



# CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL

ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

## Review of *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain*

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Volume 8.2 (2020) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2020.297 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Book Review

Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer, *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. xii + 304 pp. ISBN 9781496214249, \$55.00 (hbk)



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## Review of *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain* Shannon Skelton

Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer, scholars at the University of Rochester (USA), have constructed a compelling and indispensable volume that examines the supernatural, gothic and sublime as presented through the cinema of Mexico and Spain. With a focus on filmic iterations that reflect cultural concerns and anxieties spanning from the 1960s to the present, *The Supernatural Sublime* – an entry in the *New Hispanisms: Cultural and Literary Studies* series, is a thorough and eloquent examination of films that have eluded many surveys of Spanish language cinema. The text probes films that feature “strange and wondrous iterations of the supernatural found in both expected and unexpected hybrid cinematic genres” (1). This is accomplished through case studies and close readings of selected films through theoretical and generic positions. *The Supernatural Sublime* does not pretend to be an exhaustive, comprehensive overview of gothic and horror cinema from Mexico and Spain, but rather specific films and how those films reckon with – and represent - a variety of concerns.

Organized into seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, *The Supernatural Sublime* is impeccably researched and elegantly executed. The introductory chapter – titled “Anxiety, Awe, and the Changing Shape of Fear” – states that the study is “framed by the shifting manners in which the natural and supernatural are inextricably woven together during moments of

crisis in Mexican and Spanish culture” (1). Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer note that the place of the supernatural and the sublime in quotidian life in Mexico and Spain is unique, for “rather than [possessing] a clean break with the past” (274), both nations possess hybrids of the historical and the present and this is evidenced in supernatural Mexican and Spanish films which expose “cultural dilemmas and fears” (9). With globalization and modernity, the “invasion of the nations of the developing world by the myths and technologies of advanced societies” has resulted in “terrifying, fascinating, awe-inspiring, sublime wonders and supernatural events of ancient times recast” (2) producing a distinctive form of the gothic and monstrous in Mexican and Spanish cinema.

The next chapter, “Porous Landscapes of the Modern World: The Witch as Sublime Intruder”, considers cinematic depictions of the witch as a “shadowy figure . . . who offers spectators the promise of power over the seemingly authoritative, dominating, and masterful masculine worldview in charge of progress” (42). Chapter 3, “Haunted Houses: Inheriting the Supernatural” considers “diegetic space as contradictory, confrontational, and even home to the irrational” (24). From those domestic spaces to sinister educational places, “Evil in the Classroom: The Fascination and Danger of Schools for Girls” views learning institutions as “sites of indoctrination and experience, as well as breeding grounds for the imagination and for the paranoia of social anxieties” (133). Analyses of films by Carlos Enrique Taboada, Narciso Ibáñez Serrador,

Juan López Moctezuma and Guillermo del Toro uncover a cinema that invokes “gothic visual modes to establish a nexus between past and present” (135) to uncover cultures “haunted by the phantoms of the violence and repression that reign supreme outside their walls”(135). These films allegorize the “class issues that maintain the social status quo” (135), while the “sublime sexuality in the gendered confines of schools for girls” is often accompanied by “the threat of violence” (25). As the authors note, educated women in 1960s Mexico and 1970s Spain were seen as “tantamount to demonic threats to the nation” (25). Though these institutions may provide homosocial security in the face of a patriarchal culture, offering “the chance to learn spectacular revelations about humans” these same schools can “resuscitate memories and terrors that impede the future” (174).

The dynamics of the female protagonist/antagonist are at the center of “A Desperate Longing for Order: The Masks of Innocence.” In films such as Carlos Enrique Taboada’s *Veneno para las hadas* (1984), Daniel Gruener’s *Sobrenatural* (1996) and Nacho Vigalondo’s *Extraterrestre* (2011) women “forge a new language related to their experience of the contemporary world” (176) as they are depicted in possession of subversive powers that counteract the patriarchy as a “interruptive supernatural” force (176). Chapter 6, “Patterns of Temporal Terror: A Repetition Compulsion?” centers on chronology and how contemporary concerns are integrated into cinema by “shifting attitudes toward the natural and supernatural” and “temporality,

bringing into the open shared concerns over what we might term the terror of time” (224). Utilizing Rafael Baledón’s *La maldición de La Llorona* (1963), Rigoberto Castañeda’s *Km 31* (2006), Alex de la Iglesia’s *Las brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013) and Nacho Vigalondo’s *Cronocrímenes* (2007), the authors investigate how legends of the past and myths of the present create cinematic experiences of destabilized thematic and structural temporalities. These films scrutinize time, resulting in reconsiderations of traditional folklore in the contemporary while also ruminating on the existential chaos that is the product of temporal manipulation.

“Sublime Afterimages” serves as a summation and reiteration of analyses provided. In sum, the authors proposed that genre “structures that might provide us with some meaningful ways of approaching the unanswerable enigmas depicted in the films” (278). When these are scrutinized within the supernatural and sublime cinematic output of Mexico and Spain, critical issues of the 21st century emerge, namely the crisis of “how to reconcile oneself with history, how to resolve the conflicts of capitalism, and how to recover a transcendent aspect of life lost in the process of modernity” (264-5). Indeed, the gothic “continues to pervade the cinemas of Mexico and Spain, but what audiences experience as frightening, gruesome, or dreadful has become part of the everyday” (280) consequences of contemporary capitalism and political institutions. An enjoyable excavation of neglected films and a thoughtful reconsideration more familiar titles, *The Supernatural Sublime* not only fills a scholarly void regarding Mexican and Spanish cinema, it

serves as an extraordinary volume demonstrating the potential for scholarship that blends critical theory, formalist approaches and close readings, then subsequently presents the findings in an accessible and engaging manner.

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