

Rodríguez-Hernández, Raúl and Claudia Schaefer. *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain*. University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 304 pp.

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Internationally, in the late 1960s and 70s a new age of horror cinema emerged giving way to new genres such as the slasher and revenge film, and to a conflation of erotica and blood-splattering, onscreen violence. Perhaps the most significant development during this period was the way filmmakers fixed the source of evil and the abode of the monstrous in the seemingly safe confines of domestic settings. No longer did threatening creatures solely lurk in ominous black lagoons, invade earth from outer space or come to life in the percolating laboratories of mad scientists; rather in the 1970's the site of monstrosity, its genesis and stage of confrontation, was identified as the living room (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), high school gym (*Carrie*), and the local family beach (*Jaws*).

Drawing on horror films produced in Mexico and Spain from the 1960s to the first decades of the twenty-first century, Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer's study focuses on the way supernatural elements, simultaneously terrifying and pleasurable, get triggered and emerge in seemingly safe domestic and institutional settings. The authors' goal in this unique study is to shed light on commercial films that have been overlooked or dismissed as inappropriate material for academic studies –films that offer a “far less art house version of cultural dilemmas and fears”– and to argue that while these films may inspire terror, they also have the ability to create “wondrous amazement,” leading viewers to the sublime on a path into a darkness that is as awe-inspiring as horrifying. Oriented by theoretical approaches to the gothic, each chapter in this study addresses familiar figures, constructs, and spaces of horror —witches, haunted houses, the corridors of boarding schools, and dark highways– in revealing and insightful ways. The authors are less interested in the way the films discussed in this study merely deploy the conventions of horror genre or the depictions of monstrous intrusions, but in their interrogation of “the faculties of human comprehension and knowledge.” The result is a series of thoughtful readings on a wonderful array of lesser-known films extending from Chano Urueta's early 1960 film *El Espejo de la bruja* to Alex de la Iglesia's *Las brujas de Zugarramurdi* released in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Following a useful introductory chapter in which the authors document significant studies on horror cinema in Spain and Mexico, describe their objectives, and map the contours of their readings, the study begins with a particularly illuminating analysis of the figure of the witch and cinema's capacity to represent witchcraft and the supernatural. Focusing on two Mexican films, Chano Urueta's *El espejo de la bruja* (1962) and Arturo Ripstein's *La tía Alejandra* (1979), the authors identify the witch as a "sublime intruder" who knows how to do things that others do not, and who is capable of coming and going in mysterious ways. She is not the conventional, almost cartoonish woman in the pointed black hat who rides a broom, rather a middle age lady—a maid in *El Espejo* and an aunt in Ripstein's film—who lurks in doorways and moves between domestic spaces, possessing a knowledge, often steeped in ancient traditions, that ordinary people do not have. She is a figure who can exact her own form of justice or retribution outside the laws and conventions of the state in which she dwells, and her power, as the authors insightfully argue, "create an atmosphere of porosity where the real and the supernatural collide."

Although not acknowledged as such in the study, the authors' description of the witch in Mexican cinema is a highly Celestinesque character who echoes Fernando de Rojas' late 15<sup>th</sup> century go-between. The figure of Celestina was wildly popular in the colonial and modern Mexican imaginary. Not only did Sor Juana allegedly collaborate on a sequel to Rojas' work, but Mexico produced one of the earliest feature-length adaptations of the *Tragicomedia*, Miguel Sabido's 1976 highly provocative, sadomasochistic reworking that verged on the pornographic with an equal dose of dark, shadowy gothic settings similar to those found in Urueta and Ripstein's films. Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer's study provides evidence for Ana Almeyda-Cohen's recent doctoral thesis in which she argues that the middle-aged Celestinesque character in twentieth-century Mexican cinema, portrayed as a madame in cabaretera films, a drug dealer in narco-cinema, and a witch in films such as *El Espejo de la bruja* and *La tía Alejandra*, provide a third figure that with her power to permeate boundaries and take on shifting or ambiguous identities, breaks up the traditional Malinche/ Virgin de Guadalupe dichotomy and, thus, presents a problem for the Mexican state.

Chapters three and four move from disturbing characters to the presence of evil in permeable, diegetic spaces —(haunted) houses, classrooms, boarding schools, orphanages, and convents— places populated with children, teenagers, and young adults. These spaces do not provide the locus for intellectual or moral guidance, as might be expected, but rather serve as venues for spectacle and performance that create awe-inspiring confusion and a scenario for revisiting childhood traumas. Beginning with Carlos Enrique Taboada's overlooked trilogy ("Trilogía gótica"), including *El libro de*

*piedra* (1969), *Más negro que la noche* (1975), and *Hasta el viento tiene miedo* (1968), the authors trace the representation of children, haunted by illness, fantasies and fears or by their parents deception, who find comfort in the communion with dark forces that unnerve adults. Working through Narciso Ibañez Serrador's *La residencia* (1969) and later films including Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (2001), J. A. Bayona's *El orfanato* (2007), and Isidro Ortiz's *Eskalofrío* (2008), the authors pause to consider Juan López Moctezuma's tremendous *Alucarda, la hija de las tinieblas* (1977). Highly celebrated by aficionados of gore and nunsplotation cinema, appearing prominently in catalogues such as *The Gorebound's Guide to Splatter Films*, *Alucarda's* relentless blood-saturated spectacles would seem to distract if not overwhelm the authors' focus on sublimity or supernatural awe. For many, this film is pure recreational horror. As Meagan Navarro writes in her "Butcher Block" monthly editorial in the *Bloodydisgusting* website, a space "dedicated to graphic gore and splatter" exploring "the dark, the disturbed, and the depraved in horror, and the blood and guts involved," Moctezuma takes controversial horror that ruffles feathers "ten steps further with explicit sexuality, extreme imagery, and an explosive finale that brings shocking violence and bloodshed." Indeed, López Moctezuma formed part of what was called the Jodorowsky Circle in the 1970's, often working with cinematographer and filmmaker Rafael Corkidi who shot Moctezuma's *La mansión de la locura* (1973) and collaborating with Moctezuma in Alejandro Jodorowsky's provocative works such as *Fando y Lis* and *El Topo*. Much to their credit, Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer are able to sponge up the literal bathtubs of blood, beheadings, and blistering self-flagellations (a requisite scene in all nunsplotation films), and keep the readers' attention in dialogue with their readings of Taboada and Ibañez Serrador films, pointing to *Alucarda* as another cautionary tale about the virtue and the preservation of family values that was rooted in the deep-seated fears of the aristocratic class or newly emergent bourgeoisie.

The final chapters in this study turn from spaces to the altered perspective of chronology and its ability to disarticulate the notion of progress. Mexican horror cinema is notorious for the way pre-Columbian and colonial conflicts reemerge in the present in monstrous forms. For example, Guillermo Calderon's *The Aztec Mummy* trilogy (three films shot in 1957), Chano Urueta's *El barón del terror* (1962), and Guillermo del Toro's first feature-length film, *Cronos* (1994) are built on the transtemporal conveyance of resentful characters and forbidden artifacts that seek revenge or wreak havoc in the present. Such is the case in the *Llorona* films, in which the authors see a recycled Doña Marina reappearing as a quasi-historical figure that post-revolutionary Mexico could use to remind modern citizens of a collective mythical past. After reviewing the mid-century explosion of *Llorona*

films such as those by Ramón Peón (1933), Mauricio Magdaleno (1947), and René Cardona (1960), the authors turn to Rigoberto Castañeda's *Km 31* (2006), which conflates the *Llorona* legend with the well-known highway ghost motif. This allows the authors to make connections between two 21<sup>st</sup> century Spanish films, *Las brujas de Zugarramurdi* (Alex de la Iglesia 2013) and Nacho Vigalondo's *Cronocrímenes* (2007), and show how these films, set in locations that connect city and countryside, weave troubling events and menacing characters from the past and future into an endless and disconcerting helix in which crimes are never completely solved and evil never completely abated.

The authors' extended treatment of over seventeen films provide introductory overviews combined with rich theoretical commentaries that reveal intriguing avenues for future inquiry. If there is a weakness to this study, it would be found in the unevenness that the national cinematic productions are discussed in the work, especially works from Spain produced in the 1970s. Although ambitious, the idea of exploring the genre cinemas of Spain and Mexico in tandem is a good one, but it sets up expectations for synchronic comparisons between the way each national cinema incorporated (or rejected) the themes, motifs, characters, and cinematic techniques described in the study. It is true that the authors acknowledge on several occasions the extraordinary boom in horror cinema that took place in Spain from the late 60s and 70s, but only Ibáñez Serrador's *La residencia* (1969) is discussed in the study compared with at least five from Mexico. We might ask, for example, where is the figure of the witch in 1970s Spanish cinema that is so prevalent in Mexican films. A case might be made that Spain simply ignored this character, opting to showcase vampires, zombies, or other monsters, but even the question of why one cinematic tradition turned to the witch in a given period and the other did not needs to be acknowledged. This unevenness might be acceptable if the authors' only goal were to draw attention to the supernatural sublime in a selection of films from both countries, but at every turn the authors encourage readers to see monstrous figures metaphorically and acknowledge the plots in which they appear as alternative narratives that speak directly to social and political conditions.

While a study that covers over fifty years and two national traditions will necessarily exclude many seemingly germane films, several omissions stand out. Given the way the authors bracket their study with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Víctor Erice's highly celebrated 1973 film *El espíritu de la colmena*, which centers on a screening of James Whales cinematic adaptation of Shelly's novel, seems tailor-made for this study, deserving a very least a mention in passing, especially since Erice's film contains many of the gothic motifs and themes the authors identify as creating the titular "Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday"—touched children, black cats, dark hallways, a schoolroom. It may be

that the status of Erice's work as the "consummate Spanish art film" (according to Paul Julian Smith) fell outside the parameters of a study focused on works that have been, according to the authors, "virtually untouched by critics." Still, as Joan Hawkins made clear in her book *The Cutting Edge*, the distance between highbrow art house cinema and ignored or maligned horror cinema is often difficult to detect. Indeed, among horror aficionados, *El espíritu* has always formed part of the horror canon, appearing, for example, in *Castilian Crimson's* Spanish filmography nestled neatly between films such as *Vudú sangriento*, *Una vela para el diablo*, *Exorcismo*, and *La noche de los brujos*. Those familiar with Spanish horror cinema might also want to know how the authors would approach the children in Ibáñez Serrador's controversial *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (1976) or the chronological themes and vampiric presence in Iván Zulueta's cult classic *Arrebato* (1979).

These nitpickings should not turn scholars away from Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer's impressive and suggestive work. Fans of genre cinema who are familiar with many of the films discussed in the study will appreciate if not take pleasure in the critical attention paid to the works discussed in the study, whereas film and cultural studies scholars who may have dismissed or overlooked these films will find in *The Supernatural Sublime* a compelling encouragement to explore them.