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**MONSTROUS ANIMALS:  
SOME IMAGES  
OF REPTILES IN  
HOLLYWOOD CINEMA**

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**Abstract:** The present work aims to relate the media representation of animals, more specifically that of reptiles. The study considers that many contemporary meanings given by the media to animals such as snakes and crocodiles come from traditional religions or sacred narratives. The proposition is illustrated from the narratives of American films of great repercussion. Therefore, this investigation highlights cinema as a device that promotes bricolage, in the anthropological sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss, insofar as it uses the elements it has at its disposal and reorganizes them into new discursive appropriations or new combinations whose origin is in classical beliefs. The feature films that exemplify the proposal are: Alligator (1980), Anaconda (1997) and Anaconda 2 (2004).

**Keywords:** Movie theater. Religion. Reptiles. DIY. Social representations.

In college, the only subject I studied seriously was anthropology, and I always envied the way ancient civilizations created their myths, the stories told to their children by parents in order to teach their traditions [...] storytellers, and for that reason movies and television series are in charge of that. I wanted, in Star Wars, to make a myth of the present times. George Lucas (REVISTA VEJA, 1997).

## **REPTILES AND FILMS: MEANINGS AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS**

This article will relate the media representation of animals, more specifically that of reptiles, from popular cinematographic narratives that elaborate meanings that help to create a cultural imaginary about the natural world. The work considers that many of the meanings present in audiovisual fiction are the result of rearrangements, new combinations or reassembly of elements whose origin is found in traditional religions. Thus, we recovered

some traditional beliefs in order to verify the appropriation of snakes and crocodiles by the Judeo-Christian, Egyptian and Greek religions. Next, we present the narratives of feature films that exemplify the proposition.

The hypothesis is that cinema would promote a kind of bricolage on sacred narratives. Lévi-Strauss (2012 [1962]) explains that the *bricoleur* makes arrangements with the appropriation of elements that are within his reach, at his disposal, reorganizing them in unprecedented ways, promoting new uses from old components. Unlike scientific thinking, which is calculating, specific and prone to change, bricolage is characterized by malleability, creativity and originality, and can be associated with the notion of permanence, since it creates structures from pre-existing facts. The *bricoleur* illustrates the social inclination towards magical thinking, which coexists with the scientific and exact mentality of modernity.

The choice of such animals for this article was due to the volume of feature-length cinematographic works of the science fiction, suspense or horror genre that use these crawling beings in their productions, and because they generate a particular symbolic configuration in mass culture. of feelings and sensations about these species (FRIEDRICH & SCHEID, 2012). The films that illustrate the proposal are Alligator (1980), Anaconda (1997) and Anaconda 2 (2004), selected because they have plots that involve these animals as protagonists of the plot, and not just as a scenic element. In addition, they are narratives in which the animals have a clear intention to harm humans.

Religions assumed mythical forms throughout history, always with the aim of looking for explanations, revelations or elucidating events that occurred at the beginning of time, premises responsible for demarcating the conditions of existence and

the cataclysms that devastated species. In this sense, certain mythologies can explain the association of some feelings related to the animal world, such as fear of snakes or disgust with insects (ROCHA, 2006). As Rocha (2012) emphasizes, the set of beliefs of a society is one of the access ways to understand the relationships manufactured by a group in a given historical time. "Myth is a way for societies to mirror their contradictions, express their paradoxes, doubts and concerns. It can be seen as a possibility to reflect on existence, the cosmos, situations of 'being in the world' or social relationships" (ROCHA, 1996, p.03). The snake, for example, which in sacred stories is called "serpent", is one of the most recurrent animals in religious narratives and sustains a series of symbologies in our modern-contemporary world, such as science, knowledge, medicine and betrayal.

The constant presence of animals in movies, series, brands and other derivatives of mass culture indicates something about our daily lives. The different social meanings that the different species carry are evidence of an exercise of classification as a central practice in the elaboration of the cultural order (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2012 [1962]). When constructing their narratives, the media try to promote stabilization of meanings and offer a grammar that helps us understand the world around us. Thus, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that the imaginary triggered by Hollywood images contributes to the construction of a collective and shared system of social representations in our culture (MOSCOVICI, 2003). What we see on the big screens are narratives capable of teaching us about the world, being, therefore, a fundamental part in the construction and teaching of sociability (KELLNER, 2016).

With just over a century of existence, Hollywood cinema accumulates titles whose theme revolves around a great beast in fury

that crushes cities, terrorizes characters and mobilizes entire armies. Scenarios of catastrophes caused by natural elements are often offered by Hollywood, as pointed out by Douglas Kellner (2016).

With the expansion of distribution, access and, consequently, the consumer public, we find a greater number of scripts that transit between horror and science fiction and show the human attempt to control nature, especially to contain catastrophes resulting from human action itself. Kellner and Ryan (1988) show that the successive American economic crises and the social ills of the 20th century were allegorically represented by cinema in horror films, disasters, invasions. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, devastating animals gained prominence in several productions. *Godzilla (JAPAN, 1954)*, a classic, is a giant, bipedal reptile, also revived by the nuclear explosions that devastated Japan during World War II. In the film, the animal attacks the country and causes unprecedented destruction. Giant spiders, super insects, mutated lizards, atomic reptiles, amphibious men, sharks and killer whales, among others, become stars of the big screens (KELLNER, 2016). All corrupted in some way by science and/or human intervention in their wild habitats. The theme was already present in the biblical narrative of Genesis: nature is beautiful, human beings corrupt it (THOMAS, 2010). From the idea of "sin" on human interference in nature, spread mainly by the Christian religion, man is marked by punishment and destruction. It is not by chance that the creatures that star in films of this type represent, for the most part, disgust, danger, irrationality and savagery, that is, they bring together various aspects of what is beyond human, culture and control (DOUGLAS, 2012).

## THE SACRED NARRATIVES: OPPOSITION BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

Cinema, as an important audiovisual device that helps to elaborate cultural representations, would work in an eclectic way with the incorporation of fragments of other knowledge, as in the bricolage process, described by Lévi-Strauss (2012 [1962]). The anthropologist characterizes mythical thought as an operator of methodology: *bricoleur*. “[...]the mythical thought, that *bricoleuse*, elaborates structures by organizing facts or the residues of facts, while science, “on the move” from its own establishment, creates its means and its results in the form of facts, thanks to the structures it constantly manufactures and which are its hypotheses and theories.” (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2012 [1962], p.38). In the specific case of this work, we will see that Hollywood appropriates pieces, promotes adaptations, establishes new dispositions of the symbology of reptiles present in different religions. In this sense, we could think that cinema is an art that dialogues with magical thinking, without, however, excluding scientific thinking.

Religions are a set of beliefs, behaviors and sociocultural practices that seek to understand the meaning of life and the origin of the universe, relating human existence to immaterial, transcendental, sacred, divine, supernatural and spiritual elements. The different manifestations classified as religion can include rituals, sacrifices, celebrations, arts, texts, varied symbolic systems to revere their gods and heroes and mark their cultural codes, establishing differences and similarities between nature and culture (ELIADE, 2002). Thus, sacred narratives often use animals as models to determine norms of behavior and hierarchies among social groups. The strength of these fables is so great that they are part of the popular imagination in different parts of the world (ALVES, 1984). Next, we retrieve

some hieratic histories from the Judeo-Christian, Egyptian and Greek religions to show how reptiles were appropriated to exalt certain cultural meanings.

Present in almost all over the world, the serpent is a peculiar figure. It moves without legs, on its belly, while being able to lift more than half the length of its body, as if it could stand (FREITAS, 2003). Its presence in sacred fables is always associated with an opportunity of dubious quality, with only one choice being enough for the option to reveal itself as a medicine or a poison. In the narratives analyzed, the serpent is also a sign of omen (THOMAS, 2010).

In the Judeo-Christian religion, a set of common doctrines of Christianity and Judaism gathered in the Old and New Testaments, the serpent offers Eve the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - which, from now on, associates her with ambiguity, to borders, to danger and to knowledge. The animal reveals to the primordial couple a forbidden world, whose actions end up expelling them from paradise and introduces them to death, disease, the need to work for sustenance (BÍBLIA, 1980). That is, at the same time that it calls their attention to wisdom, the snake is also responsible for enabling the malevolent action.

In the Old Testament, the crocodile and the serpent are also associated with Leviathan, as a strong creature, who crushes all those who defy him (JOB, 41; Is, 27:1). In the Judeo-Christian norms of behavior, the consumption of crocodile and snake meat is prohibited, as stated in Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament (BIBLIA, 1980). Literature shows that all the reptiles of the water are abominable, all that have neither fins nor scales, as well as all the creatures that move along the ground, and everything that walks on its belly (LEVITICUS, 11, 9). -12; 41-47).

In the Egyptian religion, a collection of legends that were part of the religious imagination built from the time of Ancient Egypt until the arrival of Christianity, the association between the idea of ordination and the serpent is also cultivated. The figure of Ouroboros materializes this arrangement: it is the serpent (sometimes also in the representation of a dragon) that swallows its own tail, a continuous movement in reference to the cycle of life, death and rebirth. This way, the animal is interpreted as a symbol of eternity, wisdom and the origins of the world, since it forms a ring, whose movement is cyclic and infinite. Another aspect present in these legends is the snake's responsibility for the order of things in time and space (FERBER, 1999; İDÖWÚ, 1990).

In the form of Akhen, Apophis, Kheti, Saa-Set, Se-Thu<sup>1</sup>, among others, the serpent is also associated with the demons that guard the underworld. In Uraeus, the serpent-shaped ornament used as a crown by rulers, the snake is a symbol of sovereignty, royalty, divinity and divine authority in Ancient Egypt. The reptile is also worshiped in the form of Wadjet, the tutelary goddess of lower Egypt.<sup>2</sup> that in Upper Egypt <sup>3</sup>, may appear together with another goddess, Nekhbet (vulture goddess), who are the protective deities of the nation and royalty. Both are present in various royal adornments, almost always on the diadems of sovereign rulers, evoking powers of authority and protection.

Still with regard to antiquity, the serpent is a figure present in one of the most famous legends in the history of Egypt, about the suicide of Cleopatra, the last ruler of the Ptolemaic period (305 BC – 30 AD). The episode is controversial, since it is not known for sure what killed her: ingestion of poison

or stab wounds. Popular legends, however, consecrated the version according to which she was bitten by a venomous snake that is replaced, in some cases, by venomous wasps (JARCHO, 1969).

In Greek mythology, a set of narratives about gods, heroes, nymphs, titans and centaurs, developed in ancient Greece, specifically in Homer's Iliad, the serpent is associated with the rainbow, carrying the meaning of omen, indicating that something is about to happen. happen. In the Odyssey, this omen is also of dubious origin – it is not known if it is an event for good or for bad, it indicates a rupture in the narrative and a possible twist that is not always only good or bad for the characters (BRANDÃO, 1986). ; FERBER, 1999).

Among the Greek myths, there is no clear data about crocodiles. It is known that the Egyptian god Sobek in the Ptolemaic period was related to the solar god Ra. In Greece, the god Helios, also solar, was represented, in later periods, with a crocodile artifact in one hand and an aura of sunbeams on his head (COULTER & TURNER, 2012). This absence can be explained by the lack of frequent and marked contact of these creatures with the Greek peoples, since Greece, surrounded by salt water, was not the animal's habitat.

Abominations are perverse and, as Mary Douglas (2012 [1966]) teaches us, perversion is "(...) a significant mistranslation of the uncommon Hebrew word *tebhel*, which means mixture or confusion" (p.59). Still according to Douglas, everything that generates confusion does not fit as sacred, since "(...) holiness requires that individuals conform to the class to which they belong" (DOUGLAS, 2012 [1966], p.70).

1. Names attributed to gods who appear in the form of serpents or are related to them. This variety is due to the syncretism that occurred between the Egyptian and Greek religions throughout history. (WILKINSON, 2003).

2. Most fertile and mild region in northern Egypt, between the Nile Delta and the Mediterranean Sea.

3. Located in the region also to the north of the country, Upper Egypt is specifically along the course of the Nile, before the delta.

A framework to unite these meanings brought by these animals is very useful for a better understanding of the symbology associated with the snake and the crocodile:

Religion	Snake	Crocodile
Judeo-Christian	Omen, dubious revelation	chaos and destruction
Egyptian	royalty, sovereignty, guardianship	fecundity, violent death
Greek	Order, opportunity, omen	-

In a way, the ambiguity brought in the figure of these animals is revealed with an emphasis on sacred beliefs. The snake, dangerous for its venom and strength, is a symbol of the Egyptian rulers. In ancient Greece, there is also the factor of revelation of origin or quality as yet unknown. The crocodile, due to its scales, its crawling and its life between water and land, acquired an absolutely negative connotation in the Bible, since, due to its ambiguity, its confusion, it is seen as something dangerous and must be avoided. In Egyptian culture, the crocodile is just like water – capable of generating, at the same time, life/fertility and death.

After this brief presentation of some values, meanings and feelings built by sacred narratives in relation to reptiles, we can then proceed to the analysis of snakes and crocodiles in North American mass cinema films. We follow the hypothesis that such meanings once elaborated by traditional religions are systematized by cinema in new combinations and rearrangements that help to compose some representations of the modern-contemporary world.

## EMBODYING THE SACRED: SNAKES AND CROCODILES IN HOLLYWOOD

We are now going to group the films selected by animals, so that the media representation of the species and the meanings brought by them are more clearly explained. In the films around the snake, there is a recurrence of the presence of heat, danger and even a certain pleasure in this danger – in which elements of sensuality are insinuated. In those feature films whose plot revolves around crocodiles, there are also some elements of that same sexuality, but the atmosphere of terror and chaos are predominant, since the animal has a destructive potential, as we saw in the Judeo-Christian religion.. The figure of the hunter, the character whose objective is to kill the animal to display its carcass as a prize, also appears in the analyzed films. The films listed here flirt with the trash genre, that is, with an abundance of death sequences, screams, occasional comedy and frenetic action.

In order to standardize the forms of analysis and the type of material to be analyzed for the choice of films, the following criteria were used: 1) the theme of the film must necessarily address an animal, that is, the film must be about the animal and not contain it as a mere element of a scene, even if important or prominent; 2) the film must be a feature film shown in movie theaters; and, finally, 3) cultural relevance, that is, films with some impact on the box office and that are important in popular culture and for the film industry in general.

To guide the discussion, we will list the feature films in chronological order. We start by: *Alligator* – The Killer Alligator, 1980, which stands as a horror classic involving angry animals<sup>4</sup>. *Alligator* is a story about

4. No box office data were found for this work. In Brazil, *Alligator: O Jacaré Gigante* became popular for its evening screenings of “Cinema em Casa” on SBT, a Brazilian open TV channel, in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. Available in: “Boca do Inferno”, horror movie review site: <https://bocadoinferno.com.br/criticas/2015/02/alligator-o-jacare-gigante-1980/> - accessed in: 05/03/2022.

peaceful nature that, through the interference of science and scientific ambition, mutates and becomes devastating. Let's see: during a visit to an animal attraction park, including a crocodile tamer, a girl buys a cub of the species and takes it home. Her father, dissatisfied, says that the animal, which until then lived in a small aquarium, soiled the house and threw it down the toilet. The animal survives for twelve years in the sewer, feeding on the corpses of dogs that had been stolen to serve as guinea pigs in a laboratory's development of antibiotics. Underground workers and unsuspecting passers-by were also part of the menu. The film brings the animal as a destructive force to be fought and the result of human irresponsibility. The hero of the narrative, a policeman, also a victim of dog thefts, is seen by his colleagues as crazy and in a nervous breakdown. The heroine, an academic, a scholar of these large reptiles, is one of the few who believes in the phenomenon of the crocodile that became a giant after eating toxic waste. All the dead are men. Here, nature, although in captivity, was at peace, until it was exploited and intoxicated. The disturbance is the trigger for the chaos and destruction caused by the animal. Such a cinematographic narrative can be associated with the signs of danger and knowledge of the myth of Adam and Eve, from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Man or humanity suffers punishment for provoking nature and defying its ability. Human action leads to the death, disease and affliction of its own kind. The killer crocodile is portrayed as a strong and destructive monster, as presented in the Bible (1980). The animal is framed between the meanings of wisdom and evil, becoming an ambivalent symbol, as proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian religion.

*Anaconda* (1998), first film in a series of four - only the first two were shown in movie theaters - earned about 137 million dollars, according to the *Box Office Mojo*, *IMDb*<sup>5</sup>. The story brings a team from NatGeo, a paid television channel that produces documentaries about nature, in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest to film a remote indigenous tribe. While sailing on the river, they talk about the heat and sexual desire amplified by the high tropical temperatures, until they meet a stranger, whose boat has become stuck to the roots of the trees, asking for a ride. This man proves to be an enemy of the group that seeks to preserve the ecosystem and quickly sabotages the peaceful journey. He is an ambitious hunter looking for a giant snake and is willing to kill anyone who tries to stop him. With the exception of the main couple and one of the team's producers, all are killed by the hunter. This is avenged by the snake, before it is exterminated by the survivors. After escaping death and blowing up the animal, the television crew finally find the mysterious and untouched tribe they were looking for. It is as if the snake was a kind of ordeal for them to come into contact with the tribal people. The snake appears here with references to the symbologies of the Egyptian doctrine, since it transits between good and evil, promotes ordering of the established chaos and creates opportunities for action. The plot makes reference to this belief by placing the animal between danger and benevolence, depending on the circumstances. Just as Greek mythology is evoked, since the serpent figure is indicative of plot twists, both for good and for bad.

*Anaconda 2 - The Hunt for the Bloody Orchid* (USA, 2004) was directed by the same director of the first film and made about 71 million dollars.

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5. *Anaconda* no site Box Office Mojo, do portal Internet Media Database (IMDb), que divulga as bilheterias das produções cinematográficas. Available in: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13930293761/weekend/> - acesso em: 03/05/2022.

(BOX OFFICE MOJO, IMDb)<sup>6</sup>. The script tells the story of a team of scientists who, pressured by the financial committee of the pharmaceutical industry where they work, must go on an expedition in search of a rare type of orchid, native to Borneo, which has a substance that defies the laws of nature and renews the cells of the body, leading to eternal life. The journey is not easy, the rains are so heavy that no boatman accepts to transport them through the winding curves of the rivers that cut through the dense tropical forest of Southeast Asia. Only one man accepts to make the trip, charging dearly for it. All those who despised nature or demonstrated arrogance towards natural forces were killed. The survivors were those who showed wisdom and respect for the ecosystem. Highlight for a pet monkey, belonging to the captain of the boat, who at all times sensed and saw the dangers before the team realized them. The snakes, at work, once again, were calm, watching over their nest. The attacked humans did not serve for food purposes, since one of the characters raises the information that these animals could hunt only for sport. It is important to point out that the desired orchids were only accessible by a slippery trunk that passed over a large nest of the giant reptiles they breed. The snake appears as the guardian of a door/secret, just like in the Bible. Animals here can also be thought of as symbols of power, as in the Egyptian religious imagery, since they bring together important characteristics, such as omen and strength, fundamental for survival in that ecosystem, they are also responsible for the balance and stabilization of order.

Douglas (2012 [1966]) shows us that reptiles are historically associated with disgust and disgust. The explanation for such meanings can be found in his study of the

6. *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*. Idem. Available in: [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0366174/?ref\\_=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0366174/?ref_=bo_se_r_1) – acesso em: 03/05/2022.

anomaly status inherent in these crawling creatures and in amphibians and insects. The anomaly and ambiguity, first, would be related to the bodily characteristics of these animals, which move both on land and in water and lay eggs, but do not have feet. Exclusively aquatic and swimming animals - such as birds, ducks, dogs - present a certain “coherence” in their physical possibilities, such as flying only in the sky, having two legs and being oviparous, having four legs and walking on land.

By studying deeply the categories of ambiguity, anomaly, purity, dirt, from the symbolic nature that these classifications have, Douglas reveals to us that we are observer beings, which means that, of all the stimuli we apprehend, we only select those that interest. Our interests are driven by a social tendency to categorize around familiar models. According to the anthropologist: “(...) In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us builds a stable world in which objects have recognizable shapes, are deeply locatable and have permanence” (DOUGLAS, 2012 [1966], p.51).

## **MEDIA REARRANGEMENTS**

As the verification proposes, the cinema rearranges certain meanings of the reptiles already popularized in the social imaginary by traditional religions. From the repertoire built by major doctrines, he produces a new narrative, acting as a processor, with appropriations and reassembly of elements, as in a bricolage operation (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2012 [1962]).

Such messages or fables produced by the media culture often seek inspiration or reorganize components of sacred narratives produced in different historical times. This way, religions and their magical aspects can also be thought of as forms of communication indicative of the meanings present in



the modern-contemporary imagination (ELIADE, 2002). This complexity between magic and reason points to the internal contradictions of our cultural system which, based on capitalist exactitude, does not dispense with its fanciful dimension.

The media has the role of inciting and establishing certain cultural meanings. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (2012 [1966]) reinforces that the practices of selection, editing, and discarding are done numerous times during the process of building and learning cultural codes. Objects and elements receive labels and, once labeled, are more easily identified with their appropriate category. As time passes, our labeling system improves and also becomes more rigid. Everything that requires investments to fit a category is set aside with a certain frequency. Anything that makes us uncomfortable is ignored or edited to fit into existing categories. Almost always, ambiguity is viewed unpleasantly. The almost is because there are situations, as in the cinema, in which ambiguity confers richness and new possibilities for the interpretation of the same sign. Douglas also points out that individual representations are anchored in a collective system and one of the ways to control these meanings in the cultural order is through the use of ambiguous symbols with the same purpose as in the arts, with the purpose of enriching meaning or to draw attention to other levels of existence.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the character of permanence of media products is very different from that present in religious narratives. If ancient religions managed to create fables so powerful that they are appropriated and perpetuated through centuries, the products of the Cultural Industry are ephemeral, rotating, aimed at immediate consumption. Precisely because they are consumables, they need to nurture

this fleetingness. Therefore, the stabilization of meanings that the media proposes is linked to the phenomenon of consumption and can undergo substantial transformations with each new advertising movement.

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