

The Temporal Trope of the Ghost and the Rhetorical Figure of
the Family in Hispanic Horror Films of the 2000s

by

Charles St-Georges

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

David Foster, Chair
Carmen Urioste-Azcorra
Cynthia Tompkins

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes three films from Mexico, Spain, and Argentina—*Kilómetro 31*, *El orfanato*, and *Aparecidos* (2007)—and their interplay with the historicism that has traditionally served as the default referent for “reality” in Western narrative. While grounding my approach in temporal critique, I borrow from deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and queer theory to explore ways in which ghosts and the rhetorical figure of the family are manipulated in each national imaginary as a strategy for negotiating volatility within symbolic order: a tactic that can either naturalize or challenge normative discourses. As a literary and cinematic trope, ghosts are particularly useful vehicles for the exploration of national imaginaries and the dominant or competing cultural attitudes towards a country's history, and thus, the articulation of a present political reality. The rhetorical figure of the family is also pivotal in this process as a mechanism for expressing national allegories, for articulating generational anxieties about a nation's relationship with its history, and for organizing societies and social subjects as such, interpellating them into or excluding them from national imaginaries according to its grammar/logic.

The proposed trajectory through these films will help facilitate a study of the potential of these rhetorical figures to either reinscribe or question two of the most fundamental processes that go into the cartography of ideology: the imposition of (a) time and the negotiation of social subjectivity within it. Competing political narratives may use any number of rhetorical strategies to position themselves in time to promote their agendas while continuing to reinforce the overall framework that determines the parameters of what is visible, and thus debatable. As temporal anomalies who are defined

by their (in)visibility, ghosts can be used to either reinforce this framework or they can be used to articulate alternative relationships to time, and consequently, other political possibilities. Ghosts, families, and children are especially volatile rhetorical figures because of their potential to expose the mechanisms of societal organization—the construction of social subjects through their relationship to the time and the families of which they are presumably products—as negotiable processes rather than self-evident truths.

DEDICATION

To the ghosts of Terry Woods and Doyle Cluff, whose disappearance has haunted me since we were children becoming adults.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: HORROR, WESTERN HISTORICISM, AND THE PROMISE OF MEANING

Traditionally, the horror genre has been looked down upon as one of the lowest forms of culture. Notwithstanding, horror has played a central role in the development of Western culture. When deployed in literary or cinematic contexts, horror and the supernatural are considered by many to be vulgar and tacky, but when deployed in religious contexts, they are considered sacred and transcendental. Cathedrals, for example, sometimes border on the aesthetics of a carnival's house of horrors, with murals, sculptures, and figurines depicting scenes of blood, horror, and suffering in gruesome detail: the heart of Santa María pierced by seven swords, San Lorenzo being slowly burned alive on a rotating grill, the ever-lurking threat of eternal torture by Satan and his pitchfork. And one must not forget the omnipresent image of Christ and his multiple, bleeding wounds as he stands nailed to the cross.

While these grotesque images are useful when introducing a study on horror films in Hispanic culture—a culture at the religious forefront of an overall Western culture within which Catholicism has traditionally played a central, formative role—they also help to illustrate the ideologies and political agendas that are at work when an audience is emotionally interpellated to fear. While the Church's role in framing and controlling political discourse is no longer as strong as it has historically been in decades and centuries past, its conceptual parameters remain intact to this day. In this introduction, I will examine the complicated relationship between horror films and the tradition of Western narrative from which they stem: the historicism that imposes itself as reality in

the Western imaginary, thus categorizing as unreal alternate narratives that fail to obey its ideologically specific timeline.

History as universal reality

Several dominant narratives in Western literary tradition have found a certain ideological efficiency in horror. In capitalism, the motivating force for any individual to participate and uphold the existing system is the fear of what are textualized as the only alternatives: hunger, homelessness, and in a worst-case scenario, death. In order to avoid this personally apocalyptic fate—the end of one’s subjectivity—individuals must anxiously seek out “their place” in the system as subjects of (and to) capitalism, embracing its structure without questioning the structural integrity of its narrative. If they find their niche in capitalist society, their previous doubts and fears serve as narrative prefigurations to the eventual story of their success, thus reinscribing the idea that their fate has been fulfilled, along with capitalism’s promise of prosperity resulting from hard work. These two conceptual poles—on one end, salvation through the system, and on the other, death by failing to embrace it—also serve to frame the diegesis of Christianity.

In his book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach observes that, in Western society, the notion of apocalypse is rooted in the Bible, where in the Book of Revelations an end of the world is prophesied, thus establishing a point of reference through which a society can collectively imagine itself coherently situated along a historical timeline that documents a progression towards a predetermined destiny. In this way, it becomes easier to locate (and thus control) social subjects by affixing them to a specific temporal location on a universal timeline for

human existence. Due to the emotional and cognitive rewards offered by joining a collective imaginary in which one's existence is mapped out—thus calming existential fears and anxieties stemming from the unknown (specifically, the perpetual unknowability of the future)—social subjects in this framework are more likely and more willing to be interpellated as such. In other words, the idea of an end of times fabricates a pole that allows each generation to find “its place” in history, positioning itself somewhere between Genesis and Apocalypse.

In his book about the origin of nationalisms, Benedict Anderson turns to the sixteenth century and the printing of the Bible in the various vernacular languages of Europe to illustrate first and foremost the centrality of the Bible in the formation of national imaginaries, and secondly to put into perspective the importance of language in this process, since prior to the printing of the Bible, only a literate and bilingual elite (bilingual in that they had a knowledge of Latin) had direct access to the Bible or to literature in general. The printing of the gospels into vernacular languages interpellated citizens as such, on a more inclusive scale than before, into a collective imaginary framed around Biblical temporality. It also brought about the lexical and grammatical standardization of languages, as well as the negotiation and imposition of languages as such over dialects,¹ thus demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between the written word and the collective imaginary. Since the Bible was the principal text around which this imaginative process was advanced, its linguistic structures have impregnated

¹ Just as the “discovery” of the Americas in 1492 prompted the publication of the first “Spanish” grammar book (as such) by Nebrija.

common speech, leaving behind traces in contemporary language, some of which David Crystal has famously documented in the case of English.

Just as language—profoundly structured in the Western world by biblical influences—is used to construct and express any given reality, Auerbach postulates that the literary/narrative representation of reality in Western tradition has inherited its diegetic structures from the Bible: a text that significantly differs from classic Greek texts in its representation of characters, time, and space. In his famous chapter titled “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach notes that Homer presents his characters in rather one-dimensional fashion, clearly interpolated and fixed in space and time without historical background (6). The narration maintains itself in a local and absolute present, relating the thoughts and actions of characters without mysteries or ambiguities. The plot advances without creating suspense or any kind of tension that drives the narration toward a final goal (5).

In biblical narrative, however, the focus is less on a detailed description of the events—less on the means—and more on an end. In this context, the similarity in meaning between “end” as a temporal referent and “end” as goal is brought to light. In the case of the Bible, readers must often imagine for themselves the scene of the events because the where, when, how, and why—abundant in Homer, with his externalization of the thoughts and motives of the characters and his detailed description of space—are absent. In Homer, the narrative itself is what is important, while in the gospels, what matters is where the narrative is going (5). Events in the Bible serve to testify about a future fulfillment of a promise: the salvation from mortality, the second coming of Christ, the inheritance of the Earth by the meek, etc. In the gospels, a certain causal relationship

is maintained between events that situates them along a temporal linearity that is directed to a supernatural and transcendent end(ing), thus creating both a historical background that is absent in classic Greek narrative and a divine purpose for human existence through God: the ultimate signifier in Lacanian terms.

Even though this narrative inscribes the legitimacy/reality of the concept of chronology and its movement towards the future, the signifier that claims to give it coherency and meaning is paradoxically imposed in the opposite direction. It is projected from a future that never arrives (as the future must never arrive, in order to continue fulfilling its function as the future): from a promise that always remains unkept. In his analysis of Auerbach, Hayden White observes that the directionality of this causality would be inconceivable from the point of view of Aristotelian teleology or Newtonian physics, “both of which would conceive of causation as going in one direction only, from a cause to its effect and from an earlier to a later moment” (95). In this way, a previous event is interpreted—retrospectively—as a prefiguration of a later event: a phenomenon Auerbach calls figural causation and one that exemplifies the expropriation of the Judaic Old Testament by Christians, who reinterpreted it as a prefiguration to the New Testament, fabricating and claiming a genealogical and causal relationship between the two in order to advance and legitimize their agenda (White 90).

With the passing of time, with the secularization of literature, and with the industrialization of much of the West, the religious element in this historicism diminished. Christ/God disappeared as the divine and final promise to be fulfilled: he stopped fulfilling his function at the terminal end of history as that which promised to give retrospective meaning to chronology. Notwithstanding, he left intact the diegetic

framework of the overall narrative that used him as the final/ultimate signifier. “Thus, although the history of Western literature displays the plot structure of redemption, this redemptions takes the form less of fulfillment of a promise than of an ever renewed promise of fulfillment” (White 88).

This promise is, according to White and his interpretation of Auerbach, Western literature’s unique promise “to represent reality realistically” (88). That is to say that, in the Western imaginary, the representation of reality continues to root itself in the notion of history. For Auerbach, “it was figuralism that accounted for Western culture’s unique achievement of identifying reality as history” (White 95). In the retrospective framework of historicism, the final and perpetual end goal is no longer the promise of salvation, but the promise of meaning and the subsequent imposition of a coherent, sense-making narrative for human experience that searches for prefigurations in a linear, ideologically specific chronology in order to define a present and make sense out of it. Given that political debate consists of competing versions of “current reality” (as if this were a single, cohesive, self-evident entity), the enormous political advantages that accompany any definition of the present through historical prefigurations almost goes without saying, allowing discourses of power to interpret certain strategically aligned events from the past to justify a contemporary political agenda and then present this cause-and-effect relationship between history and political action as an indisputable fact: a somehow acquirable historical artifact.

In this way we can see that the presumed universality of Christianity was replaced by that of Western historicism. The promise of a second coming of Christ that would eventually and retrospectively make sense of human existence turned into the promise—

and the expectation—of a historical narrative that would correctly and coherently contextualize the present. The elimination of the illusion of an omniscient and omnipotent God gave rise to another illusion that continues to serve as a referent for the location of social subjects in time: the illusion of chronology's absolute and scientific objectivity. Notwithstanding, the exactness of clock and calendar—the apolitical alibi of the ideological phenomenon of historicism—is never sufficient to describe time as it is experienced by individuals. Time, despite the scientific uniformity of its measurements, passes much more slowly, for example, for children than for adults. The same can be said for someone living inside a prison versus someone living outside of one, or for a pregnant woman in her final trimester versus someone in a more physically comfortable state.

In her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Bliss Cua Lim calls this phenomenon heterotemporality, positing that it is untranslatable into the coherent narrative of homogenous and institutionalized time, quoting Henri Bergson: “We fail to translate completely what our soul experiences: there is no common measure between mind and language” (17). Lim proposes that fantastic cinema constitutes an attempt to translate the supernatural, contradictory and atemporal elements of personal experience (11). As a translation, this genre of cinema has a particularly complex and varied relationship with the linear chronology that dictates the parameters of reality and imposes its hegemony under the pretext of scientific objectivity, and by extension, nature and universality. It can translate anti-historical concepts such as heterotemporality and render them perceptible to a viewing public that is accustomed to the Western language of reality, which claims—or perhaps more accurately, perpetually promises—to be capable of representing everything. Since horror has its roots in the

unknown and more specifically in what is unknowable about life, oneself, and other individuals, horror films carry with them a wide range of possible interactions, both with viewers and with its predetermined referent, Western historicism.

Horror films and the Lacanian real

Before proceeding any further, a brief definition of terms is in order, although I will be the first to recognize that the delineations between genres are often vague at best, which is why it is not a primary concern of mine to decisively establish a single genre as such in my study or enter into theoretical debates about the historical and ideological situatedness of genre per se. As Jay Beck and Vicente Rodriguez Ortega have noted in their introduction to *Contemporary Spanish Cinema and Genre*, genre interpellates different people in different ways and is a constantly evolving and contested category of organization (7). Within the parameters of the horror genre we find a wide variety of aesthetics, artistic intentionalities and commercial ambitions. On one end of the spectrum we find the horror industry that consists mainly of ritual violence that shares nearly all of its defining characteristics with the pornography industry, placing the object of desire in front of the camera and submitting its body to any number of predictable activities, following a formula whose goal is spectator gratification in a specific and predetermined manner. Perhaps the diegetic structure of this kind of film serves as one of the most explicit examples of the linearity and causality of historicism. The events of the plot are mere prefigurations of a promise that has yet to be fulfilled. The final goal of the narration dictates the framework within which the events will be presented: a dynamic

that becomes evident if we consider the specific positioning of the pornographic camera and the paradigmatic importance of the money shot.

Psychoanalysis has plenty to say about this overlap between the pornography and horror industries. While the discourse of Western historicism is highly invested in constructing and interpellating social subjects as such—as coherent, self-contained, rational beings—and situating them along a meaning-making timeline, psychoanalysis explores the permeations of social subjects and the ways in which they are not coherent, self-contained, rational beings. Sigmund Freud famously presented the human mind as consisting of three different levels of (un)consciousness—the id, the ego, and the superego (which Jacques Lacan would later reformulate as the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic)—stressing the importance of the id/real as the subconscious: that which resists the making of any sense and is not subject to the laws and social grammar of the conscious mind (ego/imaginary) or its verbalization/textualization (superego/symbolic). Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung* in the original German) because for him, the truth of any given person lies not in the stories or information they report about themselves through language—a realm controlled by a learned, socially imposed grammar, both linguistic and otherwise (i.e., what one can and cannot talk about in proper society)—but rather what their unconscious mind dreamt about while the conscious mind was asleep.

The irrationality of dreams is often governed in lawless fashion by erotic impulses, from which stem the Freudian slips for which the father of psychoanalysis is most commonly known: verbalized manifestations of unconscious and unacknowledged sexual desires, a fleeting failure of social/symbolic order to properly control the

expression of the sexual desire that is rooted in the irrational and uncontrollable realm of the unconscious. The irrationality of dreams is also driven by emotional impulses, the strongest among them being fear in the case of nightmares, during which the human mind experiences unbridled terror in a way that *feels* real, even as the mind is waking up and realizing it was just a nightmare and therefore, not what the conscious mind recognizes as reality. The emotional trauma that is inflicted by nightmares is evident in the etymological link between the word trauma and the German *Traum* (dream) and the way nightmares trouble, unsettle, and even haunt us, coming back time and again throughout our life as recurring dreams, recurring nightmares.

It is not by coincidence that sexual desire, fear, and trauma all pulsate from the realm of the unconscious: what Lacan calls the real. The French idiom *la petite mort* as a euphemism for orgasm—a moment of release (similar to the release imagined in death) which we are driven to repeatedly and irrationally seek out throughout our lives—helps to bring into perspective the shared geography of death and desire within the Lacanian real: a symbiotic relationship between one's sex drive and Freud's theorizations on the death drive. Sexual desire, fear of mortality and the unknowability of death haunt people in a way that resists symbolization within symbolic order: a way that is untranslatable into master narratives like Western historicism. Nevertheless, the fear of the real—of its unknowability—elicits a desire to symbolize it in order to make sense of it: to make it mean something.

Just as fear of mortality interacts with the biblical promise of salvation from mortality upon the condition of accepting Christ as the ultimate signifier and thus imagining oneself as situated along a coherent, universal timeline of spiritual continuity,

fear of mortality also interacts with the heteronormative promise of meaning for one's sexual desire upon the condition of accepting the procreation of children as a signifier, thus imagining oneself as situated along a coherent, universal timeline of biological continuity. Both processes of imagination share a common temporal framework within which meaning is introduced retrospectively. One's existence (and the end of one's existence) is promised to eventually make sense through adherence to the imperative to believe in Christ, whose second coming—perpetually projected into the future as a promise to be fulfilled—will eventually give meaning to all human existence. One's sexual desire is also promised to make sense through adherence to the imperative to procreate, wherein the arrival of children—literal incarnations of the ideological projection of a future—will have given meaning to one's previous and continuing sexual desire: that illogical, unconscious pulsation that haunts our existence. One's eventual *mort* and one's incessant drive towards *la petite mort* are both explained within the sense-making framework of Western historicism and its promise of eventual meaning.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*—a book whose importance is central to the present study—Lee Edelman offers extensive commentary on the relationship between the death drive and the normativization of the sex drive in order to impose a temporal framework for political debate that hinges around a futurity that is embodied in children. Despite the universal pretensions of these coherent and highly normative explanations of the unknown, social subjects who are interpellated by them are not entirely satisfied by them, nor can they be, for that is the very nature of the real and its persistent, ephemeral unknowability: its perpetual resistance to the sense-making mechanisms of symbolic order. This is why sex and death are described as drives by

Freud: they are defined by what they *do*—their symptoms—rather than what they *are*, since what they are eludes definition. Their phenomenality is unnamable and uncontrollable within social order.

As part of the real, the unconscious mind produces nightmares, despite the Christian imploration to “fear not [death].” The unconscious mind also produces sexual desire that runs counter to the prescribed, supposedly self-evident reason for sexual desire as existing exclusively for purposes of procreation within the controlled, monogamous institution of marriage. Pulsating from outside the realm of social control, the real/the id/the subconscious mind produces erotic dreams that refuse to adhere to the restraints of social grammar. It is for this reason that horror and pornography exist as industries that cater to human fascination with the real by providing images that interact with the fissures and limits of the symbolic order within which social subjects are constrained, longing for the release that only the real can provide them. Of all film genres, pornography and industrial horror are the ones in which subtitles are least necessary because language barriers are of minimal importance, given the paradigmatic centrality of the voyeuristic glimpses into the real—i.e., death and sex, albeit a staged, symbolized, vicarious real (and therefore, not at all real in the Lacanian sense)—that render symbolic order (through language) secondary in importance in terms of audience demand.

Opposite the gratuitous blood and violence of industrial horror on the horror spectrum we find psychological horror, which is frequently fantastic and often referred to as the gothic, whose aesthetic aims are not to stimulate the viewer’s field of vision with an excess of blood, gore, and violence, but rather to create a dark ambience through which the idea of everyday life is defamiliarized. Gothic horror is rooted in something

that is lurking, detected but unseen: the unknown that haunts us and shares a volatile relationship with historicism, given that “the naturalism of historical time lies in the belief that *everything* can be historicized” (Chakrabarty 73). The unknown and ungraspable nature of heterotemporality threatens to expose fissures in the coherent and supposedly universal narrative of homogenous time, which feeds off of a false conceptualization of time and space as fixed, measurable entities (and therefore, subject to human control) (Lim 153).

Part of what provokes horror is the haunting realization that chronology is an illusion: that time is infinite, without a beginning or ending to grab onto in order to invent and impose meanings or explanations for human existence. Consequently, horror films—and especially those with ghosts—have a very particular potential to subvert the alleged rationality and legitimacy of historicism by alluding to the untranslatability of human experience: the limits of symbolic order when attempting to explain death and sexual desire in coherent, chronological terms. However, it is more common for them to be used as an efficient tool for the reinscription of historicism and the normative, sense-making narratives that stem from it: a function that is exemplified in the horrific nature of the images and narratives of Christianity that are meant to elicit emotional reactions that will steer followers into embracing the perpetually pending promise of salvation and meaning and embrace their proper place in time as defined by Christianity. It is also exemplified in the horrifying light in which queer subjects are portrayed by heteronormative discourse: subjects who fail to measure and define their existence and its meaning in terms of a biological contribution to the future, and therefore, fail to properly inhabit time, just as ghosts fail to respect the coherent linearity of chronological time.

A proposed trajectory for examining time and subjectivity in Hispanic horror films

What is at hand for this study, then, are overlapping mechanisms and strategies of interconnected discourses of normativity that share a temporal framework and are highly invested in promoting narrative closure. What are the intersections of fear of mortality and homophobia, and how do horror films interact with this dynamic? How are normative notions of time used to introduce homogenizing narrative structures that marginalize certain subjects to the point of erasing them altogether in order to uphold the grammatical coherence of hegemonic discourse, and what role does the ghost play in speaking to/of/through this erasure? How do horror films exploit human fascination with the real, and how are their articulations of fears, phobias, and taboos specific to the cultures and ideologies that produce them, as well as to the historical moments in which they are produced? Why is it that ghosts (as expressions of a present, lingering past), families (as the fundamental unit of social organization in a status quo present), and children (as embodiments of an ideologically specific future) are such commonly recurring tropes in horror films, and how are they used as rhetorical figures to either reinscribe or subvert the symbolic and temporal order upon which social norms are negotiated and enforced? How do gothic horror films, with the temporal liberties granted by ghosts, interact with the general framework of Western historicism, and how do they position the viewer in relation to institutionalized systems of making sense of our existence? These are the questions I hope to explore in this 5-chapter study, which centers around the temporal trope of the specter and the rhetorical figure of the family in three films from the Spanish-speaking world, all of which were released in 2007.

In the two chapters that follow this introduction, I examine Mexico's highest grossing film from 2007—*Kilómetro 31* (a modernized version of the classic Llorona myth)—in order to more slowly and carefully entertain the questions listed above. This film is a good one to start with because it provides a case study for gothic horror in its most traditional and ideologically effective role in terms of its reinscription of the status quo. In chapter 2, I explore how Western historicism has shaped the temporal framework in which a progressive, chronological movement towards modernity—the country's ultimate salvation through global capitalism—is naturalized and imposed in such a way as to make invisible, anachronistic, and therefore unreal, Mexico's indigenous. This temporal strategy helps to mute alternative histories (and by extension, alternative propositions for the present and future) by mythifying and narrating them as supernatural and even terrifying (and therefore, not real). In the tradition of Western historicism, reality is interpreted as history: in this case, that of the colonial victors. *Kilómetro 31* articulates a temporally positioned racialized normativity that serves to reinscribe Mexico's economic status quo and exile indigenous Mexicans from reality, as queer, temporal anomalies who have failed to keep up with and properly inhabit time.

In chapter 3, I examine the role that sexual normativity plays in this reinscription. As previously mentioned, discourses of power rely on the solidification of time into a historical artifact with coherent, graspable beginnings and endings that can then be used to articulate and impose a present as political reality. In tandem with this historicism is the solidification of the ongoing process of social subjectivity into static, and therefore controllable, social subjects that can then be put into their "proper" place in time. A review of the gendered space in *Kilómetro 31* helps us to explore how symbolic order is

presented as solidly masculine and properly present, while any alternatives to this order are portrayed as fluid, female, and horrifyingly atemporal. The female body is seen as queer in that it holds the potential to subvert the notions of fixed subjectivity upon which normative discourse depends. Conversely, as a single, childless female of a certain age, the victim/protagonist in *Kilómetro 31* is punished for failing to define her own subjectivity in patriarchal terms of marriage and motherhood, which is why she is eventually cast out of reality and into the supernatural, literally pulled there by the ghosts of the indigenous who had already been banished there.

Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters that focus on gothic horror films that employ the typical tropes of ghosts, families, and children in non-traditional ways: ways that invite a certain questioning of taken for granted realities rather than reinforcing them as such. Spain's *El orfanato* interrogates naturalized notions of family as well as the underlying symbolic order upon which such philosophies of social organization and subjectivity are negotiated and imposed. Ghosts, as representations of alternat(iv)e temporalities, are initially deployed to elicit a fearful reaction from viewers. Further knowledge about these ghosts, however, helps invite viewers to revise previous judgments they had made regarding these queer subjects. This knowledge also holds the potential to generate within viewers a certain self-awareness of their own historical and ideological situatedness, positioned to react to certain stimuli with certain emotional responses. Fear is replaced with compassion, and the lack of narrative closure at the end of the film helps create a space for the coexistence of multiple interpretations and multiple temporalities.

The subject of chapter 5 is the Spanish-Argentine coproduction *Aparecidos*, which also portrays knowledge as a key element in turning fear into compassion and greater understanding. As a horror film about the real-life horrors of Argentina's most recent military dictatorship, themes of national trauma and historical memory are literalized visually/supernaturally as a mutual pursuit between survivors and the ghosts of the victims who were made to disappear because they were perceived to challenge the normative narrative of the neo-fascist junta. The film's narrative invites reflections on how the coherent individuality of one's own subjectivity must necessarily be shattered in order to facilitate a transformative glance into the incomprehensibility of trauma and then reconstitute one's subjectivity from a new, enlightened perspective. The coexistence of multiple temporalities is shown in this final film not as a threat to some kind of stable, comforting reality (as seen in *Kilómetro 31*) or as a possibility to consider (as seen in *El orfanato*), but rather as an ethically necessary and integral part of human existence.

This proposed trajectory through these films will help facilitate a fledgling and far from exhaustive study of the unique potential of the temporal trope of the ghost and the rhetorical figure of the family to either reinscribe or call into question two of the most fundamental processes that go into the cartography of ideology: the imposition of (a) time and the negotiation of social subjectivity within it. To articulate any notion of time is to impose an ideology, and competing political narratives may use any number of rhetorical strategies to position themselves in time to promote their agendas while continuing to reinforce the overall framework that determines the parameters of what is visible, and thus debatable. As temporal anomalies who are defined by their (in)visibility, ghosts can be used to either reinforce this framework—to solicit fear as a mechanism for reaffirming

the need for it in order for life to make any sense according to a certain dominant logic— or they can be used to articulate alternative relationships to time, and consequently, other political possibilities. While the human condition is one that can only be represented, discussed, and debated within symbolic order and its imposing ideological structures, ghosts, families, and particularly children—with their newness to symbolic order and the way they call attention to it as a constructed rather than a natural order, a learned process rather than a self-sufficient entity—are especially volatile rhetorical figures. It is my proposition that this is due to their potential to expose the mechanisms of societal organization—the construction of social subjects through their relationship to the time and the families of which they are presumably products—as negotiable processes rather than self-evident truths.

CHAPTER 2

THE MODERNIZED MYTH AND MYTHICAL MODERNITY: *KILÓMETRO 31* AS

BOURGEOIS HORROR

“One regulates an economy with one’s texts, with *other* subjects . . .”
—Jacques Derrida (*The Ear of the Other* 156-57; emphasis added)

The Spanish-Mexican coproduction *Kilómetro 31* will be the first film in my analysis because it serves as a rich cinematic text in which to explore the ideological usefulness of the horror genre in its most traditional terms: the reaffirmation of the socioeconomic status quo through the reinscription of normativity. This normativity defines itself in racialized terms as well as in gendered terms. In the present chapter, I will focus on the former so as to connect it with the latter in the chapter that follows. Indigenous Mexicans are peripherally cast outside of reality as revenge-seeking spirits that haunt the present. Despite the blatantly conservative, reactionary nature of traditional horror narratives, *Kilómetro 31* was marketed as a hip and modern film, bringing the ancient myth of the Llorona to twenty-first-century Mexico City.

Kilómetro 31 constitutes a break with what had been the traditional vein of Mexican horror films. Mexican audiences flocked to increasingly Americanized cineplexes—benchmarks of progress towards modernity as currently defined by globalization, which is in turn defined by U.S.-style capitalism—to view it partly because the film’s aesthetics more closely resembled the U.S. and Japanese productions that have dominated the horror genre in recent decades, and partly because the subject matter was so specifically Mexican. *Kilómetro 31* represented a certain coming of age for Mexican horror, which had been packaged in previous decades by a certain sociohistorical context

that had long since passed its expiration date. Prior to the movie's release, film-related websites such as *Quinta Dimensión* and *Corre Cámara* published headlines such as “*Km 31*, vuelve el cine de terror mexicano,” and “Vuelve el terror con *Km 31*” respectively, announcing the resurrection of the long dead Mexican horror film.

Two years prior to its release in 2007, Elizabeth Hernández reported in the entertainment section of the nationwide newspaper *El Universal* that the Mexican-Spanish coproduction was underway, quoting Iliana Fox's assertion (who plays both twin sisters, Catalina and Ágata) that the film “es la primera vez que en México se hace cine de suspenso de manera seria y profesional” (no pag.). Co-producer Fernando Rovzar affirmed that “En México hay tantas leyendas, historias y cultura, que por qué no hacer cine de terror al estilo mexicano. En países como Estados Unidos apenas comienzan a crear sus historias, pero México tenemos todo tipo de leyendas . . .” Advancements in production quality were perceived to have finally done justice to Mexico's rich tradition of sinister legends and myths.

The historical context of *Kilómetro 31*

The notion that Mexico had not previously produced a suspense or horror film “de manera seria y profesional” is most likely a reference to the country's post-1950s horror films: a genre classified by Doyle Greene as mexploitation films. In his studies, Greene contextualizes this movement as having started after the nation-building Golden Age of Mexican cinema began to lose what Carlos Monsiváis called the “coherent visions of the national past and future” it had previously been responsible for forming in the Mexican imaginary (20). By the mid 1950s, a certain “ahistorical nationalism” began to

materialize, which allowed mexploitation films a looser conceptual framework in which to promote such causes as modern progress (Greene, *Mexploitation* 5). I will return to this notion of progress and how it pertains to the particular kind of temporal critique elicited by ghostly texts.

However, creativity was limited due to the near collapse of the Mexican film industry and its virtual nationalization by the 1960s: a transition that, due to government censorship, led to self-censorship and formulaic production of silver screen spectacles that were meant to compete with the emerging medium of television. “While many ‘conventional’ horror and monster films . . . were produced in the mexploitation era [1957-1977], undoubtedly the most important development in mexploitation was the incorporation of the *lucha libre* into the horror genre . . .” (11). As popular television celebrities, “real-life” luchadores were paired against fictional vampires, monsters, etc. in films that were designed to bring television audiences to theatres. Since such pairings were historically specific, in retrospect they are perceived as campy, corny, and obsolete.

Greene contends, however, that mexploitation films were able to offer a novelty product to a new generation of Mexican viewers—viewers who in large part sought to participate in some form of counterculture during the tumultuous 1960s—in a way that effectively textualized (and visualized) an abject, supernatural other and pitted it against a “real” hero from popular culture who would predictably triumph over evil in order to re-establish order and save the nation. The ideological implications of this opposition are of particular interest for my study of *Kilómetro 31*. Mexploitation films served as a double-edged sword, as horror films tend to do: they satisfied the youthful need for rebellion (in this case, rebellion against the traditionalism of Mexico’s Golden Age cinema) while at

the same time reinscribing a conservative nationalism born out of us-versus-them, real-versus-fake, natural-versus-supernatural dichotomies.

The 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, in Greene's view, marked the beginning of the end for the mexploitation genre. After the real-life horrors of the PRI's *dictablanda* officially entered the realm of public viewership, the ahistorical nationalism of the facile oppositions associated with mexploitation was significantly complicated and problematized in the national imaginary. The genre's visual appeal and shock value began to give way to the violence of Alejandro Jodorowsky's films and the increasingly graphic sexuality of films in general (especially from Europe). During the 1970s and 80s, mexploitation evolved into what Greene calls the Mexican cinema of darkness (1969-1988): a genre influenced by and in many cases marketed to the emerging market of international cinema:

A new wave of Mexican directors began making films that were "a bloody announcement that times had changed" not only for Mexican society, but Mexican cinema as well: Alejandro Jodorowsky [*El topo* (1970); *Santa Sangre* (1989)], a self-consciously avant-garde provocateur; Juan López Moctezuma [*The Mansion of Madness* (1973); *Alucarda, la hija de las tinieblas* (1977)], an innovator in formalistic, experimental horror; René Cardona, Jr. [*Tintorera: Killer Shark* (1977); *Guyana: Crime of the Century* (1979)], a purveyor of lurid exploitation. . . . Unlike traditional mexploitation cinema's frequent and idealistic affirmation of a modern and modernizing Mexico, these films darkly reflected the aftermath of

1968 and fiercely questioned how “civilized” humanity actually was in an ostensibly civilized modern world. (*Mexican Cinema*, 4)

The post-Tlatelolco Mexican imaginary began to associate itself with the global conflicts and turbulence of the 1970s. In true postmodern fashion, the positivism previously associated with progress and modernization began to disintegrate and was replaced by the skeptical realization that utopias were unattainable illusions. As Greene so eloquently observes about Mexico’s cinema of darkness:

The possibility exists that *all* utopias are degenerate utopias with inherent and potentially catastrophic defects as they seek to resolve the nightmare of history; it is only a question of how evident the flaws become, and how dramatically they will materialize. A given dystopia is not a perversion of modernity’s quest towards utopia into an anti-utopia, but one of many possibilities which could easily result in modernity’s drive towards rational progress and its conversion from ideology into myth: spaces and futures that do not attain social perfection but imprison their inhabitants in the modern world’s contradictions, uncertainties, and horrific failings. (172-73)

Greene’s use of the word “rational” to modify “progress” in this context is of particular importance to this study because I am interested in examining the ways in which normative discourse positions itself in linear, temporal fashion so as to frame itself as rational and coherent. Prescriptive, homogenizing concepts such as progress can only be articulated by looking at time in a very specific, ideologically directed fashion. Narratives that claim to provide a rational, coherent explanation for human existence (and

national existence, for that matter) manipulate time to their advantage in order to 1) infuse their rhetoric with the supposedly apolitical subjectivity of evenly-spaced, scientifically-measured chronology, and 2) efface the queerness whose very existence threatens to expose fissures in its logic. The relationship between normativity and temporality is a theme that will repeatedly revisit this study in ghostly fashion, as any proper *revenant* must do, in accordance with the word's very etymology.

For the purposes of coherently contextualizing *Kilómetro 31* within a linear history of Mexican cinema, however, we must, for the moment, focus on Greene's overall observation that the 1970s and early 1980s represented a certain disillusionment with utopias in general, as promised by revolutions and especially as promised by the status quo. Greene maps the death of Mexico's cinema of darkness in the mid 1980s, citing "the fall of 1960s counterculture, the political frustration of the 1970s, and the rise of neo-conservatism in the 1980s"—a decade whose stabilizing effects set the ideological stage for the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States was left as the only surviving superpower from the more than four-decades-long Cold War that until then had formed a global binary around which various national imaginaries aligned and identified themselves.

With the capitalism/communism dichotomy suddenly gone and with the rapid emergence of new technologies that would soon herald a new age of globalization defined in terms of "victorious" U.S.-style capitalism, the mutually-assured destruction of the Cold War was replaced as a temporal referent for the end of human existence—a screen upon which to project and historically situate national imaginaries and identities—by the seemingly assured eternal dominance of the U.S. economic model. Even the

remaining red giant, China, was adopting a highly competitive stance towards the seeming inevitability of a global marketplace framed by the logic of the free market and competition. The lingering, seemingly anachronistic persistence of a few die-hard relics from the past such as Cuba and North Korea only serve as temporal “others” in the emerging global imaginary to confirm that capitalism is contemporary—“with the times”—and that the only popularly-imagined alternative—Soviet-style, authoritarian communism—is no longer part of linear time, no longer living alongside capitalism in contemporary, mutually-assuring ideological struggle, but living outside of it.

Alternatives to capitalism no longer properly inhabit time, but linger in the periphery, like ghosts that have returned from a previous era. Emerging technologies in the 1990s such as the internet significantly impacted globalization, which in a post-Soviet world, was framed under the hegemony of uncontested—and more importantly, uncontested—U.S.-style capitalism. If the 1990s were a status quo decade for the West in which the transition into free market globalization was solidified—globalization becoming synonymous with global capitalism, as Eric Cazdyn points out—in Mexico, the 1990s and early 2000s presented a challenge to the supposed eternal global triumph of capitalism: the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). Mexico’s centuries-old colonialist economic model and sociopolitical culture that had long belittled or ignored the existence of indigenous peoples were challenged both in Chiapas and in the national imaginary, in open defiance to the global timeline of progress towards worldwide capitalism. The Zapatistas deliberately went against the grain of time, challenging a hegemonic view of history in which “the indigenous problem” was settled by the conquering Spanish centuries ago, in which a Mexican national identity was forged in

1810 with the declaration of independence from Spain and then solidified in 1910 with the Mexican Revolution and in the 1940s and 1950s with Golden Age Cinema, and in which Mexico's colonial capitalism in the 1990s was destined to fuse with U.S.-dominated global capitalism, to an even greater degree than the rest of the world by virtue of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Time was supposed to have settled the matter of indigenous insurgencies in Mexico, yet in the 1990s the Zapatista rebels appeared as if ghosts from the past, come back to haunt a nation founded on an ancient indigenous burial ground: an extremely common circumstance for horror films that take place in the Americas, perhaps most famously in Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* (1982). In a "modern" Mexico, the indigenous are supposed to be "already dead" and have already been put to death by a system whose utopian vision for modernization as defined by global capitalism casually writes them out of the narrative, just as indigenous characters were written out of the screenplay for *Kilómetro 31*. In one of its communications, the EZLN explicitly recognizes the way in which Mexican hegemony has framed the indigenous in relation to death: "A los que nos están amenazando con la cárcel y la muerte les decimos: nosotros ya estamos presos, por eso nos alzamos por libertad; nosotros ya estamos muertos, por eso luchamos por la vida" ("Comunicado de respuesta" 273).

In his important book *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*, Eric Cazdyn defines and illustrates the concept of the already dead in terms of a complex temporal relationship to death, noting that "all theorizations of death are at once theorizations of time" (8). He mentions Fredric Jameson's observation in the mid 1990s—a period that witnessed an uptick in the popularity of apocalypse-themed movies

such as *Independence Day* and *Armageddon*—that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” and then frames this “end” in terms of death (61). The death of capitalism is so inconceivable that the death of humanity—indeed, one’s own death—is imagined to be more realistic, more feasible than the organization of the world and its resources according to a logic other than that of capitalism. Like a genocidal alien invasion (*Independence Day*, 1996) or a giant meteor (read: foreign object) headed towards earth (*Armageddon*, 1998), death is neatly separated from life and placed on the opposing end of the dichotomy that negotiates its meaning:

This removal [of death from life] allows us to engage the most pernicious ideologies of life and death. Their separation, in which death is figured as the great terrorist from beyond, requires and justifies the brutal, here-and-now sacrifice of our planet and species in the opportunistic name of rescuing our planet and species. “Better dead than red” was a Cold War way of exploiting this logic (in which communism was represented in the West as even more deadly than death itself and, therefore, requiring sacrifice of all sorts of freedoms). . . . Such political malfeasance is facilitated by, if not conditioned upon, a relationship to death in which death is radically separated from everyday life, and in which the existential terror of death is exploited by figuring it solely as dystopian fantasy. (6-7)

Cazdyn associates death with revolutionary potential, since life and death cannot, in fact, be neatly separated from one another, as affirmed by Sigmund Freud and Jonathan Dollimore, who postulates that death is life’s inner motivating force (192). Life

and death share an intertwined, symbiotic relationship in which they coexist alongside and through each other: a dynamic that will necessarily be explored throughout this study. They share a murky and unsettling relationship that is paradigmatically central to the horror genre, while the coherent, linear narrative of global capitalism—whose goal is not to unsettle but rather to settle, once and for all—is highly invested in separating the two so that death can indefinitely carry out its negative function, serving as an imaginary ending point in which time can be framed and limits can be placed on the rhetorical playing field.

The concept of death shapes the temporal parameters of political debate and the imaginary in which it occurs, which is why the narrative of global capitalism is interested in exploiting the incontestability and universal inevitability of the phenomenon of death as a way of foreclosing on any debate in which these parameters would be called into question. When death stops fulfilling its invisible role as that distant temporal referent that frames political debate and is put back into play as part of political debate, taken-for-granted concepts such as the past, present, and future—highly ideological temporal constructs whose referentiality depends on the conceptualization of death as a distant and uncontestable “other” (i.e. not life, and therefore not reality, not politics)—are suddenly contestable. This is why, as Cazdyn proposes:

The concept of the already dead suggests a future beyond the temporal constraints of the new chronic [of perpetual, inescapable capitalism] and the spatial constraints of the global abyss—a future content beyond its own form. The already dead, therefore, do not constitute a political movement in the traditional sense. Rather, they portend a political

consciousness that can inspire and inform political movements. The already dead already inhabits revolution—that is, they inhabit a revolutionary consciousness informed by a certain way of living in time and space, and in relation to an unknown and unrealized future. (9)

In Mexico, the Zapatista rebellion of the 1990s put back into play the supposedly already-settled notion of a Mexican Republic and its borders, initially drawn in 1810 by declaring independence from a Spanish other and then redrawn by an invading North American other in 1848 and 1854. The indigenous “problem” was supposed to have long since been settled, and any threats to Mexico’s territorial integrity were supposed to come from the outside rather than the inside, much like death is cast, in the narrative I have been discussing, as an external, foreign threat to one’s existence rather than an internal constituent of one’s existence. The already dead indigenous peoples of Chiapas proposed “an unknown and unrealized future” by reclaiming their deaths from the logic of Mexico’s colonial history (the very term “history” is problematized here, the colonialism of present-day Mexico paradoxically illustrating one of the ways in which pasts and presents coexist alongside each other rather than being neatly separated along a coherent chronology), as well as the logic of a supposedly inevitable and uncontested global capitalism.

Since death and the unknown (and the unknowability of death) are central themes in horror films, it is not surprising to see indigenous people—with their recently proposed unknown future for Chiapas and their non-normative way of inhabiting time and space—portrayed in a horrifying light. In *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, Roger Bartra challenges the commonly-upheld assertion that

Mexico's indigenous cultures treat death with mystical indifference. He contends that pre-Columbian texts point to a profound and painful uncertainty about death and that notions of an "Indian secret" that takes the sting out of mortality are Western inventions: an example of orientalism at its finest (69-74):

In this first sense, the origin of the disdain for death is the traditional fatalism that is customarily ascribed to the peasants and to all those directly exposed, with little protection, to the inclemencies of society and nature. But this fatalism has another origin, parallel to the one just discussed: namely, the disdain of the dominant classes for the lives of those who find themselves in conditions of misery. There are people whose lives are not worth much in the eyes of their masters: the death of a Mexican Indian, just like that of a Biafran peasant or an untouchable in Calcutta, occurs in the bosom of the undifferentiated "masses"; such deaths can reach monstrous statistical proportions but do not directly threaten the civilized man. Such people die like animals, because they live like them. (60-61)

Just as indigenous attitudes towards death have been retextualized and commodified (i.e., The Day of the Dead and its commercial and cultural aesthetics), the Zapatista rebellion was effectively suppressed and even commodified. San Cristóbal de Las Casas (the former capital of the movement) now serves the Mexican economy as a quaint and exotic tourist destination, where the indigenous are only allowed to sell their wares or beg for money in certain sectors. As of 2007, dolls of Zapatista rebels are even sold as souvenirs at the Tuxtla Gutiérrez airport (Chiapas' main airport). Indeed, there

seems to be no escape from the eminence and universality of global capitalism, whose logic seems to have permeated the entire world, with the notable and useful exceptions of countries like North Korea and Cuba, whose anachronistic backwardness and lack of material wealth serve as an example to societies who might think of refusing to do business with what has become “the world” as defined by multinational corporations.

Progress is now framed in terms of global capitalism, which promises, much like Christianity, to eventually save the faithful. The free market, given enough time and freedom, will lead to the salvation of the world and an improvement in living conditions for those who learn to embrace the logic of capitalism: a logic which depends on the notion that the supply of commodities is limited and that the value of any given commodity corresponds with its scarcity. The perceived value of any resource, service, or commodity depends on a number of people—certain people—not having access to it. In his book, Cazdyn eloquently illustrates this logic by using healthcare as an example, drawing from national (U.S.) and global disparities in access to healthcare but also drawing from the way in which those who do have access to healthcare are temporally framed as patients in a way that reflects the overall chronological logic of global capitalism and its perpetuation of the present situation as chronic, unchangeable, and thus, only manageable:

The inequality of healthcare, especially when dominated by the pharmacological-therapeutic paradigm I am outlining here, is not what occurs when capitalism goes wrong, but when it goes right. In any event, cure, as a condition separate from disease, is quickly being removed from

the medical vocabulary. This new chronic condition is both an effect and cause of the new dominance of prescriptive medicine. (20)

According to Cazdyn, despite its narrative of progress, Western medicine has, in general (in complex and sometimes contradictory ways), become less focused on prevention and cure and more concerned with sustaining a hugely profitable professional paradigm of crisis management. Rather than working towards a future utopian goal in which no one dies from preventable diseases, the healthcare industry, as an industry, strives to better position itself in the present in terms of profitability by paradoxically touting the notion of chronological progress—constantly producing “new” pharmaceuticals that are merely slightly modified re-brandings of old pharmaceuticals and occasionally making “advancements” in treatment that are too expensive for most people to afford—while simultaneously depending on the perpetuation of a dystopian present in which progress towards resolving unequal access to healthcare is denied.

Similarly, the overall system of global capitalism, despite its self-sold narrative as the path to prosperity, depends on an infinite chain of crises, both economic and humanitarian, because these elements are built into the system, much in the same way, as Greene points out, that dystopia is not the polar opposite of utopia, but rather an integral part of it: “now crisis is extended, rolled out flat all the way to the indefinite ‘long term.’ And there is a meantime, now permanent, thus permitting the present to fully colonize the future” (Cazdyn 46-47). Cazdyn observes that the temporal referentiality of words like crisis and disaster has changed since the Cold War to reflect a new vision of time that limits the revolutionary imagination:

With the end of the Cold War, anomalous and nonsystemic disaster and crisis (that is, events from the outside, like a meteor or a madman) have been more likely to be employed to explain inequality and injustice. During the Cold War, for example, to speak the language of disaster and crisis was at once to speak the language of revolution: the discourse could easily slip into revolution. Disaster and crisis were truly dangerous. With “mutually assured destruction” the watchwords of the day, one crisis could accumulate into so many crises until the quantitative curved into the qualitative and the whole system was in tatters. . . . But with the transformed geopolitical situation following the Cold War, in which the United States was left as the sole superpower and the “end of ideology” became the ruling ideology, it *seemed* riskless (not to mention gratuitous) to call upon crisis and disaster. Following the Cold War, crisis and disaster were as far apart from revolution as heaven and earth. What needs to be considered in the current post post-Cold War moment is whether or not this is still the case. Is something changing so that crisis and disaster are becoming dangerous again, no longer the trump cards of those in power?

(55)

Published in 2012, nearly four years after the onset of the Great Recession, Cazdyn’s book makes a strong case for ignoring the “more spectacular political scandals, corruptions, and disasters” propagated by the media and focusing instead on “everyday economic activities (and the crises inherent in them) in order to understand larger formal problems.” The post-2008 crisis in global capitalism has helped foment a framework in

which, “[i]nstead of treating the political spectacles as chronic (as problems to manage), the economic minutiae should be treated as acute (as something to be radically changed). Which returns us to revolution” (55): a word whose etymology, as Jacques Derrida points out in *Specters of Marx*, implies not a new beginning but rather the return of a past revolutionary spirit, a *revenant*.

Cazdyn rightly observes that the 2008 economic downturn allowed global capitalism to become more visible, and thus more vulnerable to revolutionary critique. Having been released in 2007, *Kilómetro 31* serves as a valuable case study for the ways in which, even in the absence of a glaring, global economic and ideological crisis named and called out as such, conservative narratives reflect a systemic need to reinscribe the status quo in order for its revolution-crushing logic to be upheld and enforced. I use the word glaring only in the sense that the post-2008 crisis at hand has received and continues to receive official attention in the media and the political discourse of the countries at the top of the hierarchy of global capitalism because of the way it impacts their particular economies. The “everyday . . . crises” referred to by Cazdyn have always been particularly visible in Mexico: so much so that they have become a familiar part of the landscape. Serving as a textbook example of Hayden White’s notion of figural causation and Cazdyn’s notion of the new chronic, in *Kilómetro 31* draws on a certain historicism to locate present-day Mexico as a natural culmination of past events that have set the country’s political and socioeconomic structure in stone: a chronic and incurable perpetuation of the injustices upon which the nation was founded.

Of particular interest to us are the ways in which, as indicated in the epigraph for this chapter, the reinscription and regulation of Mexico’s economy depends on a certain

regulation of “other subjects”—in this case, the indigenous. The specter of the fairly recent Zapatista rebellion continues to haunt the national imaginary. In the case of *Kilómetro 31*, then, the looming, omnipresent threat of the return of a revolutionary spirit—whether that of Marx, that of the rebellious 1960s and 1970s, or that of previous indigenous insurgencies—prompts a return to the centuries-old Llorona myth and a return to Mexploitation-like oppositions between reality and fantasy, the natural and the supernatural, the present and the past, etc. In this chapter I will explore some of the ways in which indigenous Mexicans are portrayed as existing outside of time: an institution whose scientifically objective measurements provide an alibi for the highly ideological ways in which hegemonic interests position themselves within a homogenizing and normativizing linear narrative that paradoxically touts progress while simultaneously perpetuating the status quo as a chronic set of conditions that can only be managed, never cured, thus “coloniz[ing] the future” (Cazdyn 47).

As perceived threats to “the real world”—i.e. the contemporaneity of global capitalism and the logic upon which it depends (imperialism, chronology, patriarchy, etc.)—the indigenous are relegated to the unsettling, perturbing realm of the supernatural and the anachronistic: that which, according to traditional disciplines such as history, science, and economics, is unreal. Given that political discourse consists of supposedly opposing narratives engaged in competition to describe the reality of any given society, it is particularly relevant to observe how horror films textualize reality into being by exploring the fantastic, the dystopian, or the otherwise unsettling/abnormal/unreal as oppositional categories in order to define reality, as Mikhail Bakhtin has so famously observed, through dialogic means.

Reality and the (de)(re)construction of narrative credibility

Just as reality is problematically defined in terms to its supposed opposition to fantasy and life is problematically defined in terms of its supposed opposition to death, in 1919, Sigmund Freud wrote about something he distinguished as *das Unheimliche*: a term that has been translated into English as “the uncanny” and sometimes “the unhomely” because its antonym, *das Heimliche*, refers to that which is homely and familiar. Providing evidence for the argument that there is almost always something lost in translation, in English we have also used words such as “supernatural,” “strange,” and “unexplainable” to represent this concept. We encounter a similar dilemma when we attempt to translate a word like “haunting” into other languages, whether as a verb, an adjective, or a noun. No matter how many rhetorical strategies we devise to wrestle down an idea like *das Unheimliche*, we are faced with the impossibility of fully representing that which, by definition (or a lack thereof) resists representation.

Where language fails us when it comes to articulating a concept (What do we call it? Thing? Phenomenon?) whose essence is ineffable, cinema comes to the rescue, armed with an arsenal of visual tools and a narrative tradition that has established a cinematic genre dedicated specifically to the uncanny: horror films. In this study, we will deconstruct the narrative strategies used in the most successful horror film in Mexican history: *Kilómetro 31* (2007, written and directed by Rigoberto Castañeda). We will examine how the film depends on the absent presence of indigenous Mexicans to then reinscribe—through an unsettling modernization of the Llorona myth—their position at

the margins of the Mexican socioeconomic model, thus reaffirming the status quo and the dominance of bourgeois narrative in Mexican popular culture.

After the opening credits, a rather curious subtitle appears in capital letters: “HISTORIA BASADA EN HECHOS REALES.” What is the purpose of beginning a movie with such a controversial (and some would say absurd) affirmation? The audience knows they are about to see a series of “hechos” whose verisimilitude is—by definition of the horror/fantasy genre—impossible to prove or document. Nonetheless, they have come to the theatre to enjoy the excitement and chills that typically accompany any interrogation of the reality/fantasy dichotomy. The insufficiency of hegemonic systems of institutionalizing knowledge and corroborating “hechos” elicits a certain thrill from spectators. From the very beginning of the film, *Kilómetro 31* invites them to participate in this game that questions the meaning of reality and defamiliarizes it enough to leave viewers entertained, but sufficiently frightened and thrilled so that returning to “reality” can be done with a new appreciation for its otherwise everyday banality. Excited by their brief departure from normality, viewers gratefully return to the familiar world after an episodic, voyeuristic encounter with the uncanny. Horror films have become a sort of ritualized vacation for their followers. The creation of the horror genre implies a contract into which the public is born and whose terms continue to be negotiated throughout the generations according to the latest technological advances and the shifting tastes and demands of the general public.

What are, then, the demands of the contemporary Mexican public and how did *Kilómetro 31* meet those demands to become “the best-selling movie of 2007” (according to the film’s DVD cover)? Horror films currently find themselves in open competition

with other genres in matters of verisimilitude. The advances made in computer graphics increasingly influence the action, fantasy, and even cartoon genres of film. In Baudrillard's terms, the increasingly realistic images created by computers for films represent in and of themselves a simulacrum within a simulacrum. This phenomenon has caused the public to demand greater visual credibility in cinematic representations of the fantastic. Additionally, the "authentic" narratives incorporated into documentaries and so-called reality television have triggered a greater demand for verisimilitude in the narratives of the fantastic, despite the obvious contradiction inherent in such a demand: a contradiction that points back to the aforementioned perpetual dilemma of *das Unheimliche*.

In his book *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle notes that magical realism (such as Gabriel García Márquez's) and the uncanny both narrate fantastic events as if they were real (85). The first narrative mechanism presented in the film is the aforementioned subtitle. Naturally, the film's discursive format deliberately closes the critical space from which an analysis of this affirmation of authenticity would emerge: what part(s) of the "historia" is/are based on "hechos reales?" Are the words "hechos reales" being borrowed from the documentation of various automobile accidents at or near kilometer 31 on the Desierto de los Leones Highway outside Mexico City? Castañeda leaves the matter open, hoping to infect the fantastic elements of his story that have been extrapolated from the accidents with the factualness of the accidents themselves.

In the first minutes of the film, Ágata—one of the young, attractive twin sisters both played by Iliana Fox, distinguished from her twin by her short hair—is driving at night along the aforementioned highway. Emotionally distraught for unknown reasons,

she seeks solace (or perhaps distraction) in the radio. As she nears kilometer 31, her radio suddenly encounters interference. As she's adjusting the dials on her radio, she runs over a ghostly child who appears out of nowhere right at kilometer marker 31. After exiting her vehicle to see if the child is alive, a freight truck runs her over, leaving her comatose in a hospital where medical personnel are forced to amputate her legs in order to save her life. The Dantesque detail with which these horrifying events are represented is startling and impactful.

Very deliberately, Castañeda includes this graphic violence to invoke the visual verisimilitude of reality TV programs—several of which involve hospitals and surgical procedures—and establish narrative credibility. By sparing none of the gory details of the mutilation of Ágata's body, the filmmaker leaves his viewers with the impression that he is prioritizing brutal honesty—the ugly truth of reality—over concerns for public decency or spectator sensibilities. The shocking sensorial reminder that reality can be this horrific—the abundance of blood, the buzz of the surgical saw as it cuts through Ágata's bone—serves to elicit in viewers a desire for reality as they experience it extradiagetically to follow a more comforting, utopian script, reminding us of Louis Althusser's observation that any relationship to reality “is inevitably invested in [an] imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* . . . rather than describing a reality” (233-34). Castañeda's interplay with the reality/fantasy binary (and any interplay, for that matter) necessarily involves high ideological stakes.

The construction of this credibility continues with the inclusion of modern technology as an apparatus to confirm and legitimize the presence of the supernatural (or more accurately, the deliberately defamiliarized—a subject I will explore later on). As

previously mentioned, Ágata's car radio seems to detect the presence of the ghostly child. After she falls into a coma, her twin sister Catalina becomes tormented by telepathic episodes wherein she hears the enigmatic voice of Ágata calling out to her for help. The onset of these episodes is announced by anomalies in the hospital's electronic devices (and in a later scene, in a home television set), which appear to register the arrival of an energy that can be "sensed" by humans but, more importantly (in matters of verisimilitude), can be documented by machines in all their impartiality: institutionalized systems of accumulating knowledge and documenting "hechos."

Also included among the contributors to the narrative credibility in question is a policeman named Ugalde who has embarked on his own private investigation of the enigma of kilometer 31 of the Desierto de los Leones Highway. When Ágata's boyfriend Omar discovers that kilometer 31 has a long history of mysterious accidents, he goes to the police station and asks Ugalde about the ghostly child who caused Ágata's accident. Ugalde affirms:

Ya buscamos a ese niño. Yo personalmente llevo 3 años buscándolo. Ha habido incidentes: la mayoría relacionados con mujeres jóvenes. Lllaman asustadas, malheridas, a veces las reportan muertas. Tratan de que la gente no se entere. Les dirían ineptos; ya sabes. Por eso yo mantengo todo esto bajo el agua. Bueno, por eso y porque es difícil de creer.

Omar asks him, "¿Entonces por qué ha habido tantos accidentes allí?"

UGALDE. ¿Crees en fantasmas?

OMAR. Fantasmas. Eso es absurdo.

UGALDE. Yo sólo te puedo ofrecer pruebas. Tú haz tus conclusiones.

¿Quieres saber o no? (0:48:30)

This dialogue is directed to viewers as a challenge: if they want an explanation for the unexplainable, they will have to open their minds to the possibility of supernatural causality, and as previously mentioned, the elaboration of a category such as the supernatural serves to reinscribe notions of the natural. The “pruebas” to which Ugalde refers appear later in the movie when we see mountains of files piled up in a room of his apartment, all of which attest to the existence of “something” at kilometer 31. In the above instances, machines and files register the occurrence of phenomena that are not officially categorized as real. In other incidents, however, institutionalized forms of documenting reality fail to corroborate the paranormal experiences of the film’s characters, thus unsettling the reliability of any one method of “proving” the reality of any one event. As with translations of *das Unheimliche* and other semantically related words, there seems to be something lost in the translation: something that resists textualization.

In the middle of the film when Catalina visits her comatose sister’s hospital room, she sees Ágata respond to her touch by moving her finger and then opening her eyes, staring directly at her in horror. Catalina screams for the doctor, who comes running into the room to check the electric monitors that record the patient’s heart and brain activity. Concluding that Ágata is still deep in a coma, the doctor explains to Catalina that sometimes electric shocks that occur in the bodies of comatose patients can cause their eyelids to suddenly open without them actually being awake. Catalina frantically insists that her sister looked directly at her in a deliberate, conscious manner, but the doctor

affirms that “no hemos registrado ninguna medición y los aparatos no engañan” (0:33:22). The contradiction between the cinematic portrayal of Catalina’s individual experience and the tools that objectively measure human experience causes a thrilling uneasiness to set in among viewers who may not be completely satisfied with the doctor’s explanation for what they just saw.

Upon leaving the hospital that same night, Catalina convinces Omar and Nuño to drive her to the site of the accident, stating that she can’t explain why her intuition is leading her there. After a territorial confrontation between the two men that reeks of machismo, Nuño takes the wheel while he continues to argue with Omar, who is in the back seat. While approaching kilometer 31, Nuño fails to see a young woman in time as she walks in the middle of the highway before he runs her over. The police take him away for questioning, but after examining the body of the victim, they set him free, having determined forensically that she had already been dead for around 24 hours. Upon leaving the police station, Nuño speaks with Catalina and confirms that they both saw the victim standing upright, walking in the middle of the highway.

Both of these scenes illustrate individual experiences that contradict the official story: the medical history documented on Ágata’s chart and the incident report filed at the police station. Through the graphic nature of the representation of Ágata’s medical condition, the objectivity of the electronic devices that register the presence of the supernatural, and Ugalde’s clandestine investigation and piles of “proof,” Castañeda creates a multiplicity of voices that bear witness of the reality of these unexplainable happenings, only to later question the scientific measurability of said happenings by

calling attention to the chilling insufficiency and inconsistency of official ways of documenting and understanding reality as it is experienced on an individual level.

The anxiety caused by this disturbing gap between individual and collective experience is strategically exploited in the film's narrative to upset the dichotomies through which meaning and logical, coherent narrative are negotiated. The word "awake" is defined by its polar opposite, "asleep." The clearness of its meaning depends on an absolute binary wherein common sense affirms that one can either be awake or asleep, but that these are mutually exclusive and clearly-identifiable modes of being. The same can be said for antonyms like "alive" and "dead," as previously discussed. Ágata appears to be trapped between these polar opposites, which unsettles notions of fixed meaning and provokes uneasiness and fear. If we acknowledge that words are insufficient (as they are for Catalina when she tries to describe to the doctor just *how* her comatose sister looked at her, despite nothing being registered on the machines) and that their meaning is negotiated along a system of false binaries (how can Ágata be both awake and asleep: both alive and dead, keeping in mind Cazdyn's observations about the importance of death as a temporal referent for establishing a present, and thus, one's existence), the meaning we assign to our existence becomes unsettled, since this meaning is simply a narrative made up of words that fail to fully translate human experience. This spine-chilling uneasiness is sold right on the film's DVD cover and promotional posters: "Kilometer 31: un lugar entre la vida y la muerte."

This uneasiness produces another effect, however, which results in the unconscious conclusion on the part of viewers that they can only trust their own eyes: what the camera puts in front of them. As Ugalde says, they can make their own

“conclusiones”—a challenge that creates a false sense of objectivity, considering that what spectators see and hear is meticulously orchestrated by the film’s director. The human impulse to create meaning, reality, and narrative—to construct a coherent version of what is *really* happening—causes viewers to cling to the narrative presented to them, trusting in the filmmaker’s authority and greater understanding of the plot. Paradoxically, the deconstruction of narrative credibility of sources within the film’s diegesis results in the extradiegetic reconstruction of said credibility.

National allegory and the repressed Mexican “self”

We have already mentioned the director’s obligation to fulfill his part of the contract—one that is as much a social contract as it is a business contract—with the public and his need to play with and subvert the delineations that separate notions of fantasy and reality in order to produce the desired effect: a spooked and ultimately entertained audience. Nonetheless, there are reasons that are more specific to Mexican hegemony and its history for which *Kilómetro 31* has had such an impact. Narrative credibility is not only necessary to entertain the Mexican public, but also to reinscribe within it a myth that has helped define its past: one that continues to haunt the present and will continue to haunt Mexican society fatalistically and indefinitely (Cazdyn might say chronically), according to the film’s narrative. Narrative mechanisms that impose and reinscribe the interests of Mexico’s dominant class can be found in the modernization of this myth.

The myth in question is that of the Llorona: a legend that is perhaps the most well-known in all of Mexican society and that carries with it a cornucopia of

sociocultural baggage and side effects. The national allegory, articulated in tandem with a modernized version of the Llorona myth, is not difficult to identify. The twin sisters are orphans, just as Mexico has become orphaned (metaphorically), having rejected its father, Spain (by declaring independence) and having suppressed (or at least irrevocably altered) the pre-Colombian societies that were its mother. The only thing we know about Ágata and Catalina's father is that he died in "un accidente de trabajo, en una construcción" (0:36:27). Spain's authoritative/fatherly presence in Mexico died after its colonial construction.

In contrast, the absence/death of the mother is of greater interest because it involves a reversal of the classic Llorona myth. In one scene, Catalina explains that her mother "estaba enferma. Tenía esquizofrenia. No recordaba qué pastillas tomar y mi papá le encargaba a Ágata que le recordara. Siempre confió más en ella; no sé por qué. Sentí celos. Yo le di ese frasco a mi mamá. Por mi culpa tomó pastillas de más y se ahogó. Ágata y yo la sacamos de allí; intentamos revivirla. Teníamos siete años" (0:36:37).

This monologue leaves much to be clarified, but several scenes later, we are shown a visual reconstruction of the incident in which the mother is sitting in a bathtub when Catalina gives her the bottle of pills. Instead of a mother who drowns her children, we see a child who accidentally drowns her mother. In Catalina's personal history, the duality linked to the mother is a clinical disorder: schizophrenia. In the national allegory depicted in Castañeda's version of the Llorona, the duality associated with the mother represents an identity crisis.

In the rhetoric of national identity, Mexico is a nation that in one moment proudly declares an Aztec identity and in another curses its indigenous roots, looking instead to

the Spanish metropolis in search of a European reflection. We often see brown faces in Mexican art (with noble indigenous subjects, for example), while in Mexican marketing campaigns, commercials, television, and film, we witness a demographically disproportionate representation of white faces. In Mexico, as in other countries, whiteness is portrayed as desirable. Mexicans constantly see themselves represented/reflected as white. Is it because they want to see themselves as white or because the perceived need/obsessive desire to do so has been imposed upon them by the continuation of a racialized hierarchy that has its roots in the Spanish conquest and colonization? This obsession with whiteness is tacitly (or at least unconsciously) reflected in *Kilómetro 31* and has been the subject of numerous essays and cultural productions, among them *El color de nuestra piel* by Celestino Gorostiza, and more recently, Eduardo del Río's *2010 ni Independencia ni Revolución*: a title calling attention to the fact that, in its 200 years of existence, the Mexican Institution has changed very little since colonial times).

At this point we should clarify that there are several versions of the Llorona legend and that not all of them include the previously mentioned racial element. In *Kilómetro 31*, Catalina and her Spanish boyfriend Nuño return to the scene of the accident and a cottage find in the woods that seems to be from a different time. They are greeted by an older woman with long hair and indigenous features. In reality, the actress is *mestiza*, but her look is “indigenous enough” to serve as an omniscient link to the mystical world: a domain assigned to and associated with the mysteries of indigenous culture. This mysterious woman explains to Catalina:

Tus respuestas están en una tragedia que pasó hace muchos años que ahora tiene que ver contigo y con tu hermana. . . . No es casualidad que estés

aquí. . . . Esto pasó hace muchos, muchos años en la época de la colonia en un pueblo cercano a la Ciudad de México. En ese pueblo vivía una joven de belleza imponente a la cual un militar español enamoró y engañó, utilizándola para procrear los hijos que su esposa no podía darle. Al darse cuenta, la joven enloqueció de ira y se arrojó con su hijo al río, arrastrándolo junto con ella a la muerte. Desde entonces las almas de la mujer y el niño están condenados a vagar por los alrededores de los ríos. Se encuentran con ellos sobre todo mujeres jóvenes. La pena de la madre se escucha como un aullido que clama por su hijo muerto. Algunos viven para contarlo; otros no. (0:53:50)

What is fascinating here is that in this story—and for that matter the entire film—the word “indigenous” is conspicuous by its absence: it stays in the air as a secret that cannot be named but simultaneously (and contradictorily) remains as an absent presence that is understood but not acknowledged. It was necessary to call attention to the fact that the “militar” who conquered and deceived her was “español,” but by not specifying the origin of the “joven de belleza imponente” it is understood that she was a local: in other words, indigenous. This absence of that which cannot be mentioned is what opens up the space inhabited by that which is ghostly, haunting, uncanny.

In accordance with the previously mentioned Mexican tradition in matters of cinematic and commercial representation, *Kilómetro 31* has no indigenous characters (at least of flesh and bone). With the exception of the mysterious *mestiza* woman, all of the characters are white. According to Jesús Martín Barbero in his summary of Carlos

Monsiváis's proposal regarding Mexico's "golden age" cinema, Mexicans go to the movies:

a *verse*, en unas imágenes que—más allá de lo reaccionario de los contenidos y los esquematismos de forma—le proponen al público modos de . . . reconocerse mexicanos. Con todas las mistificaciones y los chauvinismos que ahí se alientan, pero también con lo vital que resultaría esa identidad para unas masas urbanas que, a través de ella, amenguan el impacto de los choques culturales y por primera vez conciben el país a su imagen. (14)

In the context of *Kilómetro 31*, we could add that the spectators see themselves reflected once again as white, and that this is not the first occasion in which they have conceived "el país a su imagen," but rather one of many occasions that have formed a repetitive and ritualized chain in the imaginary of self conception: in this case, a national(ized) self. What is interesting is that a horror film such as *Kilómetro 31* depends as much on the presence of white protagonists as it does on the absence of indigenous characters: an absence that produces the desired effect of haunting a Mexican audience that is largely mestizo and has entered into the contract set forth by the horror genre with expectations of being spooked or unsettled.

Royle describes the uncanny as a search for an unknown part of oneself (1, 16) and has commented on its dual nature (7): the uncanny as the foreigner/stranger within oneself (a concept elaborated by Julia Kristeva), or as an enemy that is already inside the house: a concept explored by J. Hillis Miller, shedding new light on the translation of *das Unheimliche* as "the unhomely". Freud believed that the uncanny draws its perturbing

force not from its foreignness or unknown nature, but rather from a subconscious recognition of something that the conscious mind refuses or fails to recognize as familiar. In other words, it is the unwanted or unrecognized familiarity of something that causes it to be uncanny. It is here that we can see the role of the uncanny in negotiating racial identity in a Mexico that is still highly invested in a colonial social hierarchy. While whiteness continues to be represented in the media and in marketing campaigns as desirable, the indigenous portion of mestizo ancestry will implicitly and inevitably remain repressed, and repression gives rise to the fantastic, as Rosemary Jackson notes in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*: “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (4).

For many Mexicans of mestizo heritage, the lack of knowledge about their indigenous roots and the sense of loss associated with the conquest of distant indigenous ancestors contribute to the absence to which Jackson refers. Another absence is marked by the silencing of indigenous voices in Mexican national discourse: voices that continue to haunt the margins of Mexican society. One could discuss this silencing in political terms that register the absence of these groups in matters of representation, in economic terms that register their absence in the ultracapitalist Mexican economic model, or in Spivakian terms that register hegemony’s inability to hear indigenous voices (whether or not they are speaking in Spanish). In any case, one notes the presence of an absence: an internalized defamiliarization among the Mexican public that is effortlessly evoked to inject an intensified sense of the fantastic into the story-telling process, whether for

motives related to folklore in general² or to the industrialization of folklore and the creation of the horror genre (with its consequent economic motives), such as we observe in the case of *Kilómetro 31*.

The effect that this internalized defamiliarization has on a mestizo audience is two-fold: its inherent duality opens up a space in which the uncanny can reside, but it also allows for a gratifying response when textualized, even in an indirect way, as we see in *Kilómetro 31*. Considering that Mexicans are constantly being represented to themselves as white, the representation of a mystified indigenous essence—one which is simultaneously present and absent throughout the film—allows the Mexican audience to feel that they too possess an exotic, mystified essence. The film serves as an exciting escape valve for that which in mainstream media is consistently repressed. The (non-) representation of a repressed indigenous identity in a mystified, exoticized way helped ensure not only *Kilómetro 31*'s record success in Mexican box offices in 2007, but also its sequel, which according to the *Internet Movie Database*, is already in the works. Just as the film invokes *das Unheimliche* by unsettling the dichotomy between fantasy and reality and “between life and death” (again quoting the DVD cover), a similar effect results from casting the mestizo offspring of the Malinche as somewhere in between supposedly fixed European and indigenous identities. Mexico: a place between civilization and barbarianism.

Nonetheless, even though the mystification (or perhaps mythification) of the repressed indigenous self resulted in the above-mentioned effect, a greater and less

² Hal Foster has commented on the link between the uncanny and the surreal; Baudrillard proposes that surrealism can only survive as folklore (Royle 97).

innocent reason exists for this my(th)(st)ification. If we return to the national allegory presented by the movie in the “remarkably beautiful young woman,” we will see that the unacknowledged fact that this exploited mother was indigenous can be easily linked to another myth: that of the Malinche: the *chingada* or “fucked [over]” mother figure in the mestizo racial imaginary that predominates in present-day Mexico. Thanks to a dialogue between Omar y Ugalde, we discover that this “joven” is known as “la mujer del río Mixcoac” and that several people claim to have heard her howls in the area that is now the Mixcoac neighborhood of Mexico City. When Nuño compares a centuries-old colonial map with a modern map of the same area, he realizes that what used to be the Mixcoac River (in which the young woman and her child drowned) is now a controlled, urban, underground drainage river in the Mixcoac neighborhood that extends towards the Desierto de los Leones Highway.

In one scene, Catalina is asleep on the sofa in Omar’s apartment in Mixcoac. She awakens to the sound of voices coming from the television set, which displays an eerie blue that abruptly turns to static, as if registering a supernatural presence. As the electronic devices once again serve to document the existence of paranormal activity, Catalina begins to hear eerie, unintelligible whispers. The door to the apartment suddenly opens on its own. As she goes to close it, she hears her sister’s voice and sees a ghostly version of her (with legs intact but horrifically mutilated by the accident), dragging herself by her arms towards a nearby manhole that leads to the city’s drainage system. Once she arrives at the urban well, Catalina hears the howls of the Woman of the Mixcoac River, invoking yet again the national allegory: there is something evil—something perturbing and unresolved—in the foundation (in this case, literally in the

foundation) of Mexico City, and by extension, the entire country. Despite Mixcoac's civilized, modern appearance, a primitive and sinister force anachronistically lurks underneath the surface.

Centuries after her death, this woman continues to haunt Mexico's entrails because of the injustices she suffered during the colonial period that have remained unresolved. In his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida proposes the concept of justice as "jointure" and that of injustice as "disjointure," which gives rise to haunting and opens a space form which specters view us (27). The child in *Kilómetro 31* is an example of one such specter (according to Derrida's definition). The instances in which characters in the film actually see the child are rare and fleeting. It's much more common that they know or sense that he sees them, but no one manages to get a good look at him. They don't know how to see him correctly, just as Mexican hegemony has failed to "see"—Spivak might say "hear"—indigenous people, despite the fact that those same indigenous people can't help but "see" hegemony with a certain imposed clarity. Derrida describes this phenomenon as the visor effect: something that characterizes specters in general and differentiates them from ghosts and simulacra (7). The lack of visibility for indigenous people in the mainstream media facilitates the twisted, spectral (in)visibility with which they are (not) represented in the film.

Specters displace time: "time is off its hinges" (18), which allows for the coexistence of colonial and modern characters in the space that has become Mexico City and its surroundings. Just as in *Hamlet* (the Shakespearian play used by Derrida to exemplify specters), a protagonist attempts to set things right so the specter will leave him/her in peace. In *Kilómetro 31* during her encounter with the mysterious mestiza

woman, Catalina learns it is possible to save her sister if she can somehow manage to communicate with the spirit of the Woman of the Mixcoac River and sacrifice herself for her sister, thus helping the Woman find historical justice in the ritualistic sacrifice of a beautiful white Mexican woman. Catalina descends into Mixcoac's underground drainage tunnels and comes across the spirit of the moribund (and digitalized) Woman.

Catalina's boyfriend Nuño finds her in the tunnel and, among so much mysteriousness and ambiguity between the world of the living and that of the dead, mistakes her for a zombie (that is to say, he doesn't know how to "see" her correctly—to recognize her) and in a confused panic, ends up beating her to death with the butt of his rifle, being encouraged by the old mestiza woman who appears to him and convinces him that killing the terrifying zombie woman he sees is "la única manera" to set things right. Having been present for Catalina's death, the spirit of the Woman of the Mixcoac River is suddenly enabled to inhabit the comatose body of Ágata (her twin), who wakes up and repeatedly screams, "¿Dónde está mi niño?!" to end the movie, leaving us with the fatalistic impression that the injustices committed during the Spanish conquest are impossible to resolve—even if sensitive white Mexicans wish to sacrifice their privilege—and that indigenous fury and indignation *vis-à-vis* said injustices will continue to dominate that mystical world of the dead, occasionally tormenting a few select victims in the world of the living. Thus, any reconciliation with indigenous people is indefinitely postponed and ultimately portrayed as futile.

The racialized politics of anachrony

Prior to their tragic reunion in the urban drainage system of the Mixcoac area of Mexico City at the end of the film, the old *mestiza* woman explains to Nuño and Catalina how it might be possible for the twin sisters to use their unique connection to appease the atemporal wrath and suffering of the “joven de belleza imponente” from the colonial era. She affirms that “solo un espíritu noble y sensible es capaz de escuchar o ver a un alma en pena” (0:57:27). In other words, an abundance of compassion and cross-cultural, cross-temporal sensitivity allows certain individuals to “escuchar o ver” suffering “que no le[s] corresponde” (0:56:33). However, this sensitivity is not portrayed as something to be encouraged, but rather something to be feared: something that jeopardizes the sanity of a contemporary woman like Catalina and ultimately destroys her. Because of the atemporal voices she hears and ghosts she sees, her ability to function in the contemporary world—the “real” world—is compromised. She is no longer able to enjoy her privileges as a white, upper-middle-class Mexican and ends up dying in what is fantastically narrated as a failed attempt to sacrifice herself in order to rectify the historical injustice in whose disjuncture her sister’s soul has become trapped.

As previously mentioned, *Kilómetro 31* manipulates the fantasy/reality binary in a way that is orchestrated to elicit a hair-raising, physiological thrill from audience members. The way in which historical events are framed in the film’s narrative reveals a particular dynamic between the notion of history and the classification of reality versus fantasy. Briefly summarizing, the tendency in Western narrative to represent reality as history is proposed in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, wherein the author claims that, given the Bible’s central role in the formation of Western literary tradition, the notion of a historically conceivable beginning (the Genesis) and the promise of a history-ending

conclusion (the second coming of Christ) solidified the linear structure of narrative in the Western textual imaginary. Historical events are retrospectively interpreted as having a causal relationship to each other in a progression towards an end result that promises to explain everything that had previously happened. The end of times establishes a temporal referent upon which all events can be contextualized (i.e. historicized) and made sense of, and that which makes sense qualifies as reality. In his analysis of Auerbach's book, Robert Doran explains that the promise of Christ's second coming—the event that would retrospectively give meaning to all human existence—has slowly been replaced by the promise and the expectation of a historical narrative that coherently contextualizes the present. As governments and non-religious institutions became increasingly secular, the idea of an omniscient God began to disappear from the structure of Western historicism, replaced by a non-religious faith in the absolute and scientific objectivity of chronology.

The measurable exactness of clock and calendar became the ideological alibi of Western historicism, despite its inability to describe time as it is experienced on an individual, human level. Time, for example, passes more slowly for children than it does for adults, as it generally does for incarcerated people versus non-incarcerated people and for pregnant women in their final trimester versus people who are not pregnant. In her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Bliss Cua Lim calls this phenomenon heterotemporality, observing that time as it experienced on an individual basis cannot be translated into the coherent narrative of homogeneous, institutionalized time: “We fail to translate completely what our soul experiences: there is no common measure between mind and language” (Henri Bergeson qtd. in Lim 17). This dynamic is illustrated several times in *Kilómetro 31*, such as when the collective,

impartial language of the life support machines affirms that Ágata is still in a coma, but Catalina's individual experience suggests otherwise. The fact that Catalina hears and sees dead people is a vivid example of heterotemporality: her individual experience is not fully situated within coherent chronological confines and language fails her when she attempts to describe what she is experiencing.

Lim proposes that fantastic cinema constitutes a translation of dynamics within the human experience that are incoherent, contradictory, and atemporal (11): dynamics that defy the notion that an individual's reality can be clearly mapped out on a chronological timeline that purports to objectively contextualize human histories. Consequently, Lim presents her book in the context of postcolonial studies, observing that during the "discovery" of their colonies, European empires employed a temporal strategy that attributed cultural differences between indigenous civilizations and their own to the former's "primitive" character: an anachronistic quality that rendered their existence unintelligible along the progressive timeline of Western historicism, which was (and is) considered objective and universal (13). Because indigenous societies had not made the same "temporal progressions" as Western societies, the newly colonized were relegated to the margins of history because they could not properly inhabit it. Their own history resists textualization in the preconceived Western paradigm of linear chronology, just as *das Unheimliche* does.

Since historicism was the predetermined conceptual framework wherein Western civilization made sense of events and people, indigenous peoples did not qualify as real. Their existence was invalid and their time and space were (and are) "other:" untranslatable along hegemonic timelines. As Lim observes, fantastic cinema is a way to

translate anti-historic concepts such as heterotemporality and make them perceptible among viewers who are accustomed to the language of reality, which pretends—which perpetually promises, in the Biblical tradition of Western historicism—to be capable of representing everything. The untranslatability of individual experience is symbiotically linked to the untranslatability of concepts such as *das Unheimliche*. Given that terror has its roots in the unknown, and more specifically in that which is inherently unknowable about life and about individuals, horror films entail a whole range of possible interactions with their default referent, Western historicism.

In the case of *Kilómetro 31*, this interaction is one that reinforces the legitimacy of the narrative structures of Western notions of reality. As previously mentioned, the film invokes the mythical figure of the Llorona, while also implicitly reminding viewers of the Malinche: the mythical mother of the Mexican (i.e. mestizo) “race.” Without the words Llorona and Malinche ever being uttered on screen (along with the word *indígena*), a Mexican audience immediately and automatically recognizes the intertextual references to these mythical women, which causes them to also recognize themselves specifically as a Mexican audience: *hijos de la chingada*. The Malinche is the Eve figure in this national genesis: this temporal referent for the beginning of Mexican history (and thus, Mexican reality), established as such in retrospect (according to the narrative tradition of Western historicism) in order to provide a coherent explanation for the existence of people now called Mexicans, understood as no longer indigenous, but mixed (or ideally, white).

By representing the indigenous Woman of the Mixcoac River as the mysterious and anachronistic other, Castañeda reinforces the historicism upon which indigenous

people in Mexico are commonly conceptualized as primitive and archaic. Mexicans (i.e. the non-indigenous) who view the film, then, are constructed as properly inhabiting history, and thus, present reality: as contemporary Mexicans, they participate in the consumption of film, in the capitalist transaction of film, and therefore, in the “real world.” The film locates its viewers as safely within historicism as they witness the torment and punishment of those who dare (in this case, Catalina) to pay attention to the unsettling and indecipherable voices of the already dead who whisper from the margins of history and the margins of society, which are textualized as fantastic and anachronistic, and therefore, unreal. The dichotomy between reality and fantasy, then—purported to be governed by “common sense” and the alleged scientific impartiality of chronological time—is in fact an ideological construct that “regulates [the Mexican] economy” by depicting “other [indigenous] subjects” (to invoke this chapter’s Derridean epigraph) as not inhabiting reality, all in accordance to the political interests of the ruling class.

By alluding to indigenous subjects in indirect fashion as a ghostly, anachronistic absence/presence, by failing to explicitly name them, and by refusing them “real” visibility (drawing instead from “unreal” computer graphics and special effects), *Kilómetro 31* keeps the revolutionary potential of the already dead (as proposed by Cazdyn) at a safe distance, exiled from the contemporaneity of modern, “global” Mexico and the political paradigm within which it operates: a colonial socioeconomic hierarchy that is rooted in race and genealogical privilege. The narrative credibility constructed throughout Castañeda’s film causes viewers to return to everyday life with a reinforced appreciation for its supposed lack of horror. Ágata’s realistic car accident and gruesome mutilation elicits within viewers two seemingly contradictory reactions: 1) a gasp of

abject terror vis-à-vis the frailty of the human body and its vulnerability to unpredictable trauma or illness, freak accidents, and excruciating pain, and 2) a sigh of relief vis-à-vis their safe situatedness as spectators—the random luck that allows them the luxury of viewing a horror film for thrilling entertainment and then returning to the comforts of everyday life.

If the universe and the forces that dictate what lives and what dies operate in such violent and random ways, far beyond human control, then Mexican hegemony is very much interested in framing everyday life in the same terms, where the forces that dictate who lives and who dies, who suffers and who does not, who is rich and who is poor, etc. are also perceived to come from beyond the veil of death, far beyond human control. In this way, everyday life and the horrors it regularly inflicts on millions of people—the gross inequalities that define Mexico’s familiar daily landscape—are retextualized as the comforting reality that, for the moderately privileged who live their lives ignoring or at least accepting these inequalities, serves as an antonym for the word “horror” as it is applied to a film genre.

Since race plays such a central role in forming the aforementioned hierarchy, after breathing a sigh of relief that they have never been hit by a truck, had their legs amputated, or been haunted by ghosts—in other words, a sigh of relief that they have never found themselves on the losing side of the random lottery that haunts the human condition and threatens to violently bring about death and trauma on unsuspecting victims—viewers can subconsciously breathe another sigh of relief that they were not randomly born on the losing side of the Conquista and Mexico’s largely racially-determined lottery of (quality of) life and death. In other words, Mexican viewing

audiences can thank God—and not the negotiable sociopolitical hierarchy that dictates the narrative of reality—that they are not trapped in “*Kilómetro 31: un lugar entre la vida y la muerte*,” condemned to be already dead: “ya . . . muertos,” as commented by the EZLN (“Comunicado de respuesta” 273). In this way, the revolutionary specters of the already dead and their potential to call attention both to the horrors of everyday life and to the contestability of the political framework that regulates a certain reality are not allowed to materialize in *Kilómetro 31* as living, breathing, contemporary people of flesh and blood, but rather as anachronistic anomalies whose representation requires artistic creativity solely for the purpose of entertainment.

Conclusion: specters and hegemonic structure

One would think that, by calling the Mexican public’s attention to the injustices committed against the indigenous during the Spanish conquest, Castañeda’s narrative could be interpreted as progressive. After all, conservative narrative tends to avoid or at least minimize such acknowledgments of injustice. Notwithstanding, after constructing a national allegory and manipulating myths, digitalized images, and the spectral “spirits” of indigenous characters, Castañeda ultimately reinscribes a conservative narrative into the Mexican imaginary with a paradoxical narrative credibility that increases both the chilling effect on the viewer and the ideological efficiency of said narrative.

After manipulating the inherent falseness of the life/death dichotomy in order to fulfill its genre-defined expectations, the film ends up reaffirming a dichotomy that locates mainstream Mexicans in the “real” world and indigenous Mexicans in the “mystical” world. The narrative suggests that the indigenous will always have a mystical,

spiritual sort of vengeance instead of equality or reconciliation in *this* world—the tangible, economic, sociopolitical world: a complicated world that is extremely difficult to navigate. Instead of confronting this world with all of its problems and complications, it is easy—and much more entertaining—to imagine a my(th)(st)ified world and relocate the indigenous problem therein.

Royle affirms that “[w]e must not simply give ourselves up or over to the uncanny” (25), but that is precisely what *Kilómetro 31* does in order to enhance entertainment value and box office sales, in addition to the greater ideological reasons previously mentioned: the repeated my(th)(st)ification of indigenous people in a hegemonic narrative that locates them within a different realm—a mysterious and spiritual realm—in order to ensure their continued exclusion from centers of power, comfortably distanced from everyday reality through the magic of the horror film and firmly stagnated at the bottom of the Mexican socioeconomic model. Derrida observes that “[h]egemony [. . .] organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (37).

While this haunting is acknowledged in *Kilómetro 31*, the message is clear: ignore it. As evidenced by Catalina’s cross-temporal sensitivity, paying too much attention to the unintelligible whispers and the ghost-like images that haunt the margins of Mexican life can compromise one’s sanity and one’s ability to function in the “real” world, allowing one to become trapped between the temporalities—between past and present; between life and death—that shape the narrative of global capitalism. Despite “noble” intentions to right the wrongs of the past, any sacrifice of one’s privilege will inevitably fail to close the disjuncture in which this haunting resides, so it’s best not to even bother.

The film exploits the unsettling fact that, as *das Unheimliche* reminds us, language and institutionalized ways of documenting and establishing reality will always fail to fully translate individual human experience.

Just as the film attempts to infect its fantastic narrative with the credibility of the “hechos reales” upon which its plot claims to be based, the film attempts to link its fatalistic political narrative with the impossibility of resolving the gap between individual human experience and its textualization. In the institution of language, there will always be something lost in translation, just as in the institution of Mexico, there will always be people who fall through the cracks. Just as Cazdyn points out, “the system cannot function without its internal crisis” (1). Globalization—with its logic of commodities that derive their value from their perceived scarcity—dictates that, despite capitalism’s promised path to prosperity, certain segments of the population must fail to prosper, and that this chronic inequality is as inevitable as death itself.

Previously I mentioned that a sequel of *Kilómetro 31* is already in the works. Why does Mexican society continue to rehash and repeat myths such as the Llorona and the Malinche? Why do so many versions of these myths continue to circulate? According to Derrida, a key characteristic of specters is their plurality and their ability to keep coming back. Precisely for that reason his book is entitled *Specters* [plural] *of Marx*. In *Kilómetro 31*, the official/direct reason for the presence/absence of specters are the injustices of the Spanish conquest. The absent cause—and the reason why will continue witnessing the obsessive and repetitive return of specters in Mexican folklore and cinema—is the subjugation of indigenous people that continues to this day: the absent presence of indigenous people in Mexico’s ultracapitalist system. By my(th)(st)ifying the injustices

committed against them in colonial times, the present-day injustices seem to evaporate in spectral fashion. Derrida postulates that there is neither memory nor future without an absent Marx, which obsessively reminds us—like a specter that always comes back to torment us—of the contradictions and injustices inherent in killer capitalism. Meanwhile, many in the film industry will continue to reinscribe the system of which they are beneficiaries.

CHAPTER 3

GENDERED SPACE AND HETERONORMATIVE TIME IN *KILÓMETRO 31*

“One regulates an economy with one’s texts, with one’s family, children, *desire*.”
—Jacques Derrida (*The Ear of the Other* 156-57; emphasis added)

In the previous chapter, I explored temporal strategies used in *Kilómetro 31* to my(st)(th)ify indigenous Mexicans and to position the logic of global capitalism as contemporary, and thus, as real. Of particular interest to us in this chapter are the ways in which, as indicated in the epigraph, the reinscription and regulation of Mexico’s economy depends not only on a certain regulation of “other subjects”—the indigenous—but also on a certain regulation of “family, children, desire”—in other words, heteronormativity. It is not entirely inconsequential that in 2006, a year prior to the film’s release, Mexico City passed a civil union law recognizing same-sex couples. While the looming specter of the Zapatista rebellion continued to haunt the national imaginary, a more immediate threat to traditional social order was manifesting itself in the form of increased visibility for queer subjects, as social progress in the Western world continues to push in the direction of civil rights for so-called sexual minorities.

These intersecting notions of progress—progress as defined in terms of global capitalism, as discussed in the previous chapter, and progress as defined in terms of civil rights—demonstrate how the concept of progress often manifests itself as a double-edged sword, concurrently framing both the narrative of globalization and that of human rights, all according to the logic of capitalism as it adapts its narrative to account for change and guarantee its continued function as the lens through which reality is perceived: outside of critical focus, invisibly framing our worldview. In Mexico, same-sex partnerships are

now legally recognized in some ways, but only inasmuch as they mimic their opposite-sex counterparts within the traditional mold of marriage. Just as death is used as a temporal referent to limit the revolutionary imaginary as discussed in the previous chapter, “til death do us part” is used as a framework in which to neutralize any potential sexual revolution that might reconfigure the parameters within which society is organized and the categories according to which social subjects are constructed, identified, and interpellated: categories such as man/woman, gay/straight, child/adult, single/married, parent/non-parent, etc.

Because women have been perceived as the source from whence social subjects arrive into the world, women, their bodies, and their sexualities have traditionally been subjected to gender-specific normative scrutiny. This observation, of course, is far from groundbreaking, as is the connection between horror films and the particular role women typically play in them. A tip-of-the-iceberg bibliography on women in horror films might include *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (ed. Barry Keith Grant, 1996); Isabel Cristina Pinedo’s *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997); Gregory William Mank’s series on *Women in Horror Films* (1999); *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (ed. Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, 2006); and *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas* (ed. Christine Gledhill, 2012).

What I am most concerned with in this chapter is the perceived queerness of the female body, its potential to subvert the notions of subjectivity that are naturalized by normative discourse, and its interplay with utopian narratives that regularly employ the rhetorical figures of family and children. Keeping in mind the death-framed temporal

paradigm addressed in the previous chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which women are portrayed as existing outside of time: an institution whose scientifically objective measurements provide an alibi for the highly ideological ways in which hegemonic interests position themselves within a homogenizing and normativizing linear narrative that paradoxically touts progress while simultaneously perpetuating the status quo as a chronic set of conditions that can only be managed, never cured, thus “coloniz[ing] the future” (Cazdyn 47).

Just as indigenous Mexicans are peripherally cast outside of reality as revenge-seeking spirits that haunt the present, women are depicted as the weaker, more vulnerable sex in urgent need of rescuing by their stronger male counterparts from these supernatural hauntings. Yet because women are also cast as the subversive sex—the sex that problematizes the notions of social subjecthood upon which society is conceived and organized—this “rescuing” also entails a certain “necessary” domination if order is to be maintained: if a certain reality is to be enforced. Just as the Cain and Abel myth set the Western precedent for racialized hierarchies of power in which one race must necessarily dominate another, the tired and timeless Adam and Eve myth—a myth in which the original default gender for humanity is masculine and the feminine is represented as a subversive and supplementary other who must be kept in check if order is to be maintained—is repeated in this supposedly modernized version of the Llorona myth. This myth is tacitly paired with the Malinche myth in order to establish a certain genesis for Mexican society: a starting point for a national imaginary framed, as previously mentioned, by death. Since birth (i.e., reproduction) is textualized as death’s polar opposite—in this case, the birth of “la raza” through the reproductive union between the

traitorous, indigenous Malinche and the conquering Spaniard Hernán Cortés—this chapter will lead to an analysis of the rhetorical figure of the child in *Kilómetro 31* and its relationship both to the Mexican national imaginary and the regulation of the socioeconomic status quo.

The demarcation of feminine and masculine space

Despite the multiple versions of the Llorona myth in Mexican (and Latin American) folklore, its principal ideological effect remains unchanged. The figure of an anti-mother is reinscribed as a binary pole in the social imaginary: a woman who, in open defiance of her prescribed role as a mother, drowned her child(ren). La Llorona represents the antithesis of the institutionally established ideal for Mexican women and serves as an example of the dire consequences of any deviation from the reproductive and heteronormative norm. The opposing binary pole is, of course, the always self-effacing Virgin Mother. Women who do not conform to this norm, like the Llorona, risk eternal condemnation to a mystical purgatory between the world of the living and that of the dead: a fluid space devoid of the stability of land and the presence of God the Father, patriarchal guarantor of post mortem order.

In this modernized and urbanized version of the Llorona myth, Castañeda plays with this fluid space in which life and death cannot be neatly separated, exploiting water's destabilizing properties to produce an unsettling effect among viewers. As Julia Kristeva has noted, the openness of fluidity—its resistance to form—is associated with the feminine, consequently contributing to the mystification and mythification of women (as elaborated by Simone de Beauvoir). In this section, I will study the cinematic use of

water in *Kilómetro 31* and the gendered link it creates between the uncanny/unexplainable and the feminine/(intra)uterine in order to relegate women to the realm of the supernatural, thus reinscribing the realm of the logical/rational as masculine territory and even going so far as to justify violent reactions against the feminine threat to social order.

Horror films are particularly useful for exemplifying the rhetorical link between the scientific category of liquid and the ideological category of women and femininity. In her essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams draws from Carol Clover’s “body genres”—pornography and horror films—and adds a third genre (melodrama) to affirm that “the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen” (4). The close proximity of this relationship between the body projected onto the screen and that of the spectator consists at least partially of a manipulation of bodily fluids: sexual fluids, blood, tears, etc. “What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (5): an uncontrolled excess that resists form, just as liquid itself resists form. In their book on the theoretical implications of the relationship between cinema and the body, Elsaesser and Hagener observe that liquid has a very particular function in horror (121), a genre whose relationship with the concept of the abject (as defined by Kristeva) has been analyzed by Barbara Creed.

Given that the abject destabilizes notions that claim to be fixed such as the notion of social order, horror films are important because they specialize in the projection of abject images: “mutilated or dead bodies, bodily secretions, discharges and waste”

(Elsaesser y Hagener 121). The border between interior space and exterior space is not respected: liquids flow through this border and suspend the order of public (exterior) everyday life. Creed proposes that horror films link the abject to the maternal by blurring the lines between the interior and the exterior. Indeed, political discourse has not ceased to debate the legal definitions of the interior of a pregnant woman's body: the delimitations that separate the individuality of the fetus from that of the woman.

These borders between individuals are necessary in order to maintain social order, which depends on a coherent narrative to construct social subjects—the most basic building blocks for social order—based on the individual separateness of their body: a space defined by interior and exterior parameters. Creed affirms that “The horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human” (14). Given that social order constantly demands an ongoing negotiation of the social subject and its individual coherence, *Kilómetro 31* and many other horror films reinscribe the authority of patriarchal order by punishing the transgressor of said order. Women, by virtue of their own biological “nature,” threaten to compromise the structural integrity of social order and to problematize the notion upon which it is founded: the notion of coherent individuality.

The antonymous relationship between fluidity and solidity is an important one for symbolic order in general, but particularly for any political agenda that wishes to naturalize the concepts upon which its narrative is founded. Social order depends on the reification and solidification of concepts, which are then positioned along binaries (such as the ones mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) to organize linguistic and social

grammar. Once these concepts have achieved solid, structural status in any institution, they become part of the landscape and remain unchallenged in political debate, absenting themselves from the realm of the contestable—defined as that which is undergoing a process of negotiation—and serving to frame political debate in strategically beneficial ways.

Concepts are taken for granted as solid, pre-existing, and static, while processes are sites of fluid, ongoing negotiation. For example, in the previous chapter I discussed the ideological implications of a clear, conceptual separation between life and death: a separation that ignores the symbiotic and dynamic relationship between these two supposedly opposing concepts. When death is considered to be a fixed, unavoidable, external concept, it can be exploited to frame and foreclose on the ongoing process of political debate. In terms of social subjectivity, as another example, once racial categories like indigenous, mestizo, and white are accepted as concepts, the ideological processes that continuously negotiate, uphold, and impose these identities are allowed to operate under the radar, outside of the realm of political debate.

In *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Rosi Braidotti establishes this key difference between concepts and processes and proposes that traditional Western thought (including academic thought) is often overly invested in describing the way things are (or were or will be) instead of recognizing that things never “are,” but are instead in the continuous process of being: a process that is political *par excellence*, and is therefore contestable and negotiable. This is why she proposes new “figurations” of social subjectivity: cartographic approaches that locate one’s place in space and time not according to coordinates along a fixed x-y axis, but rather in a way

that acknowledges the “nomadic” nature of both social “subjectivity” and the map upon which it is negotiated (2).

Put another way, subjectivity is a fluid process rather than a solid concept, which is why fluidity (as a flowing process that resists form) poses a threat to the solid concepts—or better put, the illusion of solid concepts—that serve as structural alibis for hegemonic order. The concept of a male gender and a female gender, for example—which serves as a fundamental organizing pillar of society—ignores the fact that what is considered to be masculine and what is considered to be feminine is an arbitrary process that varies across cultures and through time. The institution of gender is an illusion that must be constantly maintained precisely because it is a social construct—a process—rather than a biological fact. Where the concept of gender legitimates itself on biological sex (despite the fact that even biological sex does not operate along a neatly separated binary), the concept of the social subject legitimates itself on the physical individuality of the human body (despite biological complications of this individuality as exhibited by pregnant women and twins, both of which receive attention, not by coincidence, in *Kilómetro 31*). This is why conservative narratives are highly invested in reinscribing concepts such as femininity and masculinity, and this is why in *Kilómetro 31* specifically, feminine and masculine space is clearly delineated, and the fluidity in general, besides being gendered as feminine, is depicted as a queerly sinister threat to social order.

I use the word queer here not only because of the gender normativity invoked by concepts such as masculine and feminine, but because queer theory, as proposed by David William Foster, works against the closure and fixity of patriarchal discourse:

Lo *queer* se fundamenta en una epistemología *abierta* que repudia las definiciones *fijas* sobre las que se tensa el patriarcado y sus definiciones de la sexualidad. Fijar la lengua, y de ahí fijar el mundo, siempre ha sido el sueño rector del patriarcado, y uno de los impulsos cruciales de lo *queer* es la subversión de este proyecto en aras de otras maneras de construir una epistemología de la experiencia y la subcategoría que de ella constituye la sexualidad. (19-20; emphasis added)

The queerly and fluidly subversive potential of the uterus—feminine space that renders impossible the coherent separation of individual social subjects, and thus, the meaning of the individual—becomes apparent in the first few seconds of the film, which begins in darkness and a whispered feminine voice: “Terminó todo lo que amaba en la vida, y después, la vida misma.” Immediately afterward, light begins to appear, revealing that we are submerged in water. Air bubbles obsessively attempt to escape to the surface as the camera lingers in this eerie gendered liquidity. Just like uterine fluid (and with implicit reference to it), this feminine liquid serves to ascribe women with a closeness—both biological and sinister—to the “powers” that create and end human life, relating them not only to the unsettling falseness of the individual coherence upon which social order is based and legitimized, but also to the unsettling falseness of the life/death dichotomy that I will continue explore.

Returning briefly to his famous analysis of the *heimlich/unheimlich* dichotomy, Sigmund Freud postulated that *das Unheimliche* seems eerie to us not because of its unknown nature, but precisely because of its eerie familiarity. If something seems strange and unfamiliar to us at the same time that it elicits a perturbing response from us, Freud

proposes it is because, on an unconscious level, we recognize something familiar that the conscious mind does not wish to recognize. This theory problematizes the coherent, concise separation of concepts that by definition should be complete and total opposites. The binary system through which words and their antonyms are defined reveals itself to be insufficient when exploring the relationship between concepts so diametrically opposed as *das Heimliche* and *das Unheimliche*. The horror genre, then, traces its roots to the gap between the conscious and unconscious mind and in the problematization of the dichotomies through which all meaning is constructed.

Luis López Ballesteros translated the term *das Unheimliche* into Spanish as *lo siniestro*: a word that captures the subversive threat this phenomenon represents for social order, which also constructs its meaning through dichotomies (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, married/single, etc.). If the antonym of *siniestro* is *diestro*, then that which is familiar—that which is intelligible—belongs “a la diestra de Dios Padre:” consecrated as part of symbolic order, which is patriarchal *par excellence*. J. Hillis Miller carried out a similar study of the false nature of the guest/host dichotomy, observing that, once it enters the domain of the host, the guest becomes part of it, and that the distinction between the two begins to be erased in parasitic fashion.

According to Miller, “the enemy [is] always already within the house” (407), and as mentioned in the previous chapter, death is already inside us. In his book *The Uncanny* (the most common English translation of *das Unheimliche*), Nicholas Royle comments on this dualistic aspect of the uncanny, defining it as a stranger within oneself (7). Julia Kristeva explores this theme in *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Powers of Horror*: the latter book containing a detailed reflection on the abject. An analysis of all of these

dichotomies—*heimlich/unheimlich*, guest/host, stranger/self—reveals their false nature: a falseness brought into perspective by the body of the pregnant woman and its capacity to complicate the borders of individual subjectivity.

Consequently, the uterus is conceived of as the source of the sinister uncanny: all that threatens to subvert the meaning ascribed to human life through symbolic order, given that all meaning is constructed through binary systems. The uterine fluids that make life possible simultaneously guarantee its antonym: a mortal enemy we always carry inside of us. Royle observes that death, far from being a distant, external episode whose futurity remains suspended until our time has come, “is right inside us, working away busy as a mole, all the time” (85). Analyzing Freud’s theories, Royle comments on the uterine nature of death, observing that our bodies end up buried under the surface of Mother Earth: we go back into an interior space after our time in the exterior space of social order has ended. The falseness of the dichotomies that dictate symbolic order can lead to the horrifying acknowledgment not only of its arbitrariness, but of its inadequacy to represent the real (in its Lacanian sense: death, desire, loss).

The fact that the process of life begins under the surface of the female anatomy—beyond our capacity to circumvent language by seeing—contributes to the mythification of women as the link to an imaginary afterlife or even pre-existence containing the answers to the unexplainable: all that which is unnamable by symbolic order (in other words, the real). Basing himself on Freud and his reflections on intrauterine life, Royle proposes that the fact that we existed before being born—submerged in uterine fluid before our existence could be visually proven (before crossing, in abject fashion, the previously-mentioned border between the interior and the exterior)—invites speculation

on a spiritual, intrauterine pre- and post-existence that lies beyond our capacity to see it but within reach of a certain mystical, feminine intuition.

In *Kilómetro 31*, the connection between the (super)visual and the fluid feminine is established after the first line of the film, which, as whispered by a female voice (presumably that of actress Iliana Fox) insinuates the supposed femininity of death: “Terminó todo lo que amaba en la vida, y después, la vida misma.” The camera appears to be submerged in water until the fleeting, fluid images dissolve to reveal the image of a human eye. A close-up into the darkness of the eye’s pupil transformed into the darkness of night along the aforementioned highway, where Ágata is driving in a car by herself. To complete the visual transition from the film’s first images to the diegetic events of the plot, the continued presence of water can be observed in Ágata’s eyes. We later learn that she was crying due to a discussion she had just had with her boyfriend Omar: a misunderstanding provoked by the unsettling failure of the symbolic (words) to convey the real (emotions, feelings, and intentions prior to their codification through language).

Fighting back her tears, the short-haired Ágata arrives at kilometer marker 31, where the previously-described accident with the ghostly child occurs. At this same time, Catalina is at her nearby home with Nuño when suddenly she senses that something horrific has just happened. She begins to have visions of the accident, and convinced of her telepathic intuition, she runs out onto the highway. Nuño can’t explain his girlfriend’s sudden terrified behavior and goes running after her. They both arrive at the scene of the accident on foot, where they find Ágata on the brink of death.

What is suggested is that, having simultaneously developed within a common uterine space, the twin sisters share an eerie connection whose secrets defy rational

explanation and are rooted in that mysterious space within the feminine body. By virtue of their own anatomy as carriers of uterine fluid (with all of its consequent inherent powers), we are led to assume that they have intensified access to a properly feminine intuition that, in their case as twins, reaches telepathic proportions.

The telepathic episodes continue to occur sporadically while the comatose Ágata lies in a hospital bed with her post-amputation thighs thoroughly bandaged. The graphic, grotesque nature of the hospital scene immediately following the accident, besides contributing to the narrative credibility I have previously discussed, also demonstrates the importance of the abject in horror films. The structural integrity of Ágata's body has been compromised: the border between her body's interior and exterior has been violated. Her body is open and vulnerable: blood flows as her body fails to fulfill its social function of containing a coherent, individual subject. The binary system that dictates the grammaticality of public, normal, everyday life has been suspended and we are left in horror to witness the real: the loss of part of the human body whose integrity dictates the parameters of the social subject. We are witnessing the unsettling vulnerability of the form (words/the body) that claims to serve as a vessel for content (meaning/the soul). In the hospital, Catalina hears the enigmatic voice of her sister asking her for help: communication that subverts the individuality of the social subject upon which symbolic order depends. She doesn't know how to help her, but in the hospital's waiting room, she reveals to the men that she feels a certain unexplainable, intuitive need to return to the site of the accident:

CATALINA. Nuño, ¿me puedes llevar a la carretera después de comer?

NUÑO. Sí, claro. ¿A tu casa?

CATALINA. No, al lugar del accidente.

OMAR. ¿Para qué?

CATALINA. Ágata atropelló a un niño. ¿Dónde está ese niño?

OMAR. Catalina, no hay ningún niño y no hay nada que ver en la
carretera.

CATALINA. Necesito ir . . . no te puedo explicar.

[*Omar thinks about it, then touches her shoulder.*]

OMAR. Vete a comer algo . . . y vamos a la carretera.

[*Catalina leaves.*]

NUÑO. Mira, Omar. No te vuelvas a confundir [*referring to a previous, extradiagetic incident in which Omar had kissed Catalina, having mistaken her for Ágata*].

OMAR. ¿Por qué me dices eso?

NUÑO. Te lo sabes.

OMAR. ¿Estás en serio? (0:33:50)

This conversation is interesting because once again, we note the demarcation of feminine and masculine territory. The notion that Catalina needs Nuño to drive her to the site of the accident based on a premonition establishes that men are meant to carry out practical, concrete tasks, literally navigating through the real world, while women are meant to follow their intuition and navigate through the illogical, emotional realm of the spiritual. Additionally, Catalina must negotiate between two competing male interests in order to secure transportation from point A to point B. Even though she is perfectly capable of driving to kilometer marker 31 (a location that, after all, is within running

distance of her own house), it is understood that it is better for Nuño to drive, even though she can't explain her reasoning to him because it is rooted in a slippery, mystical, feminine (il)logic that escapes the very form that would render it intelligible.

After the dialog transcribed above, Catalina goes out to the street to smoke, where Nuño engages her in a conversation that I will cover later in this chapter. Omar interrupts this conversation by coming out of the hospital prepared to drive to the site of the accident, as requested by Catalina. Perhaps having perceived the friction between the two men with respect to their territorial dispute, Catalina asks, "Omar, ¿no prefieres que maneje Nuño? Digo, no has dormido casi nada" (0:37:47). Omar, visibly annoyed, loudly exhales and hands the keys to Nuño without looking at him, thus performing his masculinity as, by "nature," in hostile conflict with competing masculinities. This performance of masculinity is especially apparent in Omar's relationship with the policeman Ugalde. They first meet when Omar takes the initiative to return to kilometer 31 on his own and Ugalde catches him snooping around in what he deems to be his territory. Sounding his police siren and summoning Omar to demand "qué está haciendo," Ugalde struts around his police vehicle, chomping his gum in ostentatiously arrogant, "masculine" fashion:

UGALDE. ¿Se te perdió algo?

OMAR. [*looking away, annoyed at having to explain his activities to another alpha male*] No. Lo que pasa es que mi novia tuvo un accidente anoche y estaba viendo a ver si no se quedaba nada por aquí.

UGALDE. ¿Seguro?

OMAR. ¿Seguro qué?

UGALDE. ¿Seguro no estás buscando a alguien?

OMAR. ¿Cómo sabe?

UGALDE. No busques. Fue un accidente. Yo estoy a cargo de la
investigación.

OMAR. ¿Está investigando?

UGALDE. Podría decirse.

OMAR. [*laughing and shaking his head in mocking skepticism*] Podría
decirse.

UGALDE. No te metas en problemas. No investigues por tu cuenta.

[. . .]

UGALDE. [*impatient and condescending*] A ver déjame, te explico . . .

OMAR. [*visibly irritated and increasingly confrontational, changing
registers from the formal usted to the informal tú*] No me expliques . . .

[. . .]

OMAR. ¿Sabes qué? Dame tu nombre y tu número de placa.

UGALDE. [*smiling*] Ya. [*laughing as he gets into his car*] Martín Ugalde,
02034.

OMAR. ¿Martín qué?

UGALDE. Mira. Por tu propio bien, no vuelvas por acá. [*starting the
engine and driving off*]

OMAR. [*shouting after him*] ¿Me estás amenazando? (0:20:30)

Besides establishing masculinity as necessarily in conflict with others, this
exchange also establishes a certain patriarchal authority in terms of Mexico's institutions.

Ugalde may be an arrogant policeman who treats Omar condescendingly, but it is only because he has a greater understanding of the situation at hand and wishes to protect him in paternalistic fashion. Metonymically, then, the institutionalized systems of power in Mexico that may appear indifferent to citizens' particular situations, to their sufferings, etc., are portrayed as more knowledgeable, more empathetic, and less corrupt than they may appear to be at first glance (in a later scene inside Ugalde's police station, a "No más mordidas" sign is ostensibly present). Trust in the system is reinscribed, as is the previously-discussed narrative credibility in terms of what turns out to be Ugalde's extensive, non-public investigation into the recurrent deaths at kilometer 31. For as hostile and indifferent as Mexico's institutions may seem from the outside, one must trust that on the inside, there are rough but good men like Ugalde who are tirelessly working in secret for the greater good.

It is portrayed as futile to challenge these systems of power and the structure they impose. Omar will sooner die (which he eventually does) than awaken any kind of revolutionary consciousness that would seek to reconfigure existing power structures. Instead, as a man, it is Omar's job to work within the system and according to its logic in order to gain access to Ugalde's greater knowledge. This logic includes a certain code of masculinity in which he must first prove he is man enough to deserve fraternal treatment from Ugalde, who is situated higher up on the masculine hierarchy of power. This goal is achieved when Omar goes to Ugalde's police station and files a complaint about his encounter with him. After demonstrating that he is man enough to challenge Ugalde within his own realm of authority, Omar gains the policeman's respect, who then gives him the address to his apartment, where he has dedicated an entire room to research

regarding kilometer 31. When Ugalde opens his door, the camera is positioned in a way that captures the masculinity of his living space. The apartment is ostentatiously dirty and unkempt, with dirty dishes left on the table and a general lack of decoration or aesthetic sensibility. Ugalde is too obsessed with his investigation to permit himself the perceived luxury of female companionship and its accompanying frills.

This fraternal sharing of information between these two ego-driven macho men is contrasted with the relationship between Nuño and Catalina, who withholds information from him because, as a man (and therefore, a rational being), he simply wouldn't understand her. Another terrifying encounter occurs between Catalina and the supernatural world when, after taking a nap on a couch in the apartment her sister shared with Omar, she hears the voice of Ágata crying out for help and then sees her dragging her mutilated body towards a municipal drainage well in the incident described in the previous chapter. Upon seeing her sister lower herself into the municipal drain, Catalina runs back into the house, profoundly horrified, in search of the anti-anxiety pills—gendered medication that heralds the historicism of female hysteria and housewives on valium or lithium—given to her by Ágata's attending physician.

Nuño startles her when he enters, but she doesn't even attempt to explain to him what has just happened. Terrified, she prefers instead to take her pills in silence. “¿Qué pasa? ¿No te encuentras bien?” Catalina answers “no” and Nuño asks her “¿Por qué?” (0:29:36). Frustrated by his seemingly insensitive pragmatism (understood as properly masculine), she tells him: “Nuño, ¿qué quieres que te diga?” She knows it's not worth the trouble trying to explain the unexplainable to him. In this way, a certain essentialism is

reinscribed that suggests biological difference as the reason for Nuño's inability to understand the incoherent mysteries of his girlfriend.

Nuño, with his pragmatic initiative and his adept use of institutionalized forms of knowledge such as maps, books, and newspapers—discovers that the same river connects kilometer 31 and the Mixcoac neighborhood. In this same scene, amidst his piles of research, Catalina comes across a newspaper clipping from 1941 reporting the death of the old woman she and Nuño had previously met and conversed with. Noting her sudden shock, Nuño asks, “¿Qué te pasa? ¿Has visto algo?” to which Catalina quickly replies:

CATALINA. No, no. [*closing the folder containing the newspaper article and heading for the door*] Voy a ver a mi hermana.

NUÑO. ¿Te acompaño? [*we hear the door shut*] ¿Catalina? [*Nuño exhales loudly and looks out the window, frustrated at Catalina's inability to consistently engage him in coherent conversation.*] (1:07:47).

Knowing Nuño's logical mind would refuse to believe what she had just discovered, Catalina chooses instead to lie to him, deceiving him in a way that fits into the overall narrative concerning the biologically inevitable patterns of communication between men and women. She prefers not to even attempt to explain to him her plans to return on her own (without male protection) to the cabin in the woods near kilometer 31 where they initially met with the old woman. Her participation in the masculine symbolic order (the Lacanian Nom-du-Père) is limited and fleeting, and in this case, she uses language to deceive Nuño.

Meanwhile, through his examination of Ugalde's mountains of evidence, Omar comes to understand that Catalina's premonitions about recurring appearances of the old

woman at or near kilometer 31 are “correct.” He heads towards kilometer 31 as well, and Catalina passes him as he is seen walking along the side of the highway. She stops the car and finds him in an eerie, speechless stupor with dried blood all over his face and obvious signs of bodily trauma. “Omar, ¿qué te pasó? Omar, ¿qué te pasa? ¡Omar, me estás asustando! ¡Contéstame, por favor! . . . ¡Omar, contéstame, carajo, contéstame!”

(1:08:49). Without saying a word, Omar gets in the car and points further down the highway. Catalina drives for a short while until they arrive at kilometer 31, where he leads her to the site where his dead body is laying. Suddenly, the Omar who was by her side disappears and she’s left alone with the lifeless corpse and an eerie mist (i.e., vaporized liquid) that pours in from the surrounding forest. She calls the police on her cell phone to report yet another dead body at kilometer 31. After disconnecting her call, her phone notifies her that she has one unchecked voicemail: “Catalina, habla Omar. Urge que te comuniques conmigo. Conocí a una persona que . . . Bueno, tienes razón. Hay que encontrar a esa mujer . . . en el drenaje del río Mixcoac. Hay una entrada por mi casa. Voy a buscarte a la carretera. Háblame, por favor” (1:11:43).

Omar’s death is important here for two connected reasons. First, it frames the territory of Catalina’s “razón” as located beyond death. Just a few minutes earlier, Nuño had attempted unsuccessfully to communicate with Catalina, supposedly because as members of different sexes, they were operating in different realms. Omar began to slip away from the logical realm of masculine knowledge by beginning to see the “razón” of Catalina’s supernatural premonitions. The result was his nearly immediate death. Secondly, Omar’s death brings about his departure from symbolic order, which is why he is incapable of speaking when Catalina begs him to “¡Contéstame, carajo, contéstame!”

He is unable to offer her some kind of narrative to explain his horrific, bloody condition. This is yet another way in which symbolic order is reinscribed as masculine and any alternatives to this established order, with all its ideological implications for the status quo, lie outside of life in death, and therefore, beyond the realm of the possible or the feasibly imaginable.

Catalina then heads to the urban “drenaje del río Mixcoac” referenced by Omar in his voicemail. It is no coincidence that, in the film’s climactic accumulation of supernatural events—events that will lead to Catalina’s passage from the world of the living to that of the dead—water abounds. On the city’s surface, it is raining profusely, while the water from the city’s drainage system flows through its subterranean womb. With all of its openness, fluidity, and instability, water must be present in order to unchain this most sinister series of events. It is therefore not surprising that this space is also dominated by women.

The ghost of the old woman appears again, liquid-like in its digitized representation. As a citizen of this underworld, she is aware of some of its mysteries and explains that this is the place where Catalina will have to “sacrificar[s]e por [s]u hermana” (1:23:33). Once Ágata’s tortured spirit has been invoked, a legion of bony arms rises from the water—the city’s uterine fluid—lifting up her moribund body, which drags itself by its arms from the underground canal into the darkness, attempting to walk with its mutilated legs. Then, a digitized representation of the spirit of the Llorona appears, its hair floating in the air as if submerged in water. Screaming and swimming through the air, she advances threateningly towards Catalina only to then disappear. At this same moment, a shift to a secondary camera angle reveals Catalina to be kneeling by the canal

with her face submerged in the water. Could it be that all the supernatural events we have just witnessed occurred solely in her (feminine) head?

From behind her we witness the apparition of the liquid-like ghost of her mother, who tells her not to be afraid and to come “con nosotras” (1:26:58)—a pronoun that emphasizes the exclusively feminine nature of this mysterious and incoherent underworld, so far removed from patriarchal order. The Llorona returns, then suddenly the camera changes to the perspective of Nuño, who has recently arrived on the scene carrying a rifle and finds Catalina alone, standing in the canal in a sort of trance, babbling incoherently and hysterically. Upon his arrival, he is unable to see anything in the feminine/fluid/supernatural realm in which Catalina finds herself submerged. He steps in to the canal, snaps her out of her trance, and the two of them embrace, relieved to be back to normality.

Notwithstanding, by lowering himself into feminine territory and coming into contact with the water—that mysteriously feminine force—Nuño becomes confused (in much the same way that Omar had previously become confused by Catalina) in this realm of illogical illusions. The urban drainage transforms into the river of colonial days. Biologically incapable of navigating this underworld, Nuño becomes disoriented and begins to see Catalina as a decomposing zombie, dressed in colonial fashion. Horrified and confused, Nuño panics and proceeds to brutally beat Catalina with the butt of his rifle until lieutenant Ugalde arrives to bring him out of his female-induced confusion and restore order.

Tragically, the beating Nuño gave Catalina proves fatal. Upon her death, a space is opened in time—necessarily fluid, feminine, and sinister—through which the spirit of

the Llorona passes in intrauterine fashion to then possess the body of her comatose twin sister, who wakes up in the hospital screaming “¿Dónde está mi niño?!” (1:34:35). Nuño wakes up handcuffed to a bed, where Ugalde asks if he remembers anything about the previous events. Nuño seems unable to establish whether his memories were real or just a nightmare, but he twists and screams in agony after Ugalde informs him that he is being held responsible for the murder of Catalina.

The film ends leaving viewers with several questions. Among them is the question of Nuño’s culpability for the violence he committed against Catalina. According to the visual narrative presented in the film, he honestly did not know that he was killing his girlfriend because he was biologically incapable of seeing her correctly. Submerged in the underworld of the irrational and the supernatural, Nuño suffered an episode of temporary insanity. According to this narrative, it wasn’t this man’s intention to beat this woman to death. He did it in a moment of panic brought on by a lack of logic and coherence in his interaction with her: by an essentialist incompatibility rooted in the legitimacy of a supposed unavailability of biological difference that separates male experience from female experience.

We are left with a narrative that divides human territory in two, placing women in the dominion of the unexplainable/oniric and men in the dominion of the rational/tangible, illustrating the horrific consequences that follow any ambiguity between the two realms. *Kilómetro 31* reinscribes the mythification and mystification of women in ritual fashion, sacrificing the beautiful twins and adding yet another version to the already healthy collection of Llorona myths. Simultaneously, the repetition of this myth, as observed by Beauvoir, reinscribes the rationality of men and justifies their

subjugation of women in the concrete, political, and economic world, leaving the mystified spiritual underworld to the women.

Judith Butler has observed that historicity gains its legitimizing power through the repetition of previous established conventions in performative works (612). In horror films, we witness the formation of an entire cinematic genre that frequently relates women to the supernatural. Women perform roles in horror films that frequently confirm their mystery, not as human beings, but specifically as women. The violence of body genres cause “viewers [to] feel . . . manipulated by the text in specifically gendered ways” (Williams 5). The gendering of liquidity, with all of its abject implications, increases the ideological effectiveness of the narrative of horror, and instead of conceiving of the abject, the unexplainable, and the incoherent as inherent qualities of human experience, they are reinscribed as specifically feminine phenomena, thus mystifying and mythifying women once again in order to reaffirm the need for and the legitimacy of patriarchal order. Despite this modernization and urbanization of the ancient Llorona myth, Castañeda repeats the discursive conventions that are inherent in the myth and contributes to its historical force as part of an overall narrative whose purpose is to keep women in their place, outside of the real world.

Subversive misrecognition of the social subject

Returning to the above-transcribed dialog in which Nuño warns Omar “no te vuelvas a confundir,” we can observe that, after delineating masculine and feminine territory, the two men begin to confront each other in terms of territorialization. Nuño is visibly irritated not only by the previous incident in which Omar mistook Catalina for

Ágata, but also by the fact that he made the decision, when asked by Catalina, to return to the site of the accident. This was supposedly Nuño's call to make because the woman who asked for the favor is also his, and Omar intruded on his territory, thus threatening the structural integrity of social order, whose grammaticality is dictated by, among other previously-mentioned binaries such as the man/woman dichotomy, the binary between women who are "taken"—committed, officially or unofficially, to a monogamous relationship in which their body belongs to a man—and women who are not "spoken for." Catalina is spoken for by Nuño, which is why he took offense when Omar spoke for her by agreeing to take her to the site of the accident. Later, in another scene in the hospital waiting room, Catalina decides to tell Omar about the supernatural episode in which she saw her sister drag herself into a drainage well. Omar immediately limits the episode to the realm of the rational, raises his voice and scolds Catalina for abusing her anti-anxiety pills: "¡Te están afectando!" (0:43:00). Lesson learned: men are too rational to understand the mysteries of women.

After asking for forgiveness for his outburst, Omar confesses to her that he and Ágata had been fighting the night of the accident and he begins to cry. He tells Catalina, "a veces, me gustaría imaginar que eres ella" (0:45:32). Out of compassion, out of shared grief, or perhaps out of a repressed mutual attraction, the two of them kiss. Immediately afterward, Omar regrets it. After an awkward silence, the sermon begins: "Nuño tenía razón. Nos podemos confundir. Mira, Nuño y yo no nos llevamos bien. Pero es un tipo con gran corazón y te ama" (0:46:19). This brings the number of patriarchal scoldings to two. Just as Eve was the guilty party for enticing Adam into eating the forbidden fruit and the Malinche was guilty of giving in to Cortés, Catalina is the guilty party for her

moment (and apparently, her history) of transgressive passion. It is Omar's duty to reestablish order after allowing himself to be confused by Catalina.

It is here in this scene that Catalina's transgression is made clear: she betrays Nuño by kissing Omar. By making reference to a previous infraction (Nuño to Omar: "No te vuelvas a confundir"), Nuño confirms that Catalina has consistently failed to uphold the social grammar that makes her body the sole property of her boyfriend. By deviating from the gender-specific role of faithful girlfriend, Catalina has made herself vulnerable to the vengeful powers of the supernatural. As a woman, her liquid/uterine territory was already dangerously close/vulnerable to these mystical powers, but by separating herself from the reassuring firmness of the (Lacanian) Law of the Father, Catalina allows herself to be carried away by the chaotic openness of the supernatural and all its fluidity. The physical openness and vulnerability of Ágata's bloody, unconscious body is linked to her twin sister's spiritual vulnerability for rejecting the comforting closure and security supposedly afforded by patriarchal order. The supposed openness and vulnerability of the female body in general, as opposed to the male body, may also have something to do with gendered perceptions of order and security.

What is particularly interesting for purposes of this study is the queer potential of twins to subvert social order. The narrative coherence of social order depends on the easily verifiable recognition of individual social subjects. This involves a process of recognition that occurs, as Lacan points out, not in the domain of the real, but in the imaginary: terms that, in his reformulation of Freud's theories, replace the id and the ego, respectively (416). The fact that this *méconnaissance* or misrecognition of the social subject occurs in the imaginary—wherein the visually induced illusion of reality is

systematically mistaken for reality—is uncannily brought to light when one identical twin is mistaken for another.

The ambiguity of social subjectivity—misrecognition or confusion of social subjects—is not limited to external parties. Indeed, Lacan frequently discusses *méconnaissance* in the context of one’s own ego or imaginary self. In his article on “Untying Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic” as psychoanalytic categories, David Pavón Cuéllar reflects on Lacan’s comments about the paradox of the social subject, who learns to conceive of himself as such by learning the grammaticality of the first-person pronoun “I”—a word that is borrowed from an initially foreign, external linguistic order that later becomes internalized as his “mother tongue.” Even after his physical separation from his mother, the social subject learns to cognitively conceive of the singleness of his existence not as an intuitive process derived from the individual separateness of his own body, but primarily as a process learned through the imposing (and limiting) structure of a language that teaches him to refer to himself as “I” and “me,” which he learns to do as he internalizes and naturalizes this symbolic, conceptual grammaticality. Once again, the supposedly antonymous relationship between interior and exterior space becomes muddled and confused.

Despite the arbitrariness of symbolic order, throughout his decades of study, Lacan ends up focusing almost exclusively on it (Pavón Cuéllar 41). Since the symbolic constitutes the only accessible externalization of the imaginary, and the real is, by definition, “out of reach” (Lacan, “Symbolique, imaginaire et réel” 13; my translation), Lacanian psychoanalysis has no other option than to study the utterances of symbolic order. According to Pavón Cuéllar, despite having to give in to this reliance on the

symbolic for the sake of pragmatism and pure logistic possibility, psychoanalysis recognizes the existence of the imaginary and the real within the human psyche, while psychology ignores or even denies their existence in order to attribute to it a sort of coherent, individual causality (38).

Lacan explains that “The subject is what I define in the strict sense as an effect of the signifier” (*My Teaching* 79) and that, in the practice of psychology, the imaginary psyche is taken for the thing itself. In other words, the signifier is not acknowledged as such—as a mere signifier among countless others—but is rather treated as the signified, thus ignoring the gap between the two concepts and reducing the human psyche to a “definable form” (“Propos sur la causalité” 187; my translation). Psychology allows itself to be fooled by its “fixation” with this namable “object” (*La relation de l’objet* 412; my translation), since psychology can only function as a science of the mind if it treats the mind as a namable object that is intelligible, whole, and self containing: coherently individual. The human mind only “makes sense” as a concept because it resides within the realm of the “imaginary” (*Le Sinthome* 131; my translation): it comes into being purely through an imaginative process and is named purely through a symbolic process.

Individual consciousness is articulated through an “I” that is borrowed from an external linguistic system. The fact that its meaning shifts every time a different speaker uses it exemplifies the porosity of the notion of absolute individual subjectivity. “I”—the signifier that claims to establish a clear, coherent individuality—is nothing more than an arbitrary “shifter” that is paradoxically used by everyone (*My Teaching* 85). Similarly, the second-person pronoun “you” shifts in its referentiality nearly every time it is used and often results in confusion vis-à-vis the person being interpellated. By calling attention to

this paradox, psychoanalysis complicates and problematizes the clinical field of psychology, which, out of pragmatism and the lack of a viable alternative, grounds itself in the notion of an individual subject with internal cognitive processes that are coherent, accessible, and thus, treatable. The reality (read: Lacanian real) of an incoherent, unexplainable, and inaccessible human mind unsettles notions of individual subjectivity, exposing them as ongoing processes that occur within different imaginaries and that, as such, are subject to uncanny misrecognitions, both between and within subjects.

Consequently, far from being a naturally-occurring, self-producing and self-containing entity or concept, the social subject is a product of internal and external processes that are negotiable (thinking again of Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity). Catalina is produced by dominant Mexican cultural discourse as a subject whose fluid, unstable subjectivity serves as a warning against a rethinking of social subjectivity in general. If she were able to more clearly separate her subjectivity from that of Ágata's in her mind—and if she were willing to define her subjectivity in more concrete terms, as a wife, as a mother, etc.—she wouldn't be vulnerable to the haunting torment of impending madness (i.e., losing her subjectivity altogether, which is portrayed as a necessary privilege rather than an ideological imposition).

Beyond her telepathic connection to her twin sister, Catalina fails to successfully distinguish between her own subjectivity and that of Ágata in one of the final scenes leading up to her descent into madness—her loss of a stable, coherent notion of self and her descent into the womb of Mexico City, where the ghost of her mother, her sister, the old woman, the Woman of the Mixcoac River, and ultimately her own death await her. Once again, death frames the social paradigm so that it is easier to imagine one's death

than it is to imagine one's own subjectivity according to a logic other than that which is imposed by linguistic and social grammar. While driving along the urban surface of the Mixcoac neighborhood of Mexico City towards the closest access point to the heart of the haunted urban underworld, Catalina happens along a construction site where workers—men—have blocked off part of the road as part of a municipal project to extend the city's underground drainage system. Ignoring the warnings and boundaries of the very masculine order of this construction site, she frantically runs over a few bright orange cones as she brings her car to a halt near the entrance to the drainage extensions.

Before exiting her car and lowering herself into a municipal drainage well, Catalina is depicted through two different camera shots as having a schizophrenic debate with herself about her own identity, all to the genre-specific soundtrack of shrill, fast-paced, dissonant stringed instruments as they convey the disharmonious, panicked incoherence of her monologue: “No me van a vencer. No me vas a vencer. [*The referentiality of her address notably shifting from the third to the second person.*] . . . No puedo. Ya no puedo” (1:12:42). She becomes desperate, nearly hyperventilating as she rocks and back and forth in front of the steering wheel. Suddenly, in a new shot taken from her right side, her face appears calm as it rests against the steering wheel: “No tengo miedo. No tengo miedo.” The shot changes once again, and she is back to panicking: “No estoy, no estoy, no estoy en mi mente. Ágata está conmigo.” According to the logic of psychology, she is suffering from a disorder in which her mind fails to recognize itself in her imaginary as a single, self-contained entity with its own unique cognitive processes. Switching back to her right side, the calm Catalina says resolutely, staring blankly into the camera, “Yo la ayudo. Ella me necesita.” Finally, she faces forward and seems to

have accepted with greater calm the sanity-compromising realization that she is not a single, unique, coherently individual social subject: “No somos distintas—somos la misma. Somos una. Exactamente iguales.” The scene ends with a close-up of her mouth in which she whispers the following: “En mi mente . . . no estoy.”

This scene has profound implications in that Catalina’s perceived weakness and vulnerability—her downfall—are directly linked to her failure to recognize herself as a singularly unique, stable, static subject. As Lacan has noted, individual ownership of one’s mind—the concept of “mi mente”—is not the mind itself, which is an unnamable, uncontainable series of ongoing processes and cognitions. To refer to the id (real) is simply to conjure the ego (imaginary), which is not the thing itself. The confusion with which Catalina fails to distinguish between herself and her twin echoes the confusion about which Nuño warned Omar in the previously mentioned incident.

If one cannot be sure of one where one ends and the other begins, and if others also fail to distinguish “one” from the “other” (thinking also in terms of the construction of the indigenous “other” elaborated on in the previous chapter), the binary system that constructs subjectivity (and that “regulates” the “economy,” going back to the chapter’s epigraph) and the meaning behind it by clearly separating “one” from the “other” risks ceasing to fulfill its function. If any given “one” social subject is acknowledged to be a fractured, fluid, fluctuating conglomeration of selves—an ongoing process rather than a fixed concept—the creation and interpellation of the social subject as such can be problematized or even called into question, as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

Just as Catalina is construed as vulnerable to a certain kind of cognitive manipulation that causes her to fail to recognize herself and ultimately lose her wits (the Spanish “perder la razón” is particularly apt for this context, considering the gendering of reason and logic in *Kilómetro 31* and patriarchal discourse in general), the social order that depends on the coherent recognition of coherent subjects is also, by extension, vulnerable to manipulation and misrecognition. The fact that the concept of reality is in itself a manipulation-prone illusion is tacitly acknowledged by the film’s own dialog when Catalina and Nuño first encounter the ghost of the old woman and fail to recognize her as a ghost as she gives them advice on how to communicate with the spirits of Ágata, the Woman of the Mixcoac River, and other spirits who are trapped between:

OLD WOMAN. El mundo de los vivos y el de los muertos.

NUÑO. Disculpen, pero que yo sepa no se ha comprobado que existan los fantasmas.

OLD WOMAN. Pero hay gente que dice haberlos visto. ¿Crees que mienten?

NUÑO. [*hesitating before he answers, looking at Catalina not wanting to offend her or the old woman*] No, no necesariamente.

OLD WOMAN. [*dismissing Nuño’s skepticism and directing her gaze at Catalina in a knowing, compassionate way as the camera fades Nuño’s face into the background, focusing in on the attentive and engaged expression on Catalina’s face in the foreground, thus depicting her openness to non-conventional ways of being and knowing, as opposed to Nuño*] Solo un espíritu noble y sensible es

capaz de escuchar o ver a un alma en pena, pero tengan cuidado. Hay espíritus que pueden transformarse en otra forma de lo que ves. Te pueden ayudar, pero también te pueden engañar como cualquier persona” (0:57:05).

What is most obvious about this dialogue is Nuño’s refusal to buy into a supposedly feminine, irrational discourse of the supernatural. While the rational, conscious mind is attributed to masculinity and the accompanying closure and structure of its symbolic order, female knowledge is attributed to the open, formless realm of the unconscious mind. This is why the old woman encourages Catalina to sleep in order to gain insight into Ágata’s predicament:

ANCIANA. Cuando duermes estás más sensible, más abierta. Tal vez te puede ayudar a estar más cerca de tu hermana. Pídele consejo.

Duerme. Ella nos va a guiar. . . . Busca más allá de lo que ven tus ojos.

NUÑO. Perdón, señora, pero ¿de qué está hablando?

ANCIANA. A ti solo te pido que seas fuerte. Ayúdanos aunque te cueste entender. (1:05:09)

Nuño is depicted as biologically incapable of understanding feminine (il)logic, despite the best of intentions. This is reinforced when the old woman invites the two to spend the night because “ya se hizo de noche y no quier[e] que corran peligros innecesarios.” After the old woman retires for the evening, Nuño whispers to Catalina:

NUÑO. No nos vamos a quedar, ¿verdad?

CATALINA. Pues a mí me da mucha confianza.

NUÑO. [*laughing in disbelief*] Digo, el cuentito estuvo bueno, pero ¿tú realmente crees en estas cosas?

CATALINA. Nuño, yo escuché a esa mujer [the Woman of the Mixcoac River].

NUÑO. Catalina . . .

CATALINA. Nuño, es cierto. Ágata está encerrada en ese mundo. Puedo sentirlo. Me lo dice. Sueño con eso. (0:58:05)

By clinging to “masculine” logic and refusing to consider “feminine” intuition as a possible source of knowledge, Nuño reinforces the gendered binary I have been discussing through this analysis. What is added to this reinscription of sexual essentialism, however, is that Nuño’s maleness precludes his categorization as an “espíritu noble y sensible:” traits that are biologically attributed to women both by the film’s narrative text and by its cinematography as the camera literally focuses Nuño out of the supernatural picture. It is Catalina’s noble and sensitive nature that makes supernatural experience possible for her. Men, then, are depicted as lacking these traits on a biological level, which explains away, justifies, and essentializes less-than-noble, insensitive behavior on their part: behavior, for example, that could be used to describe the less-than-noble and insensitive ways in which indigenous people have been treated and continue to be treated, tying this chapter with the one that preceded it.

What is of additional interest in this conversation, however (bringing our discussion back to the susceptibility of social subjectivity to manipulation and illusion), is the fact that the film’s dialog acknowledges that “cualquier persona,” just like the “espíritus” referenced by the old woman, can “engañar” through optical and textual

illusions, causing us to misrecognize them. This invokes an unsettling realization regarding the illusory nature of reality (keeping in mind the very specific socioeconomic reality textualized and enforced by *Kilómetro 31*, as discussed in the previous chapter): how it is a truly symbolic order into which we place immense faith and that, as such, it is susceptible to a manipulation of symbols, thus rendering us susceptible to deceit, since we depend on it to communicate, negotiate meaning, and define ourselves. Without symbolic order there is nothing, which is what ultimately terrifies us, thus reinscribing the need for symbolic order, as well as the legitimacy of the institutions constructed upon it. The binary differences that fabricate meaning, then, must be respected: differences that separate Catalina from Ágata, men from women, “Mexicans” from the indigenous, etc. What interests us here are the ways in which symbolic order is reaffirmed as masculine and its terrifying alternative—chaotic nothingness, fluid openness—is reinscribed as feminine.

Sexuality, chrononormativity, and social control

As viewers, we do not know exactly what happened in the pre-diegetic incident in which Omar allegedly mistook Catalina for Ágata: how far she “let him” advance romantically/erotically—understanding that in patriarchal order, virginal female virtue is charged with keeping uncontrollable male passion in check—or just how much Omar truly mistook one twin for the other. In general, the mere existence of twins has long presented fertile material for the erotic imagination, well outside the bounds of the officially sanctioned reproductive purposes for human sexuality. In any case, the lingering ambiguity of the incident reinscribes the notion that Catalina has allowed for a

certain slippage: a certain structural weakness within a social order that relies on the coherent and unique individuality of social subjects—female social subjects in particular—in order to territorialize their bodies within institutionalized, committed, exclusive partnerships.

The mere possibility that Catalina would have exhibited any kind of “extracurricular” erotic interest poses a threat to heteronormative order since, as a woman, it is her duty to uphold the ideal of monogamous relationships around which society is organized. In general (and especially in Mexico), prescriptive notions of womanhood have reinscribed a woman’s place in society as in the home. The perceived reproductive function of the female body has long been a politically useful alibi for foreclosing on the revolutionary imagination so that the female half of any given nation’s citizens, immediately upon reaching the institutionally agreed upon age for adulthood—that is to say, upon “fully” developing into personally accountable, unique social subjects who have developed in time for long enough to be considered fully formed, coherent individuals instead of an infantile, gelatinous work in progress composed of fragments of their parents—limit themselves to domestic space, absenting themselves (much like the indigenous have been made absent) from the public forum of economic competition and political debate, and indefinitely purposing their bodies for reproduction and the rearing of children (the post-Mexican Revolution slogan “Haz patria: ten hijos” comes to mind). Once young adults become married couples with children to feed, their subversive capacity to envision alternative ways of being in the world, alternative political and economic systems, etc. becomes severely limited, replaced by the immediate need to work within the existing system to survive and guarantee survival for their offspring.

The sexual regulation of society—and particularly of women—works in tandem with political and economic regulation. Consequently, the erotic imagination and the revolutionary imagination are linked. Sexual possibilities that break with tradition—institutions of female domesticity and monogamous relationships in which a man asserts ownership of the body of his wife until death do they part—threaten to hasten revolutionary possibilities: new ways of imagining oneself in both space and time. This is why Catalina must be punished for her ambiguity, not only as a twin in terms of her individual subjectivity, but also as a woman who might wish to linger in that ambiguity in order to entertain erotic possibilities with a non-normative third party: her sister's boyfriend. If this possibility were to develop into a fluid, open, dynamic sexual relationship between multiple parties that resisted the form and temporal closure of marriage, the political imaginary would undergo a significant shift. What Catalina might choose to do with her body, as Foster has suggested, is of considerable concern for established order:

El cuerpo no es un dado y, por ello, la referencia al cuerpo no es un proceso categórico. Sin embargo, un proyecto que conjugue propuestas ideológicas ya hegemónicas sobre el cuerpo con otras perspectivas, siempre cambiantes y multifacéticas, de la corporalidad, se convierte en una dimensión fundamental de la confrontación con cuestionables universales de un cuerpo que viene dado. . . . al abogar por la plurivalencia de lo genital . . . se rechaza el coito convencional definido como limitación de la sexualidad y se abre la posibilidad de una genitalidad compartida que no puede entenderse como “masturbatoria” en la medida en que asume

conscientemente al Otro, al Otro como un Otro radical o al Otro como un yo especular [this “yo especular” taking on an additional layer of meaning in the case of twins]. Se participa, a través de posicionamientos estratégicos como Yo, Vos, Él/Uno y el Otro en un circuito de placeres eróticos a través y a lo largo del cuerpo/de los cuerpos donde pierden su especificidad las fronteras entre individuos que propicia el patriarcado. (18-19)

Therefore, in conservative narratives such as *Kilómetro 31*, subjects who pose a threat to traditional notions of subjectivity must be made examples of: they must be cast in an unsettling, terrifying light and then punished if the status quo is to be maintained.

Beyond her previously mentioned lingerings and ambiguities, both Catalina and Ágata represent a certain kind of lingering in time that is, by no coincidence, depicted as frighteningly analogous to that of the ghosts and spirits that defy normative notions of chronology. Near the beginning of the film when Ágata is arriving at the hospital on a stretcher, amidst all the chaotic movements and utterances, a male voice describes the incoming patient as having “26 años de edad” (0:8:21)—an age where young women are commonly expected to settle down and get married if they have not already done so. After all, child birth takes on new complications and difficulties once women enter their 30s. After this age, questions centered on the dichotomous categories that negotiate the meaning upon which social order constructs itself—marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, etc.—become increasingly common.

Throughout her influential book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman describes queer time as a certain lingering that goes against

the grain of linear time, progress, and modernity: an observation that helps to illustrate not only how sexual and political imaginaries are connected, but also how their temporalities are connected. The viewer is afforded several clues regarding the twins' queer lingering in time. Before falling asleep on the couch at Omar's apartment (the scene in which she is woken up by the supernatural chain of events leading to her witnessing of Ágata's ghostly appearance and subsequent disappearance into a municipal drainage well), Catalina notices a homemade tape marked "Ágata '04" protruding from the VCR (0:22:32). She plays the tape, which contains amateur footage of their birthday party three years prior (based on *Kilómetro 31*'s release date in 2007), filmed and narrated by Omar. In the film, Ágata continues to have short hair and be paired with Omar, while Catalina continues to have long hair and appears coupled with Nuño, who appears with notably darker hair compared to his current salt-and-pepper look. This flashback establishes that the sisters have been lingering in time, changing nothing about their appearance or their relationship status in three years, despite the fact that the men in their life, as patriarchal pillars of the real world, have properly advanced through time, aiming for temporal closure through institutionally defined relationships: marriage.

This lingering is again alluded to in a conversation between Catalina and Nuño towards the end of the film when it has been established that Catalina has been acting very strangely after the accident and that Nuño, despite his seemingly biological incapacity to understand her changes in behavior, has been patient with her and has been trying to help out the best he can. Catalina comes across him as he intensely studies a series of maps (gendered as real, masculine knowledge) in an effort to resolve the

mystery of kilometer 31. Catalina is moved by his hard work and dedication and takes a moment to thank him:

CATALINA. He pensado en muchas cosas y . . . y he pensado en todos estos años y . . . sí.

NUÑO. No.

CATALINA. Déjame decirte.

NUÑO. Catalina, ahora no. No. No es un buen momento. Estás [*struggling to find a diplomatic way of expressing his reluctance to discuss the status of their relationship amidst lingering concerns for her mental health*] . . . estás bajo mucha presión.

CATALINA. No es un buen momento [*nodding, repeating, and internalizing what he has just told her*]. Bueno. (1:06:25)

What is suggested by this exchange is that Nuño may have previously proposed to Catalina, but that she hadn't given him a response, choosing instead to linger openly, fluidly in time, avoiding commitment to the institution of matrimony and its temporal closure. If viewers do not intuit this pre-diegetic context, Catalina's utterance, "he pensado en todos estos años y . . . sí" makes little sense. She appears to finally be accepting his proposal, apparently pushed by the uncertainty of the present circumstances to accept solace in the stabilizing structure of marriage, but Nuño, ever the proper gentleman, does not want her to make such an important decision when she's under stress and not thinking clearly. One is led to assume that her lingering status as a single woman is what has made her vulnerable to the illogical and the supernatural. As a stabilizing institution, marriage would have protected her from the chaotic, fluid aperture of the

supernatural, but it is now too late. Time has passed, and she has failed to properly keep up with it.

Marriage has traditionally been the social and civil benchmark for adulthood. Social subjects are not considered to be fully developed and fully adult until they have found the right person and settled down, entering into an institution of stabilized, foreclosed time that will ideally define and control the rest of their existence, until death do us part. Catalina has queerly resisted this notion of chronological development—this temporal framework of progress into fully realized adulthood—by having hesitated for so long to give Nuño an answer. Her alleged failure to grow up properly mimics, in some ways, the failure associated with being queer. In her book *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton notes that queerness is associated with a certain “arrested development” in which gay people are temporally framed as sexually immature: “dangerous children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own” (22). By hesitating to adhere to prescribed notions of marriage and family in a timely manner, Catalina’s queerness causes her to live outside of time and notions of progress: a realm that, not by coincidence, is also designated for ghosts. It is the shared, queer terrain between ghosts and Catalina’s single, childless existence that allows her to become confused by/with them and ultimately destroyed by them. Ghosts, like Catalina, are queer, and as such, must be banished from politically-established reality.

Another way in which she lingers becomes apparent when she discloses to Nuño the circumstances surrounding her mother’s death. After his confrontation with Omar in the hospital waiting room in which he warns his male rival to respect his territory and not

repeat previous “confusions” when differentiating Catalina from Ágata, Nuño exits the hospital and finds his girlfriend smoking in the street:

NUÑO. ¿Todo bien? [*Catalina hesitantly nods as she exhales a deep breath of smoke.*] ¿Qué te pasa?

CATALINA. Nada.

NUÑO. Sabes, es increíble que después de tanto tiempo no sepa casi nada de ti.

CATALINA. ¿De qué hablas?

NUÑO. Bueno, sí sé algunas cosas, pero cuando te pregunto cosas tuyas, cosas importantes . . . no sé, es como . . . como que te cierras. Como por ejemplo, lo de tus padres . . . no sé realmente lo que pasó.

CATALINA. [*coldly, staring blankly through Nuño*] No tengo familia.

NUÑO. Sí sí, ya, siempre me respondes eso. Pe . . . pero ¿por qué simplemente no lo sueltas?

CATALINA. [*losing patience*] Porque no me gusta hablar de eso, Nuño.

NUÑO. No te entiendo, ¿eh? Por más que lo pienso, no te entiendo. Ya no puedo más. No puedo más. (0:35:09)

After a long, uncomfortable pause, Catalina realizes her emotional distance is driving Nuño away, and she tells him the story of how her parents died. What is of interest to us here are the ways in which Catalina is depicted in this scene as resisting normative notions of time. To begin with, she is ostensibly smoking: as a way of calming her nerves during a colossally stressful time, to be sure, but smoking also distances her from prospects of motherhood, as women who are pregnant or preparing for pregnancy

are encouraged to avoid smoking. The act of smoking also characterizes her as someone who is not overly concerned with her future health: someone who lives for the pleasures and comforts of the present without looking forward in time and planning for the future. Queer individuals are often viewed through a similar temporal lens, avoiding the adult responsibility of children and living for an endless barrage of hedonistic pleasures.

Secondly, her somewhat melodramatic assertion about her family—that she doesn't have one—is decidedly antisocial and anti-normative. Instead of coming to terms with the loss of her parents—catching up with the time that has passed since they died—and going on to form a family of her own, Catalina prefers to linger in the past without working through the sadness, pain, and trauma of her loss. If the only way to “hacer patria” is to have children, Catalina can be viewed here as subversively unpatriotic. The child she (up to now) has refused to conceive of conceiving is in many ways the child that haunts her: the child drowned in the Mixcoac River by the Llorona whose ghost caused Ágata's accident. This child haunts her intermittently throughout the film and interacts with chrononormativity in ways that have important implications for this study.

The rhetorical figure of the child

So far I have examined ways in which hegemonic discourse positions itself in time, establishing a present through ideologically driven references to a certain past and limiting the revolutionary imaginary by framing death in a way that serves to preserve the status quo as a chronic and unchangeable condition. I have discussed, in my introductory chapter to this study, how political debate consists of different narratives in competition to define a present reality. The notion of a future—just as ideological in its construction

as that of the present—is an especially useful rhetorical tool in this endeavor because of its potential to exploit not only the general angst of the human condition for political gain (i.e., existential yearning for a narrative that gives one’s life purpose and meaning), but also the entire Western tradition of differing meaning (i.e., Derrida’s teleological *différance*) into the future with the promise that eventually, retrospectively, everything will have made sense (i.e., Auerbach’s *Mimesis*).

The concept of the future is most commonly and most effectively embodied in the rhetorical figure of the child, as explained by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman contends that “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without the fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its share in the nation’s good” (11). Much in the same way that death is used as a frame to limit the political imaginary, children are used to foreclose on any potential political debate *a priori*. Once a political agenda has successfully aligned its interests with those of children—and thus, the future of the nation—the debate is over before it has even begun. After all, who would align their interests against those of a child? Consequently, the rhetorical figure of the child affords its exploiters strategically advantageous footing in the imagining of a future: an imagining with profoundly existential implications.

The social imperative to reproduce has clear connections with the perceived perpetuation of life, which is framed by death, as I have discussed, as the status quo. Edelman affirms that “[w]hat refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the

organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar that it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11). The reason why children make such frequent appearances in horror films will be a principal subject of discussion in the next chapter. For the moment, I would like to briefly examine how Catalina is portrayed “as a threat” to Mexico’s “social order” and what role the ghostly child in *Kilómetro 31* plays in reinscribing the logic behind her gendered unhinging from established social order, which, when depicted as the only possible reality, offers death as its only alternative.

Reproduction is commonly conceived of as the only way around one’s own mortality. Despite the reality of one’s impending death—the fact that “death is right inside us, working away busy as a mole the whole time, all the time” (Royle 85)—in the individual imaginary as well as in the collective imaginary exists the illusion of a certain spiritual or essentialist continuity through time that is achieved by passing one’s DNA on to the next generation, thus forming some kind of biological connection with the future and with eternity. The rhetorical figure of the child frames political debate in much the same way death does. In the previous chapter I discussed how the comforting “reality” of everyday life as defined in terms of the political and socioeconomic status quo, and how the death of society is depicted as more feasible than the death of the system. In order for life to continue, then—defined in these terms as the status quo—children must be bred to inherit this reality, learn their place in it, and carry it on.

By failing to live up to this mandate, Catalina is “already dead” in terms of the way society views her long-term existence. Of course, as Cazdyn has proposed, a certain revolutionary potential is associated with the already dead, which is why Catalina, like

the indigenous, must be eventually made absent from this film, as well as from reality. This is also, incidentally, why other non-reproducing (queer) individuals have traditionally been made absent from public view and why their relationships have not been recognized as real. Much like the already dead indigenous, the already dead non-reproducers must be textualized outside of reality by virtue of their failure to properly inhabit time.

As previously discussed, the ghostly child in *Kilómetro 31* lingers in time as a result of his mother's episode of madness in which, after finding out that the "militar español" was "utilizándola para procrear los hijos que su esposa no podía darle . . . enloqueció de ira y se arrojó con su hijo al río, arrastrándolo junto con ella a la muerte" (0:53:50). In this light, if a woman realizes she is being used as part of some kind of reproductive imperative, such a realization is pathologized as murderous, selfish, dystopian, anti-social, and outside of the realm of "la razón." Catalina's failure to marry, settle down, and procreate predisposes her to bouts of insanity that ultimately lead to her death—a death in which no one is left to carry on her DNA. Her immediate family's genealogical inheritance stops with her (and her comatose-turned-possessed twin sister): that branch of the family tree dies with her.

Before she dies, though, she is haunted and tormented by this ghostly child, who giggles eerily—at inappropriate moments, thus violating the grammaticality of symbolic/social order—as he spooks her. She never manages to get a good look at him, yet she senses and hears his presence. When Catalina is at Ágata's bedside in the hospital, she begins a monologue in which she confesses to her comatose sister that she was always jealous of her for being better at everything. Suddenly, we see shadowy

fragments of the child's body as he sneaks up behind her, barefoot, to touch her back and then suddenly disappear. She hears him giggle, after which he begins to hum an eerie melody from underneath the bed. As Catalina crouches to see if anyone is there, only managing to see his pale, bare feet, Ágata seems to abruptly awake from her coma, her eyes wide open, staring directly at Catalina in terror, insinuating that their future is doomed, having failed to procreate the child who is now haunting them. The twins' lingering in time has put them into contact with and made them vulnerable to the spirits and past injustices that also linger in time. Because of their failure to uphold the national reproductive project, both sisters are cast outside of Mexican utopia (in this case, somewhat ironically textualized as uneventful, everyday reality).

The specter of the child functions here in tandem with the imperative to reproduce, inquisitively haunting Catalina without her being able to fully identify it, exemplifying the “visor effect” I mentioned in the previous chapter which Derrida attributes to the trope of the specter (*Specters of Marx* 7). This is a theme that will follow us into the next chapter, but in order to conclude my introduction into the rhetorical figure of the child, I will focus on this particular child's implications for the narrative processes I have been discussing. To begin with, the child is exceedingly pale, which one may argue is a prerequisite for his function as a ghost. However, the child is played by a white actor, and for a character who is depicted as one of the first mestizo children of the “época de la colonia”—if not *the* first mestizo child (depending on how much overlap one infers between the Malinche myth and the Llorona myth presented in the film)—his face is notably devoid of any indigenous or mestizo features. Considering that the word “indigenous” is ostensibly absent in the descriptions of his mother (“la joven de belleza

imponente”), it is likely that his whiteness embodies Mexico’s traditional cinematic ideal of whiteness. After all, the rhetorical figure of the child represents nothing if not an ideal.

This ideal carries with it dimensions that reinscribe a certain fatalism about Mexico’s status quo. This child is effectively a bastard: the illegitimate child of his indigenous mother and the conquering Spaniard who exploited her for her beauty and reproductive capabilities. He is, then, *un hijo de la chingada*, and therefore, the quintessential Mexican. Catalina, on the other hand, embodies the *antimexicana* (just as the Llorona is the ultimate anti-mother), with her bitter, anti-societal “no tengo familia” attitude and her failure to contribute to the national reproductive project. Additionally, we learn that her last name is Hameran, which suggests a genealogical origin that is something “other” than the traditional Mexican pedigree. Thus, she can fulfill two seemingly contradictory functions at the same time. On one hand, she can embody the cinematic whiteness around which the ideal of Mexican identity has been traditionally formed, thus fulfilling the aesthetic demands of the country’s film industry. On the other hand, she can embody non-Mexicanness with her last name and in her failure to adhere to prescribed social norms. As a possible internal threat to social order and the status quo (i.e., she resides within Mexico’s borders and speaks Mexican Spanish), she must be externalized, punished, banished.

Oddly, then, the *hijo de la chingada* that haunts her and spooks the audience is depicted as eternally stunted in his development, doomed to remain stagnant in time without realizing full personhood. He represents incomplete social subjectivity, while at the same time representing a certain mestizo condition: an embodiment of the vast majority of Mexico’s population, which finds itself infantized in *Kilómetro 31*. Despite

the modernization of the Mexico's myths in the film and despite the previously-mentioned master narrative of the country's modernization and globalization that has situated its indigenous population as behind the times, and therefore, unreal, mestizos are cast a historically undeveloped race of people in need of proper parenting: parenting provided, of course, by the status quo of institutional Mexico.

Just as the policeman Ugalde condescendingly treated Omar like a child for his own good, the domination of Mexico's masses by a privileged ruling class is portrayed as ultimately for the country's own good. Just as the (mestizo) child's growth and development have been stunted by his becoming eternally trapped between the world of the dead and that of the living, Mexico's (mestizo) masses are fated to live in underdevelopment, trapped between the (white) first world and the (indigenous) third world. After all, if everyday Mexicans, like the child in the film, are *hijos de la chingada*, born out of violence and betrayal, then the exploitation and the fucking over of the masses due to their ill-fated births becomes naturalized and cast as historically inherited and eternally inevitable: Mexico's chronic reality.

Concluding my study of *Kilómetro 31*, then, we can see how the regulation of Mexico's economy is done "with one's text, with other subjects, with one's family, children, desire" (Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* 156-57). The normative mechanisms that form social subjects and organize them according to a certain logic—the logic of race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, etc.—can be observed to strategically position themselves in time in order to normalize the status quo as uncontestable reality. This is the most traditional function of horror films: the reinscription of hegemonic order as

comforting, everyday life through the depiction of any alternative as horrifying, unnatural, and unreal.

CHAPTER 4

ORPHANED CHILDREN IN THE SPANISH GOTHIC: REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAUMATIC PAST AND INTERROGATIONS OF SOCIAL ORDER

ORPHANED CHILDREN IN THE SPANISH GOTHIC: REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAUMATIC PAST AND INTERROGATIONS OF SOCIAL ORDER

In psychoanalytic terms, all social order is symbolic order *par excellence*. In *Kilómetro 31*, the need for such order—the need to establish a coherent here-and-now—was reinscribed by casting the coexistence of multiple temporalities not as an integral part of human experience, but as a deadly, external threat to one’s human experience: to one’s grip on reality. As demonstrated in the two previous chapters, this reality is imposed by national and global political agendas that legitimize their narrative by reinforcing mechanisms of social organization such as gender, reproduction (i.e., the normativization of sexual desire), and family, all of which share a symbiotic relationship with the overarching discourse of coherent, chronological progress. The ideology behind these constructs is masked by the alibi they claim in nature—in biology. The ghostly child haunted Catalina in part because of her failure to keep up with the biological time of Mexico’s reproductive imperative.

Released in the same year as *Kilómetro 31* (2007), the Spanish film *El orfanato* (the full-length directing debut of Guillermo del Toro protégé Juan Antonio Bayona) also became its country’s highest-grossing film for the year (Lázaro-Reboll 226). Beyond this coincidence, *El orfanato* is of particular interest to this study because, despite being a traditional horror film in many respects, it directly addresses concepts such as reality, the present, and family in a way that complicates and problematizes them rather than

reinforcing them. The historical situatedness of this re-thinking of such constructs is not coincidental, since two years prior to the film's release under new PSOE leadership (Spain's socialist party), same-sex couples were granted equal marriage and adoption rights. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which the classical horror tropes of the haunted house, the specter, and the child are repositioned in a way that invites a certain questioning of traditional notions of family, temporality, and human existence (and perhaps more importantly, its alleged purpose).

An entire book-length study could easily be dedicated solely to twenty-first century horror films from Spain and their implications for themes of national trauma and historical memory. The aim of the present chapter is not to take on these themes head-on—as I will do in the following chapter and as is masterfully done in Joan Ramon Resina's *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*—but rather to continue to explore how discourses of national history and identity engage individuals on a personal, emotional level: in the supposedly apolitical and biologically self-apparent realms of gender and family within which social subjects are formed and interpellated as such. If *Kilómetro 31* serves as a case study for examining the queer potential of the womb as a site that subverts coherent delineations between social subjects, as well as how narratives so often reinscribe the need for such delineations as a means of bolstering the status quo, *El orfanato*'s emphasis on children helps bring social subjectivity and social order into focus as arbitrary—and therefore, negotiable—processes. It also allows us to continue our analysis of different representations of the normative notion of time and its implications for social subjectivity.

The beginning of the current century has seen a sudden surge in international horror hits from Spain, including such widely-recognized films as Mexican director Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (2001) and *El laberinto del fauno* (2006): "las primeras dos entregas de su planeada trilogía sobre la Guerra Civil española" (Mandolessi and Poppe 16). As Antonio Lázaro-Reboll has noted in his book *Spanish Horror Film*, the transnational nature of these films, as well as their broad appeal beyond typical horror film audiences, serve to problematize traditional notions of national cinema and genre. The transnational nature of the Spanish Civil War becomes apparent when one examines it as, up to a certain point, a shared history between Spain and Mexico, the latter having granted citizenship to so many of the former's refugees. While Spain's top-grossing film from 2007 was directed by a Mexican, Mexico's top-grossing film from the same year starred a Spanish actor (Adrià Collado) and was coproduced by Filmax: a Spanish company that absorbed The Fantastic Factory, the company historically at the center of a large part of Spain's horror film production (Willis 42).

A great deal of academic literature has been dedicated to *El espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno* because their national allegories and political/historical posturing are explicit. Nothing to date has been published, however, on *El orfanato*, most likely because the film takes a more subtle tone in its contribution to the (inter)national conversation about Spain's Civil War and its decades-long aftermath, setting its events in the democratic present and making no explicit references to the war, to fascism, etc. In this chapter I argue for the importance of *El orfanato* in this conversation, not only because of its cultural popularity and its economic success, but because it takes on both the temporal positioning and the social constructs (along with their supposed biological

alibi) that have long been exploited by political rhetoric in general, but particularly by the rhetoric and logic of fascism.

A brief history of Spanish horror films

In his recently released book *Spanish Horror Film*, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll presents a history of the horror films of Spain. His analysis comes from a largely industrial viewpoint (rather than from a cultural studies perspective), and he is mainly concerned with the horror genre as such, its historical situatedness, and its constantly negotiated definition. He observes that horror films experienced a boom in the final years of the Franco dictatorship, followed by a steep decline as the country made its transition to democracy:

Unquestionably, the highest point in production was the period 1968 to 1975. The production in horror in the late 1970s and during the 1980s decreases dramatically for several reasons: firstly, the boom in historical and political films during the early years of the democracy; secondly, the so-called Ley Miró (film legislation established by the Socialist government in 1983), which privileged the production of high-quality films, based mainly on literary or historical sources; and thirdly, changing habits in the consumption of audiovisual material. It is not until the late 1990s and the early 2000s that Spanish horror reaches another production peak. (7)

This late-60s and early-70s “horror overdrive, producing around 150 horror films . . . accounted for more than a third of the national industry’s output” (11). Lázaro-Reboll

notes that, in an attempt to explain this peak in monolithic terms, a 1974 review of Spain's film industry posits either a desire to cash in on the global popularity of the horror genre or a desire to escape the country's repressive sociopolitical conditions as possible explanations for this trend. In his book, the author agrees that there is some legitimacy to these claims, noting that "a partial overview of titles reveals takes on classic monsters," (12) citing films such as *La marca del hombre lobo* (1968), *El Conde Drácula* (1969), and *La maldición de Frankenstein* (1972). Following a time when Mexploitation films had been pitting real-life super heroes against supernatural villains, Spain began releasing films with "multi-monster narratives" such as *Los monstruos del terror* (1969) and *Drácula contra Frankenstein* (1971). Unlike Doyle Greene in his book on Mexploitation films, Lázaro-Reboll does not explicitly reference the particular, global role of horror films in the 1960s and 1970s as a double-edged sword during a time of social revolution, appealing to a youthful demographic's desire to rebel against tradition while simultaneously reinscribing staunchly conservative narratives.

He does, however, observe that American horror successes such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) "spawned Spanish offspring" (12) with *No profanar el sueño de los muertos* (1974) and *Exorcismo* (1975). Notwithstanding, "while most [Spanish horror films of the 1970s] were low-budget, having low production values and short shooting schedules, there is a general misconception that all Spanish horror films of this period were cheap and cheerful exploitation fare," when the production of horror films in this period helped Juan Antonio Bardem—"an established auteur associated with oppositional filmmaking"—to advance his career. It also allowed Javier Aguirre "to finance his more radical, underground projects" (13). Aguirre would go on to

direct, for example, a full-length feature centered on the historically queer Monja Alférez (*La monja alférez*, 1987).

Lázaro-Reboll goes on to argue that other films, including *El bosque del lobo* (1970) and the renowned *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973, not released until early 1977 after Franco's death near the end of 1975), "which are not readily associated with the horror genre, form part of the same industrial and cultural milieu" of the experimental interplay between horror and other genres that was ongoing during this period (13-15). It is worth noting that among these horror films that "offered resistance to a repressive and homogenizing mainstream" (8) were Eloy de la Iglesia's films, most notably his films from 1973: *La semana del asesino*, *Una gota de sangre para morir amando*, and *Nadie oyó gritar*. Lázaro-Reboll argues that, in all three films, "de la Iglesia inscribes a homosexual subtext on both formal and stylistic levels," implicitly and sometimes explicitly subverting both heterosexist assumptions about viewership and the official and pseudoscientific discourses on homosexuality that were prevalent at the time (146).

Lázaro-Reboll contextualizes his analysis of the "homosexual intimations" present in these films by referencing the 1954 Ley de Vagos y Maleantes and the 1970 Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social that came to replace it. The latter was enforced until 1979 and established that "so-called enemies of society, among them homosexuals, could be interned for a period of no less than six months to five years in a centre for re-education" (149). In *Una gota de sangre para morir amando*—whose most recurrent criticism was its similarity to *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)—a male character is detained in just such a rehabilitation center due to his criminal past. As he lies nervously and very scantily clad, constrained to a metal table with a Frankenstein-type metal helmet

on his head, the doctor explains to him: “Lo único que pretendemos es curar tu mente; librarte de los instintos que te han convertido en criminal; conseguir que seas un hombre digno, honrado, útil a la sociedad, y vamos a intentarlo. Hace unos años te hubieran llevado . . . a la cámara de gas o te hubieras pasado la vida en la prisión. En cambio, ahora, intentaremos integrarte como elemento útil dentro del orden establecido. Relájate. No pienses en nada. No pienses. No pienses” (0:34:03). The patient is then subjected to a series of electric shocks reminiscent of the aversion therapy practiced on accused or self-identified homosexuals at the time. While the particular crime of this character is not homosexuality, the implications for a queer reading of these lines—lines delivered in a film absolutely embedded in queer subtext—are highly significant in that they address the menacing and ideological nature of the imperative to be a (sexually) “productive” member of society. I will return to the importance of this precedent in my analysis of *El orfanato* and its engagement with the (bio)logical alibi of the Franco regime and its highly normative discourse.

During the Transition period, De la Iglesia would go on to make films with more explicitly homosexual themes, but Lázaro-Reboll asserts that:

in the late Francoist period, his expression of this cinema could only be intimated and articulated through the horror/thriller genres. De la Iglesia’s film cycle resists straight gender and generic definitions, escaping any classificatory system set on closing off either the complexities of desire or the (in fact) complex consumption behaviours of popular genres. (153-54)

This side note in our brief history of Spanish film serves to highlight the ways in which the phobias behind normative discourse can be strategically confronted in horror films in

a way that exploits the genre's paradigmatic excess in order to fly under the radar of censors, yet still intimate a counterhegemonic reading among other viewers: a limited but nonetheless subversive potential that I will explore in this chapter.

As Lázaro-Reboll has noted, horror films suffered a steep decline after Franco's death. Throughout the 1980s, the *movida madrileña* produced such renowned directors as Pedro Almodóvar, whose campy, quirky films frequently portrayed transgressive characters and activities that would have been disallowed in previous decades. The politics of the Transition focused on disengaging the national imaginary from the real-life horrors of the recent past and focusing cultural production on the construction of a new, internationally open, progressive Spain, 1992 being a key year for this project, with the Seville Expo and the summer Olympics in Barcelona helping to reintroduce Spain to the world after decades of fascist dictatorship. Near the new millennium, however, horror films began to reappear in Spain, continuing, just as they had done in the past:

to give voice to cultural anxieties at the turn of the twenty-first century: the role of the media in society and its representation of violence, as present in *Tesis* or the [*•REC*] franchise, or filmic representations of the Spanish Civil War and its legacy, such as Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* . . . and *El laberinto del fauno*, which lend themselves to a more allegorical and political reading through their engagement with memories and histories that have been erased from official discourses on contemporary democratic Spain. (Lázaro-Reboll 8)

It is worth briefly mentioning that, during this post-Transition resurgence of Spanish horror films, Catalan filmmaker Jaume Balagueró wrote and directed two films

related to the abduction and torture of children: *Los sin nombre* (1999) and the English-language production *Darkness* (2002). Both films received generally unflattering reviews due to their problematic character development and their unmarketable tempo. Neither film is particularly relevant to the present study due to their relative historical and ideological detachment from Spain's past—these are horror films in traditional, industrial form. In Balagueró's films, the torture of children (and adults, for that matter) is used solely as a mechanism to cause viewers to be shocked and horrified for the sake of being shocked and horrified. Del Toro's much more successful films from the 2000s, however, do not rely on explicit violence as a selling point and represent a historically conscious return of the repressed: a revisiting of past horrors and histories that were repressed during both the Franco dictatorship and the Transition. Both films have received a healthy amount of academic attention due to their direct engagement with themes of historical memory. Before proceeding to my main argument for the inclusion of *El orfanato* in this movement, I will review academic criticism of del Toro's two films in order to highlight themes and concerns that dialogue with Bayona's 2007 box office hit, the rhetorical figure of (orphaned) children being of primary importance.

Guillermo del Toro's Spanish gothic: endangered children, affect, and historical memory

El espinazo del diablo is set in an isolated, rural orphanage run by Republican sympathizers who are taking care of and educating the male children of their fallen (or otherwise compromised) comrades during the final months of the Spanish Civil War as the impending victory of the Nazi-aided Nationalist forces is all but certain. The 12-year-

old protagonist, Carlos, is brought to the orphanage without knowing that his parents have been killed in the war. The ghost of a recently “disappeared” boy, Santi, begins to appear to Carlos, and while the other boys speak of his hauntings, Jaime—the one boy who witnessed Santi’s murder at the hands of Jacinto (a young adult/former orphan who now works there)—remains silent out of fear. While the other children are afraid of Santi’s ghost, Carlos overcomes his fear in order to dialogue with him and discover that he wants vengeance: a revenge he exacts with the help of Carlos and the boys, who are then forced to abandon the orphanage, all alone in the world, after the adults have all been killed (along with several children) in an explosion resulting from a fire maliciously set by Jacinto prior to his death.

In her analysis of the film, Helen Brinks (2004) reflects on the historical and cultural specificity of the gothic genre and the innovative ways in which Del Toro works from within a gothic framework to articulate a historical relationship to traumatic events. She begins her study by observing that most academics “have tended to focus on [the gothic] as a mode for exploring the sexually tabooed and the dysfunctions of the nuclear family, especially its generational dynamics and normative gender roles” (292). She then goes on to propose that the genre can also be used, “however,” to redefine “a culture’s ‘return of the repressed’ in terms of . . . a nation’s occluded social and/or political history and identity,” (293) positing that the traumatic past of the Spanish Civil War can be made more “accessible” through children’s eyes, as beings whose underdeveloped egos (and weaker defense mechanisms) render them particularly susceptible and sensitive both to traumatic memory’s durability and intrusiveness [thus exposing fissures in the ideal of the

social subject as a hermetic, self-containing entity, as discussed in the previous chapter] and to *what escapes rational comprehension or control*. It is with them that the audience is asked to identify. (294; emphasis added)

After having made this distinction between two different approaches to analyzing the gothic—one based on gender and the other based on national history and identity—Brinks goes on to offer a thoughtful reflection on the film’s implications for themes of trauma and historical memory. In the present chapter, it is my intention to explore how the two—gender and national identity—are not mutually exclusive approaches, but are in fact linked facets of the same “repressed” which returns as a result of the inadequacy of interconnected and mutually constitutive master narratives—heteronormative discourse and nationally normative discourse—due to their inevitable failure to “control” human experience and account for it in “rational” terms.

Brinks’s theoretical approach to trauma helps to establish a productive dialogue with my study, stemming from the fundamental commonality between gender and national normativity and the particular role death has in framing the volatile interplay between normative discourse and the uncanny. She works from Caruth’s conceptualization of trauma as a “double telling” (which I will explore in detail in the next chapter): “an oscillation between a death crisis and a crisis of life lived afterwards” that highlights “the frightening proximity of death *and* life,” thus evoking “Freud’s theorization of the uncanny”—a sensation to which children are especially vulnerable due to the incipient and underdeveloped (read: chronologically immature, thinking of Lim’s observations on the normative nature of time) nature of their sense of self (Brinks 296).

In other words, the newness of children to symbolic order (symbolic in the sense of Lacan's reformulation of Freud's concept of the superego)—an order plagued by fissures due to its inability to completely symbolize (i.e., name and make sense of) the real—can be used to explain why children make such frequent appearances in this recent series of horror/gothic films that have to do with Spain's traumatic past. In the case of *El espinazo del diablo*, Brinks observes that "harrowing images 'haunt' the viewer," thus testifying "to the limits of language and to what remains inexplicably real (in a Lacanian sense) about intranational violence" (296). A similar observation can be made about "what remains inexplicably real" about sexual desire and "the limits of language"—i.e. heteronormative discourse—when attempting to explain sexual desire through a coherent narrative that attempts to attribute (and prescribe) to it meaning and purpose. The intimate relationship between heteronormative discourse and the existential imperative of neatly separating life from death has been explored in the previous chapter. By mapping her analysis of the role of children in *El espinazo del diablo* in terms of the Lacanian real and symbolic, Brinks helps establish a theoretical framework within which observations can be made about the interconnectedness of sense-making narratives and about different rhetorical strategies for conjuring, confronting, and reflecting on that which resists meaning (in a word, ghosts).

Brinks continues to invite a queerly inflected analysis by addressing fissures in the logic of subjectivity, noting that, "by means of Santi, an uncanny, ghostly other carried within the boys' psyches, *The Devil's Backbone* reports of a cultural fascination and fear of subjectivity's alienability." By focusing on orphans, Del Toro divests "the ego of its secure familial, social, and national legacy, that symbolic inheritance that

underwrites a coherent, meaningful identity” and “stages acts of subjective dispossession” (299). This problematization of the notion of a coherent subjectivity that is “naturally” inherited with one’s own DNA—an inheritance that must then be passed on to future generations through reproduction in order to avoid spiritual death—will be a central theme in my analysis of *El orfanato*.

The orphans are not the only characters whose subjectivity is called into question by Brinks, and while she does not make a connection between the incomprehensibility of trauma and that of sexual desire (that is to say, that both reside within the Lacanian real), one of her examples includes a woman who falls “victim” to her own sexual needs. I would like to take Brink’s analysis of this example a step further in order to demonstrate the aforementioned Lacanian connection. Carmen (played by Marisa Paredes) is the matriarch of the orphanage: a living space she shares with her friend and colleague, Dr. Casares, who has an obvious love interest in her, but has become impotent in his old age. In order to satisfy her needs, Carmen has an ongoing series of sexual encounters with the much younger, virile, and attractive Jacinto (about whom Ann Davies has written an entire article), who embodies the individualistic, brutal yet seductive force of fascism. Ideologically, Carmen is opposed to everything Jacinto represents, yet despite their logical/philosophical incompatibility—and despite the fact that Jacinto grew up in this very orphanage and we as spectators do not know how long this sexual relationship has been going on between them—both characters are repeatedly driven into each other’s arms by sexual desire and its incomprehensible (lack of) logic. It is not by coincidence that the example I have chosen to focus on brings into focus the fissures that are inherent in a (heterosexist) narrative that attributes fixed sexual identities to social subjects in

order to hold them personally responsible for being sexual (that is to say, for simply being), attributing to sexuality a responsibility to reproduce: an imperative that will be central to my analysis of *El orfanato*.

As adults—fully-formed social subjects whose age supposedly allows them free agency for which they can be held legally responsible—their symbolic identities fail to exercise any logic over the pulsations of the real when needs are ever-present and resources/options are scarce. The isolation of the orphanage and the desperate circumstances of the ongoing civil war bring into relief the limits of the logic of personal responsibility/accountability that helps to dictate the grammar of social subjectivity. Such examples, according to Brinks, “call into question the meaningfulness and possibility of human agency in moments of crisis, such as civil war” (307).³ A coherent, logical narrative cannot be applied to Carmen’s behavior during these times of crisis, just as “the discursive binarisms that structure so many of the aesthetic and historical responses to the era—ones that rhetorically stage the conflict simplistically as one between democracy versus fascism, communism versus Catholicism” fail to fully make sense of individual experience and behavior during the war (301).

³ The limits of agential subjectivity in an end-of-war context are perhaps most notably exemplified in the final scene of José Luis Cuerdas’ *La lengua de las mariposas* (1999), when the 6-year-old protagonist (again, a look back at the Civil War through the eyes of a child) is instructed by his Republican-sympathizing parents—who are unable to hold back tears—to give the fascist salute and scream epithets at his former school teacher while he is being hauled out of town by Nationalist soldiers. The idea that one must perform fascism against one’s will in order to survive in this context is also highlighted in *El espinazo del diablo* when Carmen tears down the flag of the Republic and begins to decorate the orphanage with religious iconography, explaining to Dr. Casares: “Si la España nueva es católica y apostólica . . .” (0:35:15).

What are the limits of agential subjectivity? “How intelligible is traumatic history? Which aspects remain obscure, shut off from representation and knowledge?” Brinks posits that “it is in regard to these questions that the film’s gothic discourse invokes and probes the sublime and ultimately insists on uncertainty” (306): a gothic ambiguity that serves to characterize this recent series of Spanish films that reflect, through a supernatural lens, on the country’s traumatic past. A certain faith is lost in institutionalized ways of accumulating knowledge and documenting human experience (a loss of the same faith that is reinscribed rather than questioned in Mexico’s institutions in *Kilómetro 31* through officer Ugalde’s character), and the characteristic unknowability of traumatic events is at first acknowledged, and then readdressed through emotional experience.

In other words, while the trauma of the civil war cannot be fully “known” in traditional, institutionalized ways—and much less understood—films can offer affective insights into what trauma *feels* like by inviting viewers to identify and feel with individual characters. The suffering of adults in the civil war can be explained away—in highly problematic and ideological fashion—by the aforementioned binary of narratives surrounding the war, attributing, for example, the post-war suffering of surviving Republicans to the political ideology they embraced as free-thinking, fully-formed, agential subjects. They made a decision, chose a side, and then suffered the consequences: a neat, coherent, closed narrative that hinges on simplistic, totalizing, binary logic. In a somewhat different but not unrelated theoretical context, Brinks asks, “Is there a narrative capable of making sense of these (children’s) sufferings?” (308). Because children are not capable of articulating and imposing a political will that is

entirely their own (but then again, is anyone?), it is more difficult to explain away their suffering—especially their wartime suffering—in terms of choices and consequences.

Because they are novices to the symbolic order through which narrative is codified, it is particularly difficult for them or anyone else to make sense of their suffering. As observed by Edelman and as mentioned in the previous chapter, children's lack of agency is typically exploited—especially in horror films—as a way of naturalizing any given political agenda: a blank screen for the projection of adult ideology, hidden as such by the emotional impulse to protect the children (and thus the future) at all costs. In the case of the films studied in this chapter, it seems that the double-edged sword—thematic throughout the chapters of this study—can again be used to describe the potential of the figure of the child and the emotional responses it is capable of eliciting with remarkable efficiency.

By focusing on the civil war as experienced by children, Del Toro moves away from the totalizing discourse of traditional civil war histories and towards a different kind of knowledge: one rooted in affect and individual experience. It is not my intention here to form a binary between these two forms of knowledge and privilege one over the other, for certainly the latter is highly subjective and does not come close to escaping from the former in terms of the ideological framework (and accompanying political interests) within which affective reactions are elicited and codified into culturally-specific emotions. This dynamic is thoroughly addressed in Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin America Cinema*, wherein she works from a Deleuzian distinction between affect and emotion, the former being closer to the Lacanian real in terms of unnamable, original experience, and the latter being closer to

the symbolic in terms of its cultural, historical, and political specificity and situatedness. It is in this book that Podalsky, much like several academics who have written on the two Del Toro films in question, explores the role of affect in exploring “alternative ways of knowing”—particularly in relation to traumatic histories (8).

Both Brink and Podalsky call attention to the way in which “the events of the past frame the psychic terrains of the present” and how the perpetually unsatisfiable “need to symbolize what is traumatic is inextricable from the need to tell history in such a way that it bears upon and means something for the present” (Brinks 308). In the case of Spain, then, the present is a time that is no longer defined by the Transition (and its insistence on looking forward, away from the country’s isolated fascist past, towards a modern, democratic future), but rather, having gained international status (entry into the European Union and ultimately the Eurozone, for example), for the first time since 1939 is taking a look back to acknowledge its traumatic past. Brinks concludes that “*The Devil’s Backbone* ends with an acknowledgment that the trauma of that war [the Spanish Civil War] *feels uncanny* in the way it simply will not let go of the present, that its dead are too many to separate from the living or to be forgotten, that the *emotions* of that *time persist*” (308; emphasis added).

While the coexistence of past and present was textualized as dangerous and ultimately deadly in *Kilómetro 31*’s contribution to the hegemonic discourse of progress and modernity—using the trope of the specter to elicit a strong and decisive emotional reaction (i.e., fear) from spectators, pushing them towards a desire for comforting narrative closure—*El espinazo del diablo* and *El orfanato* acknowledge the initially frightening nature of ghosts, but then invite viewers, through the eyes of their

protagonists, to work through this fear, to struggle with the elusiveness of ghosts in order to dialogue with them, and ultimately to form emotional connections with them, thus replacing fear with empathy and using affect as a means of engendering sensitivity to the way trauma is experienced by individuals and how, by definition, it is impossible for the mind to introduce narrative closure to and make sense of traumatic events (and much less so in a chronologically coherent fashion). In the way of a caveat, I have chosen to describe this rhetorical strategy as an “invitation” to feel in order to acknowledge, as Podalsky does in the first chapter of her book, the multiplicity of readings of any given filmic text and how those readings are historically, culturally, and ideologically situated, with the political inclinations and personal life experience of the individual spectator playing a definitive role in the detection and reception of such invitations.

The role of affect in the context of national historical trauma is mentioned in nearly every other academic critique of both *El espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno*, Jane Hanley observing about the latter that Del Toro’s complex and original use of setting and genre creates “productive tensions between historical and fantastic narratives” (35) that provide insights into how the war was experienced (by some) on an emotional level. In her article on *El espinazo del diablo*, Anne E. Hardcastle cites Robert Rosenstone’s observation that “film emotionalizes, personalizes history” (126). She then comments on the difference in the historical situatedness of *El espíritu de la colmena* (1975) and *El espinazo del diablo*, asserting first that the latter owes a “thematic debt” to the former for viewing “fascism through the eyes of children,” and second that there is a generational difference between the two. The child protagonists in the 1975 film—set shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War and dominated by the silence and the

inaction of its frightened, numb protagonists—feel “nothing like the confidence in their own actions and rightness of their cause that allows the boys to unite, pursue, and defeat the evil threatening them” (125).

She is referring here to the end of *El espinazo del diablo*, when the surviving orphans team up in a collective plot to kill Jacinto, stabbing him with sharpened wooden poles and pushing him into a deep pool of murky water: the same pool he had previously pushed Santi’s body into after inadvertently killing him. It is in this pool that we see the ghost of Santi holding Jacinto down in an act of deadly vengeance. Hardcastle’s point about the historical distance of a Spanish viewing public in 2001 as compared to 1975 is well taken, although Brinks cautions that the idea of “children of the leftists” surviving while “the fascist bully is destroyed” is “troublesome, for it insists that the narrative can be ‘worked out’ or fully concluded only by relying on the same aggressive energies that led to earlier terror: that heady compound of violence and class divisiveness” (307). Brinks also highlights on several occasions the human mind’s drive towards narrative closure—both seen in the characters but also elicited from viewers—and how this drive plays into underlying fascist impulses. She posits that the film works against this narrative closure by insisting “on the presence of ghosts” that do not go away when revenge is exacted and that watch the surviving boys literally limp into an uncertain future with no adults to rely on in a barren, devastated landscape, thus pointing “to a deeper ambivalence about intelligibility” (308).

Hardcastle also sees the aforementioned vengeance as problematic, but in terms of historical representation, which she asserts is discarded by Del Toro in order to present “a powerful emotional perspective on the Spanish Civil War” (126). Furthermore, she

divests Jacinto's death of an ideological reading and asserts that, "instead of a divided, angry populace [as was the case in post-war Spain and continues to be the case, in many ways], the boys are united against a single oppressor, a dictator, rather than an ideology": a historical revisionism that fits "the desired image of contemporary Spain in a post-dictatorship culture" (127). My interpretation of Jacinto's death more closely aligns itself with that of Brinks in terms of the ideological nature of the confrontation that is staged between Jacinto and the boys (including Santi). To bolster her claims about the film's representation of political ideology as subject matter, Brinks makes a point of discussing ways in which the film explores "the factionalism, discord, and hatred that splinters the republican community, down to its youngest members, discovering within the world of the orphanage the 'fascist' impulses residing in the nation [and I would add, the continent] at large" (301).

By allowing this complicated and most unhomely (read: *unheimlich*) possibility into the often binary and emotionally-charged framework within which the Civil War is thought and narrated, the uncanny can haunt us in new ways. What I mean by this is that, when we acknowledge that contradiction and complexity are inherent to the human condition—a condition that is experienced both in incoherent, non-linear ways as well as in historically-contingent ways—we must then acknowledge that fascism is not a chronologically or nationally distant philosophy, but rather that, depending on events surrounding us, "fascist impulses" can creep into our cognitive processes, or worse yet, they can creep *out of us* in a truly haunting and terrifying manifestation of the uncanny. It is not my point to dwell upon, debate, or resolve the differences between Brinks's and

Hardcastle's interpretation of the villain in *El espinazo del diablo* and the ideological conflict he may or may not represent.

My intent is, rather, to situate *El orfanato* within this series of gothic films that have come out of Spain in the first decade of the twenty-first century as exploring, in less explicit terms, the ideological underpinnings of fascist rhetoric and thinking—first and foremost, the heteronormative family. If the degree to which the ideology of fascism is directly addressed in *El espinazo del diablo* (2001) is vague or debatable, one must acknowledge that in *El laberinto del fauno* (2006), the viewer is exposed in much more explicit fashion to fascist rhetoric as such. One example would be Captain Vidal's speech at a dinner table full of Nationalist military officers and a Catholic priest during a discussion of what to do about the remaining Republican units who, after their defeat in the recently concluded Civil War, are hiding in the woods, trying to avoid capture and subsequent imprisonment and/or execution. Vidal's mission is to hunt them down: a task that, as a murderous ideologue, he is enthusiastic about doing “porque quiero que me hijo nazca en una España limpia y nueva, porque esta gente parte de una idea equivocada, que somos todo iguales. Pero hay una gran diferencia: que la guerra terminó y ganamos nosotros. Y si para que nos enteremos todos hay que matar a esos hijos de puta, pues los matamos, y ya está” (0:40:06).

In *El laberinto del fauno* (2006) the examination of fascist rhetoric is explicit, as are the film's references to the Civil War. There are several things about this quote that help us, for the purposes of the present study, to contextualize *El orfanato* (2007) within the aforementioned series of Spanish gothic films from the 2000s. Firstly, where both of Del Toro's films are clearly contextualized in reference to the Civil War, *El orfanato* is

set in the present without overtly mentioning the war. Even though the war and the Franco regime serve as a subtext for the dark, murderous, literally buried past of the orphanage in Bayona's film, it is up to the viewer to intuit any national allegories (although this can be done with little creative effort and a rudimentary knowledge of twentieth-century Spanish history, given the appearances and disappearances that are thematic in the film). As in Del Toro's films, the ending of *El orfanato* "insists on uncertainty" (to borrow Brinks's phrase once more) and allows for multiple readings.

Secondly, I would like to propose that *El orfanato* represents a continued progression with respect to the other two films in terms of its interaction—and the sophistication of its interaction—with the underlying ideologies that have fueled dominant political discourse in Spain (and elsewhere, to be sure). While Jacinto is the clear villain in *El espinazo del diablo* and Vidal fulfills this role in graphic/grotesque fashion in *El laberinto del fauno*, the decisive identification of a villain is problematized in *El orfanato* where, I will argue, the bad guy is not so much a dictator figure as it is an ideology that lurks in all of us. Where *Kilómetro 31* mapped evil as an exterior force that threatened the hermetic coherence of one's subjectivity, *El orfanato* locates the threat as literally inside the house (thinking again in terms of *das Unheimliche*). Lastly (but very much related to my last point), Vidal's preoccupation for his soon-to-be-born son as the embodiment of the future—as a political ideal that must be protected from conflicting ideologies or ways of being in the world—helps to contextualize *El orfanato*'s critique of fascist logic as occurring on a fundamental level: the "family, children, [and] desire" mentioned in the Derridean epigraph of the previous chapter and located at the crossroads of heteronormativity, social control, and economic regulation.

The temporal strategies of fascist rhetoric and the regulation of sexual desire

In order to illustrate the importance of *El orfanato*'s ideological confrontation with Spain's fascist past, it will be necessary to briefly explore the philosophical underpinnings of fascist rhetoric as well as the temporal strategies that helped to map out national identity in the political discourse and the collective imaginary of Francoist Spain. This rhetoric has its roots in what is now deemed in Spanish literature the Generation of 1898, which is defined by an identity crisis that ultimately grew from a war of words into the Spanish Civil War. Having recently lost the last of its overseas colonies to the United States, Spain could no longer avoid a confrontation with the fact that it had fallen dramatically behind the rest of Western Europe in terms of industry and infrastructure. While some writers advocated for the Europeanization of the country and a departure from the tradition that had left Spain developmentally stagnated, others rejected these progressive ideas and insisted on a "regeneration" of classic Spanish traditionalism, infusing their rhetoric with a call to restore the "spiritual essence" of Spain and its former imperial glory. This call to arms would come to be known as the rhetoric of *hispanidad*: a concept that Ramiro de Maeztu set out to define and defend in his book *Defensa de la Hispanidad* (1934), capitalizing the word throughout his text in an effort to underscore its purported universality. The ultra right-wing, fascist *Falange* Party would soon appropriate this rhetoric in order to advance, naturalize, and impose its highly normative social agenda after emerging victorious from the Spanish Civil War in 1939 with the help of Hitler and Mussolini. Just like the rhetoric of *hispanidad*, the official discourse of the

Fascist Party sought to justify its political ideology in “truths” that were allegedly as universal and eternal as nature itself. In this section, I will focus on the parallels between the rhetoric of *hispanidad* and the discourse of Spain’s fascist right to illustrate a connection between prescribed national identity and prescribed sexual identity, both of which manipulate the collective imaginary in similar ways, using identical temporal strategies.

Santiago Juan-Navarro defines *hispanidad* as a regressive utopianism (396) wielded by the right as a rhetorical tool to construct an essentialist nationalism in the Spanish imaginary and to distract national attention from the harsh material reality of post-1898 Spain and redirect it towards the realm of the intangible. In this imaginary playing field, the “soul” of the “real” Spain—“real” of course meaning zealously Catholic and traditionalist—enjoyed spiritual superiority over the blatant materialism and blasphemous Protestantism of Anglo-Saxon modernity. The notion of the nation’s past was manipulated in such a way as to completely ignore the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and prolong the “spirit” of the glorious days of the Spanish Empire into the present. *Hispanidad* legitimized and reaffirmed the values that were considered key for the “éxito del imperio español: jerarquía, autoridad, centralismo, cruzada católica e intolerancia frente al secesionismo en el pensamiento o en la sociedad” (393).

In *Defensa de la Hispanidad*, Maeztu reinscribes the legitimacy of Spain’s traditional socioeconomic hierarchy by asserting that “La economía no es una actividad animal o fisiológica, sino espiritual” (76). That is to say, the economy does not fall within the realm of the material or the tangible, but rather within the elusive realm of the inaccessible and the spiritual, over which only God has control. Consequently, the

economy is not something that should or can be questioned. Throughout his book, Maeztu repeats time and again that *hispanidad* is defined by its preoccupation with spiritual matters over material ones: a characteristic that, according to Maeztu, differentiates “true” Hispanics from Anglo-Saxons as well as the fascist Spanish right from the socialist Spanish left.

The rhetorical benefits of this dichotomy for Spain’s ruling class are multiple. First, it offers consolation to a country in crisis, stressing the nation’s spiritual superiority in an attempt to eclipse its industrial inferiority. Second, it keeps any debate about socioeconomic hierarchies out of play, consecrating the topic as (super)natural and fatalistically out of reach (similar to what we have seen in *Kilómetro 31* in previous chapters). Finally, it aligns Hispanic identity with the traditionalism of the Spanish right and, through a dialogue with the Anglo-Saxon and Soviet “Others,” alienates the Spanish left as foreign or anti-Hispanic. According to this rhetoric, spiritual (rather than material) collectivism⁴ and conformity are naturally occurring values in the organic beehive of *hispanidad*, while spiritual individualism and critical thought about the country’s economic structure are not. To display a preoccupation for one’s particular position on the divinely designed socioeconomic totem pole is to betray one’s ethnicity: an identity Maeztu sought to establish as natural rather than socially constructed. Such blasphemous “materialists” were to be considered un-Spanish and, as people born and raised in Spain who somehow did not embody *hispanidad*, unnatural anomalies.

⁴ In his book *Falange: A History of Spanish Fascism*, Stanley G. Payne observes that the combination of collectivism and nationalism was a common phenomenon among the European right at the time, citing German and Italian fascism as examples.

Near the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Maeztu was shot and killed by forces loyal to the Republic, thus becoming a martyr for the fascist cause. The connection between Maeztu's rhetoric and that of the Fascist Party is clear, as Juan-Navarro points out in his research. In August of 1938, shortly before its end, Franco referred to the Civil War as a "lucha . . . del espíritu contra el materialismo, y no tiene otra solución que el triunfo de los principios puros y eternos sobre los bastardos y antiespañoles" (qtd. in Llera no pag.). This ideological battle is described nearly the same way in Maeztu's book as "la España de Don Quijote y la de Sancho, la del espíritu y la de la materia" (57).

In a propaganda piece dated September of 1937, the Fascists claim they aim to "salvar por esta lucha los valores morales, espirituales, religiosos y artísticos creados por el pueblo español a lo largo de una gloriosa historia" (Llera no pag.). In other words, the left does not pose a threat to the ontological Spain: only the imaginary Spain of yesteryear that is a byproduct of the myth of *hispanidad* and its revisionist historicism. This fantasy Spain is the only Spain that is capable of achieving the illusion of simplistic, historical continuity in the collective imaginary precisely because of its unreality. It is the only Spain that can be imagined in terms of "principios puros y eternos"—to invoke once more the words of Franco—precisely because it is imagined to have always existed: at least since 1492, the mythical year that is imagined to have established a coherent and easily-accessible "beginning" for the Spanish people. Considering that the ontological experience of a human being is limited by his/her birth and death, the concept of a national past and a national future must be imagined.

This territory of the imaginary is the domain of *hispanidad*: a territory that, once claimed, is quite easy manipulated for political gain since it forecloses on and defies

ontological reality. Once accepted as universal and eternal within the collective imaginary—once granted reality status as the “real” Spain—the political objectives of the Fascists acquire an ideological alibi that purports to place their struggle outside of their own mortality: a strategy that allows their followers to imagine that they have conquered their own mortality through a spiritual joining with something they imagine to be eternal. The fact that the Catholic Church has long employed a similar, if not identical ideological alibi is brought into perspective through its authoritative role in post-war, fascist Spain. As noted by Juan-Navarro, “la visión de Maeztu estableció las bases legitimadoras del discurso ideológico del franquismo al intuir además la posibilidad de que la espiritualidad católica pudiera llegar a inspirar una contrarrevolución que, a su vez, introdujera un sistema autoritario” (393). Maeztu’s *hispanidad* naturalized, consecrated and prescribed the absolute hierarchy of the Catholic Church: a structure that, according to Stanley G. Payne, was duplicated by the Fascist Party. Once followers have been taught to privilege the spiritual over the material, the imaginative process behind the negotiation of what constitutes the spiritual is naturalized and ignored, as is the ideological agenda from which their sense of eternity is being constructed.

The narrative of *hispanidad*, then, invites its readers to imagine a national past (inevitably narrated through a specific political ideology), to imagine that this past has a coherent and logical beginning (however mythical that beginning might be), and that an authentic spirit or essence was born during that beginning that, despite the passing of time and the inescapable incompleteness and ideological bias of History, remains pure, unchanged, and eternal. The rhetoric of *hispanidad* then invites its listeners to imagine that this spirit is now under attack by modern-day political adversaries and that action

must be taken against them (a keyword that contextualizes the Fascist magazine *Acción Española*). It invites them to defend the imaginary from the ontological. This is precisely why, in his book, Maeztu manipulates the fictitious characters of Don Quixote and Sancho: characters that continue living as spirits in the collective imaginary: a space they share with the concept of *hispanidad*.

On several occasions, Maeztu goes out of his way to stress that the spirit of *hispanidad* is an “espíritu universal” (237) and that as such, it transcends other nationalisms: “un nacionalismo que se funde en la tradición—y apenas es concebible un nacionalismo que no busque sus raíces en la Historia—, tiene que ser en España *universalista*, porque ese es el sentido de toda nuestra Historia” (279; emphasis added). Maeztu’s historical vision of Spain is that of a country chosen by God to evangelize and catholicize the globe through colonial conquest. Since Catholic theology offers a linear history to explain human existence—with a neat and tidy genesis leading towards an eventual end—Maeztu sees Spanish national history and Catholicism’s history of all human existence not only as eternal truths, but as inseparable truths. Consequently, if someone rejects the historical validity of *hispanidad*, he rejects his own historical validity and that of all humanity—an “unnatural” act of treason against the human race, or at the very least, the Spanish “race.” Following this mentality, the local chief of the Fascist movement in Seville referred disparagingly to the “unnatural position” of the Spanish left and its insistence on the separation of church and state (qtd. in Payne 95).

This term—“unnatural”—was used to demonize political adversaries who called out the rhetoric of *hispanidad* as fiction. It is not surprising, then, that the same term is often used against social subjects whose mere existence exposes the fictitious nature of

heteronormative discourse, which, among other things, prescribes sexual identity much in the same way that *hispanidad* prescribes national identity with pretensions of natural rather than constructed origins. In both cases, the reality and universality of human destiny—death, that fundamentally important temporal referent for framing political debate (as explained by Cazdyn and as seen in previous chapters)—is manipulated as a mechanism to universalize and legitimate narratives that purport to have a coherent, linear explanation for human existence and even post-existence, defining eternity in accessible, institutional terms. Maeztu asserts that, “Así como sobre el individuo se alza la guadaña de la muerte, como una fatalidad inevitable, la patria, en cambio como la rueda de la Fortuna, es permanente posibilidad” (281). Just as the rhetoric of *hispanidad* offers the illusion of the continuation of one’s consciousness beyond mortality as part of an unchanging, eternal, and universal collectivity, heteronormative discourse offers a very similar fantasy in which one’s reason for existence is explained by a reproductive imperative that, once fulfilled, will produce the illusion of continuity beyond mortality as a link in an eternal genetic chain.

Once established in the collective imaginary as universal human destiny, this imperative dictates the division of all human existence into a gender binary wherein one’s humanity is determined and defined by one’s prescribed reproductive function. To defy this existential narrative is to betray humanity itself, just as defying the existential narrative of *hispanidad* constituted an unnatural, treasonous act. In his essay “La España de Cervantes,” Maeztu claims that, during the best times of the Spanish Empire, “De cada hogar español había salido un monje o un soldado, cuando no un monje y un soldado a la vez” (162). Besides illustrating the preferential sexism that is inherent in a gender binary,

this quote exemplifies Edelman's reproductive futurism, wherein the notion of a collective future is contingent upon the reinscription of heteronormative narrative in the collective imaginary. For Maeztu, the continuity of the imaginary Spain of yesteryear depends on the reproduction of monks and soldiers. The fact that monks and soldiers, as tools of ideological conquest, are so urgently needed to perpetuate and enforce the fictitious universality of *hispanidad* brings into relief the falsely universal pretensions of the reproductive imperative that calls for their creation. After all, if *hispanidad* and heterosexuality were naturally-occurring universal phenomena, they wouldn't require continuous vigilance and enforcement.

As Juan Carlos Manrique Arribas observes in his article, "La familia como medio de inclusión de la mujer en la sociedad franquista," the Fascists felt the urgent need to enforce this imperative starting in 1939, having emerged victorious from a civil war that killed a million Spaniards and left the country devastated. In order to create "los futuros soldados de la Patria" (no pag.), women were targeted as human production factories. The Sección Femenina was quickly established, charged with "la labor de formar a *todas* las mujeres, labor . . . que con la ayuda de Dios y la fe que nos da la Falange será pronto realidad perfecta en España," according to the organization's manifesto (*Concentración* 8; emphasis added). Besides exemplifying the sweeping, gender-specific, universalist pretensions of fascist rhetoric, this passage also demonstrates its constant need for narrative closure and the illusion of not just a universally-true concept of reality, but of "realidad perfecta." In her book chapter entitled "Gender and the State: Women in the 1940s," Helen Graham explains that another reason behind the Franco dictatorship's campaign to normativize women was to offset the "moral panic"

brought on by European modernity and the rapid socioeconomic changes associated with it (184). Seeing that modernity meant newfound liberties for women, the Fascists aimed to nip in the bud the continental progress that threatened the dominance of *hispanidad* in the national imaginary:

As a result, a whole pathology of modernity was written on women's bodies via repressive state legislation—in particular with regard to pronatalism. In its bid to stabilize itself and to effect the social institutionalization of victory, the Franco regime targeted women because of the pivotal role they played within the family. The patriarchal family was seen as representing the corporate order of the state in microcosm.

(184)

Consequently, the prescribed function of women in fascist society was double. First, they were to produce children for the homeland, fulfilling their “natural” biological duty by putting their bodies to work for the State. To defy this imperative was to call attention to oneself as a threat to the universality of nationally and sexually normative discourse: a traitor to one's country and to one's biology. By invoking biological reproduction, the Franco dictatorship sought to achieve a certain apolitical legitimacy for its social agenda and for its own antidemocratic hierarchy, which it frequently legitimized as an “organic” extension of familial hierarchy. After all, to cite fascist propaganda piece examined by Manrique Arribas, who would dare speak out against “la primera y más natural de las sociedades humanas” (no pag.). The “repressive state legislation . . . with regard to pronatalism” (Graham 184) attempted to mask itself, not as legislation or the will of the dictator, but as God's natural law and the universal destiny of all women,

much in the same way that Maeztu attempted to describe the economy as divinely guided and directed.

Secondly, once women in Franco's Spain were properly indoctrinated with the help of the Women's Brigade and the Catholic Church, they would raise their children with the "correct" ideology (Graham 187), which fed off of the rhetoric of *hispanidad* and exploited its inextricability from the Catholic institution and its pretensions of universality. In the previously-mentioned publication of the Sección Femenina, one of the purposes of the *Sección Femenina* was to instill "aire . . . sano en la juventud y fe en los corazones de las mujeres para que formen a sus hijos como manda la Ley de Dios y a nuestro modo Nacional-sindicalista" (8-9). By aligning their own interests with those of "the children" and of "Dios," the Franco dictatorship not only sought to win any given political debate: they sought to avoid any and all political debate by establishing its rhetorical parameters outside the realm of the material and the ontological.

Lee Edelman has commented extensively on the political usefulness of children since, as social subjects incapable of articulating and imposing their own political agenda, they can easily serve as a blank surface for the projection of ideology. As rhetorical figures that represent "the future" in the collective imaginary, children must remain frozen in time, never growing up as they do in reality, but rather defying this reality in order to uphold the perpetually inaccessible and immaterial notion of a future so as to remain politically advantageous, much in the same way that Maeztu's "La España de Cervantes" required a suspension of time in the imaginary—the suspension of a couple of centuries of Spanish history, to be specific—as a prerequisite to its rhetorical efficacy. The discourse of *hispanidad* and the heteronormative discourse of the Franco regime both

depend on a privileging of the imaginary over the material and the ontological. They both purport to provide a coherent, linear narrative with fixed notions of past, present, and future that explain the reason for human existence in universal terms, despite the epistemological porosity and mythical nature of this narrative: despite the blatant temporal manipulations I have just outlined. Another similarity can be found in the fact that both discourses attempt to mask their ideological motives by seeking legitimacy in nature, God, and therefore universality and eternity: an imaginary realm that allegedly transcends the political self-interest of mortals. As Slavoj Žižek points out in his essay “Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach,” “Ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it . . . The position, ‘not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person,’ is the very form of ideology, of its ‘practical efficiency’” (82).

The ideological efficiency of the discourses of *hispanidad* and heteronormativism depends on narratives that exploit human anxiety towards mortality and uphold inevitably fictitious notions of past and future. The fissures that are inherent in these narratives run the constant risk of exposure, even though if they were truly as natural and universal as they claim to be, normative national and sexual identities would not be necessary to begin with. The imaginary space from which Maeztu attacked his political opponents as contrary to collective Hispanic “nature” is the same space from which queer subjects are attacked as contrary to collective human nature and from which the Franco regime imposed its reproductive imperative, providing yet another example for the interconnectedness between social control and sexual control, as well as the rhetorical and ideological usefulness of the concepts of eternity and universal human destiny.

The de-essentialization of blood in *El orfanato*

At the beginning of his iconic film *À meia-noite levarei sua alma* (1964), the renowned master of Brazilian horror, José Mojica Marins (better known as “Zé do Caixão” or “Coffin Joe”) points his grotesquely-long fingernail at the camera and explicitly proclaims a theme that usually remains implicit in the horror genre, despite its underlying importance: “O que é a vida? É o princípio da morte . . . O que é a existência? É a continuidade do sangue! O que é o sangue? É a razão da existência!” The projection of a theme as abstract and philosophically subjective as the reason for human existence onto a substance as palpable and scientifically objective as human blood is a rhetorical strategy that naturalizes the sense of continuity that is imagined with procreation. The DNA transfer between parents and their biological children helps facilitate the common fantasy that a) one’s being consists of an ancestrally-inherited essence, and b) that this essence can and must be passed on to future generations if one is to overcome the temporal limits of one’s mortality.

The reality of one’s impending death is pinned against the fantasy of one’s spiritual, symbolic continuity through biological procreation, which is why the rhetorical figure of the child is so frequently used to conceptualize and negotiate symbolic order in relation to the real. Lee Edelman and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, among others, have commented on the ideological usefulness of children in existential debates and the politics of intimacy. Released just two years after equal marriage and adoption rights were given to same-sex couples in Spain in 2005, *El orfanato* subtly repositions the child

in a way that invites a certain questioning of the traditional narrative that has constructed the national imaginary, at least in part, by means of a reproductive futurism that is embodied in the child through the essentialist notion that his behavior, personality, and life's purpose are easily explained by his genealogical pedigree: that they are all "in his blood."

The mere title of the film suggests an eerie, dystopian setting. According to the biologically corroborated rhetoric of traditional social order, the "organic" family is "la primera y más natural de las sociedades humanas." The very existence of orphanages forces one to acknowledge the fissures that are inherent in a narrative that seeks to naturalize the political construct of family—the ideological process through which it is used as a way to organize human society—by pairing it universally with the biological process of reproduction. Often times, heterosexual activity results in unwanted children, and sometimes these children are abandoned by the parent(s) who is/are biologically (and thus, legally and ethically) responsible for their existence.

Such occurrences have led to the institutional need for orphanages, which stand as monuments to the insufficiency of utopian heteronormative discourse and its pretensions of natural, universal order. Orphanages divest heterosexual desire of the ideological alibi of serving a coherent purpose by ensuring the survival for the species, thinking in terms of reproductive futurism but also in terms of the imperative to be "útil a la sociedad," as addressed in *Una gota de sangre para morir amando* (1973). In other words, while all other sexual inclinations can be condemned as selfish, unproductive pursuits of pleasure in the hear-and-now—as not serving a coherent purpose or having a *raison d'être*—heterosexual desire has been framed, not as an inexplicable and irrational drive pulsating

from the Lacanian real (or the Freudian id, if one prefers), but rather as a logical, deliberate phenomenon that stems from an individual's moral sense of social responsibility: a conscious desire to contribute to the (nation's) future by deliberately and responsibly procreating.

Orphanages remind us that this is not naturally or universally the case, and that therefore, an ideology is at work when “the family” is evoked as a naturally-occurring, divinely and universally-ordained— and therefore apolitical—entity. This dichotomy plays itself out in Lacanian terms, with God playing the role of the ultimate signifier that promises to eventually ascribe meaning to the real: to provide a chronological narrative to explain a coherent purpose for human life, death, and suffering. Ramiro de Maeztu claimed that, as a divinely and eternally-upheld essence, the concept of *hispanidad* traces its origins not to the symbolic order of man—the representation of the imaginary, the (negotiable and arbitrary) realm of ideology and political debate—but to the (deified) real, well out of reach of a mere mortal's ability to do anything about it. He even claimed the same for the economy, which he described as “una actividad . . . espiritual” (*Defensa* 76).

We have observed a similar tactic in *Kilómetro 31*'s efforts to regulate the Mexican economy by mapping any attempts to rectify the country's colonialist past and present as fatalistically out of reach: that is to say, beyond the realm of symbolic order, doomed to fall victim to the horrors of the real, with its deadly lack of patriarchal order. In all of these examples, death continues to frame the parameters of what is politically debatable, attributing those structures that serve to benefit hegemonic political interests on a fundamental level—the economy (global capitalism as inevitable as death itself),

national identity (*hispanidad* as eternal, existing before and after one's death), the heteronormative family (as imperative reproduction before one's death)—to the real rather than the symbolic. Orphans serve as reminders of the unsettling fissures between the symbolic/political construct of the family and its supposedly natural alibi in the divine real.

Of course not all orphans are deliberately abandoned by their parents, which is especially true in Spain for an entire generation of children who became orphans as a result of the Civil War, through the death (or through other disappearances, for which the victorious Nationalists are notorious) of their parents. In fact, in this context, the notion of a divine real becomes highly questionable. The terrifyingly incoherent nature of the real—death, suffering, and sexual desire—can only be made sense of through an ultimate signifier: through an all-knowing God through which a coherent purpose is ascribed to these phenomena, despite our inability to make sense of them. Orphans of the Civil War or any orphans who become such through a direct encounter with the real—that is to say, the death of their parent(s)—render a logical, coherent explanation of their loss and suffering increasingly problematic: especially when a political (i.e., symbolic) agenda is so blatantly responsible for this unnamable (i.e., real) loss, rather than the imagined agenda of a divine, ultimate signifier whose mysterious plan orchestrated said loss in a way that promises to eventually make sense in the eternal scheme of things.

In either case, if the notion that DNA equals family is to be upheld—if one continues to insist that family is a purely natural, divine entity instead of an ideologically constructed (and therefore, politically debatable/negotiable) entity—then orphans must be definitively excluded from family and its definition (which, of course, holds the

privileged political status of being the most fundamental unit of society). If, however, one acknowledges the concept of family as a social construct—as pertaining to symbolic rather than natural order—a more inclusive approach can be taken with respect to orphans and other social subjects who are marginalized by the discourse of heteronormative utopia.

Orphanages and orphans are extremely common tropes in horror films, mostly for reasons I have just discussed. In *Kilómetro 31*, the fissures in the discourse of global capitalism and its perpetually unfulfilled promise of utopian modernity are represented as dangerous and supernatural hauntings that, as such, do not properly inhabit time, and by extension reality, thus reinscribing the need for status quo social order. Typically, orphanages and orphans—neglected children whose time is out of joint in terms of the proper, chronological pairing of the period of their childhood with a corresponding period of parenthood on the part of their biological parents—serve the same conservative purpose. Without parents, their future is perceived to be less certain than that of other children: less amenable to the ideological projections of reproductive futurism.

Orphans represent fissures in the discourse of utopian heteronormativism only to reinscribe the privileged importance of the nuclear family and its comforting “natural” order. *El orfanato* is unique in that it uses this common horror trope to interrogate the legitimacy of this order and renegotiate the meaning of family to include families that are both literally and figuratively adoptive: a concept that, according to Adriana Bergero in her analysis of *El espinazo del diablo* and its orphans, holds a particularly meaningful relationship with trauma and human rights. While I will briefly touch on this in the present chapter, the majority of Bergero’s important theoretical contributions will be

applied to the next chapter of this study, which explores the “adopción del dolor huérfano del otro” and its interplay with themes of social subjectivity and historical memory.

For now, part of the title of Bergero’s study will help contextualize the present analysis: “El gótico como cuerpo-geografía cognitiva-emocional de quiebre. No todos los espectros permanecen abandonados.” The gothic geography of *El orfanato* is that of an orphanage that is situated literally at the margins of Spanish society, within walking distance of the country’s Cantabrian coast. The theoretical implications for this gothic geography are even more profound if we consider—as we did in the previous chapter—land to be a metaphor for symbolic order and liquid (i.e., the sea)—with its formless inability to contain meaning—to be representative of the real. This is a particularly apt metaphor because of the recurring trope of the ocean in another Spanish literary generation—the surrealists of the Generation of 1927—to represent the real (namely, death, sexual desire, and the elusive, unnamable essence that inspires poetic ambition), as well as that of the shoreline as a staging area for fleeting poetic (i.e. symbolic) encounters with the real. In the present section, I will examine some of the ways in which the film interacts with this staging of the shifting, ephemeral border between the symbolic and the real.

The child protagonist in *El orfanato* is Simón: an adorable seven-year-old who has yet to discover that he was adopted as a baby by Laura and Carlos. This circumstance alone helps to call into question naturalized notions of family, since DNA plays no role in how he thinks about, feels about, or experiences his relationship with his parents. Another secret his parents have kept from him so far is that he was born with HIV. Laura herself was an adopted child who spent her younger years in an isolated orphanage on Spain’s

northern coast that was eventually abandoned. She married Carlos and they decided to buy the old orphanage and turn it into a boarding school for disabled children. Once the small family has moved into their new home, Simón begins to talk about his new friend Tomás. Laura and Carlos assume Tomás is an imaginary friend, but the film's viewers are led to believe that he is a ghost: one of several ghost children who lead Simón, through a series of games involving a trail of clues, to discover files his parents keep hidden that document his HIV and his adoption.

Shortly after moving in, Laura and Carlos throw a costume party, inviting disabled children and their parents to encourage them to consider participating in their idea to convert the old orphanage into a boarding school: a repurposing of the structure that, I will argue, is metonymically connected to the film's overall repurposing of the rhetorical figure of the child and the horror genre. It is during this costume party that Simón disappears (although viewers do not learn about the definitive nature of this disappearance until later) and Tomás appears to Laura, although when she later asks if anyone else noticed his eerie presence at the party, she seems to have been the only one who saw him. To her, he is just as visible as any of the "real" children.

However, his appearance interrupts—as ghost tend to do—the viewer's experience of the party (through the eyes of Laura as constructed through the camera's gaze), when the happy sounds of music and children's laughter are abruptly replaced by an ominous, extradiegetic chord of unsettling music just as the camera focuses on Tomás, who is standing alone at the edge of the lawn, dressed as an eerily anachronistic rag doll. There is a cloth bag covering his head and face, decorated to look like a doll's head, with ill-fitting cut-outs for his eyes to look through, keeping anyone from getting a good look

at him or being able to identify him, thus exemplifying the visor effect that Derrida asserts as the definitive difference between specters and other ghosts and spirits: we can't get a good look at it, but we know it can see us (*Specters* 7). Visibly troubled, Laura goes into the house to look for Simón, ultimately reaching the end of an upstairs hallway where it meets a bathroom. The eerie music continues as she turns around and sees Tomás advancing towards her.

Tomás never says a word, which keeps him at a perturbing distance from symbolic order, uncannily and unpredictably immune from both its linguistic and social grammar. He grunts incoherently like an animal, presumably to make him appear even more terrifying and to reinscribe the comforting effect of words, coherent narrative, and thus, the alleged knowability of the nature and intentionality of others: of the recognition and recognizability of such concepts. “¿Simón?” Laura asks as Tomás approaches her. When he fails to respond, she begins to lift the cloth sack from over his face in order to confirm for herself that she has found her missing son. Tomás reacts aggressively, pushing Laura back into the bathroom. She keeps herself from falling by holding herself up in the doorway, but the momentum causes the door to swing shut on her fingers, resulting in a paradigmatically characteristic cringe from the audience.

More importantly, Tomás is portrayed as having attacked Laura and he is circumstantially linked to Simón's disappearance, having made his first appearance to Laura concurrently. As the months go by without a rational explanation for his disappearance, Laura begins to believe that supernatural forces linked to the orphanage's dark past are to blame. Despite Carlos's objections, Laura invites a team of paranormal specialists into their home, including a medium who, due to the advanced stage of a

terminal illness, is close enough to death to establish contact with the spirits of the deceased: in this case, the ghosts of the children who used to live at the orphanage.

With the help of the medium and through her own research, Laura discovers that Tomás—Simón’s “imaginary friend”—lived in the orphanage with his mother Benigna, who worked there. He always wore a sack over his head to hide the “malformación” he was born with. While in previous scenes, this sack was used to make his ghost appear especially creepy and unsettling to the audience, viewers are eventually made to understand that Tomás is a child who, beyond not asking to be born in the first place (as no one does), cannot be made to assume personal responsibility for being born with what society has designated as a “malformación.” If the ghost of Tomás is to be viewed as a queer subject by virtue of being a ghost—by failing to “properly” inhabit time—then he is doubly queer for failing to adhere to the arbitrary social grammar that dictates what constitutes a normal head and/or face.

I use the word “fail” here as a deliberate reference to Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, wherein she examines the subversive potential of all things queer in their failure to meet established measures of success, thus making those measures visible and calling them into question. This is the same process to which I have been referring through this study: the calling out or conjuring—to use Derrida’s appropriately ghostly term—of ideological constructs that have been naturalized as part of the landscape, serving to frame political debate rather than be subject to it. The failure of Mexico’s indigenous to achieve economic success in the taken-for-granted-and-politically-imposed reality of global capitalism, the failure of Catalina to marry and reproduce, the failure of Tomás to become popular with the other children at the orphanage: these failures can

invite critical reflections on taken-for-granted milestones of success and the ideologies behind them, although in the case of *Kilómetro 31*, such reflections are discouraged rather than encouraged.

In the case of Tomás, viewers are invited to acknowledge that their initial, reactionary, emotionally-charged impression of Tomás—and this is where the aforementioned relationship between affect and experiential knowledge comes into play—were wrong. Thinking of Lacanian *méconnaissance* and its implications for complicating social subjectivity (as studied in the previous chapter), the initial misrecognition of Tomás as evil helps to exemplify Avery Gordon’s description of the affective functions of the ghost, which are experienced as “transformative recognition” (8), thinking of this last word’s etymological reading as a re-thinking of taken-for-granted realities. Beyond being right or wrong, the viewer’s first impressions of Tomás are called out as being historically situated and ideologically orchestrated: products of camera placement, lighting, the strategic and culturally-specific use of sound and music, and the spectator’s own viewing habits as constructed and reinforced through the internalized yet historically-specific conventions of horror/gothic/suspense films and of film in general. Newly acquired knowledge allows viewers to revisit Laura’s first encounter with Tomás and then reinterpret his reaction to her not as aggressive, but as defensive. Knowledge about Tomás and his mask help elicit feelings of empathy, which in turn call into question previously mapped emotions, judgments, and assumptions regarding his character—about his nature and intentions. Unlike the narrative closure we have seen with *Kilómetro 31* and the rhetoric of *hispanidad*, this evolution of the spectator calls into

question the certainty with which good guys and bad guys are presented and accepted as such.

These newfound feelings of empathy for Tomás are further developed when we learn, along with Laura, that he died as the accidental result of a cruel joke played on him by the other children at the orphanage. Near the orphanage on the shoreline lays a rock formation full of caves that are partially submerged in ocean water when the tide comes in. It was inside one of these caves that the other children “habían intentado gustarle una broma. Se metieron con Tomás en las grutas y allí le quitaron el saco para ver si se atrevía a salir. No salió nunca de allí. Se ahogó. Encontraron su cadáver cuando bajó la marea. A los niños nunca les acusaron del crimen—solo estaban jugando” (0:47:21). Remembering the sea’s potential to represent the Lacanian real, we can see how the senseless death of Tomás was caused by the rigid, arbitrary, and ideologically biased grammar of symbolic (i.e., social) order. Tomás’s fear of being seen was so intense that the power of social grammar resulted in a fatal outcome.

The horror story shifts from being about Tomás’s supernatural hauntings of the orphanage to the “real-life” horror of Tomás having been born into a society that would treat him so cruelly. Notwithstanding, as previously discussed, the fact that the perpetrators are “innocent” children who cannot be held legally responsible for the unintended consequence of their actions—incomplete social subjects still under construction—complicates matters. Adding to this complication is Benigna’s subsequent decision to take out murderous vengeance against the children, poisoning them and burning their bodies in the boiler room. While Benigna is as close as the film comes to identifying a clear villain, even in her case, one is invited to reflect on the limits of

agential subjectivity in times of crisis and trauma, just as Brinks does in her analysis of *El espinazo del diablo*.

While we find her actions to be horrific, we may pause to think about the kind of mindset we might be in when, after seeing our child born into a society that imposes a difference on him to such a degree that he suffers in shame and isolation, we then see him senselessly killed as the result of a cruel joke in which his emotional sensitivities were thoughtlessly disregarded in order to provide amusement for the “normal” children, who after all, “solo estaban jugando.” Children hold a particular potential for calling into question commonly accepted notions of social subjectivity. Beyond the previously mentioned ambiguity between the subjectivity of a pregnant woman and that of her unborn child, and beyond children’s embodiment of subjectivity as an ongoing process rather than a static truth about any given individual, the parent/child relationship can be problematic for notions of coherent, self-containing, individual subjectivity. Elizabeth Stone, author of *A Boy I Once Knew*, is attributed with describing parenthood as having “your heart go walking around outside your body.” This dynamic has ghostly implications in that the human body is seen as insufficient to contain and give meaning to one’s own subjectivity, which is ultimately and paradigmatically contingent upon others. Just like ghosts, people remain invisible without the gaze of the other.

The orphanage’s horrific past is what creates the phantasmal space inhabited by these children, both Tomás and the children murdered by Benigna. Laura believes that forming a dialogue with these ghostly children is the only way to find out what happened to Simón. She takes a fistful of harmful pills in a deliberate attempt to bring herself closer to death, and soon the ghostly children begin to play games with her just as they had

previously with Simón, leading her to discover a hidden door inside a closet that connects to the basement cellar, where she finds Simón. This hidden door is apparently the secret passageway he had wanted to show her before the party, when Laura was too stressed and too busy to pay attention to Simón and have him show her his newfound hiding place. The threat to Simón's life, it turns out, may not have been an external evil that threatens the structural integrity of the nuclear family (as is so common in horror films), but rather an unseen and unacknowledged threat from within.

A double reading of the film becomes explicit in this scene because in some shots Simón speaks to his mother as a live, healthy boy, while in others, his corpse appears to have spent months deteriorating in the cellar after his death. In the shots where he is alive, he and the other children (also very much alive and healthy) rejoice that Laura has crossed over to the other side (that is to say, Laura has died) to take care of them and help heal the wounds of their traumatic past. Bayona leaves open the possibility for both a supernatural interpretation of the film's final events and a rational narrative that suggests that, pushed to the brink of insanity by her need to explain her son's disappearance, Laura's final experiences are all hallucinations brought on by the overdose that eventually killed her.

It is worth noting that the paranormal interpretation of the film's conclusion allows for the possibility of ways and modes of being that extend beyond the coherence of linear narrative. Unlike the narrative closure that characterizes fascist rhetoric, this ending allows for the possibility of multiple versions of the same story (just as multiple readings of Tomás's behavior in his initial encounter with Laura are eventually made possible), one of which even divests death of its typical terminal function (thinking of

Cazdyn, death, and the political imaginary) and allows for the peaceful, nonhaunting cohabitation of multiple temporalities (thinking of Lim and heterotemporality) as the now-adult Laura takes care of her still school-age classmates, thus forming another adoptive family with explicit links to historical trauma (thinking of Bergero's "adopción del dolor huerfano").

As discussed in the previous chapter, normative notions of time use children as a measurement of human experience. After one grows out of the arbitrarily established chronological parameters of childhood, thus becoming an adult, heteronormative discourse then measures one's adult experience in terms of the imperative to produce and raise children, watch them grow, and then enter the next phase of adulthood during which one becomes a grandparent, possibly a great grandparent, and then reach the end of what is commonly described as a full, meaningful life: a life that makes sense through narrative closure. Children who die before their proper time upset this utopian narrative by failing to grow old enough to fulfill society's reproductive imperative and become "útil a la sociedad"—useful to any sense-making narrative.

Ghostly children represent a threat to social order because they are portrayed as eternally stunted in their means-to-an-end development as social subjects. It is not a coincidence that within this same vision of temporality, "proper" chronology helps to frame homophobia: a timeline upon which subjects who do not fulfill the reproductive imperative are viewed as stunted in their development and ultimately unproductive. In heteronormative discourse, as well as in that of Zé do Caixão, "a razão da existência" is the "continuidade do sangue" from one generation to the next. According to this logic, then, the meaning and purpose of a child's existence is contingent upon that child

growing up and producing more children, thus providing a dramatic example of Derrida's *différance* and the making of meaning by perpetually deferring meaning. The untimely death of a child makes it particularly hard to accept the idea of an ultimate signifier that controls and promises to eventually give meaning to the real, forcing us to acknowledge the real's terrifying and random illogic, to which we are all subject and over which we are completely powerless. As Brinks asks regarding the orphans in *El espinazo del diablo*, "Is there a narrative capable of making sense of these (children's) sufferings?" (308).

As previously mentioned, Simón discovers there is no blood relation between him and his parents, which produces a fissure in the rhetoric of the "familia orgánica:" a phrase that strikes a particular resonance in a post-Franco Spain wherein the fascist dictatorship frequently justified its patriarchal authority as a metonymic extension of the "natural," genealogical relationships between fathers and children. Something that intensifies this interrogation of the validity of such an illusion is the fact that Simón was born with HIV: a virus that invokes a queer problematization of the meaning associated with blood. This virus that resides in his blood—and that was organically inherited from his biological mother—holds the potential to complicate the procreation process and problematize the essentialization of blood that is traditionally used to ascribe meaning and purpose to heterosexual desire and to construct the illusion of continuity through reproduction.

Despite decades of progress involving discoveries and education about HIV, the virus still raises within the collective imaginary the specter of being a gay man's disease. Beyond this queer subtext, Simón's HIV causes him to be viewed as inhabiting a certain

queer temporality. Thinking in terms of Cazdyn's temporalities, HIV was initially considered fatal but has since moved closer to the realm of the chronic: a somewhat manageable condition that, due to its transmission through blood and semen, nonetheless raises questions about whether Simón's eventual sexual desire will or should be ascribed meaning through heteronormative reproduction. If "a continuidade do sangue" is the "razão da existência," the case of adorable, innocent little Simón invites critical reflection about heteronormative time as a measurement of human existence. How does Simón fail to properly inhabit heteronormative time? Besides living *in* or *out* of time, what kind of time is Simón living *with*?

In one scene, Simón is sitting with Laura in the living room, reading a Peter Pan book.

SIMÓN. ¿Wendy se hace vieja y se muere?

LAURA. Wendy envejece. Pero Peter Pan viene todos los años a llevarse a su hija a Nunca Jamás.

SIMÓN. ¿Y por qué Wendy no se va con ellos?

LAURA. Pues . . .

SIMÓN. Si Peter Pan viniera a buscarme, ¿tú vendrías conmigo?

LAURA. [*laughing*] No. Yo soy muy mayor para ir a Nunca Jamás, hijo.

SIMÓN. Tú, ¿cuántos años tienes?

LAURA. 37.

SIMÓN. ¿Y con cuántos años te vas a morir?

LAURA. Pero bueno, ¿qué pregunta es esa? Pues me moriré dentro de mucho, mucho, mucho cuando tú ya seas muy mayor.

SIMÓN. Yo no voy a ser mayor. Yo no voy a crecer.

LAURA. [*after a beat, her expression of shock and grave concern changes to one of amusement as she tries to make sense of Simón's comments*] ¿Qué, serás como Peter Pan?

SIMÓN. Como mis nuevos amigos.

LAURA. ¿Ahora tienes más de uno?

SIMÓN. Son seis.

LAURA. ¿Y ellos tampoco van a crecer?

SIMÓN. No pueden crecer.

This dialogue has important implications for my examination of normative notions of time, the concept of growing up, and the fictitious nature of the story-telling that attempts to introduce narrative closure to human existence in order to make sense of it. Simón goes on to talk about the clues these six friends leave behind that, as part of a scavenger hunt, lead to hidden treasures. Laura's concern grows as she sees that this trail of clues is highly complex, pre-meditated, and ultimately leads to Simón's discovery of a key that unlocks the drawer where his medical and adoption records are kept. Clinging to the rational explanation that somehow Simón prepared this highly complex scavenger hunt ahead of time, Laura asks him where he got a hold of all of these things, to which he responds, "No he sido yo. Han sido ellos." When she scolds him for lying, he asserts that, "tú eres la mentirosa . . . ¡no eres mi madre!" (0:26:00). When she asks who told him that, he insists that his friend Tomás told him "que yo soy como ellos, que no tengo padre ni madre, que me voy a morir. ¡Tú no eres mi madre! ¡Eres una mentirosa!"

In the following scene, Laura and Carlos sit Simón down with a glass of orange juice and his habitual pills in order to talk about his adoption and his HIV. After staring at the pills, Simón asks:

SIMÓN. ¿Qué pasa si un día no me las tomo?

CARLOS. No pasaría nada.

SIMÓN. ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene sin tomármelas tiene que pasar para que me muera?

CARLOS. Muchos días. Muchos—semanas enteras . . . Mira, tú no te preocupes porque nosotros vamos a cuidar de ti; no te vas a enfermar ni mucho menos morir, ¿de acuerdo? (0:27:00)

In this dialogue, the question of time becomes explicit, as do the temporal strategies used by Carlos and Laura to assuage Simón's concerns about time. Fiction is again deployed here to assure the child death and sickness are not going to happen to him. Of course that narrative will have to be amended in the future when Simón is considered to be "old enough" to understand human mortality and sickness within more traditional, "adult" temporal parameters, but his parents' attempt to shield him from the Lacanian real have failed as part of the larger failure of the symbolic to shield individuals from or ascribe a narrative to the real. The reality of Simón's mortality (as well as that of his parents, who for the moment are promising to always be there to take care of him) brings about a queer relationship to the rhetoric of heteronormative time and what constitutes a normal, productive life. Simón's situation also highlights fissures in this rhetoric's strategic positioning between a supposedly natural, inherited past that then points towards a meaningful, purposeful continuation of said heritage into the future.

What happens when the blood that runs through the veins of a child such as Simón was inherited by parents who, in open contradiction to utopian order, have died, deliberately abandoned him, or otherwise disappeared? How can one imagine the continuity of blood without ever having met the sources of said blood? The naturalization of blood relationships is similar to that of language itself as representative of reality. Just as formalism and psychoanalysis have indicated, language constructs a referential, symbolic world that arbitrarily negotiates grammar and meaning in an attempt to organize human life around a collective fantasy. As apprentices to symbolic order, children serve as uncanny reminders that what adults have already internalized and naturalized as order—the way things are “supposed” to be—is in fact completely unnatural: it is an arbitrary fantasy that must be taught and learned. In the film, there are several examples of children unknowingly carrying out these unsettling reminders. In one of the first scenes of the film, Simón wakes up next to Laura and asks her, “Mamá, ¿me puedo despertar? ¿Me puedo despertar?” Laura wakes up and corrects his use of the verb despertarse: “Ya estás despierto, hijo. Ahora te puedes levantar (0:19:45)”. For an adult, the difference between despertarse and levantarse has already been naturalized. It’s not something that’s questioned or debated: it’s taken for granted. The child’s “mistake” reminds us that the conceptual difference between the two verbs is imaginary and arbitrary: decidedly unnatural. Just like linguistic grammar, social grammar—far from manifesting itself organically—only exists because it is taught as a collective fantasy from one generation to the next, thus creating the illusion of natural continuity.

For those who are over-invested in a coherent, linear narrative that prescribes a universal purpose for human existence, the acknowledgement of these fissures between

the symbolic and the real can lead to a horrifying interrogation of other things that are collectively affirmed to be real. After Laura and her husband Carlos speak with Simón about his adoption—about not being his “real” parents—the boy proceeds with a follow-up question: “Lo de los Reyes Magos, ¿también es mentira?” Laura and Carlos ignore the question, thus avoiding a Pandora’s box of questions about the constructed nature of religious traditions and the ultimate signifier from which they derive their meaning in an effort to calm human anxiety about the unknowability of the real. In the costume party scene, we notice that the converted orphanage has several large rooms: among them, a chapel that is complete with religious ornamentation. During their visit, the children loudly and playfully run around the chapel without paying attention to—without realizing—the type of ambiance that is typically associated with it. Without meaning to, the rambunctious children have demonstrated that the sacred quality attributed to religious space depends on a consensus: a shared and carefully-constructed illusion.

This innocent, unintentional potential to subvert the legitimacy of symbolic order, with all the comforts brought about by its meaning, explains the recurring centrality of children in horror films, whose genre-defined goal involves the defamiliarization of what has been naturalized in the collective imaginary for the purpose of producing an unsettling, chilling effect among spectators. In her analysis of the child protagonists in *El espíritu de la colmena* and *El espinazo del diablo*, Sarah Thomas posits that:

The viewer identifies with protagonists in their isolation, largely through both films’ use of point of view and close-ups of the children’s emotive faces . . . The child characters’ outside status and marginalization plays a

large part in drawing them to the ghost, a figure excluded by society by its very nature. (10)

This connection causes us to think of Simón's isolated existence in the remote orphanage in which the film takes place. It is also reminiscent of the queer time inhabited by both Catalina and the ghosts of *Kilómetro 31*, causing her to come into contact with and remain vulnerable to their haunting powers. What I wish to add to this observation about the outsider status these child protagonists share with ghosts is that, in my view, there is nothing particular to their character or their circumstances that causes them to come into contact with ghosts other than the simple fact that they are children and that as such—as gelatinous, unmolded social subjects—they are outsiders to adult social order. I am looking at this through the lens of Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, wherein she asserts the queerness of all children: their foreignness to a symbolic order whose logic and grammar are imposed on them in highly ideological (and therefore, unnatural) fashion. In this sense, children remind us that we are all queer to the social order we were born into and that lingering traces of that queerness reside in all of us, thus making encounters with the uncanny and the ghostly integral facets of human experience rather than externally-imposed threats to our existence.

In conclusion, while *El orfanato* brings the touristic viewer closer to the fissure between the real and the symbolic, thus reaffirming the need for the latter, it also encourages the spectator to view symbolic order with a more critical eye, just as the Spanish state, just two years prior to the film's release, questioned and ultimately revised long-established, discriminatory, naturalized notions of marriage, family, and social

order. The film's portrayal of Tomás and the other ghost children ultimately evolves. Initially, their violation of the grammar of social order is represented as spooky and unsettling: the absence of a coherent narrative to explain their existence is filled with a formulaic, genre-specific, easily-orchestrated fear of the unknown.

Nontraditional steps are taken in order to see them in a new light: a light that reveals that their way of being in the world was nothing to be feared in the first place. The dystopian space that haunts the margins of traditional Spanish society—in the film's context, the orphanage located at the margins of the Iberian Peninsula; in a wider context, the Spaniards who didn't or couldn't fulfill the performative societal roles prescribed by Franco—is not “naturally” a horrifying, abject space. The ideologically-positioned gaze that casts the object as horrifying and constructs the viewer as horrified can be contested, now matter how inflexible the norms of genre may seem. Bayona manipulates the rhetorical figure of the child to first take advantage of its classical propensity to the horror genre and then adjust the traditional gaze in order to subtly question the reproductive futurism typically associated with the child and to emphasize the subjective, negotiable nature of the symbolically order upon which it is constructed.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROBLEMATIZATION OF TIME, THE LITERALIZATION OF TRAUMA, AND THE ADOPTIVE FAMILY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN *APARECIDOS*

In the previous chapter, I explored some of the strategies used in *El orfanato* to question the “organic,” nuclear family’s allegedly natural role in organizing social order, as well as the way in which normative notions of time and individual progression through life is complicated and problematized. I also contextualized the film within an early-twentieth-century series of Spanish gothic films that address the nation’s fascist past. In many ways, the present chapter is a continuation of these themes with a closer look at their implications for historical memory and national trauma. Of course in the cases examined in this chapter and the one that precedes it, the idea of a national past becomes transnational, as evidenced by Mexican writer/director/producer Guillermo del Toro’s pivotal role in bringing about a series of gothic films that focus on the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. Argentina is another major Latin American country directly affected by this war—even more so when one considers the neo-fascist nature of its most recent military dictatorship (1976-83). Franco’s death in November of 1975 paved the way for Spain’s transition out of fascist dictatorship, while only five months later in March of 1976, Argentina was plunged into a dictatorship with eerily similar rhetoric and human rights violations. While Spanish refugees flocked to Argentina during and after the Civil War, many Argentines were forced to seek refuge in faraway destinations,⁵ Spain being one such destination.

⁵ Escape to any neighboring country was not an option in Argentina thanks to Operation Condor: the agreement among neighboring right-wing military dictatorships (in Uruguay,

The back-and-forth between the two countries continued, while those who were not fortunate enough to escape after being targeted by their governments suffered similar consequences in their respective times and countries: illegal abduction, detainments torture, rape, execution, etc. After the repression, during the 1980s and 1990s (in Argentina's case, after 1983), official narratives were proposed in both countries that deliberately employed temporal strategies as a way of focusing the national imaginary on a specific here-and-now: "distancias amnésicas respecto a la muerte social y legal del desaparecido" (Bergero 434). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Spain's Transition was concerned with forgetting the past and making up for lost time on the European and the international stage. Similar posturings with respect to time and its alleged passing were seen the Southern Cone: an attitude evidenced by General Díaz in Uruguayan director's short film *El ojo en la nuca* (2001) when he insists that "no hay que seguir viviendo con el ojo en la nuca. Hay que mirar hacia delante y olvidar rencores" (0:12:01). In Spain and Argentina, the return to democracy was frequently spearheaded by a call to forget the past in order to properly inhabit time: the new national, contemporary time of progress.

Given this shared, traumatic history—and given the increased trend in Latin American filmmaking for co-productions with European (largely Spanish) production companies—it is not entirely surprising to see a film such as *Aparecidos* (2007) set in Argentina while featuring two Spanish actors (Ruth Díaz and Javier Pereirra) under the direction of fellow Spaniard Paco Cabezas. Considering the historical trauma of the

Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Chile) to round up each other's political fugitives, as addressed in the Brazilian documentary *Condor* (2007).

Spanish Civil War and the subsequent amnesia of the Transition, it is, as outlined in the previous chapter, not surprising to see a Spanish filmmaker producing a gothic film in 2007 that involves supernatural encounters between characters in the present and the ghosts of victims of past injustices. It has taken Spain over six decades to begin making films about the Civil War, and we have yet to see a movement towards addressing in explicit, cinematic fashion, the horrors of the Franco dictatorship in the decades that followed. What is surprising, then, is to see a horror film made in such ostentatious reference to the real-life horrors—the *desaparecidos*—of Argentina’s recent past. This is especially true when one considers the genre’s reputation for exploitative entertainment. Nonetheless, it is my argument that *Aparecidos* is very self-aware in this regard and that, as a rather obscure, unknown film without the budgets, marketing, or economic ambitions of the other films featured in this study, it holds the potential to offer viewers insightful reflections on themes related to trauma and historical memory, all through a lens that exposes fissures in the normative notions of time and biological inheritance/duty. Before proceeding with my analysis of the film in question, I will attempt to provide some historical context as I have done in previous chapters, although as already mentioned in this introduction, there is considerable overlap between Spain and Argentina vis-à-vis twenty-first-century gothic/horror films and their revisitings of past traumas.

Precedents of *Aparecidos*

It is exceedingly difficult to locate *Aparecidos* within a coherent genealogy of properly Argentine horror films, primarily because of the fundamental difficulties and contradictions one encounters when attempting to establish both a genre and a national

cinema as such. To what degree can *Aparecidos* really be considered an Argentine film? As a Spanish co-production written and directed by a Spaniard, certainly the historical trajectory of Spanish horror outlined in the previous chapter holds primary relevance. Secondly, while *Kilómetro 31* and *El orfanato* were the top-grossing Mexican and Spanish films of 2007 (respectively)—with large-scale, relatively quick releases to national and international screens—the debut of *Aparecidos* in the same year was at Spain’s Sitges Film Festival, followed in 2008 by screenings at other film festivals around Europe, subsequent release to DVD, and a brief appearance in movie theatres in Spain at the end of 2008, followed by a similarly brief appearance on select screens in Buenos Aires at the end of 2009 (according to the *Internet Movie Database*). This commercial trajectory first to DVD and then to limited movie house appearances suggests a certain self-awareness vis-à-vis the film’s historical situatedness and its potential volatile combination of genre-specific and recent real-life horrors. Thirdly, the popularity of the horror genre in Argentina has historically been relatively low, with foreign films attracting most horror film aficionados, thus leaving little demand for a national industry.

Unlike Mexico and Spain, as far as I am aware, no book-length academic studies of Argentine horror films have been published to the present date. When discussed with Southern Cone scholars, the nearly universal reaction—“ese famoso postulado que se suele esgrimir a la hora de explicar la ausencia del terror como género dentro de nuestra cinematografía”—is that ““al público argentino no le atrae en especial el cine de terror.”” This quote comes from Darío Lavia’s article “Evolución del cine de terror argentino” in the online magazine *Cinefania*, wherein he maps out a steady evolution of Argentine

horror as a genre in film and television. Notwithstanding, the relative scarcity of material points to a general lack of original horror production.

Lavia observes that this was even true in the 1940s, when the few directors who were interested in making horror films had to go to Chile to do so, most notably Carlos Schlieper with *La casa está vacía* (1945) and Carlos Hugo Christensen with *La dama de la muerte* (1946). “Durante años el cine argentino no se atreve a plasmar un film de terror, en parte debido a que los productos que llegan desde Estados Unidos son considerados ‘filmes truculentos’ sin más y el rótulo ‘terror’ no genera mucha adhesión y también porque todos . . . tienen preferencia por el relato de misterio o al thriller melodramático.” This national preference for encounters with the uncanny through literature calls for further research outside the scope of the present study. Elvio E. Gandolfo and Eduardo Hojman’s compilation *El terror argentino: cuentos*—with short stories from such renowned authors as Julio Cortázar, Roberto Arlt, Manuel Mujica Láinez, Horacio Quiroga, Esteban Echeverría, and Antonio di Benedetto—serves as convincing evidence that the genre’s popularity is not dead on arrival in Argentina, but rather takes on different forms.

Fernando Pagnoni Berns has recently published an informative book chapter on the history and aesthetics of the few films produced during Argentine cinema’s “período clásico.” According to him, “El monstruo por excelencia en el cine terrorífico argentino durante la Época de Oro fue el salvaje homicida” (433) and reinforced the *civilización/barbarie* dichotomy presented in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s classic *Facundo* (1845). What Lavia presents as Argentina’s first horror film—Mario Soffici’s *El extraño caso del hombre y la bestia* (1951)—was an adaptation of Robert Louis

Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Pagnoni Berns notes that what is interesting about this film is the fact that "El aspecto del monstruoso Hyde es sintomático del temor de la sociedad hacia lo extraño, lo inclasificable. Con su piel oscura y sus labios gruesos, el áter ego del científico recuerda vivamente a un mulato, un ser de identidad imprecisa" (438). The threat to society was typically embodied in the racial(ized) other, although as time passed, "las cuestiones de la sangre y la raza comienzan a perder fuerza ante el avance del nivel económico como estandarte de prestigio social" (440). Eventually, horror films began to reflect social anxieties about monstrous subjects who lived among the rest of civilization and were not immediately identifiable through visual filters.

Lavia observes that, after *El extraño caso del hombre y la bestia*, other horror films in Argentina followed suit in their revisiting of established stories, with *Si muero antes de despertar* (1952; based on William Irish's [one of Cornell Woolrich's *noms-de-plume*] *If I Should Die Before I Wake* [1946]) and *El vampiro negro* (1953; inspired by Fritz Lang's film *M*, also known as *M: Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* [1931]). After Abbot and Costello popularized the comedic horror spoof in the US, successful reproductions occurred on screens in Mexico, Italy, and Argentina. Made-for-TV horror films continued this general trend of remaking foreign films and novels for Argentine audiences. According to Lavia, "En agosto de 1959 el único canal televisivo del país pone en el aire un programa titulado *Obras maestras del terror*, al que podríamos denominar con justicia 'primer ciclo televisivo argentino de terror.'" This series consisted of televised dramatizations of stories by Edgar Allen Poe and reached such a level of popularity that "Argentina Sono Film anuncia la filmación de una película titulada *Obras*

maestras del terror, cuyo rodaje, dirigido por Enrique Carreras, se inicia a fines de 1959.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Emilio Vieyra “es el director argentino que más notoriamente se dedica al denominado ‘exploitation’ . . . produciendo filmes hablados en inglés directamente para el mercado norteamericano, tendencia pionera en la industria . . . De esta manera la productora de Vieyra . . . lanza . . . películas de terror con ardorosas cuotas de sexo” with such industrially predictable titles as *Placer sangriento* (1967), *Sangre de vírgenes* (1967), *La venganza del sexo* (1969), and *La bestia desnuda* (1971), thus demonstrating Argentine participation in the sexy horror/exploitation films that were popular at the time in Brazil (thinking specifically of the infamous *Zé do Caixão*), Mexico, the US, Spain, and Europe. As previously commented, these films were marketed during the 1960s and 1970s as a way, beyond immediate economic motives, to appeal to a younger generation’s desire to rebel against tradition (in keeping with the revolutionary spirit of the times) while reinscribing severely conservative narratives.

Made-for-TV horror films continued to enjoy considerable success during this period, including such features as Martín Clutet’s *Un pacto con los brujos* (1969; based on Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* [1968]) and Alberto Rinaldi’s *El monstruo no ha muerto* (1970), in which an elderly Adolf Hitler “sigue conspirando desde las sombras.” This last movie may be interpreted as reflecting societal fears about the presence of Nazis in Argentina after World War II, as well as the lingering presence of fascist logic and discourse in the nation’s political imaginary. Lavia briefly discusses the work of Jorge Carlos García, whose films were never commercially released, as well as the 1970s apogee of the Bela Lugosi Club (Bela Lugosi being the starring actor in Tod Browning’s

original *Dracula* [1931]): “entidad formada por periodistas y amantes del cine como Moira Soto, Agustín Mahieu . . . entre otros. Sus actividades consisten en proyecciones especiales y quedan de manifiesto en los carteles publicitarios de filmes de terror (usualmente anglosajones) que se publican en los diarios de mayor circulación del país,” recommending certain horror films and explaining the reason for their endorsement.

It is at this point that we run into the years of the military junta. Yet, curiously, Lavia makes absolutely no reference to it in his timeline of Argentine horror. He mentions that the late 1980s “marcan el retorno de la exitosa veta de la comedia terrorífica,” listing several made-for-TV horror spoofs without so much as a footnote pointing to their historical situatedness in relation to the real-life horrors of the repression and the push to forget them during the country’s redemocratization. He does, however, mention the 1989 Batalla de La Tablada and its 40 deaths, The 1990 Carapintada attempted coup and its 21 deaths, the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and its 29 deaths, and the 1994 AMIA terrorist attack and its 85 deaths:

A la par de esta escalada de “terror real,” el cine argentino se enclaustra en dos vertientes diferentes pero aledañas: una que engloba el mensaje y la crítica social, el film testimonial, el documental y todo lo relacionado con la historia política e ideológica del país en los últimos 30 años: la otra, el llamado “nuevo cine argentino” (la primera vez que se acuñó esa frase fue en los ’60, para denominar a la generación de Manuel Antín, José A. Martínez Suárez, Rodolfo Kuhn y otros grandes directores), que abarca filmes de la parcela que Diego Curubeto denominaría “arte y ensayo.” (no pag.)

Lavia notes that, despite a lack of commercial interest in Argentine horror films, independent directors and aficionados “hacen eclosión en un festival de cine especializado (Buenos Aires Rojo Sangre) y en un auténtico ‘ambiente’ de profesionales amantes del terror, [se embarcan] en proyectos cada vez más comprometidos.” Eventually in 2008, one such project, *Visitante de invierno*, was commercially released on DVD, but critics condemned the film for its poor quality and the obtuse character of its sulky teenage male protagonist, who suffers from psychological instability and thus, cannot tell if the abductions and tortures he believes he is witnessing in a remote country house are real or not.⁶ After reporting the “frialdad” with which the film was received by critics, Lavia concludes his article—published in October of 2008—wondering if “queda abierto un hálito de esperanza para los aficionados y amantes” of Argentine horror.

In 2010 the answer may have come for Lavia, depending on his opinion of Adrián García Bogliano’s *Sudor frío*: the first Argentine horror film in decades—since before the most recent military dictatorship—to maintain an extended commercial appearance in Argentine movie theatres, appearing on 36 screens throughout the country during its opening weekend in February of 2011 and ultimately turning a modest profit, according to *The Internet Movie Database*.⁷ The film, while beyond the scope of the present study, may be important for future studies of the apparently ongoing trend of new generations of filmgoers revisiting the real-life horrors of the past through the gothic/horror genre.

⁶ Considering its plot description, I initially thought this film might prove interesting or relevant for this study, given its possible interplay with the illogic of traumatic events. Seeing the film, however, caused me to change my mind due to the poor quality of its screenplay and overall execution.

⁷ IMDb.com estimates production costs at US\$430,000, while the film’s reported gross totals AR\$3,306,081: the equivalent of roughly US\$825,000 in 2011.

Sudor frío has already inspired an academic article by Rosana Díaz Zambrana, who has observed that in regard to cinematic representations of the real-life horrors of the recent past, Argentine films have traditionally fallen “bajo el rubro de ‘drama político’ como *Camila* (1984) y *La historia oficial* (1985) u otras como *La noche de los lápices* (1986) o *Garage Olimpo* (1999), a pesar de las tangencias de estas últimas con algunos tópicos y estrategias del cine de horror” (148).

Indeed, the perpetual dilemma of how to symbolize through film the unrepresentable reality of the Proceso, with its unending and inaccessible multiplicity of traumas both individual and collective—trauma that complicates mere categories of individual and collective (and thus, notions of coherent, self-contained social subjectivity)—has been a primary cause for debate among academics and artists. An ethical imperative to tell the untellable is what has driven and continues to drive artistic production with themes of historical memory, but as an active, ongoing process, change is the only constant and questions are paradigmatically left without a satisfying answer. Which rhetorical strategies are “most effective” at offering glimpses into that which resists a totalizing, coherent gaze, and how do different viewers and generations of viewers interact with these strategies? How is this interaction historically situated and how can the quality or appropriateness of any given strategy be measured? Can a desire to reach a wide or a specific audience in order to keep historical memory alive be reconciled with a desire for box office success?

As Díaz Zambrana has noted, films like *Garage Olimpo* have opted for an audiovisual strategy that aims to make explicit the gruesome, gritty horrors of abduction and torture by pulling the viewer into identifying with victims through sensorial

interpellation, while films like *La historia oficial* have left such visual depictions up to the imagination of the viewer while focusing on narrative and affect in a less visceral and more traditional fashion—a technique that, according to the director of *Sudor frío*, fails to effectively transmit the horrors of the past to a new generations of viewers:

En la versión DVD, García Bogliano aclara que el uso tradicional de modelos formales y narrativos, usados típicamente para enmarcar y encarar la historia argentina en el celuloide como el documental y el melodrama, lejos de convocar a generaciones jóvenes ha confrontado la reacción opuesta de alienarlos. Es por ello que recurrir a una fórmula reconocible dentro de la tradición del cine de horror potencia una ventaja no sólo comercialmente exitosa sino provocadora intelectualmente para el público joven. (150)

This is a volatile proposition, since horror films are located along a continuum that is defined on one end by gothic, psychological suspense and horror, and on the other end by gratuitous gore and violence that more blatantly resemble pornography in its ritualistic staging of bodily excess (as briefly discussed in chapter 3 of this study, with the help of Barbara Creed's theorizations about "body genres," bodily fluids, and their characteristic lack of "proper" aesthetic distance). Díaz Zambrana reflects a great deal on the ethics of *Sudor frío*, citing Noël Carroll's observations about "la paradoja en las emociones del espectador de filmes de horror, cuyas reacciones conflictivas indican por un lado repulsión y por otro, fascinación placentera" (151). She classifies the film as realist horror rather than fantastic horror in that there are no ghosts or supernatural events.

The monsters are now elderly cronies from the military junta who continue to abduct young people and torture them in an ordinary-looking house right in the middle of Buenos Aires. Díaz Zambrana notes that unlike Argentine films of the 1980s, which depicted home and family as safe spaces while presenting public space as threatening, *Sudor frío* “desmantela la idea de esa posibilidad, concibiendo la privatización de la vida mediante el encierro como aquello que propicia la invisibilidad e impunidad de los actos violentos” (154). Just as in *El orfanato* (although much less subtly), the danger is coming from inside the home. The wheelchair-bound mastermind indulges in several ideological rants about the low quality of today’s youth and their abysmal lack of productivity and proper moral values, thus illustrating the sociopathic potential of narratives of normativity when taken to fascist extremes (and also bringing to light the arbitrary nature of normativity when viewed retrospectively). Notwithstanding, the film’s own visual grammar is the very epitome of tradition. These modern-day abductees are mainly young, attractive females whose bodies are strapped down to tables and doused with a fictitiously invented liquid, “parecido a la nitroglicerina pero mucho mejor” (0:22:36). If a drop of the liquid falls from their bodies to the floor, the force of the impact will cause an explosion. This is in order to keep the detainees from attempting to move around or escape. Predictably, some victims die while others manage to carry out an explosive escape and exact lethal revenge on the perpetrators.⁸ The fire destroys all the evidence of the existence of this hidden-in-plain-sight house of horrors.

⁸ The moral complexity of this revenge is discussed by Díaz Zambrana in her article, since the (pseudo)scientific/medical experiments of the perpetrators have led to the transformation of previous detainees into zombies, who are then released to eat the old men alive.

Consequently, a conflict is staged that directly threatens to victimize today's youth, thus communicating to a generation of post-redemocratization Argentines the idea that the horrors of the past are still relevant, while at the same time drawing them into this message by delivering on the "fascinación placentera" that is associated with films at this end of the horror spectrum. Díaz Zambrana describes this end as "horror de tortura" and postulates that *Sudor frío* pairs it with the

drama político para convocar moralmente a los espectadores a través de los sentimientos de identificación y retribución. Dichos sentimientos colocarán a la violencia fílmica en el centro de formaciones éticas e ideológicas ineludibles. Así, se conjugan la experiencia colectiva de "lo innombrable" durante la Guerra Sucia y la experiencia ficcional, igualmente perturbadora, de personajes jóvenes como una secuela de esa crisis nacional inconclusa. (159)

She then concludes her study by proposing that, "en el mejor de los casos," horror films such as *Sudor frío*, "pueden servir . . . como simulación de eventos reales que faciliten una vía alternativa para identificar, nombrar y denunciar el origen del mal social y así liberarlo de su 'maldito' encierro" (160).

This conclusion is certainly debatable in the case of *Sudor frío*, and Díaz Zambrana herself acknowledges the vast multiplicity of readings that are possible across the film's youthful demographic by qualifying her proposal with "en el mejor de los casos." It is not my intention to embark on an analysis of the film or to discuss at length its particular strategies for engaging an allegedly disaffected generation of Argentine youth in themes of historical memory. Its usefulness to the present analysis, rather, is the

context it provides for *Aparecidos* on several levels, the first of which being the latter's pioneering attempt to utilize the horror genre as a means of revisiting the horrors of Argentina's Dirty War. It is unknown to me whether the release of *Aparecidos* established any kind of green light in this regard that then allowed for the filming and release of *Sudor frío* three years later, but it now appears that the way is being paved for new and productive debates about genre, affect, ethics, and historical memory. Even though, as Díaz Zambrana mentions, films like *Garage Olimpo* have employed "varios tópicos y estrategias del cine de horror" out of an ethical imperative to realistically recreate the conditions endured by so many victims, the marketing of a film as a horror film in such a context raises a new barrage of questions.

Secondly, and following this train of thought, *Sudor frío* allows us to contrast the visceral here-and-now reality of its "horror realista/horror de tortura" with the fantastic elements—namely, the ghosts and specters—found in *Aparecidos*, with its multiple temporalities and its poetic literalization of the process of historical memory. In *Sudor frío* and other traditional horror films (such as *Kilómetro 31*), affective mechanisms are deployed in order to push spectators towards a desire for narrative closure: in the case of the former, a heavy-handed desire for revenge upon and the ultimate destruction of the creepy, geriatric monsters who have spent the entire movie torturing young, attractive victims. *Aparecidos*, however, uses affective mechanisms to invite the possibility of critical thought about traumatic events and the ways in which they are (not) known and experienced on both institutional and individual levels.

In this light, we can explore the film's thematic axes not necessarily as commodifications of the horrors of Argentina's national history, but rather as filmic

reflections on these real-life horrors: a visualization of the ghosts that continue to haunt the Argentine national imaginary. In this study I will examine the literalization of not only these ghostly encounters—this mutual pursuit between the film’s protagonists and the ghosts of the disappeared—but also of the retraumatization connected with the reliving of these horrors of the past, keeping in mind Cathy Caruth’s conceptual framework on trauma. I hope to at least partially explore this problematization of the classic concepts of space and time through the theoretical lens of Derrida’s specter and examine how it exposes fissures in the rhetoric of chronological time, which claims to offer a coherent, linear narrative for human experience and serves as a supposedly scientific, objective (and therefore, non-ideological) alibi for the concept of history (and therefore, reality in Western tradition). In keeping with the other thematic trope of this study—that of the family—I will also explore how the film’s insistence on the coexistence of multiple temporalities carries with it implications for multiple definitions of family, including the adoptive family of human rights, as proposed by Adriana Bergero.

***Aparecidos*: a (trans)national allegory**

Since the film at hand is not widely known and consists of a diegesis that includes paranormal incidents and phenomena that cannot be easily imagined or deduced by the unfamiliar reader, a brief summary of the film’s plot is in order. The events of *Aparecidos* occur in 2001, even though as we will see, the notion of time is problematized throughout the film. The protagonists are siblings: Pablo (18 or 19 years old) and his older sister Malena (25 or 26). Both were born in Argentina, but shortly after

Pablo's birth, their mother took them to Spain, where they had no further contact with their father, who was a doctor. As young adults they have returned to Argentina because their completely estranged and now comatose father is in the final stage of terminal cancer, unconscious and sustained only through life support, and as his only living relatives, they are charged with putting his affairs in order and making the decision to unplug him from the machine.

Their return to their native country brings about a certain distancing effect since, for all intents and purposes, they are both Spaniards and have the perspective (and accents) of outsiders, thus adding a critical element to the national self-reflection inherent in this allegory. The etymological connection between the word "native" and the biological process of birth helps to expose the ideological (and therefore arbitrary) underpinnings of essentialist notions of national belonging. Institutions such as "the family" and "the nation" that have traditionally dictated the organization of society—its controlling grammar—are exposed as ideological constructs rather than naturally occurring phenomena. The biological connection between the protagonists and their father is the reason for their journey to Argentina. Legally defined as his next of kin due to their shared DNA, they have been interpellated as family and summoned to Buenos Aires to take care of his affairs and his final arrangements, even though their familiarity with him—looking again at the etymological relationship between the words "familiar" and "family" and its implications for that which is considered homely/*heimlich* and that which is *unheimlich*—is non-existent, as is their familiarity with what is supposed to be, in terms of nationality, "their" country of origin. Being born in Argentina and being born

to their father are sudden and unfamiliar impositions caused by the impending death of their father.

Incredibly, neither of them seems to know about the Dirty War or the history of a country that stopped being theirs since before the fall of the dictatorship. While this lack of knowledge on their part is nearly impossible to believe, Cabezas has deemed it necessary in order to more dramatically illustrate their progression along the path of knowledge that will frame the film's events. This strategy may also be related to the Argentine generation gap previously alluded to by García Bogliano and both directors' perception of a need to bridge it in order to keep historical memory alive and, thus, keep history from repeating itself. Malena and Pablo were raised in a free and democratic Spain, having arrived after Franco's 1975 death. Perhaps their ignorance—their complete lack of historical memory—is meant to serve as a literalization of the Transition's official policy of forgetting the fascist past and progressing towards a democratic future.

As the younger sibling, Pablo in particular seems to embody this generation, with shaggy, unkempt hair and a sizeable tattoo that ostensibly moves up the side of his neck. While Malena is less flashy and rebellious in her appearance and demeanor and seems to be weighed down by traces of an unpleasant memory, Pablo seems to be blissfully unaware of the historical situatedness of his generation's general penchant for wild hair, tattoos, and piercings: a reaction against the clean-cut image of "proper" masculinity enforced by the dictatorships of the recent past and their social grammar. Even though Argentina had already suffered several episodes of political repression inspired at least in part by Franco's domestic terrorism, the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 was doubtlessly the most repressive, almost as if the ghost of Franco came to Argentina

within months of his death to become reincarnated in the Argentine generals that would continue repeating and elaborating on his model of oppression. When a horrific chapter in Spain's history finally ended, an uncannily similar history began to write itself in Argentina.

Using an old family photo taken when he was a newborn baby just before his mother took him and his sister to Spain, Pablo is eager to reconstruct the memory of a father he never knew, thus underscoring the ghostly nature of photographs and evoking themes of historical memory. At the age of 72, Pablo's father diagnosed himself with a brain tumor and drove from his house at the southern tip of the country in Tierra del Fuego all the way up to Buenos Aires, where he had himself admitted to a hospital under the care of an old colleague. After visiting the hospital and seeing his father in a coma, Pablo takes a seat in his car and declares: "Este coche huele a papá," as if he recognized his scent—as if there were a biologically recognizable connection between the two. Just as is insinuated in the title of Marcelo Brodsky's book on historical memory and the disappeared, *Memoria en construcción* (2005), the memory of Pablo—the young, defamiliarized and estranged Argentine—is fully under construction. In deliberate fashion, he embarks on the project to recover the memory of an absent father through the ghostly traces that remain of his past life.

This focus on the process behind Pablo's imagined past evokes once again the metaphor of the double-edged sword that has been recurrent in this study. While essentialist notions of family and national belonging are exposed as ideological processes based on a strategic manipulation of the imaginary—constructs that frame political debate between left and right but that have been most demonstrably appropriated by the

official discourse of the right in the case of the dictatorships in both Spain and Argentina— notions of historical memory are also exposed as negotiable processes in a constant state of construction and reinforcement. In terms of the ongoing process of social subjectivity and its interplay with historical memory, Pablo's age also serves to destabilize static categories of identity such as the adult/child binary. His boyish attitude, behavior, and mannerisms help to problematize the chronological normativity that legally defines him as an adult, having reached or surpassed the age of 18. Despite arriving at this arbitrary milestone, Pablo is anxiously seeking out material that will help him imagine and piece together some kind of an inherited adult identity.

Malena, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with her father or his ghost: her goal is to sign the document authorizing the unplugging of her father from life support, to make the final arrangements, and to return to Spain. But in order to accomplish this, the signatures of two family members are required. While Pablo is presented as energetic, empathetic, and charming, Malena is initially portrayed as cold, heartless, and unhappy. Pablo refuses to sign the necessary document until Malena promises to accompany him to Tierra del Fuego to visit their childhood home. They both leave the hospital in their father's car, which by no coincidence is a Ford Falcon, the vehicle associated with disappearances during the national repression. Just a few minutes into the film, the two have already left the federal capital behind and the car stops on the side of the highway for a take in which the film's title appears above the Falcon: *Aparecidos*. For an Argentine audience, the reference is unmistakable: this time, the Falcon will be an agent of appearances rather than disappearances.

This doubling of the car's function establishes the film's national allegory, representing a kind of palimpsest for the car's history, and by extension, the country's. In her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Bliss Cua Lim draws from Craig Owens's view of allegory as a palimpsest when she observes that allegory involves a textual doubling that allows for one level of experience to be constructed through another (156). She proposes that allegory is a particularly efficient vehicle for culturally specific artistic expression because it contains mechanisms that interpellate a particular audience (176), as seen in the case of the Ford Falcon. Lim quotes Owens to elaborate on the relationship between palimpsest and allegory: "Typically operating in the perception of a gap [whether this is a generation gap or a gap between a traumatic event and its narration], allegory's 'fundamental impulse' is to 'rescue from oblivion that which threatens to *disappear*,' that is, to alleviate a sense of historical estrangement" (156; emphasis added).

This historical estrangement is literalized in the case of Malena and Pablo, who embody both generational and international estrangement. Two decades after the horrors of the Dirty War, the fear that its history might also eventually disappear continues to haunt the national imaginary. While Malena and Pablo begin to familiarize themselves with the histories of their estranged country and their estranged father, they begin to discover that he was linked to the disappearances and more specifically to the torture of detainees. Their road trip slowly becomes a path of knowledge full of horrific discoveries and literal(ized) encounters with the ghosts of his victims: a family that consists of a girl, her father and her pregnant mother. In the first of several paranormal events, the ghost of the girl suddenly appears alongside the rear tire of the Ford Falcon while it's parked on

the shoulder of the highway. She appears to be searching for something that is stuck under the car, but when Pablo kneels down to help her, she disappears, leaving him in a position that allows him to spot a book that has been tied to the underside of the body of the car. This book is a personal diary of sorts that contains fragments of documentation: disjointed testaments about “something” that Pablo can’t make out at first due its lack of coherent, immediately accessible narrative structure. He doesn’t know how to read this text correctly in order for it to make sense (in the traditional sense of causal, linear narrative).

His inability to understand this unofficial history book echoes the national allegory in which those who were not directly impacted by the dictatorship’s repression (including, of course, the generations of Argentines who were born or grew up afterwards) are physically and chronologically distanced from the events of the Dirty War. Just like Pablo, those who were not directly affected by the repression must reconstruct its horrors through history books and oral histories. Notwithstanding, it is one thing to read a history book and quite another to understand what is read. This critical difference is what Caruth describes as the “movement from literal to figurative seeing,” which is a key part of beginning to understand trauma (37).

Pablo slowly begins to both literally and figuratively “see” the unofficially history book he’s found, and sporadically, clues are revealed that lead him and Malena to several encounters with the ghosts of the victims so that step by step, they learn more about their story, exemplifying in literalized fashion the concept of historiography as proposed by Jules Michelet “as a discourse with the dead” (Buse and Stott 5). After seeing the name of the Hotel Atlántida in the mysterious book (along with the map that shows its location

between Buenos Aires and Tierra del Fuego), Pablo convinces Malena to spend the night in the room next to the one that is referenced in the book: room 203. It is in this hotel room that the film begins to manifest its self-awareness as a horror film: of its volatile and complicated situatedness with the real-life horrors of the recent past.

While Malena is drying off from her recent shower, Pablo is sitting on the bed drinking a bottle of beer, grinning at the television screen, appearing to be entertained by a news report of the return of General Augusto Pinochet to Chile amidst ongoing legal proceedings against him for human rights abuses: “El anciano general consiguió volver a Chile con la estrategia de declararse mental y físicamente senil” (0:16:21). Up to this point, Pablo has been portrayed as merrily consuming media from a certain distance that allows him to treat it as light, amusing entertainment for the moment at hand. With the decreased attention span that is typically associated with his generation, he jumps from watching TV to watching a movie to listening to music through earphones. His interaction with the book he has found has been fueled by the “fascinación placentera” referenced in Díaz Zambrana’s analysis of *Sudor frío* and commonly associated with the horror genre’s youthful demographic. The fact that he is perusing documentation of real-life horrors has not sunken in. As Malena is busy brushing her teeth, Pablo addresses her:

PABLO. Malena, escucha. ¿Sabes lo que pasó aquí hace 20 años?

MALENA. [*disconnected, humoring Pablo’s enthusiastic ramblings as one would humor a particularly chatty child*] No.

PABLO. El 23 de julio del 80 asesinaron a alguien en la habitación de al lado. [*Malena’s expression turns grim and a deep, constant chord*

begins to resonate in the background of Pablo's story.] Acojona, ¿que no?

MALENA. Pablo, no empieces, ¿eh?

PABLO. [*still grinning with excitement, amused that the shocking and gruesome nature of his story is visibly upsetting/annoying his older sister*] Y me imagino que las habitaciones tienen que ser igualitas. Dormía una familia y una niña. A las tres de la mañana el hombre fuerza la cerradura. Lleva una barra de hierro y una picana. ¿Sabes lo que es una picana? Aquí lo siguen utilizando los mataderos para electrocutar a las vacas. Los 120 voltios las dejan inmóviles para poder rematarlas.

MALENA. Bueno, ya vale, ¿no?

PABLO. La primera que se despierta es la madre. [*checking the book to make sure he remembers correctly*] Sí. El hombre le da una hostia con la barra y la niña empieza a llorar. El padre se levanta tratando de defenderse, pero una descarga de la picana lo deja en el suelo temblando. Mira Malena, escucha esta parte, “Tres horas y veintisiete minutos.” ¡Hijo de puta, cuenta lo que ocurre a cada minuto! “Las descargas siempre deben dirigirse a puntos neurálgicos. En este caso una víctima recibe una potente descarga en el cuello, lo que produce un doble efecto. Por un lado, la tráquea se contrae bloqueando la entrada de oxígeno, y por otro la columna vertebral se adormece limitando visiblemente sus posibilidades de huida.” ¡Joder! Vamos,

resumiendo que el tío va y arrasa al muerto a la bañera y empieza a ahogarlo. Te lo leo. (0:18:31)

As Pablo continues to take pleasure in the graphic, scientific narration of the events described in the book—a medical discourse that reminds us of the doctor’s speech in *Una gota de sangre para morir amando* (addressed in the previous chapter) in which he coldly outlines his institution’s plans to use science and medicine to rid society of its non-productive delinquents—Malena bends down to pick up a Polaroid picture that has fallen to the floor without Pablo noticing. As soon as she views it, the unsettling background music becomes more complex, with dissonant strings and other sounds typically associated with moments of eerie discoveries in horror films. The image is of the severely bruised, disfigured, and bloody face of what appears to be a recently deceased victim of torture. Pablo’s animated and clearly fascinated reading of the event’s description reaches a new level of eeriness as this newly introduced photographic evidence begins to corroborate the reality of the events being narrated. When Malena asks him where he got this book, he responds, “Pero coño Malena, que es una coña, que no pasa nada!”

He still refuses to take the book seriously or consider it as a valid, historical document, and in the scene that immediately follows, they are both lying in separate beds staring silently at the television screen. Knowing that he has crossed a line with his youthful insensitivity and his recent attempt to push Malena’s buttons, he apologizes for the previous incident, claiming that he didn’t she would react so strongly to the story he insisted on reading out loud to her. They are both watching a cheesy, B horror film on TV in which a chainsaw-wielding masked murderer is chopping up the body of someone in

close proximity to an attractive, screaming young woman. Clearly pointing to the gender-specific exploitation commonly associated with blood-and-gore, industrial horror films (industrial in their paradigmatic similarities to pornography as an industry), the young woman takes off her blood-soaked shirt and takes off running. In order to lighten the mood and end her silent treatment against Pablo, Malena begins to mock the horror film:

MALENA. Pero vamos a ver. El asesino se carga a su amiga, a su novio, a su madre y a su perro. Y mírala, allí está. Desde luego, lo último que yo haría en una situación así es ponerme a correr así en las tetas.

PABLO. Y además que las tiene pequeñas. [*Malena laughs.*] Así es que en las pelis de terror siempre pasa lo mismo. Siempre ponen a una tía en peras que no están muy grandes. Porque si te ponen unos tetones en la pantalla, los ojos se te van, no ven nada más. El cerebro no entiende—no está preparado. O tetas o trauma. O sea, al carajo al trauma.

(0:21:04)

Pablo's biographical cartography is one in which "tetas [ajenas]" spark more interest than "trauma [ajeno]," and as a late adolescent whose accumulation of life experiences has apparently been free of any horrors remotely comparable to those experienced by generations past, he is portrayed as lacking an appropriate level of sensitivity to historical trauma: to the trauma of others. In terms of reception theory, the narratives and testimonials recorded in the strange black book initially fail to transmit the gravity of their context in a way that is meaningful to Pablo. Perhaps partly because of changes in technology and partly because of Pablo's generational distance from the original events and the lack of anything comparable in his own life experience, the codes

and frequencies through which transmission and reception occur have changed over time. Paradoxically, the occurrence of supernatural events is what alters Pablo's reception of the messages encoded in the book, helping him to properly recognize their reality and gain experiential, affectively-inflected insights into the "trauma [ajeno]" that, in truly uncanny fashion, ends up being not so *ajeno* or *unheimlich* after all.

At 3:29 a.m., Malena is awakened by suspicious noises coming from the room next door, which is supposedly vacant. She wakes Pablo up and they hear the sounds of men breaking into the room, moving and smashing furniture, screams, and pleas for help. Frightened, they leave the hotel and start driving away before spotting the mother and the daughter alongside the road. Another, more ominous Ford Falcon pulls up behind them, and the mother and daughter are abducted by mysterious, invisible agents in what will become a series of repeated reenactments of the family's story throughout the film. Pablo becomes emotionally invested in the young girl in particular, hoping to at least save her—the most helpless and "innocent" victim in this family of victims—from her fate. While this reinscribes the traditional role and effect/affect of the figure of the child and the emotionally infused ideological imperative to save the future as proposed by Edelman and discussed in previous chapters, one of my arguments will be that, as seen in *El orfanato*, the figure of the child will be slightly repositioned in such a way that invites an interrogation of traditional notions of time and family.

As textual and photographic evidence is gradually (and literally) revealed to him about the horrors of the past—sporadically and magically appearing in the mysterious book on what had previously been blank pages, thus portraying engagement with historical trauma as an ongoing process that requires time and effort—Pablo finds a

Polaroid picture in which his sister Malena appears as a tortured detainee. The traumatic events of the past have destabilized Malena as a coherent, self-contained social subject, safely residing in the here-and-now, reiterating how, in *Kilómetro 31*, the highly ideological concepts of everyday life and the present were reinscribed as comforting, non-horrific reality in opposition to atemporal, horrific “alternate” realities. She inhabits multiple temporalities and is connected to the past in ways that remain unknown to her. In this way, the relevance of the horrors of the past to a new, chronologically distanced generation of youth is presented in *Aparecidos* in a way that interrogates social subjectivity and the temporality in which it is articulated. This is in stark contrast to *Sudor frío*'s strategy for engaging this same generation by simply submitting them to torture at the hands of the original perpetrators in a chronologically coherent here-and-now: geriatric criminals who have continued to properly inhabit time and whose continued historical relevance plays itself out according to the logic and grammaticality of contemporaneity and self-contained social subjectivity.

Before reaching Tierra del Fuego, Pablo decides to separate himself from Malena in order to return to the Hotel Atlántida and learn more about the past in an effort to keep the disturbing photo of Malena from becoming “reality.” She arrives on her own in Tierra del Fuego and visits an “almacén de recuerdos” that also doubles as a records office, just as the word *recuerdos* in Spanish doubles for “souvenirs” and “memories.” Even though it’s about to close, the employee invites Malena in after she explains how urgently she needs access to documents related to her dying father. During her search, Malena uncovers newspapers and archives that reference the role of “El Doctor” in murders and

disappearances.⁹ Seeing her interest in the story, the employee makes coffee for her and shows her personal photo album, explaining that her husband was detained and killed by the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina. She tells her about her personal trauma, motivated perhaps in part out of nostalgia but also out of an obligation to share her story: “an urgent responsibility, or what Lacan defines . . . as an ethical relation to the real” (Caruth 102). Despite her tears, she insists that “no me hace daño esto, no.” The narration of the horrors of her personal history “no debe hacerme daño” because they form part of a national and ultimately international history.

Trauma, horror, and (gothic) social subjectivity

As previously mentioned, allegory finds its function in a gap, but as Caruth observes, this is a multidimensional gap. The traumatic road traveled by Malena and Pablo, for example, fills the gap between ignorance and knowledge. One could dispute this reference to the protagonists’ experience as trauma in clinical terms since they themselves were not persecuted by the military dictatorship. The film’s plot, however, complicates notions of personal experience by subjecting both siblings to traumatic encounters with both “real” and fantastic victims of the repression. Whether or not this is a literalized metaphor for her personal identification with the actual victims, we see them live and survive the traumatic events in question, which, according to Caruth, is what constitutes trauma in and of itself. Leaving the site of trauma to go on living one’s life with the haunting memory of the event is what makes the experience traumatic. A

⁹ This reference echoes the history of the infamous Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele’s and the post-World War II refuge he sought in southern Argentina, as addressed in Lucía Puenzo’s soon-to-be-released film *Wakolda* (2013).

departure from the original site will demand a repeated return as long as the survivor is still alive, since in order to return (to remember), one must leave (survive).

When Malena speaks to the woman at the records office, we observe that her trauma is precisely in the fact that she survived what her husband did not: that she was able to leave the site of trauma and her husband was not.

¿Sabés qué fue lo que más me dolió? No fue la picana, ni las violaciones . . . A mí lo que más me dolió fue la última vez que vi a Mario con vida . . . Me acuerdo que lo vi muy mal y pensé que yo también debía estar así, ¿no? que debía ser como mirarse en un espejo. . . En el 82 me vine acá, a Tierra del Fuego, y abrí este almacén de recuerdos. Y yo intenté olvidar.
(01:00:15)

Tears fill Malena's eyes as she is clearly moved by this survivor's story when delivered in person. Despite not having personally witnessed the traumatic incidents narrated by the woman, simply learning about these events produces a kind of trauma within Malena, having also survived the horrific period in which she is beginning to suspect her father was involved, exemplifying "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8), as well as the fact that "the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others" (18). This emotional identification with the other also speaks to the relationship—mentioned in the previous chapter—between affect and experiential knowledge.

Caruth proposes that if Freud turns to literature for examples of trauma that he then psychoanalyzes, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing (3): a relationship that we see exemplified in the story of Malena and Pablo. The limitations of an individual's corporeal capacity for personal experience impede one's knowledge, but even when one personally experiences or witnesses an event, one is not always able to fully understand it, thus exemplifying the gap between seeing and understanding: between "literal" and "figurative seeing" (37). The event is not available in its totality to the consciousness of the individual and consequently returns over and over again, lurking in the unconscious: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

The individual must revisit these events in order to process and begin to understand them, or perhaps more correctly, the events must revisit the individual: a process that we see literalized in *Aparecidos* with the reappearances of ghosts from the past and the reappearance of text that literally reveals itself to Pablo throughout different moments of his re-reading of the mysterious book, summoning him as if it were an animate being: "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). While the occasional appearances of ghosts, texts, and photographs offer Malena and Pablo a glimpse into what would otherwise be invisible, the lingering, spectral reminder that this is only one story out of thousands that constitute an invisible and thus unknowable whole is what ultimately haunts the Argentine national imaginary in particular when compared

to neighboring countries with similar histories of repression—Brazil, Chile, Uruguay—whose cultural production is generally focused more on forgetting than on remembering.¹⁰

The following day, after both literally and figuratively visited the “almacén de recuerdos,” Malena arrives at her first childhood home—her father’s house—but doesn’t find Pablo. Upon entering the house, she is transported back in time and becomes one of her father’s detainees, suffering a literalized torture at the hands of her father’s younger ghost and witnessing the torture of a pregnant woman: the same mother whose ghost had appeared to her previously. She sees that her father performs a caesarian operation on the mother and then leaves her to die, keeping the male baby and naming him Pablo. She then realizes that the ghostly family of victims with whom she and her brother have shared repeated encounters are members of Pablo’s biological family and that he is actually her adoptive brother. This discovery is significant in a number of ways. First, similar to what we have seen in *El orfanato*, the supposedly biological and therefore apolitical entity of the family is shown to be a cognitive, social (and ultimately political) construct.

Second, the fascists and neo-fascists who justified their undemocratic authority as a mere extension of natural, familial hierarchy and frequently exploited the rhetorical figure of the family in their discourse as “la primera y más natural de las sociedades humanas” (qtd. in Manrique Arribas no pag.), using the notion of the organic family to identify and persecute “so-called enemies of society, among them homosexuals” (Lázaro-

¹⁰ Exceptions include Brazil’s *O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias* (2006), and Chile’s *Machuca* (2004). Interestingly, both films view past dictatorships and their consequences through the eyes of children.

Reboll 149), are shown to be sociopathic destroyers of families—not in the rhetorical sense in which queer subjects are accused of destroying marriage and family—but in the literal, criminal sense: a history of parental murder, infant abductions, and illegal adoptions that were systematically practiced by the dictatorships of both Spain and Argentina.¹¹ Third, while it is possible to interpret the visitations of this ghost family to Pablo as stemming from some kind of essentialist, biological connection between them in which he naturally hears them calling out to him from the past, another possible interpretation centers around the film’s overall framework of literalizing processes related to historical memory, including the adoption of the previously mentioned “trauma [ajeno].”

In her article analyzing the function of ghosts and orphans in *El espinazo del diablo*, Adriana Bergero reflects on how Del Toro causes his “normal” character—Carlos, the young, real-life, flesh-and-bone protagonist—to embrace the usually distanced, fear-inducing, abject gothic victim, “aceptando el riesgo cognitivo que implica tal inmersión” (446). This identification with the other is rooted in emotion, which also helps to redefine:

el orfanato como el espacio identitario gestador de una clase muy especial de familia . . . La gótica es . . . eminentemente afectiva porque no es en vano que convoque intensas emociones que fluctúan entre el miedo y la

¹¹ Such abductions and adoptions are the subject of several Argentine films, including the well-known and previously-mentioned *La historia oficial* (1985) as well as the lesser-known *Cautiva* (2004). In Spain, so many instances of similar, systematic activities under the Franco dictatorship have recently been discovered that an entire section of the national newspaper *El País* entitled “Vidas robadas” has been dedicated to the cataloguing of ongoing news stories regarding the investigation of cases of stolen children.

conmiseración, el abandono, olvido o adopción de sus víctimas. Traspasar las barreras del otro y atravesar la distancia que nos separa de ese *otro* que es *inconveniente* a causa del peso inimaginable que porta, es la base de la transferencia del *sentido*—la verdad de la víctima—implícita en el activismo por los derechos humanos. (446-47)

Bergero goes on to discuss how this reconfiguration of social subjectivity—another process we see literalized in *Aparecidos* as Malena goes from being the horrified, temporally distant spectator to being the actual victim, and back—carries with it cognitive and emotional processes that result in the construction of the family of human rights built around those shared experiences. She posits a sort of cognitive genealogy as a way of constituting one’s subjectivity in relationship to others rather than a biologically predetermined (and ultimately essentialist) notion of self (452).

What is queer about this reconfiguration of social subjectivity is not just the aforementioned demythification of the organic family: the political construct that has designated certain subjects as queer in order to exclude them from its definition, and thus, from society and the rights of personhood. Just as heteronormative discourse attempts to smooth over the irrationalities and contradictions of human experience and create a clean, tidy surface upon which to project a supposedly universal (and ideologically beneficial), coherent reason for human existence framed by narrative closure, the discourse of chronology attempts to present history in a similarly coherent fashion, with clear beginnings and endings. Bergero takes the case of Spain and the official narrative of the Transition, with its smoothing over of the past and prescriptive articulation of a here-and-now that only looks forward in time. “El trabajo del testigo de la víctima gótica, por el

contrario, permitiría extraer dicho olvido de las fisuras de la inmunidad (i)legal, camino a construir geografías sociales, cognitivas y afectivas de quiebre” (454).

It is my proposal that this gothic emphasis on exposing the fissures of normative discourse is an inherently queer process in its defiance of chronormativity and its insistence on the non-teleological shattering and renegotiation of social subjectivity: a process that is literalized in *Aparecidos* with Malena and Pablo’s emotionally-charged encounters with multiple temporalities, multiple subjects, and ultimately the shattering of their previously maintained subjectivity in relationship to each other as biological siblings and their reconstitution of said subjectivity as adoptive siblings whose shared trauma binds them as family in new, overtly cognitive ways. I am borrowing the term “shattered” not only as a translation of Bergero’s “quiebre,” but also from the mirror metaphor that Suzette A. Henke uses in her work on trauma, wherein she refers to testimony as a way of “reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject” (xix), working out a graspable narrative for that which by definition is ungraspable, even by those who experienced it first hand. After surviving the graphic, bloody encounter with their father’s ghost and after discovering the criminal context of Pablo’s birth and kidnapping, both siblings realize their worldview has forever changed as a result of the path of knowledge—the process (as opposed to the static concept of history or knowledge)—that has defined their journey to Argentina.

In the final scene, they are both stuck in a traffic jam on a bright afternoon in a very public, widely-recognized area of Buenos Aires: on Tucumán right in front of Tribunales and the symbolically named Palacio de Justicia. When the sky suddenly becomes dark and it begins to rain, the siblings begin to see that the streets are full of the

ghosts of the disappeared: ghosts that no one else seems to see, thus calling attention to the relativity of perspective, memory, and history as well as the impossibility of narrative closure: the irreducible multiplicity of narratives both visible (known) and invisible (unknown). I would like to propose for *Aparecidos* a similar observation to the one Bergero makes for *El espinazo del diablo*:

en la travesía cognitiva-emocional desde esa distancia radical frente al otro inconveniente, el film . . . va dando gradual forma a una sociabilidad-sensibilidad en que *ver es sentir/no sepultar*: de allí [la] apuesta [de Del Toro] por un género solidario con indeseables (in)sepultos, verdades inaudibles y cuerpos topolizados . . . Visto desde las teorías de los derechos humanos, [se] estaría proponiendo [una] porosidad y [una] *contaminación* socio-legal [vinculadas con] una narrativa y una discursividad herida que interrumpen nuestra vida cotidiana, para reclamar(nos) la adopción del dolor *huérfano* del otro—su verdad/su sentido—, incluso a costa de (auto)infringirnos dolor. (449-50)

This framework in which “*ver es sentir/no sepultar*” is reminiscent of Caruth’s description of the telling and narrative reception of trauma as a “movement from literal to figurative seeing” (37) that entails the necessary shattering of two taken-for-granted (and thus, invisible and ideologically effective) “realities:” the notion of everyday life and the notion of the coherent, self-contained social subject. The goal of this queer shattering and reconstitution is the preservation of memory as a social practice—rather than a fixed monument—out of an underlying concern for justice.

“Time is out of joint”: the porosity of time

This same concern for justice is what has caused the subject of Argentina’s Dirty War to continue demanding public attention through various cinematic reincarnations, although *Aparecidos* is the first of these films to literalize this spectral interpellation. Despite the nearly three decades during which the military dictatorship has been officially absent, its continued presence in the national imaginary—and the continued impunity of most of the perpetrators—constitutes a rupture in the traditional notion of time: a rupture that is echoed in Ana’s monologue in *La historia oficial* as she discloses to her friend Alicia (the film’s protagonist, played by Norma Aleandro) the events that precipitated her exile in Venezuela, from which she has only recently returned. She describes how she was tortured and detained during the Dirty War and how it was difficult to apply an exact chronological order to these traumatic events: “No estoy segura si fue ese mismo día. Perdí un poco la noción del tiempo. . . . Todavía me despierto ahogada a la mañana. Estoy allí colgada; me meten la cabeza en un tacho de agua. Después de siete años, todavía me ahogo. Cuando salí de allí me dijeron que había estado 36 días” (00:24:00).

The 36 days that were reported to her belong to an institutionalized chronological system that claims to provide a coherent referential backdrop upon which human experience can be measured. Having studied the theory of Henri Bergson, Bliss Cua Lim observes that while time converts heterogeneous temporalities into uniform intervals, the clock that represents this homogeneous and empty notion of time “does not tell the truth of duration but exemplifies a socially objectivated temporality, one that remains

‘indispensable but inadequate’—a necessary illusion that must be exposed” (9). The 36 days that are given to Ana as objective information are not compatible with her experience: they aren’t coherent or relevant to her. The experience that she survived is inherently incoherent. As evidenced by the fact that she seems to be asphyxiating as she’s relating her story to Alicia, the passing of time has done nothing to distance Ana from the 36-day period of her detention.

In a logical world in which chronology functioned as it claims to, Ana would have stopped feeling “ahogada” seven years ago, since the last time they dunked her head “en un tacho de agua.” Notwithstanding, she continues to struggle for breath every morning when she wakes up as if time had not removed her from torture chamber. In other words, Ana’s life cannot be explained or measured through logic: it resists the coherent narrative offered by chronology, thus exposing its inherent fissures. Similar to the previously mentioned gap that lies between knowing and not knowing, between the occurrence of an event and its textualization, and between one generation and the next, there is also a gap between Ana’s anachronistic temporality and the chronological order that governs the society in which she must continue to live.

This calling into question of the notion of time, then—this dissonance between individual experience and the social narrative of chronology—is something that we see literalized in *Aparecidos*: a film that functions as an allegory in the gap between the personal histories of the characters and national history, but also as fantastic cinema in the gap between personal experience and social narrative. According to Lim, “fantastic narratives strain against the logic of the clock and calendar, unhinging the unicity of the present by insisting on the survival of the past or the jarring coexistence of other times”

(11). The fact that living characters such as Malena and Pablo appear on screen alongside characters that were murdered in a previous decade and the fact that they interact and converse with them as if they were present in the flesh is what allows for a literalization of the historical encounter with the other: a way of inhabiting multiple temporalities that cannot be explained through a rational or objective system.

In terms of the anachronistic and illogical contradictions that characterize human experience on an individual level, perhaps fantastic cinema could paradoxically be interpreted in some contexts as better suited to represent human experience than other genres: particularly lives marked by the irrationality of trauma. Caruth proposes that “historical memory . . . is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression, which make the event available at best indirectly” (15). She concludes that “history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18). This paradox can be applied not only to collective history, but also to personal history, since each individual is confined within the limits of his or her body and ontological experience, and a consciousness of someone else’s experience is subject to the expressive filters that make its transmission possible.

The subjectivity and surreal nature of individual experience is illustrated in one scene in particular: a scene that invokes uncanny similarities to social reality during the dictatorship. The day after their first encounter with the ghost family, Malena and Pablo stop at a gas station. Pablo starts to leaf through the mysterious book trying to figure out what happened to the mother and the daughter after the father’s murder. He comes across a photograph of the girl’s corpse with the time “12:25” written on the back. His gazes at his watch, which says 12:15, and he notices a suspiciously old pickup truck parked just a

few meters away: a truck that is anachronistically present. He hears a bang coming from the bed of the truck, which is enclosed with a metal cover and a chain. He manages to open it and sees the daughter and the mother, who is gagged and handcuffed to the body of the truck. Pablo rescues the girl and promises to come back for the mother. He runs back to the Ford Falcon with the girl in his arms, yells at Malena to get in the car, and takes off from the gas station at full speed, only for the ghostly pickup truck with its notably invisible driver to catch up to them on the highway. The truck rams the car enough times to render it immobile and, after coming to a stop, the three of them exit the vehicle and run to a roadside restaurant, thinking they will find safety in public space with other people.

They enter the restaurant visibly terrified. Pablo even has blood on his face, but the indifferent patrons keep watching the soccer game on television. Malena calls the police to report the emergency, but as she attempts to describe what has happened, she realizes that her story, just like the mysterious book at first glance, doesn't make sense: read within the social framework of what constitutes reality in the public sphere, her story is not only improbable: it's incomprehensible. Words fail her when she attempts to describe what has happened to her. She can't even give the police operator her location (another piece of information that is necessary in order for her story to have any coherence): "Es que no sé muy bien dónde estoy. Ya llamo en otro momento" (0:44:57). They believe they have saved the girl from her tragic fate, but at exactly 12:25, blood begins to leak from her chest. A few moments later, she goes flying violently through the air as if suspended by a meat hook. The visual impact is horrifying, which is why this

brutal image appears on the DVD cover and the promotional materials for the film. After hanging in the air for a few seconds, she falls “dead” to the floor.

No one else in the restaurant seems to have seen this terrifying event: a public blindness that reminds us of the period of the Dirty War. Everyone remains distracted by the soccer game, as the nation was distracted by Argentina’s 1978 World Cup win. A man sitting at a nearby table has been splattered with blood and doesn’t even seem to notice, thus insinuating the guilt of a large part of society that pretended not to see anything during the dictatorship. Horrified, Pablo exclaims, “No lo puedo creer. Nadie nos va a ayudar” (0:47:32). This scene exemplifies the “heterotemporality” that Lim refers to in her book. 12:25 p.m.—a moment supposedly shared between Malena, Pablo, the girl, and the other occupants of public space that represent society—has actually been a moment experienced in sharply contrasting and contradictory ways. The dramatic heterogeneity of experience literally played out under a clock that represents the homogeneity of chronological order puts into perspective the porosity and subjectivity of the notions of time and history: institutionalized notions that claim to give human experience an objective narrative.

As Caruth observes, “incomprehensibility [is] at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58). In *Aparecidos* we have seen how the literalization of the atemporality and heterotemporality of human experience—and particularly traumatic experience—exposes fissures in the notion of time and unsettles its purported comprehensibility. According to Amy Kaminsky in her essay on *Garage Olimpo*—another film that has to do with the horrors of the Dirty War—this is precisely the reason why the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo continue their weekly practice of demonstrating in front of the Casa

Rosada rather than giving the memory of their disappeared loved ones over to the institution of time. They are opposed to the construction of a monument to the disappeared, preferring instead to leave open “the wounds inflicted by the state,” since “monuments are fixed in place and eventually become part of the landscape” and “narratives of state terror allow us to remember viscerally” (no pag.). In other words, they want the victims of the Dirty War to continue resisting visible form in order to continue performing their function as specters: watching and calling out to us to haunt our memory and remind us of the disjuncture that is inherent in their absence.

According to Caruth, any trauma implies a departure from the original site followed by a repetitive return to that site: a return that Derrida might say is facilitated and demanded by the specter of injustice. In the case of *Aparecidos*, the literalization of the specter helps us to identify its deconstructive function in terms of the official and institutionalized ways in which a coherent narrative is claimed to be possible in order to describe and make judgments about human experience. This haunting subversive potential is commented by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott in the introduction to their book *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (10). In the same book, Ruth Parkin-Gounelas observes that “Ghosts are untimely/anachronous (with the Greek prefix ‘ana’ carrying the idea of repetition) in their disturbance of the distinction between beginnings and returns as well as between death and life” (102).

The reason why the theme of repetition is inherent in the concept of anachrony—and the reason why the trope of the specter returns time and again in literature and film—is because the systems that have become institutionalized under the pretext of a projecting a cohesive narrative onto human life—systems such as chronological time,

with its arbitrary point of departure and its fictitious beginnings and endings—are incapable of fulfilling their promise. They always leave something unresolved, something unexplained or unexplainable, to come back and haunt individual and social consciousness. One cannot help but acknowledge the haunting impossibility of comprehending the horrors of Argentine history and its victims, who must return in spectral fashion to fulfill their deconstructive function: to remind us paradoxically of the importance of their history as well as the impossibility of History in general. They obsessively remind us of the inadequacy of our systems of knowing.

Rather than presenting memory as a fixed memorial, films such as *Aparecidos* present memory as a difficult and necessary process that is fueled through various ways of knowing, of which affective experience forms a necessary part. Malena sheds tears when she listens to a survivor's first-hand account of her experience. The way in which she learned about the past from newspapers and their reporting of information—from institutionalized knowledge—is different from the way in which she learns about the past from the owner of the souvenir shop. Pablo fails to appropriately recognize the horror of the information he has come across in the book until he forms an emotional connection with the ghost of the little girl and becomes horrified for/with her. In his chapter entitled “Short of Memory: the Reclamation of the Past Since the Spanish Transition to Democracy,” Joan Ramon Resina observes that, “along with data that constitute so-called information, newspapers transmit structures of relevance and semantic guidelines which shape the reader's orientation to the past” (86). He then quotes Michael Schudson, who asserts that “the individual's capacity to make *use* of the past piggybacks on the social and cultural *practices* of memory” (347; emphasis added).

These practices and reception to them are in constant flux, both synchronically and diachronically, which is why different practices of memory are necessary for different generations and historical contexts. This is also why affect has a key role to play in this process—as much of the academic literature published on this recent wave of Spanish-language gothic/horror films with themes of historical memory seems to suggest—if these generations are to “remember viscerally.” In the case of *Aparecidos*, while Malena had the opportunity to sit down one-on-one with a survivor of the Proceso, the younger Pablo’s encounters were limited to the supernatural, thus signaling a generational difference in the way in which young people encounter, process, and dialogue with the “so-called information” that is presented to them about the subject, as well as how they might “make *use* of the past.” As time passes, fewer first-hand narratives and testimonials will be available, and encounters with ghosts will become increasingly thematic in Argentina’s cultural practices of memory.

Conclusions: ghosts, specters, and historical memory

In the way of concluding this study, I would like to start by pointing out that, in *Aparecidos*, while we see the ghosts of the victims, those who are responsible for their abduction remain invisible. Notwithstanding, the perpetrators’ lingering presence is perceived and the consequences of their actions play out in strikingly visual fashion, thus underscoring the inherent injustice in their impunity as well as a conceptual difference between ghosts and specters that I would like to propose for the case of *Aparecidos* by borrowing and reworking some of the Jacques Derrida’s terminology in *Specters of Marx*. The space from which specters view us is opened up and made possible through

temporal disjuncture: a concept that is analogous with injustice (27). While ghosts appear to us and are recognized by us as such, specters remain invisible but hauntingly present. We can't see them, but we perceive that they can see us: Derrida's visor effect. As bodiless embodiments of spirits past, ghosts can be conjured according to the grammar of social subjectivity. They assume recogniz(ed)/(able) identities and represent specific social subjects who once inhabited a body but whose spirit takes on a visible presence.

One can dialogue with them, ascertain the coherent, historical reasons for their lingering as ghosts, and in traditional fantastic narratives, set them free from limbo once justice has been carried out on their behalf by living bodies, thus reinscribing essentialized notions of subjectivity—the idea that social subjects are not formed by the societies that produce them, but rather exist autonomously as original and eternal self-contained spirits or essences—as well as the temporal framework in which they are conceived of as such, with the promise of eventual meaning and narrative closure carrying itself out in an imagined afterlife. While ghosts can be scary or friendly and carry out a wide variety of functions depending on how and to what end they appear, the prospect of making sense of them—of putting them back in their proper place—remains possible because, while potentially complicating them, they can ultimately lend themselves to the sense-making mechanisms of linear narrative.

Specters, on the other hand, perpetually problematize the possibility of justice because of the particular way in which they haunt us: as a faceless imperative that we sense but fail—in a most queer way—to fully recognize or make sense of. In the introductory chapter of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida references the “paradoxical phenomenality, the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible” as the defining

characteristic that “distinguishes the specter or the *revenant* from the *spirit*, including the spirit in the sense of a ghost in general” (7). He then goes on throughout the book, in circular and Derridian fashion, to complicate any concise, fixed definition of these terms—spirit, ghost, *revenant*, specter—thus rendering their applicability as categorical terms nearly impossible, in stark contrast to Tzvetan Todorov’s writings on the fantastic. While Todorov, as a structuralist, set out to establish terms for the categorization of literature into genres, as a deconstructionist, Derrida was fundamentally opposed to this end: particularly in *Specters of Marx*, which itself, as a text, is difficult to categorize in terms of literary theory, cultural theory, economic theory, phenomenology, or general philosophy.

It is my argument, however, that in the context of *Aparecidos* and the stark difference between the spirits of the victims and those of the perpetrators—and more importantly, the difference between the ways in which they haunt the protagonists and are made (in)visible to viewers—two different terms are necessary to describe these spirits and their implications for temporality. While I concede that this difference falls upon a continuum (a continuum upon which Derrida slides back and forth in his book) rather than a binary, what most interests me is the way in which recognizable ghosts can be viewed as improperly inhabiting time—as spirits whose time is out of joint due to a past injustice defined as such according to the reigning logic and temporal parameters of an ideologically established here-and-now—and the way in which unrecogniz(ed)/(able) specters can cause those who perceive its gaze to feel themselves out of joint with time. The specter “looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before or beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute

anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely *unmasterable* disproportion” (7; emphasis added).

While, as mentioned, Derrida goes on to elaborate on this concept throughout his entire book in ways that are beyond the scope of the present study, I would like to propose that ghosts, as I have just outlined them here in terms of their recognizability and in terms of the function they carry out in *Aparecidos*, constitute fragments—symbolic fragments, in Lacanian terms—of an inaccessible, incoherent real for whose representation they are conjured. In other words, ghosts are symptoms or manifestations of specters. They offer us glimpses, like pieces of Henke’s shattered mirror of trauma, into the otherwise ineffable, incomprehensible, and unrepresentable horror of traumatic events. In other words, ghosts provide us with fleetingly coherent subjects through whom some kind of graspable story can be narrated through pieced-together fragments of an ineffable, invisible, shattered whole, whether this whole is the entirety of any one person’s lived experience, the entirety of the Dirty War itself, or the idea(l) of justice.

While we can attempt to make some sense of the specter and attribute a reason to its lingering, faceless existence, the spectral imperative that imposes its gaze on us is an impossible one. How can justice be measured and carried out in actionable terms? In our legal system, punitive measures are established in terms of time and capital, which form part of the commodity system that dictates the logic and discourse of global capitalism, as discussed in chapter 2 of this study. Cazdyn uses the U.S. healthcare system to illustrate the contradictions inherent in this logic, wherein monetary value is assigned to the human body and, ultimately, to human life. Crimes are categorized according to severity and

their penalties fall within established, quantifiable ranges of time and/or money to be served and/or paid out by the perpetrator.

In the case of murder, how much time served in jail is appropriate for justice to have been served? In the case of compensation for the victim's families, how much money is appropriate? And in the case of a systematic campaign by a government to carry out an ideological genocide against its own citizens? Despite the impossibility of carrying out any kind of appropriate, proportional justice that somehow sets things right, makes peace with ghosts, puts them back in their place, and sets time back on its proper hinges, the spectral imperative to take up a lifelong struggle to remember the past and wrestle with the idea of justice to/for the past is what haunts Argentina's national imaginary—at least for some.

One must not forget, after all, that political debate consists of competing national imaginaries, and the struggle for justice and historical memory has not been as steady one, with limits on indictments being placed after the 1985 Juicio a las Juntas and President Carlos Menem's eventual 1989 proclamation of immunity for the perpetrators: a proclamation that was not overturned by the nation's supreme court until 2005. Due to this legal back-and-forth, the way in which Argentina's national imaginaries were haunted—imaginaries in plural since a portion of the population insisted and continues to insist on the generals' innocence of any wrongdoing—has changed rather dramatically through time. The spectral imperative for justice is a historically specific one.

Despite the impossibility of proportional justice, it is highly significant that in comparison to neighboring countries with similar histories of repression, Argentina has made and is continuing to make a considerable effort to struggle for justice on the

different levels at which such a concept can be implemented—especially since 2005. Some kind of relationship likely exists between this event and the filming and subsequent release of *Aparecidos* on the film festival circuit in 2007. Since the film's release, former military leaders such as Jorge Rafael Videla and Reynaldo Bignone have been tried, sentenced, and incarcerated for their crimes: a slow, grueling process whose significance has not gone uncontested in its significance within the national imaginary.

Even more haunting than the nation's divided consciousness with respect to the clearly dramatic events of the past—the hauntingly dramatic difference in their concepts for justice—is the possibility that, with the passing of time, this specter will cease to perform its haunting function. As Jo Labanyi has pointed out in her essay on “History and Hauntology” in post-Franco Spain, “there are many kinds of ghosts” and “there are various ways of dealing with them,” including “refus[ing] to see them or shut[ting] them out” (65). People, after all, are easily spooked by ghosts and frequently fall back on the reactionary impulse to protect the illusion of the coherent, self-contained individuality of their own social subjectivity. Of course ghosts, like other blank surfaces upon which the ideologically inflected narratives of subjectivity are projected, are far from self-evident beings that exist through some kind of original and self-same essence. This dynamic is illustrated in the ending scene of *Aparecidos* in which the siblings begin to see a multitude of ghosts that they had previously failed to see (and that people occupying the same public space still fail to see), as well as in the scene in the roadside diner in which the patrons and staff fail to see the ghost of the little girl and the dramatic and gruesome reenactment of her murder at the hands of perpetrators who enjoy, as power does, a more absolute level of invisibility.

Adriana Bergero posits that “No atravesar las barreras del otro también implicaría un permiso para no imaginarlo, para no *sentirlo*. Una distancia social que induce a dar prioridad a la protección del *yo* respecto al dolor del otro” (448). She then goes on to quote Elaine Scarry’s observation that “One can be in the presence of another person who is in pain and not know that the person is in pain” (278) and postulate that, with respect to the gothic trope of the ghost, with its characteristically unstable materiality, “la visibilidad e invisibilidad del dolor del otro—ese rastro fugaz en el espejo que devela la presencia de la víctima—es el centro de oscilación y tensión del gótico ilustrado-humanista, como lo es en el activismo de los derechos humanos” (448). This particular connection between gothic ghosts, visibility for victims of past injustices, and human rights is especially relevant for films such as the one at hand in Bergero’s article—*El espinazo del diablo*—as well as *El orfanato* and *Aparecidos*.

Notwithstanding, just as the streets were filled with previously unseen ghosts in the final scene of this last film, ghosts themselves and the films in which they appear are subject to multiple and often contradictory readings. It is the viewer’s historically and ideologically positioned gaze that will determine whether ghosts are seen, in what light they are seen, and how they will be interpreted: what their piecing together will ultimately “mean” for the viewer. Of course the filmmaker also has a primary role in positioning this gaze and inscribing this meaning through narrative, which shares an inextricable relationship with the discourses of power that interpellate social subjects as such and organize time and society in a way that regulates an economy, to invoke once more the Derridian epigraph for chapters 2 and 3 of this study.

In *Kilómetro 31*, ghosts are conjured to represent victims of historical injustices, just as they are in the last two films. Nonetheless, those ghosts carry out a different function in terms of the ways in which they engage viewers, elicit emotional responses from them, and ultimately construct them as inhabiting a modern and therefore “real” space and time. Horror is textualized as stemming from supernatural dimensions other than the comforts and narrative closure of normal human experience and the coherent here-and-now. Ghosts are portrayed in a menacing, horrifying light and used to elicit a fearful relationship with the past and its pervading historical injustices. While the specter of this historical injustice looms omnipresent, the ghosts that appear as mechanisms in *Kilómetro 31* for giving social subjectivity and narratability to it do so in a way that forecloses on the possibility of any measure of justice.

The openness of social subjectivity—and openness *to* other social subjectivities—necessary in order to adopt “el dolor huérfano” is condemned as madness with Catalina’s cautionary tale of the woman who paid too much attention to the atemporal howls of the injustices that haunt her country. Her undoing as a coherent, self-contained social subject is attributed to her character as “un espíritu” that is “noble y sensible” enough to cognitively empathize with “trauma [ajeno]”—her inability to separate her twin sister’s suffering from her own. Excessive empathy causes her social subjectivity to shatter without any subsequent reconfiguration—as we saw in Malena and Pablo’s relationship in *Aparecidos*—that would then hold the potential to question the rules that dictate social subjectivity. The openness/vulnerability of her subjectivity is further articulated by her status as an unmarried woman of a certain age: a lack of narrative closure regarding the purpose of her life that ultimately entails her banishment from reality/society as a queer

social subject who fails to fulfill the reproductive imperative necessary for the continued imagining of Mexico's progression into a modern(izing) future. The definition of family (and its subsequent implications for social organization and social control) is reinscribed along exclusively biological lines—lines that are interrupted by the Mixcoac Woman's murder of her own child and Catalina's failure to produce one.

This naturalized view of the social and political construct of family is problematized in *El orfanato*, as is the heteronormative imperative to reproduce offspring in order to be productive in society and participate in full personhood. The temporal framework in which the imagining of a progression through time into an ideologically specific future occurs is disrupted by Simón's condition, which causes him to inhabit time in a non-normative fashion, thus making chrononormativity visible, and therefore, questionable. The ghosts in *El orfanato* are made visible in such a way as to invite a certain self-awareness on the part of viewers in order to call special attention to the ideologically orchestrated way in which ghosts are conjured and presented. These ghosts elicit a fear that is eventually replaced with sympathy, and the "adopción del dolor huérfano" is literalized in Laura's post-mortem adoption of her fellow adoptees. Unlike *Kilómetro 31*, the high level of emotion at the end of *El orfanato* inscribes the coexistence of multiple temporalities—as well as narrative openness rather than closure—as peaceful and even comforting.

This is similar to the literalized process of adoption we see in *Aparecidos* when Pablo takes an adoptive attitude towards the ghostly child only for viewers to later discover that he himself is adopted. Empathy towards ghosts of past injustices and the shattering of one's coherent, self-contained subjectivity are portrayed as processes that

lead to enlightenment and greater understanding rather than madness and destruction. The social imperative to biologically create a family is replaced by the ethical imperative to cognitively and emotionally create a family that is dictated by new rules of social subjectivity. The past is shown to coexist along with the many different presents being collectively and synchronically experienced and heterotemporality is portrayed as a normal and necessary (rather than an abnormal and destructive) facet of human experience. One must chase after ghosts out of a concern for justice rather than flee from them in an effort to escape responsibility.

As temporal anomalies, ghosts constitute particularly volatile vehicles through which notions of time—and by extension, any political reality—can be either reinscribed or questioned/queered. Since political realities can only be imposed on individuals by interpellating them as such—as social subjects organized according to a certain logic—the interaction between the ideological advent of the ghost and that of the family can help to expose fissures in the narrative processes that continually negotiate social subjectivity. As rhetorical figures, children also hold the potential to either reinscribe the status quo and its perceived necessity or to expose the arbitrary nature of the symbolic order through which societal norms are negotiated and enforced, which is why they, along with ghosts, make such frequent appearances in horror films. In this study, I have explored the unique role gothic/horror films have in situating viewers emotionally and cognitively within time and in articulating ideologically directed anxieties surrounding any given historical moment.

Ghosts, with their unstable and intermittent visibility, serve as particular apt vehicles for the revisitation of subjects who have been made to disappear due to their

potential to compromise the coherence of a dominant narrative bent on making and imposing sense: cast out from “reality,” from society, from contemporaneity due to Western historicism and modern progress (as seen with the indigenous in *Kilómetro 31*), due to queer difference (as seen with Tomás in *El orfanato*), or due to state-sponsored terror (as seen in *Aparecidos*). Questions for future research include a continuation of the debate briefly explored at the beginning of this chapter regarding the ethics of combining the typically exploitative horror genre with the real-life horrors of state repression and genocide: negotiating the ethics of representation and the ongoing imperative to invite generations of young people to “remember viscerally”—to cognitively and emotionally experience and address the horrors of past injustices.

Of course, while I have used the term ideological genocide to refer to the most recent historical injustices retrospectively labeled as such in the case of Argentina, one must not forget that the disappearance of the indigenous—now characterized as a historically-distant genocide—is an injustice that has continued to this day, most notably during a time that was contemporaneous with Argentina’s most recent military dictatorship but whose genocidal scale far surpassed it, with an estimated 200,000 Mayans murdered by their own government and an additional 50,000 disappeared. Cinematic representation and revisitation of these real-life horrors in the case of Guatemala, however, has not and likely will not be comparable with that of Argentina. Disappearances in Mexico have been surging in recent years, along with the continued disappearance of immigrants along the U.S.-Mexico border. People disappear through the cracks of global capitalism every day, as pointed out in the Mexican-Spanish

coproduction *Beautiful* (2010) when a factory full of undocumented Chinese immigrants in Barcelona die in an accident amidst truly horrific working conditions.

What is the relationship between real-life and cinematic horror? What distances and proximities are required between the two in order for the latter to occur? Who has the right to a ghost? And when? How are these rights connected to those of personhood and the hierarchies that are inherent to processes of social subjectivity, both real-life and fictitious (as if there were a clear difference)? How will the gothic/horror genre continue to negotiate the historical and economic conditions that produce it? These are impossibly big questions that will go without satisfying, definitive answers, yet we still feel their spectral gaze. Ghosts will doubtlessly be conjured in response to this imperative—conjured according to the grammar of the ideologies that textualize them into being—but the questions are when, how, and why.

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