

The fictional world of *Monsters Inc.* (Pixar, 2001) in 3 stages and 3 diagrams

Stage 1

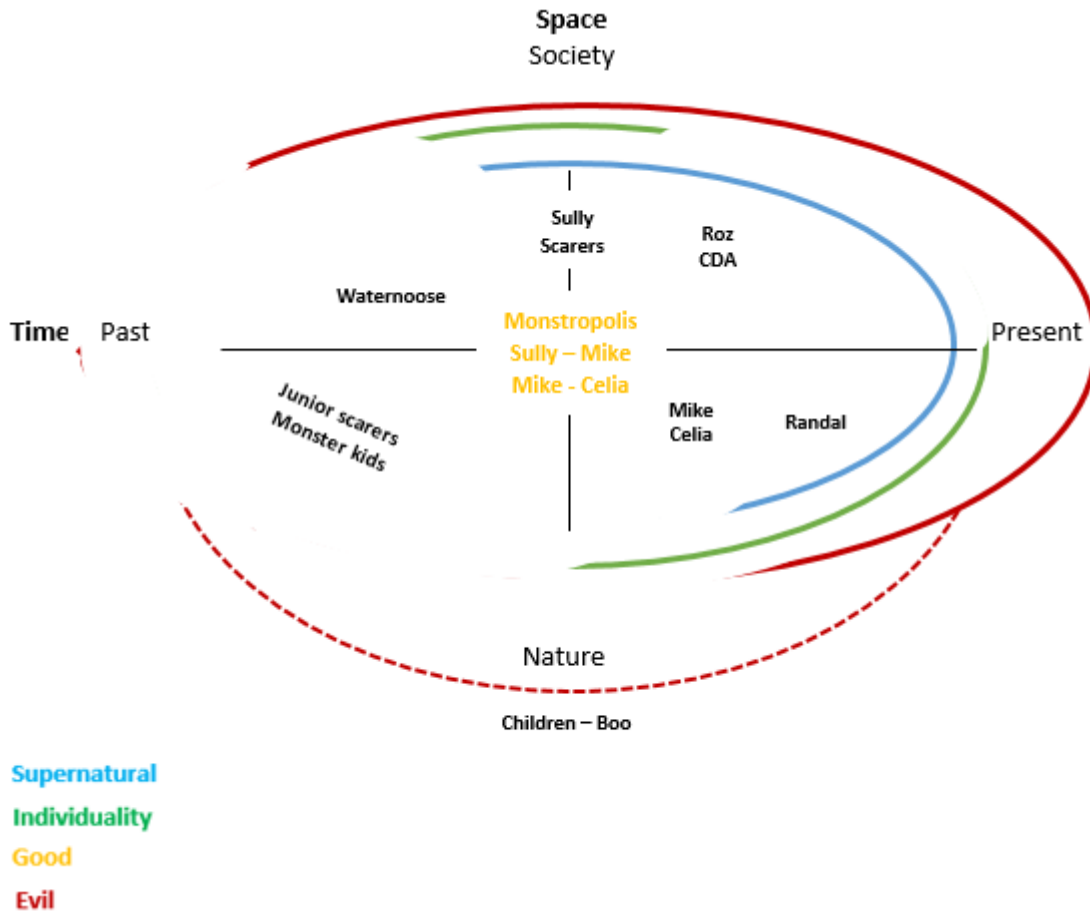


Figure 1

Like *Toy Story* or, more recently, *The Good Dinosaur*, *Monsters Inc.* is a different movie because its world is viewed from the perspective of the non-human 'other', in this case monsters. The setting of the movie is the city named Monstropolis. It functions as a parallel universe or, rather, an alternative reality to the human world, and the contact between the monster and the human world is established through doors, specifically the closet doors in children's rooms. At the beginning of the movie, the monster world is presented to the viewers as the real one and the human world is the 'supernatural' world filled with dangerous children.

As we can see in the diagram, semantic oppositions are clearly presented from the beginning of the movie. On the one hand, there is the happy world where all the monsters live in peace and harmony regardless of their shape and size. On the other hand, their lifestyle is being threatened by energy

shortage. Energy is obtained by crossing to the human world and extracting screams from children, as screams are the only energy source monsters know. However, at the same time humans are deemed to be toxic and so present a threat to the monster world. This is indicated by the position of children in 'impossibility' – the bottom part of the diagram – severed from reality.

The vertical axis of the diagram creates another separation, this time between the past and the present within the space of the monster society. The energy crisis seems to be causing trouble to the company Monsters Inc., responsible for the energy supply, and to its boss, Mr. Waterhouse. Mr. Waterhouse wants to see the factory running as it did when it belonged to his father and his grandfather before him, following the motto "We scare because we care". His adherence to the past indicates that he is a traditionalist, but his (past) world is decomposing, thus threatening his mode of existence.

In the diagram, the CDA (Child Detection Agency) acts as the counterpart of Mr. Waterhouse. It works like an internal 'army' or 'secret service', keeping Monstropolis safe and functional from inside, with the appearance of the US armed force or the FBI. Terribly high-tech, effective and anonymous – we cannot see the faces of its members – the agency represents institutionalism. The agency also seems to have unlimited authority, which confers on it a supernatural element. Its activities upset Mr. Waterhouse, as they endanger his company and his traditionalist outlook. However, at the same time the CDA promotes the belief in human toxicity, which is also part of Mr. Waterhouse's traditional view.

In between the CDA and Mr. Waterhouse is the main character of the movie, Sully. There are various reasons why he is placed there. First, Mr. Waterhouse has a fatherly bond with Sully and sees him as his best worker. Sully looks up to Mr. Waterhouse – "I've learned from the best", Sully says to him – and tries to please him as a son would. At the same time, Sully lives for the company, thus playing by the rules of traditionalism. It could be said that there is a certain innocence in Sully's behaviour – the ideal citizen who believes in the authorities and doesn't question them. At the same time, society recognizes Sully as a superhero, for he is an excellent scarer, in fact the best, which brings him close to individuality and the supernatural. However, Sully has no interest in being in the limelight and keeps to himself. The fact that Sully's fellow monsters feel admiration for him to the point of awe also means that they pay him respect, but also that they do not become his friends. To highlight their difference with Sully, many fellow monsters and the company's junior scarers, trainees who are learning to become proper scarers, are portrayed in primitivist terms, naïve, childish and incompetent.

The most important secondary characters in the movie are Sully's friend and his enemy, located together in the bottom right hand corner of the diagram. Mike is Sully's only friend. They both share

an apartment and through Mike Sully socializes with the rest of Monstropolis. The affective bond between the two is strong and exists from the beginning of the movie. Unlike Sully, who has no other plans after work than train to become a better scarer, Mike is more extroverted and in love with Celia – a receptionist at Monsters Inc. Both Mike and Celia could be classified as emotivists, as they are interested in all the good things life offers, such as Mike’s car or a good meal in an expensive restaurant. The other important secondary character is Sully’s main enemy and antagonist Randall. Randall is the second best scarer in the factory. As opposed to Sully, he seems to gain his place in society through trickery and lies. His social position is very important to him and determines his life, but he is very selfish, wherefore he appears to the audience as an individualist and emotivist. He feels continuously threatened by Sully and his position resembles that of the overshadowed younger son to whom his putative father – Mr. Waternoose – does not pay attention.

Stage 2

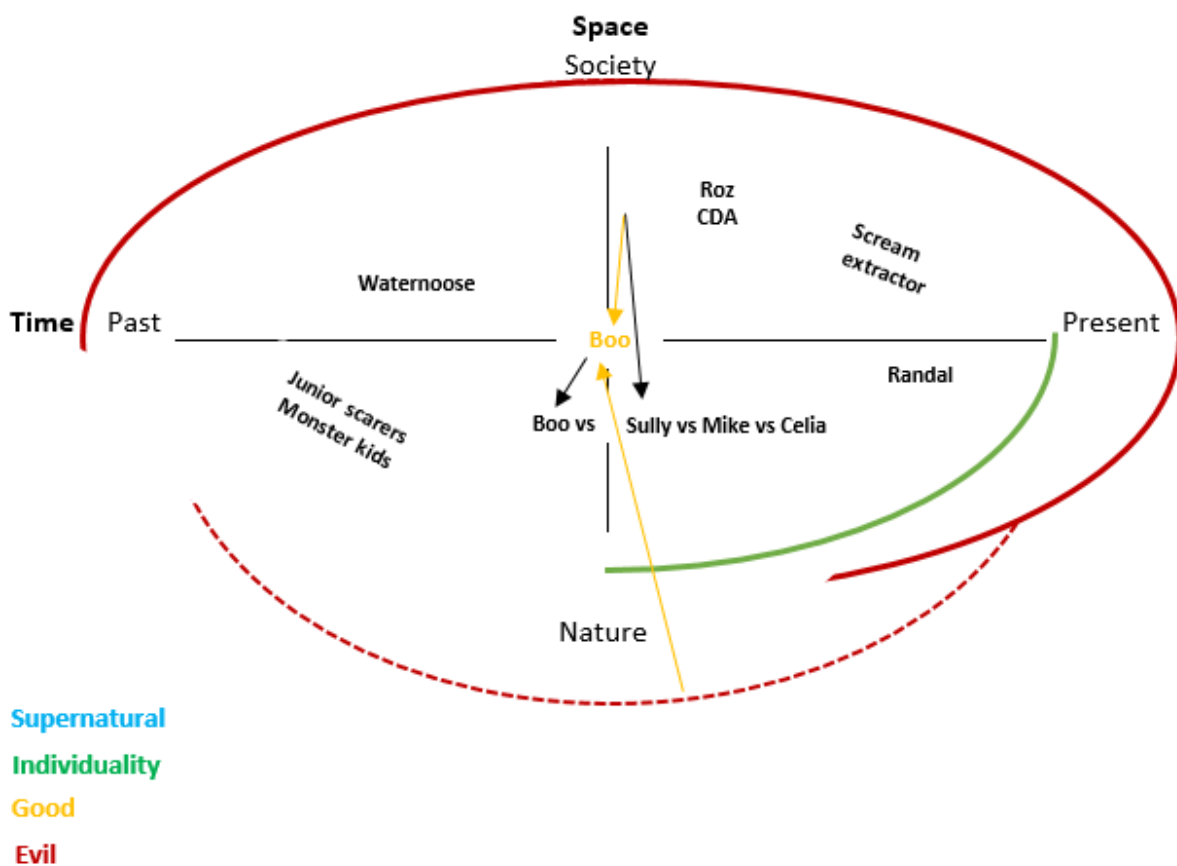


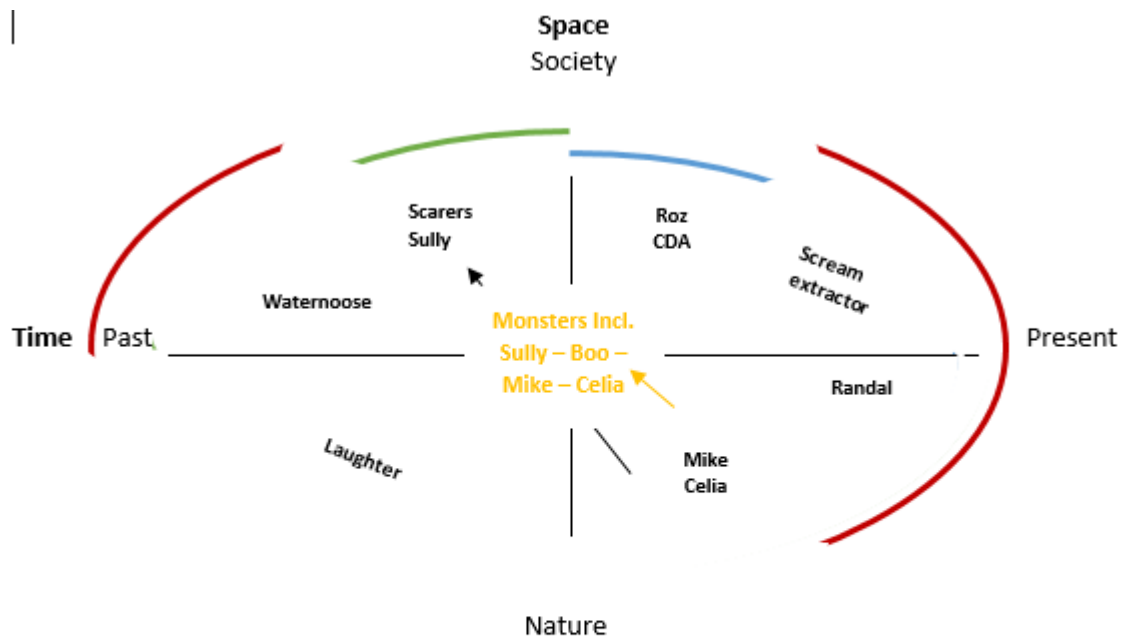
Figure 2

Semantic shifts in stage 2 start with the unexpected appearance of Boo, the human child, in the monster world. Feared by everybody else, Sully soon discovers that she is not toxic, and instead in need of affection. This changes Sully's and the audience's perception of Boo's semantic position: she moves from impossibility into reality and within it towards the very center, the affective bond. Responding to this change, Sully also moves towards the affective bond. Sully's newfound position in turn moves him towards emotivism, for to protect Boo he has to initiate independent, socially non-conforming action. The relation between the affective bond and emotivism signals a deeper convergence between affection and truth, for Sully's new love for Boo makes him aware of what is really happening.

One effect of Sully's semantic is to distance him from Mike and Mr. Waterhouse: Sully starts not heeding Mike's advice, and Mike dislikes Boo from the beginning, as he senses she is going to disrupt his safe world. The emotional distance between Mike and Sully also has a domino effect on Mike's relationship with Celia. Mike and Celia's long-awaited dinner in the exclusive sushi restaurant turns into a nightmare when Boo appears, and with Mike trying to hide her to cover up for Sully, Celia breaks up with Mike. Sully's new affective bond thus destroys previous bonds.

As to Mr. Waterhouse, Sully and Mike discover by accident that Mr. Waterhouse and Randall are developing a scream extractor, a machine invented in order to optimize the much-needed extraction of energy for the survival of Monstropolis. However, the scream extractor would also make Randall rich and save Mr. Waterhouse's company. Worst of all, extraction is done by force, saps its victims of their energy, and thus lacks all moral justification. Mr. Waterhouse thus shows he is ready to do anything rather than lose his family inheritance. His traditionalism is thus supported by institutionalism of the worst kind in the form of financial gain.

Stage 3



Supernatural
Individuality
Good
Evil

Figure 3

The last stage sees the re-establishment of affective bonds but with different configurations. Mike's broken bond with Sully is restored when Mike returns from the Himalayas – the land of the Abominable Snowman – where both he and Sully had ended up as punishment for finding out about the scream extractor. Mike finally bonds with Boo, although his bond is presided by tolerance rather than affection, and his acceptance of Boo restores his friendship with Sully. The last broken bond, that between Mike and Celia, is also restored when Celia accidentally finds out about Boo's real situation and starts helping our heroes.

Sully, Mike and Celia now fight together against Randall, Mr. Watermoose and his scream extractor. Sully and Mike trick Mr. Watermoose into revealing his plans to the CDA. The audience finds out that the head of the CDA is Roz, a grumpy administrator at Monsters Inc., who has been harbouring suspicion all along. This creates an atmosphere of observation reminiscent of Orwell's Big Brother, reinforced by the prohibition to talk about what has happened. The CDA is confirmed in its

institutionalist role, and while guarding a free world, it also remains a menacing presence, and in doing so pushes against the borders of the supernatural.

Leadership in Monsters Inc. undergoes big changes, as Mr. Waternoose is jailed and thus the traditionalist paternalistic figure of the movie is lost. This leads to the biggest semantic shift of stage 3: as we can see in the diagram, Sully takes over Mr. Waternoose's place and becomes that new paternalistic figure, thus visually replacing Mr. Waternoose in the diagram. However, even though he now wears a tie, Sully differs crucially from Mr. Waternoose in that he resorts to ecological rather than toxic or violent means to achieve his end. For laughter turns out to be ten times more effective in generating energy than fear. Already at the very beginning of the movie, Boo's laughter had turned on the lights in Sully's neighbourhood. Laughter proves a sustainable source of natural and ecological energy, alethic in nature, whereas screams are oriented towards the deontic area of the diagram. Thus Sully maintains a vital contact with the alethic part of the diagram.

The last stage sees the fusion of the two worlds – the 'toxic' human world and the monsters' universe. Except for the CDA, the supernatural has disappeared from the diagram, for the monster world is in no need of heroes or frightful beings, whether human or otherwise. Sully's affective bond with Boo has achieved what Mr. Waternoose and Randall couldn't: secure the future of the company in sustainable ways, save the monster world, keep children happy, and empower the monsters which are not scary by turning them into entertainers. By this means the two worlds become harmonically fused.