

Mediático presents an essay on Spanish cinema by [Ann Davies](#), Chair of Spanish and Latin American Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland. Professor Davies researches contemporary Spanish cinema. She is currently writing on the contemporary Spanish Gothic, and is co-editing a collection of essays on Guillermo del Toro with Dolores Tierney and Deborah Shaw.

Ghosts have become a commonplace of contemporary Spanish culture these days, ironic perhaps when the Spanish language has no direct equivalent of the English verb 'to haunt'. The preference of many Spanish filmmakers for horror and fantasy films suggest that Spanish culture has become, among other things, quite a Gothic place, populated by ghosts, zombies and other creepy monsters. Yet the Spanish Gothic itself seems to be a secret spoken of by few. When I recently began to write on the contemporary Spanish Gothic I found passing mentions of the Gothic but few commentators have addressed the topic squarely (Abigail Lee Six [2010] being one of the notable exceptions). Academics have embraced the Spanish ghosts, but they mostly perceive them in very different terms: they see them as ways of recuperating the traumatic memories of the Spanish Civil War and Francoism.

Jo Labanyi came up with a brilliant theoretical idea for discussing the recuperation of these specific memories using the notion of hauntology, a concept which draws on the work of Jacques Derrida (for example, Labanyi 2001). The ghosts of Spanish films and books are like the lost loved ones who could not be properly remembered or mourned during the Franco era, but whose memory secretly haunts the living. It's a powerful idea which many others have drawn on, myself included. I've found it of great value in teaching, as an idea that appeals to students, captures their imagination and enlarges their understanding.

But there is a risk of tunnel vision as regards our ghosts. I've no objection to analyses of films and books in terms of the War and Francoism. I've carried out such analyses myself and will probably do so again. Sometimes the appeal of this interpretation is nigh on

impossible to resist. When Guillermo del Toro's Civil War story *El espinazo del diablo/The Devil's Backbone* starts with the question '¿Qué es un fantasma?/What is a ghost?' it's hard to disassociate the two ideas. But as I carry out my own ghostbusting quest, I find there's no other interpretation on offer. I read that the ghosts of *Volver* are those of Francoism. So are those of *The Others*. So are those of *El orfanato/The Orphanage*. OK. But so it continues until in the end I feel compelled to ask: do they *all* speak of Spanish history? Are they *all* relics of Franco?

These are not rhetorical questions. As I write about the Gothic in the contemporary era I struggle with the effort to acknowledge the pains of the Spanish of past, which I am a witness many times removed. I nonetheless feel the fear of tunnel vision, but I've got into trouble for saying so. I remember a while ago at a Q&A session expressing this fear and asking if there were not wider Gothic connections to be made with the ghosts and the Gothic of other cultures. An interlocutor gently rebuked me for not realising the importance of the recuperation of memory for those Spaniards directly affected by the War. It is a sensitive topic. Yet it must be possible to recognise that the Gothic speaks to other traumas too: the loss of innocence, the repression of sexuality, the stranglehold of patriarchy, domestic violence. And in doing so it speaks to other Gothics as well.

The ghost of a solution might ironically start with perhaps the quintessential canonical Spanish film, *El espíritu de la colmena/Spirit of the Beehive*. There are many interpretations of this film in terms of Francoism, but there are others, in particular those that look at gender and the Gothic theme of decaying patriarchy. Many commentators have noted in passing *El espíritu's* Gothic resonances. More recently, however, Robin Fiddian (2013) has foregrounded a Gothic interpretation of the film by comparing it to Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. In other words, Fiddian is looking beyond Spain to see it as part of a transnational Gothic continuum that recuperates traumas, not all of which are those of Spanish history. Inspired both by him and by Labanyi, I am now studying the protagonist Ana as one of a line of Spanish Gothic heroines. The Francoist interpretations of *El espíritu*

remain valid and valuable, but readings such as Fiddian's suggest other possibilities.

We need also to remember that ghosts are not simply symbols of trauma but also sources of pleasure. The rise of Hollywood-style filmmaking and the disparagement of Francoist heritage by the new generation of filmmakers in the mid-90s is now critical orthodoxy, but still we read their ghosts in terms of Spanish history. Are these ghosts not also entertaining? But if they represent the victims of the Civil War, isn't their entertainment value somehow disrespectful? Don't we sometimes quite simply like to be scared?

Again, these are not rhetorical questions. As I continue to bust ghosts, I need to think through how these ghosts can be sources of manifold pains and pleasures. I doubt I can do this alone. This needs to be a dialogue or a conversation among those of us who care about these ghosts. I hope we can start it here.

References

Fiddian, Robin (2013), '*El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (Víctor Erice, 1973): *To Kill a Mockingbird* as neglected intertext', in Maria M. Delgado and Robin Fiddian, eds, *Spanish Cinema 1973-2010: Auteurism, Politics, Landscape and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) 21-34.

Labanyi, Jo (2001), 'Coming to Terms with the Ghosts of the Past: History and Spectrality in Contemporary Spanish Culture', *Arachne@Rutgers* 1/1, http://arachne.rutgers.edu/vol1_1labanyi.htm. Accessed 11 June 2013.

Lee Six, Abigail (2010), *Gothic Terrors: Incarceration, Duplication, and Bloodlust in Spanish Narrative* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press)

Mediático readers might also like to check out [The Gothic Imagination](#) website, based at the

University of Stirling, which provides an interdisciplinary forum for lively discussion and critical debate concerning all manifestations of the Gothic mode.

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