

**Ghostly Affinities: Child Subjectivity and Spectral Presences in *El espíritu de la colmena* and *El espinazo del diablo***

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The frequent presence of children in films addressing contested national pasts or ongoing violence suggests that the child plays a particular role in working through political conflict of various kinds. As Karen Lury has provocatively and compellingly commented in the introduction to her recent volume *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairytales*, “the child figure does not, or cannot, provide authority on the facts of war, yet the representation of its experience as visceral, as of and on the body, demonstrates how the interweaving of history, memory, and witness can be powerfully affective” (2010, 7). It is precisely this type of embodied, affective representation of child experience and subjectivity that this essay seeks to explore, in the particular context of films treating the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). Here, child protagonists have a frequent and important presence, and one that has been analyzed in great detail by extensive scholarship. For the most part, however, existing readings focus on the figure of the child as a vehicle for allegorical and symbolic readings of national history. This essay seeks to reverse the relationship between child and history, by looking at how the use of such violent historical backgrounds enables the representation of particular aspects of child subjectivity and experience, in particular those aspects brought to the fore by the child’s relationship with another figure that has been symbolically analyzed at length in this context: the ghost.

This essay examines child subjectivity as it emerges in two immensely popular films: Víctor Erice’s 1973 *El Espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*) and Guillermo del

Toro's 2001 *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*). While the two films derive from very different contexts – one made under Spain's dictatorship, the other a Mexican-Spanish co-production made in democracy almost thirty years later – both tell a story of the Spanish Civil War or its aftermath as experienced by child protagonists; both films also prominently feature ghostly presences. Most importantly, the films feature a connection between the child and the ghost that highlights crucial aspects of the child characters' subjective experience. *El espíritu de la colmena*, one of the best-known and most-loved films of Spanish cinema, tells the story of Ana (Ana Torrent), a young girl of about five living with her slightly older sister Isabel (Isabel Tellería) and distant parents (Fernando Fernán-Gómez and Teresa Gimpera) in a bleak town in Castile in 1940, one year after the close of the Civil War. After Ana and Isabel attend a screening of James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* in the town hall (in a room later used as a morgue) Ana develops an imaginative fixation with the monster, whom Isabel describes to her as a bodiless *espíritu* (spirit). She later forms a bond with a wounded Republican fugitive whom she believes to be her spirit in human form, as she finds him sheltering in the abandoned house where Isabel told her the spirit lived. He is later discovered by the local Civil Guard and killed. *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*) is a more straightforward ghost story from Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, and the precursor to his box office success *El laberinto del fauno* (2006). Set at a Republican-run orphanage in 1939 as the Civil War draws to a bloody close and Nationalist troops approach, it follows young protagonist Carlos (Fernando Tielve) who is older than Ana, probably about ten. Carlos arrives at an isolated orphanage in the care of his "tutor" who has not informed him of his father's death, and attempts to integrate himself into the initially hostile community of boys; along the way he discovers and tries to help the ghost Santi (Junio Valverde), another orphan boy who was killed by the scheming and violent

caretaker Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega), himself a former resident of the orphanage.

Focusing on three nodes of the child characters' experience and subjectivity as represented in the two child protagonists' affinity for a ghost or spirit – their outsider status, curiosity, and questioning of the boundaries between the imagined and the real – this essay explores the ways in which child protagonists can appeal to the viewer not only symbolically or allegorically (that is, by imparting certain kinds of knowledge or skirting censorship) but also through subjective and affective realms, heightened by the films' historical and political contexts. Through an exploration of the aspects of subjectivity and affect that draw these child characters to their respective spirit or ghost, we can foreground the child as subject rather than symbol, and come to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the issues of subjectivity, viewpoint, and the spectator's response in the two films. Such an approach also helps explain why these two films were hugely successful with international audiences, who did not necessarily have detailed knowledge of Spain's political history.

### **Ghostly Affinities: the Child and the Specter**

Despite their contextual and formal differences, at the fore of both films we find two key figures: a child and a specter (and, in the case of *El espinazo del diablo*, a child specter). It is worth noting that the ghosts of these films are fundamentally different beings, though they both can be considered “ghostly.” Santi is presented as an archetypal specter (in the traditional Western sense) – killed maliciously and before his time, he remains at the scene of the crime hoping to avenge his wrongful death. *El espíritu de la colmena*, although certainly a haunting film, does not present such a standard phantom. In an interview, Erice commented of the film that “Perhaps the most important moment in any mythical experience is that which reveals the ghost, the initiation;” demonstrating the imbrication of ghost and spirit in this case (Hopewell

204). For Ana, the multifaceted figure is unquestionably an *espíritu* in all its forms – whether imagined, physically incarnated in the Republican fugitive, or projected onscreen as Frankenstein’s monster. Although the conflation of Frankenstein’s monster and the idea of an *espíritu* emerges from Isabel’s fanciful explanation of the movie they have just seen, Ana quickly adopts this formulation as her own. For Ana, this being is at essence a formless spirit, but one who can clothe and disguise himself in various physical and imagined forms. Isabel differentiates the spirit from a ghost in that “los espíritus no tienen cuerpos;” interestingly, this conception aligns closely with Derrida’s claim that “as soon as one no longer distinguishes spirit from specter, the former assumes a body, it incarnates itself, as spirit, in the specter” (6). Following Derrida, then, Ana’s spirit can be seen as a bodiless ghost – until she herself imaginatively incarnates it in the fugitive – a sort of ghost himself, given that he symbolizes a defeated past that has been erased and eradicated by the current regime.

In recent years, critics have examined at length the symbolic significance of the figure of the ghost, particularly in application to the violent past, drawing on Derrida’s theory of “hauntology” to examine the social and political effects of ghosts and haunting in a variety of contexts.<sup>1</sup> The application to the Spanish case proves fruitful, particularly in the post-war and dictatorship periods, when the atrocities and injustices of the war (on both sides) were largely suppressed in the Francoist quest for rigid social stability and “progress” beyond the unresolved difficulties of the past. Various critics (Hardcastle, Labanyi 2000, 2002, Lopez-Quñones, Bergero, Moreno-Nuño, *et al*) have thoroughly examined the ghost figure in literature and film

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999); Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1996); Colin Davis, “Can the Dead Speak to Us?: De Man, Levinas and Agamben.” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 45:1 (2004), 77-89; Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville—London, University Press of Virginia, 1998); and Bliss Cua Lim, “Spectral Times: the Ghost Film as Historical Allegory.” *Positions* 9:2 (2001), 287-329.

treating the war and dictatorship in Spain. It is not my intention to offer a symbolic reading of the presence of the ghost, but rather to draw on this work in examining the ways in which the representation of the two child protagonists' subjective experience is highlighted through their dealings with the films' spectral figures.

The central focus of the films is connection forged by each child protagonist with his or her respective ghost or spirit. The films communicate this particular affinity in their imagery, using reflections, visual parallels, and doubling to link the protagonists to their ghosts. Reflections and doubling play a central role in *El espíritu de la colmena*. Not only does Erice's film repeatedly refer to or mimic its intertext – James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* – in themes, imagery, and even the composition of shots, but Ana's affinity with the *espíritu*/fugitive is also solidly established through visual doubling.<sup>2</sup> Before actually finding the fugitive, Ana seeks the *espíritu* in the well beside the abandoned house, but there finds only her own face reflected back, in the place where she hoped to find the spirit's. Ana's face and the *espíritu*'s are directly linked on several occasions; for example, in one transition between scenes, a close-up of Ana, falling asleep after she has returned from her moonlit escape, dissolves into a close-up of the fugitive, sleeping in the abandoned hut just after he has jumped from the train.

Later, in another much-analyzed scene mirroring Whale's film, Ana encounters the monster in the woods after the fugitive has been shot and her involvement with him is discovered by her father, prompting her to run away to the woods. Ana sits in the dark, alone by the side of a lake or pool, much like the one in Whale's film, gazing again at her own reflection. The water quivers and ripples suddenly, blurring and distorting the reflection of Ana's face; when the waters settle once more, we see that it has been replaced by that of Frankenstein's monster, as if he is seated in precisely the same place as Ana. At this moment, however, we hear the rhythmic

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough treatment of all allusions to *Frankenstein*, both "overt" and "covert," see Willem (1998).

cracking of twigs and the camera moves to a medium shot of Ana from behind, with the perspective zooming in – we are seeing through the eyes of someone approaching her. Ana turns to see the monster, physically incarnate as in Whale's film (but played by what is obviously another actor, whom some, including Lury (2010), have said resembles her father), slowly lumbering toward her. He approaches and sits beside her, echoing Whale's original scene shown earlier in the film, where the monster approaches the young girl beside the lake and begins to play with her. This version of Frankenstein's monster does not smile and offer to play, but rather looks seriously and sadly at Ana, who returns his gaze with what appears to be curiosity, fear, and some excitement. For the spectator, the scene has an ominous undertone as we know that the little girl of Whale's film met an unfortunate fate at the hands of Frankenstein's monster; yet despite her shivering from the cold, Ana's gaze conveys more curiosity than fear, as she is face to face with her ghostly double she has so assiduously sought and lost with the fugitive's death.

In *El espinazo del diablo*, doubling and reflections play a prominent part as well. Carlos is not only placed in Santi's bed when he arrives at the orphanage, effectively replacing him, but repeatedly visually linked with him as well. Shots often alternate directly between the point of view of the living boy Carlos and the ghost boy Santi; many shots of Carlos and Santi also mimic or draw parallels between one another. For example, in their first full encounter in the kitchen, Carlos hides from Jacinto by tucking himself into an arched cabinet, mimicking the arched doorways both to the kitchen area and to the basement in which we often see Santi appear and which come to identify with him; by being out after curfew in the kitchen, he also unknowingly replicates Santi's fatal transgression. Minutes later, Carlos walks down the stairs to the basement, and his enlarged shadow flickers on the wall, just as Santi's did the first time Carlos caught a glimpse of him in the kitchen just after arriving. When Carlos and Santi come almost face-to-

face, Santi cowers behind a basement pillar as Carlos approaches. Santi, in close-up, breathes heavily with eyes widened, seemingly more afraid of the human Carlos than Carlos is of the ghost Santi; the reversal of their positions blurs the line between child and ghost, incarnate and spectral, real and imagined, demonstrating to the spectator that the distance between the two is not so great. Later, Carlos approaches the cellar cistern in search of Santi; kneeling over it, he asks Santi questions about who he is and what he wants, gazing down into the pool in search of him, but finding only his own reflection where he hopes that the face of Santi, his ghostly double, will appear.

### **On the Outside: Kindred Spirits**

Thus in both films the child and ghost share a strong connection; what's more, this bond highlights nodes of childhood experience and subjectivity that make the child uniquely receptive to the ghost, and empathetic to the viewer. The first of these nodes is the child's outsider status. Both protagonists occupy isolated, outsider positions in their respective films. Even the settings are remote: Ana lives with her fragmented family in an old, dilapidated house, "barely recognizable from what it once was" on the outskirts of the small village of Hoyuelos. She and her sister, Isabel, spend their time playing in an abandoned house on the edge of civilization, aside the railroad track and surrounded by seemingly endless fields of wheat, with few means of connection with the larger world. Likewise, in *El espinazo del diablo*, we find ourselves in a remote provincial outpost, with crumbling buildings and a desolate landscape. The orphanage is a day's walk to the nearest town, and stands in the midst of wheat fields ringed by distant mountains. But the war serves as another, often implicit, but constant and smothering backdrop; as Antonio Gómez López-Quñones aptly puts it, "el film propone que el espectador asuma la Guerra Civil como un invisible marco circundante que aprisiona a los personajes, los enmarca y

los condiciona” (152). The buildings, like those in *El espíritu de la colmena*, are in a sorry state of disrepair and neglect, obviously for lack of resources in the midst of war; as a result, they also serve as the perfect setting for a ghost story, as Adriana J. Bergero has commented in her study of the film as gothic text (436). The interior structure of the school, as well as that of Ana’s home, is disorienting for the viewer – tracking shots between locations are rare in both films, leaving us without a sense of how different rooms connect and how much of the buildings we actually see.

The two children are isolated socially as well as physically. Unlike Ana, whose family is loosely held together by fraying threads, Carlos is, albeit unknowingly, an orphan. Abandoned by his “tutor” at the orphanage, he is forced to start anew in an often hostile environment. Ana, although not an orphan, leads an even more solitary life. Her parents are distant, both from one another and their children, due to wounds of war that are still all too fresh. As Rob Stone has eloquently noted, “cut off from the outside world and each other, they can hardly comprehend the flowering wonderment of Ana” (91). There is only one scene of warmth between Ana and each parent. She and her mother interact only in a short scene where Teresa is combing Ana’s hair; we see some affection but it almost feels forced on her mother’s part, as if she is playing the role of a happy mother for her daughter’s sake. Though still largely absent, Ana’s father appears in some ways more involved with his children than Teresa, although many critics have envisioned him as a patriarchal oppressor (see Deleyto, Evans, Riley).<sup>3</sup>

Ana is largely left to her own devices. Shy in school, she seems not to have friends her age, except her sister Isabel; even this relationship, however, begins to unravel after Isabel plays

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<sup>3</sup> I do not see Fernando as standing in for an oppressive patriarchal force, or symbolically allied with the dictator (as Evans does); there are certainly parallels between the monster and Fernando, but given that Ana actively seeks the monster and desires “to be his friend,” I think that these similarities show her relationship with her father as similarly hopeful and searching, albeit hesitant.



a trick on Ana, faking her death to Ana's great concern and compassion. Ana then shuns Isabel, and possibly even wishes true death upon her in the following scene, where Isabel and other children are leaping over a San Juan fire later the same day.<sup>4</sup> In this scene, Ana refuses to take part in the children's game, remaining literally on the periphery of their makeshift society. She watches from the sidelines, sitting by herself as the others gleefully take turns jumping over the flames. As Peter Evans has commented, here Erice "formally strives constantly to set Ana apart from Isabel and the other children" (16). The camera alternates between shots of Ana and the others, implicitly showing us her point of view as a subject alienated by and set apart from the others. The sequence of shots escalates sharply in tension and focus, bringing us closer and closer to Ana's perspective and inviting us to adopt her viewpoint as she watches the children; we feel her gaze become focused upon her sister as the other children gradually disappear from the reverse shot frames. In the final two shots, the camera lingers on Ana in close-up, showing her intent and unblinking gaze as she watches her sister; it then cuts back to a final shot of Isabel, in a wider angle and slow motion, as she runs up to the fire, braces herself, and leaps over it; at the apex of her leap the music swells to a discordant climax, and the shot freezes with Isabel in midair – Ana's symbolic burning of Isabel that signifies an irreparable rupture between the two girls. In this sequence we see as Ana sees, through the empathy-provoking camerawork described by Emma Wilson, which I term a "child's-eye view" (335). This proximity is essential to our identification with Ana, as it "brings the viewer up close to the image, disallowing distance" from the child portrayed onscreen (Wilson 332). We feel Ana's isolation and alienation

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Evans has analyzed this scene as one where Ana "looks, and then symbolically burns Isabel to death through Erice's technique of slow-motion culminating in the freeze-frame of Isabel positioned above the fire, only a shadow of herself now, charred to death" (Evans 16). I would argue that while Ana certainly sets herself in opposition to Isabel in this scene and perhaps imagines her death, it is more useful to see this scene as one in which the spectator is calculatedly allied with Ana's outsider perspective than one in which Ana "steps aside from the dance of life" (17).

from the others as we grow closer and more attuned to her perspective, culminating in the final freeze frame. While other characters shun the protagonists (or vice versa), the films construct these characters as empathetic subjects for the spectator, as we see *with* them rather than look *at* them, precisely the type of shift Wilson considers fundamental to representing children as fuller subjects (332, 335). The viewer identifies with protagonists in their isolation, largely through both films' use of point of view shots and close-ups of the children's emotive faces – in particular, that of Ana Torrent, much commented and at times fetishized in criticism of the film.

The child characters' outsider status and marginalization plays a large part in drawing them to the ghost, a figure excluded by society by its very nature. In the Western imaginary, monsters and ghosts are banished to the periphery of society – to haunted houses, forests, and graveyards, places that the living don't visit, and that the sunlight doesn't reach – places like Ana's crumbling house and the isolated orphanage, both homes that have been rendered “unhomely” by the ravages of civil conflict. Freudian analysis of the horror genre has often considered the ghost or monster of conventional horror films as representing the marginal or deviant side of society, “that which must be excluded, or repressed, so that the western drive towards technological progress and world domination can proceed” (Cook 197). Frankenstein's monster “is an outcast whose fate calls into question the assumptions and values of the ‘normal’ world” (Cook 205), not to mention the accidental possessor of the brain of a violent criminal; Santi is an orphan who breaks the rules on a dare, sees something he was not meant to and pays for it with his life; Ana's *espíritu* is a Republican fugitive, a loser of the Civil War, on the run from a regime seeking his death. It is this outsider status that he shares with Ana: as Stone aptly points out, “the union of Ana and the *maqui* is based on their exclusion from society” (92).

In the cases of both Santi and the fugitive, the characters' ghostly outsider status directly

results from the threats they pose to normative “progress” and power – Santi jeopardizes the safety of Jacinto’s secret, and the fugitive serves as an incarnation of Republican resistance to the Francoist regime, still a very real presence in 1940. The Franco government maintained its image of power and stability through a brutal suppression of those who opposed the regime. For Jacinto to maintain his power as the alpha-male of the orphanage and to carry out his master plan to rob it, he must violently ensure Santi’s silence about his treacherous activities. Both Santi and the fugitive are thus excluded from the social worlds they inhabit – the fugitive must hide in an abandoned building in a remote and desolate landscape, and Santi is excluded from the living society of boys to which he once belonged, relegated to haunt the cellars and dark corners of the orphanage.

But as both films remind us, those who have suffered do not disappear merely by being buried or concealed. For Avery Gordon, haunting is a social phenomenon that “describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (8). In Gordon's formulation, the world of ghosts is one of “seething absences” and “muted presences” (21, 195), which affect the social reality often without our notice. Gordon’s idea of a “seething presence” seems particularly apt to describe the case of *El espinazo del diablo*, where Santi’s presence literally seethes in the well beneath the orphanage. Ana’s *espíritu* materializes as Gordon’s “muted absence;” in both the scene of Fernando’s recognition of his watch in the cinema-turned-morgue and the subsequent scene at the breakfast table, there is no spoken dialogue. Fernando merely nods at the Guardia Civil to accept his belongings, looking puzzled about how they came into the fugitive’s possession but offering no explanation to the guard (he does not know, but imagines, that Ana took them to him). In the following breakfast scene, much-commented upon for its showcasing of the family members’

isolation (through a lack of establishing shots or shots showing more than one character at once), no words are exchanged between Fernando, Teresa, and the girls.<sup>5</sup> Ana and her father mutually acknowledge her connection to the fugitive (via her father's stolen watch) in a wordless sequence of glances in a shot/reverse shot sequence. Both this ghost and Santi, through their "muted absences" and "seething presences," draw attention to all that goes unsaid: the characters' isolation and their loss, and, not least, the political situation. Most importantly, their presence is only noted by the child characters and not the adults, as it is the children who are kindred spirits in their isolation.

### **Curiosity: Seeking the Ghost, Summoning the Spirit**

As we have seen, both children occupy outsider positions, alienated from their peers and distanced from the adults in their lives. But despite their isolation, perhaps as a result thereof, Ana and Carlos seek their ghosts persistently and actively seek to help them, whether by providing material support or avenging untimely death. This persistence is due to the protagonists' remarkable curiosity, which often surprises the viewer as the children venture into dangerous or uncertain situations. Ana's thirst for danger has been widely analyzed, particularly the scene in which she and Isabel listen for the arrival of the train in a scene of seething tension – as they see it approach, Isabel removes her ear from the track and Ana remains, poised over the rails, until the last possible moment, curiously watching the train approach.<sup>6</sup> Carlos's first two actions upon arrival at the orphanage are fearless: within minutes of arriving at an unfamiliar place under difficult circumstances, he knocks on an undetonated bomb and heads toward the doorway where the ghost of Santi has momentarily appeared. Both children's heightened

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<sup>5</sup> See Deleyto, de Ros, *et al.*

<sup>6</sup> Arata sees this scene as demonstrating Ana's fearlessness and imaginative capacity, while Evans argues that the train "brings only death" – I would argue that, on the contrary, the train is a symbol of escape, progress, or forward-looking, as it is the only way in or out of Hoyuelos and the most technologically advanced machinery in the film.

curiosity leads them where others dare not go, in search of danger and excitement – and toward the ghost.

Both children not only seek the ghost or spirit, they actively invoke it. After viewing *Frankenstein* in the town hall, Ana floods Isabel with questions about the monster. Her sister explains that if she is the monster's friend, she can summon him merely by letting him know she is there: "soy Ana."<sup>7</sup> In announcing her own presence, Ana summons the spirit's presence to her, demonstrating that she is ready to receive it. In Ana's first attempt at summoning the *espíritu*, she sneaks out and stands in her house's moonlit courtyard, looking up at the moon and then, in close-up, closes her eyes calculatedly, seeming to focus on something. We could safely assume that she is whispering the invocation silently to herself. The shot of Ana's face dissolves into one of the railway tracks, and the following sequence of shots, showing the fugitive leap from the train and hide himself in the abandoned house, implies that Ana has summoned the fugitive – her *espíritu* – and brought him to a (temporarily) safe resting place.

Carlos, too, repeatedly summons the ghost of Santi, initially inadvertently. On his first night in the orphanage, the camera shows Carlos as he tosses and turns in bed, unable to sleep. He looks at the wall beside him and sees the name of the previous occupant, Santi, etched there. He traces it with his fingertip and quietly recites Santi's name to himself, twice, a seeming invocation. The camera then moves from a close-up of Santi's name to a close-up of Carlos's face as he seems to notice something; the music hums with tension as he sits up in bed and turns to the curtain on the other side. We now see, along with Carlos, the shadow of a boy – a shadow that could almost be Carlos's, as it mirrors his position perfectly – another instance of doubling. It is only when the shadow moves and extends its arm (in greeting?) that we realize definitively

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of this phrase has been widely analyzed by critics, many of whom see it as a self-assertion on Ana's part; while this reading is valid, I see the phrase more in the sense of the English "it's Ana:" an announcement of one's presence, an identification upon arrival. Cf. Egea (2002), Labanyi (2000), de Ros (2005), *et al.*

that it is the shadow of a boy on the *other* side; Carlos asks “¿quién eres?” and then hastily pulls the curtain, only to reveal that there is no one there. He realizes he has summoned the ghost. After his initial invocation, Carlos actively and intentionally invokes Santi’s ghost on multiple occasions, taking great risks to communicate with him and discover his purpose. While the other children have heard Santi, “él que suspira,” at night, no one has dared seek him out and learn his identity. Both when Santi appears invisibly by Carlos’s bed and when Carlos finds him in the cellar, Carlos’s first question to him is “¿quién eres?” – something no one else has thought to ask. Even in these initial encounters, Carlos seeks the spirit without fear, using his name when the other boys dare not. Carlos, like Ana, is largely drawn to the ghost by his boundless curiosity.

Even after Santi’s chilling pronouncement that “muchos vais a morir,” Carlos continues to pursue him, actively reaching out to Santi more than ever before. He approaches the bomb (another sort of ghost in the film, as its presence in the courtyard is a haunting reminder of wartime violence, as Gómez López-Quiñones has pointed out) and asks where Santi is; one of its ribbons flies off toward the kitchen, and we see a quick shot from Santi’s point of view as he waits just inside the doorway. Santi waits for Carlos, wanting to be found. Carlos enters the kitchen and calls Santi’s name twice, telling him he wants to talk to him, because he doesn’t want anyone to die. Unlike in their previous encounter, when they never came face to face, Santi turns around and approaches Carlos, who is obviously torn between his fear and curiosity, backing away slowly while maintaining eye contact with the approaching specter. Carlos eventually flees and hides, too afraid of Santi’s prophecy, but he does not run from him again after it proves true in Jacinto’s massacre soon afterward. This time, Santi appears behind Carlos as he gathers food from the rubble, and Carlos tells him “no voy a correr más. Quiero hablar contigo. Dime. ¿Qué quieres?” Carlos now knows that the living are less to be trusted than the

dead, and finally asks Santi what it is he *wants* – the essential question for a ghost, who by nature has some sort of unfinished business. Santi tells Carlos he must bring him Jacinto, and touches his face, almost tenderly, before disappearing. Touching him adds an embodied dimension to the boys' connection; by making physical contact with Carlos, Santi shows his ability to impel him to action as a real part of Carlos's world. Carlos responds, "ya entiendo. Voy a ayudarte." Carlos is the only person who gives Santi an audience and offers him help; in the end, it turns out to be mutually beneficial, as the boys bring Jacinto to Santi and he helps them do away with him for good.

### **Another Way of Looking: Imaginative Vision**

The child's bond with the ghost stems also from his or her imaginative vision of the world – a viewpoint of which the adult characters in the films are shown not to be capable – resisting the binary between reality and fantasy or imagination. *El espíritu de la colmena* more prominently showcases the imaginative realm, but elements of childhood imaginative capacity, such as games and drawings, are present in both films. Notably, the credit sequence to *El espíritu de la colmena* features creative reconstructions of key events and characters in the film as drawn by the child actresses. Children's drawings play a key role in the plot of *El espinazo del diablo*, as it is through Carlos's discovery of aspiring comic-book artist Jaime's pictorial representation of Santi's murder that he comes to understand what has happened to render the young boy ghostly.<sup>8</sup> The children's imaginative capacity is set in stark contrast to the mentality of the adults around them, preoccupied by the bleak present and dismissive of the fantastical elements the children pursue. Ana's parents are too wrapped up in their personal affairs and losses to

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<sup>8</sup> In recent years, drawings made by children in Republican *colonias* for children during the Civil War have garnered increasing interest and served as the subject of exhibitions and book collections. Drawings are one of the only creative products produced *by* children and thus provide a potential window onto child subjectivity; nonetheless, in the case of the *colonias* as well as the two films, the drawings were primarily directed by adults and thus must be understood in that context.

notice their daughter's preoccupation: her mother tells her simply that "un espíritu es un espíritu," effectively closing the conversation Ana attempts to begin.<sup>9</sup> In an equally dismissive move, when Fernando realizes Ana has somehow been involved with the fugitive, he surprises her at the abandoned house, but, not knowing how to speak to her, frightens her and forces her to run away and retreat further still into her interior life. By the same token, when Carlos tells the head of the orphanage, Doctor Casares, that he thinks he has seen a ghost, Casares changes the subject to criticize the superstition and fear which are dominating Spain and Europe; as a self-proclaimed "man of science," he conceives of the ghost only as a metaphor and not an actuality.

We could account, in part, for the child characters' openness to ghostly presences as based on their acceptance of situations wherein "the boundary of fantasy and reality is blurred," a key element of Freud's *Uncanny* (150). For Freud, this blurring serves to explain why many situations or images which adults find to be "uncanny" (*e.g.* talking dolls) are not so for children, because the child often blurs this boundary intentionally, through play and imagination. The uncanny also arises from "everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come out into the open," a perfect description of both Santi, physically hidden by his killer, and the fugitive, who must remain hidden to stay alive (Freud 132). The adult, through learned behavior and repression, finds these uncanny subjects unsettling and undesirable, while the child is drawn to them, curious, imaginative, and thirsty for knowledge.

The blurring of his boundary seems particularly pertinent in the case of Ana, whose ghost emerges largely from her own imaginative faculties. Rob Stone has stated that "the central quandary of Ana [is] her inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy;" but I would not

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<sup>9</sup> David K. Herzberger, in his work on Francoist historiography and literature, characterizes State-sponsored historiography under Franco in very similar terms; he calls it "'truth by assertion'...the past is how we say it is because we say so" (17). Much like the State's discourse to the people, Ana's mother's response is a tautology empty of meaning that avoids giving an answer through seemingly providing one.



consider this a “quandary” so much as an alternate viewpoint that enriches the audience’s understanding of her subjective perspective and experience (88-9). A scene that perhaps most aptly demonstrates this alternative perspective is the one mentioned previously in which Ana encounters Frankenstein’s monster at the edge of the forest lake. Some critics have claimed that Ana imagines or psychically projects this scene, others that it happens, just as it appears, within the reality of the film. I would argue that, as with much of the film, the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred and impossible to trace, putting the spectator in an empathetic alignment with the child’s position, privileging imaginative capacity. When Ana first sees the reflection of the monster replace her own, it is physically impossible that it is the monster’s true reflection, because he is not sitting in the same position that she does on the bank: in the next shot we see that he is standing paces behind her. The point of view shots are purposefully disorienting to the viewer – we sometimes see the monster from Ana’s perspective or vice versa, and sometimes observe the scene as outsiders either from the monster’s original distant position or from a position beside the monster and girl. Karen Lury, writing on Japanese film, has commented on how the shift between an adult’s and child’s perspective can alter the spectator’s experience of onscreen events; speaking of the film *The Demon*, she writes:

...the opening sequence of the film pictures, with a mix of hesitancy and intimacy, the three children at play...Yet significantly, after a few minutes, the perspective changes...now we see the children and their play from their mother’s anxious and frustrated point of view...this contrast between different points of view – in which children can be seen as charming or as monstrous – is frequently revisited. (2010, 50)

The shifting and disorienting point of view shots in this sequence could be interpreted as an alternation between an external adult perspective such as Ana’s father might see were he there (or the filmmaker’s), and Ana’s perspective – mingling vision with imaginative projection.

In the end, we do not know if the monster is “real,” imagined, or somewhere in between; in any case, what matters is that for Ana the experience is immediate and embodied, and that

these shifting perspectives bring the spectator closer to that experience, seeing with her more than looking at her. Having run away from her family after being isolated and alienated by them, Ana seeks communion with her *espíritu*; here she finds yet another incarnation thereof, and makes a connection to it – a connection that in some unspoken way alters her life. Although she is visibly afraid in the scene, she is also visibly curious, and when she first looks at the monster her expression is one of tenderness and welcome. For Ana, the apparition of Frankenstein's monster could be her way of re-incarnating the fugitive (himself a re-incarnation of the monster, her original *espíritu*) after he has died. I posit that it is this loss that traumatizes Ana and causes her to withdraw from her family into her mysterious “illness,” not, as some have claimed, her meeting with the monster in the woods itself. The monster, as another version of *espíritu*, serves as a parallel outsider figure that Ana welcomes, not rejects. Although the doctor claims she will cure herself by “forgetting, little by little,” her cure lies in fact in seeking her *espíritu*, her kindred spirit, whom she summons once more at the end of the film, at last freeing herself from the confines of her sickbed and denying a mandated cure of oblivion.

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions of both films are ambiguous. Ana's family members remain distant from one another, but Ana, though greatly traumatized by the death of the fugitive, leaves her bed and summons her *espíritu*, maintaining hope that she can still reach him. As Linda Willem comments, Ana's is the “one unbroken spirit within a beehive of conformity and isolation” and her curiosity and imagination cannot be understood or satisfied by her well-meaning but debilitated parents (724). Ana's search for the *espíritu* – her double, her kindred spirit – continues, leaving us with a certain optimism about her future. In continuing to seek the spirit, she continues believing in it, believing against reason and hoping to bring back what she has lost.

The end of *El espinazo del diablo* also leaves us uncertain about its protagonist's future, but with some hope. Having given Santi his wish and delivered him Jacinto (and, less optimistically, helped kill him), the surviving band of boys leaves the orphanage for the wider world. As they walk in darkness through the foyer, the camera tracks them at their eye level, as if including us in their group. Although the boys head toward an uncertain and likely violent future, away from the protection of the orphanage's walls and in the midst of a brutal war, they depart as a group, in a community they did not have before, and without looking back.

Both *El espíritu de la colmena* and *El espinazo del diablo* present us with isolated young protagonists in difficult circumstances. However, through the characters' affinity with the ghost – based on their outsider status, curiosity, and imaginative capacity – these child protagonists gain the interest and identification of the viewer through the directors' use of proximity and point of view. We feel and see the world with them, looking through a “child's eye view” at the events of their lives, seemingly experiencing them together. These films invert the normative relationship of children and adults, along the lines Karen Lury has pointed out in his writing on children in cinema. In the standard paradigm, the adult teaches and shows to the child, who observes and learns; here, we learn from the child who shows us, but also watch *with* the child as the events of his or her life unfold (Lury 2005, 308). The films set these children apart from the adults around them, showing them to be perceptive, imaginative, and open to the ghost in ways that adults are not, inviting the spectator to see things differently as well. This alternate viewpoint not only leads to greater affective identification on the part of the spectator; in the context of Spain's contested past, such an alternate viewpoint also serves to valorize a figure that, to quote Lury once more, “does not, or cannot, provide authority on the facts of war, yet the representation of its experience as visceral, as of and on the body, demonstrates how the

interweaving of history, memory, and witness can be powerfully affective” (2010, 7). Precisely this embodied and emotional experience that could account for the films’ popularity and lasting effect, even outside the Spanish national context.

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