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Tracing the Borders of Spanish Horror Cinema and Television

Edited by
Jorge Marí



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: Tracing the Borders of Spanish Horror Cinema and Television	1
JORGE MARÍ	
PART I	
The (Postmodern) Gothic	
1 Trapped In the House of Mirrors: <i>The Others</i> as a Transnational Postmodern Gothic Thriller	15
SANTIAGO JUAN-NAVARRO	
2 Contemporary Spanish Gothic Heroines	34
ANN DAVIES	
PART II	
Mothers, Children, Patriarchy, and the Biopolitics of Reproduction	
3 Monstrous (Re)productions: Mothering Patriarchy on the Spanish Horror Screen	53
SOHYUN LEE	
4 <i>Suspendido en el tiempo</i>: Children and Contemporary Spanish Horror	67
MARIA PRAMAGGIORE	

PART III

Sound, Vision, Media, and Intermediality

- 5 **Dude, Where's my Phallus?! Locating the Horror of *La piel que habito* / *The Skin I Live In* (2011)** 91
SAMUEL AMAGO
- 6 **Why They Film: The Camera and Viewer Address in Found Footage Horror Films from Spain** 108
ANNE E. HARDCASTLE
- 7 **Sound of Fear in Recent Spanish Films** 124
MARTIN BARNIER

PART IV

The *[REC]* Phenomenon

- 8 **After the End of History: Horror Cinema in Neoliberal Spain (2002–2013)** 141
VÍCTOR PUEYO
- 9 **Generating Fear: From Fantastic Factory (2000–2005) to *[REC]* (2007–2014)** 161
ANTONIO LÁZARO-REBOLL
- 10 **The Medium is the Monster: Metadiscourse and the Horrors of post-11 M Spain in the *[REC]* Trilogy** 190
WILLIAM J. NICHOLS
- 11 **“I am an eye, I am a mechanical eye...”: (The *[REC]* Series)** 212
JEAN-CLAUDE SEGUIN

PART V

**A Focus on Individual Filmmakers:
Daniel Calparsoro and Paul Naschy**

- 12 **Blurring Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Spanish Horror TV: The Case of Daniel Calparsoro** 235
VICENTE RODRÍGUEZ-ORTEGA AND RUBÉN ROMERO

13 An Icon Rises from the Grave: The 21st Century Cult Stardom of Paul Naschy	252
ANDY WILLIS	
<i>List of Contributors</i>	265
<i>Index</i>	269

1 Trapped In the House of Mirrors

The Others as a Transnational Postmodern Gothic Thriller

Santiago Juan-Navarro

The settings of Alejandro Amenábar's first three films (*Tesis / Thesis* [1996], *Abre los ojos / Open Your Eyes* [1997], and *The Others* [2001]) refer to the characteristic universe of the thriller. The characters wander about in sinuous—and often claustrophobic and threatening—spaces that increase their anxiety and, by extension, that of the spectator. The secret corridors of a university, a video library plagued by abject images, a prison that is at once physical and mental, or a haunted house into which sunlight cannot penetrate—these are spaces that connect with the best tradition of the film thriller, a tradition in which the labyrinth is the central metaphor not only of the characters' condition and worldview, but also of the structure of the film itself. As in classic labyrinths, Amenábar's first productions create dead ends that entrap the spectator. Their plots are complex, digressive, and twisting, filled with unexpected turns and tangles.

Formally, the structures of his first three feature films adhere to the same pattern (prologue, development, and epilogue) that materializes in similar ways. In all three films, the narrative is set in motion with a black screen and a voiceover that addresses the characters (but also us, the viewers). This prologue works as a narrative prolepsis that introduces the main topics, hints at their mysteries, and announces some of their clues. The central body of each film presents characters who are struggling with a mystery that they are attempting to solve and a plot that they are trying to overcome. In the process, they discover clues not only to the enigma they face, but, more importantly, to their own identity. They achieve this major insight only at the very end of the film, in the epilogue. In that final segment, the movie's central themes are revisited and some of the remaining pieces of the puzzle are solved.

This narrative formula recurs in all of Amenábar's thrillers, which have enjoyed significant international success. From the shower of Goya awards that recognized *Tesis*, his *opera prima*, to his blockbuster *The Others*, widely distributed in the United States, his thrillers have been recognized by both critics and audiences, confirming over and over that it is possible to make good auteur cinema without ignoring

the demands of the market. Amenábar's cinematography has grown increasingly refined, while his appeal to large audiences has multiplied, reaching its peak in *The Others*.¹ This success can arguably be explained by his mastery of the mechanics of suspense. In fact, suspense is the structuring element of his early productions: when viewing those first films, the spectator remained 'suspended' between questions and answers, anticipations and resolution, the hidden and the revealed, the mundane and the marvelous, pain and pleasure.

It seems appropriate that Amenábar's thriller trilogy concluded with a US-French-Spanish co-production that paid homage to his most admired Hollywood models and that contained all the characteristic ingredients of suspense. While he had freely experimented with the slasher film genre in *Tesis* and with science fiction in *Abre los ojos*, in *The Others*, Amenábar explores the supernatural thriller in its postmodern gothic mode. These variations on the 'thriller' theme indicate that, rather than being a genre proper, the thriller can be considered as a metagenre that incorporates several other genres under its umbrella (Rubin 4). The term can thus be used to refer to productions that are very diverse but that nevertheless display a common feature: the use of excess at all possible levels, but especially of fear, suspense, action, vertigo, and movement. This amalgamation of excessive feelings produces ambivalent responses in the spectator, who simultaneously experiences distress and pleasure, attraction and loathing. Above all, thrillers, like roller coasters, aim at debilitating our emotional stability, inducing a strong sensation of vulnerability that paradoxically can end up being extremely pleasant. The etymology of the word underscores these implications: *to thrill* = "to cause to feel a sudden intense sensation," while *thrall* = "one who is held in bondage." These definitions convey the aggressive and sadomasochistic nature of this narrative mode and suggest its impact on the audience (Rubin 6–7).

The Others in Context

A transnational co-production like *The Others*, set in foreign soil and shot in English with international actors, has to be understood within the transnational framework of Spanish cinema at the beginning of the 21st century. Like its characters, the film itself inhabits a historical and spatial 'limbo,' which makes it difficult to ascertain its Spanishness (or at least, to do so in traditional terms). As Marvin D'Lugo has pointed out, "the lack of specificity in the story, setting, and cast of these films suggests the inevitable dissolution of the nation as an operative category for classifying film productions" (39). Despite these classification challenges, film critics, especially those in the Anglo-American and French academia, have struggled to associate some of its themes and vicissitudes with contemporary trends in 'national' cinema. For example,

Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz has gone further than most in interpreting the *The Others* as a “historical allegory” of the cultural and historic trauma of the nation. To make this claim he traces daring and suggestive (although at times far-fetched) analogies to films by Víctor Erice, Luis Buñuel, José Luis Borau, Carlos Saura, and Guillermo del Toro. While, in some cases, those allegories may be somehow explicit, or as Acevedo-Muñoz calls them “pragmatic” (e.g., the case of the Spanish tradition of mothers and monsters in contemporary culture), they are better aligned to as “unconscious allegories”—a slippery concept that is not always well suited to talk about a filmmaker who is anchored in American (not Spanish) cinema. The 1990’s generation of young filmmakers—Alejandro Amenábar, Isabel Coixet, Chus Gutiérrez, Agustín Díaz Yánes, Julio Medem, and Gracia Querejeta—looked for models in global cinema and thus abandoned the metaphorical style and political obsessions of its predecessors. As Rosanna Maule has observed, these directors “have moved into a broader framework of culturally oriented cinema, one that is more in keeping with contemporary Spanish society and the new audio-visual market” (113). A case in point is Amenábar, a master in fusing Hollywood genres with Spanish cinema’s style and approaches (Berthier 23).

Equally contentious are Acevedo-Muñoz’s claims of the film’s subscription to a national cinematic tradition due to anecdotal details regarding its reception and exhibition. Even though the film was shot in English, Acevedo-Muñoz observes, it was released in Spain in a Spanish dubbed version and the film became “officially nationalized” by receiving numerous Spanish Goya Awards and by becoming the highest grossing film of the year at the box office” (212). In fact, all foreign-language films, and especially Hollywood movies, have always been dubbed in Spanish since Franco’s years² and the nominations of *The Others* for multiple Goya Awards was also the origin of a bitter controversy. Spanish filmmaker Vicente Aranda, whose film *Juana La Loca*, represented Spain at the Oscars that year, did not attend the Goya ceremony and he furiously blamed the US industry for attempting to appropriate the Goya Awards. Aranda claimed that *The Others* was a foreign film that should have not even been considered by the Spanish Academy of Cinematography. This claim was echoed by conservative newspapers, such as *ABC* and *El Mundo*, which also questioned the “Spanishness” (*españolidad*) of Amenábar’s film based in the language of production and its international cast.³ These consideration notwithstanding, *The Others*, received most of the Goyas, except the Goya for Best Actress, which interestingly went to Pilar López de Ayala (the protagonist of *Juana La Loca*), helping somehow to appease Aranda’s anger. Amenábar always kept a cautious distance throughout this controversy. When questioned about this by the media, he did not go beyond some ironical remarks. Regarding the language in which it was produced he commented: “this is a movie that

takes place in England; it would have obviously made no sense to shoot it in Swedish". As for its Spanishness, he was even more categorical: "Ask Hacienda (the Spanish IRS) if *The Others* is Spanish or not!" All these observations point to a new concept of the 'national cinema' category, which can no longer be restricted to the same invariable cultural marks or stylistic traits that had been used to categorize cinematic traditions until very recently. *The Others* is a transnational film that originated in Spain, shot by a Spanish filmmaker on Spanish soil with, partly at least, Spanish capital, in spite of the caveats expressed by critics. The fact that, along with *Agora* (2009), it is a film that lacks the stereotypical traits of Spanish cinema does not preclude considering it as part of a new development within that tradition, one in which "the return to the transparent conventions associated with genre cinema goes together with modest auteurist pretensions" (Sánchez-Biosca 367). Although national traits may be present in the film, they are subdued by a transnational and globalized aesthetics that does not detract from the merits of the project. As Paul Julian Smith pointed out in his enthusiastic review for *Sight & Sound*: "Perhaps the most uncanny miracle of this terrific thriller is that Amenábar has materialized a European art movie in the heart of darkness that is the US film industry" (53). This transnational project was shortly followed with *Mar adentro / The Sea Inside* (2004), "a highly localist feature" (Smith, "Auteurism" 145) inspired by the true story of Ramón Sampedro, which put to rest the futile polemic about the *españolidad* of Amenábar's cinema, while "reconciling Spanish film audiences with Spanishness" (Maule 118), as is proven by its national success.

The Others is, above all, an exercise in style, more concerned with the formal mastery of a new hybrid genre (the postmodern gothic thriller) than in making political, moral, or historical statements. Like other Spanish filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s, Amenábar crafts his films within a trans-cultural dialectics that is indebted to a highly international conception of picture making. It is in this sense that he has helped to expand the concept of a national tradition, rather than breaking away with it.

Reflexive Structure and Intertextuality

Like *Tesis* and *Abre los ojos*, *The Others* contains a metatextual subplot in which the film reflects on reality and fiction, life and death, nature and representation. The film opens with the voice of Grace, the protagonist. She is preparing to tell a story: that of the film we are about to see. She begins by recounting the myth of the world's creation according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The film's genesis is thus identified with that of the universe and, throughout the movie, many elements will suggest that the world inhabited by Grace and her family is not truly a slice

of life but a fiction in which the characters will become progressively more aware of their fictitious condition. To highlight this baroque reflexive framework even further, the opening credits are displayed over the image of a book that contains the fiction that the spectator is about to see: two children in an old house illuminated by candles, a woman placing a key in a lock, a child pointing with horror to something off-screen, a marionette of a fallen angel, another child shouting in bed. The last drawing, depicting an old mansion as viewed from the edge of a lake, fades into the image of the real house. This metamorphosis is the first in a series of hints that accentuate the film's liminality and its fluctuation between the real and the apparent, the natural and the supernatural, and wakefulness and dreams. Through this *mise en abyme* of the utterance,⁴ which foretells important elements of the plot, we are placed in the peculiar geography of the film, a space ruled by a darkness on which characters are projected and on which sounds explode, a space that is none other than the scene of cinematic fiction.

Immediately after the film's self-conscious prologue, we witness Grace's awakening, although those familiar with Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* will wonder if what is depicted from this point on is her real life or her dream. Until the very end, the audience remains suspicious of the true nature of events. In any case, the subsequent images confirm the film's reflexive nature: Like actors at a theater, the servants arrive at the house and Grace proceeds to assign them roles. We note that the gardener, Mr. Tuttle, displays continual insecurity regarding his role and relies on Mrs. Mills, the housekeeper, to remind him of his tasks.⁵ The tics of the British comedian Eric Sykes, who plays Mr. Tuttle, provide a comic touch to the metatextual subplot.

After the introductions, we are presented with the setting: the old house that refers us not only to the characteristic realm of gothic fiction but to the archetypal space of cinema, as well. As with the movie theater where we are viewing these images, the haunted house must be kept in the dark; otherwise the health of the photosensitive children who inhabit it could be jeopardized, in the same way that the cinematic illusion would be endangered were someone to turn on the lights in the theater. All the events in the plot take place within the confines of the house; the only exceptions are Grace's two excursions to the area immediately surrounding the mansion, and both of these take her right back to the house itself. The characters in this fiction have no escape beyond the universe of fiction itself. The protagonist's only attempt to flee is immediately aborted by a mysterious fog that prevents her from seeing what is beyond the house. Her initiation journey is not so much outward as inward. It is a journey of self-realization that ends only when she comes to recognize and accept her "unreal" condition.

When *The Others* premiered in the United States in August of 2001, both critics and audiences immediately pointed to its surprising

similarities with another supernatural thriller, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), which had been released a short time before. Like Amenábar's film, *The Sixth Sense* is a ghost story told from the point of view of the ghost, who also ignores his spectral condition. It is only at the end of these films that we, the audience, discover the protagonist's ghostly nature, and we do so at the same time as do the characters themselves. The similarity between the final resolutions of the riddles in both films is striking. The most direct influences in *The Others*, however, are not to be found in Shyamalan's film but in the classics of the genre to which Amenábar has often referred: on the one hand, films about haunted houses, such as *The Changeling* (1980), and on the other, adaptations of Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and, especially, *The Innocents* (1962) by Jack Clayton.

Directed by Peter Medak, *The Changeling* tells the story of a pianist who, after the tragic death of his wife and daughter, retires to a lonely mansion and begins to experience supernatural occurrences linked to the house's mysterious past and its previous owners. A number of parallels with *The Others* is evident. The action in both cases takes place in a haunted house. The supernatural events consist mostly of inexplicable noises and objects that seem to move on their own. In both cases, a tension grows between the house and its new owner. In both movies, a plot thread develops around a disturbing enigma. Other superficial details, such as the fact that the gardener in both cases has the same name (Mr. Tuttle) and that the new owner of the house is a pianist, further reinforce this connection. However, the most relevant influence of Medak's film lies in its narrative and cinematic techniques. In both films, terror does not spring from what is explicitly shown or from special effects, but from what is merely suggested or glimpsed. Both movies pay special attention to the creation of a morbid and tense atmosphere that surrounds the characters who, though they attempt to solve the enigma rationally, are finally forced to accept a supernatural explanation for their mysterious circumstances. As ghost stories, both *The Changeling* and *The Others* are very effective, but both aim to achieve more than mere entertainment. The gothic plot is used as a departure point for exploring death and the feelings of loss and grief that accompany it, the determined search for truth in an atmosphere of mystery, the dubious and obscure nature of family values, and the constant struggle of conflicting ontologies. Other classic films about haunted houses, such as *The Haunting* (1962) or *The Uninvited* (1944), may have also influenced Amenábar's work, but it is Medak's film that seems to have made the strongest impression on the Spanish director (Juan-Navarro, *Alejandro Amenábar* 76–77; Rodríguez Marchante 198).

Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* is another dominant intertext in *The Others*. Based on Henry James' novel, the film is set in an isolated mansion, where a young governess is in charge of a pair of orphan

children. Eerie apparitions and inexplicable behavior on the children's part cause her to wonder about the house's history, especially about the fate of the previous governess, Miss Jessel, and the former valet, Peter Quint. *The Innocents* is not a ghost story but a psychological thriller in which the complex consciousness of the female protagonist is analyzed. Although the governess' struggle with the forces of evil seems to be real, the result, as in James' novel, is deeply ambiguous. After viewing the film, we can conclude that the paranormal phenomena are only the result of the psychosis of a mentally deranged woman, but we can also accept, if we wish, a supernatural interpretation of the events. Clayton's film does not choose a definite explanation; it leaves the end open to the audience's interpretation.

As in Amenábar's movie, *The Innocents* presents two children under the tutelage of a woman whose overprotective instincts can be interpreted either as genuine love or as a psychosis with fatal consequences (both films deal with infanticide). In both cases, the children initially seem to be haunted by the servants. While this possibility is eliminated in *The Others*, Clayton's film toys with it from beginning to end. In both productions, there is a continuous transfer of real and supernatural beings who inhabit two conflictive ontologies (the world of the living and that of the dead) with the intent of taking possession of a haunted house. The very title of Amenábar's film refers to a memorable passage from *The Innocents* (and from James' novel): toward the end of that film, Miles observes, "we have the whole house for ourselves," to which the governess replies, "there are still *the others*" (ambiguously referring to the ghostly servants Quint and Jessel). Amenábar's film, of course, seeks to go beyond the movies that serve as its models in order to offer a new "turn of the screw" in which, as in most postmodern fictions, any glimpse of ontological security vanishes to thin air.

Unlike *The Innocents*, Amenábar's film explicitly favors a supernatural explanation that seeks to add more complexity to the semantic instability of its models. *The Others* poses many questions, not all of which are clearly solved. The nature of the afterlife, the destiny of the main characters, and the details surrounding the crisis that ends in Grace's mental derangement are some of the loose ends that remain at the end of the film. Amenábar's purpose is not to provide the audience with a moral justification or a detailed explanation of events. While *The Innocents* is a psychological study of the act of perception under the influence of anxiety and religious obscurantism, *The Others* reexamines this same topic from a metatextual perspective. In this sense, Amenábar's film is closer to the self-conscious impulse that underpins James' novel, where the author seemed to reflect on the act of fiction writing within fiction itself. As in *The Turn of the Screw*, where the governess' narrative dramatizes the writer's conjuring up of setting and characters, Amenábar's film presents Grace as the origin of the fiction in which she appears.

A simple detail at the beginning of both films allows us to appreciate the intensification of the reflexive component in Amenábar's work. As in *The Others*, the haunted house in Clayton's film (Bly Hall) is seen for the first time reflected in the waters of a lake. In the case of Amenábar's film, the reality-simulacrum interplay is even more complicated, as the film gives us not just two but three images of the mansion: the drawing during the credits sequence, the real house, and its reflection. These three images appear to refer to the film's three superimposed realities: that of the living, that of the dead, and that of those who ignore their condition; three images that, in addition, point to an increasing problematization of reality and representation. Unlike Clayton's movie, which reveals itself as a masterful example of modernist gothic, Amenábar's postmodern view leads his film to portray a Baudrillardian hyperreality ruled by third-order simulacra.

The Others and the Gothic Tradition

Because of its themes, atmosphere, setting, structure, and characters, *The Others* conforms, in an original way, to the narrative and cinematic mode encompassed by the gothic genre. In its most traditional expression, gothicism conjures up a formula that includes haunted castles, subterranean corridors, gloomy landscapes, monsters, ghosts, and an overwhelming feeling of mystery and fear. For many readers, the gothic is also characterized by grotesque distortions, excessive melodrama, and morbid sensations that combine in a surreal phantasmagoria of darkness and terror. Although the style originated in the late 18th century, its expressions, which are still extremely popular, have been so diverse that, as William Veeder points out, "the attempt to define the nature of the gothic literature... is one of the longest ongoing enterprises in fiction studies" (20). In an effort to determine its scope, Charlene Bunnell distinguishes three dominant features in gothic literature and film: (1) its ability to actively engage the reader's participation in the story; (2) the tension between symbolic dual worlds, such as the diurnal and the nocturnal; and (3) the use of four particular elements—the setting, the journey, the double, and the supernatural—to reveal themes and motifs and to enhance characterization.⁶ To these features we should add a particular fascination for the uncanny and the sublime, the former understood as "the return of the repressed events, memories, and fantasies—the encounter with one's own most intimate fears" (Grunenberg 176), and the latter defined by Edmund Burke as a state of irrational ecstasy unleashed by the contemplation of the obscure, the uncertain, and the confusing on a large scale. Amenábar's film illustrates each of these features, opting for the mode known as 'female gothic,' which is more subtle and ambiguous than its male counterpart. Unlike explicit—and often repulsive—horror, which, according to Anne Williams, characterizes male gothic,

female gothic works through restraint, innuendo, and suspense.⁷ The manner in which these features materialize in *The Others* is, however, very innovative, providing the genre with a development that is more akin to contemporary aesthetics than to the 18th and 19th century sensibility to which most traditional expressions of the gothic subscribe.

As the film unfolds in the gothic tradition, the audience is held in suspense along with the characters. This implication goes beyond the standards for the genre, since we not only become emotionally involved with the story, but we are also inscribed into the narrative itself. In fact, the movie opens with Nicole Kidman, in voiceover, reading a story that we may think is being addressed to us. She begins with the words, "Now children, are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."⁸ Although we soon learn that she is actually speaking to her son and daughter, in those early moments, we have no way of knowing that, and we therefore become Grace's interlocutors.⁹ The narrative that follows is told from Grace's point of view and, as in Amenábar's previous films, we will accompany the character on her journey of self-realization. As the story progresses and possible solutions are implied in the film's plot, we will need to modify our hypotheses and expectations regarding the enigma (the identity of the Others).

As the audience for a gothic thriller such as *The Others* experiences all of the film's devices, they also experience the catharsis that, according to the most traditional accounts, is characteristic of this genre.¹⁰ Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), one of the pioneers of the gothic novel and the founder of what has come to be known as female gothic, asserted that the goal of all gothic fiction was to evoke pity and terror (150), thus generating an expansive fear and a metaphysical consciousness through which the reader could achieve a sublime experience. In gothic novels, transgression provoked fears of social disintegration, leading to a reconstitution of limits and frontiers. Good was presented in contrast to evil, and light and reason triumphed over darkness and superstition. Gothic fiction was not so much an unbridled celebration of excess as an exploration of the 19th century limits that distinguished virtue from vice, reason from passion, and the self from the Other (Botting 5). In many senses, the rise of the gothic at the end of the Enlightenment could be interpreted as a response to rationalism, since the visceral experience of a supernatural nature satisfied the reader; it awakened the imagination as a result of expanding the human soul. Radcliffe embraced a positive view of terror, because its very darkness had the ability to stimulate the sublime faculties of the imagination. Unlike horror, which forces the imagination to fold in upon itself, terror limits itself to the suggestion of evil and the grotesque, thus opening a space for human curiosity and ontological exploration (Radcliffe 149).

The Others also exemplifies the tension between light and darkness. The diurnal world is luminous because it is familiar and common. The

nocturnal world, on the contrary, is the inner world of the primitive and the intuitive. It is dark, not necessarily because it implies evil, but because it is unknown and alien. Amenábar's film, like a gothic novel, favors the nocturnal and resorts to darkness and chiaroscuro to underscore the metaphorical components of the film. The fog, the opacity, and the liquid treatment of light, which should be credited to Javier Aguirresarobe's photography, combine to create an atmosphere in which memory unfolds, not so much as an obstacle to achieving knowledge and enlightenment, but as an image of the process through which we can attain both (Cadava 6, 7).¹¹ Since Grace's two children suffer from a strange allergy to light, we are placed in the middle of an obscurity that is enlightened only by the dim flame of candles. Similarly, the exterior of the house is surrounded by fog; the absence of luminosity dominates both settings. From an ideological perspective, this emphasis on the dark serves to emphasize the characteristic impulse of the nocturnal world: the transgression of social behavior, religious rituals, family duties, and the repressive instinct. But darkness also serves to emphasize some of the characteristic features of the female gothic: ambiguity, openness, and absence. In this narrative mode, faithfully represented by *The Others*, what is unsaid and not shown has a greater psychological impact.¹²

As Bunnell points out, the setting "is crucial in establishing the mood and atmosphere that set the tone, heighten characters' sensibilities, and engage audience involvement" (82). And indeed, the setting of this film is one of the archetypal spaces of gothic fiction: the haunted house in which supernatural phenomena occur. The originality of Amenábar's film resides in the inversion of the point of view traditionally employed in this type of story. While gothic literature and film adopt the perspective of the individual who confronts the aggression of a supernatural entity, *The Others* makes us sympathize with the specter in her fight to conquer the domestic space. In this fight, a special importance is conferred upon everything that separates the spaces, everything located at the thresholds: curtains, windows, fog—in short, everything that highlights the story's liminality, the *in-between* of places and ontologies in conflict. The house and the origins of its haunting constitute the film's central focus, but the house itself is a space that, as in conventional horror literature and film, is not only physical but also psychological and spiritual. The characters' displacements through this geography, therefore, have a dimension that goes beyond its materiality. However, the great originality of the film is that, unlike the psychological journey of the human being toward the supernatural, which is common in gothic film classics such as *The Haunting* and *The Changeling*, *The Others* depicts the process of a supernatural agent's adaptation to empirical reality.

The domestic space also plays an important role at the diegetic level. As Susan Becker points out, "after all, gothic horror is domestic horror, family horror" (4). At one point in the film, the children, Anne and Nicholas,

memorize a lesson that states, "The house and the family. We all live in a house with our family."¹³ The shuttering of the house is crucial for the survival of the children, who are thought to suffer from a strange illness that makes them photosensitive. This isolation is important for Grace, as well—not only for the security of her children but also for the assuaging of her fear, which she has incubated in her loneliness. And Grace and the children are not the only ones confined to the haunted house—the servants cannot separate themselves from it, either. Referring to the years she has spent there, Mrs. Mills comments that "they were the best years of my life. That's why we came by, because this house means a lot to us." The house seems to possess its inhabitants, but the film seems more interested in the reasons why its inhabitants fight to possess it. A great part of the narrative revolves around the control of the house, a recurrent motif in the gothic tradition, since a true gothic work "should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration" (Grunenberg 195).¹⁴

The fact that the house must remain in darkness and must be hermetically sealed off from the outdoors adds a Chinese-box effect to the claustrophobia, another characteristic that is typical of the genre. "No door must be opened without the previous one being closed first," Grace warns the servants. There is no electricity in the house, which seems to be suspended in a primordial space, completely isolated from the rest of the world. The fog traps its inhabitants in an entropic existence that resembles that of the limbo that is mentioned so many times in the film. Displaced in time and space, the mansion is a sealed universe from which there is no escape. As in the archetypal gothic castle, it is a metaphorical expression of the psychological landscape of its owners. Grace's determination to conquer that territory is her way of trying to reclaim sovereignty over her mind. Her fight to maintain control over the inviolability of her home is symbolic of her attempt to reassert her personality and her mental health, thus following a tradition that recurs in gothic fictions: "The invasion of the private and secure space of the home by some unknown evil force exemplifies the conflict between interior and exterior world, between individual and society" (Grunenberg 176). From this perspective, the constant closing of doors and windows in the film can be interpreted as an effort at psychological compartmentalization that originates in Grace's refusal to accept the memory of the murders she has committed. The house thus turns out to be a metaphor of the self, since the gothic space is not a physical location but an epistemological state of self-possession. In the end, the struggle the film depicts is one that centers on a case of usurpation and the right to haunt/possess the house, the home, and the self.

Two other identifying characteristics of the gothic—the double and the supernatural element—allow the characters to move within the

nocturnal world (or at least to perceive it). Grace is a being torn between her religious education and her supernatural condition, between her strict moralism and her homicidal instincts. But the element that most clearly connects her to the female gothic genre is her psychosis. The gothic world is marked by pain and destruction, fear and anxiety, but above all, it is a world of mental derangement, a world that undermines our weak rationalism and reveals the dark side of reality. Gothic fiction is essentially a regressive fantasy, as psychotic states are usually perpetuations of states we have experienced in our childhood, states ruled by the family romance and the projective identification.

As in his previous films, Amenábar follows the tradition of the female gothic by dramatizing the search for identity in a world in which reality often becomes tangled up with appearance. In *Art of Darkness*, Anne Williams proposes the existence of “masculine” and “feminine” principles in gothic fiction. These two varieties differ both in terms of narrative technique and in their conception of the supernatural (their different use of horror and terror). Williams traces the origins of female gothic back to Greek mythology or, more precisely, to the interpretation of Greek myths by Freudian psychoanalysis. These mythical narratives are characterized by the female’s point of view, the happy ending, the explanation of the phantasmatic, and the subscription to terror. The myth of Psyche and Eros, for example, opposes that of Oedipus, which corresponds to a male’s perspective. From a Freudian point of view, gothic fiction could be interpreted as another expression of “the return of the repressed,” the reoccurrence of the unconscious fantasy faced with the constraints of the Age of Reason. With the advent of poststructuralism, however, and especially with Foucault’s questioning of Freud’s repressive hypothesis or with the linguistic turn of Lacan and Kristeva, gothic writing has been subject to constant reassessment. Drawing on poststructuralist concepts, Williams reexamines some aspects of archetypal criticism and essentialist feminism in order to distinguish between masculine (destructive) and feminine (constructive) principles, which she incorporates into the theory of gothic fiction. But it was Ellen Moers who coined the term “female gothic” as a way to refer to fears of sexuality and maternity. Moers’ theory challenges the forms of fiction ruled by patriarchal prejudices, reevaluates gothic novels as part of a feminist critical movement that recovers women’s repressed and marginalized writing, and examines topics related to the female experience, sexual oppression, and difference.

According to Moers, female gothic uses the *topos* of the haunted house as a metaphor for the female body that is owned by others. Moers’ analysis of female gothic texts as a coded expression of the woman’s fears of confinement to domestic space and to her body (experienced in its most extreme form in childbirth) was very influential. It generated a corpus of critical works dealing with the way the female gothic articulated the dissatisfaction of women existing in a patriarchal society, but it also placed

the gothic at the center of female writing. In the 1990s, however, and as a result of poststructuralism's destabilization of gender categories, both the term and the concept began to be reconsidered and contested. At any rate, what is evident in Amenábar's film is a distancing of the features associated with old gothic forms and a rapport with the more subtle and complex form of female gothic. The film's moral ambiguity and its transgressive depiction of the heroine bring it closer to this gothic mode as well as to the characteristic expressions of postmodern gothic.

In *The Others*, Amenábar gives cinematic expression to the female gothic. The presence of the double (the Other) has a disturbing effect on the audience. On one hand, the duality in the film transgresses borders as well as social and linguistic norms. On the other, the possibility of the spectator identifying the supernatural element and thus giving closure to the film's indeterminacy is deferred. Actually, the film's plot is organized around the deferred recognition of the specter. What we at first take to be the signs of ghostly entities turn out to be mundane expressions of daily life, as mundane as the inhabitants of a house changing the curtains: "*The Others* reverses (very neatly) the trajectory Freud describes when he speaks of the way the everyday moves towards the uncanny" (Bruce 22). Suspicion, which at the beginning focuses on the servants, soon passes to the children; then it moves on to the mother; the absent father, Victor; and an old woman, who turns out to be a medium. As a result, the suspense, mystery, and intrigue that are characteristic of the genre keep growing until the very end.

One of the reasons we are unable to recognize ghosts as such is because we expect them to be 'others'—they are not supposed to be 'us.' Unlike traditional gothic novels, the most recent expressions of the genre show the human side of the specter, a move that serves to evoke the sympathy of the audience. The ghost ceases to produce fear and instead inspires pity and compassion. In the case of *The Others*, the haunting is disturbing because the film insists on locating personal traumas within a context of hostilities (the references to World War II and the infanticide perpetrated by Grace). The film haunts us because of its persuasive insistence that the spectators should reconsider their relationship to the Others (an insistence that is highlighted even by the film's title). The movie forces us to reconsider all borders (between the self and the other, the personal and the political), thus unsettling any attempt at comfort. It also haunts us because it succeeds in undermining our apprehension of the others in a way that is deeply self-conscious and transforming, since the recognition of the other implies the recognition of ourselves (Bruce 24).

Ontologies in Conflict: Postmodern Gothic

Female gothic literature and film typically describe the heroine's moral education and her capacity to distinguish Good from Evil without

succumbing to the latter. In *The Others*, however, the protagonist's confrontation with supernatural forces turns out to be futile. "The Others," the film seems to suggest, are us, once we are able to know and accept ourselves. By means of a story of psychic and cultural dislocation, the movie depicts Grace's journey from religious dogmatism to philosophical skepticism within a self-reflexive plot that connects the film with the metatextual trends of postmodern thought.

This connection between literary postmodernism and the gothic tradition is not as preposterous as it may seem at first sight. In fact, during the past few decades, critics have thoroughly explored the points common to both cultural expressions, thus generating a proliferation of hybrid forms identified by multiple labels, such as "postmodern gothic," "neo-gothicism," or "gothic postmodernism."¹⁵ As noted previously, the gothic can be understood as a reaction to the Enlightenment, with which it coexisted during the last decades of the 18th century. In a similar fashion, postmodernism reacts against the *grands récits* of modernity, which originated precisely during the Age of Reason. Formally, the gothic's hybridity is very well suited to postmodern eclecticism. As Kilgour points out, "this promiscuous generic cross-breeding is part of the gothic's 'subverting' of stabled norms, collapsing of 'binary oppositions,' which makes it appropriate for a postmodern sensibility" (1998: 40). In the same way that the infinite regression of postmodernism continually defers any closure, the gothic's morbid tendency toward death and decadence often leads to nihilism and *horror vacui*. The culmination of this gradual decoding of authority and convention produced by gothic stories is an anarchic state of unbalance and disorder. Like postmodernism, the gothic is associated with the loss of faith in universals and absolutes. Reality, identity, and narrative are constructs of perception that reveal the emphasis of the gothic and the postmodern in spectacle, surfaces, and performance.

Amenábar's film employs these elements from the gothic tradition, but reformulates them within a new and radical perspective that is in tune with postmodernism. His film can thus help us understand not only the similarities but also the formal and philosophical gap between the old and new expressions of gothicism. Unlike typical horror films, *The Others* explores beliefs, faith, and doctrine from a perspective in which skepticism and doubt become dominant. Although the use of indeterminacy is a common trait of gothic novels, in postmodern artifacts it attains a metaphysical relevance. While gothic ambiguity is a narrative need (Smith 7) that facilitates suspense, in postmodernism it becomes an intellectual imperative of ontological and epistemological implications. While gothic novels question our perception of reality, identity, life, and death, they tend to reestablish the dominant order. The gothic novel's immense appeal was due to the opportunity it gave readers to vicariously experience its characters' transgressions, which were nearly

always punished at the end. These transgressions were thus limited to a carnivalesque temporary dislocation of the hegemonic order, which would finally end up being restored: "Like the carnivalesque, the gothic appears to be a transgressive rebellion against norms which yet ends up reinstating them, an eruption of unlicensed desire that is fully controlled by governing systems of limitation" (Kilgour 8). Amenábar resorts to the cathartic quality of suspense but avoids its normalizing power. Thus, the ghost, a recurrent motif in the gothic tradition, gains a metaphoric dimension that did not exist in the old gothic novels. Ghosts here are a figure of speech, an excuse to deal with other things, such as how religion confers an artificial meaning on life and death. In the director's production notes, Amenábar distances himself from the more stereotypical expressions of the genre: "many mystery stories, above all, those that belong to the genre of 'gothic horror,' tend to be religiously biased, its moral interpretation almost always in relation to sinfulness; the individual who tampers with nature and who dares to overstep the bounds of the divine...in general, stereotypes of Good versus Evil" (Rodríguez-Marchante 113). By contesting religious morality and dogmas, the film undermines those dichotomies. The characters in the film do not respond to the gothic's distinguishing Manichaeism; good and evil are relative, and any sign of divinity is banned.

This questioning of the myths of origin and of ultimate truths can be appreciated from the very beginning, when Grace tells the story of the world's creation, which soon turns out to be the creation of the film, and finally reveals itself as the creation of reality through fictions. Among those fictions, Grace systematically resorts to biblical narratives that are always understood literally. The protagonist's insistence on religious obedience turns it into a simulacrum of order within which she can make headway with her life, but her strong personality and her religious zeal are a façade behind which she attempts to hide her repressed anxieties and insecurities. The intrusion of the supernatural jeopardizes her ideological stability. Her certitudes are progressively undermined, sometimes even by her own children. Anne's commentaries, for example, equate biblical stories, which she refers to as supernatural and incredible, with the world of superstition. The spectator is soon aware of Grace's ironic position from a moral point of view. The protagonist seems obsessed with the concept of truth, loathing imagination and fantasy, as well as storytelling (Anne's stories about Victor), which she considers a form of lying. However, from the very beginning, Grace emerges as the archetypal storyteller, who lives deceived by her own fiction. She is, in fact, a character, trapped in her personal narrative.

It is this self-conscious element, explored at the beginning of this essay, that more clearly connects Amenábar's work with the post-modern reconceptualization of gothicism. I would like to reexamine this aspect in connection with a well-known debate in film theory: the

dream metaphor to explain the dynamics of the relationship between the film and the spectator, a metaphor that, as we will see, is thematized throughout the film.¹⁶ Some of the first film theoreticians, such as Ricciotto Canudo and Jean Epstein, discovered the oneiric quality of films. Raymond Bellour and Guy Rosolato elaborated psychoanalytic analogies between movies and dream mechanisms and conditions, proposing that films had a ‘latent’ content that could be psychoanalyzed. In fact, before the 1930s, psychoanalysts had already begun to apply the Freudian scheme of interpretation to films. Beginning in the 1950s, French critics began to explore the relationship between film exhibition and the spectator. Thus, Roland Barthes referred to the experience of film watching as para-oneiric, to the extent that when moviegoers leave the theater, they feel sleepy and drowsy as if they had just woken up (104). But it was Christian Metz and Jean Louis Baudry who developed the dream metaphor in depth. Metz applied the theories of Freud and Lacan to cinema, suggesting that the popularity of the medium as a form of artistic expression was due to its capacity to serve as an imperfect reflection of reality and a method by which to dwell in the dream’s unconscious state. For Baudry, the cinematic experience resembles a hallucinatory psychosis. The spectator’s passivity, the third-order simulacrum of the reality we live through films, and the theater’s darkness combine to create this state. The illusion of reality in a dream evokes the impression of realism in cinema, which has led some critics to compare the effect of the cinematic projection to Plato’s Cave. Although the cinema was invented to capture reality, it has become an instrument of fantasy, dreams, and emotions.¹⁷ In “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” (1974–1975), Baudry argues that cinema became the technical materialization of a perennial dream of a perfect and total simulacrum. Many of these intimations seem to have an objective correlative in Amenábar’s film, which could be interpreted as an allegory of the dream metaphor.

The Others refers us to the archetypal space of cinematic representation. Even before the credits begin to unfold, Grace’s voice assumes the task of the storyteller and places us in the role of those being read to, suggesting that, to a certain extent, the film’s victims may be found not only on the screen but also in the audience. As noted earlier, both the movie theater and the haunted house need to be kept in darkness, lest the children and the cinematic illusion, respectively, be endangered. Anne and Nicholas’s photophobia denotes their own material condition as lights and shadows recorded on celluloid that needs darkness ‘to develop.’ All the movie’s events, save for Grace’s two brief excursions, take place in the house, since the characters in this fiction do not seem to have an existence beyond the universe of fiction itself. The protagonist’s only attempt at escape is almost immediately aborted by the mysterious fog, suggesting that her journey is one of self-knowledge that will end only

when she realizes her ‘unreal’ condition. It is significant that this anagnorisis takes place after the contemplation of other images—specifically, the macabre photos of the servants’ corpses. The familiar gothic motif of the portrait as a representation of life is replicated by the morbid pictures of the dead posing in a parody of the living. In these images, the spectators contemplate themselves sitting, immobile, in the movie theater, viewing what they believe to be a representation of life on the screen, when in reality, the characters—and this is something we will find out only at the end of the film—simulate a life that is possible only in the realm of filmic illusion.

In *The Others*, Amenábar gives another turn of the screw to his relentless exploration of ontologies in conflict. The realms of the real and the supernatural struggle throughout the film, only to meet an unexpected ending: what we considered supernatural was actually reality, while the assumed reality was part of the paranormal domain. The implications of this ontological transgression go beyond a witty plot turn or a banal reflection on the afterlife, however. The transgression of the structural frames between reality and fiction, an element that characterizes Amenábar’s films, makes us question critically the world we live in—a postmodern global world not of eternal truths but of artifices, simulacra, and contingent structures.

Notes

- 1 Amenábar’s consecration in the film industry took place years later when he won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film for *Mar Adentro* (2004), but in terms of international presence, all of his films made after *The Others* have had more limited circulation.
- 2 The practice of dubbing dates back to an order issued by the Caudillo on April 24 1941, during a period when Franco’s regime was controlled by filo-fascist politicians and extreme nationalists. In some cases this led to script changes in essence turning dubbing into a tool for censorship.
- 3 Interestingly, Amenábar’s own “Spanishness” may also come into question when considering he was born in Santiago, Chile to a Spanish mother and Chilean father.
- 4 *Mise en abyme*, as Lucien Dällenbach understands it, is “any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it” (8). Dällenbach also refers to this type of *mise en abyme* as “fictional,” defining it as “an intertextual résumé or quotation of the content of a story” (55).
- 5 When Grace addresses Mr. Tuttle for the first time (“You must be the gardener”), the latter hesitates and only after a pause does he answer, “That’s right, the gardener!”, as if he had just discovered his own role.
- 6 Charlene Bunnell, “The Gothic: A Literary Genre’s Transition to Film,” in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 79–100.
- 7 See also Miles 47.
- 8 The film’s opening words evoke the BBC radio program “Listen With Mother,” broadcast in the UK between 1950 and 1982, which always began, “Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin.”

32 Santiago Juan-Navarro

- 9 Amenábar went on to employ this same device in his fourth feature film, *Mar Adentro*, an existential melodrama at odds with the generic conventions of the thriller.
- 10 The Aristotelian notion of catharsis (and its latter day psychoanalytic underpinnings) has been recently questioned by some cultural theorists. Julian Hanich, for example, dismisses it by pointing out that we visit the cinema to experience emotions, not to rid ourselves of them (9).
- 11 In fact, during postproduction, the possibility of changing the title to *The Darkness* was entertained.
- 12 Amenábar has often insisted on the importance of ambiguity and the off-screen in the buildup of suspense (Juan-Navarro, "La pantalla" 381).
- 13 "The bourgeois family is the scene of ghostly return, where guilty secrets of the past transgression and uncertain class origins are the sources of anxiety" (Botting 214).
- 14 Brian McHale has explored the role of domesticity and the haunted house motif as two elements that suit the postmodern explorations of worlds in conflict, such as the confrontation between the possible (the "real") and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal: "the haunted house: nothing is more domestic, more normal, than a middle-class house, so nothing is more disruptive than other-worldly agents penetrating and 'taking over' a house" (8).
- 15 For a detailed discussion of the similarities between gothic and postmodern practices, see Armitt, Becker, Beville, Botting, Cornwell, Kilgour, Sage and Smith, and Tinkler-Villani and Davidson.
- 16 The dream metaphor for film viewing is one of the most persistent metaphors in both classical and modern film theory. In the Spanish context it has been thematized in several 20th century novels (e.g. Terenci Moix's *El día que murió Marilyn* and Juan Marsé's *El embrujo de Shanghai*). For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see Marí (2003).
- 17 Robert Stam summarizes Baudry's theories in this way: "The shadowy images on the screen, the darkness of the movie theater, the passive immobility of the spectator, the womb-like sealing off of ambient noises and quotidian pressures, all foster an artificial stage of regression, generating 'archaic moments of fusion' not unlike those engendered by dream" (Stam 1999: 163).

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