The films of Guillermo del Toro abound in monsters, and the cinematic monster is a question of matter out of place. Monsters in literary, cinematic, and media texts are those creatures that on one level repel us, and they do so precisely because their physical existence defies our expectations of normality in ways that offend us. They ingest or expel substances that we find revolting; they look peculiar and misshapen. Many monsters appear humanoid, which underscores the notion of matter out of place still further, as we have ourselves as a so-called normal template for comparison. These monsters look like us except for the fact that matter is out of place: they drink blood, their flesh rots, their faces are misshapen, they become unnaturally hairy. Jasia Reichhardt argues, “Only a human being or a humanoid can be a true monster. No monstrous cupboard, chair, plant or teapot could engender real fear, horror and fascination all at once. The essential condition for a monster is that the human characteristics it possesses must not be changed too far” (1994, 139). Reichhardt’s position is highly debatable (to give just one example, the possessed chair of The Changeling (Peter Medak 1980) certainly unnerved me); but I would agree with her to the extent that humanoid monsters fascinate us far more than any other kind precisely because they resemble us to some degree. I would also suggest that this arises because humanoid monsters possess a subjectivity akin to our own: it is harder to argue for the subjectivity of a teapot (though not necessarily impossible). Even
within this comparatively narrow categorization of the monster, del Toro provides a fair range of examples, many of which are humanoid, such as the vampire of Cronos, the eponymous lead of the Hellboy films and some of his opponents (such as the forest elemental of Hellboy II: The Golden Army), the ghost of El espinazo del diablo/The Devil’s Backbone, and the Faun and the Pale Man of El laberinto del fauno/Pan’s Labyrinth.

If the monster repels us because of its peculiar, misshapen, or revolting body, we have theories to account for this revulsion and fear. One of the best known is Mary Douglas’s notion of purity and danger, the mechanisms whereby society attempts to keep itself clean and pure. Peter Hutchings comments that, from the point of view of Douglas’s theories, “the horror-monster is a kind of pollutant; it embodies a crossing of borders and a transgressive mixing of categories” (2004, 35), and he goes on to quote Noel Carroll, saying that monsters “are un-natural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme: they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge . . . Monsters are in a certain sense challenges to the foundations of a culture’s way of thinking” (Hutchings, 2004, 35). In all this, there exists the concept of cleansing a society of impure things; the monster comes to function as a sort of scapegoat, taking on all the impurities that society needs to cast out and then being sacrificed, killed in often ritual ways, so that the impurities are destroyed along with the monster. The monster takes on matter out of place that is subsequently and consequently cleansed.

Following on from these ideas, the well-known abjection theory of Julia Kristeva considers the disgust and yet the fascination we experience with the repellent liquids and substances that breach bodily boundaries: urine, feces, vomit, blood, and semen. As Hutchings notes, the abject is not simply “that which is disgusting, and which threatens identity. The abject also offers a source of fascination and desire, seductively drawing our attention to the limits of our selfhood even as we seek to distance ourselves from that experience” (2004, 36). Again, we are dealing with matter out of place, substances that are and yet are not a part of us: we require them for our bodily survival and maintenance, and yet part of that very maintenance is expelling these substances from our bodies. Following Hutchings, we can note that the fascination as well as the disgust with these substances is another reason why we like to have monsters in films: creatures that are deeply connected to the abject, out of place but compelling precisely because they are out of place.