

## History and Hauntology; or, What Does One Do with the Ghosts of the Past? Reflections on Spanish Film and Fiction of the Post-Franco Period

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In this essay I shall link a number of films and works of fiction produced in Spain during the last three decades. ~~The question I shall be asking is what does a society—in particular, Spanish society of the transition and since—do with history; that is, what does it do with the ghosts of the past?~~ Given current criticisms of contemporary Spanish culture, triggered by the 1992 quinquennial commemorations, for refusing to confront the traumas of the past, this is an important question. While agreeing that, in many respects, ~~contemporary Spanish culture—obsessed with creating the image of a brash, young, cosmopolitan nation—is based on a rejection of the past. I want to stress the engagement with history by a considerable number of directors and writers, both older and young; and also to suggest, tentatively, that the current postmodern obsession with simulacra may be seen as a return of the past in spectral form.~~

Just as there are many kinds of ghosts (I shall be talking about werewolves, vampires, Frankenstein's monster as well as the politically displaced or "desaparecidos"), so there are various ways of dealing with them. One can refuse to see them or shut them out, as the official discourses of the State have always done with the various manifestations of the popular imaginary, where for good reasons ghost stories are endemic. One can cling to them obsessively through the pathological process of introjection that Freud called melancholia, allowing the past to take over the present and convert it into a "living death." Or one can offer them habitation in order to acknowledge their presence, through the healing introjection process that is mourning, which, for Freud, differs from melancholia in that it allows one to lay the ghosts of the past to rest by, precisely,

acknowledging them as past. The first two options—denying the existence of ghosts, becoming possessed by them—in different ways result in a denial of history (through repression or through paralysis). The last option—accepting the past as past—is an acknowledgment of history, that allows one to live with its traces. As Derrida nicely puts it in *Specters of Marx*, ghosts must be exorcised not in order to chase them away but in order "this time to grant them the right [...] to [...] a hospitable memory [...] out of a concern for justice" (175). For ghosts, as the traces of those who have not been allowed to leave a trace (Derrida's formulation again)—are by definition the victims of history who return to demand reparation; that is, that their name, instead of being erased, be honoured. This concept helps explain why the ungrammatical term "los desaparecidos" (in English, "the disappeared"), which wrongly uses "desaparecer" as a transitive verb, so caught the imagination at the time of the military take-overs in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay: for it constructs the dead, by virtue of the fact that they have not just "disappeared" but have "been disappeared," as ghosts or revenants (to use the French term) who refuse to have their presence erased but insist on returning to demand that their name be honoured. Derrida has proposed the term ~~"hauntology" as a new philosophical category of being—an alternative to ontology—appropriate to describe the status of history: that is, the past as that which is not and yet is there—~~ or rather, here. That this "virtual space of spectrality" (Derrida 11) is somehow related to the simulacra of postmodernism is an idea that immediately suggests itself.

In their book *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*, Rowe and Schelling recount a startling anecdote:

There are conditions under which a massive erasure of memory can occur. A study, begun in 1985, of villas miserias (shanty towns) in Córdoba, Argentina, has revealed an absence of memory of the period of military government (1976-85), as compared with the years preceding it. This silence is not the result of fear: informants were not hesitant with information about their activities in the preceding period, details of which could equally be considered "subversive." Nor does it indicate a lack of knowledge, since the issue was what they remembered not about the country or the government but about their own lives. (119-20)

Rowe and Schelling suggest that the reason for this traumatic erasure of memory was the lack, during the period of military dictatorship, of any form of collective sphere other than that imposed by surveillance; that is, the lack of any space in which memories could be articulated. What is so striking here is that the casualty of this suppression of all forms of collective discourse should have been private memories. For popular memory—relying on oral rather than written transmission—requires some kind of collective space, even if it be reduced to that of the family (which is never a purely private sphere). When teaching adult Spanish students who grew up under Francoism, I have frequently been struck by the fact that the only historical knowledge they had about Spain's immediate past was transmitted to them by their families (and "family" here means a collective, extended family network).

Interesting work has been done in France by Pierre Nora (1984-93) on the notion of *lieux de mémoire* or "memory places": that is, the dependence of memories on attachment to some concrete site; for example, a monument or a landscape. This concept has also been developed by Raphael Samuel in his wonderful book *Theatres of Memory*. The sense of place in the films of Erice or the novels of Marsé and Llamazares is extraordinarily strong—but in all cases these are spaces where the possibility of collectivity and communication is denied or at best curtailed. One thinks of the oppressive silences in *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973) and *El sur* (1983); the image of snow blotting out the traces of landscape and with it memory in *Luna de lobos* (1985) and *Escenas de cine mudo* (1994), plus in both novels the image of the mine which forces memory underground into a disaster-prone space that threatens, and frequently causes, obliteration; while in Marsé's novels the barrio succeeds in keeping popular memory alive only in the form of dispersed, discontinuous, phantasmatic fragments. It is also worth noting that *El sur* and Marsé's novels focus on Andalusian migrants in the north, while Llamazares's novels deal with the Leonese maquis forced into hiding or (in *Escenas de cine mudo*) a series of travellers who pass through the Leonese mining village, while Llamazares is himself coming to terms with his own uprooting from his Leonese village now submerged beneath a pantano. In *Beatus Ille* (1986) and *El jinete polaco* (1991), Antonio Muñoz Molina similarly recreates his fictional Mágina—modelled on his own former hometown, Ubeda—through a return to roots by his protagonists from economic exile in Madrid and

## Notes

1. Unpublished talk to Film Seminar, Department of Spanish, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1997.
2. For an excellent exploration of the symbolic potential of the vampire genre, see Gelder 1994.
3. See the unpublished paper "Cronos and the political economy of vampirism: notes on a historical constellation" by my colleague at Birkbeck College, John Kraniuskas.
4. Tannahill (1996: 167-88) shows that the vampire myth, often but not only in this sense, predates its nineteenth-century literary manifestations by several centuries in the popular imagination, notably in the "vampire epidemic" that swept Hungary, Moravia, Silesia and Poland in the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.

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