Vinci codex, an early form of notebook in which the artist, mathematician, and inventor recorded his observations, theories, and drawings. Del Toro often begins a page with drawings. Then, in an effort to make each page of his notebooks beautiful, he tries to fill up the remaining space with writing, arranging the text around the images so that the writing becomes part of the design. As a result, some of the writing in del Toro's notebooks is completely unrelated to the content on the rest of the page; it is simply meant to fill out the composition.

This page from del Toro's Notebook #5 is no exception. The central image, "Mako on the Stairs," shows a protagonist of del Toro's 2013 science fiction film *Pacific Rim* as a child. In the drawing, a little girl dressed in blue holds one red shoe and wears the other as what appear to be snowflakes fall around her. Just to the left of the image of Mako, del Toro has noted, "Cold colors in the Tokyo FB [flashback] except for the shoe in Mako's hand" and "Rain of slow gray ash." Above this drawing, del Toro has drawn the skeleton of one of the movie's monsters.

In the movie, this scene appears as part of the adult Mako's flashback. During a monster attack in Tokyo, young Mako finds herself alone, clinging to her shoe, on an abandoned street. She is caught in the middle of the military's battle with the monster before a hero swoops in to save her and destroy the monster. As an adult, Mako trains to fight monsters, but her memories of that day haunt her and at first affect her ability to fight.

Pacific Rim is saturated with color, but del Toro wanted Mako's flashback to have a limited color range in order to distinguish it as a formative, solemn moment in the film. The cool colors and general lack of warmth in the scene make young Mako appear even more alone and vulnerable. For del Toro, the colors in this flashback defined the entire palette of the movie: blue is dominant in Mako's memories and appears in her present as well, signifying that she is scarred by her past. It is only once she begins to come into her own and successfully fight the monsters that more colors begin to seep into her story.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What methods do you use to remember ideas, events, and information? Do you use notebooks, a computer, or another technological device? What are the relative advantages of each? Judging from what we know about Guillermo del Toro, why do you think he uses physical notebooks rather than a technological device that would be easier to travel with and share with collaborators?
2. Choose a scene from your favorite movie, and analyze it as if it were a still image. If it were a painting hanging in a museum, how would you describe the colors, mood, and composition? Why do you think the director, cinematographer, and designers made the decisions they did for this particular scene? What do you notice that you hadn't when watching the movie before?
3. If you could look into any writer, artist, filmmaker, or famous person's notebook—a journal of their evolving ideas—whose would you choose and why?



Page from Notebook #5

2010-15

Guillermo del Toro

Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil with collage elements

8 x 10 x 1 1/2 in. (3.15 x 3.94 x 0.59 cm)

Collection of Guillermo del Toro, © Guillermo del Toro

Photograph courtesy of Insight Editions