

CHANGELINGS, DESIRE, AND ILLUSION: A STUDY ON THE DOUBLE IN THE SERIES *KATLA*

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of the double through the Nordic folkloric theme of changelings in the Icelandic series *Katla* (2021). The research objectives are three: (1) To understand *Katla*'s narrative and aesthetic complexity, particularly in its transitions between Nordic noir and post-Nordic Noir; (2) To explore how Icelandic cultural context, specifically the geom mythology of volcanism, shapes narrative development; and (3) To analyze the main character, Gríma, as an illustration of the double through changelings, aiming to understand her narrative characterization, existential constitution, etiological affiliations, and ontological relationships. The methodology involves authors associated with narratological studies and theoretical frameworks related to double studies, alongside *a priori* categories within an interdisciplinary framework encompassing literature, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Ultimately, it is concluded that the desire to reclaim a past emotional life and the experience of loss, which act as the driving force behind illusion in the character and its changeling's dramatic arc, shape the figure of the double within the work.

Keywords: Serialized fiction; changeling; double; *Katla*; character study; interdisciplinarity.

CHANGELINGS, DESEJO E ILUSÃO: UM ESTUDO SOBRE O DUPLO NA SÉRIE *KATLA*

Resumo: Este artigo investiga a representação do duplo por meio do tema folclórico nórdico dos *changelings* na série islandesa *Katla* (2021). Os objetivos de pesquisa são três: (1) Compreender a complexidade narrativa e estética de *Katla*, particularmente em suas transições entre o *noir* nórdico e o pós-*noir* nórdico; (2) Explorar como o contexto cultural islandês, especificamente a geomitologia do vulcanismo, molda o desenvolvimento narrativo; e (3) Analisar a personagem principal, Gríma, como uma ilustração do duplo através dos *changelings*, com o objetivo de entender sua caracterização narrativa, constituição existencial, afiliações etiológicas e relacionamentos ontológicos. A metodologia envolve autores associados a estudos narratológicos e quadros teóricos relacionados aos estudos do duplo, juntamente com categorias *a priori* dentro de um quadro interdisciplinar que abrange literatura, psicanálise e filosofia. Por fim, é possível concluir que o desejo de recuperar uma vida emocional pregressa e a experiência da perda, que atuam conjuntamente como a força motriz da ilusão presente no arco dramático da personagem e de seu changeling, moldam a figura do duplo dentro da obra.

Palavras-chave: Ficção seriada; *changeling*; duplo; *Katla*; estudo de personagem; interdisciplinaridade.

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1. Introduction

This article has the general objective of analyzing the Icelandic miniseries *Katla*, globally aired by Netflix in 2021, through an interpretation that encompasses the formation of the double through the Nordic folkloric figure of changelings. The research question guiding this work is as follows: "How is the representation of the theme of the double conveyed through the figure of changelings in the series *Katla*?". Therefore, the focus of the analysis, in this sense, falls on the issue of the double materialized in the unusual manifestations of the changeling, understanding them as part of Nordic culture and folklore. In other words, the changeling (as a process and result of the substitution of people and beings between fairies and humans) is present in the miniseries through five characters (Gunhild, Mikael, Ása, Magnea, and Gríma) who are observed here in a close geomythological connection with *Katla*, the real-world volcano that gives its name to the fictional production.

Analytically, the specific objectives of the article focus on three fundamental points: (1) Understand the complexity of the empirical object regarding its narrative and aesthetic construction (especially through the transitions between Nordic noir and post-Nordic noir); (2) Discuss how the Icelandic cultural context that gives rise to the narrative is permeated by autochthonous elements relevant to the development of the plot (with emphasis on the geomythological question of volcanism); and (3) Analyze characters that concretely explain how the issue of the double is portrayed in the figure of changelings (with the intention of understanding the narrative characterization of the characters and, more specifically, the existential constitution, etiological affiliations, and ontological relationships of the double in this type of representation).

The hypotheses that underpin the discussions in the article focus on the idea that the double is summoned to the plot, in its interrelation with changelings, through: (A) The desire to restore a previous affective life; and (B) Loss as the driving force of illusion. Thus, the connection between the theme of the double, the unusual nature of the changelings, and the sociocultural importance of volcanism in the construction of the fictional narrative reaches its analytical climax through the view of the double as desire and illusion, tensioned through Gríma and her double, that is, the character selected for the third part of the final analysis. Theoretically and methodologically, authors from interdisciplinary fields are discussed, ranging from literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis to geomythology and television studies.

Regarding the reasons justifying the existence of this article, it is worth noting two points: the scarce discussion (at least in the Anglophone universe) on specific television series related to the

Icelandic media landscape and the lack of available studies correlating the double with the figure of changelings in the analyzed work. Structurally, the article is divided in four parts: (1) Literature review on the changeling, (2) Theoretical framework on the double through literary, psychoanalytical, and philosophical lenses, (3) Methodological procedures, and (4) Analyses (Analysis I - Empirical Object, Analysis II - Cultural Context, and Analysis III - Selected Character).

2. Literature Review on Changelings

The term “changeling” is an Anglicism adapted from the French word “changeling” (or “changeon”) and could be loosely translated as “swapped” or “replaced,” finding its strongest connotation in European folklore² as the idea of a “changed person/child.” But who performs this type of exchange? And, most importantly, “what” or “who” is left in place of the original individual?

As a scholar of the subject, Lawrence (2010, p. 14) attempts to address these questions by explaining that the very “mutable” nature of the changeling serves as a warning that attempting to classify or draw strict boundaries to define it is inherently problematic. Even the origins of the earliest accounts of such figures depend on the cultural framework or era we choose to use as our lens of observation. In other words, the “mutability” of changelings also manifests in the search for seminal records of their appearances depending on the chosen period of analysis, such as the Victorian, Romantic, or Medieval era (Lawrence, 2010, p. 16).

In terms of historical recovery related to European folklore studies and anthropological fieldwork, Piaschewski (1935), Lawrence (2010), and Lancy (2015) concur that fairies (sometimes referred to as little people or good people) living in forests or a magical underworld were responsible for the exchange. They would kidnap human children and replace them with rebellious and deformed fairies known as changelings. However, there is a significant difference between the folklore concept of fairies associated with this uncanny figure and the Disney-like idea more familiar to the general public. Here, fairies are beings who often engage in malicious, harmful acts towards people. Hence, changelings attempt to mimic humans but end up exhibiting strange behaviors, speaking ominously, looking peculiar, walking oddly, and, in some cases, even displaying aggression. Lancy (2015, p. 51), in his studies on childhood, further explains that changelings can also be seen as a “subset of demonic children that elicit a negative reaction from their caretakers.”

² Changelings, although primarily known from Germanic, Celtic, Nordic, Slavic, and British folklore, are not exclusive to European countries. There are remarkable accounts of changelings in North, East, and West Africa - such as the case of “ogbanje” in Nigeria, according to Onu and Solomon-Etefia (2019, p. 102) - in Asia (China and Japan), and in Oceania (Australia), as explained by Piaschewski (1935, p. 171-174).

Ashliman (1997) recalls many stories by collecting folkloric accounts of changelings in Scandinavia, highlighting the presence of this uncanny figure in narratives spanning countries and regions such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. In the specific case of Iceland, Árnason's accounts (1862, 1864), found in "Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri" (Icelandic Folktales and Adventures), depict stories where changelings lurk within the domestic space, maintaining the foundational structure of child exchanges with other magical beings, as seen in the tales "The Father of Eighteen Elf Sons," "The Elf Woman Steals a Human Child," and "The Baby's Crib at Minni-Þverá."

It is important to note that, beyond the folklore and anthropological significance of the subject, changelings are also invoked to explain the interconnections between ableism and disability studies.³ According to Haffter (1968) and Goodey and Stainton (2001), a significant link can be observed between these topics based on the discrimination against people with disabilities, particularly children, during times when any deviation from normality (corporeal normativity) was considered grotesque, an aberration, or divine punishment (whether visibly notable physical disabilities referred to as "deformities" or intellectual disabilities, including autism). As Lancy (2015, p. 13) asserts, even children regarded as problematic, difficult, unwanted, or disliked by their families could be viewed as changelings.

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Therefore, in order to provide a single definition to guide the reflections in this article regarding the understanding of changelings, we turn again to Lawrence (2010) and his discussion on the essential element that must be taken into consideration: the process of exchange. In this sense, rather than understanding the term "changeling" as something that designates a species or group of fairies, the author suggests comprehending it as "a description of a particular operation and its mechanisms: the changeling is what has been replaced by another" (Lawrence, 2010, p. 13-14).

Furthermore, bringing a closer understanding of the reasons behind the persistence of such a folkloric figure and its relation to the double in contemporary times, Lawrence (2010, p. 15) states: "Finally, changelings also express a fundamental human anxiety about the unpredictable nature of life and these strange residents who seem to compete with us for territory." Thus, we understand

³ There are also academic works that reveal the connections between changelings and gender studies when discussing mistreatment and abuse perpetrated by husbands against their wives. According to Lawrence (2010, p. 14), "Throughout the 19th century, numerous children and women were abused or killed because their parents or husbands suspected them to be changelings. In this case, the changeling assumes the role of the stranger, the disobedient, and the unwanted human." The most famous case is the feminicide of the young Irish woman Bridget Cleary, who, according to Bourke (1999), was tortured and burned alive by her husband and relatives in 1895 because it was believed that a fairy had swapped her with a changeling.

Katla's changelings both as the uncanny process of exchange and the peculiar manifestations resulting from it: the double (that which or who returns to the place of the substituted subjects). Lastly, as further support for this definition, it is pertinent to note that the very meaning of the term “umskiptingur” (used to describe changelings in Icelandic) carries semantic proximity to the idea of movement between the process of exchange and its outcome, as the noun originates from the Icelandic verb “umskipta,” which means “to exchange” or “to substitute.”

3. Theoretical Framework on The Double

3.1 Literary Lens on The Double

Observations of the double from a literary perspective are extensive and can be found in various thematic possibilities. However, as Herrero Cecilia (2011) points out, it is during the Romantic⁴ period that the double gains prominence, especially with the introduction of the term *Doppelgänger* by Jean-Paul Richter in 1776. In the realm of fantastic narratives, this becomes even more evident as the double “produces anguish and unrest, as this figure comes to disturb the normal and natural order of things” (Herrero Cecilia, 2011, p. 22).

One of the major contributors to the debate, Doležel (1985), plays a significant role as a literary theorist by presenting a tripartite view of the construction modes of what he calls the “triangle of the double.” This is achieved through the themes of Orlando (an individual duplicated through changes in time and space), the theme of *Amphitryon* (two perfectly similar individuals coexisting in the same world with distinct personal identities), and the theme of the double in the strict sense. It is within the third aspect of this triangulation that the author establishes his most powerful definition of the double: “two alternative incarnations of the same individual coexist in a single fictional world” (Doležel, 1985, p. 464).

Building on Doležel's work and his definition of the third part of the “triangle of the double,” Bargalló (1994, p. 17) introduces the notion of “unfoldment” as a way to grasp the double itself. Following Bargalló, both incarnations can coexist in a space and time that allows for physical and verbal interaction between them. To understand the processes that generate unfoldments, Bargalló

⁴ When discussing the most important literary movements and schools and their relation to the *doppelgänger*, it is also worth visiting Fusillo's reflections (1998, p. 22-23) on what he aims to construct, in a sort of literary chronology, as an interrelated panorama between literature and the double. The author indicates that in Classical Antiquity, the *doppelgänger* is manifested through the notion of “stolen identity”; in the Baroque period, the *doppelgänger* is seen through “disturbing resemblance”; and finally, in Romanticism, the *doppelgänger* is revealed through “duplication of the self.”

directly references Doležel (1985, p. 468-469) and brings together the ontological relationships of the double through three mutually exclusive typologies in the literary field: fusion doubling (an individual is generated by the fusion of two originally different individuals), fission doubling (the duplication or splitting of a single individual into two personifications where there was only one before), and metamorphosis doubling (an individual who transforms their identity and acquires a different personality from before) (Bargalló, 1994, p. 17).

Finally, Fusillo (1998) can also be mentioned as a relevant author in the search for possible definitions of the double. In his work, the researcher explores what he calls “double identity” through a meticulous study of literary themes such as the apparent double, the dream double, specular characters, complementary characters, and others. In this way, Fusillo aims for terminological precision (similar to Doležel’s approach) by stating that, within a single space-time context created by fiction, the double concerns the identity of a character that is duplicated: “one becomes two; the character, therefore, has two incarnations—two bodies that respond to the same identity and often the same name” (Fusillo, 1998, p. 8).

3.2 Psychoanalytical Lens on The Double

In the field of psychoanalysis, undoubtedly, there is a rich space for discussing the manifestations of the double, with reference to Rank’s work *The Double*, originally published in 1914. Interested in literature, anthropology, folklore, and mythology surrounding the theme, Rank provided a psychoanalytic interpretation of the double through the lens of narcissism, proposing that the duplication of the image (in various manifestations) is a form of projecting one’s own self-image. As stated by Rank, there is also a trace of death in this perspective that needs to be taken into account: the double, while creating fascination with the reflection of one’s own image, is responsible for Narcissus’s demise (Rank, 1976, p. 114-115).

Besides Rank, another reference in the study of the double within the realm of the psyche is Pélicier (1995), who constructs a typological classification based on the etiological filiation of the double. He determines the origin of the double through six categories: a) natural double (identical twin), b) physical phenomena as doubles (echo, shadow, mirror, footprint), c) manufactured doubles as simulacra (mannequin, photograph, portrait, silhouette), d) doubles created by a being (something created from another being, a monster, a creature), e) doubles as a result of transgression (borrowing, unilateral transfer, mutual exchange, migration or substitution of one’s soul and thoughts to another subject), and f) doubles as a result of transformation (metamorphosis

in various senses and other transformations related to or connected with death). The author's goal, apart from seeking precise definitions, is to discuss how clinical semiotics is influenced by literary references on the theme of the double, as discussed by Rank.

3.3 Philosophical Lens on The Double

From a philosophical perspective, Guiomar (1967) highlights the connections between death and the double, stating that to study the double, one must first understand that it is the fear of death and the futile attempt to escape an inevitable fate that motivates the desire to duplicate oneself, to project oneself beyond a singular and finite subject. Consequently, as the author emphasizes, it is through the imminence of death that we create an illusory vision of another self, which differs from the original subject that projects and duplicates itself (Guiomar, 1967, p. 407). Hence, he suggests the need to classify the existential constitution of the double through a triadic typology: physical double, psychic double, and emotional double. These categories, with their respective specificities, encompass prime, derivative, and generalized aspects that characterize the double. Hence, the author discusses that the prime aspects refer to physical resemblance (*doppelgänger*s, twins), psychic processes (which include, but are not limited to, apparitions and hallucinations of the psyche), and emotional processes (through the logic of recognizing oneself in the other, alterity). Derivative aspects, on the other hand, are related to physical phenomena (echo, reflections in water and mirrors, shadow, false memories, dreams, etc.). And finally, we have the double through generalized aspects projected onto elements such as trees, houses, animals, lights, flames, beings, and inanimate objects, etc.

In the realm of philosophy, Rosset (2008) is a significant reference for thinking about the double and its interrelation with illusion. According to Rosset, the presence of the double goes beyond being merely a mythological motif, a literary theme, or even processes that challenge psychological normality: the double, he states, “is present in an infinitely broader cultural space, namely, the space of all illusion” (Rosset, 2008, p. 24). For the philosopher, the phenomenon of the double can be understood through the illusion of oracles (the event and its double), metaphysical illusion (the world and its double), and psychological illusion (man and his double). When discussing illusion, Rosset (2008) addresses how individuals refuse to face reality, creating a form of voluntary blindness or denial of the concreteness of life and facts. As a result, through illusion, they “duplicate” reality as a paradoxical way of understanding a real event (undeniable from a factual perspective) that takes on different interpretive contours as if it were a distinct (illusory, distorted, oblique, unfolded) occurrence.

4. Methodological Procedures

Considering the specific objectives that guide this article, the methodological discussion encompasses three levels of analysis: the analysis of the empirical object, the analysis of the cultural context, and the analysis of the characters. In this regard, for the first two analytical stages, the theoretical framework and the observation of the series *Katla* are employed to explain its aesthetic and narrative elements, as well as to position it within a transitional universe between Nordic noir and post-Nordic noir. Similarly, using this same methodological approach, the discussion focuses on the predominant role that the theme of volcanism plays in the plot (something that extends from the work's title to the setting of the narrative, from the geomythological imagery in the cultural context to the justification for the emergence of doubles in this fiction).

At the third level of analysis, to examine how the theme of the double is manifested in *Katla* through the figure of changelings, the analytical focus shifts to the narrative construction and development of the work's characters. The reason for directing attention to the characters is justified because, as Reuter (2007, p. 41) points out, it is through them that actions are permitted, assumed, lived, interconnected, and ultimately give meaning to the narrative. Thus, at this analytical level, two methodological procedures are employed: the first is the procedure of approaching the empirical object (aimed at delineating, contextualizing, and characterizing the characters to be analyzed), and the second is the procedure of analytical scrutiny (aimed at thoroughly analyzing the previously delineated, contextualized, and characterized characters, based on the typologies of the double).

4.1 Criteria for Selecting Characters

Regarding the selection criteria for the main character under analysis, it is important to focus on identifying which characters specifically represent the unusual manifestation of the changelings throughout the entire series. To achieve this:

(a) In the initial phase of selection, following Lawrence's discussion (2010) and considering the order of appearance of the doubles of both living and deceased individuals, the characters Gunhild, Mikael, Ása, Magnea, and Gríma are recognized as the changelings in the series.

(b) In the subsequent phase of selection, Doležel's definition (1985, p. 464), supported by Fusillo (1998), is employed. It defines the double as "the two alternative incarnations of one and the same individual that coexist in a single fictional world". Therefore, the focus is on highlighting only

those characters who possess a double while they are alive and have a necessary interaction with it, namely Gríma, Gunhild, and Magnea.

(c) Lastly, in the final phase of selection, Gríma is chosen for a detailed analysis. This decision is based on the fact that the direct interactions between Gríma and her double have the most screen time in all five episodes of *Katla* compared to the doubles of Gunhild and Magnea. Consequently, Gríma and her double stand out in the differential procedures of the character system, which will be explained further.

4.2 Procedures for The Character Study (Categories of Narrative Characterization)

This approach involves utilizing narratological studies and adapting their applications to the context of serialized fictional discourse. As a starting point, Lawrence's definition (2010) of changelings and their exchange process is used to characterize Gríma's double as a changeling. Scholars such as Hamon (1983, p. 154-160) and Sepulchre (2011, p. 117-125) contribute to the discussion of differential procedures as a means of contextualizing a character system from a qualitative perspective. In Hamon's (1989) work, the discussion is centered on three differential procedures:

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- Differential distribution, which involves articulating character actions and existence to distinguish them from one another in terms of quantities and frequencies of character appearances and their interventions in strategic or non-strategic locations within the narrative.
- Differential autonomy, which combines character actions and existence based on how characters are interrelated. This means that the more important the character, the more they sometimes appear alone, but the more encounters they have with numerous other characters due to their power of action or role in the plot.
- Differential functionality, which focuses on character actions and considers their varying importance in the plot. This includes the character who carries out decisive actions, which will either lead to success or failure.

Bringing Hamon's discussions into audiovisual materiality, Sepulchre (2011, p. 118) highlights that "these differential procedures constitute an analytical framework applicable to stories, particularly television series." Her work suggests that the viewer will distinguish the main character from the secondary characters and extract elements of qualification (the portrayal of a character places the viewer within a horizon of expectation) and functionality (the actions of the character) based on the differential procedures. As a consequence, the discussions will cover the context unit

(scene sequence), register unit (screentime), and examined code (visual and sound dimensions). Finally, from Reuters' perspective, narrative analysis focuses on the nominal designator of characters (understanding the meaning behind a character's name) and the potential narrative effect associated with these designators, such as comedic effects, ideological effects, guiding of reading, and other possible effects (Table 1).

Table 1 – Character Study (Categories of Narrative Characterization)

Character Study (Categories of Narrative Characterization)			
Lawrence (2010)	Hamon (1983)	Sepulchre (2011)	Reuter (2007)
Characters/ Changelings:	Differential procedures (character system):	Differential procedures applied to serialized television fiction:	Narrative analysis (character designators):
- Gunhild and her changeling (double)	- Differential distribution	- Context unit (scene sequence)	- Nominal designator
- The process of exchange	- Differential autonomy	- Register unit (screen time)	- Narrative effect associated with the designator
	- Differential functionality	- Examined code (visual and sound dimensions)	
	- Qualitative perspective		

Source: Author's own work.

It is important to note that the procedures proposed by these authors serve as a flexible analytical framework for understanding the characters, rather than having strict rules that every character must strictly adhere to in the analysis.⁵

4.3 Procedures for The Analysis of the Double (Existential Constitution, Etiological Affiliation, and Ontological Relationships)

The focus of these procedures is on examining the selected character, Gríma, using insights from authors who have explored the concept of the double across literature, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Guiomar (1967), Pélicier (1995), Doležel (1985), and Bargalló (1994) are chosen for their unique typologies that contribute to the study of the double. These authors provide specific terminologies that enhance our understanding of the subject, as already explained in this work (Table 2).

⁵ This applies, for example, to the methodological choice of using only three out of the six differentiated procedures when studying the hierarchy of characters (Hamon 1983).

Table 2 – Analysis of the Double (Existential Constitution, Etiological Affiliation, and Ontological Relationships)

Study of the Double (Categories)			
Guiomar (1967)	Pélicier (1995)	Doležel (1985); Bargalló (1994)	Rosset (2008)
Existential constitution: - Physical Double - Psychic Double - Affective Double	Etiological affiliation: - Natural double - Double as a physical phenomenon - Double fabricated as a simulacrum - Double as the creation of a being - Double as a result of transgression - Double as a result of transformation	Ontological relationships: - Double as fusion - Double as fission - Double as metamorphosis - Double as an unfolding	A broader locus of interpretation: - Double as an illusion

Source: Author's own work.

Therefore, the analytical categories of existential constitution, etiological affiliation, and ontological relationships are employed to analyze the representations of the double in Gríma's narrative development throughout the series. These categories follow a *priori* coding approach, meaning they are predetermined based on existing theories, concepts, or research debates before analyzing the data. When applied beyond their original context, these codes guide the qualitative analysis of changelings in *Katla*. Additionally, Rosset (2008) is equally significant in this discussion, providing a theoretical backdrop for a broader interpretive framework that accommodates the existence of the double, which, according to the author, is permeated by illusion.

5. Analysis I: Empirical Object

5.1 *Katla*, The Series

Released as a work that blends drama, science fiction, and folklore elements within an aesthetic setting that traverses from typical Nordic noir elements to a more recent characterization of post-Nordic noir, the series *Katla* premiered on Netflix on June 17, 2021. From its production by RVK Studios to the original idea conceived by Baltasar Kormákur and Sigurjón Kjartansson, the eight-episode series was entirely crafted by Icelandic screenwriters and directors such as Davíð Már Stefánsson, Lilja Sigurðardóttir, Börkur Sigþórsson, Þóra Hilmarsdóttir, and the aforementioned Kormákur and Kjartansson. Set in Vík, a small town located in the southernmost part of Iceland, the narrative revolves around a community that continues to reside there despite the eruption of the

Katla volcano a year earlier and the subsequent sanitary, economic, and social effects it brought forth.

The central driving element of the plot is the appearance of a young woman completely covered in ash, who mysteriously emerges in the town with no explanation and claims to be familiar with the place and its inhabitants. It is later revealed that the young woman is named Gunhild and had worked in the town twenty years prior during an exchange program. The predicament arises when it becomes clear that the present-day Gunhild has aged and is living in Sweden with an established life and a son named Björn, while the young Gunhild seems to be stuck in time and is still involved in an affair with a man named Þór. Hence, two individuals with the same name, appearance, and identical life history, but with different ages, create the paradox of the existence of a double.

The concept of the double is contextualized within folklore when the mystical character Bergrún, owner of a hotel, suggests that those who mysteriously returned (or were duplicated) are actually beings replaced by changelings. This reframing of the double as a changeling becomes plausible as “the double motif is a device that assumes many incarnations [...]. More than a literary motif, the idea of the double is present in many mythical and religious narratives of Western culture” (França, 2009, p. 9-10).

It is worth noting that besides Gunhild, other important characters include Gríma (who works in seismic monitoring and experiences traumatic grief due to the loss of her sister Ása) and the volcanologist Darri (a researcher studying *Katla*, compelled to visit Vík and uncover the unsettling connections between the volcano and the appearance of doubles of both living and deceased individuals, such as his deceased son Mikael). While the narrative has a close-to-ensemble approach in handling characters like Ása, Þór, Gunhild, Darri, and Mikael, it is ultimately Gríma who emerges as the main character due to her significance in the story and direct or indirect involvement in all narrative threads.

5.2 The Aesthetic Shift from Nordic Noir to Post-Nordic Noir

In terms of the aesthetic-stylistic configuration of the empirical object, *Katla's* setting is grounded in the narrative logics of Nordic noir. As Hansen and Waade (2017, p. 5) assert, it can be said that the series finds its place within the boom of Nordic stories “[...] which have received unprecedented international attention in one way or another, whether through the adaptation of a novel, the remade version of a series, or even the assistance of the original version.” Consequently, these stories incorporate significant tropes, as Saló Benito (2019, p. 293) and Hansen and Waade (2017, p. 28-29) recall, and can also be observed in *Katla*. These tropes include multidimensional characters with profound psychological depth, individuals with obsessive, solitary, and

impenetrable personalities and interests, strong and complex women who act as determined and courageous protagonists (yet also disturbing), captivating investigative plots and mysteries (whether criminal or supernatural), and somber locations evoking isolated, gray, and cold spaces that bring the “local color” to the forefront of the screen, among others.

Katla, alongside productions such as *Trapped* (2015) and *The Valhalla Murders* (2019), represents the transformations of the Icelandic audiovisual media landscape⁶ through production and distribution partnerships between traditional channels and production companies in the country and the streaming service Netflix. As a result, apart from the dominance of the three main channels operating in the Icelandic market, Netflix has proven to be one of the most important platforms for showcasing Nordic noir to the world. Furthermore, having specific Icelandic series included among these productions allows for the highlighting of social and cultural differences discussed by Creeb (2015) and Gillis and Guðmundsdóttir (2020) within the distinct audiovisual practices of each country in the region.

From another analytical perspective, it is worth noting that authors such as Wicks and Kääpä (2022) perceive the show not as a production of Nordic noir but, conversely, locate it within an emerging aesthetic they prefer to call the “post-Nordic noir” framework. In this regard, Wicks and Kääpä (2022, p. 6) explain that *Katla*, alongside other works (especially the *Norwegian Twin* (2019) and the *Finnish Man in Room 301* (2019)), diverges from narratives primarily associated with police procedurals and crime dramas, which are foundational to Nordic noir. Instead, *Katla* exhibits characteristics of other genres, such as science fiction. In a kind of preservation of the more traditional elements of Nordic noir and the adoption of other characteristics that were previously not part of the established canon, the series culturally encompasses what the authors refer to as a “sense of place” within the Post-Nordic Noir. Thus, when the authors speak of a sense of place, they are not only referring to the distinctive characteristics of a setting but also to the dimensions that shape individuals’ “identity in relation to the physical environment of place” (Proshansky, 1978, as cited in Wicks and Kääpä, 2022, p. 4). They further explain, “The grey, brutal landscape, covered in ash is a main driver of the story as all the strange happenings are explained through the Icelandic volcanic landscape (that also serve as the roots of many indigenous myths and stories that the show mines)” (Wicks and Kääpä, 2022, p. 6-7).

6. Analysis II – Cultural Context

⁶ According to Saló Benito (2019, p. 233), the main channels operating in the Icelandic TV market are the public broadcaster Sjónvarpið (RÚV-TV) and the private broadcasters Stöð 2 and Skjár 1.

6.1 Volcanoes and The Geomythological Imaginary in Iceland

Regarding the sociocultural relevance and the role of the Katla volcano in the series' plot, it is necessary to delve into the geomythological field to understand how Icelandic society has coexisted with volcanoes throughout its historical and anthropological development, from the period of settlement to the present day. Even in ancient Norse mythology, particularly in the literary records of the Edda (a collection of mythological texts in prose and poetry from the 13th century), there is a cosmology that addresses volcanism as part of everyday life without a clear separation between nature and humans (Nordal, 1990; Nordvig, 2021). From a geomythological perspective, the geological and topographical observations of the environment need to be taken into account in the formation of myths, legends, and folklore of a place because “this mythical pattern is a cosmology: a system that gives meaning to the social and physical world,” explains Nordvig (2021, p. 1).

On a deeper level, volcanoes have traditionally represented the national image of Iceland, as can be seen in official postage stamps circulating in the country since the post-independence period in 1918 (Oslund, 2011, p. 54). In the case of Katla, one of the most active volcanoes in Icelandic history, the relationship that people have with it in contemporary times is also imbued with superstition: “It has been observed that modern Icelanders living near the Katla volcano employ a mixture of myth and legend, but also taboo, in their perception of risk associated with the location and possible eruptions” (Jóhannesdóttir and Gísladóttir, 2010, as cited in Nordvig, 2015, p. 76).

To grasp the sociocultural significance of volcanoes in the country, it is worth mentioning that Katla and Hekla (another important volcano) are used as female names for children (Torfing 2015). This carries great weight in a country that imposes strict rules on naming practices and has state control over the list of officially accepted names by the National Registry of Iceland (Þjóðskrá Íslands), through a committee that has regulated names since 1991. In other words, “Icelandic culture has become familiar with volcanoes and, in a way, has even befriended them” (Torfing, 2015, p. 92).

As stated by Reuter (2007, p. 52-53), the functional importance of space brings elements that demonstrate that it is much more than a simple frame for the story. In *Katla*, space produces a sense of realism and a sense of reality (conveying verisimilitude), provides thematic and generic orientation (especially regarding the mystery of noir), marks stages in the characters' lives and actions (such as demarcating a before and after the eruption), and structures the groups of characters (directly or indirectly linked to the volcano), among other functions. Katla actively propels the narrative forward by catalyzing the origin of the doubles, thereby directly shaping the development of the series' dramatic arc.

Even the ashes of the volcano (a direct result of the eruption that changed the fate of the small town and its residents) serve as a metaphorical way to discuss how the environment is permeated by toxicity. Not only in a literal sense but also in the form of familial and interpersonal issues among the characters and their doubles. In this regard, the almost suffocating atmosphere and the absence of clearer natural light set the tone of the narrative. Therefore, in bringing geomythology back into the discussion, Katla (both within and outside the fiction) acquires a unique narrative agency in the sociocultural formation of the nation, as “even today, modern Icelanders tend to personify the Katla volcano when asked about it” (Jóhannesdóttir and Gísladóttir, 2010, as cited in Nordvig, 2015, p. 99).

7. Analysis III: Selected Character

7.1 Gríma and Her Changeling: Narrative Characterization

The changelings in the narrative of *Katla* are distributed through the characters Gunhild, Mikael, Ása, Magnea, and Gríma, as mentioned earlier. However, it can be understood that only three of these characters fit Doležel (1985) and Fusillo's (1998) definition concerning the necessity for the double to coexist with the “raw material” from which they originated or unfolded (Bargalló, 1994). Therefore, the characters Gunhild, Magnea, and Gríma stand out as they directly face the atypical situation of having to coexist with their changelings (doubles) while still being alive⁷. Nevertheless, given the frequency of appearance, direct interactions, and narrative importance that the character Gríma and her double have from the beginning to the end of the plot, it is on them that this final analysis focuses⁸. In this sense, the process of exchange, as discussed by Lawrence (2010), becomes highly relevant in the character's narrative arc. Not only does it initiate the main conflict in Gríma's life, but the extraordinary nature of two identical people living together because of the exchange propels the theme of changelings from the realm of “ancient legends” to a contemporary and ordinary daily life in the Icelandic city of Vík.

⁷ In the narrative, when the doubles of Mikael and Ása appear, the “original” characters are already deceased in the “real” life (the former, apparently, due to a suicide and the latter due to hypothermia). Therefore, in the case of these characters, the key to understanding the interplay between the double, desire, and illusion seems to be more directed towards the concept of mourning – something that will not be discussed in this specific article.

⁸ Although Gunhild is an important secondary character in the narrative (especially in terms of her dramatic and narrative function, as stated by Couégnas (2006)), her and her double's screen time is very short when compared to Gríma. The six direct interactions between Gunhild and her double occur as early as episode 2 and extend to episodes 3, 4, and 5. On the other hand, Magnea and her double have only five direct interactions in episodes 6 and 8 (the double appears healthy and full of life precisely when the original version of Magnea is ill, bedridden, almost in a vegetative state, under the care of her husband Gísli).

From a qualitative perspective of analysis, Gram's position in the Katla plot is also evident as the main character, meaning that in terms of differential functionality, her presence is regular, relevant, and serves as a motivation for conflicts in the narrative (Hamon, 1983). More than that, her functionality is also aligned with the register units (explained further ahead), as her presence is evident and significant in all episodes (even before the appearance of its double). Consequently, in terms of differential distribution and differential autonomy (Hamon, 1983), the character simultaneously has a high frequency of appearances in scene sequences and considerable autonomy in interacting with other characters and moving across various narrative plots. In other words, she regularly moves across different narrative scenarios through her relationships with Gríma (her changeling), Gunhild (both original and changeling characters), Þór (father), Ása (sister), Kjartan (husband), Darri (the scientist), Gísli (the police officer), amongst others. In other words, Gríma's scope of movement extends across virtually all narrative plots, beyond her own as the main character, affecting the lives of other characters to varying degrees.

Following Sepulchre's (2011) discussions, Gríma and her changeling are analyzed within the context unit of scene sequences in which both the double and the "original" appear, encompassing a significant portion from episode 5 to 8. In terms of temporal register units, the screen time of both the double and the "original" character amounts to approximately eleven direct interactions throughout the narrative (one interaction in episode 5, four others in episode 6, two in episode 7, and four in episode 8). Concerning the examined code, the visual dimension evokes the idea of proximity and separation between the two characters through the characterization (clothing, makeup, hair, and even physical posture) of the original Gríma and her double, a happier and vivid woman (Fig. 1). As for the sound dimension, the characters' voices are slightly modified aiming to convey a sense of gentleness and youthful aspect to the double, in contrast to the distant, cold, and even sad voice of the "real" Gríma, which somehow reflects the challenges and traumas the character has endured over many years.

Figure 1: Gríma e her changeling at home.



Source: © *Katla* (2021), Netflix.

Furthermore, Reuter (2007, p. 101-102) explains that even the names by which the characters are presented in the narratives function as an element he calls a “nominal designator,” which in this case, serves the purpose of referring the character to a specific “geographical-cultural area.” “Above all, it ‘gives life’ to the character. Like in real life, it establishes their identity. [...] Every mention of their name is equivalent to recalling their set of characteristics” (Reuter, 2007, p. 102). Thus, as previously mentioned, in an Icelandic cultural context where the names given to individuals are taken so seriously that there is federal legislation and strict control on the matter, the decision to name Gríma cannot be interpreted as a random choice⁹. Instead, it can be seen as a motivation for characterizing her as someone who embodies the representation of the double through two main interpretations. The first interpretation is connected to the ambiguity of the name concerns its Old Norse origin variant of “Grímr,” directly connected to the Icelandic word for “mask” (Peterson, 2004, p. 2007). Following the discussions brought by Lopondo and Ruiz Alvarez (2013) and Belting (2017), the symbiotic relationships between the theme of the double and the mask are extensively documented in references that range from cultural and religious rituals and ceremonies to the earliest forms of theater and literary works from various periods and schools. The second interpretation is related to the dual use of her name, following the Icelandic official name

⁹ Pertaining to the geographic-cultural aspect, it is possible to observe that the name Gríma is predominantly used in the Icelandic context, according to the statistical information provided by the “Hagstofa Íslands” (National Statistics Office of Iceland) and compiled on the website “Nordic Names” (<https://www.nordicnames.de>). Furthermore, the name Gríma (along with Kjartan, for instance) is also part of the literary heritage of the country, as a character name found in the Icelandic work “Laxdæla saga,” written around the second half of the 13th century.

registration service (“Þjóðskrá”), which states that “Gríma” is a name that can be given to both men and women (<https://island.is/leit-i-mannanafnaskra>). Therefore, following Reuter’s discussion on the narrative effects associated with the designators, we propose that the name Gríma may fit into a duality effect; that is, it suggests both a sense of mystery and duplicity inherent in the character’s identity (consequently extending the effect to her changeling as well).

7.2 Existential Constitution, Etiological Affiliation, and Ontological Relationships: The Double as Desire and Illusion

Building upon Guiomar’s insights (1967), Gríma’s changeling fits into the category of a physical double since its presence is clearly felt and acknowledged in the protagonist’s real-life experiences, as well as in the lives of other characters who interact with her (the double), albeit unknowingly dealing with a changeling. Equally significant, concerning the fundamental aspects of the physical double as discussed by the author, it’s fair to say that Gríma’s changeling aligns with the concept of a double that is unmistakably recognized through complete physical resemblance, essentially functioning as a genuine doppelgänger of the character.

Moreover, in terms of etiological affiliation (Pélicier, 1995), there’s a juxtaposition of meanings that shape Gríma’s changeling existence as a double that moves between two typologies, namely: (1) The changeling fits into the double category as a creation of a being by means that not always can be considered natural (in this instance, the volcano, as elaborated upon later in the analysis), and (2) It can also be interpreted as part of the double category resulting from a transformation of character into another which ties into the idea of a double as a metamorphosis, a notion to be further explored concerning ontological relationships. Within Pélicier’s framework, it’s noteworthy that the relationship between the double and its original often entails discomfort, conflict, and disturbance. Furthermore, Gríma’s changeling relationship with Gríma aligns with what Pélicier (1995) terms a “*syngnosique* relationship,”¹⁰ indicating that the knowledge of one exists in the consciousness of the other, albeit utilized differently by the double (Lama, 2004) – a dynamic exemplified by the character’s changeling successfully winning back Gríma’s husband with a demeanor contrasting her current and persistent lingering sorrow and life’s hardships.

When it comes to ontological relationships, Gríma’s changeling presents itself as a metamorphic double (Doležel, 1985), that is, an individual who transforms their identity and

¹⁰ “The French term without translation. Syn = an element meaning ‘together’ and indicating the idea of gathering, of community, in a space or time, and gnose = knowledge” (Lamas, 2004, p. 62). Following the approximate translation from French to Portuguese by Lamas (2004), it could be said that the term, without a literal translation into English, could be understood as “syngnosic”.

acquires a personality different from what they had before (in this case, the double is more vivid, light, and happy – not necessarily reviving the memories of mourning that robbed Gríma of joy after the loss of her sister Asa). Similarly, the double here also transitions from being a result of transformation discussed by Pelicier since the issue of death permeates Gríma's narrative in at least three senses: the mother's suicide, the sister's death by hypothermia, and the suicide of the sister's changeling (which also emerges later in the narrative) in the same sea where their mother took her own life. Equally important, Gríma's double fits perfectly into the idea of double as unfolding (Bargalló, 1994) because the double and its original coexist inherently, having physical and verbal interactions in the narrative's diegetic plane. Furthermore, following the author, the double as unfolding is identical (in all possible physical representations) to Gríma: "For the resulting form to be considered an unfolding of the original, we understand that it must take on the 'human form,' even if it manifests through a 'non-human entity' (Bargalló, 1994, p. 17)."

Finally, to explain the origin of Gríma's double (and of other character's changelings in general), one must turn to the last episode of the series in which, as the volcanologist Darrin tries to explain, there is something (possibly a residual element of a very old comet) in the structure of the volcano that possibly ties to the feelings of the people who live there (especially connected to the desires and illusions of its inhabitants for past emotional relationships), causing the doubles to emerge in the plot. Thus, it was the desire of Þór to reestablish the previous (and adulterous) emotional life with Gunhild that led the volcano to understand the need to create, in its ominous interior, the changeling of the Swedish woman, for example. The same applies to Magnea's changeling, which is brought to light by her Gísli's desire to resume a normal (including sexual) life with his wife in a version that resembles her before she suffered from the degenerative disease caused by the eruption of the volcano one year ago. In this way, it is understood that Kjartan, Gríma's husband, misses his woman's "happy version" and realizes that little by little he no longer recognizes her. The mourning and pain-marked Gríma is not the young woman he desires. His desire – including sexual desire – prompts the volcano to understand the need to create a changeling of Gríma who behaves just as Gríma did before the loss of her sister: a young and beautiful woman who dresses well, who lets her hair down, who has libido, and who even renovates their own house to keep it youthful and light (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Gríma (seated), her changeling, and “their” husband, Kjartan.



Source: © *Katla* (2021), Netflix.

But beyond desire, what Gríma's changeling (and by extension, the other changelings in the narrative) ends up expressing is the denial of life's stark reality by humanity. That is, here enters directly what Rosset (2008) explains about the double as an explicit manifestation of the illusion experienced by the people. Thus, even though permeated by a fictional mark (and bridged between science fiction, post- and Nordic noir, and folklore¹¹), the changelings represent the double as the desire of people who, not knowing how to deal with the reality they face (be it through denial of mourning, loss of past emotional lives, or even companions who do not behave as before), end up becoming the materialization of this same people's illusion. In other words, in *Katla*, it is the refusal of reality that prompts (primarily in people and secondarily in the volcano) the need to create changelings to alleviate, even if delusional, human suffering and life's hardships.

Finally, as the narrative hints in the last episode, Gríma's changeling ends up committing suicide in a complex game of Russian roulette between the original character and her double, which, through deliberately confusing camera angles and movements, creates an atmosphere of doubt and tension about who will ultimately die (Fig. 3).

¹¹ Important to note is how the theme of changelings as doubles is reinvigorated in *Katla*'s narrative through science fiction (SF) and folklore. This observation aligns well with the reflection brought by Lawrence (2010, p. ii) when the author explains in his thesis how modern SF continually employs elements of Western European folk narrative to explore subaltern and subterranean culture - meaning, both the politically disenfranchised and biologically deformed figures who threaten to emerge from their underground lairs (caverns, cellar dwellings, laboratories, industrial underworlds) and infiltrate the most cherished institutions of the upper world." In the recontextualization of the changeling motif, displacing fairies, it is the amalgamation of the volcano and its metaphysical capacities that governs the genesis and substitution of changelings.

Figure 3: Gríma and her changeling at their final confrontation during a Russian roulette.



Source: © *Katla* (2021), Netflix.

The death of Gríma's double seems to encapsulate what Doležel (1985, p. 469) states: "It is no coincidence that 'double stories' so often end with a murder that is also a suicide." The double's suicide is confirmation that not even the deepest desires can sustain the illusion of a life untouched by the contradictions and brutality of reality. Furthermore: "Despite being an extension of the subject, even when fully and positively identified with it, the double does not abandon its condition as a simulacrum, a mere shadow, since it has no value in itself, but only that which its model provides it." (França, 2009, p. 8). To put it differently, no illusion can surpass (or replace) the suffering that inevitably not only accompanies reality but also shapes it.

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8. Conclusion

Returning to the initial question that guided this article, the theme of the double is depicted in the series *Katla* through the folkloric figure of changelings, with the main character Gríma serving as an illustrative case that exemplifies the findings of the reflection. Thus, it can be said that the double in the work in question arises from the confluence of two levels, which we can refer to as the level of form and the level of content (or thematic level).

On the level of form, it can be asserted that: (1) The double is depicted as a physical double with primary aspects that constitute a literal physical identification between the original being and the duplicated being (existential constitution), (2) The double is represented as one that transitions through the creation of a being into the double as a result of a transformation (etiological affiliation),

and (3) The double is represented as a being that is configured through metamorphosis and, consequently, as a result of an unfolding in which the double coexists and interacts physically, visually, and verbally with the “normal human” from which it unfolded in the same narrative plane (ontological relationships).

On the level of content (thematic level), supporting the hypothesis introduced at the outset of the study, it becomes apparent that the concept of the double emerges within the narrative as a manifestation of desire and illusion, serving to materialize the losses, traumas, and emotional burdens experienced by the inhabitants or even visitors of Vík. This phenomenon is intricately linked to their metaphysical connection with the volcano Katla, which, in a symbolic manner, gives rise to changelings of their cherished ones, both living and deceased, offering a distorted solace to those grappling with the harshness of reality.

Methodologically, especially in terms of character portrayal, the interaction between narratological studies and the realm of television series is highly productive for selecting characters and understanding their various dimensions within the narrative, such as distribution, autonomy, functionality, and nominal designator, among other elements. Still within the analytical process, it can be argued that this Icelandic series stands out as a unique work in its use of narrative space. Drawing from Nordic noir or post-noir aesthetics, particularly emphasizing the notion of a sense of place, the volcano shapes the conflicts of the characters (and their changelings). Equally significant is the geomythological approach, where Katla emerges as an active character within the sociocultural landscape of the plot, rather than just a geographical location.

Finally, as a limitation of the research (and thus, opening new avenues of inquiry), it is essential to recognize the significant role of mourning and death, alongside the trauma of loss, as influential forces in shaping the aesthetic and narrative construction of the double in *Katla*. In other words, examining characters like the changelings of Ása and Mikael (and their connections with the grieving and traumatized family members) could offer new insights into how these beings are linked to the desire to reclaim past emotional lives and the illusion of participating in a generative simulacrum of the double.

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