
Miriam Haddu

Much of the current scholarly work conducted on Guillermo del Toro’s Spanish-language films (Cronos [1993], El espinazo del Diablo/The Devil’s Backbone [2001], and El laberinto del fauno/Pan’s Labyrinth [2006]) has, among other things, observed the cultural and economic context for their production (Shaw, 2013), the element of the reappropriation of history within the narratives (Hardcastle, 2005), and the filmic texts’ engagement with national discourse prevalent at the time of making (Labanyi, 2007). These concerns are manifested in the forms of a rapidly changing society brought about through entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Cronos) or the modern hauntings of the nationally repressed historical trauma of the Spanish Civil War (El espinazo, El laberinto). This chapter will take as its exploratory premise the examination of El espinazo—the first of del Toro’s Spanish Civil War films. Taking on board and expanding upon scholarly work conducted in the field, the chapter will examine the significance and role of the specter in El espinazo, beyond the symbolic and cognitive meanings attributed to its presence. It will read the framing of the ghostly apparitions in the narrative as examples of del Toro’s attempts to redefine the gothic mode on the screen. A key to an understanding of this process lies in the observation of del
Toro’s use of cinematic language, noting his attempts at reconceptualizing a familiar and influential genre. Underlying the presence of the specter in the film is the notion of mortality and, crucially, the role the photographic image plays in articulating such a concern. The photograph as emblematic of a past existence will be scrutinized in this chapter, and the analysis will focus on the important scenes involving Jacinto and his photographic image. The importance of photographs acting as visual traces of a lost past, as metaphors for the specter, and as visual sources of (unseen) history is alluded to throughout the film and will be explored in detail in my analyses.

Despite the apparent differences in narrative focus, del Toro’s three Spanish-language films are linked by a common desire to explore issues that are imperative to the director. Del Toro’s three Hispanic films provide the forum for an exploration of a system of beliefs and intellectual questionings that are crucially important for the filmmaker and are framed within the context of the supernatural. Cronos, his opera prima, allowed del Toro to examine the vampire genre set in a modern Mexican context and, in the process, redefined the image of the vampire in all its contradictions of the sublime and the abject—encapsulated in his creation of the loveable yet paradoxically repulsive bloodsucker, Jesús Gris (Federico Luppi). Next del Toro turned his attention to the image of the ghost in his second Spanish-language film, El espinazo, where the specter took both the form of a monstrous vision, alongside its role as representing ethereal vulnerability. In El espinazo the child-ghost is portrayed as both a frightening, grotesque spectacle and as a reminder of a terrible crime committed against an innocent boy. This senseless crime against a child returns as an important event that concludes the narrative of El laberinto, a film that uses the magical realm of a child’s imaginative universe to explore parallel stories that testify to the infliction of violence, armed conflict, and injustice.

There are compelling intellectual reasons for focusing solely on El espinazo in this chapter. First, del Toro has labelled this his “first film,” despite the fact that he had already made two other features prior to the making of El espinazo. Having access to and absolute control over all aspects of preproduction, filmmaking, and postproduction for El espinazo, combined with adequate funding in the form of cofinancing, contributed toward a smoother running of the project as a whole. With hindsight del Toro reflects that “Devil’s Backbone saved my creative life; it allowed me to survive the hardships of Mimic,” a project on which the filmmaker did not have absolute creative control (DVD extras). Second, it is in El espinazo where we find evidence of