

Article

Engaging the Ethics of the Future: The Aftertimes as Emotional, Material and Temporal Accumulation in the Spanish Animation Film *Birdboy: The Forgotten Children*

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Abstract: In this essay I analyze the critically acclaimed movie, *Birdboy: The Forgotten Children*, a dystopic animated film based on the graphic novel *Psiconautas*. It takes place on an island populated by anthropomorphic animals, most of them young, who live in a time after an industrial accident destroyed the livelihood of its inhabitants. Birdboy and some of his friends try to escape their reality either by taking drugs or by attempting to abandon the island, but they are hunted by police, by the gang of rats that inhabits the dump, and by their hallucinations. In the end, although they do not achieve their goals, Birdboy and his friend Dinky reunite in an inner paradise. Drawing on various theoretical approaches, such as Hannah Arendt's notion of new beginnings and Timothy Morton's sustained project of ecological critique, I study the ways *Birdboy* represents time and engages with the ethics of the future. *Birdboy's* universe is marked by emotional, physical, and temporal accumulation. The interconnection of sentient and non-sentient beings on the island shows the impact of legacies and the difficulty of creating radical new beginnings. *Birdboy's* story is ultimately a call for responsibility for the future rooted in the awareness that everything leaves a trace.

Keywords: futuristic films; socio-environmental justice; future studies; dystopia; speculative fiction; Spanish cinema; animation; *Birdboy: The Forgotten Children*; *Psiconautas*, *los niños olvidados*



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1. Introduction

Birdboy: The Forgotten Children, a 2015 Spanish auteur animation film by Alberto Vázquez and Pedro Rivero, is one of the most intriguing Spanish movies from recent years. Its story is based on a graphic novel by Vázquez, *Psiconautas* (Vázquez [2006] 2020),¹ which was later developed as a short movie, *Birdboy* by the two directors (Vázquez and Rivero 2011).² With a modest budget and box office success, and without achieving wide popular fame, *Birdboy* (Vázquez and Rivero 2015) has been one of the most extensively recognized movies within and beyond Spain. It won seventeen national and international prizes, including the Spanish Goya,³ was longlisted for an Oscar (Redacción AV451 2017), and has been favorably reviewed in major international venues, such as The New York Times (Scott 2017). As of March 2022, one of the several reviews of *Birdboy* on YouTube has accumulated—in little more than a year—more than one and a half million views and more than four thousand comments that interrogate its deeper meanings (DaniboubeTV 2020). Comparisons of the film have likened it to German expressionism (Lehane 2017), the styles of Tim Burton (Izquierdo Navarro 2017) and Edward Gorey (Whittaker 2018), and the web page *Sensacine* reviewed it by saying it is “as if Bosch had illustrated *The Carnival of Animals*” (my translation) (De Partearroyo 2017). This gap between its commercial and critical success is perhaps a reflection of another sharp contradiction within the film: the disparity between *Birdboy's* attractive design and its intensely perturbing themes, which makes it an animation movie not at all suitable for children. Filmed in 2D following the stop-motion technique, its aesthetic has a comic-like character, and is similar to 2D video games such as *Hollow Knight*

([Hollow Knight 2017](#)). Its protagonists are designed with a preponderance of geometrical forms and its unique color palette is abundant in pastel, nonrealistic tones. At the same time, *Birdboy's* story is a nightmarish, dystopic fable whose universe portrays monsters (which are, in contrast with the main characters, black, sharp bodied, and filmed on a dark-red background), and whose seemingly naïve protagonists are capable of violence, drug addiction and cruelty.

Birdboy takes place on an island populated by anthropomorphic animals who live in a time after an accident in the industrial district destroyed the factories, killed the workers, and rendered all fish extinct. The accident also created an enormous dump where the factory plants previously stood. The movie happens in the span of a day and, as Vázquez points out, is composed of several short movies that converge at the end ([RTVE.es/EFE 2017](#)). It starts with two rats who live in the dump. They are siblings, now orphans. The older brother tells the younger what the island used to be like before the accident, when the inhabitants had jobs in the factory and nature was more fertile. In the non-destroyed part of the island, Birdboy, a young anthropomorphic bird, takes drugs and is learning to fly, while he remembers his late father, and is intermittently accosted by monsters. He buys drugs from Zacharias, a young pig who is now a drug dealer because he can no longer make a living off fishing since the accident. Zacharias also takes care of his drug-addicted mother. Dinky, Birdboy's ex-girlfriend, who is a young mouse, lives with her biological mother and her abusive stepfather since her biological father died in the accident. Dinky plots an escape with two friends: Sandra, a young bunny, and Little Fox. They steal money from Zacharias and go to the industrial zone to buy a boat. There, they are harassed by the rats who inhabit the dump. When they are about to be killed by them, Birdboy becomes a monster who spits fire and destroys the rats who were going to harm his friends. The three friends then sail away by boat, but a storm stops their progress. Birdboy, who has now learned to fly, flies to guide them, but he is shot to death by the police. The boat sinks and Dinky goes home after her frustrated attempt to leave. The next morning, Zacharias fishes the dead body of Birdboy out of the water. At the end of the film, the plot moves away from its dark themes and shows some hope: a golden firefly that emerges from Birdboy's corpse finds Dinky and guides her to an inner paradise on the island.

2. The Familiar and the Unfamiliar

Birdboy incorporates several familiar and unfamiliar elements, and it does so by both incorporating and subverting some cinematic and literary genres. On the one hand, it shares characteristics with science fiction, namely, the creation of a post-apocalyptic world. *Birdboy's* universe is driven by cognitive estrangement, the poetic device Darko Suvin relates to the *novum*, his well-known premise of the genre. For Suvin, science-fiction “is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional “*novum*” (novel, innovation) validated by cognitive logic” ([Suvin 2010](#), p. 67, original italics). He defines the *novum*, in general terms, as “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality” ([Suvin 2010](#), p. 68, original italics). The post-catastrophe universe *Birdboy* creates dominates the narrative and evokes the science-fiction trope of the wasteland. For the audience, it is at the same time recognizable and new; however, because of the inclusion of animal protagonists and fantastic monsters, not everything in *Birdboy* is validated by cognitive logic. *Birdboy* also relates to fables, commonly populated by anthropomorphic animals, a type of character that, according to some studies, adds a therapeutic value for children ([Suvilehto 2019](#)). Vázquez, the creator, is aware of *Birdboy's* characters' literary origin, universality, and the engagement they produce. He states: “Animals refer to the world of tales and fables. We like them because they do not have time or place, they are icons. Also, they empathize with the spectator” [my translation] ([RTVE.es/EFE 2017](#)). Their universality, and the affection the audience develops towards animal stories is perhaps why it is so shocking when we see them suffering, hunted by fantastic monsters, and, in some cases, being morally reprehensible and cruel. In *Birdboy*, there is not only the affection the audience might develop towards the characters, but also a

sense of unfamiliarity, both because animals behave like humans and because they behave in different ways than the ones we are used to seeing represented in fables.⁴ In this sense, *Birdboy* is more in line with books depicting animal protagonists that address political issues, such as *Animal Farm*, or the non-fictional comic *Maus*.

Additionally, the inclusion of monsters and children, a word mentioned in *Birdboy*'s subtitle albeit not completely accurate,⁵ links *Birdboy* to the Spanish cinematic tradition. As it is well known, children appear in many Spanish movies, usually related to the "memory boom" that looks back to the Civil War and its aftermath. *Birdboy* also portrays children who are living in a world marked by the consequences of a catastrophe they do not completely understand; however, its focus is not on the desire to comprehend a repressed past, but a yearning to belong to a difficult present and future. Children in other Spanish movies also sometimes coexist with monsters, are represented as monsters (Wright 2013; Thomas 2019) or as the non-anthropocentric other (Lury 2010; Thomas 2019).⁶ *Birdboy*, on the one hand, humanizes most of its young animal protagonists instead of accentuating in humans the biological part of life, as some other Spanish movies do.⁷ Nonetheless, the characters are still uncanny because of their anthropomorphism, their relation to monsters (and the fact that *Birdboy* ends up becoming a monster), and their violent and extreme circumstances. It is not uncommon for children in movies to provoke a dual engagement of affection or identification (they are what adults were, and the audience wants to care for them) linked to an estrangement or separation (because they are no longer what adults are, and they have different motivations). This oscillation between identification and opacity has been analyzed by Sarah Thomas with regards to Víctor Erice's movies. Thomas argues that it creates an ethics towards children and the past because it highlights both the impossibility to access the past, and the importance of trying to understand it. The familiar and the unfamiliar in *Birdboy*, a science-fiction narrative and animal fable where children cohabit with monsters, functions in a similar way, but it points to the need to engage with the future.

3. The Ethics of the Future

In what follows, I will argue that *Birdboy* uses these familiar and unfamiliar themes to suggest an ethics of the future, which is formulated by representing a post-apocalyptic universe that is not detached from the past, even after a catastrophe, but always already marked by emotional, material and temporal accumulation. The story links an environmental disaster that affected the island, the extreme poverty experienced by the rats who live in the dump, drug addiction, mental disease, generational struggles, a desire to leave home, violence, police brutality, fantasy and hallucinations in a story whose true choral protagonist, according to Vázquez, is the island (RTVE.es/EFE 2017). In addition, the themes of the movie are complemented by those developed in the short movie and the graphic novel, which act as prequels. Some of *Birdboy*'s negative reviews identify the overlapping of many themes as one of the flaws of the film, which is incapable of resolving any of them in depth (Oveja 2020). My contention is that accumulation is not a drawback, but a key element of the story. *Birdboy* suggests an ethical engagement by provoking affection and estrangement when representing the impossibility of achieving new beginnings for the younger generation in a world burdened by the weight of the various legacies that coexist in the same space and time.

Futuristic movies such as *Birdboy* underscore the importance of imagining stories about the future, or alternative temporalities and places. On the one hand, there is a need to describe and represent one's own vision of the world, a sentiment that was captured by the 15M movement and the idea that "if we do not tell our own story, they will tell it for us" ("si no nos contamos nos cuentan" in the Spanish original; my translation) (Moreno-Caballud 2017, p. 391). The stories of resistance about the future are particularly important considering the socioenvironmental crisis. Luis I. Prádanos, in his monograph *Postgrowth Imaginaries: New Ecologies and Counterhegemonic Culture in post-2008 Spain* (Prádanos 2018), highlights the need to develop imaginaries and narratives that provide

alternative visions. Real-world stories perpetuated by technological companies tend to be blindly optimistic and rush towards the future without being hindered by the impact of their actions. In contrast, the foundation of science-fiction, to which *Birdboy* stays truthful, challenges the unproblematic technological and industrial development with narratives that explore the responsibility we bear towards the present and the future. Teresa López-Pellisa, one of the leading experts in science-fiction in Spanish, also defends the necessity of imagining alternative futures through speculative fabulation, citing scholars that emphasize the ethical element of the endeavor (López-Pellisa 2021). Although there is a possibility that dystopic counternarratives about the future end up facilitating a “historical melancholy,” to use Jameson’s words, towards the present and ultimately immobilism, they can also open new ways of considering the present times as part of history, where the present becomes the past of a conceivable future instead of the end of times (Jameson 1982, p. 152). Additionally, as mentioned above, fictional stories can produce affective engagement. In *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, Alison Landsberg argues that mass culture texts about earlier times provide a way to experience the past not only by identifying with it, but by developing an affective engagement (Landsberg 2015). For the same reason, stories about the future are crucial: without stories about the future, the future does not exist. Futuristic stories present the audience with an opportunity to develop empathy towards characters they both recognize and do not identify completely with, and to consider alternative conceptualizations of temporalities.

4. The Times of the Future

Birdboy suggests an extended responsibility towards the future that is inextricably linked to visions of temporality. The ethics of the future is, like all ethics, directed to those who are not us, and whom we will probably never meet. As Daniel Innerarity explores in *The Future and Its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope*, when developing an ethics of the future, there is no logic of reciprocity. Innerarity defends instead an ethics of transmission towards those who are far from us in time and space: a working relationship with the future that considers past legacies, the challenges of the present and the need to facilitate new beginnings. He questions not only the logic of considering our times to be the end of history (as it was famously formulated by Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1992)), but also the validity of thinking that what is new is radically innovative, because that “contradicts the reality of our history, which includes both continuity and innovation in equal measure” (Innerarity 2012, p. 40). The notion of responsibility, he argues, is usually focused on the past; he proposes to add to it an “anticipatory responsibility, a responsibility of foresight, prevention, and future configuration” (Innerarity 2012, p. 73). *Birdboy* follows the tradition of post-apocalyptic fiction by exploring what happens after a catastrophe, hence its temporality situates its protagonists both after what can be considered the end of history and in the middle of a story.⁸ It also questions the idea that after a catastrophe some things will completely end, and other radically new ones will emerge. Instead, *Birdboy*’s critique, which is inextricably related to the climate emergency and the ethics of the future, shows the impact of constant accumulation in time and space. The aftertimes following a disaster do not experience a clear cut with the ill effects of the past: inheritances still influence the possibilities of new beginnings for new generations.

Through the representation of emotional and material accumulation, and the attempts to escape it, *Birdboy* portrays, and questions, Hannah Arendt’s famous formulation of new beginnings as the inherent human capacity to begin by acting, which is one of her main contentions in *The Human Condition*. *Birdboy* also interrogates Arendt’s view of time that conceptualizes human life as a rectilinear movement that “cuts through the circular movement of biological life” (Arendt [1958] 1998, p. 19) and understands history as a series of extraordinary interruptions made by human beings (Arendt [1961] 2006, p. 43). In *Birdboy* there is a desire for new beginnings and to do away with traditions, but the actions taken by the protagonists are not conducive to achieving their goals: they live in a world where the effects of their environment greatly influence the present, both emotionally

and materially.⁹ In this sense, *Birdboy's* representation of temporality relates to Timothy Morton's ecological thought, which is based on the interconnectedness of the environment (Morton 2012, p. 7). Morton's argument engages with pollution and accumulation in space, but it also affects the future. Linking space and time, he states:

The future is one of those things like Nature, set up as a thing "over yonder": something else that the ecological thought dissolves. If there is no world, there is no future, since we can't assume a fixed temporal horizon, just as we can't assume a fixed spatial one. We can't throw empty cans into the ocean anymore and just pretend they have gone "away". Likewise, we can't kick the ecological can into the future and pretend it's gone "away". (Morton 2012, p. 161)

Birdboy shows the trash that accumulates and does not go away, and also how actions have consequences in different times and can impede new beginnings. It suggests the interconnectedness of sentient and non-sentient beings, space and time, which questions the idea that the past, present and future are clearly separated. An ethics for the future, then, acknowledges the emotional and material interconnectedness in space and realizes we are creating a world where extraordinary, individual new beginnings that Arendt relates to the human condition no longer seem possible. At the end of the film, perhaps to underscore this idea, the inner paradise on the island, in contrast with other spaces in the movie, shows a different temporal connectivity of care and renewal more in line with natural cycles. In what follows, I will analyze the emotional and material accumulation that affects the inhabitants of the island, and how the accumulation relates to the temporal association of beings, inanimate objects and spaces.

5. Emotional Accumulation

Birdboy portrays some characters' personalities as a complex emotional matrix. The most literal example of a split is Sandra, the young bunny who tries to leave the island with Dinky and Little Fox. The first time she appears in the movie, when she is trying to protect Little Fox from some aggressors, the bullies fear her because she is, as they say, crazy, and people say she hears voices inside her head. While they say this, some small, black, red-eyed bunnies emerge from Sandra's head, as if they were shadows of herself. She also becomes black and red-eyed. Throughout the movie, these personified voices do not leave her. In one instance, they tell her to push Little Fox off a cliff when he stops to eat berries from a tree. In another, when the three friends encounter the storm at the end of the movie, the dark bunnies urge her to let Dinky drown and save only herself. Both times Sandra successfully defeats the evil part of herself, but the fact that the black evil bunnies look like her and they never go away reveals that she is intricately connected to them. Sandra's voices question the fact that a person has an individual essence, while also representing the impact of mental health issues.¹⁰

The character that shows a higher degree of complexity and accumulation within himself, both in a realistic and fantastic way, is Birdboy. He hears voices from other people, especially when he is learning to fly. Some of them tell him he will never do it, and they criticize his late father. Birdboy also hears the voice of his father, which is always encouraging and loving. The comic illustrates something similar. On one page, Birdboy is in the middle of four panels, each one depicting what other people think of him. The four panels surrounding him are numbered and they are titled "1. His professors", "2. Urban legend", "3. My speculation" (where the possessive adjective refers to the student who is telling a friend all her speculations about Birdboy), and "4. His only friend (Dinky)" (my translation) (Vázquez [2006] 2020, n.p.). Later in the book, Birdboy is on the top of a panel that occupies half of a page and is titled "Birdboy's fears" (my translation). Below, his worries are numbered and the pictures are connected to him by lines. These worries include the fear of the unknown, love, a strong dependence on certain substances, loneliness and "psychobirds". This representation of a person surrounded by other external and internal voices points to the impossibility of ignoring the environment and questions the existence of a united being. Birdboy also takes drugs that lead to

hallucinations and reveal suppressed memories. The first time the audience sees him taking illegal drugs he is sitting on the pier and falls on his back. There is light coming from his eyes, and a tree growing from his heart while he bleeds through his mouth. Two dark birds start pecking at his heart with bloody beaks. Later, when he goes to the lighthouse where his father used to work, he sees similar dark monstrous birds. There, Birdboy's shadow takes the shape of one of them. He tries to escape his shadow, that both is and is not him, but the lighthouse door is locked, and the shadow seems to eat him. Shortly after, when he is made aware that Dinky and her friends are in danger, all the monsters that inhabit the lighthouse conflate in Birdboy, who becomes a huge black bird made of all of them. In that shape, he flies to the industrial zone spitting fire that kills the rats in the dump and destroys their houses. After that, he gradually returns to his former form. In the destruction scene, his anger toward others who attack the vulnerable, his fears, and the hallucinations caused by the drugs coalesce in him. He is both good and evil, capable of saving and killing. The movie depicts a character who is shaped by his environment, affected by emotional accumulation, drugs, and his inheritance.

6. Inheritances

The legacy from the former generation is another important factor for the emotional accumulation experienced by Birdboy and several other characters in the film. Birdboy, for instance, is influenced by his father's past actions, which viewers learn about from the adult police officer who tells his younger partner the story of Birdman, Birdboy's father: a lighthouse worker who helped to guide fisherman who were out at sea. After the accident, Birdman lost his job, put on a mask and started flying to transport drugs, with help from other birds, which is why most trees on the island were cut by the police—so that the birds could not use them to protect themselves. The older police officer was the one who shot and killed Birdman. The movie shows Birdman's death: he was shot while flying, fell, and his backpack opened and revealed he was carrying golden acorns. The meaning of the golden acorns is never explicitly explained, but they seem to have positive connotations and will later be connected with Birdboy. Even though Birdman is dead, his memory affects his son. For instance, Birdboy hears his father's voice while trying to fly. In another instance when Birdboy goes to the lighthouse, he sees a picture of his father, envisions his old bedroom, and hears Birdman's supporting words once again. Following his father's footsteps, Birdboy becomes involved with drugs and is equally hunted by the same police officers because of it. Birdboy also knows where the golden acorns can be found—in an inner part of the island that resembles a paradise, where he will wind up at the end of the film.

Other characters are also affected or attacked by their parents. When some school bullies are hitting Little Fox, they tell him he is a coward "like his father" and will always be one. In effect, Little Fox, one of the least developed characters, always seems to follow the others. Dinky's caring father dies in the accident, and her mother remarries somebody else. Dinky's stepfather is the only human in the movie, but he constantly wears a disguise pretending to be a mouse. He also has a dog, who they say is Dinky's brother, Johnny. He does not behave as anthropomorphically as other animals in the movie and also wears a mask disguising his face. Dinky's stepfather and stepbrother visually depart from the rest of the family, which is one of the many metaphors of the film: they are shown from Dinky's perspective, who sees them as outsiders. In the comic, they say Dinky's stepfather is a foreigner and that her mother's new marriage caused Dinky to end up in a psychiatric hospital. In the short movie, Dinky's "fake father", as they call him in *Birdboy's Art Book* [Vázquez and Rivero 2016, p. 53], suddenly appears after her biological father dies. He gaslights her pretending to be her real father and tells her about memories Dinky has of her and her biological father. In the movie, Dinky's real father only appears in memories, and her fake father is already installed in Dinky's house. He constantly criticizes Dinky and praises Johnny. Her new family leads Dinky to try and escape the island and further

underscores how the traumatic past and older generations are having a powerful effect in younger generations.

This can also be seen in Zacharias, the young pig, who is a former fisherman and now deals drugs. He has a very traumatic relationship with his mother, who also shows a split personality provoked by her drug addiction. While he is fishing in an ocean with no fish, he says he hates his job, but cannot leave the island because he is taking care of his mother. He has a symbolic tattoo with an anchor next to the word “mamá” surrounded by a heart. When he gets home, his mother yells at him from the upstairs bedroom. In what is probably one of the most disturbing parts of the movie he goes up the huge-looking stairs to find his overweight mother lying in bed and asking for more drugs. A spider then emerges from his mother’s nose and speaks as if it were her. She pressures Zacharias and tells him that his father would be embarrassed because he does not do anything productive. Zacharias first refuses, but finally injects his mother with drugs. The spider increases in size until it is bigger than Zacharias and follows him around the house. In that moment, Dinky, Sandra and Little Fox break into Zacharias’s house and steal his piggy bank. The spider gets very angry at Zacharias for losing the money, calls him a burden, and tells him nobody besides her will ever love him. The spider then becomes smaller, and Zacharias’s mother tells him to kill her. Zacharias kills the spider, and, with that, his mother also stops moving, which might suggest that Zacharias, by killing the spider, also killed her. This is a perturbing scene that takes the struggle between generations to an extreme and shows both the effects of drug addiction as well as how the actions of one generation can impact another. It also suggests that there are several parts within an individual, which, as in the case of Birdboy, are a product of external factors such as drugs, but it highlights that killing one part of them will kill the whole person.

Throughout the film, Sandra, Birdboy, Dinky, and Zacharias try to create new beginnings by acting. In the case of Birdboy and Sandra, they fight, with some success, with parts of themselves that appear as monstrous, and their actions affirm their ability to overcome their fears. Dinky and her friends on the one hand, and Zacharias on the other, would like to start anew by leaving the island, their family, and past; however, their attempts to act freely, which means escaping from their family, are unsuccessful. Dinky, Little Fox and Sandra are stopped by a storm, and Dinky ends up returning home to her abusive family. Zacharias also remains on the island until the end. Their individual actions that try to create new beginnings away from their tradition do not change their lives. In addition, they are burdened by the traumatic accumulation of a violent past. Birdboy’s father was killed by police, Dinky’s father was killed by the accident, and Zacharias’s mother was destroyed by her drug addiction and later by him. Even Birdboy’s and Dinky’s good memories of the past have the seed of a tragedy, because what are seen as the good old days were fueled by an economic force, the factory, that caused alienation, and eventually destruction and death. The past is alive as trauma, and the present shows the impossible fight for new beginnings. The movie only contains one instance in which a legacy is passed on with less friction, when the older police officer who shot Birdman teaches his younger partner how to kill. To do so, he kills a mother bird who leaves a nest of now orphaned birds and later shoots Birdboy (but only hits his arm). After some resistance, the younger partner learns the lesson and fires the shot that kills Birdboy. The young police officer is similar to an empty vessel that receives knowledge from his elders and does not question it: he killed Birdboy, just as the older police officer had killed Birdman. The police officers represent the transmission of an oppressive legacy by those in power, portraying a society that aims to cyclically defeat those who are seen as the enemy. In this way, *Birdboy* prevents the possibility of new beginnings that break with the inherited: most characters would like to escape but they are not successful in their new actions, while others continue the repressive traditions of previous generations.

7. Material Accumulation

While most of the characters that live in the non-destroyed part of the island fight, unsuccessfully, for something new, the ones that live in the industrial zone are aware of not only the emotional but also the material accumulation that comes from the past, and they know that they lack any kind of future. The movie starts with a motto illustrating their relationship with objects and time. Even before there are any images on screen, while the initial credits are running, a voice is heard asking another, younger voice to repeat these words: "We are the forgotten children. We don't have a father nor mother. We search for our future in the trash. The future has passed, trash is the present, blood is our law" (my translation). Afterwards, the older voice talks about the prior times the younger one does not remember. Back then, the island was fertile and there was happiness and work in the industrial zone, but the explosion destroyed all of that and killed some of the island's inhabitants. The title of the movie appears then and, finally, the audience sees the two characters who are talking: an older and a younger brother, both anthropomorphic rats who live in the dump. Some of the main topics are thus presented even before the movie's title: the lack of a future ("the future has passed"), the past that is remembered with nostalgia but that also destroyed the future for the orphaned "forgotten children", the fact that the present is materialized in the trash that is left behind by the past and present inhabitants of the other parts of the island ("trash is our present"), and the law that has to do with blood, as an immediate and corporal consequence for actions ("blood is our law"). That motto summarizes how the rats relate to their environment, to each other, and to time: because of the accident they are orphans and were displaced to the dump, they are severed from their past in time and space, and they are also deprived of a future. It is notable that, although telling past stories might make no sense in the perpetual present, the older sibling who remembers the accident tries to pass his memories down to his younger sibling; however, they all live now in an eternal present whose law is violent and inexorable. Later in the movie the two rats run into two other rats, also an older and younger sibling whose skin is a darker shade of grey. The two older siblings start fighting, and later, to imitate them, the younger ones do the same. After their fight to the death, only two rats remain: the older lighter skinned one, and the younger rat with darker skin. They look at each other and continue marching together, even though each of them is responsible for killing the other's sibling, which suggests that in their eternal present where blood is the law, what happened a minute ago is not as important as their immediate need.

The rats' way of life is made possible by the accumulation of objects in the dump. Trash has an essential presence in the movie. At some point, while Dinky, Little Fox and Sandra run across a field of dead trees, a voice says: "Trash is alive, it grows and reproduces itself. Trash is a part of us, it grows and reproduces itself. Little by little, trash will end up taking over the whole island" (my translation). This situation exemplifies Morton's assertion that the ecological thought requires realizing that everything is interdependent and interactive, that we cannot really throw anything away because everything has consequences, nothing is outside the cycle. Trash may even be considered a *hyperobject*, another of Morton's terms, which refers to "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 2013, p. 1). In *Birdboy*, trash is larger than the animals who inhabit the dump, and also operates in a different time scale. *Birdboy* also illustrates some of the points that Samuel Amago outlines in *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain*, namely, the fact that trash has agency and never disappears completely (Amago 2021). In another Spanish movie, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (Almodóvar 1988), according to Amago, trash represents the past that the protagonists want to leave behind, but that ends up coming back. Similarly, in *Birdboy*, trash does not disappear; however, in contrast with the Almodóvar film, it not only evokes the personal past but also the dark side of the technical advancements, more in line with neoliberal critiques that appear in recent graphic novels also analyzed in *Basura*. The island is a finite environment where everything accumulates, and nothing leaves. Not only can the characters not escape, but also the objects keep accumulating in the ever-growing dump, in a spatial and temporal scale that

goes beyond human understanding. Trash provides an immediate way of life but does not offer a future outside of it. Another rat who inhabits the dump, who guides Dinky, Sandra and Little Fox, shows the vicious cycle made possible by trash. He is the sibling of somebody they knew, Little White Mouse, and was rumored to be living in the city; however, he never left and is living in the dump, constantly searching for copper. He also had his arm cut off as a punishment for stealing. He tells them: “I exchange copper for coins, coins for food, and food for copper” (my translation), which accentuates the non-productive circle of material accumulation and evokes Jameson’s famous quote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson 2003, p. 76). His presence also functions like a dark foreshadowing for the three friends, because they will also not be able to leave. Finally, he exemplifies how breaking the law is paid for with their own bodies: he lost an arm for stealing, and they will risk losing their lives for venturing into the industrial zone. Birdboy, metamorphized into a monster, is the one who breaks the vicious circle of the eternal present in the dump by killing all the rats and saving his friends. That act of killing and saving, on the one hand, shows for the first time the ability of Birdboy to have agency and act to change their destiny. On the other hand, it has terrible implications, it suggests that the people without a future are dispensable, and that the ones who live away from the trash can easily and rightly kill them.

8. Interactions between Animals

There are other ways in which *Birdboy*’s universe shows the hierarchy between animals that share the same time and space. The ones that live in the dump are all rats, while the non-destroyed part of the island is populated by other species (birds, bunnies, dogs, pigs, etc.). *Birdboy* evokes several tropes connected to the use of rats in fiction: rats have been used to suggest an infestation, sometimes of undesirable humans, as well as to represent the ultimate survivors of an apocalypse. Their situation suggests that rats are a minoritized group of denizens, almost bare life, as Agamben has defined it, and, in this case, bare life does not have a future, only a present. Even though their life would be considered *zoē*, that is, “the simple fact of living” (Agamben 1998, p. I), and not *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” (Agamben 1998, p. I) that is usually linked to the political life, they seem to believe they are more in contact with reality than the rest of the animals. When Dinky, Sandra and Little Fox are about to be killed, they tell the rats they do not know who they are. The rats repeat in unison the motto heard at the beginning, and the rat leader tells the three friends: “However, you are the ones that are nothing. You are only flesh, flesh without soul. You live in your island, in your set, oblivious to trash and pain. We feed off your trash and your pain” (my translation). The rats know very well about the other parts of the island, but this knowledge is not reciprocal; however, this exchange shows that the ignored parts of a space, similarly to what happened with the ignored parts of time, cannot be erased, and they threaten the present.

There are also hierarchies among the animals who live in the non-destroyed part of the island, which also show extremes in the continuum between *zoē* and *bios*. Mammals tend to be more anthropomorphic, while birds tend to be less so. Birdboy does not communicate with other mammals with words but can communicate easily with birds who do not talk with the rest of the characters. The relationship of Birdboy with nature and the portrayal of most birds in the film as mistreated nature may suggest that Birdboy, instead of representing a self-standing character, does in fact represent nature. This also explains why policemen are chasing Birdboy: it symbolizes the perpetual devastation of the environment. Birdboy, however, does not depict a normative vision of nature, but something similar to what Morton calls “dark ecology”, (Morton 2013) that is, an ecological awareness seen as a loop, where humans realize their interconnectedness to the environment. It also involves becoming aware of themselves as a species for whom the attempts to escape the web of fate are the web of fate. Birdboy, on the one hand, is constantly chased by the police. On the other, he kills other sentient beings, the rats, contributing to the annihilation of life in the island. He also harms himself by using drugs. Finally, he gets shot when helping to flee

the island's oppressive environment, thus trying to escape the web of his fate becomes his web of fate.

In addition, there are other animals that differ from the anthropomorphic protagonists. There is only one character that seems to be human, Dinky's fake father, who wears a disguise pretending to be a mouse and might be represented as such because he is perceived from Dinky's perspective. He is one of the villains of the story, intruding in a world that is not his, and is symbolically labeled a foreigner in the comic. There are also two animals who resemble pets. The first one is Dinky's brother, who behaves like real-world dogs do, and wears a mask marking his fakeness, consistent with a representation from Dinky's point of view. Another animal who behaves non-anthropomorphically, is Zacharias's parrot, who lives in a cage on Zacharias's boat until Birdboy frees him. Zacharias does not treat the parrot well and ends up saying that he envies him because he is happy with a life reduced to its biological functions. The relations between different animals make visible the differences between biological and political life while reproducing real-world inequalities at the same time they question them, illustrating some of the interconnections that happen in the natural world.

9. Sentient and Non-Sentient Entities

In addition, the animals in the film share their universe with anthropomorphic objects, usually shaped as animals, something that blurs the distinction between natural beings, objects, and trash. The movie represents animals and specific animalized objects as sentient entities, while the majority of objects, including trash, are non-sentient. The first animated object to appear is Dinky's alarm clock, Mr. Reloggio, who wakes her up at the beginning of the day. He is shaped like a mouse, and, talking in a robotic voice, urges Dinky to get up. Dinky pushes him away when the alarm goes off, breaking him, and he complains, arguing that he has feelings. Dinky's fake father fixes Mr. Reloggio, scolds Dinky, and gives him legs so that he can move freely. Mr. Reloggio then walks outside the house. He sees Johnny the dog and calls him brother, but Johnny bites him and throws him into the ocean. Mr. Reloggio ends up in the dump and interprets the trash that surrounds him as a massacre that caused pain to his siblings, other metallic objects. He is finally picked up by the pair of sibling rats and used by one to kill the other rat in their fight. Mr. Reloggio finally breaks down in the fight, which is his equivalent of death, or becoming completely inanimate and therefore trash. Mr. Reloggio represents, on the one hand, the mechanization of life: he is responsible for waking Dinky up and speaks and beeps in a robotic voice. He also imposes order as Dinky's father, and is linked to his neglect, because he cares for him, an object, more than for her. Mr. Reloggio embodies the transitory and apparently arbitrary nature of time: he explicitly conveys this idea when he talks in anguish about the passing of time and the fact that it never comes back; however, because *Birdboy* represents different temporalities, the passing of seconds on a clock seems only one of the possibilities to relate to time. Additionally, like the other animated objects that appear in the movie, Mr. Reloggio personifies the idea that objects are alive and have interactions with sentient beings. His final demise also shows the transformation from a sentient entity who controls time, to trash, that is, a non-sentient hyperobject which now belongs to a temporality which is larger than human scale. A similar idea is suggested by Zacharias's piggy bank, who is also capable of talking, and evokes the capitalistic need for saving money. When Dinky, Sandra and Little Fox steal him to get the money it has inside, Little Fox wants to take the piggy bank with them, but they tell Little Fox to leave the trash behind. Little Fox claims that he is not trash, but an object who fears being alone. The piggy bank responds: "Thank you. What you just said is very beautiful" (my translation). When the rats capture the three friends, they break the piggy bank to check if it has money, and thus he also becomes trash, a non-sentient entity.

Another animalized object is the duck that the three friends use as a boat. They go to the industrial zone to see Uncle Klaus, an older rat smuggler who sells organs, weapons and jewelry out of a hangar. He also sells boats that can be used to leave the island. He

shows them several models shaped like different kinds of sea animals (a dolphin and a shark), which suggests that even if sea creatures died, they still live as objects. Because the better boats are too expensive for the children, they end up buying an inflatable duck, made of what is described as a very polluting material, PVC. He also speaks, although, as Klaus suggests, his beak can be tied shut. The duck tells them his story while the movie shows the images: he used to live happily with his mother and siblings in a PVC lake; however, he was captured and put in a cardboard box, which he is now happy to escape. This visual metaphor is charged with irony since PVC is seen as appearing naturally, pointing to the fact that it is so entrenched in our world that it seems to have its own life. It also refers to the pollution and oppression behind the work of companies that pack things in boxes in an assembly line. The accumulation of different animals and objects in the same territory, which questions the normative borders between sentient and non-sentient beings, again relates to the responsibility to care for everything on the planet and to the interconnectivity of Morton's ecological thought. He calls for an ecology that seeks an interrelation between entities without (the concept of) Nature (Morton 2009), because the Western world has modified and accepted it so much that we can no longer talk about Nature *sensu stricto*.

10. Different Spaces

The various spaces of the island also accumulate in a finite territory. One of the most relevant is the dump, which used to be the industrial zone. *Birdboy* highlights the lack of a future after the factories are gone and nature is destroyed by linking the factories of the past, which are depicted by memories, with the current wasteland where the rats live. The images that represent work in the factory before the accident are also dystopic and establish a contrast with the words of the characters that remember them as the prosperous past. They show the workers, who all look the same, following a straight line to enter the building. There are also signs that warn of the pollution in the industrial zone. The industrial complex that went too far in mechanizing life and provoked a catastrophe that affected the environment evokes the literary trope of the wasteland, especially popular during the decades after the Second World War, which sometimes imagines humanity starting over. In *Birdboy*, however, there is no clear future depicted before or after the accident. Both spaces, the industrial zone and the dump, show an eternal present.

The non-destroyed parts of the island, which, according to the police are named one, two, and three, also contain different spaces that are linked to time. Vázquez connects the island to the Galicia of the nineteen eighties, where he grew up, a place where drug trafficking was widespread and where wildfires destroyed forests (Burstein 2017). In the movie, the forest is destroyed by the police who want to cut the trees to be able to catch Birdboy more easily and end what they think is his drug trafficking. *The island's* landscape, in effect, shows the devastation of Galicia by drugs and fires, as well as the problems brought by deindustrialization, while it connects those themes to a larger environmental destruction perpetuated by those in power. On the island there is also a big cemetery, a constant reminder of the past lives that inhabited the place and keep occupying its space. That is where Birdman, Birdboy's father, rests. His tombstone is seen as bigger than the rest, possibly depicted from Birdboy's perspective. There is also the very symbolic lighthouse, where Birdman worked guiding the ships. When the accident destroyed the fish and boats stopped needing the lighthouse, Birdman started flying around the island. According to the police officers, he dealt drugs, but we see him carrying a backpack with golden acorns. Birdboy seems to inherit Birdman's relationship to the lighthouse. When he goes there, he sees his past life and also monsters. He also embodies a lighthouse when he guides the three friends who are sailing in the boat. At the end of the film, he also guides Dinky to a hidden paradise.

Another important space is the hidden paradise that exists on the island, which is related to the golden acorns that Birdman used to transport. The meaning of the golden acorns is never made explicit, but they connect Birdboy to nature, again suggesting he represents it. The first scene with a golden acorn involves Birdboy planting one of them in

a forest glade and watering it. A bright, green plant emerges from the golden acorn. In a place where police are taking down the trees to be able to catch Birdboy, he is restoring life. He also has access to the hidden paradise where he goes after he gets shot in her arm. He crosses a dense forest with black and grey thorny trees. At some point a drop of his blood hits the floor and a red plant with golden stamens surfaces, an image evocative of the myth of Hyacinth. He keeps walking and enters a dark cave, following a firefly who guides him, until he reaches a site where there is light, live trees, red and yellow flowers, and a blue lake with living fish. In the middle, there is a big tree where birds live, whose branches resemble roots covered by grass. The top of the cave has stalactites. Birdboy submerges himself in the lake and a swarm of fireflies go to heal him and eat his blood. After he is cured, he feeds the non-anthropomorphic birds. One of them tells him she is dying, and thanks him because, due to his care, she lived longer in a paradise that she never thought she would see again. Her advice to him is to expel the demon within himself and to take care of himself, and not only of others. After that, the old bird dies, and a firefly comes out of her mouth, joining the fireflies who live on the top of the big tree. Some golden acorns fall from the tree on Birdboy's head. He puts one of them in his pocket and buries the bird in the cemetery, near his father's tombstone. The same utopian space with the golden acorns is featured at the end of the movie, after Birdboy dies.¹¹ When Birdboy saves Dinky, Little Fox and Sandra from the rats of the dump, they start their attempt to sail away from the island; however, a storm sinks their duck-boat. They are rescued, but Birdboy, who was guiding them, is shot by the police. Dinky has to return home at the end of the day, where her parents scold her. She showers, as she had done in the morning, going back to the same routine, as if nothing had changed. She writes her thoughts in her diary: she has the impression she will never leave, that she should accept it and stop fighting her fate. Meanwhile, Zacharias fishes Birdboy's corpse from the water, and from his mouth a firefly emerges and flies to meet the others. Dinky sees the fireflies from her window and follows them to the black, thorny trees, where she sees the red flower with golden stamens that came out of Birdboy's blood, and discovers the hidden paradise with the tree, the blue lake, and golden acorns. Dinky grabs one of them and says "Birdboy" while looking up to the old tree and the fireflies.

On the one hand, the different time-space Birdboy knows and the two protagonists enter at the end, does not explicitly solve the problems that happen outside the cave, and it seems like a *deus ex machina* solution to very real and tangible problems. It is also problematic that only some have access to this paradise. The very notion of paradise conveys a hierarchy and privilege that only a few have. This ending also relates to other Spanish movies with children protagonists that have their desires fulfilled after death. This happens in films as varied as *Marcelino pan y vino* (Vajda 1954), *Pan's Labyrinth* (Del Toro 2006) or the science-fiction movie, *Eva* (Mañillo 2011); however, while in those movies the protagonists' goal is to be reunited with their real parents, in *Birdboy*, the protagonists are reunited with each other and connected to the cycle of life. In this sense, they manage to escape their familial patterns and form a new beginning, even if it is after Birdboy dies. The utopian space underscores Birdboy's, and now Dinky's, connection to a natural world that juxtaposes different time scales, those of slow-forming stalactites with old trees and birds. It is also a reminder of the new beginnings related not entirely to human actions but to the natural cycle: a plant can emerge from Birdboy's blood, and the fireflies with curative powers are born after a living being dies. It shows that there can be a utopian space on earth, for those who see and follow the metaphorical light of the fireflies, if there is a connection with all beings, living and dead. It therefore subverts the need to escape to create new beginnings by revealing nearby ecosystems and giving a glimmer of hope.¹² At the same time, its temporality coexists with that of other spaces that accumulate in the island: the dystopic eternal present of the dump, the cyclical destruction of the environment represented in the forest, and the memories of those in the cemetery. Utopia in *Birdboy* is not totalizing, but a possibility represented in a space and time that cohabits with others.

11. Conclusions

After the last scene with Dinky, the title of the movie appears, marking the end of the story, but some images continue: there is a black sea with white fish that fly to the white sky and become black birds who finally turn grey. There is a bird who carries something bright in his beak and drops it, an image evocative of the dove of Noah's Ark. There is the lighthouse, colorful houses, and a red bird. Viewers see the landscape before the accident, with factories, boats and cranes, and a bird flying above them. The movie credits start to appear while the camera follows the bird. There is a rainbow, and a huge cemetery with flowers. Finally, more fields and a single boat, while the bird flies to the right of the screen. At this point, the movie shows the credits with white letters over black background. The images in this ending again expose accumulation and interconnectedness of times, spaces, objects and beings, and question the idea that there can be a clear ending and a radical new beginning.

Birdboy shows an accumulation of topics, or, as the creators indicate, the pollution that occurs inside and outside a being (Lehane 2017). The story evolves from the more existential themes highlighted in the comic to underscoring the destruction of the environment and the connection between different temporalities. The film does so by showing the accumulation inside oneself and the material accumulation of beings, objects and spaces. *Birdboy*, ultimately, touches on the notion that everything we do that has an impact, be it psychological or physical, in a world where we all live together, sharing spaces and times. It also questions the necessity and the possibility of new beginnings outside our environment if we do not engage with the complexity of nature. Above all, the movie focuses on the consequences that all of this has for the future: how the accumulation affects the younger generation that lives in a world whose development has been exhausted but where the remains of the past have not disappeared. *Birdboy's* relation with the past shows a contrast with other Spanish movies with children that depict the importance of remembering a repressed history. In *Birdboy*, the past is recalled with nostalgia, but it also shows a way of life responsible for the destruction of the future. Even if there is not an explicit exploration of possible causes, *Birdboy* helps us to feel the consequences of every action, and expands the scope of responsibility from remembering and bringing justice to the victims of the past to engaging with an ethics of the future.

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Notes

- ¹ "Psiconautas", the title of the comic and the original title of the full-length movie in Spanish, can refer to "psychonautics", the analysis of altered states of mind generally achieved by taking hallucinatory drugs. Such states of altered conscience are one of the main themes in *Birdboy's* story.
- ² The characters and themes are very similar in all three pieces, although there is an evolution from the more existential topics developed in the comic to underscoring the destruction of the environment in the movie. Due to space constraints, a complete analysis of the development of characters and themes from the comic and short movie to the full-length film goes beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, I will mainly refer to the 2015 movie, while indicating discrepancies with the other two pieces when relevant.

- 3 On the same night *Birdboy* won the Goya for best animation film, Vázquez also won the Goya for *Decorado*, in the category of animated short film. *Birdboy*, the short movie, had also won the Goya in 2012. The complete list of awards can be found in the movie's official web page (Anonymous n.d.), www.psiconautasmovie.com, accessed on 20 March 2022.
- 4 Anthropomorphizing non-human animals could also be speciesist. *Birdboy* does not emphasize animal rights, but rather, it uses them to represent human topics; however, there also seems to be a critique of animal hierarchies that I will discuss below.
- 5 On the one hand, even if they are called “children”, the protagonists are not human. They are also not exactly of childhood age, but are adolescents: the graphic novel mentions Dinky is fourteen years old. In any case, I believe considering them children functions to mark their separation from the older generation. In addition, all of them are “the forgotten children” according to *Birdboy's Art Book* (Vázquez and Rivero 2016, p. 10), although in the movie only the rats who live in the dump identify themselves as such.
- 6 Some of the most famous films portraying children and monsters are *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Eric 1973), *The Devil's Backbone* (Del Toro 2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (Del Toro 2006).
- 7 See, for example, Sarah Thomas's analysis of Antonio Mercero's movies (Thomas 2019, pp. 66–107).
- 8 *Birdboy's* short movie, in contrast, starts before the accident, so the apocalypse is situated in the middle. In the movie the pre-catastrophe world is conveyed by memories.
- 9 It is worth noting that, for Arendt, the human capacity to begin by acting is a political phenomenon that demands a human plurality, and it does not explicitly refer to a physical escape from an oppressive society. I read *Birdboy's* characters attempt to escape the island metaphorically, as their desire to create new beginnings outside of their elder's tradition.
- 10 Dinky also experiences mental health illness and a split within herself, something explicit in the graphic novel and not in the movie. The comic inserts a framed tale called “The transformation of Dinky” (my translation) in which one of her classmates tells another the story of how she ended up in a psychiatric hospital after the accident killed her biological father and her stepfather moved in with them. Later, Dinky appears with a mask that was given to her by the doctors and makes her seem happy; in the short movie she also wears one after her father dies. In both cases Dinky is split between her being with and without the mask: she uses it around her family but takes it off with Birdboy.
- 11 It is worth noting that this inner paradise does not appear in the graphic novel, which ends when Dinky returns home after her failed attempt to scape and Birdboy dies. This changes the story's meaning slightly: the graphic novel ends without offering any explicit hope.
- 12 The creators have recognized they wanted to give some encouragement at the end, so that the audiences can experience all emotions in the movie. According to Vázquez: “There is an intensity in the movie [. . .] but they should also take away some hope. Even though the movie is dark there's still light at the end” (Lehane 2017).

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