At the Toronto International Film Festival, horror fans usually set their sights on the popular Midnight Madness program, but there is another showcase that covers all things dark and strange: the Vanguard section, or as programmer Colin Geddes likes to call it, “Midnight Madness’ smarter older sister.” One such sibling in this year’s lineup is Juan Carlos Medina’s allegorical horror-thriller PAINLESS (known as INSENSIBLES internationally). Set in Spain, the film follows two parallel storylines—one contemporary, and one taking place during the Spanish Civil War.

Written by Medina and [REC]’s Luiso Berdejo and gorgeously shot by Alejandro Martínez, PAINLESS, despite its grim subject matter, is gorgeous to behold. The filmmakers understand that that there can be beauty in horror, and the film’s lighting and composition are breathtaking from end to end. The story starts in 1931, where we meet up with a group of children who are impervious to any type of physical pain. Being kids, they like to test their limits and basically be gross, so they get in the habit of setting themselves on fire, eating their own flesh and pulling off each other’s fingernails for giggles. This behavior seriously spooks the local townsfolk, so the local doctor and nuns lock up the children permanently in straitjackets in a sanatorium.

A few years later, a prominent Jewish doctor (Derek de Lint) on the run from the Nazis joins the kids and tries to help them cope and understand pain. Time runs out, though, and the hospital turns into a staging ground for communists and then the fascists. The only boy to survive the

war is trapped like an animal, and is found years later by the fascist soldiers. He is renamed Berkano (Tómas Lemarquis, also seen in this year’s ERRORS OF THE HUMAN BODY) and becomes their chief torturer for the prison. These flashbacks are told in conjunction with a present-day story of man trying to find out who his birth parents are so he can get a life-saving bone marrow transplant.

PAINLESS’ story is similar in structure to THE GODFATHER PART II; it’s not so much told with flashbacks as via parallel storylines. And much like with Francis Coppola’s film, it is debatable whether this approach works or not. On one hand, the modern story does give you a breather from the intensity of the past events, but the switching to the present and then back again makes it hard to get too emotionally involved with the characters.

Where the film succeeds brilliantly is in its realistic depiction of a 20th-century tragedy (the Spanish Civil War) that has always been overshadowed by WWII, which occurred pretty much at the same time. Medina creates a very realistic universe of a real disease, during a real war, depicting real tragedies that have left a deep scar on the Spanish people. PAINLESS dances this fine line between these true historical events and moments that fall into the realm of fantasy. One scene where a child operates on a puppy without any anesthesia (it too feels no pain) is where the film slides unfortunately into the fantasy realm. The majority of the film, though, is set in the sobering real world of fascist Spain, and that is where the movie hits a nerve. The film shows how authentic human monsters can become real-life Frankensteins under the right conditions, and it’s within this realm that PAINLESS truly shines.