"Nobody’s Children":
Gothic Representation and
Traumatic History in *The Devil’s Backbone*

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In the opening frames of *The Devil’s Backbone*, Guillermo del Toro’s 2001 film set during the Spanish Civil War, a bomb drops from the hatch of an airplane; immediately, the camera cuts to a boy, unconscious or dead, lying on the flagstones of a cellar, his head bleeding. A voiceover “reads” the disconnected images, saying enigmatically, “What is a ghost? A tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again?” These two images, of a bomb and a bleeding youth, indelibly conjure up traumatic aspects of Spanish and Eurowestern twentieth-century history (and of our own twenty-first). While not specifically targeted in warfare, it is the younger generation who suffers most, as “accidental” casualties and as survivors living with war’s long-term effects. And bombs, first used against a civilian population on a large scale in the Spanish Civil War, a testing ground for fascist Italy’s and Nazi Germany’s use of them in WWII, have become the preferred weapon of modern warfare whenever available, from the so-called smart bombs to cluster bombs to the bomb lurking behind the others, whose insanity perversely renders all other bombs “preferable”: the atom bomb. As containers of Western violence, bombs are the tragedy that keeps repeating itself, the container of desires and fears that, no matter how much “payload” we drop, we can’t seem to let go of. As an image, too, the falling bomb is one we’ve been haunted by, seen countless times in films, as early as Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangeglove, or* *How I Learned to Love the Bomb*. This generic image appropriately portrays a representational relationship to history, one in which that image, despite (or, should I say, precisely because of) its seemingly universal significance for the West, still carries a horrifying charge.
Such visual repetition is an acknowledgment of the impact of other films on the director del Toro’s imagination. Yet, more importantly, in this opening scene, the viewer glimpses an allusion to a representational mode and discourse—the gothic—chosen for the film’s attempts, narratively, ideologically, and psychologically, to come to terms with a traumatic era in Spanish national history: the Spanish Civil War. Recall, for a moment, the first scene of the so-called original gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1759). Conrad, the son of the usurper Manfred, is crushed to death by a giant helmet crashing through the castle’s roof. Symbolizing the legitimate owner’s imminent return, this supernatural manifestation of the “sins of the fathers coming to rest upon the sons,” stagey and theatrical as it is, never disappears through the course of the narrative, due to its—the helmet’s—literal and figurative weight. Like the helmet, with its message that the younger generation will be destroyed either way, by legitimate or illegitimate patriarchal politics, the bomb dropped in *The Devil’s Backbone* remains a threatening, uncanny presence, a permanent feature of the mis-en-scène, for, as inexplicably as the reasons for an orphanage in the middle of an arid Spanish plain being its target, the bomb doesn’t explode upon impact. Instead, it remains embedded in the central courtyard, where it becomes psychically linked to the boy Santi, who died the night it falls into their world. At various times, its metal twinges, breathes, seeming to whisper or speak, tick its warning, or to be a beating heart to the boys who put their ears up to it. Like the helmet in *Otranto*, but more so, the bomb comes from and refers to an “elsewhere,” whose violence erupts into the boys’ present and threatens the security of their future. *The Devil’s Backbone*’s premier scene thus underscores the film’s gothic identification and raises an important question: why choose the gothic to remember and mediate a narrative of national, historical trauma?

Although there are many competing definitions of the gothic, this essay understands the gothic as a mode of symbolization that expressly seeks to explore what a culture prohibits, fears, or desires to the point of its repression, denial, or abjection (see Hogle 4). In works of gothic imagination, the repressed or abjected material returns in a terrifying guise and demands recognition. What a culture represses, of course, changes over time, across cultures, and according to the imagination of the artist; many studies of the gothic, though, have tended to focus on it as a mode for exploring the sexually tabooed and the dysfunctions of the nuclear family, especially its generational dynamics and normative gender roles. There is a tradition of gothic literature and criticism,
however, that redefines a culture’s “return of the repressed” in terms of an ethnic group’s or nation’s occluded social and/or political history and identity. This gothic includes Nathanial Hawthorne’s wrestling with a deleterious material and psychological Puritan legacy in The House of the Seven Gables; Mary Wollstonecraft’s and Thomas Paine’s extensive use of gothic tropes in their political essays to denaturalize certain reaction-ary ideological effects and render those effects uncanny (the overbearing “grip” of outmoded and unjust customs or traditions is represented as a dead hand clasping the present from beyond the grave); Thomas de Quincey’s exploration of states of psychological disintegration and demonic othering as he attempts to ratify a British imperial agenda in The Confessions of an English Opium Eater; and Toni Morrison’s Beloved, in which a baby girl seems to return from the dead, a ghost made flesh, leading a family and community to revisit the multiple traumatic legacies of slavery.

Because the gothic is a genre concerned with how a repressed or denied past intrudes into the present in an unwanted, fear-inducing guise, it is a genre well-suited to explore the continuing effects of traumatic history, whether individual or collective. Further, it is a narrative mode whose oft-noted formal features—repetition and fragmentation—mirror the incompleteness and uncertainty of trauma survivors’ stories, as they struggle to narrate events from their own past and to survive (see Langer).

The gothic, because of its decidedly non-mimetic view of reality, due to its inclusion of supernatural manifestations and effects, is also particularly adept at exploring and staging extreme or disavowed psychological states. Del Toro invokes the gothic in The Devil’s Backbone to interrogate what Spain psychologically and ideologically represses about the Civil War and its ongoing legacy. As a discursive mode, the gothic shapes a particular response and understanding of this historical trauma, one that foregrounds the challenges such a national catastrophe presents simultaneously to representation and (self)knowledge. The Devil’s Backbone, as a gothic film, rewrites Spanish Civil War history in respect to its traumatic impact on intelligibility, to a coherent sense of self, and to the possibility of catharsis or closure. To investigate how the film engages with these issues, I identify a gothic of dispossession, wherein del Toro shows how being subjected to violence and becoming a violent subject in turn enact a dispossession of self, creating a disfigured, diminished self; a gothic of the uncanny, in which certain recurrent, quasi-hallucinogenic, non-narrative images stage the seemingly insurmountable life-in-death affect of trauma; and a gothic of unintelligibility, in which the film’s represen-
tations of sublimity or stagings of accident feel out the frightening possibilities of history's meaninglessness. Each of these gothic perspectives exerts pressure upon the stability of notions of national identity and belonging in the wake of the Spanish Civil War.

*The Devil's Backbone* also explores the multigenerational trauma of that war. It focuses on children—orphanned children—as mediators of the catastrophic effects of war upon the psyche, especially the boys Jaimé and Carlos. They are survivors. Even the ghost Santi is one, for the ghost is a figure for the survivor per se, reliving, reenacting, and sharing aspects of the unassimilable as a shared hallucination, which comes unbidden and seems to possess the children. By mediating the Spanish Civil War through the vocabulary of childhood trauma, however, the film also insists that this past is more "accessible" through children's eyes, as beings whose underdeveloped egos (and weaker defense mechanisms) render them particularly susceptible and sensitive both to traumatic memory's durability and intrusiveness and to what escapes rational comprehension or control. It is with them that the audience is asked to identify. Further, in showing how even the most "innocent" of populations turns to aggression and brutality, the film underscores the extent and depth of the war's depredations upon the collective, national consciousness. Finally, the emphasis on a disaster visiting the young (without parents) points allegorically to the vulnerable status of Spain's fledging democracy. While the Civil War is out of the realm of experience except for the most elderly populations of Spain, *The Devil's Backbone* suggests that this era, which represents Spain's first attempt at democracy, continues to stand as a disavowed core of national identity, whose pathological dissociation is less about survival than a simple will-to-forget a violence that turned a nation's political factions, and consequently its citizens, against themselves. For the filmmaker, clearly sympathetic to the republicans, this violence created "corrosive communities," afflicted communities set apart because of what they experienced but of which they were not permitted to speak: in essence, having to deal on their own with the traumas of the civil war period, while the rest of the nation denied them and "moved on." Del Toro creates a political bond between the present and this period, in effect "passing on . . . a crisis but also . . . passing on . . . a survival that can only be possessed with a history larger than any single individual or any single generation" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 71). Witnessing this kind of trauma depends upon a later generation, his own in fact, and implies a dual responsibility: to the dead and to the multiple generations of survivors, including, but not restricted
to, those who were children during this period. This ethical commitment puts the director himself in the role of imagining or re-creating the trauma in his “symbolizing process” for his audience (143).

Let me first retrace the film’s plot. The action unfolds over the course of a few days within the confines of a remote orphanage/school in Spain that has become a home for children of the republicans, whose parents have either died or are fighting at the front. It is run primarily by the politically engaged teacher and headmistress, the middle-aged Carmen, her age-peer Dr. Casares, a poet and an intellectual, and the young man Jacinto, a kind of general handyman. Carlos, a new arrival at the orphanage, immediately sees and begins communicating with the ghost of a boy, who, we discover, disappeared the same night the bomb landed in the orphanage’s central courtyard. The ghost Santi warns Carlos that the boys are in danger of future harm (“many of you will die”). Santi’s presence is denied or ignored by the adults but is a felt presence to the other children there, who keep it to themselves. Although bullied by a few of the boys, especially Jaime, Carlos manages to create friendships with others that enable him to uncover some secrets behind Santi’s haunting and their future danger. Santi has been murdered by Jacinto, shoved against a pillar that knocks him unconscious and then tied and dropped into a pool in the orphanage’s cellar. Santi’s friend Jaime witnessed the murder but was unable to prevent it; Jaime never reveals what he has seen because of his fear of the older, stronger, and intimidating Jacinto.

Interwoven with this ghost story is the story of the quasi-Oedipal relations between Carmen, Dr. Casares, and Jacinto. Jacinto, described by Carmen as the “saddest” of the orphans, is now a young man in his twenties who does odd jobs, a menial laborer. Although he has a girlfriend, Conchita, he has been “servicing” Carmen sexually for many years (it is suggested, since his sexual maturation). Carmen is ashamed of her sexual dependence but continues fucking Jacinto. Politically, she is committed to teaching the orphans socialist values in the classroom; she also guards over a considerable amount of gold donated to the revolution, which she hides in the orphanage and attempts unsuccessfully to funnel to the cause. Although her relations with Jacinto are not openly acknowledged, Dr. Casares tolerates them, presumably because he is sexually impotent. He shows her his love through the poems he recites to her and through his devotion (he stays there to be with her, instead of going off to fight as her husband has done). Jacinto hates the stigma the orphanage places upon him; yet, he stays to steal the gold Carmen hides in an attempt to re-create himself as a rich man—and out of a longing to “burn it [the
orphanage, his stigmatized past] to the ground.” When he realizes that Carmen and Dr. Casares, for safety reasons, are leaving with the children and the gold as the nationalists approach, he demands that gold. When she doesn’t turn it over, he sabotages their flight by using the gasoline from their truck to trigger an explosion at the orphanage. Countless children die, as does Carmen; Dr. Casares is fatally injured, and other children survive with different degrees of injury. When Jacinto comes to ransack the safe and claim the gold, the boys seek revenge in the name of Santi. With the supernatural presence of the deceased Dr. Casares assisting them, they are able to lure Jacinto into the cellar where they disarm him, wound him, and push him into the pool where Santi locks him in a fatal embrace. This oedipal story merges with the ghost’s/boys’ story. Together, they trope the violent, dysfunctional social relations that unleash the Spanish Civil War and its traumatic effects upon the younger generation. The orphanage is a microcosm of Spanish civil society leading up to and during the war.

The Gothic Uncanny

Theorists have articulated trauma’s symbolization as a kind of “double telling”: an oscillation between a death crisis and the crisis of a life lived afterwards (Caruth, Unclaimed 7). This “double telling”—the frightening proximity of death and life—evokes Freud’s theorization of the uncanny. In his essay “The Uncanny,” he traces that feeling to those experiences, persons, or things, among others, that blur the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and to those where dead bodies appear to come back to life. Children, he notes, are particularly susceptible to feelings of the uncanny (140). The Devil’s Backbone generates a number of recurrent uncanny images that efface the difference between death and life/survival, similar to the operations of traumatic memory. Within a narrative moving toward an end, these images are inessential to plot—to narrative causality and resolution. Yet, their extraneousness to narrative telos is compensated for by the quasi-hallucinatory, psychically dangerous power they radiate. Harrowing images “haunt” the viewer. Insofar as the film privileges these images over a narrative given to understanding, it testifies to the limits of language and to what remains inexplicably real (in a Lacanian sense) about intranational violence. Among the film’s uncanny images are the slugs, the bomb, the pool, and the ghost. One could say that they function as part of the film’s traumatic core: the returns to them never result in an easing of traumatophobia (a return to the trauma in order to reach mastery, to successfully rewrite the
menace of death). Other threats to the boys’ survival, such as Jacinto, are laid to rest. These images, however, elude whatever closure or resolution the filmic narrative offers and instead stand as embodiments of the felt “live-dead” quality and persistent threat of traumatic history.

Upon arrival at the orphanage, for example, Carlos immediately finds a slug in the courtyard and secrets it away in his box of precious things (his container of “the real”)—the same slugs that are later and repeatedly seen thriving amidst the decomposition of the pool where Santi’s body lies. They presumably will feed upon the dead Jacinto as they have upon Santi. Their vitality depends upon death. Sotoo the bomb, in its unexploded state, with its “live,” ticking core, promises future phallic, fraternal violence and death. “Put your ear against her,” Jaime says. “You’ll hear her ticking. That’s her heart. She’s still alive. And she knows we’re here.” The bomb is also temporally linked to Santi’s death: “Where’s the ghost?” “It came with the bomb,” the boys remember. Having fallen on the same night, the bomb ties this individual death in the past to those still alive, implicating them in a future communal death that will be unleashed by a different kind of explosion. Located below the orphanage, the pool conjures up both the unconscious and a womb, one that gestates dead things, dead children. As an image, it visually echoes Dr. Casares’ specimen jars holding “nobody’s children,” the fetuses with spinal deformities. The spatial, temporal, and metonymical contiguity of all of these images to living death is a way the film visually re-creates the “again and again” of trauma survivors’ later encounters with death in the imagistic mode of flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations.

It is the ghost Santi, however, who embodies multiple facets of trauma as the haunting by a living-death experience. Santi’s ghost bears witness to a past event that, as Caruth writes, “cries out through the wound”; his is a past whose present significance is not fully known, except as pain (Caruth, Unclaimed 3). Santi’s own wound, a red vapor or smoke rising from a cracked, decaying, oddly doll-like visage, threatens to reduce him to the fading immateriality of the ghost (Figure 1). A messenger of death (“Many of you will die”), his ghost functions as a “dead other” within the world of the living—even as he embodies or foretells what will be “them.” Insofar as the boys internalize this warning, their own self becomes inextricably tied to the “dead other,” their identity constitutively bound up with the dead child (8). Santi becomes the foundation of the boys’ individual and communal identities. As the basis for an identity, itself originating in violent death, Santi’s embodied presence and message insist that history for these children—and for the
nation they emblemate—comprises catastrophic events that will never cease to take place. “The past lives on”—and on and on, a literal return of the war to the community, as if the present and the living were possessed by some kind of deadly fatefulness from the past, manifested as the ghost Santi.10

The uncanniness, though, lies not only in the subject matter, the cumulative force of these images, but in the awareness of the “again and again” of the process of repetition.11 For these children/Spain, history as a return, or as the compulsion to repeat, feels like “living death” insofar as it doesn’t really die or end. History keeps on hurting these children/the nation, some of whom will manage, nonetheless, to survive. Del Toro’s “indirect” telling of the Civil War, like other forms of traumatic narration, preserves these experiences as events—even while it records them as attempts at forgetting (Caruth, Unclaimed 27). Thus, Dr. Casares rejects the ghost’s existence; Jaime scoffs at there being a ghost; some of the other boys believe that Santi has simply run away; and the film embraces a “fantastic” mode—all of which variously serve to distance or keep the traumatic knowledge of death at bay. This dialectic of preserving and forgetting points to a (national) struggle with death that is finally unmastered. This is especially manifest in the character Jaime, whose denial of the ghost serves as a kind of wish-fulfillment, a way to stave off a horrible guilt that, because he was not capable of fighting Jacinto or able to swim into the pool and bring the unconscious Santi to the surface,
he is responsible for his death. For him, the traumatic history symbolized by the ghost tells what it means not to act. His denial of the ghost within the community of boys speaks of his attempt to elude a terrifying memory of not being able to ward off (an other's) death, and surviving nonetheless.

The Gothic of Dispossession

By means of Santi, an uncanny, ghostly other carried within the boys' psyches, The Devil's Backbone reports of a cultural fascination and fear of subjectivity's alienability. As the film unfolds, interior and exterior forces fragment various characters' sense of self-possession or self-identity. Those forces are coupled with affective states of terror and abjection. By divesting the ego of its secure familial, social, and national "legacy," that symbolic inheritance that underwrites a coherent, meaningful identity, the film stages acts of subjective dispossession. The film's title and its connection to dispossession—what the devil's backbone refers to and what it has to do with this story—comes to light when Carlos asks Dr. Casares if he believes in ghosts:

Carlos: Do you believe in ghosts? I think I saw one here.

Dr. Casares: I'm a man of science. But Spain is full of superstition. Come here. Europe is sick with fear now, and fear sickens the soul. And that, in turn, makes us see things. (Points to fetuses with spinal deformities preserved in large medical jars). In town they call this 'the devil's backbone.' They say a lot of things. That this happens to children who shouldn't have been born. 'Nobody's children.' But that's a lie. Poverty and disease. That's all it is. The liquid they're in is called 'limbo water.'

For much of the rural populace around the orphanage, spinal deformities like "the devil's backbone" mark a child as unloved by God and unfit for human society, so that even in death the child remains unacknowledged, denied burial in a sanctified, communal space. They are "nobody's children"—children without a name, without an origin, without a narrative (Figure 2). Their arrested development and preservation puts them beyond time and change, outside history, locking them up in a kind of liquid amber. Dr. Casares claims these explanations stem from benighted, superstitious fear, and he insists on the narrative of the necessity of Enlightenment rationalism and social progressivism. The film, however, encourages skepticism: who can believe Dr. Casares when he makes a living selling the "limbo water" to the locals, pandering to their beliefs.
that it is a cure-all for numerous ailments; when he drinks it himself, presumably as a cure for his own impotence; and when he later returns as a ghost to help the children survive? “Nobody’s children” or the devil’s backbone reads as a metaphor for those attempts to write a history, such as the villagers do through religion, that could confer meaning upon what look like horribly random, meaningless events. It also exposes the hypocrisy and unacknowledged irrationality of those who, like Dr. Casares, profess a rational, secular worldview.

Figure 2: The Devil’s Backbone

‘Nobody’s children’ also refers to the orphaned children who are the subjects of this imagined history. They are the doubly traumatized: once by virtue of the loss of or abandonment by their parents, that “crise d’identité” that Robert Jay Lifton calls the “broken connection,” an experience of one’s own psychic death in the too-early or too-prolonged separation from the parent, and once by virtue of the violence, the “death equivalent,” that does—or nearly does—kill many of them at the orphanage (see Lifton, Broken). These children are doubly dispossessed: of their role within a family unit, left to the care of (albeit kindly) strangers, and as “nobody’s children,” without a place in the national or social order, unwanted, and, as the film makes clear, all-too-easily forgotten were they to die or be in danger of dying. They also make an unlikely point of view for a narrative that revisits the Spanish Civil War. These boys are
“orphaned history,” their story seemingly far from the conflict’s frontlines. An overlooked group—the orphaned, surviving children of the republicans—are imagined and given a voice and history. One of the few writers on the period to acknowledge the child survivors of the war, Paloma Aguilar notes how the war becomes the definitive moment for the children who lived through it:

The generation which lives through war and a postwar period during childhood, forms the deepest impression of this experience and finds it difficult to conceive anything different, given that the first experience known consists of the ruins and all the psychological scars of violence. (5)

The film’s children do not offer a “mainstream” perspective on a war that, due to the victory of the nationalists and to collective amnesia and avoidance, does not get remembered or told. If ghosts return from the dead in order to demand a narrative for something that hasn’t been adequately symbolized, then Santi, in his own “limbo water,” represents aspects of a dispossessed past returning—the repressed contagion of violence that infiltrates and infects everyone, even the most isolated, vulnerable group of children during the war (and therefore, by implication, the entire nation). Carlos, the filtering consciousness, is a child prepared to “listen” to this experience, as he does to Santi, and insert it into the historical record.

However marginalized they are made to appear, “nobody’s children”—the dispossessed of history—comment on the civil war in important ways that dominant discourses of the left or right have not found easy to acknowledge. Theirs is “orphaned” discourse. As del Toro films it, the failure of the civil war cannot be explained in terms of the discursive binarisms that structure so many of the aesthetic and historical responses to the era—ones that rhetorically stage the conflict simplistically as one between democracy versus fascism, communism versus Catholicism, innovation versus tradition, civilization versus chaos. Most obviously, the viewer recognizes this when he or she notes how certain fascist impulses, religious conservatism, and chaos are constitutive aspects of those who identify themselves as republicans. Del Toro seeks a filmic vocabulary to explore the factionalism, discord, and hatred that splinters the republican community, down to its youngest members, discovering within the world of the orphanage the “fascist” impulses residing in the nation at large. He suggests that this disavowed
violence is symptomatic of a persistent, traumatic repression. Further, he criticizes the republicans, whose official ideology cannot come to terms with festering class re­sentment, the regression to extreme individualism, or the psychological roots of a will-to-power that closely resemble the fascist tendencies in Italy and Germany supportive of Spanish nationalism.

It is Jacinto who embodies both this resentment and will-to-power in The Devil’s Backbone. To say that the film walks a fine line between psychological exploration and sympathy with a brutal, often violent, and remorseless character is not to say that it endorses a fascist mentality. Jacinto, the orphan par excellence, whose “I don’t need anyone” sums up his anger at his parent’s and surrogate parent’s abandonment of him, as well as his feeling of stigma and exclusion from the community, turns to hypermasculinity to redefine himself and assert an invulnerability against circumstance. He uses physical threats, verbal intimidation, and overt violence to control others. This escalates when he finds out that Carmen, despite her republican politics, is ashamed of fucking him because, with his history as an orphan, he doesn’t fit into the educated, cultured milieu to which she belongs:

(After they both come, Jacinto tries to kiss Carmen but she won’t let him). Carmen. This is the last time.

Jacinto. The last time—same old story. (Goes to her dresser, makes a noise). Scared the old man will hear?

Carmen. I’ve never been scared. I’m ashamed.

Jacinto. You’re ashamed of me. Not him. He’s a gentleman. What a pity that’s not enough. You need a hard cock as well. And your husband and the doctor—tough luck. The old man looks at you with love. He did that even when your husband was alive. I was seventeen. By then, they took care of the poetry and I of the flesh.

Jacinto’s inferior class and generational position have allowed Carmen to sexually exploit him, while preserving the romanticized image of herself that Dr. Casares cultivates. Dr. Casares—who blatantly ignores Jacinto’s sexual liaison with Carmen and treats him with condescension, and who, dismissing the irrational, cannot “see” the orphanage’s ghost and is therefore blind to the dangers that Jacinto’s rage poses to the boys—bears a burden of responsibility, with Carmen, for the future deaths of many
children, and for the crippling injuries of those who survive. As adherents of republican principles and as “parental” figures for the boys (Spain), they prove themselves incapable of addressing and ameliorating class conflict. Through Carmen, the film explores the “sexiness” of the male machismo underlying fascism, as she seduces and allows herself to be seduced by Jacinto. Both she and Dr. Casares exacerbate and heighten class hatred, fueling the energies of war.

Jacinto channels his anger at this class and generational subordination into a ritual of male sexual domination and female submission played out between the two of them. Yet, in other arenas, Carmen claims to know Jacinto better than he himself does; she tells him that “of all the orphans you were always the saddest. The lost one. A prince without a kingdom... the only one who was really alone.” In giving him this version of himself, emphasizing his isolation, she exacerbates his grounds for shame and rage. An “other” is writing him—he is his surrogate mother, in fact, for whom he feels affection, if not love. Carmen aligns the effects of Jacinto’s psychological history of deprivation and exclusion with a political ideology “other” than the one held by the republican community of which she and he (ostensibly) are a part. It is an ideology associated with Spanish nationalism, as her focus on a powerful but solitary ruler, dispossessed of a throne (“a prince without a kingdom”), and acting alone, makes clear. To spite Carmen’s superior knowingness, her claim to have “captured” him, Jacinto is determined to show her just how lonely he is willing to be, how little he will need anyone or their knowledge of him—measured as the strength of his anger to destroy her, the others, and even the buildings there completely. Carmen’s reading of Jacinto’s character turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy at the very least and grounds for vengeance at worst, nurturing Jacinto’s latent fascism. She may be an astute judge, but she also “fixes” Jacinto into a role that not only feels imprisoning but is deadly for himself and others. His persona reflects how the ongoing struggle against perceived powerlessness and isolation can be fought by embracing an extreme individualism and will-to-power over others.

In exploring what is difficult to acknowledge about a traumatic civil war, The Devil’s Backbone also looks at how Jacinto’s fascist behavior reproduces itself in the actions of his former targets or victims. This is true for both Jaimé and for the band of boys who ultimately take revenge upon Jacinto for the murder of Santi and the explosion that kills so many more. As a spectator of Jacinto’s murder of Santi, Jaimé keeps silent to avert a similar fate, knowing what Jacinto is capable of. “I was a coward,” he admits later, “I was always afraid of Jacinto.” Jaimé lives not only with
the trauma of being sole witness to Santi’s death, with its concomitant ethical burden to reveal and bring the perpetrator to justice, but he lives with the “humiliated memory” of not having acted heroically, by rescuing Santi. That is the secret he carries along with his knowledge and silence about Jacinto’s crime, creating a tissue of isolation from the other boys. Those who were his peers emerge, through the lens of guilt, as those he is capable of betraying, again, by not being able to save them (as happens to Dr. Casares too when he watches his fellow republicans lined up before a firing squad). His felt diminishment, like Jacinto’s, results in decidedly non-heroic threats toward those smaller and weaker than he is. Thus, Jaime taunts and jeers and gestures at cutting Carlos across the cheek with a knife, should Carlos say anything about their being in the cellar (which is “off-limits”), just before Jacinto actually does cut Carlos’s cheek and threatens to “cut him in half” for being in that forbidden place. Jaime becomes a young Jacinto, the bully/leader the other boys must submit to in order to escape his retribution. Jaime mirrors Jacinto’s hypermasculinity, his hierarchical/authoritarian mode of relating to others, and his cultivated individualism, a doubling that is most evident in his direct reiteration of Jacinto’s statement “I don’t need anyone,” at the moment when Carlos, in a friendly gesture, proposes an artistic collaboration (Jaime would draw the comics, Carlos write the text). The Devil’s Backbone limns how a survivor/witness of traumatic history can seek power over others as a means of survival, to ward off further vulnerability to disaster.

Just as Jaime’s “fascist” response to trauma represents a grave psychic compromise rather than any sort of renewal, so do the boys’ actions when they bond together to seek a kind of primitive justice, murdering Jacinto for Santi’s death and the deaths of other boys in the explosion. While this cathartic violence offers release, a definite psychological pleasure for the boys and for the viewing audience, the film avoids suggesting that it represents some kind of wish-fulfillment, a fantasmatic republican triumph. Nor does the boys’ egalitarian banding together to commit the retaliatory murder represent a more just and preferable mode of interrelating, an alternative to Jacinto’s individualistic mode. In harnessing their collective will and strength, they ultimately embody a new kind of brutality, the obvious victory of those who simply outnumber their enemy. Fratricidal violence replicates itself within the boys’ community, leading to social fragmentation: verbal abuse and intimidation, physical threats escalating to murder—these are the traumas that impinge upon these children’s world. In acting out a version of the civil war amongst themselves, these boys are driven to commit murder to ensure
survival, a "choiceless choice" that is nothing to be proud of, and certainly brings neither consolation nor resolution. Instead, these actions prove retraumatizing. As the boys—victims now become perpetrators—leave the orphanage, we watch them hobble on canes and crutches, a literalization of the maiming and crippling psychic legacy of the war (Figure 3).

We also see Jacinto, the erstwhile perpetrator, now a victim of the boys’ murderous rage, locked in an eternal embrace with his new double, Santi (Figure 4). To the extent that civil wars call forth a killing of "one’s own kind," it is a violence that is always directed against oneself, creating a disfigured and diminished form of collective self, whose memory is itself a form of brutalization: "Humiliated memory . . . forces [one] into an unnatural relation with the past, because the ‘knowledge’ it imparts crushes the spirit and frustrates the incentive to renewal" (Langer, Holocaust 29). Because of this unbearable knowledge of the past, they literally cannot carry themselves into the future. The child-survivors have been prematurely dispossessed of the fantasy of a complete self—analogous to Spain’s loss of a coherent national identity. The film underscores the humiliated memory associated with the war in the concluding image: the ghost of Dr. Casares watches in the shadows as the crippled boys depart, his rifle in hand, underscoring and memorializing the violence of that place.
The Gothic of Unintelligibility

In evoking the ways that traumatic history can feel like something “other” that catches the subject, instead of the subject directing and controlling events, *The Devil’s Backbone* inscribes this history as a dispossessment of agential subjectivity. One of the most interesting tensions in the film returns to this gothicized ground, but with epistemological concerns that can be formulated slightly differently: namely, whether and to what extent we can attribute meaning to horrific events. How intelligible is traumatic history? Which aspects remain obscure, shut off from representation and knowledge? It is in regard to these questions that the film’s gothic discourse invokes and probes the sublime and ultimately insists on uncertainty. The “confusion” surfaces around the attempts to determine whether history is a comprehensible, causal sequence of events or composed of sudden, unintelligible accidents; whether repetition makes history look like recurring sameness or whether, and in which ways, there can be repetition with a difference; and finally, to what degree history remains “other,” and to what extent it is capable of symbolization.

Figure 4: Jacinto and Santi in a Fatal, Final Embrace

The most obvious arena where *The Devil’s Backbone* tests out the intelligibility of history as crisis is in its mirrorings and parallels. Some parallels seem to assert that history can be rewritten, repeated with a difference, and that the possibility for meaning emerges in a transforma-
tive change of an earlier traumatic situation. There is a transformation in Jaime that occurs around that place of secrets, violence, and death—the pool. The first time he is there, he is traumatized by his inability to save Santi because he cannot swim. He masks his shame with violent bullying of the other boys. Later he finds that Carlos, who can swim, is willing to jump in to save him, despite Jaime’s earlier intimidation and abuse—a progressive working out of an earlier death trauma in favor of life and meaningful self-sacrifice. In three other violent scenes at the pool—Santi’s murder by Jacinto with the hidden Jaime as onlooker; Jacinto threatening an inquisitive Carlos, with Jaime and the boys as open onlookers; and the boys, led by Jaime and Carlos, banded together as a group, undoing Jacinto’s domination—the viewer easily reads the repetition as the working out of a previous transgression, with the murderer brought to an “appropriate” justice (eye for an eye) and the previously victimized finding strength together to defeat a common oppressor. In this reading, *The Devil’s Backbone* can be said to alter what was (the republicans’ defeat by the fascists) in favor of what might have been, converting the subjection to cruelty into solidarity, disunity into loyalty, and failure of will or cowardice into courage, so that the children of the leftists survive while the fascist bully is destroyed. Such a reading is troublesome, for it insists that the narrative can be “worked out” or fully concluded only by relying on the same aggressive energies that led to the earlier terror: that heady compound of violence and class divisiveness. “Transformed” history collapses back into history repeating itself.

There are other examples of such repetition (without a difference) in the film that call into question the meaningfulness and possibility of human agency in moments of crisis, such as civil war. For example, “limbo water” holds the deformed fetuses in Dr. Casares’s laboratory, caught between heaven and earth according to Catholic doctrine. The children reimagine this uncertain state of limbo when they voice their fears that the war will never end and that the heat keeps the dead, like “the one who sighs” (Santi), trapped between heaven and earth. The film echoes this “inbetweenness” of the status of knowledge concerning the war with the image of the pool holding Santi (and Jacinto) in a symbolic limbo. There they await a narrative that could make sense of the potent combination of accident and choice that leads to their fatal embrace. Instead of some overarching design, such repetitions, in fact, point to accident and deformation. How are we to make meaning out of the many accidents that compound this history’s traumatic affect: from the accidental mother-father loss that all these boys share, to the accident of
Santi’s death, resulting from an intimidating push that killed instead of merely stunning him, to the randomness of the bomb falling in their courtyard, unexploded yet threatening to explode at any moment, to the most accidental outcome of them all, that the explosion in the courtyard kills some boys and not others?

Finally, a stasis, a lack of (narrative) movement associated with an unresolved sameness accrues—first and foremost—around that unexploded bomb, the “leftover payload” after the war within the orphanage itself has ended, whose destructive potential has yet to be known or understood. But it also persists in the image of the fetuses in the jars, whose deformity is fixed in formaldehyde and whose meaning requires the imposition of an explanatory narrative that the film retreats from offering. Is the devil’s backbone a sign of divine disfavor, of poverty, or simply an accident? So, too, the film’s insistence on the presence of ghosts—whether the ghost of Santi or Dr. Casares—points to a deeper ambivalence about intelligibility: to the desire and need to make meaning of catastrophic history, of those things about the past (here, one’s national identity) that demand symbolization. This need to symbolize what is traumatic is inextricable from the need to tell history in such a way that it bears upon and means something for the present. Is there a narrative capable of making sense of these (children’s) sufferings? The film’s last words—a virtual repetition of the monologue at the beginning— withhold a conclusion that would put the ghosts it has conjured to rest:

What is a ghost? A tragedy, condemned to repeat itself? A moment of pain, perhaps. Something dead which still seems to be alive. An emotion suspended in time—like a blurred photograph. Like an insect trapped in amber.

Here, the script traces the way the ghosts of the Spanish Civil War that it has summoned up point to something still unsymbolized about national history. It has put one ghost to rest, Santi, but another, Dr. Casares, haunts the orphanage in his place. It is from his vantage point that the camera’s last shot takes in the boys as they make their way into an uncertain future, suggesting that the events of the past frame the psychic terrain of the present. The Devil’s Backbone ends with an acknowledgment that the trauma of that war feels uncanny in the way it simply will not let go of the present, that its dead are too many to separate from the living or to be forgotten, that the emotions of that time persist, suspended
in their own limbo water; and that the contours of the tragedy, a familiar yet strange past, is also distorted in the eyes of the present, requiring that the living struggle to read the surviving images. In doing so, they acknowledge that some things will always remain missed or unpossessed.

Notes

1. I use the verb “remember” in order to highlight the constructed and cultural nature of memory, how it is subject to continual narrative reconstruction.

2. See especially Schmidt; Malchow; Martin and Savoy; and the chapter on imperial gothic in Brantlinger.

3. In its exploration of how the violence structuring a wartime consciousness penetrates into seeming enclaves of innocence and wreaks its chaos there, The Devil’s Backbone resembles William Golding’s coming-of-age anti-war horror story, The Lord of the Flies.

4. Historians and sociologists repeatedly use the word “trauma” to describe the effects of this era of Spanish history. As Paloma Aguilar notes, the daily press still speaks of the “collective amnesia” of the Spanish regarding the Civil War, even though the public is flooded with books and movies about the war (xix).

5. The concept and term “corrosive communities” stems from Erikson 189.

6. Elie Wiesel, for example, asserts that he died during the Holocaust yet continues to live. Greenspan writes about Holocaust survivors that “this simultaneity of being and not being should be understood literally. The co-presence of ongoing death and ongoing life—without resolution or higher synthesis—is, for survivors, embodied reality” (148).

7. The notion of images of disaster haunting the viewer in contrast to narratives which strive to understand where that horror originates stems from Susan Sontag (89).

8. On traumatophobia, see Lifton, Broken, 171–72.

9. In a number of works, Lifton speaks of trauma as the psychological equivalent of death, as the survival of extreme threats to the physical and psychological self: “One brings to a death encounter one’s own death imagery and one’s own lifelong experience not only with death but with death equivalents, such as separation, and with the way in which these interact and become, in some sense, in some degree interchangeable over the course of one’s life” (Caruth, “Interview,” 136–37). See also Lifton “History.”

10. Michael Lambek’s anthropological work on spirit possession as a vehicle for the symbolization of communal memory in Madagascar is relevant here: “When the spirits are persons from the past, once living figures who reemerge after death, the narratives they evoke include dimensions of broad
collective interest. . . . Each spirit is vehicle for a history that is preserved, in part, through relations between contemporary hosts and the figures from the past who possess them. . . . They are thus ‘living history’ in a strong sense; they bring forward and force people to acknowledge the commitments of and to the past” (243).

11. Interpreting Freud’s notion of the uncanny, Neil Hertz observes that whatever formally reminds us of this compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny (301).

12. For the notion of ghosts as what is inadequately symbolized, see Žižek 199.

13. Alun Kenwood writes of this “Manichean” tendency (30). See also, in the same volume, Kevin Foster’s description of this as a “versus” rhetoric.


15. The term is from Langer’s Holocaust Testimonies.

16. In an interview, del Toro commented that he avoided using any music at this climactic moment so that the film would not seem to “approve the act of violence” (Chun 28–31).

17. In his reflections on the sublime—for which he employs a gothic vocabulary of darkness, obscurity, and terror—Edmund Burke notes that words representing privation are especially suited to the sublime. Pictorial moments are not as efficacious because they make that which lacks a literal referent too iconic. Showing how sublime thoughts or objects unleash a breakdown in representation, Burke proves himself interested in the representational consequences of darkness. Further, Burke speaks tellingly of the fear occasioned by the mind’s inability to represent its own experience to itself. Del Toro uses a gothic film vocabulary—especially the literal and figurative meanings of the ghost—to find a language for such absences (57–87).

18. Caruth speaks of how the notion of accident is a way of expressing what cannot be precisely grasped about trauma (Unclaimed 6).

19. For traumatic testimony as containing a lacuna or core of impossibility, see Agamben 13.

Works Cited


