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### **Review of Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer, The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain**

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**Rodríguez-Hernández, Raúl and Claudia Schaefer. *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 304 pp. + 15 ill.**

*The Supernatural Sublime* is a timely book with an innovative approach and an engaging prose. It focuses on Mexican and Spanish films that visualize how supernatural elements intervene in the natural world and compel viewers to think about a number of important issues affecting contemporary societies: the contradictions of the project of modernity as materialized in the contexts of Mexico and Spain; the limits of knowledge, science and reason to make sense of the world; the uncertainty about the place of the human species in an imminent future dominated by technology; the breakdown of the traditional family structure; the wane of patriarchy and, related to that, the fear of women as menacing figures responsible for that displacement of patriarchy.

The introduction effectively outlines the main conceptual threads of the book (the concepts of the supernatural and the sublime) and the methodology (philosophically-oriented close readings supported by some attention to the visual aesthetics of the films). It also delineates the chronology (five decades of film production in Mexico and Spain) and the chosen corpus for analysis: a variety of genres in which the supernatural has an important presence, including horror, science fiction, Gothic thriller, and film noir, and how all these genres combine with melodrama in interesting generic hybrids. By embracing this generic hybridity, the authors add new insights to existing studies of some of the films included here that had previously been explored through the lens of a particular genre (i.e. the Spanish horror film by Antonio Lázaro-Reboll, the fantastic by Shelagh Rowan-Legg, the Gothic genre by Ann Davies and Xavier Aldana-Reyes) or of an iconic figure (i.e. the vampire in Mexican cinema by Doyle Greene, ghosts in Latin America and Spain by Alberto Ribas and Amanda Petersen).

The rest of the book offers nuanced and richly-textured readings of films that are examined in relation to an impressive theoretical and philosophical framework that encompasses Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist theories (Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, Jameson), and analyses of modernity and its shortcomings (Habermas, Sloterdijk). Films are considered beyond the framework of national cinema, emphasizing the influences of Hollywood genre conventions and how those are enriched by inflections of the particular contexts of production. Interestingly, the comparative (Mexico-Spain) analytical structure underpinning this study delivers some fascinating analogies between both national contexts. The best example of that is perhaps Chapter 3, entitled “Haunted Houses,” which explores two films by Mexican director Carlos Enrique Taboada, *El libro de piedra* (1969) and *Más negro que la noche* (1975), along with the more recent Spanish horror films *El orfanato* (José Antonio Bayona, 2007) and *Eskalofrío*

(Isidro Ortiz, 2008). These four films present the home and the orphanage (a sort of substitute home) as spaces haunted by ghosts of the past that can be read as allegories (of colonial structures in the case of Mexico, of Francoist socio-political structures in the case of Spain). The authors convincingly show how these films complicate teleological discourses of progress that shore up the concept of nationhood in modern Mexico and Spain by enabling the reemergence of “the archives of the silenced” that uncannily resurrect in moments of crisis (100), thus exposing the cracks in those national narratives.

The authors’ critical acumen is at their best when they support their claims with examples of the visual styles of the films at hand. For instance, the analysis of the use of lighting conventions and disruptive music to create Gothic atmospheres is really useful for appreciating the sophisticated making of films set in boarding schools for girls and young women that Chapter 4, “Evil in the classroom,” tackles. This example brings me to another strength of the book: the suitable focus on gender as a central element in films that deal with the supernatural and, above all, on the role of women, visualized as equally dangerous and captivating, repulsive and appealing. Chapter 2 examines in depth the witch in Mexican cinema of the 1960s and 1970s as an ambivalent figure that conjures up a mythological, pre-modern time, but which infiltrates, like capitalism, in the modern phase of the nation. The witch reappears prominently, even if in satirical mode, in Chapter 6 in the excellent analysis of Álex de la Iglesia’s *Las brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013). The authors aptly point out how the Basque director reactivates these figures of the past to make a sharp commentary on the precarious conditions created by global capitalism in the social structures of contemporary Spain.

This significance of gender makes all the more apparent the biggest oversight of the book: the absence of close readings of films directed by female directors. Women take center stage in this book but as (quasi-)monstrous objects of the male gaze, “as oppositional figures to enlightened society, bearers of occult powers, and the last visible remnants of a premodern world” (176), never as bearers of the film gaze. The inclusion of at least one case study focusing on a female director would have enhanced the insightful conclusions of the book in a prominent way. While examples of films directed by women that would fit into this study may be scarce—as a result of the notorious gender asymmetries of the film industry—an explanation or disclaimer about this seems necessary.

All in all, *The Supernatural Sublime* is a welcome addition to the growing list of valuable studies on Latin American and Spanish cinemas. The authors do a commendable job at analyzing the importance of the supernatural in cinema beyond the constrictions of genre formulas and the narratives of the nation. The comparative framework (not only in terms of national context but also of temporal planes) exposes intriguing, at times disturbing, affinities between the

socio-economic and political situation of the late 1960s and 1970s and the 2010s. Therein lies, in my view, the biggest revelation and source of terror of this book. Mexican and Spanish films compel us to face the historical continuities between moments of crisis and, above all, the unfinished business that reappears, in uncanny fashion, to haunt us in the present on both sides of the Atlantic.

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