

## **Beyond the Rubble: Unpacking the Trauma of Cartel Violence in *Vuelven* (López 2017)**

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The representation of trauma in cinema, and in art more broadly, has garnered increasing interest in recent years, particularly regarding how film succeeds in conveying the complex and often inexpressible experiences of traumatic events. According to Marcela Andruchow, “the representation of traumatic events [not only] can be approached through an artistic lens, but art can also collaborate in the processes of working through traumatic experiences themselves” (2018, 4)<sup>1</sup>. When young protagonists are involved, trauma acquires a unique significance, as it not only reflects the vulnerability and resilience of children and adolescents, but also underscores the ways in which trauma can shape and distort their understanding of the world. According to Fabiola Alcalá, in many films where children emerge as protagonists, they “carry on their shoulders the weight of war; although none of them directly participated in the conflict, they nevertheless suffer its consequences and the need to adopt a mature stance despite their young age” (2018, n.p.). Drawing primarily on the work of trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, this article explores how films such as *Vuelven* (*Tigers Are Not Afraid*, López, 2017), *Pan’s Labyrinth* (del Toro, 2006), and *The Devil’s Backbone* (del Toro, 2001), among others, examine the child character as a mechanism for representing trauma, while film style and narrative structure simultaneously contribute to this representation by exploring the complexities of traumatic experience.

In recent decades, cinema has witnessed a resurgence of films featuring children and adolescents as protagonists, often incorporating supernatural elements, ghosts, and other entities that function as symbols of trauma stemming from war, conflict, or cartel violence. One possible explanation for the rise of films with these types of protagonists is the growing recognition of the profound impact trauma has on the lives of many young people. Cathy

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<sup>1</sup>All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Caruth has emphasized the various ways in which traumatic events can shape and distort an individual's understanding of the world, often leading to feelings of disorientation and dislocation. "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them. Or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995, 5). In many of these films, the use of supernatural elements serves to represent the trauma experienced by the protagonists, to possess them, so to speak, creating a sense of unease and uncertainty that mirrors the emotional states of the characters and, by association, those of the spectator.

Although in the vast majority of modern horror films ghosts are portrayed as shadows or vengeful beings that seek revenge against an individual who wronged them in life—or against society at large—in many Hispanic films, where the ghost emerges as a key to the recovery of a forgotten or ignored memory, the ghost simply seeks to make its story known or to restore a past injustice.<sup>2</sup> In fact,

in none of [these films] are ghosts or the supernatural what is truly dangerous; rather, they are characters who ultimately generate empathy in the resolutions of the plots. This is because repressive violence and isolation [...] were exercised by neighbors, by officials, and by law enforcement. In the streets, in homes, in prisons. The terror of the past, real terror, persists and begins to be represented as a trace, as ghosts who return not to seek revenge but to find justice (Souto 2014, 8).<sup>3</sup>

Some films that employ supernatural creatures to convey the trauma and fear experienced by children in contexts of war and violence include *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) by Guillermo del Toro, *The Orphanage* (*El orfanato*, 2007) by J.A. Bayona, *Aparecidos* (2014) by Paco Cabezas, and *Vuelven* (2017) by Issa López. These films offer powerful critiques of past and present social structures that have perpetuated trauma and

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<sup>2</sup> Some movies with shadowy or vengeful ghosts in the last 20 years are: *Dark Water* (2002), *The Ring* (2002), *The Grudge* (2002-2004), *The Woman in Black* (2012), *Mama* (2013), *Lights Out* (2016), *His House* (2020), *Talk to Me* (2022), *Skinamarink* (2022), to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> Other titles that explore ghosts as a mechanism for justice are *Kilómetro 31* (2006), *La casa muda* (2010), *The House at the End of Time* (2013), *La Llorona* (2019), etc.

violence, thus contributing to a growing body of Hispanic cinema that sheds light, among other issues, on the human cost of war, cartel violence, and corruption.

In *The Devil's Backbone*, Guillermo del Toro delivers a haunting exploration of the Spanish Civil War. Set in an isolated orphanage, the film tells the story of a young boy named Carlos, who discovers that the school is inhabited by the ghost of a former student. As film theorist Karen Lury notes, “the child on screen is often used to represent the fragility and vulnerability of human life” (2010, 123). Accordingly, as the story unfolds, we realize that the ghost is above all a manifestation of the unresolved trauma and pain that linger within the orphanage. Santi, the ghost who continues to haunt Carlos, serves as a symbol of the atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War, and the film uses his presence to reveal the truth of the crimes that took place in the orphanage vis-à-vis the nation itself. By association, the crime committed against Santi becomes a monstrous representation of the trauma produced by the conflict between Nationalists and Republicans. Through the ghost’s appearances, del Toro elucidates the brutal treatment of orphans and innocents who were caught in the crossfire of war. The use of atmospheric tension and visual metaphors in the film—such as the unexploded bomb at the center of the school or the lost objects belonging to the other children—not only creates a sense of unease and fear but also emphasizes the trauma and vulnerability of the characters throughout the narrative. According to Eduardo Ortiz Maldonado, “in *The Devil's Backbone*, the Civil War is a traumatic experience that demonstrates how insignificant and fragile human life can be, especially that of children, who become the most vulnerable victims of the conflict” (2011, 7). *The Devil's Backbone* is an exploration of cinema’s power to convey the emotional and psychological impact of war and trauma. The film’s themes of loss, sacrifice, and the power of human connection are timeless and universal, and its use of the supernatural underscores the idea that the past is never truly past, and that the consequences of our actions can extend across generations.

*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) is a fascinating and imaginative film that explores the fantasies and fears of a young girl named Ofelia, who lives in post-Civil War Spain. The use of the mythical creature of the faun, along with other supernatural beings, creates a rich and complex world that serves as a metaphor for Ofelia’s inner experiences. The faun, with its dual nature, represents both the wonder and the terror that Ofelia confronts as she navigates the harsh realities of her life under the rule of her cruel stepfather, Captain Vidal. The film’s use

of visual metaphors and symbolism highlights the lasting impact of trauma on vulnerable individuals during times of war and oppression. The labyrinth itself is a powerful symbol of Ofelia's inner world, representing both her desire to escape and her need to confront the darkness that surrounds her. According to Marcela Andruchow, "the traumatic event is repressed or denied and remains hidden from consciousness. But what is denied or repressed from memory does not disappear; rather, it returns in a transformed, distorted, or disfigured form" (2018, 4). In this way, *Pan's Labyrinth* employs fantastic creatures and imagery to create a sense of wonder and magic that serves as a counterpoint to the brutality and violence of the world surrounding Ofelia. The film highlights the resilience and imagination of children, who often use fantasy as a mechanism to cope with harsh realities. Through fantasy and imagination, children can process and make sense of their experiences, escape or manage overwhelming emotions, reassert control in a world that may seem chaotic, and express feelings or thoughts they cannot verbalize. This can manifest in various ways, such as creating alternative worlds or scenarios, engaging in role-playing or pretend games, and imagining situations in which they feel safe or empowered. Through mythology and fantasy, *Pan's Labyrinth* creates a sense of timelessness and universality, underscoring the idea that past experiences continue to shape our present and future.

Finally, *Vuelven*, directed by Mexican filmmaker Issa López, is a remarkable work that challenges dominant emotional narratives and amplifies the voices of victims at the hands of the cartels. López crafts a narrative that blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, underscoring the enduring impact of cartel violence on the lives of young people. The use of abandoned buildings, rubble-filled streets, and unsettling landscapes in the film serves as a powerful metaphor for the trauma and displacement experienced by the protagonists. Indeed, *Pan's Labyrinth*, *The Devil's Backbone*, and *Vuelven* share a common feature in their representation of space: the depiction of a society in ruins as a reflection of societal decay and corruption, as well as the abandonment of its characters. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the rural setting and the labyrinth itself symbolize the complexity and darkness of postwar Spanish society (as well as a reminder of a glorious past, both for Spain and for Princess Moanna), while in *The Devil's Backbone*, the abandoned and crumbling orphanage reflects the devastation and neglect of the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, in *Vuelven*, desolate and violent urban spaces marked by cartel presence reveal the decomposition and corruption of contemporary Mexican society. Through the innocent gaze of children, these spaces seem to transform into

makeshift zoos and improvised soccer fields, in an attempt to counteract the horrifying reality of the world around them.

In these films, space is not merely a backdrop but becomes a character in its own right, reflecting the emotional and psychological states of those who inhabit it. The ruined and desolate environments symbolize the loss of innocence, the destruction of hope, and the disintegration of society. The characters are forced to navigate hostile and dangerous spaces, emphasizing their vulnerability and abandonment. Through the depiction of these spaces—abandoned factories and mansions, rooftops turned into campsites, alleyways covered in graffiti and trash—directors convey a powerful critique of society and its structures, highlighting the need for change and renewal to overcome the violence, corruption, and trauma afflicting these communities.

In *Vuelven*, the use of visual metaphors creates a sense of unease and desolation that reflects the protagonists' emotional states. The monsters that inhabit the protagonists' spaces—ghosts, supernatural creatures, and cartel members—embody the fears and anxieties of the young characters. These entities symbolize the violence and systemic corruption that perpetuate the trauma experienced by the characters. One visual element that acquires deep symbolic meaning in several of the films discussed is blood. In *The Devil's Backbone*, for instance, the blood that floats as if suspended in invisible water and flows from Santi's head is a constant reminder of the violence and death that occurred in the orphanage. This image is particularly disturbing and suggests contamination and corruption that permeates the entire environment. In *Vuelven*, by contrast, the trail of blood that appears next to Estrella when she first sees a corpse on the sidewalk becomes a visual symbol of the violence and death surrounding her. Blood becomes a presence that initially pursues Estrella and later guides her toward her final destiny. We move from believing that Estrella is being led toward an uncertain fate by a dark and violent force to understanding that the blood is once again the manifestation of the silenced voices of the cartel's numerous victims.

The use of monsters in *Vuelven* can be interpreted as a manifestation of the “monstrous other,” a concept explored by Julia Kristeva in her work on abjection. According to Kristeva, the monstrous other represents the “disturbing, ambiguous, and indeterminate” aspects of human experience (4). In the context of *Vuelven*, monstrous entities represent the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of cartel violence, highlighting the cyclical nature of fear and violence that perpetuates trauma. Furthermore, the film's representation of trauma

reflects the concept of “postmemory,” a term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the ways traumatic experiences are transmitted across generations (2012, 5). In *Vuelven*, the experiences of Estrella and the other children are shaped by the trauma inflicted on their families and surroundings, illustrating how traumatic events can have lasting effects on individuals and communities.

Another Spanish film worth highlighting in this analysis is *The Orphanage* (*El orfanato*, 2007) by Juan Antonio Bayona. Although it does not address the Spanish postwar period like *The Devil's Backbone*, nor does it overtly convey political messages, it nonetheless presents ghosts who, in their own way, transmit an ideological message calling for social change. The main characters are Simón, an adopted child who is HIV-positive; Laura, his adoptive mother and herself an orphan, who decides to found a school for children with Down syndrome; and, of course, the orphan ghosts who, through following clues in their sinister game, ultimately guide Laura—among other things—to the discovery of the missing body. The fear generated by the film relates to what critics have termed the “monstrous child,” that is, an apparently innocent creature who, either through character or physical appearance, inspires terror from the adult perspective. The children’s physical deformities also serve to denounce adult vices, as Sara Martín Alegre explains when she notes that many horror films “no doubt use the child to portray the faults of the adults, but in the process, they offer adult readers disturbing images of victimized and victimizing children” (2001, 105–06)<sup>4</sup>. In *The Orphanage*, although the monstrous children initially appear as villains, they are later portrayed as gentle beings who simply wish to help and ultimately become the vehicle through which adults externalize their own fears. In this way, both the orphans of *The Orphanage* and the children in *Vuelven* cease to be seen as monstrous children and instead become representations of Peter Pan’s “Lost Boys,” albeit with significant parallels and differences.

In both films, the children exist in situations of vulnerability and abandonment, whether physical or emotional. In *The Orphanage*, the ghost children who inhabit the rural house are victims of trauma and abandonment that have left them voiceless and absent from the world of the living. Similarly, in *Vuelven*, the young protagonists must navigate a violent and hostile world in which cartel presence has stripped them of both future and hope. While the children in both films share characteristics with Peter Pan’s Lost Boys—such as

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<sup>4</sup> Not my translation

abandonment and the desire for belonging—important differences remain. Whereas the Lost Boys of *The Orphanage* are able to find a new family and sense of purpose, even if only in the afterlife, particularly through Laura, Simón's mother who represents Wendy or the maternal figure, the children of *Vuelven* face far darker and more complex realities. Two of them are murdered by a cartel member, and most of the others, like Estrella—who represents Wendy in this version of the tale—end up alone, without the support of a family or familial group. Although the open ending of *Vuelven*, which shows Estrella walking through an open field filled with flowers, appears to communicate a sense of hope, the reality is far more sobering. The young protagonists must fight to survive in a world that seems to have abandoned them. In this sense, *Vuelven* presents a darker and more realistic vision of childhood and vulnerability, underscoring the urgent need for protection and care for children in situations of risk.

Finally, the film's narrative structure, which blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, contributes to a pervasive sense of unease and uncertainty, emphasizing the lasting impact of cartel violence on young lives. As Roger Luckhurst notes, "traumatic temporality disrupts the linear progression of time, creating a sense of temporal dislocation" (2008, 79). In *Vuelven*, the use of non-linear narrative structures and the blurring of reality and fantasy—we never truly know whether Estrella imagines her mother or whether her wishes come true, always with terrible consequences—serve to convey the protagonists' traumatic experiences, highlighting how trauma can interrupt and distort the perception of time. The representation of trauma in *Vuelven* also reflects broader themes in Hispanic cinema, which frequently explores the intersection of violence, corruption, and social inequality. While Hispanic cinema has a long tradition of representing trauma and violence—often through metaphors and allegories that convey the complexity of these issues—*Vuelven* contributes to this tradition by offering a powerful critique of the social structures that perpetuate trauma and violence in cartel-controlled territories. In conclusion, *Vuelven* offers a nuanced and reflective portrayal of trauma, displacement, and systemic violence in the context of cartel brutality. Through its use of monstrous entities, visual metaphors, and non-linear narrative structures, the film conveys the complex and enduring impact of trauma on young lives. As a work of Hispanic cinema, *Vuelven* contributes to a growing body of films that challenge dominant narratives and illuminate the human cost of cartel violence.

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