

The Cinematic Child's Shifting Subjectivities as They Challenge a Nation's Streamlined Historical Past

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Sarah Thomas. *Inhabiting the In-Between: Childhood and Cinema in Spain's Long Transition*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 240 pp. ISBN 9781487504885.

According to Pierre Nora, “we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” (“Between Memory and History” 7). Some half-century after Franco’s death, the question of memory in contemporary Spanish consciousness remains a fiercely contentious and divisive one, as evidenced by the Spanish Supreme Court’s long-debated decision to exhume the bones of the dictator from his tomb within Spain’s “Valley of the Fallen,” which finally took place after a decades long conflict in October of 2019. The proliferation of Spanish cultural production dealing directly with memory of the nation’s violent past is often most-closely associated with Spanish film of the 1990s and 2000s, during the country’s “Memory Boom,” known for some of Spain’s most internationally-recognized fantasy and horror films such as Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), J.A. Bayona’s *The Orphanage* (2007) and Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001). Perhaps due to the much less explicit or high-budget depiction of left-over trauma from the Spanish Civil War and subsequent dictatorship, film of the Spanish Transition, such as Carlos Saura’s *Cría cuervos* (1976) and Víctor Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973), received fewer international accolades; yet these films serve undeniably as the foundation for the trope of haunting, so frequently used in the following decades, to depict the concept of the “living-dead” in a nation whose past trauma has been left, literally, unexcavated.

As Sarah Thomas’s *Inhabiting the In-Between: Childhood and Cinema in Spain’s Long Transition* (2019) points out, film of Spain’s 1970s, while much more allegorical than frightening, dealt with the topic of unrecognized trauma and censorship directly through the child protagonist’s interpretation of Francoist repression as very much alive within Spanish collective consciousness. While children have a long-held role in Spanish film of the 20th century, works within the field of cinematic studies which highlight the child as complex and critical to the radical changes occurring in Spain at the end of its almost 40 years of dictatorship are still relatively few. *Inhabiting the In-Between* builds upon the

small number of scholarly works which examine the child as agent in the treatment of national conflict onscreen such as Erin K. Hogan's *The Two Cines con Niño: Genre and the Child Protagonist in Over Fifty Years of Spanish Film* (2018) and Rachel Randall's *Children on the Threshold in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Nature, Gender and Agency* (2017). Thomas analyzes the child's vision in Spanish Transition film as it interprets a nation on the precipice of a break from authoritarian rule and as it offers new perspectives on the future through a study of the work of four seminal Transition directors: Antonio Mercero, Víctor Erice, Carlos Saura and Jaime de Armiñán.

Most groundbreaking is Thomas's establishment of a boundary which exists between child and adult across films of the Transition in which the two function in opposition to one another. Drawing from a diverse series of films from Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's 1976 *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* to *El espíritu de la colmena*, Thomas points to the significance of the child's portrayal as sinister, omniscient or as existing across some form of physical barrier from the adult. Her interest in "how child-centered films from this period depict overlapping temporalities and selves, casting the child as both self and other" and "the ways in which the child figure disrupts linear time and spectatorial identification" are particularly relevant as her analysis moves away from any singular, reductive explanation for the proliferation of child protagonists in Transition film, and later throughout the 1990s and 2000s (9). Instead, Thomas's book recognizes the child's role in these films as central to unpacking "anxieties about the nation, the future, and the afterlife of violence" (8). Her depiction of the child as embodying multiple contradictions and temporalities, as well as ability to identify as both subject and object, provides a compelling contribution in understanding the child as caught between a generation implored to forget its national trauma and one faced with the repercussions of that decision. While Thomas writes on children in film of the Transition who are exceedingly different, they all model ways of perceiving and interacting with the past which the adult cannot access without the filmic child's guidance, raising the timely topic of the role Spain's current generation will play in the nation's ongoing memory debate.

Thomas elegantly presents the question of the significance of childhood itself in films like Carlos Saura's *El jardín de las delicias* (1970) and *La prima Angélica* (1974) and presents the child protagonist in films like *Cría cuervos* as it disrupts the notion of time as fully linear; the child's perspective challenges the notion that the past can be erased, despite Spain's attempts to do so during a "period of crisis and change, suspended between the history of the dictatorship and the (retrospectively spurious) promise of a future democratic break with the authoritarian past" (11). She exposes how these films force their spectators to consider the concept of futurity itself, as the child's inherent "in-betweenness" brings the concept of multiple temporalities, and multiple subjectivities, into the context of present-day Spain. The family is often looked upon as a metaphor for Francoist Spain's dynamics in films of the Transition; Thomas's work brilliantly reveals how the filmic child of the 1970s serves as the groundwork for child-driven film of Spain's Memory Boom. Thomas's book exposes the latent anxieties which inevitably result from the erasure of a nation's past through a picture of the oscillating dynamics between adult and child which "raises epistemological concerns regarding the legibility of the past in concrete historical moments

of the Long Transition” (24). The child or adolescent onscreen, Thomas demonstrates in *Inhabiting the In-Between*, strives for liminality in relation to both time and space, refusing any binary logic, such as that of the Transition’s streamlined narrative of the past.

Works Cited

Nora, Pierre. (1989). “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations*, No. 26, *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.