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ABSTRACT

Building on Jo Labanyi's influential 2006 work, this article refocuses her analysis of the haunting motif on a pressing contemporary issue in Spain: immigration. While Labanyi explores how ghosts represent repressed fears associated with the Spanish Civil War, this study extends the metaphor to challenge outdated notions of 'Spanishness' in the face of the country's evolving multicultural identity. Two films by Chus Gutiérrez, *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), show how this haunting theme now encompasses immigration and underscores the need to confront both historical and current challenges. In these films, spectral figures represent not only Spain's unresolved past, but also its future, urging a redefinition of national identity that embraces cultural diversity. As with earlier works on the Civil War, *Poniente and Retorno a Hansala* call for a collective reckoning with Spain's complex, hybrid identity.

KEYWORDS: Haunting motif; 'Spanishness'; immigration; ghosts; historical past.

1. Haunting and 'Spanishness' in Post-Franco Cinema

In Spain, taboos have historically shaped cultural identity, particularly when it comes to confronting difficult pasts and silenced truths. After the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975), open discussion of the trauma and violence of these periods was systematically

suppressed. However, as Spain transitioned to democracy and became a popular destination for immigrants – particularly from Africa – new taboos emerged around immigration, race, and the country’s postcolonial legacy.

Building on Jo Labanyi’s influential 2006 work on historical memory, this article examines how two contemporary Spanish films by Chus Gutiérrez, *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), use the ‘haunting motif’ as a narrative device to challenge exclusionary definitions of ‘Spanishness’. Both films, I argue, call for a more inclusive rethinking of a national identity that embraces diversity rather than rejecting it.

While much existing scholarship¹, including Labanyi’s work, has focused on ‘historical memory’ in relation to the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship, this article shifts attention to a critical contemporary issue in Spain: immigration. I argue that the trope of ‘haunting’ in these films highlights outdated and inaccurate ideas of ‘Spanishness’ that need to be addressed and reconsidered. *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008) challenge the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about Spain’s historical past that are at odds with its evolving multicultural identity.

This emerging concept of ‘Spanishness’, centred on the immigrant experience and the haunting spectres of the nation’s past, echoes earlier explorations of the enduring trauma of the Spanish Civil War. In her analysis of post-Franco literary production and the challenges of reconciling the past, Labanyi asserts that

if we view modernity not in terms of capitalist development but as a particular set of attitudes toward the relationship of present to past, it becomes possible to elaborate a conception of modernity that, while it accepts the importance of moving on and continues to believe in the possibility of creating a better future, is also respectful of the need to acknowledge the past. (2007, 91)

According to this perspective, then, modernity does not require a complete break with the past; on the contrary, it demands that modernity “engages with the past and regards ruins as something to be cherished” (ibid., 102).

Historically, taboos have protected social norms by preventing the discussion of particular topics. From Spain’s transition to democracy (1975 to

¹ See, above all, Graham 2001; Marcos 2010; Davies 2011.

1982) to the present day, attempts to confront the spectres of the past, especially the Civil War and Franco's regime, have been limited. The recovery of the lost past of Spanish history from the years of the Civil War (1936-1939) to the end of the dictatorship (1975) seems to have really taken off only since 2000, when some grassroots movements, human rights, and non-profit organisations – and a more supportive political party line – formed a collective "*lieux de mémoire*" (Colmeiro 2011, 28). Labanyi distinguishes between two approaches in Spanish literature and cinema to this pre-democracy past: one that presents a realistic account, making the history palatable to a broad audience while neutralising its potential for advocacy; and another that uses non-realist modes of interpretation to demonstrate the relevance of the past in the present. Haunting narratives belong to the latter category, pushing for revised accounts of the past in order to expand the collective sense of what it means to be Spanish. According to Labanyi, these narratives – which avoid realism and instead focus on the haunting past – “retain a sense of the difficulty of understanding what it was like to live that past, as well as making us reflect on how the past interpellates the present” (Labanyi 2007, 112).

Such narratives are thus not only therapeutic, but also a call to action, as they stress the legacy of the past in the present. In the case of immigration, ghost narratives serve the dual purpose of “making visible the disappearances and absences silenced in normative historical accounts, while confronting a difficult past that has been viewed as taboo and that still needs to be dealt with in the present” (Colmeiro 2011, 30).

Just as haunting narratives previously questioned Spanish society's silence on the atrocities of the Civil War, more recent ghost motifs in immigration films unsettle the preconceptions of the African 'other', and thus challenge the very idea of 'Spanishness'. Christina Sánchez-Conejero (2007) notes that the simplistic image of Spain promoted by Franco – a white, monolingual, Catholic nation – is both reductive and illusory. In contrast, 'Spanishness' seems to emerge much more “as an openly plural concept in post-Franco Spain” (Sánchez-Conejero 2007, 4) in terms of ethnicity, religion, and language. She further observes that 'Spanishness' cannot simply be defined as a post-national state or a 'post-national identity'; it must also take into account what Javier

Tusell describes as “patriotismo de la pluralidad” (1999, 232), which acknowledges a plurality of cultures within Spain (Sánchez-Conejero 2017, 7).

Since 2000, much of the literary and cinematic production on immigration and memory has focused on dismantling exclusivist, clear-cut notions of ‘Spanishness’. In these works, ghosts are often used as narrative tools to defy such narrow conceptions, especially in stories that explore the intersections of immigration and historical erasure. The spectral immigrant and the haunting historical past converge to unsettle the very notion of ‘Spanishness’ which, according to these films and stories, needs to be rethought if Spanish society is to move forward.

Following Spain’s transition to democracy after the death of Franco, and its subsequent accession to the EU, there has been a significant increase in the number of films, novels, documentaries, and other artistic representations addressing the complexities of immigration. In the early twentieth century, migratory movements were decidedly directed outward – to Latin America and the industrialised European cities – or to urban centres within Spain. However, it was only after 1975 that Spain began to attract diverse immigrant groups, especially from North Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Many immigration-focused films from this period depict the ‘otherness’ of immigrants, often relying on stereotypes and highlighting the conflicts that arise from cultural encounters. Despite the potential for diverse narratives, the representations of immigration have often remained confined within narrow frameworks, emphasising the tensions and struggles stemming from cultural clashes. However, the cinematic output of the 1990s, while acknowledging these conflicts over immigration, also began to denounce the intolerance, xenophobia, and racism prevalent in Spanish society.

Director Chus Gutiérrez has made significant contributions to this discourse with her films *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008). Unlike earlier Spanish productions, Gutiérrez’s films offer nuanced and multifaceted perspectives on immigration, addressing the past, the present, and the material and metaphorical dimensions of the issue while incorporating the lens of historical memory (Berger 2016, 187-88). The following section explores each film, paying particular attention to the ghostly or spectral motifs that enrich their themes.

2. *Poniente*: Spectral Visions of Immigration

Poniente (2002) tells the story of a patriarchal family of horticulturists living in the fictional coastal town of La Isla in southern Spain, who exploit and discriminate against their immigrant workers. Fed up with the abuse, these immigrants unite and fight against their bosses for better wages, leading to violent confrontations and the forced exodus of the immigrant workers. The protagonist, Lucía (Cuca Escribano), returns from Madrid, where she worked as a teacher, to bid farewell to her dead father, from whom she inherits his greenhouse business. This return to her roots is also a means for Lucía to reclaim an identity that she has suppressed during her time away. Lucía embodies the struggle of being an outsider in her own homeland – an emancipated woman asserting her agency in a patriarchal context where opportunities for women are scant, particularly in the greenhouse culture of southern Spain. Although her ‘otherness’ differs from that of the immigrant workforce of the *invernaderos*, Lucía nonetheless witnesses and experiences discrimination repeatedly throughout the film. Her character acts as a bridge between the past and the present, reflecting how Spain’s history of oppression and exclusion is echoed in its treatment of immigrants today. Her interactions with Curro (José Coronado), a mediator who informs her of the changes in the village and the greenhouse, and Adbenbi (Farid Fatmi), a worker in her greenhouse, symbolise the urgent need for Spanish society to confront its fears and prejudices – modern-day taboos that need to be addressed.

Curro, an outcast who has spent most of his life in industrial Europe, desperately wants to find himself. With Pepe, another man familiar with the immigrant experience, Curro is a conduit to historical memory. In a pivotal scene, the duo watches a domestic film about Spaniards migrating to Switzerland during an economic crisis. The black-and-white shot seems almost like a spectral vision of a past that has come back to haunt the present, making the audience aware of the “urgent need to create a collective memory of traumatic historic episodes in order to transcend the chronic amnesia that has historically characterized Spanishness and, by doing so, reshape the national identity” (Ballesteros 2005, 11). Failure to reckon with this past can have serious consequences not only for immigrants, who in this case are forced into a

perpetual nomadic exodus, but also for Spaniards, who remain blind to their hybrid identities. Adbenbi, the immigrant *savant* who organises the workers in their struggle for better conditions, is the only character who has successfully accepted his hybrid identity, cherishing his past rather than obliterating it. His dialogue with Curro below, for instance, emphasises the crucial issues of identity and shared history:

Adbenbi: Te lo he dicho mil veces. Que no somos árabes. Nuestro pueblo tiene cinco mil años de historia y se extiende por todo el norte de África. Tenemos nuestra identidad, nuestra cultura. Nuestra propia lengua.

Curro: Tienes suerte de tener raíces.

Adbenbi: Mis raíces son tus raíces. Nuestros ancestros fueron los mismos. España fue un país bereber durante muchos siglos.

This exchange challenges Curro's narrow view of otherness and reveals the intertwined nature of their identities. Adbenbi's assertion that "Mis raíces son tus raíces" ("My roots are your roots") rejects oversimplified narratives of nationalism, emphasising their common ancestry and the long presence of Berber culture in Spain. He invites Curro, and by extension the audience, to acknowledge the hybrid nature of their cultural heritage, arguing for a shared past that can foster mutual understanding and solidarity in the face of contemporary challenges.

In *Poniente*, Chus Gutiérrez draws inspiration from real-life events, particularly the clashes between locals and immigrants in El Ejido, Almería, in 2020, to craft the film's climax – the exodus of the immigrant workers. During a violent uprising against the group of immigrant workers, two scenes recall the repression of the past as a political taboo, revealing a collective inability to confront historical traumas. Some locals, fearful of changing social dynamics and resistant to the assimilation of immigrant workers, take advantage of the precarious economic situation to incite violence, culminating in the expulsion of the immigrants. This expulsion, as well as the burning of books and the "Moors out" graffiti seen on the streets throughout the film, evoke a centuries-old fear of the 'other'. Once again, Spain fails to recognise itself as a

convergence of cultures and peoples that have coexisted for centuries, leaving indelible roots – an undeniable reality that Adbembi persistently tries to explain to Curro.

In conclusion, *Poniente* presents a spectralisation of the past through the black-and-white documentary footage that haunts the main characters, Curro and Lucía², with the aim of creating a collective memory that can transcend the traumatic history of Spain while, at the same time, forging a cross-national identity. However, the main characters are not yet ready to accept this new reality, indirectly re-enacting the symbolic rejection of “the Moors” that occurred more than 500 years ago. They fail to see themselves in the ‘other’ and continue to cling to an exclusionary self-perception. As the director herself remarks, “si la gente dejara el miedo a un lado y se mirara a los ojos, comprendería que de algún modo es también el otro”³: this is the message that Adbembi, the ‘other’ of the film, as well as the ghosts of the past, are trying to convey.

3. *Retorno a Hansala*: Redefining Spanish Identity

Retorno a Hansala (2008) delves into the taboo of migrant deaths, an issue fraught with political and social implications that is often overlooked in public discourse. The film’s opening scene immediately throws the audience into the midst of a familiar nightmare: thousands of people crossing the sea in search of a better life, many of whom often fail to make it. The visual juxtaposition of shots above and below the water’s surface alludes to the agony of those who drown, their clothes floating helplessly as they struggle in vain. By opening the film with such imagery, Chus Gutiérrez immediately grabs the audience’s attention, forcing them to face the reality of those risking their lives to reach Europe – a reality many prefer to turn away from. The taboo in this context is the shared responsibility of European nations, including Spain, for these ongoing tragedies.

² As Daddesio remarks, “both Curro and Lucía experience a sense of displacement but, whereas Lucía is returning to a place where she lived and felt compelled to leave, Curro is living in a place that he hardly knows” (2009, 56).

³ <https://revista.consumer.es/portada/en-el-tema-de-la-inmigracion-hemos-querido-borrar-nuestro-pasado-pero-no-podemos-ignorar-el-futuro.html> (1 June 2024).

The film's protagonist, Martín (José Luís García), works in a morgue, trying to identify the bodies of those who have drowned while crossing the sea. When he discovers a personal connection with one of the deceased, Martín embarks on a journey to the migrant's homeland. In this narrative, the journey is both physical and deeply personal, a means of Martín's self-discovery. Unlike the conventional immigration narratives revolving around external conflict, *Retorno a Hansala* explores Martín's inner struggle to find and redefine himself. As a man undergoing an existential crisis – or more precisely, a *crisis de masculinidad* – he has to deal with the crumbling of his personal and professional life. His wife has cheated on him, his daughter manipulates him for her own ends, his work gives him nightmares, and the 'other' – represented by Leila (Farah Hamed), the film's female protagonist – challenges his ingrained assumptions about race and gender. From the outset, Martín is haunted by his personal failures, the unspoken truths presented by Leila, and the bodies lying at the bottom of the ocean, which he can no longer dismiss as faceless statistics.

Retorno a Hansala becomes a road movie, a quest that Martín must undertake to confront the suffering of others and recognise the human stories behind the nameless bodies he deals with in his morgue (Cornejo Parriego 2013, 22). Through this odyssey, he comes to understand that the silenced victims of history – the drowned migrants – are not just numbers but individuals who deserve justice. He becomes aware of the suffering of others, learns to recognise the human stories behind the numbers, and begins to feel responsible for their deaths. As Jacques Derrida (1994, 15-16) argues, justice can only be achieved when we acknowledge our responsibility towards those who have been erased or forgotten. This is precisely what Martín ends up doing. His transformation over the course of the film gestures towards the potential social change that could result from breaking the silence around immigration; his evolution from a detached professional to someone who genuinely empathises with the migrants represents the possibility of redefining Spanish identity itself. At the end of the film, Leila also recognises his transformation when she wryly remarks that Martín's job has become a vocation rather than a business.

Leila's role as an equal, or even a protagonist, is another novel aspect of the film. Far from being a passive character, she is depicted as an empowered

Muslim woman, integrated into Spanish society with friends who treat her as an equal. Leila embodies agency, defying the stereotypical expectations associated with her race and gender. In the end, it is through her journey with Martín – returning the personal belongings of the unidentified dead to their families – that the latter finds a deeper meaning in both his personal and professional life. His growing awareness of the ‘other’ gives him a sense of belonging that had previously eluded him. The ethical acceptance of the spectral figures – the unnamed dead – instils in Martín the sense of responsibility needed to do justice to the anonymous bodies that all too often wash up on Spain’s shores. By the end of the film, Martín is a changed man who embraces a new kind of ‘Spanishness’ that rejects exclusionary, monolithic notions of identity.

The final scene is charged with symbolism and captures the new relationship between Martín and Leila. As they stand together, looking out towards a horizon where Africa can be glimpsed, Leila points it out to Martín. This moment highlights not only the geographical proximity of Africa, but also the historical and cultural ties between the two places. The scene symbolises the new, hybrid identity that both Martín and Leila now embody, which recognises the interconnection of their histories and the need for solidarity in the face of contemporary challenges.

4. Conclusions

In these and other recent films, North Africa (and Africa more broadly) re-emerges to as a spectral force that symbolically haunts Spaniards, reminding them of the historical events that bind these two lands: from the rise and fall of Al-Andalus to the Spanish protectorate over the Western Sahara between 1884 and 1975, from the involvement of Moroccan soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the disputed status of Ceuta and Melilla, to the close economic bonds of recent decades, these films remind us of a past characterised by power imbalances, exploitation, and racial hierarchies. Acknowledging this past disrupts the long-held image by confronting uncomfortable truths about power, exploitation, and racial hierarchy that challenge both the image of Spain as a unified, homogeneous nation and the national myths of identity and self-perception. Mirroring this, modern immigration destabilises the notion of a

singular 'Spanishness', as the cultural diversity introduced by immigrants disrupts traditional perceptions of national identity. This disruption often leads to social anxiety and the stigmatisation of immigration, marking it a modern taboo. Viewers of these films are asked to acknowledge this new 'Spanishness', to respond to the ghosts of Spain's recent past, and to reconcile that past with the present. In this way, we are shown that Spanish society can move forward.

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