Re-membering Identites: Terror, Exile and Rebirth in Hispanic Film and Literature

by

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Date: May 17th, 2010
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation examines fictional representations of Argentine and Spanish authoritarianism from the position of exiled, traumatized and/or marginalized subjects. Though the primary texts and films engage questions of terror, trauma and repression from the 1930s to 80s in Spain and Argentina they stand out from works made within these contexts (that is, works lacking spatial and/or temporal distance) by focusing on how and to what extent individual and collective rebirth can arise from the ashes of terror, exile and oblivion. On the one hand, these works explore the ways in which authoritarian terror and repression maintain and are maintained psychologically, historically and ideologically in these cultures by a series of artificial separations between self and other, fantasy and reality, history and fiction, female and male, desire and responsibility, the spiritual and material, plurality and unity, the past and the future. On the other hand, these works suggest that it is by confronting the repressed authoritarian past through pluralistic, fictional, “exilic” retellings that these binaries may be transcended and that identity, history and reality itself may be radically re-membered.

In effect, the capacity to “re-member”, which is revealed to be essentially synonymous with the act of “rebirth”, demands a confrontation with the past that is every bit as dependent on “fantastic retellings” of both reality and fiction as it is on history or reality--to the same degree, in fact, that the realization of the self is contingent on an encounter with radical alterity. The various forms of monstrosity, exile and ambiguity that coalesce within these films and texts not only enable this to happen, but they imply that the creation of the primary work depends as much on its audience as it does on its
author. Accordingly, the ethical processes these works establish, through narrative layering, ambiguity and other techniques, occur not only within the films and texts but in the outer relationships and responses they elicit from their readers or viewers.

Thus, the processes of exile and rebirth that these works establish can only be fully appreciated in dialogue with their audiences (via a “narrative ethics”), with history and with theories ranging from feminism to mysticism to psychoanalysis (drawing on Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud) to ethical philosophers, in particular, Emmanuel Levinas. In my endeavor to stimulate this dialogue, in which I both build on and depart from these theories, I reveal how and why “exile” fiction has become such a crucial medium for refiguring “identity”—a term which itself becomes inseparable from spirituality. Accordingly, spirituality is not detached from reality or fantasy, but rather buried in the repressed identities and memories that, when exposed through the “monstrous ambiguities” of fiction, reveal an indestructible bond between self and other, desire and responsibility, fantasy and reality, among other dichotomies.

At the same time that these works offer positive models of spirituality, rebirth, and re-membering, they incisively critique the repressive ways in which religion and specifically, Christianity, have been manipulated, in conjunction with authoritarian paradigms, to terrifying, repressive, “sacrificial” ends. More generally, all of these works, notwithstanding their “timeless” and exilic dimensions, represent pivotal moments in Spanish and Argentine history while at the same time revealing innate links or analogies between authoritarianism and religious doctrine. On the other hand, the timeless, placeless, exilic nature of these works helps shed light on the growing and
global importance of exile film and literature as well as the correspondingly great and ever-growing need to re-examine the lost, buried and terrifying past that they re-member.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Martha, for teaching me the most important lessons in life—perseverance, love and an open mind.
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Introduction

Authoritarianism is based on the paradox, the illusion that life equals death and that selfhood equals the exclusion of others, the sacrifice of others, the spilling of blood. In authoritarian Argentina and Spain of the 1930s to 80s this false opposition between self and other spirals into a series of other dichotomies such as male vs. female, reality vs. fantasy, desire vs. responsibility, the past vs. the future and the material/sexual vs. the spiritual. As historians like David Rock (on Argentina) and Michael Richards (on Spain) have noted, the need for sacrifice and blood is justified not only as a national and practical “necessity” but, rather ironically, as a means of acceding the spiritual. Alternatively, spirituality is itself degraded to worldly laws and agendas, often disguised as “religion”, that divest the very notion of spirituality of its meaning and power. Though communists, Jews, women, homosexuals, foreigners, and others are blamed, even tortured and killed for their countries’ economic, cultural and other crises, those in power, while continuing to advocate the elimination or taming of these “others” simultaneously disavow responsibility for their deaths, disappearances, tortures, and traumas.

Authoritarian rule in these countries thrives on the additional paradox that truth consists of deceit and erasure, a future without a past, and a past without a future. It is built on the illusion that national and collective identities are bound to the monolithic narratives of powerful men with money and guns. Yet, what makes these men most dangerous are not their guns but their words—their stories of hate and oblivion that are stamped with the seal of official Truth; stories that in their desire to distance themselves from fantasy and fiction become, ironically, distanced from that which is most real;
stories that in their very attempt to dissociate from these monstrous “others” become, in the process, that which is truly monstrous--that which is alienated from its very own self.

The objective of this thesis then, is to turn these paradoxes on their heads, to make the silences speak, to make the strange familiar, and to turn the various monsters that populate my primary works into the heroines who are no less present and powerful. This is done not through histories but through fictions, fictions that not only expose the crises and contradictions of authoritarian Spain and Argentina but in the process of retelling them simultaneously resist them. These are works that dramatize the possibility of death and rebirth through the very lens of those who have been erased from official history. Though my primary works are all authored by men, their “feminization” by factors such as exile, trauma, and homosexuality is crucial. These works unanimously stress that if personal and communal rebirth are to fully unfold, the female element must be radically reconceived, and its power and presence must be rescued from historical, psychological, and spiritual exile. The end result, however, is not the affirmation of the feminine but rather the dissolution of the very categories of male and female as the protagonists learn to embrace androgynous identities and attitudes through their journey of rebirth.

In fact, both Victor Erice’s, El espíritu de la colmena (1973) and Guillermo del Toro’s, El laberinto del fauno (2007) are films which, though made by men, portray post-war (1940s) terror in Spain from the perspective of young female protagonists--girls who were, incidentally, about the same age as these men when they suffered their respective terrors/traumas. As orphaned/abandoned girls they not only reflect the “feminization” of men as well as their repressed sides and vulnerabilities, not to mention analogous and
powerfully subversive links between childhood and film\(^1\), but also the potential for a liberating revolution (and even the birth of a new generation of hope) that occurs precisely on the brink of exile and death. The fact that these films recycle a variety of mystical themes and symbols popularized in medieval Spain through (Islamic) Sufists, (Jewish) Kabbalists and Christian mystics/Gnostics helps us viewers appreciate the extent to which cycles of death and rebirth occur not only on personal, individual, even fictional levels but also in historical cycles or waves. The films’ ability to juxtapose elements of these supposedly antagonistic religions in a way that both highlights the destructive and dogmatic nature of organized religion, specifically in Spain, as well as the liberating qualities that inhere in the pluralistic emanations of their more mystical variants immediately evokes two dialectic images of Spain that coalesce into a third synthetic one.

Though the films subsume all three “moments”, as a totality they express this third and final synthesis. The first image harks back to a moment in which these three religions coexisted (though not entirely peacefully) in medieval Spain; the second represents an image of rupture and exile, as conveyed by the Spanish Inquisition (the prime model for Franco’s own exterminating regime) and, specifically, the Edict of Expulsion; and the third is a moment of synthesis or rebirth—a rebirth that enables these religions to reunite, albeit in a way that destroys the very concept of religion itself in favor of a non-repressive, more pluralistic yet also more unitary notion of the spiritual—one which cannot be found in any one religion but rather in fictional, poetic and artistic processes. Appropriately, monsters, as they symbolize repression, alterity, exile, abjection and ambiguity, figure strongly in these films. Though they embody the

\(^1\) A question which Vicky Lebau has recently theorized in her book, *Childhood and Cinema* (2008) and to which I will return in subsequent sections of this dissertation.
repressed plurality and true unity that has been demonized by both religion and authoritarian repression, it is for this very reason that these monsters also serve as the key to true spirituality and rebirth.

This dialectic between (monstrous) exile and rebirth is paralleled in both films in the movement between fantasy and reality, time and the timeless, future and past, male and female, self and other. In both films, the two girls are led by imaginary monsters into an alternate world that parallels the real world. Though the monsters are derived from the fictions and fairytales the girls absorb, they also represent real people in the girls’ lives, whether evil, “fascist” stepfathers or potentially subversive yet repressed heroines. The point is, they are monstrous not because they are bad but because they are feared. Once the fear is conquered, the monster, like the illusions on which authoritarian terror is based, is revealed for what it truly is—both everything and nothing. It is, paradoxically, through an encounter with their empty, orphan-like states that these young heroines conquer their inner and collective demons. In this way, they learn to grow up, embrace responsibility and find their “true Fathers” not in an authoritarian pseudo-God (Franco) but rather, deep within themselves.

Though this emphasis on self-discovery as well as the corresponding need to confront repressed monsters and demons are equally essential to all my primary works, these two works are unique in their exploration of the extent to which children, somewhat counter-intuitively, can become role-models, even teachers to their parents, who, in the midst of an ever growing climate of corruption, repression and terror, have lost not only their connection to their innocence and open-mindedness but also to an-Other world of fantasy and love. And yet, it is by finally reconnecting to one’s inner child that these
adults can remember (perhaps much like Erice and del Toro themselves) not only the
forgotten past but also their forgotten and forsaken selves.

Though my Argentine texts, Manuel Puig Delledone’s, *El beso de la mujer araña*
(1976) and Tomás Eloy Martínez’, *Santa Evita* (1995), address many similar themes,
they explore these issues through adults rather than children. In so doing, they expose
other equally important dimensions of authoritarianism (particularly with respect to adult
sexuality, sexual repression, responsibility, betrayal and forgiveness) as well as, more
generally, the specific lessons and wisdom that only adulthood can offer. This decision
to focus on adulthood in many ways reflects the specific type of authoritarian terror
representative of Argentina and the ways it has affected the particular lives of Puig and
Martínez, particularly as adults. In light of Vicky Lebau’s book on the bonds between
childhood and cinema, it is also appropriate that these works be novels rather than
films—though, given the childhood repressions and multi-temporal issues that emerge in
these novels, and specifically, *El beso*, it is just as fitting that *El beso*, though a novel, not
only consists of but is generated through (the retelling of) films. At the same time, much
like the rest of my primary works/films, and in the tradition of both mystical and
psychoanalytical works (for example, those of Jacques Lacan, who in turn, builds on
Sigmund Freud), these novels suggest that the journey inwards towards self-discovery is
simultaneously a journey outwards towards communal renewal, unity and remembrance.

In *El beso*, for example, the cellmates, Valentin (a macho guerrilla “rationalist”) and
Molina (a passionate yet passive homosexual) learn to remake themselves by first

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2 I am thinking here of Lacan’s notion of the uncanny, which in turn, evolves from Freud’s notion of the
*unheimlich* (literally, the “un-home-ly” or “un-home-y”). Ironically, despite Freud’s secular abhorrence for
his ex-disciple, Carl Jung’s “mysticism”, many of Freud’s concepts (and particularly his treatises on
dreamwork and the uncanny/un-home-ly) powerfully coincide with spiritual, even mystical precepts.
losing themselves in each other. Ironically, these polar-opposite men are placed in the same cell so that Molina can pry information from political-prisoner, Valentín. Yet, as their personal histories, values and theories become mixed with Molina’s film narrations, they establish a give-and-take relationship that enables them to become more balanced individuals—a relationship which the readers, in turn, are encouraged to mirror. In truth, all my primary works, largely by virtue of being multi-layered fictions, invite their audiences to participate in the very same sort of ethical narratives (or retellings) in which they themselves partake. In this way, the ethical processes these works establish occur not only within the films and texts themselves, but also in the outer relationships and responses they elicit from their readers and viewers.

To summarize, this dissertation examines fictional representations of Argentine and Spanish authoritarianism from the position of exiled, traumatized and marginalized subjects. Unlike texts made within and during these contexts (specifically, from the 1930s to 80s in Spain and Argentina), these works address the ways in which renewal and hope can arise, both in literature and life, from the ashes of terror, exile and oblivion. At the same time, these works serve as a springboard for an ethical theorizing or a “narrative ethics” in which it becomes possible to transcend the previously noted dichotomies as well as the dissociating effects of trauma by means of fictional retellings of the past.

Unlike other current formulations of a “narrative ethics”, mine not only makes the crucial move of incorporating film\(^3\), but it more adequately explores why and how a narrative which \textit{performs} an ethical function must not only emphasize and transcend the

\(^3\) Though a variety of critics and theorists ranging from Slavoj Žižek to Kaja Silverman have similarly noted the uniquely ethical effects of film, they do not directly insert their ideas into a “narrative ethics”, nor do the theorists typically associated with “a narrative ethics” make an effort to explore the ethical effects of film in this context (of a “narrative ethics”).
self/other divide but also the inseparable dichotomies of male and female, spirituality and materiality, responsibility and desire, fantasy and reality, among others. With the possible exception of the categories “male” and “female”, this is not to suggest that these words have no true meaning, but that they are complementary rather than oppositional. Indeed, it is by being separated and pitted against one another that these terms lose true meaning. In much the same way that the self becomes nothing without the other, desire and responsibility, fantasy and reality, among other binaries treated in this dissertation need each other in order to gain real substance.

In an effort to demonstrate this, I explore new dimensions of exile and how they intersect in fiction—a task that requires redefining the very notion of what exile fiction is in more expansive and inclusive ways. Most crucially, I analyze the extent to which exile is not a place of secularity (an idea popularized by exile theorist and writer, Edward Said) but rather, a place from which full-blown spirituality may emerge—a spirituality that is, nevertheless, tied, through the very experience of exile, to both mystical and psychoanalytic concepts, such as the uncanny. In this light, it becomes evident not only that metaphysics, psychoanalysis and science overlap but also that (exile) fiction is the vehicle most capable of conveying this bond as well as its significance.

Ironically, the primary anxiety I have over this dissertation is my own feeling of placelessness. To begin, I feel somewhat out of place for attempting a serious, academic work that is so “metaphysical” in nature, particularly in the predominantly “secular” fields of film and literature. The flip side to this concern is that this dissertation might just as easily be positioned as a work of spiritual or religious studies as one of film or literary studies. And yet, one of the main goals of this dissertation is to demonstrate that
the two are one. Perhaps then, my anxiety over “not belonging” is appropriate in a dissertation that deals with exile and, what is more, that resists pigeonholing ideas or concepts into rigid or binary systems. After all, the dichotomies that this dissertation explodes are not only those between self and other, male and female, fantasy and reality, spirituality and reality, among others, but, just as fundamentally, the limits and categories of academic fields of study themselves.

Though other critics, perhaps most notably, Sophia McClennen (in her book, *The Dialectics of Exile*), have similarly envisioned new, more open and expansive ways of defining exile (for example, McClennen argues that the notion of exile must be extended to people forced to leave their countries due to economic pressures and other indirect measures), my work, while building on or integrating this understanding of exile, goes one step further—specifically in light of its metaphysical nature. By necessity then, I not only examine other types of non-forced exile but, more importantly, inner forms of exile, such as homosexuality, border-subjectivity, and other forms of trauma and estrangement as well as the ways in which these different types of exile intersect in fiction.

The works I examine employ metaphors such as monstrosity, imprisonment, and even fantasy itself to represent such exile—and yet, in each case, these metaphors or symbols of exile transform into vehicles of rebirth. The various forms of exile that converge in my works are also largely conveyed through the exile of what feminist psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, calls “poetic language”, which according to Kristeva is itself defined by a certain type of exile which, nonetheless, leads to rebirth. In short, it is the very openness of poetic language (or its resistance to monolithic meanings⁴) that enables it to achieve this. Yet, though I largely build on Kristeva’s premise that literary

⁴ Monolithic meaning is, of course, epitomized by authoritarian discourse.
language is, by nature, exilic, and though I use her central concepts of self-doubling and, especially, the maternal receptacle as the vehicle through which this rebirth occurs, this dissertation departs from her theories in manifold ways. Not only do I explore the different types of exile that are wed in fiction as well as the historical and philosophical significance of these distinct forms of exile, but in so doing, I am forced to focus more heavily on the Other (and specifically the relationship between the self and the Other) rather than dealing primarily with the ways in which the author’s own personal need to remake him/herself is revealed in and through the text.

Indeed, Kristeva’s notion of rebirth through poetic language is a relatively solitary process, as it limits and is limited to the author—and specifically, the author’s desire. Thus, it must be balanced by a deep engagement with the Other, which, as I will soon elaborate, calls for the help of theorist, Emmanuel Levinas, and, particularly his work on radical responsibility. Yet, whereas Kristeva is excessively subject/desire oriented, Levinas prioritizes responsibility to the Other over and above the self—to the extent that both self and other become meaningless terms, along with responsibility. It is only by putting desire and responsibility into dialogue, and by noting that they each have equal and interconnected importance, that either of them may gain real significance and thus, ethical weight. Just as self-discovery is dependent on the Other, desire and liberation become one with responsibility—and they do so by means of fantasy/fictional retellings which, paradoxically, more fully expose the hidden elements of reality and history.

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5 Admittedly, within Levinas’ own logic this would not necessarily be construed as a problem since, as Gabriela Basterra notes, “Kant, Levinas, Lacan, and Badiou are not concerned with the difference between the self and the other, but rather with the gap opened within the same by an irreducible event” (“Ethics, Perhaps” 37). Though I would agree that autonomous identities do not wholly exist as such (since the self is tied to and defined by the other), if ethics completely denies the notion of identity through which the concepts of self and other emerge, then not only does the notion of altruism lose all meaning, but ethics itself is reduced to non-ethics—that is, theorizing in a void. Simply put, if the self does not exist, how can it be responsible?
On the other hand, though Kristeva makes no attempt to incorporate film into her theories of poetic language and its processes of exile and rebirth, this dissertation explores how film is capable of using analogous techniques. In fact, many of these techniques (including visual metaphors and even silence) are less restricted by the encaging quality of language that poetic language itself can only imperfectly escape—though certainly, films’ appeal to visual, auditory and other stimuli not found in literature imposes its own set of limits and “cages”. Yet, as in literature, it is the exilic nature of the films I explore and their correspondingly monstrous and ambiguous techniques that enable them to generate rebirth. Though all my works share a wide range of intersecting themes and techniques, this idea that exile is the potential site of ethical, spiritual and narrative rebirth *par excellence* is not only tightly tied to the ability to overcome false dichotomies but, as each of my works uniquely demonstrate, it thoroughly debunks the idea that science and psychology are antithetical to spiritual matters.

Psychologists and psychoanalysts ranging from Sigmund Freud to Carl Jung to Jacques Lacan to Julia Kristeva help solidify this bond between the spirit and the psyche, however unwittingly. Psychoanalysts tend to do so in a more direct and, occasionally, even a conscious way (for example, Carl Jung consistently emphasizes the strong affinity between dreams and visions/spiritual awareness). Though the Lacanian tradition might be more reluctant to affirm this link⁶, Lacan’s notion of “the Real”, the Other, the uncanny, and even, albeit more ambiguously, his understanding of the Mirror Stage, all find direct parallels in a wide variety of mystical traditions (perhaps especially Sufism) that long predate his work. Julia Kristeva, on the other hand, is not only largely aware of

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⁶ Though Lacan never definitively or explicitly rejects or espouses metaphysical or spiritual concepts or concerns, the Lacanian tradition cemented by his followers is overwhelmingly secular in nature.
many parallels between metaphysics and psychoanalysis, but she explicitly notes the ways in which biblical stories, beliefs and paradigms help people make sense of their lives, particularly through the process of creative writing. This idea resonates with this dissertations’ persistent suggestion that spirituality culminates in artistic creation.

Kristeva has also noted (*Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*) that depression itself a consequence of lack of faith. Thus, the motive for all creative writing is the desire to remake oneself (and to cure the feeling of exile, depression and estrangement) through art. Alternatively, we might say that madness evolves out of a lack of faith in reality and in the existence of others. Yet, ironically, madness is often construed as the very belief in radical alterity, in metaphysics and even poetry (or more generally, art). Perhaps the figure most popular for promoting this idea within the realm of academia is Max Nordau in his polemical book, *Degeneration* (1892). In this book he not only explains how mystics suffer from a sort of bodily (and specifically mental) degeneration but he more loosely extends this notion of degeneration to artists (particularly contemporary, non-classical artists), who, he claims, contrary to scientists, have disordered, irrational and diseased minds—and in fact, display striking similarities to criminals.

It is little wonder, then, that as Ian Singer notes in his introduction to Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, “The charge of madness dogged

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7 Though some theorists and critics (most notably, William Ellos in his book, *Narrative Ethics*) have been stumped by Kristeva’s alleged profession of atheism (which, in any case, may no longer be true), despite being so mystically, spiritually, even biblically inclined, it is important to remember that one can be spiritual without being a theist. More importantly, as each one of the works addressed in this thesis demonstrates in its own peculiar way, one does not need to believe in the dogmas or even the historical truths of any given religion in order to appreciate many of the spiritual values embedded in their stories. Indeed, a person who believes that Jesus is his/her messiah (or a person who considers himself to be a true Christian) should not be shaken in his/her faith were it to be proven that the historical Jesus never existed—for what makes this man-God truly powerful and enlightening is what he represents and promises—not what he was or might have been. Alternatively, a true Jew must not believe that Jonah actually lived in a whale in order for Jonah’s story to have spiritual weight—though, of course, a “true Jew” or “Christian” would most likely not define him/herself in these exclusionary terms (that is, as Jew, Christian or anything else).
Blake throughout his life and continued to pursue him after death”(xxvi), presumably due to the highly spiritual or, as Frye prefers to put it, visionary nature of his poetic work. In his effort to justify Blake’s visionary (as opposed to mad) qualities, Frye is quick to point out the need to distinguish between the imaginary (that which is not real) and imagination (that which links the self to others and to reality itself)—a difference I will soon explore in more detail. While true madmen certainly exist (and perhaps dwell in their own imaginary worlds), poets and visionaries reside in an imaginative realm that, nonetheless, joins them more deeply to their true selves, to God, to reality and to others.

Though many psychoanalysts prove useful in conveying these links (whether willingly or not), to the other extreme, scores of psychologists, and especially trauma theorists/experts, tend to be both unusually (and unwillingly) helpful and yet, bitterly close-minded, as they attempt to reduce all irrational processes and even the alienating effects of trauma and exile to disorders, boxes and labels as opposed to potentially enlightening or “eye-opening” experiences. This not only keeps the victims of trauma in victimized, powerless, even stigmatized positions, but it does so in a way that immediately evokes Michel Foucault’s analysis of madness as a category that does not necessarily reflect actual human insanity but rather emerges, evolves and defines itself (madness) in accordance to shifts in power-knowledge (and even bio-power, as a regime concerned with fostering the life, growth and “care” of the population). By sustaining these categories, psychology stifles alterity, freedom and free-thinking, and hence prevents people from appreciating the full humanity/personality of others as well as realizing their own. Moreover, by preserving victims in a state of victimhood, psychology plays into a larger structure/pattern governing Western Society that, as
Gabriela Basterra wisely observes, keeps people (as victims) from becoming truly responsible subjects/agents.\(^8\)

In reality, Basterra’s work (as explored, for example, in “Ethics, Perhaps” and, more extensively, in Seductions of Fate) centers on what she calls “tragic subjectivities”, that is, the notion that in Western societies subjectivity and autonomy are based on victimization and (the internalization of) guilt—and, more generally, on accepting the tragedy of fate. Subjectivity is not only predicated on the illusion of autonomy that underlies what Basterra calls the “rational political order” but, as a consequence, it often, paradoxically, comes into being or is defined by precisely those external, fateful, uncontrollable events or traumas that become markers of who one is. As a result,

“Attention” to the other represents the other either as the victim that must be saved by projecting one’s own idea of the good, or as the “diverse” other that must be carefully kept at a distance (through “tolerance” and “charity”), or as the enemy to be vanquished, or as the victim of a society that lacks democracy. Even when “well” intended, these depictions of the other deflect attention from the problem of the same, which is the problem that concerns Kant, Lacan, and Levinas. The “same” that Levinas describes in Otherwise than Being does not coincide with itself because it is not a “one” (neither a unicity, nor singular) but plural. In the plurality of the same lies the impossible possibility that is ethics. (“Ethics, Perhaps” 26)

While this dissertation similarly endorses this Levinasian notion of ethics, it also points to obstacles in Levinas’ thinking that make it impossible for him to truly envisage an effective and coherent ethics of alterity—as I will more amply explore on my section on “Narrative Ethics” and elsewhere. Yet, more to the point, my dissertation both converges with yet departs from (while not necessarily disagreeing with) Basterra’s

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\(^8\) According to Basterra, “Being responsible for one’s actions implies being responsible before someone else, and if we deny our responsibility we also deny our accountability to other people. It is the receiving pole of action, the real people who suffer from our acts, that we blind ourselves to—that we obliterate, when we depict ourselves as victims. (It is in this way that when we claim we are victims we create real victims.) But perhaps even more pressing than refusing responsibility is the aspiration to preserve the social symbolic order that produces us as subjects.” (“Ethics, Perhaps” 28)
critique of the tendency to understand subjectivity via the subjects’ victimizing traumas, guilt, needs and, in effect, lack of responsibility for his/her life (conceived of as a “fate”). Though this dissertation concurs that the traumas or experiences that enable one to define oneself in fateful ways must be rejected (or reevaluated in ways that resist deterministic irresponsibility), at the same time, these traumas offer the possibility of conquering fate. In part, for the very reason that they are not self-induced but rather unexpected and uncontrollable, these traumas serve, potentially, as a means of confronting the very radical alterity that lies within the self—and thus, they may enable one to overcome victimization and, more generally, false notions of the self (as estranged from the other).

In any case, the “disordering” labels that may be applied to trauma victims are dangerous not only because, if accepted by the “victim”, they suffocate freedom, identity, agency and responsibility but also because they are predicated on the separation of science and reason from the “irrational” and degraded realms of emotion and spirituality. In fact, if pushed to its limits, the entire biblical tradition as well as all other forms of religion and spirituality could, within the logic of much trauma theory and psychology, easily be explained away as the result of post-traumatic stress syndrome. And yet, as my primary works suggest (particularly my final chapter on Alejandro Amenábar’s Abre los ojos), when science is truly pushed to its limits, it depends on faith, spirituality and the irrational to the point that it must effectively fuse with them.

In a manner of speaking, whereas my primary works all blow air into the deflated balloon of our seemingly two-dimensional reality, thus enabling us to see its true and full dimensionality; psychology and, specifically, trauma theory, tend to flatten the world. Admittedly, some experts on trauma have begun to develop more sympathetic ways of
understanding trauma victims, and even propose that the label PTSD be discarded. According to David Becker in “The Deficiency of the Concept of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder When Dealing with Victims of Human Rights Violations”, “[…]as Eissler suggests, if we call that experience a ‘disorder’, we repeat the denial initiated by the victimizers, and thereby deepen the trauma…Would it not be more correct to consider somebody disordered who does not become ill after such an experience?”(103-104).

And yet, as the wording of this quote implies (and, specifically, the word “ill”), even those trauma experts who are relatively sympathetic to trauma victims and the stigmatizing labels they are forced to wear, still view the experience of trauma as a handicap rather than as an experience that, for all the obstacles, sufferings and setbacks it induces, may also generate positive, artistic, even healthy outcomes and processes. On the other hand, trauma theorists, even as many of them label the experience of trauma as a disorder (or at the very least a problem that must be overcome), are especially useful in helping us to expand our definitions and understanding of exile and estrangement. To begin, trauma theorists generally agree that recovery from trauma is a process that can only truly commence once the “victim” is distanced from his/her traumas and the environment that provoked or enabled them. This need to occupy a “safe distance” might help explain why texts and films that are distanced, spatially and/or temporally, from the

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9 Judith Herman’s book, *Trauma and Recovery*, serves as a perfect example. Though overly focused on incest and war, it is exhaustive in its coverage of the reception and treatment of trauma victims, from “blaming the victim”, not believing the victim (thus reproducing the trauma), to (un)productive ways of remembering. While documenting ‘typical’ responses in victims, it offers plausible explanations and cures. Yet, despite its pretenses to defend the victim from further trauma by mislabeling or not listening, it often comes close to doing so by associating certain acts and personality traits with post-traumatic ‘disorders’. On the other hand, though it focuses primarily on distinct types of therapy, it also touches, crucially, on the importance of storytelling and, more generally, truth telling, as well as the crucial roles that faith and the law play in recovery. My major complaint, however, is reflected in the title itself—for mere recovery (rather than *rebirth*) is simply not radical enough for victims, who, as Herman herself acknowledges, must reconstruct a system of beliefs in which guilt, responsibility and undeserved suffering make sense.
terrors they depict, are especially adept at focusing on rebirth as much as terror and exile. Furthermore, as suggested both by the personal biographies of my authors/auteurs and the content of their fictional works, trauma itself constitutes yet another sort of “interior exile”—a notion that most trauma theory would support. Though this exile may madden, even kill its victims, it is from this very place of exile that a true rebirth may take place.

This is not to discount the fact that traumatic experiences may oftentimes produce true psychosis or other insurmountable “problems” and crises, including suicide, death or, less dramatically, the retreat into imaginary rather than imaginative worlds (as defined by Frye). Yet to reduce trauma to this polar extreme or “cage” would be to reduce the world itself, or rather, to strip it of its power, splendor and, especially, its artistic genius. As each of my chapters explores in its own particular ways, probably none of the primary works that I examine could have been written or produced had their authors and directors not been subjected to alienating factors such as trauma, exile, and other forms of terror and estrangement. As we will continue to see, an undeniable link exists between exile, spirituality, psychoanalysis and fiction.

Though the exilic “theology” that these primary works advocate draws as heavily on mystical and religious traditions (particularly Abrahamic ones) as it does on psychoanalytic ones, it resists not only the prejudices of many variants of psychology (and especially trauma theory) but also the monolithic and repressive dogmas typically associated with these (Abrahamic) religions and the violence and intolerance they have provoked as “organized” institutions. In fact, spirituality, as defined by these texts, undermines religion—for it cannot be found in dogma, much less that of any one religion.

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10 Though, following Kristeva’s definition, all fiction is to varying degrees exilic by nature, exile fiction—which in its prototypical form interlaces various types of exile and ambiguity that Kristeva does not imagine and with ethical effects she ignores—is especially adept at exposing these bonds.
but rather in a discovery of the self that is also, paradoxically, an encounter with radical alterity. Despite the tendency of organized religion to repress alterity (and this includes the repression of the very alterity that lies at the “mystic” core or heart of every religion), if religion gets anything right it is its tendency to focus on rebirth. Even the most horrendously conservative and dogmatically religious followers and “leaders” (who, in truth, are also followers) will often explain their religious convictions through the metaphor of rebirth. Yet, this term means little more to them than their newfound ability to passively and blindly obey a repressive, dichotomous, judgmental and fear-inspiring dogma or (pseudo)God. As Northrop Frye maintains,

There is only one false religion […] First, it postulates some kind of God who is unknown and mysterious because he is not inside us but somewhere else where, only God knows. Second, it preaches submission, acceptance, and unquestioning the status quo, it is always “State Religion, which is the source of all Cruelty.” (Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake 66)

Frye concludes, “It is in the God of official Christianity, however, invented as a homeopathic cure for the teachings of Jesus, that state religion has produced its masterpiece.”(67) In fact, the films and novels I engage in this dissertation reveal this terror-inspiring and highly repressive “religious” thinking as well as its ties to authoritarianism while at the same time turning religious paradigms on their heads. As the ordering of its title suggests, this dissertation is not only about terror, exile and rebirth but about the dialectical dynamic that occurs between these three terms. Through the primary works it examines, this dissertation explores two opposing dialectics. On the one hand, it exposes the dogmatic “religious” and “authoritarian” dialectic that begins with (false) “rebirth” (as embodied in the rise of a new authoritarian leader-God-Father), which then leads to terror (and thus, fear, passivity and blind obedience) and finally
exile/estrangement. On the other hand, this dissertation reverses this repressive ordering—that is, it envisages a new, more hopeful sequence that begins with terror, moves to the ambiguous space of exile, and ends in a positive yet still ambiguous rebirth that emerges from a newfound capacity to view and experience spirituality as the antithesis of that promoted by organized (or state) religion. As Frye further explains,

[…]even men who cannot reach the idea of God believe in the reality of larger human bodies, such as nations, cities, or races, and even speak of them as fathers or mothers. It takes genuine faith to see a nation or race as a larger human being, or form of human existence, and a good deal of such faith is undoubtedly idolatry.” (Fearful Symmetry 50).

To be sure, this partial faith is inherent both to organized religion and to any type of nationalism or authoritarianism—and it is, perhaps, even more dangerous than no faith at all for it replaces true unity with false unity (one which is based on exclusion) as it mistakes tyrants for God and a single country/nation for the world—or even the heavens themselves. Thus, it is no great surprise that authoritarianism, nationalism and God are explicitly fused in Franco’s National Catholicism. Though the subject of religion is more subtle in Argentina, it is still overwhelmingly present and tied to the authoritarian mindset, particularly as advocated by Peronism (a subject treated extensively in Chapter 4, which focuses on Tomás Eloy Martínez’, Santa Evita). In reality, Perón becomes a pseudo-God to his people in much the same way that Franco does—only rather than self-elevating himself to this level, to a great extent, he has his wife, Evita, do it for him. And yet, his legacy of terror, sacrifice, and repression was not entirely the Peróns’ own creation but the logical outcome or evolution of a country plagued by years of repression, authoritarianism and intolerance—and, as more fully explored in El beso, it continued to
recycle itself in even more perverse forms throughout the 1970s and 80s, culminating in the terror of the “Proceso” or “Dirty War” which *El beso*, in many ways, anticipates.

Of course, one must consider that Argentina is not only traditionally Catholic, but it is a country whose religious and historical legacy reaches back to and overlaps with the repressive histories of the Spanish Inquisition. In fact, its legacy of repression is exacerbated by the erasure, eradication and repression of its “barbaric” indigenous tribes from the onset of the Spanish Conquest of the “new world” —a theme that also forcefully resurfaces in *El beso* and *Santa Evita*. On the other hand, because Argentina is plagued (from the 1930s to 80s) by a series of ephemeral authoritarian coups and governments, none of which maintain the explicit and powerful ties to religion that Francoism does, religious and spiritual issues are treated in more subtle, ambiguous yet no less powerful ways in these texts and in the authoritarian cultures they reflect.

**A New Hope**

Yet, what is perhaps most remarkable about the works treated in this dissertation, both Spanish and Argentine alike, is their ability to represent negative patterns, dialectics and dichotomies while at the same time offering models of hope that effectively reverse and reorder such paradigms. It especially fitting that this be achieved through fiction, and, specifically, exile fiction. As Northrop Frye has noted (most notably, in his book on William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*), the true visionary is not a priest, preacher or religious authority, but rather the writer or artist. The true artist, like the true visionary, thrives not on passive obedience or repressive, monolithic meanings; rather, he actively creates pluralistic meanings through his hyper-vigorous imagination. For both Frye and Blake,
though imagination is unique to each individual, it is also that which ties one individual to others through a third term—divinity (or what Frye might conflate with his theory of archetypes and psychoanalysts with the uncanny)—which enables a person to recognize oneself in an-other. In this light, divinity/spirituality is synonymous with imagination.¹¹

And yet, though this divine imagination may be conceived of as a sort of “third term” (that which is neither self nor other), it is, in truth, nothing more than the synthesis of both self and other—and thus, it constitutes the true reality or Self that reconciles, while also destroying, two separate and false terms-identities-dichotomies. This idea is crucial to this dissertation inasmuch as, in the primary works I examine, the terms imagination, spirituality and (true) identity become, increasingly, one and the same. As all of the primary works in this dissertation potently corroborate (perhaps especially El laberinto and El beso) fantasy is not an escape from reality but rather a means of radically confronting and re-membering it. This ostensive paradox may itself be resolved in light of Frye’s own distinction between the imaginary (as that which is not real) and imagination (as that which, though transcendent, links us to the real and to each other)¹².

The other reason this idea that the imagination provides a link between self and other is so relevant is because it relates to the fact that both Frye and Blake ultimately equate God and Man. Or rather, though man can only imperfectly become God, God is

¹¹ As Ian Singer concisely explains in his introduction to Fearful Symmetry, “For Blake, all human imaginations are identical, not in the sense of being the same, but in the sense that they can recognize in one another something of themselves.”(xxxviii). In this respect, a parallel emerges between Blake’s understanding of the “imagination” and Carl Jung’s notion of the true “Self” (as opposed to complexes). ¹² Frye states, “It is true that we often confuse the imaginary with the imaginative in ordinary speech, and often mean, when we say that something is ‘all imagination,’ that it does not exist; but such modes of speech and thought, however intelligible in themselves, cannot be used in interpreting Blake”(36)—or, by extension, any true poet or artist.
the ultimate expression of the perfect man\textsuperscript{13}. This notion is central to my dissertation in the sense that it consistently suggests that one of the fundamental problems with authoritarian discourse (specifically in Spain and Argentina) is that it is predicated on the notion that man may use God (particularly as he is conceived in the form of the self-sacrificing Jesus) as a scapegoat who will die for man’s sins rather than as a model (of unconditional love, forgiveness, peace, etc.) to follow. By contrast, if godliness becomes something that we must imitate rather than use as an excuse to “sin”, and if our ultimate goal is to become as similar to God as possible, then this implies that man is utterly and completely responsible for himself.

Just as Man must become like God rather than distance himself from God in false humility (which as Frye and Blake suggest, is often little more than doubt), it follows that the spiritual world itself must be sought after in this world, even as it also transcends and remakes it. According to Blake and Frye, though the spiritual world is an-Other, transcendent, and more perfect world, it may be accessed directly in reality (which is conceived as a sort of fallen emanation of it). Not surprisingly, those most equipped to see this world are not clergymen or even mystics but rather poets and artists. Of course, as the primary works I engage in this dissertation consistently demonstrate, this distinction between mystics and poets is itself somewhat untenable—and, what is more, even if a distinction could be made between the two, it would remain just as useful to reflect on the similarities between mystics and poets as on their differences. Though the similarities are numerous, perhaps the most obvious and general parallel can be found in

\textsuperscript{13} As Frye tells it, “The identity of God and man is qualified by the presence in man of the tendency to deny God by self-restriction. Thus, though God is the perfection of man, man is not wholly God: otherwise there would be no point in bringing in the idea of God at all.”(\textit{Fearful Symmetry} 38)
the mystic’s experience of exile and rebirth—which in all major ways is identical to that of the poet/“visionary”.

Not surprisingly, though Frye is quick to comment on Blake’s isolation, he does not fully treat the importance of exile and its relationship to poetic or artistic “vision”.

14 One issue, however, that I take with Frye is that he is overeager to detangle Blake from any mystic qualities, preferring to use the word visionary. Though I have no problem with the word visionary, his reasons for utterly rejecting mysticism are somewhat misguided. To begin, he (mis)understands mystic experience as being wholly irreconcilable to reality, as he equates mysticism with the imaginary realm as opposed to the imaginative. Secondly, he views mystic experience as utterly untranslatable, yet, in truth, all ideas (including portrayals of reality), are somewhat untranslatable as they are limited to words, images, representations or “boxes”—and this obstacle is no less considerable for the “visionary” than for the “mystic”. Furthermore, as reflected in the very dialectic of exile and rebirth that defines mystic experience, mysticism takes both forms—that is, estrangement/exile followed by reunion/rebirth. Thus, while mysticism often has the immediate effect of further isolating one from reality, ultimately, the goal is to draw its subject closer—indeed, to completely remake this subject while simultaneously uniting spirituality to the material world. Another weakness in Frye’s understanding of mysticism is conveyed in his following statement “[…] The mystic experience for him [Blake] is poetic material, not poetic form, and must be subordinated to the demands of that form.” (Fearful Symmetry 15). And yet, as Ian Singer correctly observes in his introduction to Fearful Symmetry, for Blake, there is no difference between meaning and form—in fact, the form is the meaning—or rather, meanings. Curiously, Singer’s following citation of Frye would imply that Frye himself is, at least on some level, conscious of this, “Chief among Blake’s terms for Frye’s critical purposes were ‘form’ and ‘image.’ ‘If there is such a thing as a key to Blake’s thought,’ Frye writes in Fearful Symmetry, ‘it is in the fact that these two words mean the same thing to him’ (22).” (Fearful Symmetry xxix) More crucially, though it is certainly true that some mystical experiences (such as union with God or visions that occur while not writing) ignite or stimulate poetic form and thought rather than constitute it, what Frye forgets (or perhaps fails to grasp as he is not himself a writer) is that the very act of writing is, if truly poetic, a form of mystic experience. It is poetic and spiritual for the very reason that it appears to come from an almost uncanny voice that is one’s own and yet, not one’s own. On the other hand, I do sympathize with Frye’s distaste for the word “mystic” or “mysticism” in the sense that, as he accurately points out, a good number of so-called mystics are not poets. What is more, most people who acquire such “mystical” status do so because they associate themselves with a particular organized religion—even as they tend to be, to some degree, mavericks within this tradition. Like Blake, Frye resists the notion that there is anything but One True Religion—that of the poets. Nevertheless, this is not a good enough reason to dismiss mysticism altogether, much less the parallels that do, indeed, exist between mysticism and Blake’s works. Perhaps had Frye been a writer himself (or even a more avid reader of mysticism), he might have been more capable of appreciating these nuances. After all, the very idea that there is a third term (such as the imagination) that links self and other is utterly mystical in nature—as is the process of exile and rebirth that characterizes both mysticism and poetry.

15 To an extent, Frye writes off Blake’s isolation as a characteristic of “his age” rather than as a significant, even crucial aspect of his work, style and vocation as poet/visionary. Though his isolation (and, especially, his general reception as a madman) does indicate something important about the time in which he lived, it also, more specifically, reflects how artists themselves are viewed. Frye states, “Now of course it is quite true that Blake was a neglected and isolated figure, obeying his own genius in defiance of an indifferent and occasionally hostile society; and he himself was well aware that he was ‘born with a different face.’ But he did not want to be: he did not enjoy neglect, and he had what no real artist can be without, an intense desire to communicate […] if we look at some of the other poets of the second half of the eighteenth century—Smart, Cowper, Chatterton, Macpherson, Ferguson, Collins, Burns—we shall find the percentage of mental breakdowns and social maladjustments among them abnormally high. It is clear that
Perhaps if he did, he would have been less eager to degrade the relevance of mysticism—which, in virtually all its known variants, is predicated on and generated through exile, rebirth and re-membering. In a sense, it is ironic that religious traditions, such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity, religions that initially emerge out of the positive dynamic between exile and rebirth, have morphed into religions of dogma that reverse this dialectic (such that it ends in exile rather than rebirth). After all, it is through the estrangement of exile that dogmas and labels are broken, and the masks and shells of (false) self are cast off. The subject who finds herself in this broken, homeless, placeless state has the capacity to re-member herself and the world in more liberating ways for the very reason that she belongs to no one group, category, place or “herd mentality”.

As this dissertation clearly demonstrates, both true identity and true spirituality not only emerge from exile, but in the process, spirituality becomes tantamount to self-discovery, liberation, fantasy and ambiguity—while at the same time reconciling itself to history, reality, psychoanalysis and science in a way that infuses these terms with greater meaning. The urgency of reconciling science and fantasy is not about reducing fantasy to reality or vice versa but rather of remaking reality through fantasy and the imagination—which, for Frye and Blake, becomes a synonym not only of spirituality or vision but also

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the spiritual loneliness of Blake was not so much characteristic of him as of his age”(12). And yet, it is it important to keep in mind, first, that all these men are, significantly, poets (though this does not detract from the idea that society is at fault, it does suggest that poets and artists are perhaps more rejected and estranged from society than others.) Secondly, it is just as crucial to note that, even though Blake has finally achieved the praise and respect he is due (at least among many artistic and academic circles), the greater part of the current non-academic, non-artistic world (and perhaps even a sizeable portion of academia) might still be inclined to view him as insane. And, for many who do not, it may only be because academic authorities judge him sane.

16 On the other hand, this is less surprising if we consider the incredible power and sway that they hold over the masses, which they have achieved, in great part, by becoming public institutions.
of science\textsuperscript{17}. Science, though a worldly or “material” discipline is one that enables humanity to transcend nature—or at least, the limits it seemingly imposes. For Frye,

We are born into a fallen world and are therefore born with a “natural” tendency to make the most rather than the best of it, to accept it as final reality. But if man were really natural he would be a simple being like an animal in whom selfishness and self-development are the same thing. Most apologies for tyranny are based on analogies from nature, based in their turn on the assumption either that man is essentially natural or that nature is divinely ordered. But the polities of the wolf pack and the beehive are not good enough for us. (\textit{Fearful Symmetry} 64).

In this light, more than an element of materiality, science functions, much like mystical or visionary illumination, as a third term capable of reconciling the spiritual and material worlds or dimensions of man by infusing the material body with a transcendent quality. It is, in fact, this delicate relationship between science, spirituality, exile, and rebirth that my final chapter on \textit{Abre los ojos} most powerfully examines. Yet it does so in a way that highlights both the benefits and dangers of science and technology--depending on whether they are used to override and replace spirituality or work with and for it.

In truth, it is not surprising that the director of \textit{Abre}, Alejandro Amenábar, is homosexual, not only because the film deals with the key themes of exile, monstrosity, and rebirth but perhaps especially because it uses the metaphor of virtual reality (and thus, science and technology) to explore the dynamic between exile and rebirth. In his book, \textit{Sueños de exterminio: Homosexualidad y representación en la literatura argentina contemporánea}, Gabriel Giorgi offers a penetrating look at how homosexuality has been portrayed (often by not being portrayed at all) in contemporary Argentine literature and life. Yet, even as homosexuality often remains too abject to be explicitly depicted (and

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\textsuperscript{17} According to Frye, “[…]the central symbol of the imagination in all Blake’s work is the city. […] Of all animals, man is the most hopelessly maladjusted to nature: that is why he outdistances the animals, the supreme triumph of the imagination which has developed and conquered rather than survived and ‘fitted’” (\textit{Fearful Symmetry} 43)
when it is, it is often as a means of making the homosexual immediately disappear or of imagining his “final end”\(^\text{18}\), Giorgi demonstrates ways in which it is thematized through other “monstrous” devices and metaphors, and, specifically, through any group that is seen as a threat to the “natural order”. For example, Giorgi notes that,

> [...]Aunque sin sexualidad, los exterminadores del texto de Bioy sexualizan a los ‘viejos’ y hacen de ello un escándalo intolerable, una falta al orden natural: los viejos se vuelven, paradójicamente, cuerpos contrarios al orden de la naturaleza, y esta transformación se lee en relación a la sexualidad. Se suman así a la serie de cuerpos contra natura que pueblan las “tierras de nadie” [...](15).

Though Amenábar is a Spaniard, something similar occurs in his film. The topic of homosexuality (much like authoritarianism) is never directly confronted or portrayed in *Abre* (whose monstrous protagonist is heterosexual); and yet, the scientific paradigm it incorporates becomes not only a site of exile and rebirth (of both a spiritual and sexual nature) but just as critically as a means of overcoming the laws of nature and even time—laws which repress not only humanity in general but homosexuals in particular.

As Giorgi explains, just as organized religion demonizes homosexuals for their inability to reproduce (in fact, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah may also be compared to the masturbatory sin of Onan)\(^\text{19}\), nature itself is often used as an excuse for this demonization—even and perhaps especially within the context of religion. Not only is

\(^{18}\) Giorgi crucially explains, in reference to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah that “[...] los sodomitas nacen en el mismo momento que son condenados a desaparecer.”(22); and yet, on the other hand, they also appear through their very absence. In short, every attempt to exterminate or repress homosexuals has the dual and contrary function of making homosexuality appear. Furthermore, Giorgi correctly observes, “Paradojas de un cambio histórico: la homosexualidad, que había sido la encarnación típica de una sexualidad ‘antinatural’, y por ello monstruosa e inhumana, se convierte, por la misma razón, en el símbolo y el modelo de la sexualidad humana, en el momento en que la modernidad parece liberar a los seres humanos de ciertos mandatos que venían de la naturaleza.”(27). Indeed, it is for this very reason that many of the primary works in this thesis, most explicitly *El beso*, envisage homosexuality as that which symbolizes ultimate liberation. And yet, curiously, *El beso*, though written by a male homosexual, uses lesbianism, specifically, as an expression of such liberation—for reasons I will soon elucidate.

\(^{19}\) As he explains, “El sodomita evoca, nuevamente, el riesgo de ‘degeneración’, de cancelación de linajes y de pérdida de la ‘semilla viril’, pero lo hace ya como peligro que asedia a la salud del cuerpo social y de la vida colectiva: ya es el personaje moderno que forma parte de los lenguajes y los repertorios de la ingeniería social y la eugenésia de las poblaciones.”(22).
the rhetoric of disease (most prominently, AIDS) manipulated as both a religious and “natural” justification for the repression and “social extermination” of homosexuality, but, more generally, the biological inability of homosexuals to reproduce (with each other) is exploited to justify the “unnatural”, disordered, monstrous state of homosexuality. Appropriately, Giorgi relates the “unnatural” state of homosexuality to biopolitical economies and specifically, to their relationship to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “homo sacer”\textsuperscript{20}. In view of all this, we can easily see why homosexuals (and particularly homosexual artists, writers or filmmakers) might be especially inclined towards both spiritual and scientific matters—that is, to the extent that they re-envision the natural world in a way that resists the very laws or patterns of nature and biopolitics.

On the other hand, I am careful to use the term spirituality so as not to confuse it with religion—which, to the contrary, is predicated on two contradictory impulses. Rather than remaking the material world by injecting it with spirituality, religion degrades the material world so as to access what it mistakenly views as “spiritual” while, at the same time, it relegated or encages the spiritual world to material matters. In truth, it is ironic that so much emphasis (particularly in Spain and Argentina) is placed on natural concerns such as the need to reproduce, when, if the natural world is truly the degraded one, emphasis should be placed on the spiritual over and above the material. If Christ’s true kingdom is, as he presumably suggests, of an-Other world, why then are Christians so

\textsuperscript{20} Specifically, he states, “Esos cuerpos se hacen visibles en su anomalía, su ser contra natura, en relación a zonas en las que los derechos, la ciudadanía, la ley, se suspenden, en ‘estados de excepción’ respecto del orden jurídico y político. La noción de “homo sacer” en Giorgio Agamben resultará crucial para trazar este recorrido: “homo sacer” es ese individuo cuya vida ha sido despojada de valor en un orden jurídico-político dado y cuyo asesinato, por lo tanto, no constituye homicidio ya que es material disponible (y descartable) para ejercicios de poder sobre los cuerpos y al vida colectiva—es ‘vida desnuda’ (o ‘nula vida’).”(14-15)
obsessed with reproducing in this world? More generally, why are they so fixated on justifying their “dreams of extermination” through nature and natural laws?

The answer can be found in two opposing principals. On the one hand, it is reflected in their diametrically opposed notions of the spiritual and the material—which, like the irreconcilable distance they posit between man and God, leads to an analogous distance between worldly and spiritual concerns. Curiously enough, though women are conceived to be subservient to men, as my primary works reveal, society obliges them to take on the Christ-like sacrificial and spiritual role that frees men to kill, “sin” and pursue worldly affairs. Alternatively, however, this emphasis on natural concerns is also reflected in the “partial faith” or the desire, particularly through authoritarian models, to reduce spiritual models to worldly ones—that is, to turn a nation into paradise and its leader into God. Yet, in so doing, spirituality and ethics are effectively divorced or exiled from reality rather than married to it. Indeed, these “partial faiths” are themselves based on the fearful exclusions and separations mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

While these dichotomies and exclusions are manifested in each chapter of this dissertation and their corresponding works, El beso (and, somewhat indirectly, Santa Evita) do an especially fine job of exploring how sexual repression and the “laws of nature” turn not only the homosexual but the lesbian, specifically, into the quintessential model of both sexual and spiritual repression and liberation. Though as Giorgi suggests, the anxiety over reproducing is, in some ways, especially repressive and pernicious to gay men (given their responsibility to carry on the male line/surname), as these works reveal, female homosexuality is, perhaps, even more of an attack on nature, for it not only

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21 I am, of course, borrowing Gabriel Giorgi’s term.
affirms the very existence of female desire (detached from its reproductive abilities) but it negates the prime and only value of women—that is, to reproduce.

Though Evita herself never mentions homosexuality publically (perhaps because the very mention of it would elevate it out of the abyss of non-existence), her focus on the importance of female procreation, as reflected in her propagandistic autobiography, *La razón de mi vida*, renders lesbians the greatest threat to the patria. This carries over into *El beso*, where the homosexual protagonist, Molina, who in many ways embodies the negative stereotypes and separations popularized by Evita (yet which also precede her), nevertheless employs the paradigm of heroic lesbianism, through his film narrations, as the ultimate symbol of monstrous rebirth and liberation. In so doing, he and his cellmate, Valentín, learn to remake themselves in truly liberating, non-dichotomous ways.

Finally, in addition to enabling me to envision new approaches to exile, trauma, a “narrative ethics” and the ongoing relevance of authoritarianism as well as the corresponding need to revisit it in current academic and public debates and daily conversation, each one of my chapters permits me to offer fresh readings of my primary works—readings which, nonetheless, are heavily indebted to the invaluable insights of the numerous critics to which I refer and build on, even as I deviate from their readings and conclusions. At the same time, all of these works/chapters have the additional function of helping me to explore the extent to which many of the problems which plague not only Spain and Argentina, but increasingly, the world are, at heart, psychological, ethical or even spiritual in nature. More exactly, they enable me to formulate answers to a series of problems, dilemmas and enigmas that characterize the (post)modern world.

*22 The absence of lesbianism from public discourse is also paralleled in the bible. Unlike stories such as Sodom and Gomorrah that demonize the male homosexual, lesbians are never explicitly mentioned—a fact which implies that the very existence of lesbianism is presumed to be so unnatural that it must not exist.*
As Jacobo Timerman asks, how is it possible that the violence of WWII has been so dismally repeated (in Argentina and elsewhere) even after it was universally accepted as wrong? Why is it that authoritarian terror and erasure have arisen precisely in some of the most culturally eclectic of nations? What is the relationship between authoritarianism and religion? Why do so many works composed by exiles, border subjects and trauma survivors choose authoritarian contexts to present their crises? What are the antinomies on which authoritarian terror rests? And why is exile fiction especially effective at resolving them? More specifically, how do the “exilic” works I examine invite their readers/viewers to participate in their own versions of retelling and remembering? What ethical effects can novels achieve that films cannot? Alternatively, in what ways does film pick up from where narrative leaves off? And what are the ethical effects or ramifications of this? More broadly, why is it that “exile fiction” may boast of its increasingly “universal” or “global” appeal. Finally, why are spirituality, ambiguity and monstrosity so centrally tied to and privileged in exile film and literature, particularly in response to (Spanish and Argentine) authoritarian terror?

Though my answers to these questions do not in any way devalue or contest theories which explore the centrality of race or economics to the problems that beset our ever more global and post-modern world, it does suggest that these problems will not disappear until a deeper engagement with the illusions and ethical, psychological, and metaphysical matters to which they are inextricably bound have been duly examined. The works that I address in this dissertation all share this common goal. Yet, before we look more closely at the specific contributions of each work, it will help, at this juncture, for me to offer my reader a clearer idea of what a “narrative ethics” is and should be.
A Narrative Ethics

A “narrative ethics” defines both a genre of fiction and a corresponding mode of analysis concerned more with the ethical, inter-subjective effects of (re)telling, narrating, reading and witnessing than with mere representation—though, certainly, the fictional works associated with a “narrative ethics” tend to employ similar representational models and devices. Perhaps the most exemplary book on “narrative ethics” is Adam Newton’s (Narrative Ethics, 1995), a compilation of literary analyses which build primarily on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas\(^23\), secondarily on Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as other thinkers such as Stanley Cavell\(^24\) and Paul de Man (though de Man is also severely criticized for his relativism and “bad faith” as a deconstructionist\(^25\)). To summarize, “narrative ethics”, in its most evolved variations, occurs through the relationship it establishes between the text and the world more than through its explicit (or even implicit) morals—though, as we will see, the two cannot always be so neatly separated.

According to this trend, narratives are ethical, primarily, because of the dynamic they establish between literature and life—or between the writer, (re)teller and reader—a dynamic that forces the reader to actively engage in the (re)construction of the text/world.

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\(^23\) Levinas is central to “narrative ethics”, above all, because of his theory of “ethical alterity”, which, in turn, requires radical (inter-subjective) responsibility. In many respects, this notion of “ethical alterity” is similar to Adorno’s “non-identity” thinking as a means of overcoming repressive reason. It is, indeed, surprising that Adorno has not been more openly acknowledged as a major contributor to the creation of “narrative ethics”. On the other hand, both Adorno and Levinas are, as I will later elaborate in more detail, ultimately incapable of fully recognizing how both literature and life can become (through an engagement with each other) a place of transcendence.

\(^24\) As Newton observes, “Like Levinas’ philosophy of ethical alterity, Cavell’s concept of acknowledgment as the necessary response to an intersubjective claim assigns ethical action and language to a plane which is not primarily epistemological or ontological; such a plane lies transverse to or, as Levinas puts it, ‘otherwise than’ the dimensions of being or knowing whose common project of adequation—the grasp after persons—it cuts across and interrupts” (Narrative Ethics 28).

\(^25\) As Newton points out, “ethics finds no place in de Man’s theory because of his absolute reification of epistemology” (NE 49). I might also add that de Man’s notion that there is nothing outside of the text is in itself exactly what “trivializes” both life and literature and thus, eschews responsibility. By contrast, within the logic of a “narrative ethics” (which, theoretically, emphasizes the inseparability of life and literature), one could argue that if there is, indeed, nothing outside of the text, then there is, quite simply, nothing.
In a somewhat simplistic sense, we might say that for a narrative to be ethical it must be, to employ Roland Barthes’ logic, “writerly” (that is, open to the plural meanings that its readers must actively construct) as opposed to “readerly”\textsuperscript{26}; though this alone is not enough. Indeed, contrary to Barthes, who argues that textual plurality is liberating precisely because it “irresponsibly” denies meaning and enables its readers to “forget” (meaning), I argue the contrary—that is, that the plurality of language is liberating for the very reason that it forces us to both rebuild and remember in highly responsible ways.\textsuperscript{27}

As Newton describes it, “narrative ethics”, “designates readers as active witnesses, ‘author-creators,’ as Bakhtin would say, and not simply ‘author-perceivers.’”\textsuperscript{27} In effect, rather than focusing on ethics as an entity that exists outside of language, a “narrative ethics” is concerned with exploring the ways in which narrative may actually be ethics. Ideally, one could conclude that a narrative ethics is a means of reading/writing that not only involves the reader/witness in its ethical processes, but, in the process, stimulates the transcendence of the set of dichotomies listed throughout this dissertation. Though no one thinker associated with this school of thought has fully achieved this task (or even conceived of it precisely as such), the attempt to rethink the self/other dichotomy and thus, extend responsibility increasingly outwards through narrative is particularly central to this movement.

\textsuperscript{26} See for example, pages 4-5 of Barthes’ book, \textit{S/Z}, for a more thorough definition of the “writerly” versus the “readerly”.

\textsuperscript{27} Of course, in a sense, the forgetting to which Barthes refers has more to do with forgetting the monolithic meanings that we are passively instructed to learn or associate with words and ideas than with the type of repressive forgetting I critique in this dissertation and which it is the task of “writerly” texts to overcome. Thus, in this respect, Barthes and I are not of such different minds—rather, we are drawn to different aspects of the word “forgetting”. These differences are also reflected in our oppositional understanding of “theology”, which, for Barthes, is equivalent to monolithic Language and Truth; whereas, as I suggest through my various works, plurality is practically synonymous with godliness. In truth, all our fundamental points of departure may be summarized in the following quote: “Forgetting meanings is not a matter for excuses, an unfortunate defect in performance; it is an affirmative value, a way of asserting the irresponsibility of the text, the pluralism of systems (if I closed their list, I would inevitably reconstitute a singular, theological meaning): it is precisely because I forget that I read.”\textsuperscript{S/Z 11}
Yet, for this very reason, texts that fall into this category should ideally provide (self-reflexive) examples of how to read (or more precisely, engage) with a text—which, paradoxical as it may sound, requires a certain degree of ambiguity. Without ambiguity there would be no room for creation, for “otherness”, for plurality, for difference or, as Levinas would say, for “interruption” (by and for the Other). Simply put, without ambiguity, there would be no responsibility. Much of this ambiguity can be found at the level of language itself, which, as I further explain in subsequent sections of this dissertation (particularly in Chapter 1), Julia Kristeva is particularly useful in identifying as a hallmark of poetic language. In short, poetic language is unique in that it is by nature multiplicitous, ambiguous and subversive. It offers the hope of rebirth precisely because it comes out of a place of death, destruction and despair\textsuperscript{28}. While Levinas, despite his well-deserved role as father-figure to a “narrative ethics”, remains (insomuch as he conceives of an excessively selfless, loveless concept of ethics) somewhat locked in this very cage of destruction, death and despair, Kristeva, by contrast, is helpful in pointing out how desire, love (and the author herself) are crucial elements of poetic language—and must, therefore, be integrated into any “narrative ethics” which aspires to be truly effective. Yet, when compared to Levinas, Kristeva does not duly exploit the inter-subjective dimensions of poetic language or, more precisely, the potential of poetic ambiguity for fostering inter-subjective relationships of love. Rather, love, for Kristeva, remains largely transcendent (even external to) language.

More generally, though Kristeva reduces her theories of rebirth, monstrosity and literary exile to an overly subjective, desire-driven reflection of authorial agency (or more precisely, psychic traumas, depressions, fears and desires), Levinas, on the other hand,\footnote{In other words, it comes from a place which enables “genotext” to be largely revealed}
makes the author somewhat irrelevant to the fictions he or she creates. Yet, as this dissertation generally supports, the types of fictions that participate in a “narrative ethics” are, usually, those which are written out of the need to recover from or remember some sort of deep trauma, terror and/or exile, whether external/literal or internal. Though Kristeva understands this, her theory does not appreciably consider that these traumas are typically reflective of larger historical and cultural problems and repressions—and thus, deeply embedded in the fictions themselves. Though she also appears to understand how the creation of these fictions or narratives may be useful in recovering from or dealing with traumatic experience (as Cathy Caruth and countless other trauma theorists would agree), her contribution to my own understanding of “a narrative ethics” remains incomplete precisely because it ends right here. What truly makes these types of fictions or narratives most ethical and relevant both to this dissertation and to life is not just that they liberate the individual from his or her own demons, but the fact that, in doing so, they are already in and of themselves not only personal but also historical, social and cultural. In turn, the reader or viewer can use or interpret these retellings, rewritings or performances in order to extend responsibility increasingly outwards.

Levinas, by contrast, in his understanding of radical responsibility, focuses exactly on this ethical capacity of fiction to involve its readers/viewers and thus, make them responsible for someone and something other than themselves. Yet, his notion of radical responsibility is so radical that it actually becomes useless—and thus, irreponsible. If one lives only for the other, if one always gives in utter passivity, then

29 It is important to consider that, as Cathy Caruth argues, trauma, a common feature in all my primary works, not only requires telling and listening, but is also, in her words “characterized by the fact that she [the victim] can tell a ‘slightly different story’ to different people: the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort” (Trauma, Explorations in Memory 154)
this is not a give-and-take relationship but a masochistic one. Furthermore, one is not helping the other to become responsible but rather, one is encouraging the other to do whatever the other wants. One is making the world a worse place, not a better one. Even if we accept the Kantian categorical imperative (which is itself flawed), Levinas’ theory still fails—for even if everyone were to become passive and live only for the Other, the result would be nothing—no action, no speech, only immobility--only silence. Indeed, it would be a world not too different from the one critically depicted in *El espíritu*.\(^{30}\)

Admittedly, Levinas himself might concede to this, as he also distinguishes between morality and ethics (a morality which does, in fact, enable one to disregard or override his ethical injunctions). But this very dichotomy that he enforces between morality and ethics is, much like the other dichotomies I purport to dissolve in this thesis, more destructive than useful—and even if this distinction could be maintained, it would only highlight the futility of Levinas’ ethical system. If an ethical system only makes sense in a void or in a world estranged from inter-subjective relations, then it is, to be sure, non-ethical. At the same time, limited as Levinas’ ethical theory may be, it is highly useful to this thesis when put in dialogue with other theories such as those of Julia Kristeva.

Finally, deconstructionists, such as Paul de Man, though with less emphasis on the importance of reconnection, rebirth and the role of the feminine, also explore the extent to which literary language is essentially, as Newton quotes, “a wandering, an errance, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled./Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*” (*Narrative Ethics* 122). Yet, though it may be true that the “homeland” is a mere

\(^{30}\) Although, as will become more evident in chapter 1, silence is ambiguously portrayed in this film as both a manifestation of society’s repression and its corresponding lack of communication as well as, more subversively (via Ana), a symbol of innocence, transcendence, ambiguity and non-verbal communication.
illusion—an illusion which it is, in fact, the task of “narrative ethics” to destroy—it does not follow that there is no possibility of creating a second, “truer homeland” through the very process of rebirth/re-connection which, ideally, defines a “narrative ethics”. The presumed impossibility of reconnection, responsibility or even ethics itself is perhaps the most momentous defect inherent in deconstruction.

Thus, what sets a genuine “narrative ethics” apart from mere “deconstruction” is that it not only destroys but also rebuilds. Yet it neither destroys nor rebuilds Truths31, at least not in a traditional sense. Rather, a “narrative ethics” destroys and rebuilds relationships themselves. Though these relationships are built, destroyed and maintained through narrative, narrative itself cannot be separated from reality because, as Theodor Adorno argues (and as further reinforced by my literary analyses), all fiction, even as it departs from, “escapes” from or subverts reality, is grounded in it32. In Adorno’s words, “There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed”(AT 138). It is precisely this transformative role (which reconfigures both past and future), that enables art to transcend the

31 Though, as Theodor Adorno keenly observes, even in the process of merely deconstructing “Truths”, an artwork reveals deeper, more disturbing truths about the world (which in some sense remain intact even as they are subverted). He states, “Many works of the highest quality are true as the expression of a consciousness that is false in itself….The separation of what is true in itself from the merely adequate expression of false consciousness is not to be maintained, for correct consciousness has not existed to this day, and no consciousness has the lofty vantage point from which this separation would be evident. It is for this reason that works unfold not only through interpretation and critique but also through their rescue, which aims at the truth of false consciousness in the aesthetic appearance. Great artworks are unable to lie. Even when their content is semblance, insofar as this content is necessary semblance the content has truth, to which the artworks testify; only failed works are untrue”(130, AT).

32 According to Adorno, “True imagination is escape, but not exclusively so: What transcends the reality principle toward something superior is always also part of what is beneath it; to point a taunting finger at it is malicious. The image of the artist, as one of the tolerated, integrated as a neurotic in a society sworn to the division of labor, is distorted. Among artists of the highest rank, such as Beethoven or Rembrandt, the sharpest sense of reality was joined with estrangement from reality”(Aesthetic Theory 9)
dichotomies of self/other, male/female, spiritual/material, etc., while at the same revealing how it is from the very alienation of exile that genius is (re)born.33

The fatal yet endlessly renewing ambiguity inherent to poetic language is heightened not only thematically and metaphorically in my texts and films but, more importantly, through various techniques characteristic of “ethical narratives”--most notably, the existence of multi-layered narrative, which not only inverts and subverts monolithic meaning (as seen, for example, in El beso de la mujer araña and Santa Evita), but which invites the reader him/herself to participate in the recreation of the text. This adds to the text’s ambiguity while expanding responsibility increasingly outward. As Newton astutely remarks, by implicating “their respective audiences; ironically, they [texts consistent with a ‘narrative ethics’] force responsibility outward”(21).34 This becomes especially clear if we consider not only Levinas’ notion of responsibility but also Sartre’s notion that one becomes immediately responsible for any text one encounters. Thus, on the one hand, the representative function of literature remains crucial to “narrative ethics” even as it is simultaneously transcended. This representative

33 As Adorno explains, “Artworks do not achieve what is objectively sought in them. The zone of indeterminacy between the unreachable and what has been realized constitutes their enigma. They have truth content and they do not have it. Positive science and the philosophy derived from it do not attain it. It is neither the work’s factual content nor its fragile and self-suspendable logicality. Nor—despite traditional philosophy—is art’s truth content its idea, even if that idea is so broad as to include the tragic or the conflict between finite and the infinite. Indeed, in its philosophical construction such an idea rises above subjective intention. Yet, however applied, it remains external to the artwork and abstract.”(128, *Aesthetic Theory*). He adds, “Just how little truth content converges with the subjective idea, with the intention of the artist, is evident to the most rudimentary consideration. There are artworks in which the artist brought out clearly and simply what he wanted, and the result, nothing more than an indication of what the artist wanted to say, is thereby reduced to an eniphered allegory. The work dies as soon as philologists have pumped out of it what the artist pumped in, a tautological game whose schema is true also of many musical analyses”(*Aesthetic Theory* 129).

34 Luis Buñuel’s El ángel exterminador (1962) is also a great example of this inasmuch as responsibility is increasingly extended outwards (from the elite group entrapped in a party/room to an entire Church congregation and finally, to the audience itself).
function is necessary not only because it is what links fiction to reality but also because it is only through re-presentation that reality can be subverted.

Accordingly, though a meta-textual “mirror-like” function is sustained between the frame stories, inner stories and outer realities (which, in addition to linking fiction to reality also provides a common ground for the unification of various “others”, “strangers” or subjects), each level of interpretation must, nevertheless, subvert or refigure elements of its interior story/reality. In “ethical narratives” even the mirroring function that occurs from one level of fiction/reality to the next is already one that, by necessity, changes reality. For example, if Molina and Valentín reinterpret the realities/films that they retell, then the reader (of the novel itself) must, even in his/her attempt to simply mirror Valentín and Molina, be critical of them. In this way, even the pessimism of such texts can be transcended through the active engagement of the interlocutor/witness. Though a “narrative ethics” combines both representation and subversion, even the representation that occurs is always already a re-presentation—that is, an altered presentation or “reality” itself. In a sense then, there must always remain some degree of ambiguity in any narrative text for three distinct reasons.

First, this ambiguity is, as Kristeva asserts, what characterizes poetic language itself. Secondly, this ambiguity is exactly what enables and, indeed, requires the reader to become an active participant in the construction of reality/text and thus, responsible for both oneself and others. Even if such ambiguity may imply a certain degree of pessimism, pessimism itself can be optimistic inasmuch as it permits the possibility for inter-subjective growth, criticism and subversion to occur. Moreover, the word “ambiguity” itself implies not a lack of meaning but rather, as Newton suggests, a double
meaning—that is, a meeting place of divergent meanings rather than (simply) a meaningless void. In short, these ambiguous elements are what enable the necessary difference between self and other which, in turn, enables the text (and thus, responsibility) to expand increasingly outwards to wider, wiser and thus, more responsible audiences. Finally, it is through ambiguity that the various separations elaborated throughout this thesis may be reconciled and/or transcended.

Yet, notwithstanding the ability of a novel or film to promote this idea of a “narrative ethics” it is, ultimately, up to the readers themselves to create liberating, responsible and socially productive responses—and, moreover to act on them. This requires both the wisdom and the courage to overcome appearances and fear. All that a literary text or film can do in this respect is to help stimulate such courage by poignantly moving its readers through the truth of its lies, and, above all, through the beauty that lurks within even the shadow of its sadness.

Chapter Summaries

Though all my chapters address the key issues articulated thus far, each chapter makes its own distinctive contributions. My first chapter, entitled “The Window of the Beehive”, examines Víctor Erice’s 1973 film, El espíritu de la colmena. This film, though temporally distanced from the terror and trauma it portrays, is the only work made both within and during authoritarian rule. Accordingly, it is filled with silences and long shots.

35 At the same time, it is important to consider that, as Newton suggests, “the important point here [in a “narrative ethics”] is the dialectical relation between fictional world and real world—the play of representation ‘across the borders’ between them. (The self is already borderline, anyway, always ‘half someone else’s,’ as Bakhtin puts it.)”(57). In effect, this further demonstrates the extent to which Kristeva, (as I will more adequately prove at a later point), by dismissing the inherent collectivity of even the most seemingly personal sorrow, overlooks the (social) sickness that drives all melancholy creativity.
of spatial emptiness, which reflect the extreme repression of 1940s post-war Spain.
While this film is, as a consequence, more ambiguous, subtle, and, in many ways, less explicitly optimistic than other works I examine, it also opens up a path towards renewal and hope, in part, through its very use of silence, ambiguity and fantasy. On the other hand, *El espíritu* not only offers a highly nuanced and realistic portrayal of civilian life in Spain in the early 1940s, but it comments on specific historical problems such as the disappearance of both (republican) soldiers and civilians, their consequent burial in mysterious common graves (or *fosas*), the kidnapping and misplacement of children during these crucial years, and the sexual repression and lack of mobility (aimed particularly towards women) resulting from both direct physical violence as well as the series of sexual and pro-natal laws and social codes established in the early 40s.

These themes are accentuated through the quasi-mystical appearance of the appropriately mute, “orphaned”, “feminized” yet fundamentally androgynous monster of Frankenstein who the young protagonist, Ana, appears to wish into existence after seeing James Whale’s (1931) *Frankenstein*. From the first scene in which a group of children flock to a makeshift theatre in a small, desert-like Castilian town to view this foreign film, this monster is refigured as victim, friend, foe, exile, and even Spaniard. In his monstrosity, he embodies the quintessential outcast/border-subject as he is everyone (his parts come from various humans) and no one--for precisely as such he is like no one else.

At the same time, by likening this foreign monster (as well as his creator) to each of the main characters through various visual metaphors, camera techniques, thematic and symbolic parallels and the use of role-play, *El espíritu* not only explores the complexity and fluidity of Spanish post-war identity, but more crucially, how that which
is most foreign or strange is, paradoxically, that which is most acutely Spanish and, more generally, that which lies at the core of oneself. As a patchwork creation, the monster of Frankenstein is a mirror of society, the self and, specifically, the collective revival of the dead, the disappeared and the forgotten. He represents not only unity and remembrance but the potential for a sexual-spiritual awakening that reveals an innate link between sexuality, spirituality, fantasy and memory as well as the ways in which film and monstrosity enable this process of re-membering to occur. In effect, *El espíritu* solidly establishes how universal themes, histories and myths intersect within the culturally specific, particularly through the vehicle of film, which, particularly within the context of post-war Spain, mobilizes its public in radical and liberating ways.

Indeed, both the public experience of film and the medium of film itself encourage movement, fantasy and boundary crossing (ie. extreme transgression under Francoist law), especially for women and children. At the same time, this film explores, perhaps better than any other, strong and subversive links between childhood and cinema. In *El espíritu* the child\(^\text{36}\), like the vehicle of cinema and the metaphor of monstrosity, becomes not only a model of a liberating pluralism and “a narrative ethics” (expressed through showing as much as telling), but in so doing, the child becomes the prototypical model/artifice for expressing links between innocence and sexuality and even spirituality and sexuality. As Vicky Lebau (building on Freud) argues (*Childhood and Cinema*), childhood sexuality is one that is based not on reproductive urges but on pure polymorphous desire—a notion which helps us understand why films (like *El espíritu* and *El laberinto*) that feature children are capable of dramatizing similar sexually subversive

\(^{36}\) In particular, the “liminal child”—who is on the cusp of discovering her sexuality and thus, is more properly in between childhood and adulthood —embodies this link between sexual, spiritual and self discovery
processes as fictions, such as *El beso*, that use the paradigm of adult homosexuality. On the other hand, though, historically, the child has often been sexualized on screen for the very reason that she serves as a passive receptacle for the male gaze, the protagonist of this film, Ana, effectively reverses this paradigm, among many others.

Finally, in the process of retelling and remembering, *El espíritu* not only rewrites or reshapes Mary Shelley’s and James Whale’s substantially different yet equally influential versions of *Frankenstein*, among other fictions, but also real historical documents, such as Nazi Germany’s anti-Jewish propaganda book, significantly entitled “The Poison Mushroom” (whose introductory story of the same name almost perfectly parallels a crucial scene in *El espíritu*). Most certainly, as a film which builds on and reconfigures traditions as diverse as *Frankenstein*, *El Quixote* and even the bible itself, *El espíritu* helps lay out the bones of my own (narrative) ethics.

These bones gain added flesh in Chapter 2 (entitled “The Key, The Keeper, The Girl and the Beast: Resisting State Terror through ‘Fantastic’ Realities”), where we discover that not only does *El espíritu* pay homage to these works (most notably, *Frankenstein*), but it also becomes, in many ways, the model for another film, *El laberinto del fauno* (2007). As a film set in the verdant mountains of the North, where the last residues of the “red resistance” are hunted down by Franco’s army, *El laberinto* blatantly reveals the violence that accounts for much of *El espíritu*’s oppressive silences. Though this film is not technically a remake, it builds on, mirrors and often inverts many of the themes, structures, characters, and metaphors found in *El espíritu* through the little-girl protagonist’s descent into the underworld/unconscious of post-war Spain.
Notwithstanding its ‘fantastic’ outer-narrative, which forces it to forego much of *El espíritu*’s complexity, its fairytale structure and consequent need to simplify/polarize the forces of good (embodied by the young orphan, Ofelia) and evil (represented by her step-father, Captain Vidal) allow it to clearly and effectively dramatize the psychological battles waged within the psyches of post-war Spaniards. In addition, its dual (realistic and fantastic) structure help it to more adequately reveal how memory, identity and the various binaries endemic to authoritarian terror are interrelated. As my reading of the film further suggests, though the fairytale frame-world is portrayed as an-Other/spiritual world, it symbolizes the potential (as a metaphorical world) for a new physical reality to arise in which the separations explored in my thesis are successfully transcended.

Yet, del Toro’s film is perhaps most unique in its ability to reveal how true spirituality often consists in disobedience even more than (blind) obedience and in monsters even more than in traditional beatific figures (such as angels). This disobedience not only vitally empowers the supposedly powerless domains of fantasy, spirituality and childhood/female abjection (associated with monstrosity) but it incisively critiques the Francoist notion of sacrifice, which not only reinforces the splits previously mentioned but does so in a way that disrespects and devalues the very humanity of its Spanish subjects who must sacrifice their individual selves for Franco, for National Catholicism and, above all, for the “patria”.

At the same time, though del Toro himself is not a Spaniard, it is for this very reason that his film helps us appreciate the degree to which (Spanish) authoritarianism serves as the sublime expression of the separations noted in this thesis. On the other hand, it is important to note that though del Toro stands out from the other writers and
directors treated in this thesis in that he has no direct relationship to the country which he depicts in his film, he has to his credit many experiences which explain and legitimize his use not only of the paradigm of exile but of the bitter reality of post-war Spain as the basis for his inner historical narrative. These include his self-exile to the US (following his father’s abduction in Mexico), his deep and prolonged friendships with exiled Spaniards in Mexico (including important film-critics and directors) as a child and young adult\(^{37}\), his general experience of Mexico as a country plagued by dogmatism, blind obedience, violence and corrupt institutions, and, perhaps most importantly, his childhood experiences of trauma, terror, extreme repression and physical abuse by his ultra-conservative Catholic grandmother—who in many ways embodies the violent separations of Franco’s National Catholicism.

Moreover, not only have both del Toro’s proximity and distance from post-war Spain helped him make his film more attractive on a global scale, but his distance, especially, has permitted him to illuminate certain features of post-war Spain that would have been otherwise impossible, and, what is more, to create a film that balances both realism and hope through the creation of a parallel fantasy world. This dual-narrative not only enables del Toro to more effectively underline the ways in which the various false dichotomies endemic to authoritarianism are interrelated, but, in so doing, the film gives special attention to the movement between reality and fantasy as a means of resisting state terror and its rhetoric of sacrifice. In truth, it demonstrates, even more powerfully than El espíritu, how fantasy, far from serving as a mere escape from reality, can also serve as a means of drastically confronting and changing it.

\(^{37}\)--which is not surprising given the inordinate number of Spanish exiles who took refuge in Mexico.
In this sense, the film serves as a perfect transition to my third chapter on Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), which further elucidates the degree to which state terror may be overcome (paradoxically, in exile) through fantastic retellings, and specifically through the encounter with repressed monsters and beasts—hence, its title, “The Key, The Keeper, the Woman and the Beast: Resisting State Terror through ‘Fantastic’ Realities”. Yet, rather than viewing the world through the lens of an orphaned or abandoned girl, this Argentine novel, also written in exile, shifts to the viewpoint of two marginalized men who, from the very isolation (or symbolic exile) of their prison cells, discover true freedom and love. Like all the protagonists examined in my various chapters, films and texts, though these two men ultimately arrive at a balanced state which enables them to transcend self and other as well as male and female categories, they must first become highly “feminized” (or “abject-ified”) through their experience of terror, trauma and exile. Of course, since *El beso* features two highly polarized men (a highly “rational”, communist, machista, and an ultra-emotional homosexual with fascist inclinations), the redemption of the repressed “female” element is explored not through actual women but via the repressed sides or Jungian “shadows” of our male protagonists. These are often filtered through the female heroines that populate their film narrations.

Indeed, the choice of the protagonists’ films and the way in which they are retold reveal just how deeply the female/male division as well as the repression of desire (especially Other/homosexual desire) are central to authoritarian terror and indivisible from its other artificial binaries. In addition, *El beso* does an especially fine job of highlighting the pivotal importance of overcoming the dichotomy between science and the irrational realms of emotion, desire, the psyche and the spirit, which, it turns out, are
inseparably linked to the corresponding (and equally false and destructive) dichotomy of desire and responsibility. What makes *El beso*’s treatment of spirituality perhaps most exceptional is not only the subtly with which it addresses metaphysical matters but the way in which it employs metaphysics to both reveal the limits of science, reason and psychoanalysis while also demonstrating their mutual compatibility—a theme which Amenábar’s *Abre los ojos* will later take up, albeit in a more contemporary context.

The protagonists’ self-likening to the female alter-egos found in their film-narrations not only highlights these facts as well as Molina’s and Valentin’s own processes of “feminization”/abjection but, just as crucially, their drive to turn the female victims into powerful and liberated heroines. Yet, not all these “heroines” are truly or unequivocally heroic. The film-narrations are replete with a vast assortment of so-called “heroines”, who combine, to various degrees, everything from proto-fascist, passive, self-effacing qualities to true altruism, gender-bending and courage—yet, what virtually all of them share in common is the impulse to self-sacrifice.

The way in which *El beso* reframes and retells these films (often in ways which significantly depart from or distort the original films themselves) permits the reader to better appreciate the various ways in which self-sacrifice (and especially female self-sacrifice) has been understood and received in Argentina. Like *El laberinto*, *El beso* does not necessarily condemn the notion of self-sacrifice; rather, it offers sophisticated ways of understanding the nuances of sacrifice and the varying ways and degrees to which it may function either in radical or repressive ways—specifically in reference to female sacrifice. Not surprisingly, the various film-stories and the ways in which they are told,
received and critiqued reflect the protagonists’ evolving relationship and identities—an evolution which is also mirrored in their changing understanding of female heroism.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the novelties of this film may be due as much to the genius of Puig as to his own unique personal history. As a film that foregrounds many of the specific insights one can learn only from adulthood it makes sense that Puig’s own experience of exile was based not only on his childhood sufferings (due to both his precocious gender “abnormalities” and the constantly inconstant authoritarian climate that defined the Argentina of Puig’s youth), but even more devastatingly, on his adult sexuality as well as the increased (authoritarian) terror and literal exile that accompanied his adulthood.

Finally, though Puig’s flair for rewriting/reframing previous films and fictions is similar to that found in other works (such as El laberinto and El espíritu), specifically in terms of its liberating qualities and ethical effects, as a novel, El beso is forced to use somewhat different methods to engage its audience in these ethical retellings. In addition to its use of ellipses (which replace, for example, El espíritu’s ambiguous silences) and other techniques that require the reader’s active construction of the text, El beso’s very structure embroils its readers in its world of fantasy, re-membering and creative retelling in a far more explicit way than El laberinto or El espíritu. The need for the reader/viewer to actively critique and reconstruct (rather than just passively absorb) the text or film in question is clearly reflected in Molina’s and Valentín’s own active engagement with the films they narrate, interpret and remake.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) The fact, moreover, that the two protagonists typically debate the films in a way which deepens both characters’ understanding of the fictions they interpret as well as their own lives and selves, not only makes their relationship to the films somewhat akin to Kristeva’s understanding of the “maternal receptacle”
In contrast to the type of liberating, pluralistic retelling that occurs in *El beso*, much of the retelling found in Tomás Eloy-Martínez’ novel, *Santa Evita* (1995) is used by men who create stories about “Evita” (Eva Perón) which center on how they “made her”. Their parallel efforts to gain control over Evita’s embalmed, elusive, exilic corpse, as it wanders throughout the world with its multiple wax copies, become, much like the text itself, a mirror of both national and personal struggles over power and identity--and, most certainly, a reflection of the country’s fears, neuroses and artificial separations. The ambiguous ways in which Evita, both in life but especially in death, embodies conflicting desires, urges, fears and beliefs (both liberating and repressive), makes her a symbol not only of her husband’s rule (whose rise to power and eventual downfall were equally fueled by contradiction) but also the contradictions and volatility of a country defined by instability and chaos since the advent of authoritarianism in the 1930s and, in many ways, even earlier. At the same time, Evita’s immense power, her corresponding saintliness and her equally strong demonization, all of which become curiously heightened in death, not only reflect Evita’s own hypocrisy and manipulation of men (which she achieved, to a great extent, by enabling them to believe that they “made her”), but perhaps more crucially, it permits us readers to appreciate why the female sacrificial body has become a central source of both desire and anxiety for men—as well as, more generally, how this notion of female sacrifice has been historically and culturally received in Argentina.

Evita, who, despite being a radical advocate for the poor and “barbaric” sectors of society and an equally fierce detractor of institutional corruption as well as oligarchic greed and abuse was, nonetheless, a woman who not only reveled in her own

(continued)
contradictions but she reinforced many negative stereotypes regarding women. As revealed in her propagandistic autobiography, *La razón de mi vida*, Evita not only affirmed that women complement men as their mysterious, emotional, irrational counterparts, but she urged women to obey and passively accommodate their more active, public, logical and competitive men. Above all, she urged women to relegate themselves to their “noble” existence as housewives—or rather, empty, self-sacrificing receptacles of life. While reminding women that their ultimate value and sole life-purpose was first, to produce children, and secondly, to promote and enhance the joy and success of their husbands and sons, the ironically motherless Evita considered herself to be mother of all Argentina—but especially the poor. Using a quasi-mystical rhetoric reminiscent of Santa Teresa’s she attempted to gain the trust of her nation by precariously elevating and demeaning herself (as a mere woman), and by beseeching her public to blindly obey and empty themselves out for Perón—whom, in virtually all ways, she likened to God.

And yet, the novel itself explores both the negative (chaotic or contradictory) and positive (pluralistic) dimensions of the “quasi-mystical” ambiguity associated with Evita and her legacy—as manifested in the parallel, ambiguous functions of language, storytelling and Evita’s wandering corpse. In death Evita becomes not only Perón’s empty receptacle but, potentially, all of Argentina’s and even--via the novel--the worlds’. On the one hand, this novel exposes how most people, particularly the Argentine Army, treated Evita’s corpse in much the same way as they treated and manipulated language—that is, as a means of projecting their monolithic, repressive and self-elevating “Truths”. Yet this body, for all its passive emptiness, resisted being tamed and buried in much the

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39 In truth, “Santa Evita” was very much like the great mystic, Santa Teresa—only her God was not a transcendent being or essence but rather Perón himself.
same way that the novel as a whole, through its endless, pluralistic “wanderings”, resists being encaged or reduced to one meaning, name or monolithic discourse.

Indeed, the more the Army attempted to tame, control and desecrate the corpse (by urinating on it, raping it, masturbating on it, and even naming it), the more they lost control, leading them to eventually believe that the corpse was cursed—and yet, the corpse, which simply functions as a mirror of those who encounter it (much like the monsters from other works) was not itself cursed but rather meted out upon the Army its own self-inflicted curse. Though all the primary works in this dissertation similarly examine the ways in which the drive to oppress and repress backfires, *Santa Evita* communicates this idea far more vividly, persuasively and powerfully by emphasizing the oppressors’ perspective, sufferings and madness as much as the oppressed.

On the other hand, at the same time that the novel brutally exposes the Army’s monolithic “death drive”, it embodies “life-giving” plurality in various ways. Though *Santa Evita* employs many of the same techniques as *El beso* for involving the reader in the reconstruction of the text, this similarity is evidenced, primarily, in the fact that the novel itself is built on a collection of stories about Evita including real interviews, fictional interviews, historical evidence and fictional accounts of Evita’s life by an array of ideologically diverse authors ranging from Julio Cortázar to Jorge Luis Borges to Rodolfo Walsh to Néstor Perlongher and to Evita herself (via her autobiography, *La razón de mi vida*). By creatively reframing these diverse works—and even fusing real interviews with fiction to the point that they become indistinguishable—the novel not only points beyond itself (to the reader) while transcending the dichotomies of self/other,
male/female, etc., but it effectively blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, the real and the fake, truth and falsity in ways that no other text comes close to achieving.\(^{40}\)

Yet, contrary to what most critics assert, the novel does not absolutely destroy truth, but rather, it reveals that the very Truth of authoritarianism is a lie that pretends to be True. With all this in mind, it should now be clear that chapter 4’s title, “The Sanctity of Erasure” both serious and ironic. While there does appear to be much hope, even sanctity in the ambiguities and erasures that surround Evita’s life, body and legacy, they also embody and perpetuate a great deal of death, hypocrisy and repressive erasures.

In my fifth and final chapter, entitled “The Awakening”, I engage with the 1997 film, *Abre los ojos*, directed by Chilean born Spaniard, Alejandro Amenábar. Like the other works I examine, this film (which similarly pays tribute to *El espíritu*, albeit more subtly than *El laberinto*) suggests that it is only through remembering/reuniting with the “spiritual”/“fantastic” world via dreams, that one can make sense of reality and vice versa. But what happens if life is a dream (virtual reality) and the dreams are actually memories of reality? The protagonist, César, a parentless youth who prizes his handsome face, immense wealth and womanizing charm above all else, confronts this question when he loses his beauty in a car crash. Though no amount of money can repair his disfigured face, he is so intent on regaining his beauty that he would rather be cryogenically frozen (by a company called Life Extension/L.E.), have his decision to be frozen erased from his memory and live a dream (VR) rather than face reality.

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\(^{40}\) The novel’s particularly great skill at debunking the false dichotomies of past and future, history and fiction, the real and the fake is revealed in two parallel ways—first, through the wax copies of the corpse (which are superficially identical to the “original”), and secondly, through the parallel narratives regarding Evita’s life, death and legacy, which similarly undermine any pretense or belief that there is an original or official Truth—a pretense which lies at the very heart of authoritarianism.
Yet the virtual paradise he dishes out a small fortune to live/dream turns into a nightmare as his repressed past and monstrous face return and as the woman, Sofia, whose love he has literally paid for, morphs erratically into the very same psychopathic ex-lover-turned-stalker, Nuria, who was responsible for destroying his face. César, whose mind quickly begins to unravel as a result of these disorienting mutations, ends up killing Sofia (as he mistakes her for Nuria) and thus, landing in a psychiatric penitentiary. In fact, the film begins in César’s virtual cell and is narrated for the most part retrospectively, as he tries to make sense of his nonsensical reality/nightmare from the double exile of his virtual prison.

Through “dreams” of his former reality (that is, “dreams” embedded in his virtual dream), César is led to the horrifying discovery that his life is but a dream and that his “dreams” are actually repressed fragments of his former reality (of 1997 Spain). And yet, César must not only use clues from his “dreams” in order to make sense of his “reality”, but he must also use clues from his so-called “reality” (which is actually virtual) to make sense of his “dreams”. In particular, a television add on L.E. that César sees in prison triggers a vague familiarity that makes him revisit his dreams through a hypnosis administered by his virtual psychiatrist, Antonio—who like everyone else in César’s world is a projection of some repressed side or alterity of César himself.

Though the transformation of César’s paradise into hell is commonly attributed (particularly by film critics) to a technological “glitch” or fluke, the true reason that his paradise degenerates into a hellish inferno is because the L.E. machine actually works all too well. Though it fails to come through on its promise of paradise, it inadvertently bequeaths upon César a far more valuable gift; namely, a confrontation with his truest
and deepest desires, fears and demons. Thus, the flaw in science and technology is not that it is incapable of fulfilling its technical promise, but rather that it cannot control or tame the psyche or the soul. In its very attempt to do so it unwittingly “becomes one” with morality/spirituality, as all the relationships of César’s past are inverted, and as he is forced to reap the negative karma he has so blindly, irresponsibly and unkindly sown.

At the same time, César can only comprehend “reality” by moving beyond the parameters or boundaries of traditional logic, science and reality itself. After all, the last step in César’s final awakening from his virtual reality/dream requires that he jump off a skyscraper and commit symbolic suicide. His only assurance that he will wake up is a promise from the virtual spokesperson of the very same company responsible for his virtual nightmare. In short, though technology and science are themselves ambiguous (as ambiguous as the psycho-spiritual development of the people who use them), to move beyond a purely virtual world which separates the self from its Other (and yet, rather ambiguously, forces a monstrous encounter with it) requires making a leap of faith—even if that leap of faith is, at least partially, in scientists and science itself.

Following Santa Evita, Abre is the only other work treated in this thesis to delve into the psyche and sufferings of the “oppressor” (César) as much as the oppressed—and, specifically, how the oppressor may be victimized by his own oppression. Accordingly, César’s escape from his nightmare depends not only on his ability to see how reality and fantasy/dreams are interwoven, but on his ability to appreciate the degree to which the self cannot be separated from the other—and thus, confront his own monstrosity, which is also, largely, the monstrosity of his culture. Though his virtual reality alienates him from others, it is, ironically, in the double exile of his virtual prison that César, much like
the protagonists from *El beso*, becomes more connected to his own alterity as well as that of others in a far deeper way than he ever could have imagined in his 1997 reality—a reality that encourages egotistical, narcissistic, irresponsible and, perhaps above all, superficial relationships. 1997 Madrid is not only a world that has forgotten or repressed its authoritarian past, but the demons of this past return or are recycled in even more pernicious ways as they are wed to various post-modern crises and vehicles of estrangement. The culture of 1997 Madrid is one that replaces authentic relationships and even people with masks, both social and literal, and homes with “non-places”. In so doing, the reality of 1997 Madrid not only becomes less “real” but also equally isolating.

In an effort to demonstrate this, *Abre* responds to *Santa Evita*'s questions regarding truth, authenticity and fetishism in ways that reveal how not only women, but, increasingly, men are reduced to, even enslaved to appearances. Yet, above all, in the process of questioning appearances and their relationship to selfhood, alterity, identity and reality, the film implies that truth, selfhood and reality are, if nothing else, defined by the need and ability to be connected to others as well as to oneself.

**“Back to the Future”**

Clearly, *Abre* is the only work I examine that represents themes such as exile, rebirth, and monstrosity through a futuristic nightmare rather than retrospectively, through the lens of authoritarianism. Yet, though this film is superficially very different from the other works treated in this thesis, it responds to many of the questions they evoke in subtle yet penetrating ways. Following the tradition of all my primary works, *Abre* incisively

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41 Not only does *Abre* reinforce the interrelatedness between the distinct types of dichotomies analyzed throughout this thesis, but it is especially powerful in demonstrating the ways in which the dichotomy
critiques society’s tendency to forget at the same time that it passively absorbs the images, ideas and technologies it is fed—whether that be due to the presence (or in Abre’s case, the shadow) of authoritarianism or the increasing obsession with and dependency on appearances and technology\textsuperscript{42}.

Yet, despite all the obvious parallels between Abre and the other works analyzed in this thesis, I find it necessary to more fully justify its place in this thesis given that this futuristic film makes no explicit references to authoritarianism. In truth, its very lack of such references allows the viewer to appreciate just how crucial it is to remember the repressed past. As the film’s complex exploration of time conveys, not only is it necessary to understand the past in order to move on to a new and different future, but, inversely, it is by looking (imaginatively) forward towards the future, that the film is so effective at looking (historically) backwards. The film’s treatment of time not only enables it to explore the numerous cultural and historical implications of the interconnectedness of past, present and future but also philosophical questions regarding time—or rather, timelessness. Abre’s timeless quality has the added function of increasing its global appeal and thus, solidifying its power and ability to perform a

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\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, for all Abre’s striking differences, it is, in an almost “uncanny” way, strangely familiar. Not only does it deal with the crucial theme of memory, but it demonstrates, perhaps better than any other film or text, how tightly interwoven the past, present and future are. Though Abre’s structure is, like many of the other works I treat, cyclical and repetitive, this repetition simultaneously signals a radical change, awakening or rebirth. In fact, all César’s symbolic awakenings are accompanied by this repetitive command (open your eyes)—most importantly, his exile/entry into virtual reality and finally, his rebirth into a (hopefully) even more enlightening reality where César can genuinely connect with “real” others.
narrative ethics. One of the most remarkable aspects of this film is its ability to use time itself to engage its audience in a narrative ethics—which it achieves not only through its timelessness but also through its temporal layering\(^{43}\).

Of course, though the audience’s role is indispensable to the construction of a “narrative ethics”, it is also important to consider Amenábar’s own complex identity, history and relationship to terror/exile as it intersects with both the film and its audience. Amenábar’s identity is both exilic and global, first, because, like the other authors and directors treated in this thesis, he is a fragmented, transnational border subject—to be exact, a homosexual Spaniard with Chilean “baggage”\(^{44}\), who for this very reason (his Chilean-ness) is never quite a Spaniard but something in-between. In addition, he is a member of Spain’s Generation X, a generation that has been handed a legacy of erasure from its estranged parental generation (many of whom never speak a word of their authoritarian past), and which is symbolized not only by César’s literal lack of parents (as an orphan) but also by the fact his middle-aged doctors literally attempt to heal his “monstrosity” by giving him a prosthetic mask. At the same time, both these facts or symbols have multiple metaphorical functions, one of which is to highlight Generation X’s (and to some extent, all of Spain’s) sudden need to adjust to a world of ever

\(^{43}\) The fact that César’s subjective experience of 150 years (the time he spends in virtual reality) as just one single year is further condensed by the spectator’s own experience of this time as just several hours (the duration of the film) not only highlights, on a philosophical level, how subjective and artificial time is, but it permits the film to use temporal layering to hook its audience into the film’s own inner ethical dynamic in much the same way that my other works use textual layering to the same effect. At the same time that this layering distances the viewer from César (enabling the viewer to actively create his or her own views), it also sutures the viewer into a similar and highly sympathetic role—for just as César must learn to make sense of the world on his own, the same is true for his equally disoriented viewers. Likewise, just as César discovers that all the characters in his world are mere images or psychological projections of César, we viewers become privy to the fact that César himself is a mere projection of the combined efforts of the director/writer (auteur), Amenábar himself, and the audience—who through various visual metaphors, camera techniques and other methods, is invited to actively partake in the construction of the film.

\(^{44}\) To be exact, Amenábar is the homosexual son of a Spanish mother and Chilean father who grows up in post-dictatorship Spain—a place which, though marked by repression/terror is also increasingly “global”.

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increasing scientific and technological advances and even, more generally, globalization. The need to constantly readjust to a new and bewildering world is symbolized not only through exile but also César’s numerous “rebirths” and it is especially characteristic of Generation X’s struggles (the generation to which both César and Amenábar belong).

Finally, in addition to being a gay border subject (Spanish-Chilean exile) and child of the liminal, homeless and increasingly global Generation X, even Amenábar’s rejection from his film institute (where he notoriously failed out) may have enhanced his feeling of isolation and exile. Thus, Amenábar’s personal history is useful to consider not only because it helps us understand his own relationship to authoritarianism and exile, but also how the different types of exile (personal, metaphorical and literal) intersect in fiction. At the same time, his personal history enables us to more deeply appreciate the legacy of authoritarianism in the post-modern age as well as the urgency of returning to this past—via works such as those studied in this thesis.

Indeed, as the global dimension of his work suggests, it is not only imperative that Spaniards reassess their own past but, to a great extent, it is vital that the world at large return to a past that is not just Spain’s but to a great extent their own. While *Abre* serves as a wonderful and rich work in its own right, it also points beyond itself both towards the future and its viewers and also towards the past. More specifically, it points towards the other films and texts that I analyze in this thesis, all of which contribute their own exceptional insights on authoritarianism and exile. Above all, these works attest, each in their own way, to the increasing importance and relevance of exile film and fiction as well as the inseparably linked importance and relevance of a “narrative ethics”.

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Chapter 1:

“The Window of the Beehive”

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Víctor Erice’s 1973 film, *El espíritu de la colmena (The Spirit of the Beehive)* both begins and ends in the crossroads between past, present and future, in a land that is empty, silent, desert-like, repressed—and yet, in many ways, on the brink of being filled. This film, though temporally distanced from the terror and trauma it portrays of post-war Spain, is the only work I examine made during authoritarian rule. Not surprisingly, it is filled with silences and long shots of spatial emptiness, which capture the extreme erasure and repression of 1940s Spain. Yet, these silences are, like the film itself, highly ambiguous. In numerous ways, the film’s ambiguity is presaged in its opening scene, as the vast, empty plains of Castile are pierced by the journey of a single truck. At this moment the screen simultaneously flashes the words “Erase una vez…” (“Once upon a time”), followed immediately by the phrase, “En un lugar de la meseta castellana hacia 1940” (“Someplace in the meseta of Castile around 1940”).

Though the first set of words lend the film a timeless, mythic quality, the second set echo the opening lines of what is arguably the most famous work ever written in the Spanish language—Miguel de Cervantes’, *Don Quijote de la Mancha I* (1605). Yet, curiously, the time specified in this second phrase is not 1605 but 1940.¹ This unlikely juxtaposition (of three temporalities) is highly significant. By blending the transnational

¹ The exact lines are “En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme” (97), “Someplace in la Mancha [also the meseta of Castille], of a name I prefer not to remember”. Appropriately, *El espíritu* is a film about a town which also “prefers not to remember”. Though we might infer that film occurs in Hoyuelos (since the truck passes a sign with this name at the crossroads in the opening shot—and, in fact the movie was largely filmed in Hoyuelos), the town’s name is never explicitly mentioned, reinforcing its general symbolic anonymity.
fairytale phrase (“Once upon a time”), with both a precise (post-war) time and a
classically Spanish quote, “En un lugar de la […]”\(^2\). These opening lines anticipate not
only the ways in which the worlds of fantasy and reality, present and past, time and
timelessness will ambiguously merge in this film but, specifically, the ways in which that
which is most distant or foreign will become, at once, unequivocally Spanish.

At the same time, this juxtaposition of 1940s Spain with both the time of
Cervantes and a more unspecified, mythic time reveals Franco’s deluded formulation of
1940s, Spain. It is a time which Franco wished to make mythic, eternal and fairytale-like
precisely by insisting on its link to the time of Cervantes (the Spanish Renaissance) while
simultaneously wiping out or erasing everything in between. Just as the violence,
intolerance, isolation and repression of the Franco Regime followed and perhaps
responded to a time of great progress and reform in Spain (under the Second Spanish
Republic), the era of the Spanish Inquisition (beginning in 1478), responded to the
coexistence of Spain’s three great cultures and religions (Christianity, Islam and
Judaism\(^3\)) with the persecution and erasure of all non-Catholics or heretics. The essential
difference, of course, is that this coexistence or *convivencia* was not altogether peaceful,
and the Inquisition was, indeed, predated by much inter-cultural violence.

This culminated in 1492 with the Edict of Expulsion, a date which significantly
coincides with Spain’s conquest of America and its consequent imperialism, slavery and,
ultimately, the repression and destruction of alterity not only within mainland Spain but,

\(^2\) “En un lugar de la Mancha” is, of course, slightly transformed—into “En un lugar de la meseta castellana”.
\(^3\) Only several centuries earlier, the land that would one day become Spain generated both the most famous
Kabbalist (Jewish mystic) to ever live, Moses de León (author of *The Zohar*) and the most famous Sufi
(Islamic mystic), Ibn Al’Arabi (both 13\(^{\text{th}}\) Century mystics). Of course, though Jews, Arabs and Christians
lived in relative peace in both Ibn Al’Arabi’s Al-Andalus and Moses de León’s Christian kingdom (what
would become Castile), it must be noted that these two great mystics did not, strictly speaking, inhabit the
same country (as Spain did not yet exist).
to a sizeable extent, throughout its colonies (where alterity, though marginalized, could not be utterly destroyed). Yet, this time of death and erasure also led to great expansion, growth, trade, and, as reflected by the marvels of golden age literature, culture and even religion⁴, it was likewise accompanied by true artistic genius and splendor. It is worth noting here that Spain’s “Golden Age” is born with its “Renacimiento”—which, rather significantly, means not only renaissance in Spanish but also literally “rebirth”.

Though the idea that a “rebirth” can arise from the ashes of darkness and death is highly relevant to El espíritu (and, in fact, the aforementioned truck is responsible, symbolically, for ushering in this very hope), it is important to first remember that it was for all the most pernicious reasons that Spain’s Golden Age became the idyllic time for Franco—the time that, for him, expressed the eternal “Spanish essence”. Much like Francoism, beneath its golden shell, the era of Cervantes was filled with the rot of imperialism, exclusionism, erasure and thus, a false notion of unity and nationalism.

As is well known, modernization in Spain was severely delayed as a result of Spain’s reliance on the colonies (and, more precisely, the slavery and imperialism it enabled). Moreover, although Spain expanded, both literally and otherwise, as a consequence of its imperialism, it simultaneously shrunk not only in the sense that this growth required the suppression of difference but also inasmuch as it helped spawn Spain’s infamous leyenda negra⁵, further blacklisting and isolating her from other European nations (albeit somewhat unfairly given that similar atrocities occurred in the

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⁴ In addition to Cervantes, the Spanish “Golden Age” produced famous playwrights such as Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina, Lope de Vega and even the sublimely famous religious mystics, Santa Teresa de Avila and San Juan de la Cruz (both 16th century mystics). It is interesting to consider, however, that both these reformers were persecuted (particularly San Juan de la Cruz) and lived only shortly after the onset of the Spanish Inquisition. Though both are of converso descent, it is ironic that Santa Teresa de Avila became, under Franco, the symbol of Spanish “purity of blood”.

⁵ Of course, as explored in Margaret Greer’s, Walter Mignolo’s and Maureen Quilligan’s Rereading the Black Legend, this had started well before the Spanish Conquest of the “New World”.
very countries so quick to denounce Spain—most notably, England). For all these reasons, it is only fitting that for Franco (at least in his postwar years), the ideal Spain was not a Spain of progress or modernization, but one of autarky and permanence. This too is both reflected and contested in this opening scene, as a truck, a symbol of modernization, movement, the foreign and the strange, plows through the empty, monotonous terrain of post-war Castile. As we learn moments later, this truck carries within it an even more powerful symbol of change, movement, modernization and the strange. It carries a film. And this film is *Frankenstein*.

In truth, both the truck and its contents starkly contrast with the stagnant isolation and repression typical of 1940s Spain. Though post-war Francoism stands for isolation and autarky, this film is mythic, universal, and what is worse, a foreign import. Though Francoism epitomizes authoritarian hierarchy, monolithic discourse, and absolute obedience, this film invites a plurality of voices and interpretations as it is not only a remake of yet another foreign work (Mary Shelley’s novel), but will also be re-interpreted/re-performed by the little girl protagonists, Ana and Isabel.

In the spirit of *Don Quijote*, which itself critiques its own culture, in large part, by rewriting previous literary genres, *El espíritu* uses similar techniques to become both a testament to the authoritarian drive to erase, and yet a prime example of how all attempts to erase history and “otherness” are ultimately self-destructive. The shadow, the echo,

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6 It is imperative to keep in mind, however, that Franco becomes paradoxically drawn to modernization and even American influence in his later years (even as he rejects such foreign intrusions on a theoretical level). Ironically, as scholars such as Francisco LaRubia-Prado have noted (see, for example, his article entitled, “Franco as Cyborg”), Franco himself literally becomes somewhat of a “cyborg” in his late years as a consequence of his artificial/mechanical life extension.

7 Moreover, it encourages women and children to leave their repressive homes/“beehives” and unite in public spaces. The film also happens to be directed by an openly gay man, James Whale, which is highly appropriate given that homosexuals were seen as a threat to the traditional family structure in Spain and the moral health of the Spanish people. As such, homosexuals were viciously persecuted by the Franco Regime, as they blatantly defied the foundational assumptions of Franco’s National Catholicism.
and the enduring presence of the film, *Frankenstein*, on *El espíritu* not only increases the film’s ambiguity but, in the process, it ignites the girls’ imagination while enabling them to transgress--and often literally move beyond--the laws and codes of post-war Spain, whether spiritual or sexual. In fact, *Frankenstein* encourages movement to such an extent that, as symbolized by the truck that carries it, it effectively turns *El espíritu* into a journey itself. Though within the temporal and spatial limits of the film, the protagonists’ journey is largely circular, the ethical effects of the film moves the viewers themselves in radical ways--as they are urged to follow Ana’s attempts to revive the ghosts of the past while simultaneously imbuing these ghosts with new and relevant meanings.

At the same time, considering the stagnant, repressive reality of 1940s Spain, this journey is potentially liberating for the protagonists themselves--especially the females, who, under Franco, are even further restricted, repressed and immobilized than the men. It is important to keep in mind here that the film offers hope to its viewers largely by presenting models both to avoid and to follow. More generally, however, the very novelty and urgency with which *Frankenstein* is received in this small, forgotten town expresses the repression and silence of all characters, young and old, male and female. While the girls’ mother, Teresa, is more concerned with writing letters to an anonymous ex-Republican soldier/exile than looking after her children, her husband, Fernando (an ex-Republican), finds his beekeeping hobby a more fascinating substitute to his family.

All this is established in the film’s first few minutes, when Fernando, the patriarch/beekeeper, comes home to an empty house after wandering about and tending to his bees. The maid informs him that his daughters are watching a film and that his wife has also gone out. Though the maid fails to specify Teresa’s whereabouts, the viewer
knows she has biked off to the train station to mail one of her letters. At this point, we also learn that Fernando himself rarely eats meals with the family, making us immediately less sympathetic towards him. Yet, despite Teresa’s parental neglect, the fact that both her letters and the film, Frankenstein, serve as a secret space of rebellion and fantasy quickly establishes a degree of complicity between Teresa and her daughters. This connection is reinforced by the fact that, much like Teresa’s letter-writing (which forces her out of the house) the girls’ film-viewing moves them into a semi-liberating public space. As a result of Teresa’s and Fernando’s repression, the girls are not only physically and emotionally abandoned (and thus, in many ways, immobilized) but, in another, ironic sense, more free to move about and search for alternate role models through film and fantasy as no one is around to restrain them. This paradox anticipates the manifold ways in which Franco’s repressive laws may, in fact, backfire.

It is essential to remember, however, that these “transgressions” become a focus of attention because they serve as the exception, not the rule. The intense repression of 1940s Spain is reflected not only in the film’s overwhelming silences but also in the lack of movement, the long-shots of spatial emptiness, and the suffocating sensation of being trapped in a beehive—a sensation which, as most critics of the film have noted, is reinforced by the house’s honeycomb shaped, yellow-tinted windows, among other techniques. As the film’s title itself suggests, though the protagonists are not ill-intentioned or unintelligent, the effect of living in such an oppressive beehive is that one becomes, almost inevitably, the product of one’s environment—inhuman, mechanical, bee-like. This inhumanity, repression and isolation are revealed in the first minutes, as
Teresa writes to her anonymous exile. Though Teresa is introduced to us with tightly sealed lips, we viewers are privy to her internal voice, which sorrowfully reminisces,

But now and then when I look around and find so much absence and destruction, and at the same time so much sadness, something tells me that perhaps our capacity for truly living has vanished along with them. I don’t even know if this letter will arrive in your hands. The news that we receive from outside is so scarce and confusing.

As Teresa’s words suggest, though the characters are all acutely repressed, silent and distanced from one another, beneath their bee-like shells, they are also highly complex, sated with desire and curiously connected to each other by means of their shared (“monstrous”) repression. The fact that this letter begins as a voiceover to an image of Fernando suited up in his beekeeper attire reveals the degree to which Teresa’s words are truly expressive of everyone else’s state of mind—and perhaps especially Fernando’s. As adults who have learned to repress their deepest wishes (or the true “spirit of the beehive”), both Teresa and Fernando’s desires as well as their need to keep these longings secret are manifest in the film’s frequent use of voiceovers to reflect their literally unspeakable thoughts. Thus, though Teresa is not writing directly to or about Fernando in this letter, in a strange sense, she is.

Like Teresa, Fernando is so repressed that his thoughts remain largely unspoken; yet when his internal voice is heard (filtered through voiceovers) it is usually not his own voice but rather the voice of both fictional and “real” characters, ranging from Henry Frankenstein to his own wife, Teresa. In a film defined by its ambiguous cast, Fernando outdoes them all as the most repressed yet repressive, ambiguous yet authoritarian figure in the family. From his first appearance, in which he is dressed as a beekeeper, giving him an almost inhuman look, he is likened to the monster commonly known as
“Frankenstein” who, rather significantly, has just been introduced to us viewers (and to Ana and Isabel) in the previous scene. Yet, Fernando’s role as beekeeper equates him even more to Henry Frankenstein (the creator) than to his “monstrous creation”. Like Dr. Frankenstein, Fernando sacrifices those he loves most (his family) in order to play an almost godlike role over his own creation. Following Henry’s abandonment of his “monstrous” creation, Fernando’s children become his own abandoned bees.

Yet, as Fernando’s monstrous beekeeper suit suggests, even when he plays beekeeper he is still, like the other characters, somewhat of a victim. Accordingly, Dr. Frankenstein’s relationship to his own monster serves as a metaphor for the ways in which all El espíritu’s characters are interconnected and ultimately ambiguous. Although some efforts to escape the oppressive beehive are more laudable than others, all the characters, from Teresa to Fernando to Ana to Isabel, employ their own subtle, secretive yet at least partially subversive means of resisting the overwhelming atmosphere of repression. Yet, Ana, as an innocent, open-minded child, is the only character who comes close to truly escaping in her fierce attempt to embrace fantasy, spirituality and, in general, otherness. However, because she lives in a cynical, repressed, muted world, she cannot liberate/renew herself in a way that is complete, stable, public and unambiguous.

Ana and Isabel, though perhaps more abandoned than repressed, convey their own repressions, from the very beginning, through their very thirst to explore that which has

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8 In general, Fernando spends the majority of his time outdoors; yet whether he is tending to his bees or simply enjoying a leisurely stroll, it is always in solitude. When at home, like Teresa, he locks himself away in his study, likening him even more to the notorious Dr. Frankenstein. With one ambiguous exception (which I will later explore), the little contact he has with his children reinforces his role as patriarch/beekeeper.

9 In keeping with Henry’s deepest cravings, what Fernando wants most of all is to escape through the symbolic window of the beehive. Though both men blindly attempt to achieve this by becoming somewhat oppressive, neglectful father-figures themselves, in the process, they create monstrous doubles of their very own vulnerabilities and repressions—monsters which offer hope of change, however uncertain.
been denied them by means of a fantasy world of their own creation. Or rather, it is a fantasy world based on other fantasies and fictions, yet which the girls make their own through their imaginative use of role-play to transform/re-member the past, to explode Spain’s borders, and to “rewrite” or shed new meanings on fictions and traditions as diverse as James Whale’s 1931 film to the Bible itself.¹⁰

As is fitting, the journey begins when the girls view Whale’s *Frankenstein* in a local makeshift theatre. This mysterious film immediately prompts Ana to ask her sister why the monster kills the little girl and why the townspeople then kill the monster. Her sister’s accidentally brilliant answer that the monster is not dead, but rather lives (invisibly) in a nearby shed leads Ana to search for this monster within both the shed itself and the well alongside it. In the process of invoking the spirit through ritualistic acts grounded in both Whale’s film and biblical traditions, Ana’s well becomes, much like Miriam’s well (the biblical prophetess and sister of Moses), transformed into a mystical symbol of both suffering and hope. Ana’s heartfelt wish and steadfast determination to befriend the “spirit of the beehive” is finally rewarded as an anonymous exile arrives to town, symbolically, by train, and proceeds to take shelter in the very same shed in which Ana believes the “monster”/“spirit” dwells.¹¹

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¹⁰ Yet, Isabel, while capable of entertaining Ana’s fantasy world (to which she is largely an accomplice) appears to take mainly after her father. For though she enjoys playing in Ana’s fantasy-world, and though she even uses it to share rare moments of intimacy and solidarity with her sister, ultimately, she views it for what it is—mere fantasy. Still worse, Isabel uses it primarily as a means of toying with Ana, of carrying out perverse power fantasies and of expressing her budding sadomasochism rather than as a way of identifying with Ana as an equal. By creating this fictional world, Isabel learns to “play God” in much the same way as does Dr. Frankenstein when he creates his monster or even Fernando, who, much like Franco himself, becomes God to his own microcosmic world/ beehive.

¹¹ The fact that Ana confuses this man with the monster/spirit himself proves highly symbolic, as both men are similarly exiled from society (or perceived as “monstrous”), and yet, to a great extent, symbolize society itself. Frankenstein, as a literally patchwork creation/revival of the dead reflects this *maquis*’ own function as a return-of-the-repressed (or, more precisely, the forgotten exiles, disappearances and/or murder victims thrown anonymously, into mass graves during and after the Civil War). Thus, though all the film’s characters are likened in some essential way to “the monster”, this nameless exile’s similarities are most
The fact that Ana invokes the monster/maquis by means of her womb-like well is of interest not only because the well serves as a biblical symbol of rebirth in the midst of exile, but also because it is a biblical symbol of both spiritual and sexual awakening. In this respect, it gestures towards Ana’s own liminal position, as she herself may be on the cusp of a spiritual-sexual rebirth. The well’s sexual function also reflects the mirror-like role that both the monster/spirit and the nameless refugee will play, particularly in relation to Ana’s own desire, but more generally, in relation to Spanish desire of the 1940s. Sadly, unlike Miriam’s well, Ana’s well fails to water the barren fields of post-war Castile and its people. In her quest to revive the monster/spirit, Ana, nevertheless, gives new meaning to the various traditions which intersect in El espíritu--from the Bible to Shelley’s Frankenstein to Whale’s own remake of it. In the process, she learns to connect, however tenuously, to those around her--particularly via her maquis friend.¹²

Above all, by resuscitating the ghosts of the future-past, Ana not only offers the viewers a model to follow, but, in so doing, she connects both to the viewers themselves as well as to the ghosts of Spain’s past—and not only those of the post-war and Civil War Spain but, to some extent, to the voices of dissidence that were repressed and destroyed many centuries earlier.¹³ Just as Ana transports her viewers and the victims of Spain’s violent past into a time without boundaries, the viewers themselves transport Ana into

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¹² Most immediately, Ana’s maquis serves as both a projection of Ana’s father (and her love-hate relationship with him) as well as a substitute to him. Furthermore, since this anonymous exile encompasses many of the qualities of Teresa’s own ex-Republican exile, his appearance seems, in an almost eerie way, to be a response both to Ana’s ritualistic invocations as well as Teresa’s desperate letters. In truth, the arrival of this maquis enables Ana to cultivate a relationship with him which, in many ways, parallels her mother’s relationship with her beloved exile.

¹³ As I will soon explore in more detail, Ana imitates spiritual models far more akin to Jewish, Sufi and Christian mystics of the Middle Ages and even the Renaissance than those of National Catholicism.
their own worlds—making her truly timeless. The monster, in many senses, expresses this paradox. Not only does he represent both the future and the past, the self and the other, and even male and female qualities as they are traditionally polarized or defined but also and above all the unity of all beings. This interconnectedness is, ironically, both that which makes any sort of redemption (for Ana and her family) impossible within the context of the film—and yet, it is also that which symbolizes the ultimate potential for true unity and love\textsuperscript{14}. It is the very complexity of the characters, and the ease with which good can become bad, that makes mercy, forgiveness and unconditional love necessary. Through Ana’s unrelenting desire, even in her “failures”, to hope for a better world, she inspires her viewers to truly believe, forgive and love, with patience, courage and hope.

This is reflected in the final scene, which features Ana looking dreamily out the window of her symbolic beehive, still remembering and desiring her magical Otherworld, even as she is estranged from it. Though this scene ambiguously implies that she may be destined to become like her sister, mother or even her father\textsuperscript{15}, what counts most is our very last vision of Ana, as she yearns for a place of true unity, love and remembrance. Indeed, perhaps more essential than her affinity with the other characters or “bees” is her

\textsuperscript{14} In this sense, the film distinguishes between personal salvation and communal redemption. After all, it is precisely because redemption is impossible (and yet Ana still hopes for it) that Ana is capable of salvation through her unconditional love and hope.

\textsuperscript{15} In this scene her final words are not her own but rather the words/voiceover of Isabel—as she utters the magic phrase “Soy Ana” (“I am Ana”) to invoke the spirit. Though the confluence of the two girls’ identities is potentially just as liberating as it is oppressive (depending on whether Isabel becomes like Ana or vice-versa), Ana’s immobile mouth signals the birth of her own repressive mechanisms. Like her parents, she appears to have finally acquired an inner “adult” voice. Thus, we are left wondering if Ana will end up as repressed as her mother. Worse yet, she may become like her father, who, in a previous scene, stands wistfully at the window of the beehive (much like Ana), silently desiring what he knows he cannot have through the voice(over) of another (in his case, Henry Frankenstein).
function as an expression of Erice/Fernández Santos16 and even the viewers. These ties imply that Ana’s ultimate destination is a place of re-membering and thus, hope.

From the film’s very first scene to the very last we not only catch a glimpse of El espíritu’s overwhelming ambiguity and invisible movements, hopes and transgressions, but, specifically, we get the immediate impression that two worlds are about to clash—the Spanish and the foreign, the modern and the traditional, fantasy and reality, childhood and adulthood, future and past, male and female, the stagnant and the dynamic, among other dichotomies. Indeed, the idea that this film is a journey offers hope in a significant way. Just as the devastating silences of the 1940s disguise the whispered fantasies of rebellious children and star-crossed lovers, the fact that nothing appears to happen in this film similarly disguises the fact that in another, deeper sense, quite a lot does.

The film’s ambiguity not only opens up a space of hope, courage and unconditional love for Spaniards themselves (particularly as they read the film retrospectively), but forces the reader to actively engage in the reconstruction of the text (or film). The fact that the actors (Ana Torrent, Isabel Telleria, Teresa Gimpera,

16 As Paul Julian Smith crucially notes, “The question of the contribution of coscriptwriter Ángel Fernández Santos is more complex as it raises the problem of artistic priority. For while the two share the credit for the screenplay, in the typewritten script held in the Biblioteca Nacional (Fernández Santos and Erice 1973) Fernández Santos’s name comes first; while in the film itself it comes second. In a lengthy piece in El país, published to celebrate the tenth anniversary of El espíritu de la colmena (Fernández Santos [1983]), Fernández Santos (a faithful supporter of Erice’s subsequent films, in which he himself played no part) gives his account of the origins of the script. According to Fernández Santos this was such an intimate process of collaboration that the childhood memories of each man alternated in the narrative: thus Erice provided the mushroom picking and monster games of the children; Fernández Santos the well, the fugitive, and the school anatomy lesson. Fernández Santos attributes to Erice a decisive stroke: the ‘amputation’ of the original frame narrative set in the present in which the adult Ana returns to the village in which she grew up to visit her dying father. This cut led to an internalization of the narrative: deprived of an on-screen storyteller, spectators are obliged to recreate the story inside their own consciousness, using the ‘secret look, indebted to a secret identity and poetic time, which exists behind the eyes of every human being’. //Fernández Santos thus takes the internalization of the narrative to be also a universalization of it: the two men’s private memories become, immediately, those of the audience.” (“Between Metaphysics & Scientism” 108-9)
Fernando Fernán Gómez) keep their real (first) names as characters is emblematic not only of *El espíritu*’s intent to take fiction seriously, but also the degree to which fiction has relevance to modern Spaniards and even humanity itself. Yet, it is relevant not only because it represents reality, but because, in the process of representing, it transforms it; whether through the cast of actors or through the spectators themselves.

Appropriately, the ambiguity inherent to poetic language (and even more so to silences) is heightened both thematically and metaphorically in *El espíritu* through various techniques characteristic of “ethical narratives”—most notably, the existence of multi-layered narrative, fiction or “reality”. This multi-layering not only inverts and subverts monolithic meaning, but invites the viewer/reader to participate in the recreation of the film or text. The fact that, thanks to the film’s recurrent use of voiceover, we viewers can hear what the characters themselves cannot hear or say, underscores not only the extreme repression in which they are enveloped, but also our distance from it. Ironically, it is our removal from this world that enables us to penetrate the minds of the various protagonists in ways that they themselves cannot. Thus, the voiceover not only reminds us of our safe distance from the repressive world of the Franco Regime, but it grants us a secret knowledge of which the characters themselves remain largely unaware.

Like the children who flock to see James Whale’s *Frankenstein* in the film’s opening scenes, we critics have hopefully not yet become hardened to reality to the point that our imaginations no longer work. Yet, unlike these children, we, whether Spanish or not, partake of a distance which carries with it an obligation to actively, critically, even creatively engage with the film itself—and all its layers. Not only are we free from the
burden of having to disguise, censor or silence our thoughts, actions and interpretations of fiction and reality, but, with a bit of luck and effort we can do just the opposite.

**Reframing the Silent and the Monstrous**

As we have only begun to see, the ambiguous potential of *El espíritu* to subvert or escape the repression of the Franco Regime occurs on various levels. On one level, it is wedged between the various layers of interpretation that the film enables--from the girls’ interpretation of *Frankenstein* to the viewers’ own reading of *El espíritu* as a whole. Yet, this ambiguous potential for subversion is embedded, just as crucially, in the silences—and perhaps even more so within “Frankenstein”, both as monster and as film. Let us not forget that in *El espíritu’s* opening scene, this film, *Frankenstein*, is already present, lurking invisibly within the truck that carries it into Ana’s tiny forgotten town. Much like the voids and silences themselves, the film, more generally, hides enormous power and potential. In a similar way, the film’s invisibility (within the truck) presages the so-called “monster’s” or “spirit’s” own concealed potential—as he too is described and portrayed as being essentially invisible. In reality, the film, *Frankenstein*, proves to be just as symbolic and liberating as the truck itself; for, not only does it become a vehicle of movement and change, not only does it too harbor secret power, but, more crucially, it ignites the imagination of our young protagonist, Ana, and her sister Isabel. Were it not for this, *El espíritu* simply could not and would not exist.

Logically then, three types of ambiguity will form the axis of this chapter, the axis around which all other interpretations revolve. Obviously, the ambiguity of silence and the ambiguity of monstrosity are two of these. Yet, the third and final ambiguity, that of
layered interpretation itself, is just as important, for it permits me to look both beyond the
limits of this film—for example to del Toro’s 2007 remake—as well as deep within—to
Mary Shelley’s novel, Whale’s film, and even the Bible. My ability to explore the
relationships between these various layers reinforces my larger reading of the film and its
ambiguities while enhancing the novelty and sophistication of my readings. Thus, at this
juncture, I would like to further clarify both the goals of this chapter and, in the process,
what it is that I contribute to the abundant criticism already done on *El espíritu*.

As my reading of this film fits within the framework of my larger project,
naturally, part of what I am concerned with are the types of terror, exile, ambiguity,
remaking and remembering that occur in this film. As a totality, the way in which I glue
these topics together itself constitutes a fairly novel approach within the context of the
criticism already written on *El espíritu*. Nevertheless, this approach forces me to delve
depth into the presentation of themes previously explored by many critics of this film--
such as silence and monstrosity. Though these topics are hardly new to critics, I am
capable of looking at monstrosity and silence in new ways not only by relating them to
ambiguity, silence, exile, death and re-membering, but by explaining how the very act of
writing and retelling may be used in potentially subversive ways. For example, my
examination of monstrosity gains coherence not only in relation to these topics, but by
situating it within the broader framework of my own “narrative ethics” (though I achieve
this, in part, by building on critic, Adam Newton’s, own “narrative ethics” as well as his
views on monstrosity17). At the same time, by highlighting the interrelatedness of these

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17 In particular, Newton’s way of relating monstrosity to death, exile and rebirth are very appealing to me,
most likely because he too builds largely on many of the same theorists—most notably, ethical philosopher,
Emmanuel Levinas. His lack of critical interaction with Levinas, however, means that he also inherits
many of the same limits in theorizing. If Newton had put Levinas in dialogue with Julia Kristeva’s theories
three types of ambiguity I am able to make more comprehensive observations. More generally, my engagement with a variety of theorists ranging from Jacques Lacan to Julia Kristeva to Emmanuel Levinas sheds light on the complexity of the film’s various ambiguities and their relationship towards one another. The fact, however, that all of these ambiguities are fused through the film’s undeniable mystic quality is crucial.

Indeed, if nothing else, my focus on spirituality is what makes my reading of *El espíritu* valuable and unique. Though critics such as Robert Miles, Xon de Ros and Richard Curry touch briefly on spirituality/mysticism, they do so in a relatively tangential way. For example, Miles and Ros make a reference to Gnosticism in an effort to explain the somewhat subversive meaning of Ana’s Eve-like apple-offering to the anonymous *maquis*, which I happen to quote directly (and which also functions within the larger framework of my work on Spanish mysticism). Yet, for Miles, the significance of this act ends here. He does, however, also point out an important thematic parallel between Saint Peter’s denial of Christ and similar denials set up in this film. He asserts,

> [...]Fernando’s denial over the body of the fugitive is preceded very closely by the crowing of a cock in the background. This effect has been preceded by two other such noises, both at significant times in terms of Fernando’s influence in the house. Another is heard when Ana and Isabel are ‘shaving’. [...] Here Fernando is notably absent. In fact it was his departure which seems to have signaled their chance to get excited and play about the house. [...]exactly one hundred shots before this, a cock is heard crowing as Fernando is again momentarily absent, though is powerful influence in the house is implied. [...] An interesting inversion: the cock crows three times over the course of the film and Fernando denies knowledge (of the fugitive) once. Or has Fernando been in a kind of denial of exile, monstrosity, rebirth, etc., he might have avoided these pitfalls—though, as we will see, her theories are equally limited. Throughout this sub-section, I will point out where both Newton and Levinas diverge from and converge with the general, theoretical spirit of this chapter, and more specifically, with my views on monstrosity, silence, exile and ambiguity. Both Newton and Levinas understand monstrosity as being reflective of historical, personal, collective and even mythic emanations of terror, repression and “exile”. For this reason, though neither one of them comments on *El espíritu* itself as a film, their views on monstrosity apply very much to *El espíritu*. Furthermore, since the ambiguity of monstrosity is tightly tied to the ambiguities of silence in this film (also symbolized by the monster), my use of Kristeva, Levinas, Newton and mysticism will be just as central to my discussion of the silences as to monstrosity.
about something all along? The near-regular spacing of the crowing throughout the film suggests an—albeit almost imperceptible—build-up to an event with the final sound coming as Fernando becomes an ironic Saint Peter figure who denies all knowledge, not just for his own salvation, but for that of his family.” (“The Possible Subplot” 109).

More crucially, Miles establishes a link between the monster/refugee and the biblical Jesus in the scene where the fugitive’s corpse is laid out to rest on an examination table. This not only helps solidify Fernando’s role as Saint Peter but, inversely, his likening to Saint Peter (who denies Christ) also strengthens the bond between Christ and the refugee—and by extension the “monster”. Miles explains, “[…] The suggestion of the Christ-like nature of the fallen maquis is reinforced by the composition of the sequence itself. The foreshortening of the image of the body recalls the figure of Christ under a shroud in devotional portrayals such as the Lamentation of the Dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna (1447-1501) […]” (109). This equation between the maquis refugee and Christ is useful to my own reading since it parallels (and thus reinforces) the kinship between the monster of Frankenstein and Christ (or at least a divine figure of rebirth). Nevertheless, the scope of Miles’ argument does not enable him to delve further into the spiritual/theoretical ramifications that I address in this essay, or to use them in ways that explicitly critique traditional views of religion (as reflected, for example, in Francoism).

At the same time, we must not forget that the three ambiguities mentioned above are interrelated. Though numerous critics have commented on the importance of the film’s obvious silences, most do not give full attention to their ambiguity, particularly in relationship to monstrosity. Even to the extent that some critics do engage all these themes (Celestino Deleyto, for instance, makes an important connection between monstrosity and ambiguity), their conclusions differ from mine. This will become
increasingly clear as I confront them on more specific points throughout this chapter.

Likewise, though Jo Labanyi does a stunning job of providing balanced (historically and theoretically) readings on haunting, monstrosity and memory, and though I often cite her directly, the conclusions she draws are somewhat different from mine.\(^\text{18}\) As will be

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\(^{18}\) Criticism on *El espíritu* is so vast and wide-ranging that it would be impossible for me to summarize it exhaustively—much less in a chapter that hopes to shed new light on what is arguably Spain’s most famous film. However, I would like to highlight the major trends, and especially those to which this chapter is most indebted. Some of the earliest criticism/close readings of the film have very specific focus—for example, they deal with just one character or women in general—yet they are worthwhile reads. Luis Arata’s “I am Ana: The Play of the Imagination in The Spirit of the Beehive” is a fine example of a good close reading, and it is one that I cite several times throughout this chapter. Virginia Higginbotham’s books, especially *The Spirit of the Beehive/El espíritu de la colmena*, offer solid close readings as well, and they have helped many of the critics I quote to ground their arguments. Other close readings of a similar nature include *Tres décadas de El espíritu de la colmena* by Jorge Latorre as well as *El espíritu de la colmena: Víctor Erice: Estudio crítico* by Jaime Pena Pérez. Many of the critics I cite also make use of Latorre, Pena Pérez and countless other critics whose work is centered in close-readings. Even Virginia Higginbotham’s top-notch reading (*The Spirit of the Beehive*) is predicated on her central argument/belief that there is a conflict between the objective/impersonal/historical narrative framework and the personal/subjective world of Ana. Though I don’t necessarily agree with this observation, Higginbotham’s work stands out from other close-readings in that it acknowledges the historical and intertextual dynamics and frameworks in which *El espíritu* is embedded (the only other work to do this is Linda Willem’s, “Text and Intertext”). In particular, Higginbotham makes an important reference to the impact of Rosalía de Castro’s poem, “Folhas novas”, on the film, and she is the only critic to mention the influence of Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, on *El espíritu* (though she does little more than simply state this fact, without developing or proving it, this is appropriate to her work). On the other hand, Higginbotham (like Paul Julian Smith) also provides crucial information regarding the historical circumstances in which the film was produced (particularly with respect to the ways in which Franco’s post-war laws affected and restrained women) as well as the personal circumstances of the film’s creators and, finally, the cinematic traditions into which the film fits and/or resists. This includes a brief exploration of the effects of censorship. In addition, several other books and articles locate *El espíritu* within relevant Spanish, European and even American traditions and transitions—for example, neorealism, silent films, “New Spanish Cinema” and even Hollywood—while also touching on the effects of censorship and the so-called “dictablanda”. Leading film critic, Marsha Kinder, does an especially fine job of positioning *El espíritu* within all these traditions and transitions in her groundbreaking, *Blood Cinema*.

There are also quite a few books and articles which place the film within Víctor Erice’s own personal trajectory as auteur—most importantly, Paul Julian Smith’s chapter entitled “Between Metaphysics and Scientism: Rehistoricizing Víctor Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena*. In this work he (in his own words) historicizes “the question of art cinema, auteurism, and their relation to cinematic language by examining the emergence of a press persona for Erice in representative writings by and interviews of the director over twenty years and the complex Spanish responses to this very self-conscious project over the same period.” (94) In particular, Smith is useful for his ability to show/explain the initially mixed reactions of the Spanish critics to *El espíritu* (something which Higginbotham also echoes) as well as the meaning of Erice’s antagonistic attitudes towards commercial norms, his understanding of artistic integrity and how these attitudes influence his work. Finally, he is the only critic I have encountered who highlights the importance (or even existence) of Erice’s coscriptwriter (Fernández Santos) on *El espíritu* as well as what the ramifications of Fernández Santos’ influence on the film means within the relevant frameworks of art cinema, auteurism, cinematic language and Spanish culture at large. José Luis Castrillón Hermosa’s book, *El cine de Víctor Erice*, and Carmen Arocena’s widely cited book entitled, simply, *Víctor Erice*, are other, even more comprehensive examples of close-readings which situate *El espíritu* within the larger trajectory.
of Erice’s own work. Arocena’s work is one that I cite frequently throughout this chapter, and even more so in chapter 2. She is also the only critic who gives substantial attention to what she views as rites of passage/rebirth and the way they are reflected in *El espíritu*—though, essentially, she limits her arguments to what one theorist (L. Levy-Bruhl) has argued about rites of passage within primitive tribal societies.

Most other criticism on *El espíritu* is primarily either historical or theoretical; though, as my use of such criticism highlights, it nonetheless builds on much of these earlier close readings. Very few works, however, put the historical and theoretical into dialogue (Jo Labanyi being one notable exception). In general, the theoretical criticism is based largely in feminism and the degree to which the film resists or fails to resist the male gaze/scopophilia (for example, see Susan Martin-Márquez’s “Monstrous Identity: Female Socialization in *El espíritu de la colmena*” or Linda Williams’ “‘When the Woman Looks’”). Given the centrality of Ana’s relationship to the monstrous (Frankenstein) it is not surprising that theoretical analyses are also well grounded in monstrosity in general and, in particular, its relationship to feminine abjection, desire and resistance (see, for example, Dominique Russell’s “Monstrous Ambiguities: Víctor Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena*”, Celestino Deleyto’s “Women and Other Monsters: Frankenstein and the Role of the Mother in *El espíritu de la colmena*”, and Juan Egea’s “El monstruo metafórico en *El espíritu de la colmena*”). Articles which deal with the relationship of monstrosity to both the loss and recuperation of history and memory are equally crucial—a particularly strong example and one which is very much in line with my own mode of theorizing memory in relationship to monstrosity is Jo Labanyi’s article, “History and Hauntology”. Yet her understanding of monstrosity as a haunting (revival) of the forgotten past (which, in turn, is based on theorist Jacques Derrida’s understanding of haunting and which also builds on Avery Gordon’s sociological approach to haunting). Considering the importance of monstrosity to both this chapter and to my entire thesis, it is only natural that I frequently quote what I consider to be the best and most relevant articles on monstrosity—in particular, those of Russell, Deleyto, Miles and Labanyi. Though Robert Miles’ “Entre dos fuegos” and Richard Curry’s “Clarifying the Enigma” do not focus primarily on monstrosity, they each contribute specific insights in relation to monstrosity and other issues that I quote directly. They are also two of the finest close-readings I have encountered. The more specific ways in which I use, agree or disagree with their views, theories and readings will become increasingly clear in later sections of this chapter as I put myself in direct dialogue with them when necessary. Finally, Xon de Ros’ “Innocence Lost”, offers a fine reading of *El espíritu* and one that is especially useful to me in highlighting the ways in which film is related to feminine experience, mobility and modernization—and particularly within the framework of *El espíritu*.

In a more historical vein, I also build on numerous articles that focus on the erasure of memory (for example Ignacio Prado’s “Raza y rizoma” and Jo Labanyi’s “El cine como lugar de la memoria”). More specifically, there are quite a few articles which examine the residual resistances to the Franco Regime of the 1940s (for example, of Republican soldiers exiled to France), such as Paul Preston’s “Resisting the State: the Urban and Rural Guerilla of the 1940s”, which I cite directly (though it offers no analysis of *El espíritu* as it is not intended to be a literary critique). I also make use of several articles that deal with the treatment of children in post-war Spain. Good examples of these historical approaches can be found in Marsha Kinder’s article, “The Children of Franco in the New Spanish Cinema” or Sandra Harper’s “The Concept of Childhood in Víctor Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena*”, both of which I directly engage throughout this chapter. Finally, there are some excellent articles which explain the laws and codes of the 1940s, especially regarding gender, sexuality, the family unit and the (mis)treatment of females—a topic which has obvious relevance to a film (and thesis) so concerned with feminine desire and abjection. Aside from Virginia Higginbotham’s aforementioned book (*The Spirit of the Beehive*), some of the most useful and concise work on these issues is done by Helen Graham in her chapters entitled “Gender and the State: Women in the 1940s” and “Sexual Politics” (in Labanyi’s *Spanish Cultural Studies*). Though neither of her articles comments directly on *El espíritu* this chapter is deeply indebted to them both.
Yet, before I delve more deeply into mysticism, psychoanalysis and other relevant theory, I should more fully address the film’s third and final ambiguity—that is, the layering and rewriting of the previous traditions embedded within the film. To be sure, one of the most distinctive aspects of my own reading is that it focuses on the way in which *El espíritu* draws from and rewrites other traditions. Though one other critic, in particular, Linda Willem, has done a fine job of pointing to the interplay between Whale’s and Erice’s films (and I cite her perhaps more than anyone else), the ultimate conclusion that she draw from this interplay differs radically from mine. She notes,

In *El espíritu de la colmena* Erice’s subtle political message is conveyed through the film’s overt intertextuality, and as such it can be perceived by all viewers. But a more select audience is privy to the covert intertextuality that enhances the mythic quality of Erice’s film by delving deeper into Whale’s rendering of the Frankenstein tale. These hidden references add to the enjoyment of the viewing experience for those who perceive their presence, but do not detract from that experience for those who do not. Herein lies one of the keys to the success of Erice’s classic film. (725).

Despite Willem’s remarkable acuity for detailed analyses, since she barely mentions what she refers to as the film’s “overt intertextuality” (or the scenes from Whale’s film that are shown directly in *El espíritu*), she takes for granted that they reflect a single political message which is “perceived by all viewers”. In a film as subtle, and more importantly, as ambiguous as *El espíritu* the assumption that there are overt messages perceptible by *any* viewer is ungrounded. As we have already begun to see, even the film’s “overt intertextuality” has numerous layers and thus, how much the viewer knows about Spanish history, culture, psychoanalysis, mysticism, feminism, trauma, among any number of other theories and traditions, may strongly influence the way he or she reads this film—even putting aside its so-called “covert intertextuality”.
Yet, Willem’s statement regarding “covert intertextuality” is equally problematic. Given my use of intertextuality as a means of increasing ambiguity, rewriting history, exploding dichotomies and, ultimately, of increasing the protagonists’ and the viewers’ ethical reconstruction of self and text, Willem’s idea that the sole purpose of such “covert intertextuality” is to increase the viewer’s enjoyment and the film’s mythic quality is simplistic. As my use of the “covert intertextuality” from Whale’s film and from various other works embedded in *El espíritu* suggests, these other, less obvious or “covert” references are just as substantial, even as political, as the more “overtly intertextual” ones. In fact, much of this “covert intertextuality” complicates the “overt”—either by further supporting these overt references, or, in some cases, by turning them inside out. This, in turn, enables me to substantiate many of my own readings and Willem’s.

That being said, I do not wish to dismiss or degrade the work of the manifold critics, theorists, historians, psychoanalysts and many others without which this chapter would have been literally impossible to write. Indeed, as will become increasingly clear as I progress throughout this chapter, every critic I cite, even when I disagree with him or her, has taught me something new in the process and helped me to clarify my own ideas, thoughts and theories. With this in mind, I will now elaborate on the theories or theorists most relevant to this chapter. This is crucial not only because these theories can help us better understand *El espíritu* in light of the abovementioned issues and topics, but it will also enable me to concretely show both the advantages and limitations of these various theorists and theories as well as the film itself and its “monstrously ambiguous” silences.
Ambiguous Theory

As theorists Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva and Adam Newton would concur, ambiguity is vital to any good fictional work. Without ambiguity there would be no room for creation, for “otherness”, for plurality, for difference or, as Levinas would say, for “interruption” (by and for the Other). Simply put, without ambiguity, there would be no responsibility. Yet though both Levinas and Kristeva prove crucial to my reading of this film, I depart from them both in considerable ways. Levinas, despite his well-deserved role as father of a “narrative ethics”, conceives of an excessively selfless, desire-less concept of ethics. Moreover, for Levinas, ethics exists beyond the representational limits of language, and, in a sense, beyond human relations and the world itself. Kristeva, by contrast, is helpful in pointing out how desire, love (and the author herself) are crucial elements of poetic language--and must, therefore, be integrated into any “narrative ethics” which purports to be truly effective. Yet though Kristeva acknowledges the inter-subjective dimensions of poetic language (see Revolution in Poetic Language) does not duly exploit the potential of poetic ambiguity for fostering inter-subjective relationships of responsibility and love. In fact, love, for Kristeva, remains largely transcendent (even external) to language--and thus, to a great extent, relationships.

Nevertheless, both Kristeva and Levinas prove crucial in demonstrating how ambiguity, exile, and silence intersect in El espíritu through the concept of monstrosity. Kristeva, furthermore, is particularly helpful in clarifying the degree to which the “feminine” or “feminization” is also intrinsically linked to exile, silence and monstrosity by way of what she calls the “maternal receptacle”. This reinforces my idea that the film’s monster and all men associated with him (most notably, the anonymous exile) are
“feminized” through their traumas, repressions and interior exile—which, in turn, make them “monstrous”. This becomes especially significant given Kristeva’s observation that the exile is, by definition, nameless (*Powers of Horror*). In this way, both exile and rebirth are likened to the “feminized” monster (who, though referred to as “Frankenstein” via popular culture, actually has no name of his own) as well as the nameless exile. It is through both figures that Ana, appropriately, aspires to remember and remake herself.

On the other hand, Levinas does an equally fine job, if not better, of explaining the monster’s mirror-like function and how this is related to his exilic status. This may be at least partially due to the fact that Levinas himself builds on many mystical ideas, which, when fused rather than splintered into religious categories, serve as a sort of skeleton key for unlocking the major enigmas of *El espíritu*. Perhaps inadvertently (and despite his rather misogynistic inclinations), Levinas helps us tighten the knot between the monstrous and the feminine. Given the monster’s “specular” nature, it is no wonder that monsters are often associated with female sexuality. This constitutes one of many reasons why it is important to read Levinas both with and against Kristeva.

In fact, I will begin my more meticulous theoretical analyses by focusing on the relevant contributions of feminist psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva. Her understanding of monstrosity, doubling, and rebirth has obvious relevance to this film, particularly in its

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19 I am also thinking here along the lines of feminist theorist, Luce Irigaray, when she convincingly argues how women become the mirror of male desire and fear in her intriguing, *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

20 More generally, however, they signal a change or an awakening in sexuality—for example, those characteristic of adolescence or homosexuality. This is hardly shocking if we consider that sexual awakenings often indicate an impending death/rebirth, whether wanted or not—or more precisely, *both* wanted and not. Because they point towards radical change, these awakenings are, typically, changes which may be both highly attractive and yet difficult to embrace—even more so in a film about repression. Thus, it is only logical that sexuality be viewed as both highly ambiguous and even monstrous. Since feminine sexuality is, in general, considered to be abject, it makes perfect sense that our main character would be a young girl in a highly repressive culture (and who is, quite possibly, on the brink of discovering her sexuality). With this in mind, it may also be interesting to consider that James Whale (who, to my knowledge, never lived through a repressive dictatorship nor was exiled) was, on the other hand, openly gay in a time when being gay was not half as tolerated as it is today—which is not saying much.
treatment of gender. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva points out that the existence of “doubles” is highly characteristic of the desire for what she labels “rebirth” in literature. For her, true literature, which is defined by “poetic language”, expresses a melancholic disposition, which nevertheless desires to heal and transform itself through the very act of creation. Kristeva believes that all melancholic attitudes are a result of a lack of faith, which the act of creative self-expression and renewal tries to restore. “Poetic language” is capable of carrying out this task, albeit to a limited extent, because, rather than communicating in a typical, univocal way (as does other “masculine” language), poetic language is, by definition, fresh, ambiguous and creative. More specifically, “poetic language”, which Kristeva defines by being in a state of “exile”, can open up a single word to various meanings. We might say that this word, when touched by poetry becomes like a rose at the moment that it blossoms—its tight, stony unity exploding into luminous petals. Yet, this is true not only of words, but of symbols, metaphors and other devices, which, within the realm of poetic language, transform common objects or ideas by giving them new, more complex meanings or functions.

If we apply this idea to film (which Kristeva does not), we could extend this transformative function of poetic language to images as well. Perhaps more crucially, Kristeva specifically refers to the existence of monsters or “monstrous doublings” as being characteristic of the desire for rebirth (as filtered through fiction). Within the framework of *El espíritu*, this becomes especially relevant given the central role of the “monster” of Frankenstein—even more so if we consider the many characters and “doublings” that are filtered through him almost as if he were not just another double but the third element, the “feminine womb” or the “maternal receptacle” itself.
As I will soon examine in more detail, all of these features of Kristeva’s thought closely resemble the mystical ideals of medieval Spain, in its Christian, Jewish and Islamic varieties, not to mention aspects of our protagonist’s (Ana’s) behavior. The fact that in *El espíritu* the “monster” is associated with Ana’s “wishing well” is itself crucial; for this well, aside from its feminine mystical connotations, resembles, as a deep pit within the earth, a large vagina. The fact that a well could potentially (and should ideally) hold water makes it an even more potent female-sexual symbol. However, the fact that, within the context of *El espíritu* it is associated with monstrosity and, what is more, surrounded by the barren fields of Castile, implies that the well/“vagina” is “dry”. In this respect, it serves a dual function. While, on the one hand, its dryness corresponds to the repressive state of post-war Spain, both sexually and otherwise, on the other, Ana’s obsession with reviving it (and her ambiguous success in doing so) points towards hope.

In Ana’s mind, this well becomes her own mystic window, a space of pure potentiality that transports her to an alternate reality. In this way, the well functions much like the silences. Though the silences are indicative of a time of repression (and, in this sense, reflect the well’s dryness), by virtue of being nothing at all they express the unlimited potential that defines emptiness and ambiguity. Though the film’s silences are as empty as the well is dry, both produce, if nothing else, a (silent) monster/spirit filled with hope and redemption. This ambiguity inherent in the well, the monster and the

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21 It is associated with the biblical prophetess, Miriam, with all the wives of the Jewish patriarchs (Jacob, Abraham and Isaac all meet their wives at the well), and, more generally, with Divine Presence.

22 For those who have not seen the film or need their memories refreshed, after peering deep into the well, believing that the monster/spirit, “Frankenstein”, dwells deep within it, Ana then tries to “pull him out”, so to speak, through various ritualistic gestures, derived from both the film, *Frankenstein*, and the bible. Of course, if the well itself is a vagina, then “deep within” must signify the womb. The fact that Ana would like to pull this monster out of the womb (ie. give birth to it) reflects her own desire to become reborn (inasmuch this monster symbolizes her own projected or repressed self). As will become further evident when I embark on my close textual analyses, Ana not only believes that this well hides the “spirit”/“monster”, but she continually treats it as if it were a source of magic, hope and transcendence.
silences is further reflected in Ana herself who, in mystical terms, appears to be spiritually liberated or transformed, insomuch as she both “revives” and remembers the monster even at the film’s end, but not communally redeemed, since her relationship with this monster remains silent, solitary and secretive. The fact that Ana is incapable of full redemption precisely because she is intimately interconnected to a repressed and unredeemed community is expressed in the silences themselves (as they, in turn, signal society’s repression and lack of communication).

Thus, while *El espíritu* perfectly adheres to many of Kristeva’s theories regarding ambiguity, exile, rebirth and even the function of the so-called maternal receptacle, it pushes her ideas one step beyond. On the one hand, Kristeva explores how the semiotic becomes the essential bridge out of abjection and into subjectivity. And yet, many of Kristeva’s works (for example, *In the Beginning Was Love*) suggest that silence, even more than poetic language, reflects the impossible ideal towards which humanity strives (as Lacan would more wholeheartedly emphasize, this desire for “the Real” is what explains the so-called death drive). For Kristeva, love itself *precedes* language (as “the Symbolic”)—and yet, as *El espíritu* suggests, this is both true and untrue. Though Ana’s relationship with her “monster” is completely non-verbal\(^\text{23}\), not only are the film’s silences indicative of a general lack of human warmth and connection, but even the silent, subversive relationships Ana establishes with her sister and the *maquis* exile are either short-lived (the exile soon dies) or incomplete (as is the case with her sister).

\(^{23}\) In fact, Ana finds radically inventive means of communicating not only with her monster but also her newfound *maquis* friend and even her sister, Isabel, by means of non-verbal gestures and role-play (a theme which I will more extensively explore in subsequent sections of this paper).
In short, we learn that love, at least of a human variety, both exceeds words yet also requires them. Kristeva’s idealization of silence is, to be sure, undermined in El espíritu by the very degree to which the film epitomizes true rebirth and love (on Kristeva’s terms)—and yet, nevertheless, fails to communally redeem its characters. In effect, while positively reinforcing all the major features found in what Kristeva would define as “poetic narrative” or films of rebirth (monsters, doublings, symbolic vaginas/wombs, etc), El espíritu is also riddled with ambiguous, yet ultimately oppressive silences. Though the silences in El espíritu may be filled in playful and subversive ways, they are, ultimately, more indicative of an obstacle than a solution--hence, these silences undermine her theories as much as they endorse them.

Contrary to Levinas, Kristeva does not amply acknowledge how and why responsibility is just as important as desire in the process of rebirth. This, in turn, is related to her relative disinterest in exploring different types of desire (what we might define as desire vs. Desire) as well as the degree to which full rebirth (or redemption) can never be merely individual, but rather, as El espíritu suggests (albeit through its negative example), it must be collective. This need to reconcile desire and responsibility becomes especially clear if we consider that unbridled desire is not always a positive quality—especially when it comes from someone who is semi-repressed or in a state of spiritual darkness or, alternatively, when society is itself submerged in violence and repression. Yet, neither of these cases would imply that humanity or even earthy existence itself is inherently flawed or that desire is intrinsically opposed to

24 As will become more evident in other chapters where I explore more positive examples of love, though love can certainly transcend language, it is (especially within the realm of real, human relationships here on earth) a product of language itself—and, especially, what Kristeva calls “poetic language”.
25 Of course, she does explore different types of desire in “Stabat Mater” and “Women’s Time”. 
Beginning with the first example, we must distinguish between “Desire” (as that which actually coincides with Responsibility) and “desires”—which can be contradictory and unhealthy.\(^{26}\) We must be careful not to confuse the repression of Desire with the need to control or overcome unhealthy complexes.\(^{27}\)

Essentially, what makes us human, what makes us, arguably, capable of being spiritually aware, is a) language, however ambiguously, and b) responsibility. Neither of these are opposed to love, but quite the contrary, they enable love to happen.\(^{28}\) Though Kristeva appears to understand the “contractual”, inter-subjective nature of language, Levinas offers a clearer and deeper understanding of its truly positive function; for it is this very willingness to give up total control over language that enables communication to exist. In this respect, even sacrifice, provided it does not consist of the perversely bloody and repressive variety, such as that found in Francoism,\(^{29}\) can be healthy. Levinas, even more than Kristeva, helps warn us against reducing literature to an overwhelmingly psychic (and thus, author-centered) process. While literature is perhaps

\(^{26}\)This will become especially clear in Chapter 3 through the more or less positive example that Manuel Puig’s novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*, offers us. My application of Carl Jung’s archetypes, shadows, and complexes (as well as the mystical equivalent of different levels of soul) helps clarify how this reconciliation between desire and responsibility occurs in this novel, if only for a moment. Yet even here, because society itself is in a general state of depravity, true love cannot endure.

\(^{27}\)A person may, for example, deeply desire to gain power over others; and as a result, this person may desire the failure or even the death of others. But it is exactly this type of person who has not found love—a much stronger, healthier urge, and one that, if deep and true, can lead to the reconciliation of desire and responsibility. By contrast, a person who desires power above all else is deeply repressed (not to mention, potentially psychopathic); but such a person is driven by complexes rather than true desires. Alternatively, in a society which is itself run by complexes and fears rather than love, even a relatively healthy, altruistic person may find himself forced to submit to unwholesome urges; for, in a perverse sense, they help him survive. The point, however, is to recognize them as such (as complexes, not Desires), and to liberate the self from them little by little, collectively—not through silence but through communication.

\(^{28}\)Not surprisingly, in both Christianity and Judaism “the word” is associated with existence itself (and in the Christian tradition, explicitly with “the beginning”). Although language can certainly be oppressive—and particularly in authoritarian cultures—as Adam Newton suggests, it is also a sign of a contract between humans and God—and, indeed, between humans themselves.

\(^{29}\)As Michael Richards comments, “For Franco, there could be ‘no redemption without blood’” (*A Time of Silence* 14), a problem which not only reinforces the self/other, material/spiritual, and other splits but also highlights the centrality of “sacrifice” to the Franco Regime and its implementation of terror.
reflective of and stimulated by the author’s own desire for rebirth, it far surpasses that function both in its source and in its ethical effects, which are social and inter-subjective.

On the other hand, *El espíritu*, through its monumental silences, is a fitting embodiment not only of Kristeva’s overvaluation of silence but of Levinas’ passive approach to ethical alterity. Yet, just as with Kristeva, to the extent that *El espíritu*’s silences reflect Levinas’ ideal notion of alterity, they demonstrate, quite ironically, the limitations or potential problems attached to Levinas’ thought. At the same time, these silences underscore the ways in which Levinas is useful not only in comprehending this film, but in understanding how the different emanations of exile and ambiguity treated in *El espíritu* intersect in its treatment of both silence and the monstrous. In order to fully appreciate this, it will help to examine how Levinas’ fixation with monstrosity is tied, crucially, to his obsession with the “face”. As Adam Newton indirectly tells it,

[W]ith Levinas and Claude Lanzmann, I would argue that beings have an identity before the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time. To invoke them through ‘the projection of a face’; simply provides the material coefficient to the ethical summons which Levinas sees as residing primordially in a face. It is ethics, in this sense, which irrupts into and cuts across constructed historical time. This ‘beyond of history draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility…”(*TI*, 23). By “showing forth,” the face itself, we could say, conduces to a form of monstration. Or rather, it is or does monstration. Miller momentarily hints at one especially significant linguistic and phenomenalist consequence of this fact, but he does not tie monstration to the face per se…”*Monster*: the word means ‘showing forth,’ the demonstration of something hideously unlawful or unique, for example a monstrous birth”(*HH*, 102) (*Narrative Ethics* 175)\(^{30}\)

Though Levinas reduces the face to a mere “material coefficient to an ethical summons” (which it also is), the fact that the etymological root of “monster” is related to a “showing forth” helps us see why the actual monsters presented in my films and texts function, somewhat like the “face” itself in multiple, ambiguous ways. On one level,

\(^{30}\) For more information of Newton’s notion of “monstration” see pages 153-154 of *Narrative Ethics*. 85
they represent the “baggage” or “waste” that society would like to forget or repress. This is evidenced in *El espíritu* not only inasmuch as the monster epitomizes both sexual repression and the repression of past memories and responsibility (and thus, also the future), but, more concretely, because the monster embodies the “monstrous births” of Ana and the countless other orphaned children of the post-war era whom she represents.\(^{31}\)

On the other hand, the “creature’s” monstrosity is emblematic of the fact that society—and, specifically, the fictional characters who represent society—occupies a transitional moment in which it is forced to face that which it has repressed. Thus, the above quote is crucial because it underlines the extent to which that which is monstrous is monstrous *because* it is repressed—or rather, no longer repressed (which is why it is visible) yet not fully accepted either (which is why it is monstrous). In this sense, the monstrous becomes the perfect symbol of the in-between, exilic space between life and rebirth (or a sort of symbolic death itself).

At the same time, the fact that the monster symbolizes a time beyond time (or “mystic time”) is also relevant being that the monster of *El espíritu* represents just that. It is also important to remember that the monstrous is ambiguous not only because it denotes an “in-between” space and a timeless (simultaneous) time, but, above all, because it serves as a reflection of the people who surround it, and, more exactly, their fears, guilt and frustrated desires. This idea finds concrete support in *El espíritu* since the monster takes on a chameleon-like function as his presumed invisibility is materialized in

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\(^{31}\) As I will further explain in another section of this chapter entitled “Back to the Future”, Ana’s self-likening to the monster is largely a consequence of her radical difference from her parents, particularly from her father (who may not even be her biological father). This makes her situation representative of all the other post-war children who felt not only spiritually estranged from their repressed parents but, in many cases, were literal orphans due to the fact that Franco had children of political prisoners reassigned to Francoist families or homes.
the various different “faces” of the film’s central characters. Yet, this also reveals a more crucial problem in Levinas’ theorization; for inasmuch as the Monster expresses that which is still radically Other to us, he is content to leave us with the face of the Monster (rather than transform it into the Beautiful). Though this Other is also strangely familiar, for Levinas, it must remain radically Other in order to have ethical weight.  

Both the beauty and limitations of Levinas’ philosophy become further evident with respect to language itself. As Adam Newton appropriately observes,

In Lurianic Kabbalah…exile creates the circumstances for redemption; in what is called the shevirah, or rupture, the receptacles designed to receive the divine light of creation shatter, and from that point on, all creation contains a flaw and awaits mending. In a parallel process, exile produces narrative—either “the way back” itself or a narrated story about it.”(Narrative Ethics 122).

Clearly, both Levinas and Newton not only appreciate the degree to which rebirth actually erupts from exile and destruction, but they also look towards language itself as a way back. Nevertheless, Newton’s problem resides largely in his formulation of this task as an “either or” issue—despite his conscious desire to define narrative as ethics. In reality, this “narrated story” is not just a story, for it is the story itself which leads the way “back” to a (second) home/earth. Though Newton himself appears, at times, to believe that such a second home is possible, he cannot quite get us there because he relies too much on merely applying Levinas to literature rather than critically engaging with him. To summarize, Levinas himself is incapable of true tikkun (mending) precisely because his view of alterity (and thus responsibility) remains, as I have suggested, utterly passive.

32 In reality, Levinas borders on contradiction; for, on the other hand, Levinas’ notion of alterity understands the encounter with radical alterity (alterity, which, much like the monstrous, calls us to act ethically), as something that is both radically different and yet strangely familiar (in the context of psychoanalysis we have something similar in the notion of the “uncanny”). In the bible too, we have a somewhat similar concept in the notion of the stranger (whom the Jew must treat well precisely because he too has occupied the same position, as exile or “alien”). The stranger, it turns out, is, in a sense, actually the “same”/self. Yet, Levinas does not go this far, for despite the Other’s strange familiarity, this radical Other must maintain its status as radically Other.
That is to say, though he correctly believes, much like psychoanalyst Carl Jung, that we are all responsible for absolutely everyone and everything (an attitude which becomes especially convincing if we reflect on the extent to which we are all interconnected), he reduces responsibility towards the other to little more than a hollowing out of the self. Yet the problem with this is not that the self is hollowed out, but that, within Levinas’ ethics, the (ideally ethical) self remains essentially hollow.

In effect, Levinas, like Kristeva, clearly recognizes the importance of trauma, exile, vulnerability and destruction as a means to “rebirth” or what Levinas would more properly call a means to encountering “the other of the other”. Yet, his need to define ethics as that which remains in this state of exile prevents him from becoming as radical as he wishes. Levinas would, of course, resist this critique insomuch as he believes such exile can, actually, be overcome precisely through this encounter with the “face”. Nevertheless, his manner of theorizing the face as a mode of radical passivity trivializes both literature and life in a way not much different from the deconstructionists.

Furthermore, his inability to see, as Kristeva does, the feminine, maternal component to rebirth also misses the mark, and more generally, renders him incapable of appreciating the extent to which the need to rethink gender is crucial to rethinking identity. As will

33 Unlike Levinas and Kristeva, the deconstructionists focus only on the need to destroy dichotomies, language and even relationships themselves, without even attempting to rebuild them. Though they are interested in exile and death, they have no interest in rebirth.

34 Of course, this idea is not new to me. As Sarah Schneider, for example, innovatively remarks in *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine*, the origin of evil itself is reflected in the creation of gender differences and the corresponding separation of souls into either male or female bodies. Yet, though existence itself is also, in a more general sense, the root of all evil, like gender separations, this process can be reversed. More specifically, Schneider argues that eventually, humanity will be capable of overcoming gender separations as the world itself is mended—and when this happens, the product will be “more good” than what existed before existence itself—which, of course, was already perfect. Levinas, however, who appears to take biblical gender references at face value (and, accordingly, has a somewhat misogynist view of women) would be loath to accept this idea.
become increasingly obvious, it is precisely this heterogeneous notion of gender that *El espíritu* embraces through the curiously young “role model”, Ana.

As Ana herself helps us see through re-performing both gender and identity, the doubling that occurs in *El espíritu* is as heterogeneous and androgynous as the monster itself, whose very monstrous position reflects not only his androgyny—as he is likened to virtually every character, whether male or female—but also his essential “feminization”. The monster’s feminization is also mirrored in the various characters who, whether male or female, are “feminized” by their traumas and repressions. We can infer from this that the unification of masculine and feminine (endorsed, for example, by Spanish mysticism) does not refer so much to the need for actual men to unite with actual women. Rather, it implies that each person must find within herself a balance between what are traditionally defined as masculine and feminine attributes—a notion which will be further supported in future chapters, films and texts.³⁵

Just as importantly for *El espíritu*, despite Levinas’ recognition of the need to encounter the “strange” (much like Lacan) as something deep within oneself³⁶, he does

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³⁵ The monster’s resemblance to the mystical Shekhinah or Malkhut—who, though androgynous, leans towards being referred to as feminine inasmuch as she reflects the “feminized” position of exiled humanity—reinforces this notion that, in order for repression to be overcome through rebirth, each person, must find a balance between the so-called masculine and feminine—one which, in the process, actually deconstructs these very terms (“masculine” and “feminine”). But I will save the details of this argument for my more concrete analysis of Ana and her “doubles”.

³⁶ Though Levinas (even by the time he writes *Totality and Infinity*) sees radical alterity as something which calls to us from the very depths of our own subjectivity, it ultimately comes from a place that is utterly transcendent—beyond being, and especially, beyond subjectivity. As such, it is unknowable (much like the mystical *Ein Sof*, which I will further describe in a moment). This idea is not wholly problematic, depending on how we understand and use it. In the case of Levinas, it leads him to conclude, first, that ethics exists outside subjectivity itself (which may also be true depending on how we define it). Yet, more problematically, it suggests that the call of radical alterity is that which we should pursue as humans, or technically, *not* as humans—herein lies the paradox. Though there may be truth to much of what he says this utterly incomprehensible Other cannot deeply concern us as humans precisely because it remains radically Other—that is impossible—and, indeed, beyond good and evil. As Levinas himself says, the idea that love for this radical alterity is reconcilable to any sort of earthly or erotic love is “the equivocal par excellence” (*Totality and Infinity* 255)
not seem to firmly grasp how this encounter with the strange is, truly, something that is already within us and, what is more, that this alterity is ingrained not only in who we already are but in how we already act—even if our actions center around the repression of this alterity. Any ethics that aspires to benefit the world should aim to transform this Other (as monster) into something else rather than just acknowledge its existence. It is precisely this connection that not only reconciles past and future but, more crucially, self and other, and thus, desire and responsibility in a profound way. Yet, for Levinas, the idea that devotion to this radical alterity is reconcilable to any sort of earthly or erotic love is, in his own words, “the equivocal par excellence” (Totality and Infinity 255). By extension, all reconciliation, whether between self and other, male and female, desire and responsibility, etc. lies outside the scope of Levinas’ ethical system.

Curiously, Newton notes that, “The word for face in Hebrew, incidentally, panim, incorporates the root meaning “to turn”, which underlies both panim in its connotation of “outside” and pnim, meaning “inside”(NE 200). Funny then that Levinas does not acknowledge the deep relationship between the two meanings—or the wider ramifications of such ambiguity. On the other hand, we must consider that Levinas creates his theory of the face in Totality and Infinity (1961)—that is, before he refined his theory of alterity in Otherwise than Being (1974), where he replaces the figure of the “face” with “the trace”37. Though his notion of “the trace” more successfully invokes the idea of an other

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37 As Gabriela Basterra shrewdly noted, “[…] Levinas is better known for his earlier attempts to address the question of ethical motivation in Totality and Infinity (1961). In this text, the ethical demand comes from an absolutely exterior other, an other that cannot be represented because it exists outside of the constellation of content, which Levinas names with the figure of the face, le visage. But in evoking an other that is absolutely exterior, isn’t Levinas already positing it? Would the “face” name a true absence, or does it represent just one more speculative thought, a presupposed other? This is the question that Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot raise in the mid-1970s. In his 1964 response to Levinas, ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ Derrida writes, ‘According to Levinas, there would be no interior difference, no fundamental and autochthonous alterity within the ego.’ In other words, if the other is absolutely exterior,
within the same, it still leaves us with the problem of “theorizing in a void” or a responsibility so radically Other that it becomes meaningless—that is, as an impossible innocence that lies beyond good and evil and even relationships themselves. In truth, Levinas might have been better off to modify his notion of the face rather than discard it.

Newton himself unwittingly points to a final flaw in Levinas’ thinking when he states that, “Levinas’ sense of recognition eschews Hegelian mediation because it believes neither in struggle nor in synthesis”(202). Nevertheless, the very seeds of such synthesis can be found in Levinas’ notion of the “third party” which enables the thou to become a we. As Newton himself suggests, the fundamental principle of “narrative ethics” is finding the path through which “the Other shows the way to the others”(183).

It is the desire to follow this path that stimulates Levinas’ ethics of alterity. The problem, however, is that Levinas’ “we”, rather than becoming a “common ground”, remains (in its “pure” state) the infinity of other—that is, both everything and nothing.

In this way, Levinas’ ethics of alterity remains at heart what I would term an “ethics of impossibility”—or, within the context of this film, an “ethics of silence”.

Though the infinity of the other does, indeed, approximate what could be called an even
deeper or higher spirituality (as the mystical equivalent of the Kabbalistic Ein Sof), because it remains ideal in a purely transcendent way, it should not and simply cannot be taken as an actual model for real, human relationships. As Levinas would have it, the monsters are never redeemed in this film but rather continue to lurk, invisibly, in the shadows of the silences themselves. Within these shadows, though Ein Sof remains forever unreachable, Malkhut (Divine Presence) still dreams of one day crowning and

39 Kabbalah makes an essential distinction between Ein Sof (God as boundless, infinite, and utterly transcendent—and which one might say is the rough equivalent of the secular, psychoanalytic understanding of the Real, for either Lacan or Kristeva) and the more accessible idea of God, filtered through the Godhead (or, in Kabbalah, the “Ten Sefirot”). I am quick to add, however, that these are not conceived of as being two different Gods—for God is One—but rather two different ways of knowing/comprehending (or, in the case of Ein Sof, not knowing/comprehending) God. A human being or subject can potentially cleave to the Godhead (or at least, to Shekhinah) through mystical experience, but never to Ein Sof. The “lowest” of these sefirot, Shekhinah (often referred to in the bible as Adonai, or before Jacob, El Shaddai) is actually Divine Presence. Before messianic times (or the time of redemption) Shekhinah exists in a state of exile—meaning, precisely, that spirituality itself is exiled or separated from reality. The point of existence is to heal this wound. Once this happens, Shekhinah (herself also known as “corona”/“crown”), will be equated with the highest of all the ten sefirot (Keter, “Crown”, “Will”, or Ayin/“Nothingness”—or, more precisely, no-thingness). Yet Shekhinah (Earth, Moon, Kingdom) will only become appropriately “crowned” once She is synchronized with or “married to” Tiferet (known as Heaven, Sun or Beauty). In the meantime, the world is portrayed as chaotic, exilic and, above all silent; for true speech can only occur when Tiferet (also known as Voice) and Shekhinah (known, conversely, as Speech) are harmonized. This harmony is symbolized not only by speech but by the full moon of King Solomon, which also represents, even literally, the total unification of moon and sun—at least from the perspective of earth. Considering Kristeva’s notion of “female time” (which she views as cyclical, and which bases on the cycles of the moon itself) it is curious that she ignores its Kabbalistic significance. Indeed, though time/space restrictions prevent me from offering an exhaustive analysis of the moon in El espíritu, its obscured, smoky state is just as reflective of humanity’s exile (and, in particular, the highly exilic state of post-war Spain) as the film’s silences. Though Ana looks to the moon in order to connect with her spirit-world, and though she does appear to be somewhat successful, the moon’s strong, enchanting light is always somewhat obstructed by clouds, and thus, only partially and indirectly perceived. With this in mind, it may also be useful to entertain the possibility that these smoky clouds also correspond to the smoke from the cigarettes that Ana’s father constantly puffs away at, and which in Kabbalah, represent the demonic. This smoke certainly constitutes a constant, suffocating presence in El espíritu—much like Fernando’s often suffocating presence as family patriarch (and culminating in Ana’s decision to run away). In the film’s opening minutes, as the girls watch Frankenstein, this link is prefigured as the theatre is filled with a pervasive smoke which can be seen particularly well through the film projector’s bluish rays of light. Curiously, the film’s bluish rays resemble El espíritu’s pervasive blue moonlight (which is similarly filled with smoky clouds, yet which, from Ana’s perspective, is equally enchanting). Though the film, like the moonlight, projects rays of hope which stimulate both movement and change, particularly for females, the smoke which stands between it and humanity serves as an obstacle, a reminder that Divine Presence herself is caught up in the demonic realm of exile—and her glory estranged from both heaven and earth. In this sense, the smoke itself would appear to play a parallel function to the film’s repressive silences.

40 Similarly, in its raging ambiguity, El espíritu’s monster is no more than empty potential, much like Keter (“crown”) or “ayin” (nothingness). Yet, unlike the root of creation/ayin, this monster shares Shekhinah’s exile. In his exile he becomes both empty and full, but unlike Keter, much of this filling is “monstrous”.

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being crowned. Yet, unfortunately for the post-war period portrayed in *El espíritu* (and thus, for Ana herself), this crowning requires words—not silences.

Clearly, Levinas and Kristeva, though crucial in helping me to formulate my own theoretical views and in illuminating many aspects of the film, could have benefited from a careful reading of each others’ works. Yet, this might not have been necessary had they been more closely acquainted with the nuances of Spanish (medieval) mysticism.

**Mystical In-fusions**

As we will now explore in more detail, Spanish mysticism not only pervades *El espíritu* but, in many respects, it permeates the thought and theories of Kristeva and Levinas. At the same time, many of these mystical precepts depart from their theories in ways that more adequately explain concepts such as salvation, redemption, exile, rebirth, ambiguity, monstrosity, silence and the uncanny as they emerge in *El espíritu*.41

Of course, unlike Kristeva, Levinas, would not deny that he was radically influenced, as a philosopher and thinker, by his Jewish religion—and the fact that he writes from within the shadow of the Holocaust gives him a personal, traumatic history that makes him an especially appropriate theorist to help us understand a film about authoritarian repression, spiritual exile and its relationship to ethical and spiritual

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41 It is also worth noting that Levinas’ notion of radical responsibility also builds on the mystical notion that we are all responsible not only for ourselves but for everyone, for the world itself, and certainly, for every situation in which we find ourselves. Yet, his idea that this radical responsibility requires absolute passivity is highly flawed, particularly from the perspective of *Kabbalah*, which values balance above all else—and, specifically, the need for give-and-take relationships which balance justice and strength with love and mercy. The fact that the kabbalistic concept of *Tif’eret* (Heaven/Beauty) itself represents and can only be achieved through precisely this balance of judgment and love is telling. It is, in fact, only by cultivating these types of balanced relationships that we, as human beings, can become radically responsible for both ourselves and for others.
“rebirth”\textsuperscript{42}. Yet, like Kristeva, Levinas could have profitted from a more profound yet critical engagement with mysticism. On the one hand, both their theories might have gained strength and clarity by making a theoretical distinction modeled on the Kabbalistic or Gnostic distinction between Divine Presence and the indivisible notion of God as the Infinite (or \textit{Ein Sof}). In addition, they could have benefitted from a close analysis of (Islamic) Sufism, which makes a similar distinction. In his monumentally famous work, \textit{The Bezels of Wisdom}, Sufi master, Ibn Al’Arabi, states that,

[...] God draws our attention to what is originated as an aid to knowledge of Him and says [in the Qur’an] that He will show forth His signs in it. Thus He suggests that knowledge of Him is inferred in knowledge of ourselves. Whenever we ascribe any quality to Him, we are ourselves [representative of] that quality, except it be the quality of His Self-sufficient Being. Since we know Him through ourselves from ourselves, we attribute to Him all we attribute to ourselves. It is for this reason that the divine revelations come to us through the mouths of the Interpreters [the prophets], for He describes Himself to us through us. If we witness Him we witness ourselves, and when He sees us He looks on Himself. \textit{(The Bezels of Wisdom 54-55)}

Among other reasons, this quote is important because it suggests that in knowing oneself, one comes closer to knowing God. In so doing, it helps us see how Levinas’ notion of finding God in the Other approximates quite closely to the Islamic (or Sufist) mystical writings of medieval Spain. It also reveals how many Sufists, like the Kabbalists of the same era, similarly distinguish between God as unknowable and Divine Presence. Similar to Spanish Kabbalists, Ibn Al’Arabi, who also happens to be from medieval Spain (or Al-Andalus) and who is typically referred to by Moslems as the “greatest Master”/most renowned Sufi of all time, portrays Divine Presence in intimate relation to humankind. As suggested by the following quote, Divine Presence is, for him,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Levinas, born 1906 (in present-day Lithuania) not only lost many loved ones during WWII, but he was taken captive as prisoner of war during the German invasion of France where he gained citizenship in 1930.
\end{itemize}
a mirror of humanity, the epitome of ambiguity and, paradoxically, both radically Other or strange and yet intimately buried within Oneself. In Ibn Al’Arabi’s words,

In seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees His Names and their determinations, which are nothing other than Himself. The whole matter is prone to intimacy and ambiguity. (*The Bezels of Wisdom* 65)

As further evidenced by the next quote (also from Ibn Al’Arabi), it becomes obvious that both Levinas’ and Kristeva’s emphasis on self-knowledge (much like psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan’s, understanding of the uncanny) renders their thinking remarkably similar to that of medieval Spanish Sufism. As Ibn Al’Arabi explains,

The Essence, as being beyond all these relationships, is not a divinity. Since all these relationships originate in our eternally unmanifested essences, it is we [in our eternal latency] who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows Himself as Divine. Thus, He is not known [as “God”] until we are known.//Muhammad said, “Who knows his [true] self, knows his Lord” being the creature who knows God best. Certain sages, among them Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, have asserted that God can be known without any reference to the created Cosmos, but this is mistaken. It is true that a primordial eternal essence can be known, but it cannot be known as a divinity unless knowledge of that to which it can be related is assumed, for it is the dependent who confirm the independence of the Independent.” (*The Bezels of Wisdom* 92-93)

Indeed, *El espíritu* is a film about self-knowledge and, particularly, the relationship between self-knowledge and alterity, remembrance and spirituality. In this respect, it is a film that closely relates not only to Sufist thought but also, more generally to medieval Spanish mysticism (one must consider, for example, Kabbalah’s emphasis on the direct relationship between memory, self-knowledge and knowledge of God).

In addition to these similarities between mysticism and the writings of Levinas and Kristeva, we have seen that both Levinas and Kristeva search beyond the exile of poetic language towards rebirth. Though Levinas and Kristeva share much in common with medieval mysticism in this respect, we might argue that Levinas’ “ethics of alterity”,

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despite its presumptions of mending and unifying, leaves the self stranded in a void of alterity. From this perspective, Levinas’ theories stand somewhere between mysticism and deconstruction. Mysticism, though it is, within the framework of literary theory, criticism and cultural studies, the least explored and respected of all the theories I employ in this thesis, is also the most helpful, particularly within the context of this chapter.\footnote{Of course, this is only if we put aside many of the sexist, socially repressive and quite exclusionary notions of identity that erupted within medieval kabbalistic theory and, to some extent, Sufism as well—yet, which are not central to the wider kabbalistic and sufist systems themselves.}

Given that Spanish mysticism is essentially concerned with themes such as paradox, exile, death, rebirth, ambiguity, redemption and remembering, the fact that the films and novels treated in this dissertation share these qualities only further suggests their mystical nature—especially since they do so in an attempt to remake or retell the past as well as other stories\footnote{As explained in the introduction to the Zohar (the most famous known kabbalistic text ever produced), The Zohar itself is a sort of “retelling” (see page, lxii). Moreover, though written by one man (presumably, Moses de León) it incorporates many voices or “rabbis”. Indeed, it is a retelling that, much like El espíritu, retells, or reinterprets the bible itself, in part, by placing it in a contemporary context (contemporary, at least, for those who write it).}. El espíritu not only shares all these qualities, but it makes frequent and significant uses of blatant mystical symbols such as windows, fields, wells and moons. Its emphasis on the “messianic child” of Isaiah as well as the so-called New Testament teachings is, as I will also explore towards the end of this chapter, another theme common to religions ranging from Judaism to Christianity to Buddhism and more.

Most centrally, however, the monster of Frankenstein, as everyone and no one, as a mirror of society itself, and as the symbol of exile \textit{par excellence} (yet also the hope of rebirth) becomes not only what Kristeva would call “the maternal receptacle” but, in many ways, a manifestation of \textit{Malkhut/Shekhinah} herself\footnote{Though, like other “scientific monsters” and Golems, Frankenstein’s monster expresses anxieties about masculinity, science, male mutilation (castration) and male-female disharmony, it is precisely for these reasons that, as we will continue to see, he becomes an even more perfect symbol/vehicle of rebirth.} (or more generally, the
“female” Divine Presence of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mysticism\textsuperscript{46}). The fact that, according to Ana’s mother, he is, like all spirits, “good with good girls and bad with bad girls” reinforces this link even more. Julia Kristeva’s observation that rebirth happens, symbolically, through her so-called maternal receptacle complicates yet also clarifies the ambiguous function of both El espíritu’s silences and its monster.

Though Kristeva at many moments in her writings pits herself against Judaism (particularly in \textit{Powers of Horror}) and, to some extent, Christianity (which she nevertheless views as a perfect model of rebirth), her “feminine receptacle” is not so different, actually, from the \textit{Malkhut} (Divine Presence) of both Christian and Jewish mysticism. In addition to the other parallels already drawn between Kristeva’s theories and medieval Spanish mysticism, if we refer back to the previous quotes from the Sufi mystic, Ibn Al’Arabi\textsuperscript{47}, clear similarities emerge between the medieval Islamic notion of divine presence, Kristeva’s maternal receptacle and the monster of Frankenstein.

This idea that the monster/spirit becomes a mirror of society is especially significant if we consider that \textit{Malkhut}/\textit{Shekhinah} not only functions in a specular fashion (as Divine Presence) but is described in precisely these terms in \textit{Kabbalah} (see, for example, page 73 of \textit{The Zohar, Volume II} where Divine Presence is likened to a mirror/mahazeh) as well as in Sufi literature (refer to the quotations cited several pages

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Malkhut} (Kingdom/Divine Presence) is a term used by both Gnostics and Kabbalists. Though Gnosticism is most closely associated with Christianity, it is important to point out that there are many different types of Gnostics (including early Jewish Gnostics). Also, though \textit{Shekhinah} (another term that is essentially interchangeable with \textit{Malkhut}) is specific to \textit{Kabbalah} (Jewish mysticism), there are so-called Christian Kabbalists (that is, Christians who build on Kabbalah). I might also add that the term Gnostic is somewhat problematic inasmuch as it can correspond to Gnosticism (and, more loosely, to the dualistic distinction between divinity/God/the heavens or paradise versus a flawed material world and a correspondingly evil demi-god), but also to the word \textit{gnosis}, which simply refers to the idea that one can know virtually anything through oneself (or, more exactly, through one’s own personal/mystical experience of divinity).

\textsuperscript{47} Ibn Al’Arabi was born in a part of Al-Andalus that is present day Murcia, Spain.
back). This will be even more crucial to consider when I discuss not only the monster’s doubling with or link to Ana and other “feminized” men, but also his association with the moon (symbol of Malkhut) and even the well itself—both of which are used by Ana as means of invoking the “monster”/“spirit”. As I will now show, this well is tightly linked, biblically, not only to exile and rebirth but to both spiritual and sexual awakening—and more generally to Shekhinah or Malkhut. As translator Daniel Matt quotes in a footnote of The Zohar, “See Genesis 26:18. The well symbolizes the realm of faith, Shekhinah, who is filled with the flow of emanation, which She conveys to the world. By digging the well here below [on earth], Isaac stimulated the flow above [in the sefirot].” (The Zohar, Volume II 282). The well is further associated with Shekhinah given that both Adonai and “Field of Holy Apples” are two of Her names, for according to The Zohar, That holy well stands beneath Him—Field of Holy Apples. From this well were watered the flocks that Moses tended in the wilderness. From this well were watered the flocks that Jacob selected, when they were selected for his share—all those chariots, all those winged beings.// Three pillars rest upon this well; from them, this well is filled. It is called (Adonai), My Lord; (The Zohar: IV 62).

In yet another footnote Matt tells us, “See BT Ta’anit 9a: “Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Yehudah says, ‘…A well [miraculously accompanied Israel in the desert] for the merit of Miriam….When Miriam died, the well disappeared, as is said: Miriam died there, and immediately afterwards: There was no water for the community (Numbers 20:2).’” (The Zohar: Volume II 212). This same footnote appears on page 239 (note 283) but adds

See Bereshit Rabbah 60:5: “All the women went down and filled their pitchers from the spring, but as for her [Rebekah], as soon as the water saw her, it rose. The blessed Holy One said to her, ‘You have provided a sign for your descendants. Just as the water rose the moment it saw you, so with your descendants: as soon as the well sees them, it will immediately rise.’ So it is
Then Israel sang this song: Rise, O well! Sing to it! (Numbers 21:17). (239)\(^{48}\)

This interests us for two reasons. First, Ana, in her effort to make the “spirit” rise out of the well not only peers into the well, cries out and drops a rock into it, but, after these efforts fail, she squats down next to the well and jumps up, moving her arms upwards as if she could somehow make the water/spirit rise (and in the process she roughly imitates the “monster’s” movements from the depths of Henry Frankenstein’s dungeon/womb). Secondly, the fact that the well is associated with the prophetess Miriam is interesting not only because she too is female but also because her name, albeit indirectly, likens her to Ana\(^{49}\). This link is further supported by the fact that Ana lives not only in a repressed society but one which is, quite literally, dry, and thus, in dire need of being “watered” in every sense of the word. On the other hand, the well is significant not just as a sign of feminine mystical powers (such as Miriam’s) but also as a well that may benefit anyone who has faith. In Volume II (pages 281-284) of The Zohar we are told that Isaac digs a well, as did Abraham before him (Genesis 29:2-10), as a sign of faith. More specifically,

\(^{48}\) This footnote appears right after Matt tells us, “She went down (ha-aynah), to the spring (ibid., 16), spelled with a (he)—a mystery, for Miriam’s well manifested, so it is written: (ha-aynah), with a (he), and the water rose toward her.”(212). Matt also adds a footnote, in which he suggests, “On Jacob and the well, see Genesis 29:2-10. Abraham and Isaac, symbolizing Hesed and Gevurah (the right and left divine arms) embrace Shekhinah, symbolized by the well. Jacob, symbolizing Tiferet, consummates the union with Her. See Zohar 1:133a, 140b.” (282). For another example of how Shekhinah is related to the well, see Daniel Matt’s footnote 270 where he suggests, “See the list of supernatural phenomena in M Avot 5:6 “Ten things were created on Sabbath eve at twilight…the mouth of the well….” There the reference is to the well that miraculously accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness; here it also alludes to Shekhinah. Abraham and Isaac conveyed Her waters to he world; Jacob and Moses united with Her.

\(^{49}\) This becomes especially interesting if we consider that the little girl from the film, Frankenstein, who is killed by the monster at the lake is named Maria (and is also Ana’s filmic/fictional double). This is highly significant in both the Jewish and Christian religions. Maria, of course, is the Latin form of the Hebrew, Miriam (as in Moses’ sister). In the Christian tradition, the name (Maria) is doubly significant since, in addition, Maria/Miriam (or in English, Mary) was the mother of Jesus/Joshua. In short, “Maria” gives birth to the Messiah himself.
Rabbi El’azar said further, “Isaac acted fittingly, for since he knew mysteries of wisdom, he endeavored and dug a well of water, to fortify himself fittingly in faith. Abraham endeavored and dug a well of water. Isaac, following him endeavored and dug a well of water. Jacob found it prepared and sat down by it. They all went striving after it, to fortify themselves fittingly in perfect faith.” (281-282).

Yet, perhaps more important is the fact that the well is what waters people in the time of exile, as is said, “You will be like a watered garden” (The Zohar, Volume II 284).

It is imperative to keep in mind, more specifically, that the, well, as symbol of Shekhinah, not only accompanies the Jews in adversity and Exile (referred to here as “Miriam’s Well”), but it also accompanies the patriarchs and Moses during their own specific exiles, which they endured alone. According to The Zohar, Vol. II King David was not accompanied by in exile for several reasons:

But when David fled [unlike the patriarchs], all those rulers of the earth, all the mighty of the earth, and chiefs of Israel fled along with him—surrounding him on the right and on the left, guarding him in every direction. Seeing such honor, he uttered song.” //Rabbi Yehudah continued, “They all encountered this well. Why not David? Because at that time it was hostile toward David, so he didn’t encounter it. Jacob and Moses were welcomed joyously by this well, who was eager to approach them; as soon as it saw them, water rose toward them, like a woman delighting with her husband. (346).  

Obviously, the fact that the well accompanies its people through harsh times and exile is highly relevant to El espiritu as Franco’s Spain forces both literal exile (as symbolized by the refugee) as well as a sort of internal exile upon its people, as reflected in the dry field/well, the beehive and its bee-like inhabitants. Yet, above all, this exile is mirrored in the refugee and the monster who, like the well, symbolize, particularly for Ana, both the current state of exile and the hope of rebirth. Moreover, the final line of the above quote, which describes the well as being “like a woman delighting with her

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50 Or as Matt interprets it (see footnote 214), “David’s sin with Bathsheba, who symbolizes Shekhinah, had alienated him from the divine feminine, so She along with Her symbol (the well) were hostile toward him. See Zohar 1:93b-94a.” (Zohar, Volume II 346).
husband” not only gives its “rising waters” a clearly sexual connotation, but in the process further highlights the degree to which this well is symbolic of Ana herself. We must not forget that Ana, though not a literal exile, is somewhat of an exile within her own land—in fact, much like Frankenstein’s monster, she is abandoned by her very own father. The implication then, is that Ana searches for these exiles/monsters/spirits by and through the well not only as alter-egos but as potential symbolic “mates”—or more exactly, as mirrors of her own liminal identity/sexual awakening. This notion that the well serves both as a symbol of hope and as a medium for sexual-spiritual arousal is reinforced more explicitly in the following lines of The Zohar, Volume II,

Come and see: When he sat by the well and saw water rising toward him, he knew that right there he would encounter his wife. Similarly, when Moses sat by the well and saw water rising toward him, he knew he would encounter his wife there. So it happened to Jacob—his wife appearing there—as is written: While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came. When Jacob saw Rachel... (ibid., 9-10). Of Moses is written: The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses rose up and saved them (Exodus 2:17), and there Zipporah appeared. That well brought this about for them.// “Come and see: (The Zohar, Volume II 348)

Yet, above all, the idea that spiritual rebirth, love and sexual fulfillment come out of death and exile (all of which are symbolized by the well) is most clearly reflected in this next passage from The Zohar, IV,

As they [the rabbis] were walking, they came upon a well of water. They stood over it and drank of the water.// Rabbi El’azar said, “Happy is the share of the righteous! Jacob fled from his brother [Esau] and he encountered a well. As soon as the well saw him, the waters recognized their master and rose toward him, rejoicing with him; there his mate coupled with him. Moses fled from Pharaoh and encountered that well, and the waters saw him, recognized their master, and rose toward him; there his mate coupled with him.”(The Zohar, Volume IV 67).

As translator, Daniel Matt, further explains (in footnote #298),

51 Though the well is, in many ways, a symbol of feminine wisdom/sexuality, the fact that, regarding her relationship to the well, Ana follows patriarchal models (such as those established by Abraham, Jacob, and David) is appropriate if we consider not only that she is a filter for Erice’s own experiences but, more crucially, the well itself becomes, much like the monster and perhaps even Ana, essentially androgynous.
Jacob fled from Esau to Haran, where he came upon a well, symbolizing Shekhinah. Since he had attained the rung of Tif’eret (Shekhinah’s partner), the waters of the well rose toward him, and there he appropriately met his mate, Rachel. Similarly with Moses, who fled from Pharaoh to Midian, where he came upon a well and met his mate, Zipporah. (*The Zohar, Volume IV* 67)

The evidence linking *El espíritu*’s monster to this mystical well and thus, to Shekhinah Herself is incontrovertible. In fact, this “monster” becomes likened to Shekhinah not only through the well, but, more generally, as the manifestation of silence, exile, and mystical experience in general—not to mention female sexuality. For this reason alone, spirituality plays a pivotal role in this film. At the same time, however, the ambiguity of *El espíritu*’s silences and what they come to mean make Spain’s mystical traditions even more relevant and necessary to understanding the film in all its complexity. For Kabbalah and Sufism as well as for *El espíritu* the silences express the

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52 This same idea that love can come out of hardships (particularly in reference to the well) is also supported in the following lines from *The Zohar: Volume IV*, “For Rabbi Abba has said, “How many wicked there are in the world who engender more virtuous children than the righteous! And a virtuous one issuing from a wicked one is more laudable—being pure from impure, light out of darkness, wisdom out of foolishness. This is finest of all!”// “He saw, he saw (Exodus 2:11-12)—by the Holy Spirit he saw and envisioned everything; so he gazed at him and killed him. The blessed Holy One brought all this about so that he would go, just as Jacob went to that well, as is written: *He sat upon the well* (ibid., 15). Of Jacob is written He looked, and here: a well (Genesis 29:2). Of Moses is written He dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat upon the well—because even though they shared a single rung, in this, Moses ascended higher.// Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Yitshak were walking on the way. Rabbi Yose said, “That well seen by Jacob and seen by Moses—was it the same well dug by Abraham and Isaac or not?”// He replied, “At the time that the world was created, this well was created; and on the eve of Sabbath at twilight, its mouth was created. This is the well that Jacob and Moses saw.”(*61 The Zohar, Volume IV*). Footnote 268, by Daniel Matt, offers a more thorough explanation, “God arranged for this act, which prompted Pharaoh to seek Moses’ death, forcing Moses to flee to Midian. There he found a well—the same well, as it were, that Jacob had come upon several generations earlier. This well symbolizes Shekhinah, with whom Jacob and Moses united—both of them attaining the rung of Tif’eret. Yet Moses attained greater intimacy with Shekhinah than did Jacob: *he sat upon the well*.// The full verse in Exodus reads: Pharaoh heard of this thing and he sought to kill Moses, and Moses fled from Pharaoh’s presence and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat by [or: upon] the well. The full verse in Genesis, describing Jacob’s arrival in Haran, read: He looked and here: a well in the field, and there were three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for from that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the mouth of the well was large…” (*The Zohar, Volume IV* 61).

53 Yet, curiously enough, the only interpretation of *El espíritu* which really seems to understand the centrality of mysticism to the film, whether consciously or not, is not an academic work or article but rather an artistic reproduction or remake—namely, *El laberinto del fauno*. Of course, this film is just as much a new creation as it is an interpretation; and, as it is itself a retelling, it twists *El espíritu* in ways that make it both less complex and yet far more so. But this is a theme I will further explore in Chapter 2.
ambiguity of life and, above all, its current state of exile—and yet, despite this negativity, they are ambiguous in a way that neither Levinas nor Kristeva fully comprehends.

Though silence represents repression, as I briefly hinted at in reference to Kristeva, repression, or at least, suppression, is sometimes necessary, particularly if the desires that wish to be expressed come from a person who is him/herself repressed (and thus, perhaps desires nothing more than to oppress others). This type of person should be careful to control his actions and silence his tongue. According to Kabbalah, it is especially important to keep silent when one is angry. More generally, in times of extreme oppression or exile, because this exile expresses the Shekhinah’s exile from the world, one should be cautious with one’s words, for voice is not united with speech. This idea is very well supported in the The Zohar, Volume IV, where we learn that he who is “uncircumcised of lips” lives in a time of exile,

Yet now he [Moses] says, I am uncircumcised of lips! If so, where is the word that the blessed Holy One promised him previously?// However, it is a mystery. Moses is voice, and speech, which is his word, was in exile; so he was ‘uncircumcised’—obstructed from expressing words. He said, ‘How will Pharaoh listen to me, when my word is in exile? For I have no word! I am voice; word will be lacking, for She [Shekhinah] is in exile.’ Consequently, the blessed Holy One made Aaron his partner.”(The Zohar, Vol. IV 91).

What we must consider here is that Shekhinah, “the word”, is existence itself. Thus, if she (as word or as speech) is in exile, this is only because she is separated from voice (since Moses achieved the rung of Tiferet/Heaven, he is associated with Voice). Logically, Speech cannot produce any sound if it is separated from Voice. Hence, if heaven is separated from earth (or conversely, if the earth is exiled from heaven), then speech is either distorted or, in extreme cases, silent (or mute). With this in mind, to the extent that the monster in El espíritu is an embodiment of Shekhinah, the fact that he
himself is mute is symbolic of humanity’s exile (in Whale’s version he can only, at most, babble like an infant; and in Shelley’s version, though he teaches himself to speak and even read, no one wants to communicate or listen to him). Similarly, we are told that,

As long as speech was in exile, voice withdrew from it, and the word was obstructed, voiceless. When Moses appeared, voice appeared. Moses was voice without word, which was in exile; as long as speech was in exile, Moses proceeded as speechless voice. And so it continued until they approached Mount Sinai and the Torah was given, whereupon voice united with speech, and then the word spoke, as is written: Elohim spoke all these words (Exodus 20:1). (The Zohar, Vol. IV 92)

This idea that the unification of voice and speech does not occur (on a communal level) until the Torah is given at Mount Sinai is more critically reflected in the fact that, “All the days that Moses was in Egypt, seeking to bring the word out of exile, the word did not speak. As soon as it came out of exile, that word—who is speech—led and guided Israel, but did not speak until they approached Mount Sinai, when it opened with Torah fittingly.”(The Zohar, Volume IV 92). It is important to consider that it is at Mt. Sinai that two vital events happen. First and foremost, the Torah is revealed; yet, though Moses is the only person who directly communicates with God, other Jews also experience God in a way so powerful that they momentarily die only to become reborn54. And secondly, the moon becomes full, as revealed in the following quote,

54 In The Zohar, Volume IV we also learn that, “According to the way of the world, when joy comes to a person or when sorrow comes, and he does not comprehend, he cannot bear it—his heart momentarily flies away. But once he comprehends, he endures steadfastly and can bear it. All the more so here, for look, Moses told them everything that would happen afterward, fortifying their hearts with words—and yet they could not endure. All the more so, if he had not told them anything! Therefore, he said to them (Exodus 19:25), at first, strengthening their hearts, and afterward: God spoke (ibid, 20:1). Despite all this, they could not endure; for we have learned that Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya, in the name of Rabbi Yose: When they heard the word of the blessed Holy One, the souls of Israel flew away, ascending to His Throne of Glory to cling there…….. “At that moment, Torah returned the soul of each and every Israelite—seizing and grasping their souls to return them to Israel, as is written: Torah of YHVH is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalms 19:8)—restoring the soul, literally!”(474). Editor, Daniel Matt, more explicitly informs the reader in footnote 388 that, “According to a rabbinic tradition, God’s revelation at Mount Sinai
When Israel stood at Mount Sinai, [the moon] began to shine, as is written: *He bent the heavens and came down* (Psalms 18:10). What does this mean: *came down*? That the sun approached the moon, and the moon began to shine, as is written: *the banner of the camp of Judah to the east* (Numbers 2:3). At Mount Sinai, Judah was appointed royal official in the kingdom, as is written: *Judah still rules with (El), God, and is faithful to the holy* (Hosea 12:1)……Judah was found *ne’eman*, trustworthy, to receive kingship, and the moon began to shine.” *(The Zohar, Vol. IV 475)*

In reality, the other reason this interests us is because, contrary to Kristeva’s notion that the feminine receptacle is symbolic of “rebirth” since it is distinct from and prior to what she calls “masculine language” (or the Symbolic), Kabbalah would appear to imply more continuity. Of course, even for Kristeva, the feminine receptacle and its pulsations color the speech later acquired, yet her ultimate distinction between the symbolic and semiotic and her degradation of the former cannot be found in mysticism. Rather, all language is, in essence, feminine—as is the creative process symbolized by *Shekhinan*. The transcendent God of unity (*Ein Sof*) is One and the source of everything, including creation. More specifically, it is the feminine womb (or receptacle) that both shatters this unity into creative plurality and difference yet also enables “mending” to occur. Thus, though in a sense, *Shekhinan* holds the seeds of exile (as long as this plurality is not unified) she also allows reunification and rebirth to occur. In short, this descent into exile (or into language itself) is what permits that which is already perfect (God) to become, as Sarah Schneider suggests, even “more perfect” through *us* (human beings). Only humanity can bring glory to God by “remembering” him from this space of exile and alterity, and, above all, by choosing good over evil. Before *Shekhinan* (and the “word”), there was only innocence—but innocence is neither good nor evil, for

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was so overwhelming that the people of Israel died momentarily, leaving the Torah with no one to receive her. Soon, though, they were revived.” *(The Zohar, Volume IV 474)*

55 Judah is the ancestor of the three Kings (King David, King Solomon and King Messiah).
without difference, there is no free will. In this sense, Shekhinah, though herself empty, is actually the opposite of emptiness inasmuch as she offers humanity unlimited potential, a potential which she, moreover, actualizes through us humans—or, conversely, we through her (as she is nothing more or less than a perfect reflection of humanity itself).

To summarize, a time filled with silence is, necessarily, a time of harsh repression, a time of exile. However, it is also for this very reason a time filled with hope—a hope that emanates from the well herself as symbol of both exile and re-awakenings, of death and rebirth. From this perspective, though it is important to learn to speak, as long as humanity remains unredeemed, humanity must learn to appreciate the positive side of silence. As “Rabbi El’azar said, “My silence assembled a temple above, a temple below. Indeed, ‘a word is worth one coin; silence, two.’ ‘A word is worth one coin’: what I said, the meaning I aroused. ‘Silence, two’” by holding my silence two worlds were created, erected as one”(10?)56. With this in mind, Ana’s silence and, in particular, her muted voice in the film’s closing scene becomes even more ambiguous. Though they reflect her extreme state of exile, they may also be a sign of prudence and even great faith, for The Zohar: Volume IV teaches,

[…] the blessed Holy One did not want Israel to arouse a word in the world; for if Israel aroused a word, they would not arouse the name of Compassion, and Judgment would not be rendered with Compassion—as is written: \textit{YHVH will fight for you, and you—keep silent!} ‘Do not arouse anything! For the name of Compassion must be aroused upon them to render Judgment with Compassion; so you should not produce a defect and arouse something else. (227)

Indeed, from the viewpoint of Kabbalah, though silence is a sign of a problem, a separation, a wound that has not been mended, sometimes this silence must be endured quietly. As further stated in Ecclesiastes, there is a time for everything—even a time for

56 As Daniel Matt adds (footnote 65) “Rabbi El’azar’s silence stimulated his father, Rabbi Sim’on, to reveal mysteries of two realms”.

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silence. In a time of calamity or exile, silence can become a sign of cowardice, but it may also become a sign of self-control, patience, faith and hope, a sign, that no matter how much we suffer, no matter how much we are tested, we will keep faith that our suffering exists for a reason, that our suffering is not for nothing. This, in turn, enables us to accept responsibility for past, present and future, and not only for ourselves but for everyone around us. In this respect, though *El espíritu* expresses the pessimism of its day, it also paves a path towards a brighter future.

As a final, transitional note, I might add that there are two characteristics that define hell or death in *Kabbalah*: silence and oblivion. The fact that silence and oblivion are so intimately related is hardly surprising given that both are suggestive of humanity’s current state of exile. This becomes even more significant considering that remembering and rebirth require retelling—that is, they necessitate filling in the silence with speech. The centrality of silence and oblivion to humanity’s current state of exile and separation is not only reflected in the references that I have already quoted, but can be summarized in two simple facts. First, *Dumah* (the angel in charge of the souls of the dead and a name for the netherworld in the Bible) literally means “silence” (*The Zohar, III* 360--see also footnote 131). Secondly, hell itself is described as a place of oblivion, or “a place without remembering”, as revealed in the statement: “It happened at the end (Genesis 41:1). What is at the end? // Rabbi Shim’on said, “A place without remembering, and this is End of the Left.// Why? Because it is written: But remember me with you when all goes well for you (ibid. 40:14).” (*The Zohar, III* 181-2). Last but not least, *The Zohar* tells us that the demonic side (separated from the divine) culminates in oblivion,

The demonic side, which culminates in oblivion, caused the cupbearer to forget about Joseph. / In the *Zohar* the word (*zekhirah*), “remembering,” connotes
(zakhar), “male,” specifically the divine male potency, Yesod, often symbolized by Joseph. The demonic realm lacks the flow of emanation from Yesod, so it is “a place without remembering.” Conversely, Yesod is described as “a place without forgetting”. (The Zohar, III 182).

“A place without forgetting”: that is, in many ways, what our monster represents. Or at least, as “return-of-the-repressed”, he embodies the hope of becoming exactly that place where remembering occurs. Yet, as long as he remains monstrous, he will simultaneously represent the spiritual exile, death, repression and oblivion of the world.

“Monstrous Ambiguity”—From Franco to Frankenstein

In truth, El espíritu conveys its ambiguities just as potently through the symbolic monster of mad-scientist, Victor Frankenstein (named Henry Frankenstein in Whale’s film version) as through its silences. The monster of Frankenstein represents exactly that which is most feared, repressed, exiled, and shunned, and yet, any attempt to subdue, tame, kill or evade him only renders him more fearsome and dangerous. Thus, just as the film’s central characters become ambiguously intertwined, this “monster” becomes both a symbol of Franco and a symbol of his victims. After all, the monster himself cannot be understood in isolation from his “father”—both of whom the characters of this film take after in manifold ways.

On the one hand, this ambiguous monster represents Franco, who both resists yet increasingly embraces modernization and the foreign in order to extend his regime and even his own life. Even as Franco rejects certain forms of modernization and the foreign or strange (particularly in his early years57), he inadvertently ushers in(to Spain) an

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57 Of course, it must be noted that Franco not only promoted certain kinds of modernization through the various phases of his dictatorship, but the Italian and German-style industrialization, engineering feats, etc., were part of the regime’s rhetoric from the very beginning.
explosion of both; one which will become even more pronounced in his later years. This “future” time of the 60s and 70s is also anticipated in the film’s opening scene as the truck not only heralds in phantoms of the past but, more precisely, phantoms which simultaneously point towards the “future”—or to be exact, the “future-past”\(^58\).

As I will more fully explore in a later section of this chapter, the “monster” of Frankenstein himself also represents past, present and future. Appropriately, this “monster” is linked in and through the film, even more than to Franco, to those seductive strangers who represent the need to open Spain’s tight borders to a realm of movement, fluidity and change. The need for such fluidity, particularly with respect to identity is reinforced by the fact that not only is this fictional monster scorned, rejected and abandoned by his very own “father”/creator, but, in his very monstrosity he becomes both a symbol of everyman (as he is, literally, made of the parts of various humans) and yet no one (for precisely as such he is like \textit{no one} else). Indeed, he is both radically strange and intimately Spanish—as further implied by the fact that he represents not only the exiled and erased phantoms purged from Spain and its official memory but, even more so, the “living-dead” civilians featured in this film (namely, Ana and her family). For all these reasons, the films’ monster becomes the prototypical symbol of repression, exile and “border-subjectivity”\(^59\). As the creature himself explains in the original \textit{Frankenstein},

\begin{quote}
Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire \\
\end{quote}

\(^{58}\) Since the film is made in 1973, the “future” that is anticipated in \textit{El espíritu} (which takes place in the 1940s), is actually coterminous with the moment in which the film is made (1973). From the perspective of Erice at the time in which he makes \textit{El espíritu} this “future” is thus, the present. From the perspective of contemporary viewers, this “future” is actually the past.

\(^{59}\) I am using the term “border subject” to refer to someone who is neither one thing nor the other but located in an in-between, indefinable space to which common labels or categories cannot be applied. Though this may be potentially quite liberating, in general, it is more immediately perceived as isolating.
knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (*Frankenstein* 132)

In reality, the “creature” considers himself to be even more accursed than “the fallen one”, for, just moments later, he exclaims:

Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred.”(*Frankenstein* 133).

Yet, ironically, it is through his very distance from humankind that the creature becomes the most fitting symbol of humanity, particularly in the context of post-war Spain. More ironic still is the fact that, by virtue of being the quintessential symbol of exile, he also becomes an equally ideal symbol and vehicle of rebirth. More concretely, we must look to his symbolic origins and essence if we wish to fully understand how he functions not only in *El espíritu* but in each of the traditions/fictions which this film rewrites. He is, after all, no ordinary monster; for his own life begins only when the various parts/humans from whom he is composed literally come back from the dead through his “monstrous” embodiment. In this way, despite his self-likening to the “evil one”, he is, just as accurately (and ironically), an embodiment of potential solidarity--for he symbolizes, quite literally, the death of the individual ego that is “reborn” as many. This idea is reinforced throughout *El espíritu*, as this “monster” is symbolically resurrected in the various characters to which he is likened. As a mirror-reflection of society, the “creature” becomes a symbol of ambiguity *par excellence*. Yet, as we have
seen, it is his ambiguous, mirror-like function that makes him, particularly from a mystical perspective, not so much diabolic as divine; or rather, “human, all too human”\textsuperscript{60}.

On the other hand, the monster’s ambiguity is further intensified by the fact the his rebirth in the characters is, in many ways, more like a renewed death (or a dead life) than a true re-birth—and yet, it is a necessary death, a death that, like Ana’s magic well, offers hope by virtue of forcing anyone who undergoes it to confront the past. In a film riddled with ambiguity, the one thing we know for certain is that this monster, as both everyone and no one, the return-of-the-repressed, the \textit{already dead}, can never truly be killed. Though he apparently dies in James Whale’s film version, this is, as little Isabel suggests to her sister, just a trick, a lie. It is, in fact, as a symbol of border-subjectivity and border-temporality\textsuperscript{61}, that this monster, commonly known as “Frankenstein”, becomes the ultimate symbol of both remembering and rebirth. He represents not only the need to re-member the past in the present, but the possibility of a more hopeful future that only such remembrance can provide. The fact that he lives, ultimately, in Ana’s imagination implies just this. He is a doorway into both the past and the future—or rather, he is the crossroads itself, the window, the meeting place not only of distinct temporalities but also of various identities. Yet, above all, he reflects their insep
erability.

Not only does he encapsulate the ambiguity of silence, monstrosity and exile, but his presence is felt in each and every character from each and every work that leaves its trace on \textit{El espíritu}. Thus, at this juncture, though my primary objective will be to focus on how \textit{El espíritu} rewrites and/or reinserts the traditions of Whale and Shelley into its

\textsuperscript{60} By “human, all too human” I mean that he is made up of human parts engineered by another human.

\textsuperscript{61} I use this term to imply that this monster is both an incarnation of the ghosts of the past (or a haunting) as well as a projection of future hopes, dangers and desires. In many senses, his presence not only bridges different temporalities but reminds us of their inseparability.
own framework, in order to fully appreciate how this happens, I must also--and more fundamentally--show how the various characters find themselves (or lose themselves) in the faces of their others. This too is not only a psychoanalytic idea popularized, in particular, by Jacques Lacan, but, as we have seen, a mystical idea that long preceded Lacan and even Freud, as advocated by Christian, Jewish and Islamic medieval mystics. Though this should already be obvious, given the importance of Spain’s mystical legacy, I find it appropriate to end this section with a final quote by Ibn Al’Arabi. He notes,

There is nothing in anyone from God [as other], and there is nothing in anyone but what comes from his own self, however various the forms. Though this be the eternal truth of the matter, none knows it [directly] save certain of the elite of the saints. Should you meet one who possesses such knowledge you may have complete confidence in him, for he is a rare gem among the elite of the Folk.// Whenever a Gnostic receives a spiritual intuition in which he looks on a form that brings him new spiritual knowledge and new spiritual grace, [he should know] that the form he contemplates is none other than his own essential self, for it is only from the tree of his own self that he will garner the fruits of his knowledge. (The Bezels of Wisdom 69)

In this next section of the chapter we will see, more concretely, how the encounter with one’s Other indeed becomes, in El espíritu, an encounter with oneself.

**Be-(friending) the Stranger/Be-(coming) the Strange**

*You shall not oppress a stranger
For you know the heart of a stranger
As you were strangers in the land of Egypt...*  
*Exodus, 23:9*

Immediately after the film’s opening sequence, the camera shifts its focus from the symbolic truck (as it enters Ana’s tiny, provincial town) to Ana herself, as she views Whale’s 1931, *Frankenstein*, in the town’s makeshift theatre. Ana’s wide black eyes show that she is both mesmerized and moved by this strangely terrifying, foreign film--a
fact reinforced by the question that she poses to her older sister both during the movie and then again, later that night. As both girls lie in bed, Ana, still mystified by the film, asks her sister why the monster kills the little girl and why the townspeople then kill the monster. Isabel, most likely in an effort to maintain her status as the wise older sister, fabricates a story—a story which, in all probability, she decides to embellish in order to wield even more power over her naïve younger sister, as she gets Ana to believe in a world of her own making. Isabel explains that movies are lies and that the monster did not actually die (he is a spirit, and spirits are immortal); rather, he lives on invisibly in a nearby shed. Though he only goes out at night when he puts on his “skin-disguise”, if you are his friend, he will come to you whenever you wish. All you must do is state your name out loud, “Soy Ana” (“I am Ana”), says Isabel.

Although Isabel most likely fails to understand the implications of what she tells her sister, the fact that the monster can only be summoned by stating one’s own name prefigures the way in which this monster will function as each character’s own “double” or psychic projection (and, above all, Ana’s). In fact, this is prefigured even earlier as Ana watches the movie. Ana’s awestruck gaze reveals not only her distance from the film (as it appears to her as radically new, foreign, shocking, and strange) but also her uncanny closeness to it. On the other hand, what we must consider here is that the film could not move or touch Ana if it did not in some way hit on something that was already at the core of Ana’s being. By nature, we might say that awe is defined by what psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, (building on Freud’s das unheimliche—the un-home-(l)y) calls the uncanny—that which is strange to me yet simultaneously at the heart of me. In this respect, awe signals an awakening in the person who experiences it. It stirs up or
brings to consciousness that which lies dormant within oneself, within that part of oneself which is strangely familiar (or repressed). As Ana’s eyes glow in wonder, we get the distinct impression that the film’s monster, as a vehicle of awakening (or as a spiritual alarm clock, so to speak), will become that very stranger who embodies Ana’s journey from repression to awareness to self-knowledge.

However, since Ana’s own identity is intimately connected to the identity of those who surround her, this monster becomes a symbol not only of Ana but of her repressed society. This idea is foreshadowed by the fact that it is Isabel who utters the words, “Soy Ana” (both at the film’s beginning and its end). These words establish an immediate bond not only between Ana and the monster, but also between Ana and Isabel, who, in many ways, become doubles of one another. At the same time, this crucial tie between Ana and Isabel, is predicated, in part, on the even more essential bond between the monster/spirit and the anonymous exile (and by extension, their link to Ana). Isabel unwittingly reinforces this connection when she says that the monster does not really die. Though Isabel’s intention may be to trick Ana rather than tell her the truth, the monster truly lives on both through the imagination of these little girls as well as through his symbolic function as “return-of-the-repressed”—which in turn, is most concretely manifested through the almost magical appearance of Ana’s anonymous refugee.

Since Ana is not only the film’s protagonist but also the most interesting and integral character, let us then continue our vertiginous trip through the beehive from Ana’s perspective. After all, even the monster’s link to the refugee is tightened through Ana, who, much like the refugee himself, not only forges connections between Whale’s film, Shelley’s novel, the Bible and her own world, but imposes these links on her
triangular relationship with the monster and the *maquis/exile*. As I briefly mentioned in
the introduction to this chapter, the affinity between this fugitive and the monster is
presaged from the film’s first scene where the monster/film, *Frankenstein*, is brought into
Ana’s town by truck. In a similar fashion, the fugitive also arrives to town by another
symbol of movement, modernization and border crossings—a train. The fact that this
refugee hurts his ankle when he jumps from the train gives him, as critic, Linda Willem
puts it, a “gait reminiscent of that of the monster” (725). As Willem further notes,

The morning after the renegade’s assassination, his corpse is laid out on a
rectangular table and covered with a sheet so only the outline of the figure is seen.
In Whale’s film the monster’s body is shown in an identical manner just before it
is brought to life. Thus this scene suggests an ironic contrast between life and
death. The relationship between the renegade and the monster is further implied
by the placement of the renegade’s corpse under the movie screen that had been
used to show the *Frankenstein* film to the townspeople. (”Text and Intertext” 725)

Ana’s clearest double is, much like the *maquis*, the largely invisible spirit of
Frankenstein, who only physically appears at the beginning (via the film, *Frankenstein*)
and towards the end (when his reflection blends with Ana’s in a pond). At the same time,
this connection strengthens, in turn, the bond between Ana and the *maquis*, since the rest
of the monster’s appearances take place indirectly through his alter-ego, the anonymous
exile, and/or through Ana’s ability to mimic his actions.

A crucial example of this occurs the night when Ana runs away after learning that
the fugitive man she has been aiding has been hunted down and killed. As Linda Willem
observes, the townspeople organize a search with dogs barking loudly and bright torches
to contrast with the night sky, much like the one that occurs in Whale’s *Frankenstein*.
This obviously equates Ana with the monster. Of equal import is the fact that these
torches are, in Whale’s film, what the monster fears most (in fact, it is only when Henry’s
assistant, Fritz, scares him with a torch that he shows his first signs of aggression). As Willem herself notes, it is fire that kills him as the townspeople set the windmill to which he escapes ablaze, taking him down with it. Finally, we should keep in mind that even in Mary Shelley’s novel the monster, after encountering his creator’s dead corpse, feels pity for him, and, out of remorse, vows to kill himself by burning himself alive.

The parallels between Ana and Frankenstein (and by extension, the *maquis*) are further reinforced just a few scenes before this fugitive is killed. In this scene Ana observes her sister and friends as they jump over a bonfire—yet, as Willem points out, the camera angle makes it appear that these girls are actually *on fire*, just like the monster in the final scenes of the horror film. While Ana appears to be mesmerized by their courage (for unlike the monster, they appear to enjoy jumping over/through the flames), her distance from these girls reveals her proximity to the monster. As both her distance and her large, luminous eyes suggest, she fears the fire in ways these other girls do not. Thus, Ana’s distance and fear anticipate the death of her fugitive friend since he too is identified with the monster. More crucially, in view of Ana’s profound bond to both the monster and *maquis*, Ana’s distance prefigures her own symbolic death at the lake.

In truth, the fact that Ana’s very proximity to the monster is what distances her from the other girls highlights the film’s essential paradox. Ana can only re-member herself through others—and yet, she can only achieve this by first separating from them. At the same time, this paradox does not render the situation hopeless or irresolvable—especially if we consider that all the characters are, in some way, likened to the monster. Rather, what separates Ana from these other people, what makes her, temporarily, even more abject, is her very *awareness* of her situation.
As we have seen, the monster perfectly encapsulates this paradox, for though he is a reflection of “everyman”, he is also the ultimate reject. If only the eyes of society were to be truly opened, his monstrosity would disappear. Likewise, it is his general condition as social outcast that renders this fugitive/maquis more similar to the “monster” than any other character—a reality supported by the fact that Ana herself actually confuses him with the “invisible spirit”, which she believes he physically incarnates. This equation is solidified even more by the fact that, like “the monster” of Mary Shelley’s novel who “escaped to the open country and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel” (*Frankenstein* 109), the fugitive/renegade of *El espíritu* also takes shelter in an abandoned hut in the middle of a vast expanse of empty land. Following Frankenstein’s monster, who claims “Here then I retreated, and lay down happy to have found a shelter, however miserable, from the inclemency of the season, and still more from the barbarity of man” (109), *El espíritu*’s fugitive also finds shelter, however brief, from the frigidity of nature and man.

There is, however, one essential difference between the monster’s treatment and this fugitive’s. In the novel, the “creature” studies the family in the adjacent house through a chink in the wall. He learns to love and sympathize with this family, and he shows this love through kind deeds such as cutting wood for them and doing other anonymous favors. Yet when they finally meet him face to face they assume he is a villain and run him out of the village in horror. Unlike this ungrateful family who repays “the creature’s” good deeds with violence and rejection, Ana treats this outcast with love and loyalty—though, sadly, her fellow townspeople do not.²

² There is a “double” parallel/rewriting here for, on the one hand, the townspeople are likened to the ungrateful family in Shelley’s novel. Yet, on the other hand, they are also likened to the townspeople in the Whale’s film version. Aside from the similarities in the ensuing pursuit (dogs, torches, etc.) it is only after
Here again, Ana becomes, paradoxically, both more connected to other people through her connection to “the monster” and yet, at the same time, distanced from them to the extent that they are incapable of accepting their “true face”, which thus, appears monstrous to them. However, Ana may also be partially to blame. Not only is she ultimately inseparable from these people, but she herself may ambiguously wish for the exile’s/monster’s death, even as she helps him. This is insinuated by Ana’s desire to project onto both the monster and the exile her own ambiguous love-hate relationship with her father by giving the refugee her father’s coat, pocket-watch, food, etc. 63 If we believe that Ana really does hold some sort of supernatural sway over reality, then her ambiguous desire to kill her father may, in fact, culminate in the death of the exile (and the monster himself); for by giving this man her father’s possessions, she equates him with the very person she most desires to “kill”, replace or transform (yet deeply loves).

Ultimately, whether or not Ana has magical abilities matters little in the sense that, even if she does not, the exile’s death reflects her own ambiguous desire to transform. 64 On the other hand, the possibility that Ana does hold some mystical powers (or that her desires are capable of influencing reality) is not only an extremely interesting and subversive notion but one which is supported by various other facts. First, the *maquis* both enters town and leaves it (dies) in a time and fashion that reflects Ana’s desires and perhaps just as easily Teresa’s--not to mention the fictional world on which the monster kills Maria that this occurs. By contrast, in *El espíritu*, the outcast (“monster”) never kills Ana (Maria’s double), yet he is hunted down and killed anyway—and, at least metaphorically, so is Ana. 63 This act also conveys a variety of other ambiguous functions, which I will take up at later points. 64 Though a part of her wishes to merge with him in a liberating way (and though she may momentarily achieve this), the fact that Ana herself eventually loses her voice (and thus “dies” in a way that is not necessarily positive) soon after the actual death of the refugee further suggests that she has indeed killed a part of herself. Moreover, the birth of Ana’s new “repressive inner voice” implies that her subsequent “rebirth” or “new self” may not be more liberating than her “old self”. From this point on Ana’s relation to the monster/Otherworld will become a secret which, much like her mother’s letters, she dare not speak out loud—not even in the privacy of her own bedroom.
Ana’s fantasies (and the film itself) are based. Like the film, *Frankenstein*, the *maquis* both comes into town in a symbol of modernization, and is hunted down and killed in a way that closely resembles the fictional monster’s demise. More crucially, he enters town only after Ana has endured every type of ritual enchantment she can fathom, from yelling to dropping rocks in a well to her radical decision to sneak out one night (the time when the spirit supposedly manifests himself in bodily form, even to strangers).

Once she has escaped, Ana runs frantically in search of the spirit, until finally, she decides to meditate under the cloudy moonlight. After gazing up at the sky longingly, with eyes as wide and radiant as the very moon they reflect, she closes them in wishful prayer. The image of Ana’s face then dissolves into an image of train tracks bathed in the dawning light of day—the very same train tracks that Ana and Isabel frequently play on and which lie adjacent to the abandoned shed in which Isabel had told Ana that the spirit dwells. This image of empty train tracks is suddenly filled by a train that carries the anonymous exile whom Ana will soon befriend. It is hardly shocking then, that Ana confuses this man with the “spirit”—especially given that, right after the *maquis* jumps off the train he runs to the exact same abandoned barn or shed where Isabel says (and Ana believes) that the spirit lives. The fact that this “spirit” arrives the very next morning after Ana slips out to look for him most likely confirms in her eyes that her wish has been granted—and, in fact, we viewers almost get the strange feeling that it has. At a later point in the film, the fugitive entertains Ana by making the pocket-watch that she has just given him disappear and reappear in and out of his sleeve. Despite being a simple magic trick, it most likely erases any doubt that Ana may have about the stranger’s supernatural
existence. Though this *maquis* does not use real magic, the timing of his act and the way in which it fits into Ana’s perceptual framework makes it magical, indeed.

Yet, this possibility that the *maquis*’ arrival is somehow supernatural or mystical in nature may have just as much to do with Teresa’s spirituality as with Ana’s. In fact, Teresa’s involvement would actually support the idea that Ana does have a mysterious sway over reality (or, at least, that the two of them combined, as a mother-daughter team, have this special ability). Not only do Teresa’s desperate letters parallel Ana’s unwavering ritual observances, but, more specifically, the fact that this *maquis* arrives by train—which is exactly how Teresa’s letters go out—would seem to endorse this idea that he is actually a long overdue response—incarnate. There is, in fact, one key scene (when Teresa steals out to the train station at the beginning of the film) that parallels the refugee’s arrival with undeniable precision.

The screen image shows an immense field pierced by a single, long, empty road. Teresa, who just moments earlier writes the film’s opening letter to her refugee, enters the screen from the bottom on bicycle and rides off upwards into the horizon on the dark path which cuts through the otherwise empty field (and screen) vertically. This recalls the very same scene that brings the refugee into town. As Ana’s night-vision fades into the next morning the first image we viewers see are train tracks that similarly punctuate the barren fields of Castile vertically. The train that carries this refugee into town also speeds onto the screen from the bottom up (very much like Teresa on her bike).

Thus, even if there are no mystical powers at work, we get the strong sensation that Teresa’s desires are inseparable from her daughter’s. If nothing else, Ana, by choosing the refugee over her own father, symbolically rewrites her mother’s failed
marriage by replacing her father (Teresa’s husband) with Teresa’s true love. In this way, Teresa becomes just as much a part of the symbolic monster/spirit as Ana. On the other hand, if Ana does have mysterious abilities, they are themselves ambiguous to the extent that they reflect, much like her mother’s possible powers, her own ambiguous relationship to the monster and to herself. As is fitting (considering Teresa’s intimate connection to her daughter), Ana’s mother throws her last letter into the fire right after the “deaths” of the exile and Ana. This becomes significant in light of the parallel relationship between Ana and her monster/exile and Teresa and her own ex-Republican exile. The fact that Teresa’s letter burning is highly reminiscent of the fictional monster’s death in both Shelley’s and Whale’s versions of *Frankenstein*—not to mention Ana’s obsession with fire evidenced in an earlier scene—further supports this idea.

Though Ana’s sister, Isabel, does not explicitly partake of these strange mother daughter parallels, the story she tells Ana (that the monster is both real and immortal and that he lives close by) turns out to be, as we have already begun to see, true. This, in turn, implies that Isabel too has a strong link to both her mother and her sister—and perhaps even an ability to influence reality as well. Yet, despite Isabel’s almost eerie powers to presage the future, her ambiguous claim (that film is a lie, but that the monster is real), is more emblematic of her transitional role between childhood and adulthood than any conscious knowledge of these deeper meanings. Her assertion that film is deceptive hints at her adult-like cynicism, or rather, her need to draw a rigid line between fantasy and reality more than her desire to bridge the two. And yet, the fact that as Isabel says this she simultaneously brings fantasy and reality together in the very same sentence
(by telling her sister that the fictional monster is actually real) points to her childlike desire to keep this fantasy world alive and real.

In truth, Isabel does show moments of genuine complicity with her sister--for example, when she whispers to Ana late at night the secrets of their fantasy world or when she covers up for Ana when Ana sneaks off to the shed/well to search for the spirit. An even better example occurs when Ana roguishly imitates their father shaving. Isabel appears to enjoy this subtle means of softening his masculine authority almost as much as Ana. Like Ana, she seems to relish filling in the voids and silences of post-war Spain with performances/role-playing as well as, more generally, her active imagination.

This is only natural given that both girls are subject to the exact same cultural and familial repressions. Yet, as said, Isabel also maintains a striking distance from the very fantasy world she helps create. Whereas Ana, in her sublime innocence, takes this fantasy world very seriously, her sister, Isabel, often remains aloof from it, treating this world almost as if it were a game. Isabel’s subtly mischievous smiles often suggest that she may, in fact, revel in the power she gains over reality (and especially, over Ana) through the creation of this alternate world. If nothing else, it certainly empowers her to tease and manipulate Ana--particularly in the absence of their repressed and neglectful parents--and to test the limits of her naivety. As Sandra Harper notes,

Isabel is only capable of pretending, playacting, or scaring (Rubio, Oliver and Matji 148). Her smiles and obvious disbelief, reflected by facial expressions during the Frankenstein film and as she watches her sister call to the spirit at the well, contrast sharply with Ana’s intense concentration and belief. (“The Concept of Childhood in Víctor Erice’s El espíritu de la colmena” 80)

In general, Isabel willfully adopts both roles of oppressor and oppressed. One afternoon, for example, while wearing her father’s beekeeper gloves, Isabel springs up
from behind Ana in an attempt to replay a scene from the movie in which the “creature”
kills his own creator’s wife. Yet, through her father’s symbolic garb Isabel embodies and
conflates the roles of monster/bee and beekeeper. After scaring her sister by playing
dead, Isabel intensifies her sister’s terror by pretending to be the murderer. The fact that,
at this point, Ana might still believe that the “monster” really killed her sister, only makes
Isabel’s joke even more terrifying to Ana. More crucially, Isabel has, by this point,
mixed both roles up in a way that suggests that monster and creator are not only equally
to blame for this death, but that they are, in fact, one and the same (and even more so if
we consider that Fernando’s beekeeper role more generally parallels Dr. Frankenstein’s).

Yet, though this is a realistic insight, and one that illuminates both Shelley’s and
Whale’s Frankenstein, Isabel simply interprets rather than transforms. Though she
conflates oppressor and oppressed, her rendition still leaves them caught up in a constant
power struggle. As Willem summarizes the scene,

One afternoon Isabel frightens Ana by pretending to be dead. The scene begins
with a scream from their bedroom, which is heard by Ana in another part of the
house. Ana immediately goes to the bedroom and finds the immobile body of her
blonde sister on the floor and the window to the balcony open. After checking the
balcony, Ana tries to console her sister by saying “Ya no está. Se ha ido.” This
scene parallels the one in Whale’s film where the monster attacks Dr.
Frankenstein’s fiancée, Elizabeth, who is also blonde. Like Ana, the doctor hears
a scream and rushes to the bedroom where he finds Elizabeth lying motionless
near an open window that the monster had used for its entry and exit. (“Text and
Intertext” 725)

What strikes me most about this quote is that it underscores the difference
between Isabel (whose intent is to scare Ana, albeit playfully) and Ana (whose desire is
to care for her sister, quite seriously) with respect to role-play—and, by extension, real-
life relationships. Though Ana also imitates both the monster and his creator throughout
the film, unlike Isabel, her point is not to scare others but rather to bond with them. In so
doing, Ana significantly reforms the role of the oppressive, Victor Frankenstein (or in Whale’s film, Henry Frankenstein). Like our so-called monster, Ana too is reflected in every other character in a significant way. Though, on a superficial level, Ana’s primary double appears to be her older sister, Isabel, this doubling just as often puts them at odds with one another as it brings them closer. Ana is, as we will continue to see, more firmly identified with the stranger/fugitive living in an abandoned shed, (whom she provides with food, company, and clothes) or even her mother, who, despite having resigned herself to having loved and lost, still loves and still remembers. Finally, aside from identifying with her sister, the fugitive, the monster and her mother (largely through their mutual interest in this fugitive figure who replaces Fernando as husband/father), Ana also identifies with her father, even as she “replaces” him. In fact, Ana’s exceedingly complex relationship with her father, which consists of her oftentimes inverted or subversive mimicry of him, constitutes one of the film’s greatest attributes.

Given that Ana’s father is, especially from her perspective, the most authoritarian figure in the film, one of the most radical ways in which she uses role-play is as a means of refiguring her father’s identity rather than simply touting his “virtues”. Aside from her complicated relationship with the maquis—whom Ana uses largely as a filter for transforming her relationship with her father—the most telling scene in which Ana

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65 As various critics point out, such as Robert J. Miles, the flowers that the little girl, Maria, offers Frankenstein in Whale’s film version are replaced by Ana’s apple gift to the fugitive, which in turn, “recalls the dialogue between Dr. Frankenstein and his creation in the original novel: ‘Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel’” (“The possible subplot in El espíritu de la colmena” 109) As both Miles and Xon de Ros suggest, Ana’s gift of an apple is, in fact, a sign of how the revolt (in the Garden of Eden) becomes, within the Gnostic tradition, an act of creation. In fact, we could also call it a “monstrous rebirth” but only if we use this expression in a relatively positive sense—for unlike the little girl, Maria, who dies after confronting the monster, Ana does not die when she confronts the fugitive/symbolic Frankenstein nor does she die when, in the last scene, she directly confronts the Frankenstein’s monster in the lake. Of course, it may be argued that she dies a symbolic death—especially since the last scene dubiously suggests that she has lost her voice (which is replaced with an interior voice).
employs role-play to try to reform her father is the shaving scene briefly mentioned a
couple pages back. As Ana goes through all the steps from lathering up to spraying on
aftershave—except the actual shaving—she turns this act into a joke rather than a serious
aspiration. Ana’s playful imitation of her father, as revealed by her twinkling eyes and
impish laugh, reveals her desire to “soften” what she views as his rigid, harsh
masculinity—an effect enhanced by her soft, hairless, delicate face. The fact that, in the
process, Ana is capable of making her sister, Isabel, laugh—and, more crucially, that Ana
takes pleasure in achieving this effect—also highlights her fundamentally different take on
role-play since Isabel’s deployment of role-play elicits panic rather than pleasure. It is
also reflective of Isabel’s use of role-play as primarily a means of representing reality in a
way that complies with the status quo rather than being radically transformative.

In short, though both Ana and Isabel are capable of using film or fantasy in
creative ways, and though they both import many of Frankenstein’s elements into their
own reality, Isabel has a limited, conformist, often frightening way of doing it—which is,
sadly, very realistic. While Ana’s role-play culminates in her ability to “become one”
with the monster, and to try to redeem him, Isabel has a very different take on these
performances. She not only delights in replaying the film’s most morbid moments, but in
so doing Isabel reveals her nascent sadomasochism and thus, her disquieting notion of
what relationships can and should be. Thus, Isabel, who obviously can distinguish
between reality and fantasy, as her assertion that film is a lie suggests, most likely invents
this fantasy world not simply because she has a burning need to dwell in it, but so that
she may wallow in the power and exploitation that this world grants her. In this light, the
girls’ fantasy world is a reflection of those who enter it. It can be a dark, hellish world filled with demons and death or, alternatively, a paradise of peace and reconciliation.

Ana’s ability to not only “see” this Otherworld but to take it as seriously as if it were real (through her relationship to the “spirit”, the well, the refugee, etc.) implies that she occupies an even more childlike position than her older sister. The fact that Ana is extremely playful in her performances of real life situations (such as the shaving example just cited), indicates that, if anything, it is the real world that she resists taking seriously. It would also seem, however, that Ana’s “childlike” need to engage in this mystical world is not only more healthy and mature, but due, in part, to the fact that she, like Isabel, is neither a child nor an adult but rather on the cusp of becoming a woman.66

Yet, unlike Isabel (who is also delicately poised between two worlds: the adult’s and the child’s) Ana is interested in and motivated by very different features of each world. While Ana emblematizes the open-minded acceptance of childhood, as Sandra Harper suggests, “Isabel seems to reflect both the spontaneous, unmotivated and sometimes deliberate cruelty of children. Her fiction, self-conscious playacting underscored by her self-contemplation in the mirror, is cruel.” (“The Concept of Childhood” 80). More fundamentally, whereas Ana sees fantasy and spirituality not as an escape from reality but as a means of radically changing it; Isabel, by contrast, views fantasy as separate from reality, but as a good way, nonetheless, of manipulating reality and thus others. In this respect, Isabel becomes very much like Franco, who also views reality as separate from spirituality. Yet, like Isabel, Franco imposes his own dogmatic

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66 Thus, drawing on Lebau’s arguments about childhood, liminality and cinema (in Childhood and Cinema) we might argue that whereas Isabel is a necessary character, Ana, in a sense, actually becomes cinema itself
view of the world on others as if he himself were God. Moreover, Isabel’s sacrificial blood-lipstick and degenerate sexuality are, though not the intended effects of Francoism, the logical extension of a dictatorship deeply invested in repression, sacrifice and, specifically, the degradation of everything female and material. In many ways, Isabel becomes the model of all that is corrupt, contradictory and perverse in the Francoism.

In truth, Isabel (who is three years Ana’s senior) is more fully experiencing the sexual pangs of adolescence in her typically sadomasochistic way. Her desire to paint her lips with her own blood suggests this in a way which becomes even more disturbing when we consider that Isabel gets this blood by strangling a cat (who then bites her). Though Isabel most likely gets the idea to use this cat from the film, Frankenstein, (which also features a cat, significantly, in the scene right before the little girl, Maria, is killed by the “monster”) Isabel transports this image into reality in an alarming way. Aside from expressing her SM tendencies, her desire to link her own cat to the film’s cat strengthens the idea that Isabel is truly obsessed with this particular scene (that is, the death of Maria at the hands of the monster). This makes Isabel into even more of a dark “double” or shadow in relation to Ana, especially if we consider that Ana too is fixated

67 Interestingly enough, psychoanalyst, Carl Jung argues that it is the replacement of God by the State (as “new Father”) that, to a large degree, accounts for what he calls the atheism implicit in all dictatorship. What this suggests is that dictatorship not only gives birth to despair and resignation rather than faith or hope, but, more essentially, that it requires (even when it presumes to be religious, as in the case of Franco’s National Catholicism) that the dictator replace God himself. This is reinforced by Francisco LaRubia-Prado’s observation that, “The paternal figure of Christ in relation to mankind becomes a filial figure in relation to Franco. Franco’s divine fatherhood makes him the very origin of the law. Franco, as a Catholic, worships his son Christ. One cannot help but suspect that, in this Oedipal inversion/identification with his father/son Christ, Franco was in fact worshipping himself.//Franco’s protagonism as Christ’s father is reflected in Costus’s 1981 painting Aparición de Franco ante el Sagrado Corazón’ (see Figure 4). In this painting Christ as Son is speechless with admiration as he slightly looks towards his left, suggesting that—like Semele before her lover Zeus—it would be fatal for him to openly admire Franco’s radiant face in all its splendour. Welcomed with humility by the Son, Franco smiles as he rides his magnificent white horse enveloped in an ascending cloud. In turn, Franco pierces the ethereal atmosphere with his phallic arm erect. His fascist salute becomes an ostentatious exhibition of the rank that his unquestionable paternity grants him in relation to the Son” (“Franco as Cyborg” 147).
on this same scene. We must not forget that it is Ana’s curiosity regarding this scene (about why the girl and the monster must die) that inspire the creation of this Otherworld.

Yet, for Ana, this scene must be resolved, rewritten or “re-performed” in a way that dislodges it from its morbidity as opposed to a fantasy that one should take pleasure in gloomily replaying, as does Isabel. Isabel’s masochistic, sacrificial desire to appear “attractive” through applying bloody lipstick reinforces the sense that sexuality, for her, consists in perverse power struggles rather than loving, give-and-take relationships. Her use of a cat—which not only tends to symbolize female sexuality in general, but, more crucially, is inspired by Maria’s death at the lake at the hands of the monster—to achieve this connection further implies an deep relationship between sexuality and monstrosity.

At the same time, it bolsters the idea that there is a link between sexuality and spirituality in this film. In this light, we might argue that Isabel’s inability to take seriously Ana’s spiritual world also reflects her radically different idea of what a healthy relationship entails, whether sexual or not. As Isabel’s desire to identify with both the monster/murderer and the victim/Maria suggest, in her eyes, there are only two roles in the world that one can play—winner or loser, oppressor or oppressed. Thus, her warped sense of sexuality is indicative of her dark, repressive spiritual state. On the other hand, we should be careful not to judge Isabel too harshly for her sinister role-playing. Even if it is less healthy and hopeful than Ana’s more transformative performances, Isabel’s acting is, nonetheless, more real. Though Ana turns her father’s shaving into a soft, soapy parody, this performance does not change who her father really is.

Yet, it does enable Ana to survive through laughter. Just as crucially—and much like Ana’s silent relationship with her monster/spirit and refugee—it serves as a reminder
that, even as Ana externally submits to the patriarchal beekeeper, inwardly, she does not have to think like him. She can make fun of him and even steal his from him—as long as her actions remain invisible to him. Alternatively, though Isabel’s troublesome behavior is a consequence of her repressive, patriarchal, post-war society—and, specifically, her internalization of it—her morbid performance of Frankenstein serves as more than just a highly accurate portrayal of her world. Isabel’s unsettling, almost femme-fatale understanding of both sexuality and spirituality, despite being the dark, bitterly realistic and logical consequence of Francoist mentality, constitutes a strong example of the way in which Franco’s attempt to turn females into self-sacrificing, repressed sexual objects (through laws, codes, censorship and cultural propaganda) ultimately backfires.

“The Return of Paradox” or “The Expression of Repression”—Monstrous (re)Births and Mad-den(I)ed Mommies

These contradictions will now become further manifest as we more closely examine the highly complex, Teresa, who in her own repression becomes, much like Isabel, the paradoxical expression of the logic of Francoism. Her role is more complicated and ambiguous than Isabel’s since her need to hold on to the memory of love turns her into a semi-positive role-model (as she inspires Ana to attempt to transform memory into hope), even as it entails the neglect of her girls. Though Teresa too becomes both victim and victimizer, she also becomes an agent of change. In so doing, she underscores the fact that, in addition to El espíritu’s central paradoxes involved in making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, this film also turns other, more culturally specific paradoxes on their heads. In particular, Franco’s push for pronatalism, the confinement of women and the sacrifice of desire (particularly women’s) often elicited just the opposite effects of
what these laws intended. This is evident from the film’s start, as the sexually repressed Teresa writes letters to a beloved exile (probably a *maquis*) that are never returned.

The anonymity and ambiguity of this exile/*maquis* (we can never be sure of who this man is in relation to Teresa, though most likely an ex-lover) makes the pain caused by his absence and estrangement emblematic of the suffering ignited by the loss, exile and disappearance of thousands of Spaniards. More specifically, it is representative of the isolation characteristic of women in post-war Spain, due not only to the loss of their loved ones but also because of repressive laws such as those listed in the following quotation from Helen Graham’s, “Gender and the State: Women in the 1940s”:

> Under the terms of the March 1938 Labour Charter (*Fuero del Trabajo*) married women were also to be freed from the workplace and the factory. The Fundamental Law of 18 July 1938 (*Ley de Bases*) established the family subsidy (paid to the father) ostensibly so that women should no longer need to work to supplement low male wages. From 1942 onwards all labour regulations stipulated the dismissal of married women (*excedencia forzosa por matrimonio*) and on 26 March 1946 the Family Subsidy Law (*Ley de Ayuda Familiar*) deprived men whose wives worked of the state-paid family bonus (*plus familiar*). (184)

> It is safe to assume that Teresa’s unemployment is a consequence of both her depression, as she is surrounded by so much loss, as well as the fact that in 1940s Spain it is neither financially very profitable nor socially acceptable for women to work--or even leave home.⁶⁸ And yet, it is in the very solitude of her home that Teresa finds time to

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⁶⁸ As Virginia Higginbotham further explains, “During the Civil War, Franco’s sister, Pilar Franco, organized and headed a women’s auxiliary, which provided nursing care and domestic skills to Nationalist soldiers as part of their war effort. In the postwar period, the Sección Femenina, as it was known, gained status as an official entity of the Franco government. Its primary function was the supervision and instruction of unskilled women in general. Women who wanted to get a passport or a driver’s licence, for example, had to complete the sixteen obligatory hours of courses which included cooking, sewing and home-making. In 1940 laws allowing divorce, passed by the Second Republic, were revoked by the Franco regime, trapping many men and women in lifeless marriages. Women were not allowed to own property in their own names, and were required to obtain permission of either their husband or their father in order to work outside the home. Women were excluded by law from holding positions in the legal system, such as those of judge or magistrate. This was especially insulting, since three women had served in parliament in the Republican government prior to the Civil War. Women under the Franco regime were doubly repressed.” After the Civil War and the Second World War, women in other countries were encouraged to
daydream, to reflect on all that she has lost and all that she desires. In effect, by being cut off from the man that she loves Teresa becomes distanced from everyone, even her family, with whom she spends less time rather than more. Clearly then, Franco’s attempt to privilege responsibility to one’s family at the expense of desire inexorably backfires. For Teresa is neither a more responsible mother towards her children, nor is she a better wife to her husband, whom she seems to resent more than love.

Indeed, it is important to remember that Ana’s mother is not only repressed throughout the film, but becomes even more repressed at the film’s closure when, in a highly symbolic move, she burns the final letter she has written to her lover. Though under the highly repressive Franco Regime, Teresa has good reason to do so, that does not detract from the significance of this act of erasure. As mentioned earlier, this act is highly reminiscent of the final scenes of Whale’s film where the monster goes down in flames. This link between the monster and Teresa is reinforced by the fact that Ana’s monstrosity, which itself reflects her dubious origins, also implies that her mother is monstrous—or more specifically, an “adulteress”. Regardless of whether Ana’s biological father is Fernando or some other man (ie. the beloved addressee of Teresa’s letters), the fact that Ana is not only physically but also mentally and spiritually unlike her father makes her, and by extension, the mother who birthed her, monstrous.

This becomes especially significant if we consider Dominique Russell’s observation that, “For Aristotle…anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a

quit work, return home and have children. In Spain, the Franco regime went further by awarding financial bonuses to women with the largest number of children. Franco’s minister of education publicly discouraged women from obtaining a university education, since the regime planned for them to stay at home and have children.” (The Spirit of the Beehive 5-6)

69 Ana’s dark hair and eyes starkly contrast with the light hair and eyes of the rest of her family. Significantly, the fugitive man/father-figure whom Ana befriends is not only dark-haired and dark-eyed like her but is similar to the man Teresa writes in that he may also be a maquis.
way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type” (“Monstrous Ambiguities”190). Even more importantly, Russell adds that, “one essential aspect of monstrousness is the dubiousness of paternal origin. Yet if a child who does not resemble her father is a monster by that very fact, so too does the mother become monstrous as a result of this non-resemblance”(191). Thus, Russell concludes that “Teresa can be thought of monstrous because of her adulterousness”(191). Not only do I agree, but I would add that even if Ana is not the physical product of adultery, the fact that Teresa is alienated from her family and, perhaps, commits “mental adultery” already makes her somewhat of a symbolic adulteress.

The fact that both mother and daughter choose a fugitive/refugee over Fernando underscores the complicity and “monstrosity” of them both. This complicity is further suggested by the fact that just as Teresa sends her letters to her exile by train, the maquis that Ana befriends also arrives by train. In this way, these unconventional relationships that both mother and daughter establish with undesirable fugitives (the very types of men who are supposed to be forgotten) not only threaten Fernando’s power as “beekeeper” or family patriarch but also the traditional family structure endorsed by Francoism and above all, its quest to obliterate all traces that such men ever existed. Yet, as poignantly suggested by the scene in which Ana sticks her tiny foot into the massive footprint of a man, (a footprint she assumes comes from the “spirit”), not only will such outcasts be remembered, but they may even be “reborn” in the children who remember them.

In short, Franco’s power is, in many ways, like a ticking time-bomb. As the monster’s function as “return-of-the-repressed” suggests, he cannot truly be forgotten—nor can any of the exiled or murdered victims of the Spanish Civil War. The more
Franco attempts to repress that which is strange, the more appealing the strange becomes; and the more Spaniards themselves identify with the “stranger”. Similarly, by repressing the woman (Teresa) and binding her to her home, Teresa has actually become the exact opposite of the ideal wife and mother that Franco envisions. In the process, she helps gives rise to another generation of women (Ana and Isabel) who, though they may turn out just as repressed as Teresa, will be equally inadequate models of feminine virtue as defined by Francoism. Thus, while Francoism succeeds, in the short term, in terrorizing and repressing both men and women--and even in turning its subjects into monsters (in their very own eyes), the monstrosity of Francoism will eventually self-destruct.

In fact, little Ana, despite her almost supernatural link to her mother, appears to learn more from her sister, Isabel, than from either of her parents—a fact which becomes even more ironic when we consider Isabel’s own budding femme-fatale sexuality, which makes her a less than ideal substitute, to say the least. With the exception of one or two scenes (for example, when Ana’s mother gently brushes Ana’s hair and tells her about spirits), most of Ana’s questions are directed to her older sister, further reinforcing this idea that Franco’s Spain actually encourages parental abandonment. Furthermore, it is the maid, not the mother, to whom Ana runs for help when her sister, Isabel, plays dead. It is the maid, too, who is home when Fernando arrives to an empty house. This scene potently suggests that it is the overwhelming sense of abandonment caused, ironically, by the laws Franco designed to prevent it, that inspires Fernando’s two girls to go and see the film, Frankenstein—while his wife, meanwhile, bikes to the train-station.

In both cases, these females would prefer to fantasize through fiction and escape from the oppressive beehive/home rather than conform to standard, “feminized” roles.
The fact that Teresa is actually forced to leave home and visit the train station because her beloved has been exiled by the regime becomes yet another way in which the contradictions of the Franco Regime are explored in this film. Similarly, Ana and Isabel leave home and view a film which, like the train, is associated with both modernization and the foreign/strange because they feel distanced from their very own family.

Ironically then, it is because of Franco’s attempt to keep Spain pure and isolated that these Spaniards are stimulated to search for something outside of Spain—and they do so precisely to find themselves. It is because of Franco’s effort to keep his subjects purely and fanatically “Spanish”—and thus, distanced from the strange—that his subjects become, like Ana and Isabel, strangers in their own land. Isabel’s warped sexuality and spiritual cynicism is, moreover, a glaring example of the deranged way in which Franco’s attempt to keep females passive, prude and devoutly Catholic, is preparing young girls to become, rather than happy housewives, unwieldy, power-hungry, sado-masochistic adulteresses. Yet, whatever they become, the stranger will continue to haunt them.

In conclusion, though the effect of the mother’s “abandonment” of her children and husband has a directly negative rather than liberating consequence for everyone involved, it does indicate, nevertheless, the degree to which Franco’s repressive laws were destined to fail. Above all, these laws represent the fundamental split between desire and responsibility on which Francoism is predicated (and which extends back to the 19th century), particularly for women. At the same time, it is from the “exile” imposed by the Franco Regime that these girls find creative ways to renew themselves—albeit silently, secretly and subtly. Though they fail to become fully and positively
reborn, much less change society at large, their fantasy world enables them to endure the harsh realities of the Spanish dictatorship. What is more, in their struggle to survive they learn to rewrite the world in ways that commemorate the monster/stranger and all he represents, and in ways that, through us viewers, immortalize Ana and her family. As we critics and viewers carry on the tradition that Ana and her family left behind we hold the power to remake them—perhaps in more radical ways than they themselves managed.

Thus, as this next section clarifies all the more, just as Ana, Isabel and Erice attempt to reinterpret fiction as a means of remembering the past, we viewers are invited to continue where they left off. What this requires, however, is that we become every bit as critical towards them as they themselves are towards the traditions that they rewrite—or imbue with new meaning. As we have seen, Ana and Isabel use the monster (and, more generally, role-play) to “rewrite” their own relationship with their father. Whereas Isabel appears to use this role play (via the monster) to realistically interpret her father’s actions, Ana uses role-play (and both the monster and her exile friend) to try and change her father—or if not, replace him. Yet, though Ana fails to truly transform her father in reality, she succeeds in rewriting or reinterpreting the other traditions through which her father is filtered both to her and to us viewers. Just as Ana rewrites, and to some extent, redeems the monster (at least in her own eyes), we must also be attentive to the thoroughly different ways in which she and her father, Fernando (as actual beekeeper/patriarch), interpret him. As we will now more fully see, Ana’s approach is much more

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As Sandra Harper would concede, though the film does provide hope, Ana’s rebirth is essentially negative. She states, “As a result of her experiences with the pretend death of Isabel, with the real death of the refugee, and with the cruelty and violence of the hive, Ana dies symbolically and is reborn, no longer the innocent child that she was” (“The Concept of Childhood in El espíritu de la colmena” 83)
radical—and it is one, moreover, that illuminates previous traditions from Whale to the Bible in ways that make them relevant to us, even now in the 21st century.

“Reframing, Rewriting, Redoubling the Monstrous”—From Victor Frankenstein to Víctor Erice:

Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

—Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

These words spoken by the creature himself, otherwise known as “the monster”, “daemon”, or even the “Devil”, as Victor erratically calls him, reflect the degree to which this monster becomes the very reflection of society. As a result, this quote reveals one of many ways in which we might more properly liken “the monster” not to the devil but to Divine Presence. Given the fact that this divine presence will be caught up in the clutches of evil and exile until humanity is redeemed, Victor’s label (Devil) is not so much ironic as it is imprecise. At the same time, Victor’s use of the designation, “daemon”/ “Devil” to refer to his “creature” recollects Franco’s own use of “the Beast” (another name for the Devil/Anti-Christ) to refer to anyone “anti-Franco”. Given other evidence in support of Franco’s self-likening to God (see, for example, footnote 59), this idea that “Anti-Franco” becomes tantamount to “Anti-Christ” under Francoism comes as no surprise. Specifically, this title of “the Beast” is used in reference to those “monstrous others” who, like both Frankenstein’s monster and Ana’s nameless exile, remain, for Franco-Father, dehumanized, evil, nameless. As Francisco LaRubia-Prado observes,

The clash between the hero and an enemy who, given its dehumanizing and dehumanized nature has no name beyond terms or notions such as ‘the Beast’ or
‘the red hordes’, leads to the engendering by the hero through his phallic cannons, of the Church of Christ in Spain. The Crusade becomes his ‘sexual’ act as, through his valiant struggle against those who burnt convents and churches, Franco makes possible the being of Christ on Earth (or at least on Spanish territory, though Franco’s partisans also projected his mission as universal). Thus, the general becomes the symbolic father of Christ (“Franco as Cyborg” 146-7)

Yet, moving beyond labels, what is most striking about the “daemon’s” quote from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the implication that this monster is a mirror of society—the very same society that views him as daemon, monster, beast. Thus, if he (“the beast”) metes out violence and death, this is because violence and death are all he has learned, all he has received from society as a whole. As a mirror of his surroundings, this so-called monster also reflects the ultimate paradox inherent in Victor’s (and by extension, Franco’s) desire to create life. Though Victor physically achieves this act of rebirth by animating life from the ashes of death, the life he bestows is, in reality, no life at all. It is, rather, a marginal existence, one of exile, repression and abuse—for the one thing Victor cannot provide his creation with is affection and love. Not only is he incapable of giving it himself, but neither does he attempt to change society for the better. Rather, Victor is concerned with the shell of life, the science of bodily functions—and he examines such life in isolation from love. As “the creature” explains to his “father”, Victor, (shortly after killing Victor’s baby brother, William) upon encountering him in the mountainside,

Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; My soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow beings… Shall I not then hate those who abhor me? (*Frankenstein* 103)
In this context, “the monster” is clearly likened to Ana, who is also immensely distanced from her silent, estranged parents. Like the monster, she too, as a young girl, represents that which is most fragile, voiceless, and powerless. Alternatively, “the creature” is just as easily equated with Ana’s refugee, who is abandoned, even persecuted by his own new, symbolic father, the Franco Regime, who likewise views him as a “nameless beast”. Yet we have seen that the monster is also more loosely equated to all the major characters in the film. In fact, in a more theoretical or symbolic sense, this monster may be compared to all Spaniards who suffer throughout the Franco Regime and its aftermath the terror of a corrupt “father-figure” (Franco), who, in his attempt to “play God”, achieves, somewhat like Victor Frankenstein, just the opposite. Rather than life, he perpetuates death; rather than freedom, he perpetuates repression and blind obedience. Rather than uniting spirituality to reality, he suffocates spirituality and separates it from the material world as he advocates violence and sacrifice above all else.71

As we have seen, Ana is primarily connected to the various characters (and even Spain at large) through their mutual connection to the “spirit”/“monster” and his own “double”, Victor Frankenstein. Of course, this still leaves much of Ana “unread” or uninterpreted; for Ana shares a thirst to revive this monster that only her father, Fernando, who aspires to be like Dr. Frankenstein, can comprehend. Yet, despite Ana’s and her

71 As Michael Richards confirms in A Time of Silence, “The regenerationist symbolism of essential Spanishness coincided with the ascetic regimen that Francoism imposed. Communism was the ‘gravedigger of history’. A whole way of life, culture tradition itself was at stake. By the time of the Civil War these essences had almost been lost...and were only to be recovered at the expense of an enormous sacrifice. One of the foundational principles of the Falange, the Spanish fascist party, was a ‘revaluation of violence’. War was seen as an ‘element of progress’ and violence as ascetic, as ‘creative and purifying’” (A Time of Silence 3-4). As Richards further explains, “Francoism enforced both the physical expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Republicans and a kind of expulsion of thought through the proscription of ‘foreign ideas.’ Symbolic renewal meant ‘purification’ and destruction. Falangists were charged with ‘the obligation of persecuting and destroying Judaism, freemasonry, Marxism and separatism.” (A Time of Silence 9)
father’s common interest in reviving “the monster”, Ana’s manner of doing so is markedly different from Fernando’s—who remains painfully loyal to Dr. Frankenstein in both motivation and technique. Yet, though the two men have a far more repressed and twisted way of striving towards this goal than Ana, Ana is not so innocent herself. If we examine parallels between Ana’s behavior and Victor’s, we will see that, just as much for Ana as for Fernando, the monster represents not only her repressed (sexual) desires, but also her ambiguous desire to kill (in Ana’s case, her own father) and the consequent guilt it produces. In order to properly set the stage on which all these dynamics may unfold, it will help to go back to the original pairing/“doubling” on which all others are based—that is, the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his so called creature.

Indeed, the inseparability between Victor and his creation is reflected through their similar designation as “Frankenstein” (and for which reason I refer to both Victor and Henry Frankenstein as “Dr. Frankenstein”—though actually, Victor was not yet a doctor in Shelley’s novel, but rather a medical student). Although Victor Frankenstein’s “monster” is technically nameless, a fact which is in itself highly important, of equal import is the fact that this creature has himself become known, through popular culture, as “Frankenstein.” This appears to be testimony to the capacity of the masses to at least instinctually grasp what may not be so obvious on a conscious level—that is, that this creature is, in many senses, Victor’s (or, in Whale’s film, Henry’s) own “double”. More specifically, we might argue that this monster is a manifestation of Victor’s subconscious or repressed fears, desires and guilt. It has been widely noted, for example, that the monster’s decision to kill Victor’s fiancée, Elizabeth, might have reflected (aside from the monster’s desire for vengeance), Victor’s own subconscious need to avoid an
incestuous relationship with his soon-to-be bride, who happens to be his cousin. In Whale’s film version, we might also argue that the monster fulfills Henry’s subconscious desire to kill both his unsupportive mentor, Dr. Waldman, and his goofy lab assistant, Fritz, who is, in many ways, the person most responsible for turning Henry’s “experiment” into a criminal “monster”.

To begin, Fritz clumsily retrieves the brain of a criminal rather than a “normal” brain to use for Dr. Frankenstein’s “experiment” (without ever advising him). Yet, despite the so-called monster’s “criminal” brain, he was passive and obedient until Fritz scared and intimidated him with a torch of fire. After this, he was locked up in a dungeon where Fritz, against the will of Henry Frankenstein, continued to beat and mistreat him—that is, until, finally, “the creature” escapes, killing Fritz first and then later Dr. Waldman. After the death of Fritz, Henry falls sick and begins to yell out Fritz’ name, while repeatedly muttering “It’s all my fault!” Though his own sense of guilt derives from the actions of “the monster” (since the creature is, literally, his own creation and responsibility), it would also appear that some of this guilt is due to the fact that, subconsciously, Henry may have wished for these deaths, as both Waldman and Fritz threatened and/or undermined his “experiment” in significant ways.

It is worth noting here that Frankenstein is reluctant to give up on his “experiment”, even when he begins to show aggressive tendencies. It is not until Henry learns that the monster has killed Fritz, a village girl and even Dr. Waldman that he determines to hunt it down and kill it. Furthermore, when Henry first learns that his creation has the brain of a monster, he begs those closest to him, those few people who share his secret, to be patient with the creature. This may very well be more of a question
of pride than empathy, especially if we consider that, from the monster’s birth, Henry refers to his creation not as “son” but rather as “experiment”. Nevertheless, it may also reflect his ability to at least partially empathize and identify with the monstrous rather than abandon the creature he has sculpted with his very own hands.

Either way, in Mary Shelley’s version, the monster’s creator, Victor Frankenstein, is even less sympathetic to the monster. As soon as he opens his yellowish eyes, Victor flees from his own creation in horror. The creature not only represents that which Victor both desires yet fears (such as Elizabeth’s death), but in and of himself, he is a manifestation of Victor’s greatest desire (to produce life and to push the limits of science, knowledge and the unknown), and yet, his paramount fear (precisely the unknown, the other, the repressed and perhaps even life itself). In many ways, the entire novel may be understood as Victor’s escape from himself and from his own repressed “monstrosity”.

This is further reinforced by the fact that when “the monster”, after killing Victor’s brother, frames an innocent maid, Justine Moritz, for the murder, Victor accepts the situation rather than admit his own guilt for having created the monster/murderer. Through his silence, he too becomes equally guilty and equally monstrous. In much the same way, the characters of El espíritu become monstrous through their silence.

Yet, Victor’s double role as both himself and his monster, creator and creation, oppressor and oppressed, victor (literally) and victim, is reflected particularly well in the role of Ana’s father, Fernando, whose ability to play both parts reveals the facility by which the victim or “loser” (eg. Fernando as probable ex-Republican\textsuperscript{72}) may also become

\textsuperscript{72} This becomes especially convincing in light of Carmen Arocena’s remark that “El silencio de Fernando, su incapacidad para participar en la vida social del pueblo, su aislamiento en las faenas avícolas nos dan la imagen de un perdedor. Su pasado está archivado como esas viejas fotografías pegadas en un álbum en una de las cuales aparece junto a Unamuno. En otra de las fotografías que forman parte de su pasado
oppressor (Fernando as beekeeper). At the same time, his example as victim turned oppressor reveals the ways in which social cycles of terror and violence are regenerated through fear. Ana’s father, as both beekeeper and bee, loving father and rigid patriarch, victor and victim is, arguably, the most ambiguous of all characters—and thus, most easily equated with both Victor Frankenstein and his “monster”. Even Fernando’s cigarette smoke is, as suggested earlier, a possible reference to his “demonic” or at the very least repressive role as an impediment to his daughters’ fantasy world.

In general, Fernando’s obstructive role is reflected in the fact that every time the girls wish to converse late at night over their secret fantasy world, they must whisper lest their father discover and put an end to their secret. One night, while the girls are absorbed in their fantasies, one of the girls suddenly cries out, “¡Que viene Papá!” (“Daddy’s coming!”), before quickly blowing out the candle. In this scene, Fernando’s presence clearly signals the need to return to reality—which, as the ensuing darkness suggests, is highly repressive and, literally, unenlightening.

On the other hand, Fernando’s ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that the sudden darkness which he brings about is offset by the very next scene, which begins in broad daylight, and which opens with a vision of Fernando as the archetypal doting father. As he sits, hunched over in the grass with his girls--stooping, quite literally, to their level--he attentively yet playfully examines nature with them. His seemingly genuine interest in entertaining his daughters while teaching them the secrets of mushrooms, and his almost

archivado, vemos la imagen de un primer plano de Teresa con una dedicatoria que dice <<A mi querido misántropo>>. El destinatario de esta dedicatoria no puede ser otro que Fernando. Su odio a la sociedad no es más que una exaltación de la filosofía de Unamuno, su maestro, que privilegia al hombre como individuo antes que como ser social. Fernando vive únicamente en el presente. El pasado de las fotografías se ha perdido definitivamente.” (*Víctor Erice* 106)
childlike fascination with nature itself, makes him seem almost immediately like more of an accomplice than an oppressor.

Fernando’s avid desire to play the role of accomplice is filtered through his nonetheless bitter attempt to achieve this by pitting the two girls against their mother both subtly (by likening her to a “poison mushroom”) and explicitly, by telling the girls that they can only visit the far-off smoky mountain if they promise not to tell Teresa. The aura of secrecy that Fernando lightly tries to establish, while paralleling the girl’s secret fantasy world, seems somewhat ironic, perhaps even false, given that, from their perspective, he is the main authority figure from whom they must guard their secrets. Fernando’s words become still more unbelievable when we consider that, though Teresa appears to be even more absent from the girls’ lives than Fernando (despite—and largely because of—Franco’s laws designed to provoke just the opposite) her absence literally prevents her from carrying out the role of family disciplinarian.

On the contrary, Teresa, like her girls, not only hides her own secrets (letters) from Fernando, but, as we have seen, her ability to sneak out of the beehive is equated very much with her daughters’. Thus, Fernando’s sudden eagerness to take his girls outdoors (outside the “beehive”) and even possibly to the far-off, “fairytale-like”, misty, mushroom mountain turns him, unexpectedly, into an uncharacteristic symbol of mobility and liberation. In this way, he also momentarily bends down the adult world of history and reality to the childlike world of fantasy and myth.\(^{73}\)

\(^{73}\) Sandra Harper summarizes this general split in reference to Marvin D’Lugo. As she efficiently puts it, “D’Lugo points out that the polarity of the adult and child’s worlds is one of the essential conflicts of the film and is suggested in several ways. The child’s point of view and its association to fairy tale or myth, suggested at the beginning of the film by a child’s drawings and the phrase <<Érase una vez>>, is juxtaposed with the more literal history evoked by adults.” (“The Concept of Childhood in El espíritu de la colmena” 86)
This becomes even more complicated when we consider that this mountain, though supposedly the place where “good mushrooms” grow, is also indirectly equated with the “poisonous mushrooms” (and, in particular, with Teresa, as symbolic mushroom). As I am about to demonstrate, these mushrooms, which Fernando himself deems to be “poisonous”, become a central symbol of repressed alterity, monstrosity, mobility, the *maquis* and unlawful (especially female) sexuality. Thus, as the scene proceeds, though we become increasingly sympathetic towards Fernando, we also become increasingly wary of trusting him. His ambiguous identity becomes, essentially, reflective of his ambiguous relationship to the “poisonous mushroom” itself.

From a “cynical” perspective, even Fernando’s unusually warm and paternal disposition might be viewed as little more than a means of indirectly/symbolically turning the girls not only against their own mother74 but against all Others represented by what he deems to be “the poison mushroom”. As Fernando tells his two girls which mushrooms are “good” and which are “bad”, he metaphorically reveals the ways in which he, though most likely an ex-Republican, has become a binary thinker, like Franco himself, who divides the country into “good” and “bad”. By signaling a particular mushroom as being “la peor de todas” (“the worst of all”) and then stomping on it with his big, black boot, Fernando appears to mimic Franco’s need to crush all those “contaminating” or “poisonous” others who threaten the purity of the *patria*.

Yet, this is particularly ironic if we consider that Fernando himself cannot be neatly placed into either category (of good or bad, fascist or rebel, victim or victor). In fact, despite his newfound affinity to the patriarchal, oppressive Francoist role, the fact

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74 Ironically, however, Fernando inadvertently equates Teresa with both the poisonous mushroom *and* with the misty mountain.
that, as Robert Miles suggests, “the color of the mushroom’s cap and black bands”,
reflect falangist insignia (“The Possible Subplot” 107) might reflect Fernando’s residual
desire to crush precisely those who crushed the Republic. This is reinforced by the fact
that, according to Fernando, the best mushrooms may be found in the misty mountain
(often associated with huidos/stragglers who hid or took refuge in the mountains of Spain
after having lost the Civil War). Yet, even this possibility only renders both the
mushrooms and Fernando himself more ambiguous and thus, even more monstrous.

That is, both Fernando and the mushroom become associated with the monstrous
“Frankenstein” as a manifestation of that which is most Other and yet also, as a symbol
of the ambiguous, of everything and nothing, of victim and victor, of oppressor and
oppressed. In short, Fernando’s very example serves as a warning of the dangers of
pigeonholing people as either good or bad. However, as critics such as Sandra Harper
would agree (“The Concept of Childhood” 82), Fernando himself does precisely this
through symbolically labeling certain mushrooms as “poisonous” by nature.

This ambiguity is heightened by the fact that while Fernando may associate the
misty mountains with the huidos (and thus, the “good mushrooms”), the mist is also
associated with the lost man to whom Teresa writes and who, perhaps, robs Fernando of
his wife’s affection. As Robert Miles, Celestino Deleyto and others note, Teresa herself
is covered in a similar mist when she goes to the train-station to send letters to her
beloved exile. In this sense, the misty mountain represents, simultaneously, all the things
that Franco wished to repress—from exiles and women to modernization itself, as
symbolized by the train’s mountain-like mist. It is helpful here to remember that Ana’s
mother has much in common with the monster/poisonous mushroom not only because
she represents female sexuality, but because, as a possible adulteress, she may be guilty of engendering Ana’s own “monstrosity”—which is partially connected to the possibility that Ana is not Fernando’s biological child. This reduction of true parenthood to biology is in line with Fernando’s seemingly deterministic understanding of nature.

In fact, there is one more crucial link that tightens this connection—one that identifies this “poisonous mushroom” with the Jew (not only as a religious but as a racial category). For the staunchly Catholic Franco, Jews, along with masons and communists, constituted the biggest threat to the “purity” and morality of the Spanish people. This view is hardly surprising if we consider that the Jew is not only non-Catholic but non-Christian. What is perhaps worse, from Franco’s perspective, the Jew is born a Jew—and as a racially flawed creature, the Jew is, therefore, particularly difficult to redeem. Not surprisingly, the Jew was on the top of the Spanish Inquisition’s blacklist—which, in many respects, Franco used as the ultimate model for his governance (although, clearly, Franco was less concerned with conversion and more obsessed with the utter erasure of the so-called Jewish “race”). It is also worth noting that, according to the acclaimed religious scholar, Gershom Scholem,

> Judaism, in all its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside it. (The Messianic Idea in Judaism)

75 On the other hand, Franco employed Jews in his administration, especially in foreign-relations posts, and he even helped save Sephardim from Eastern Europe. He also permitted the operation of a synagogue at the top of a luxury hotel. In addition to reinforcing Franco’s contradictory treatment of Jews (which overlaps with Perón’s, as will become clearer in chapter 4) this more specifically illuminates how his (often opportunistic) practices did not always coincide with his propaganda or rhetoric.
This quote is highly relevant both for its ability to highlight crucial differences between Francoism and Judaism as well as for its limited, over-generalized and erroneous polarizations of wider religious categories (specifically, Judaism and Christianity). The limitations inherent in this binary understanding of the two religions become particularly obvious if we consider that Kabbalah distinguishes or at least suggests (through its appreciation of the possibility of “karmic” reincarnations, the significance of Yom Kippur, among many other factors) that there could be a difference between personal salvation and worldwide redemption--as do certain varieties of Christianity. In fact, El espíritu itself urges its viewers to resist this religious schism by maintaining a similar distinction between salvation (what Scholem associates with Christian redemption) and redemption itself (what Scholem equates with Jewish redemption).

Ana’s secret relationship with her silent, invisible monster is, to be sure, an example of both her lack of redemption and yet her ability to maintain (despite that lack) some degree of personal, individual salvation or rebirth. Though this highly personal transformation offers hope even on a practical, worldly level (since it may stimulate her to remember and help transform the world as an adult), because it remains secret and, to a great extent, solitary, it prevents her from being fully satisfied and redeemed, both inwardly and outwardly. At the same time, the fact that even this level of personal salvation requires that Ana understand herself in relationship to others further reveals the limits of Scholem’s polarization of what he labels Christian redemption (which, for him, is entirely subjective) versus Jewish redemption (which is necessarily inter-subjective). On the other hand, Scholem is essentially correct in pointing out that while the Jew is inclined to see redemption as a worldwide process, by contrast, for many Christians—and
certainly for Francoists--both salvation and redemption occur not only privately and in a wholly Other (spiritual) realm but, I would add, they are achieved through the exclusion of others as well as through a degradation of the material world and body by means of sacrifice (particularly of Others)\textsuperscript{76}. In this way, his quote not only helps illuminate a fundamental characteristic of Francoism but, more specifically, Franco’s hatred of Jews.

With this in mind, it is well worth mentioning that an anti-Semitic children’s book entitled \textit{Der Giftpilz} (The Toadstool/Poison Mushroom) was published in Germany in 1938 by Julius Streicher (executed as a war criminal in 1946). This book, filled with various short stories, begins with an introductory short story (also named “The Poison Mushroom”), which parallels, often word for word, what happens in this particular scene of \textit{El espíritu} where Fernando takes his girls on a mushroom hunt. The following summary is taken from the online “German Propaganda Archive” (Calvin College), which in turn, has taken this from a 1938 publication issued by “Friends of Europe” in London based on the original source (Ernst Hiemer. \textit{Der Giftpilz}. Nuremberg: Stürmeverlag, 1938).

A mother and her young boy are gathering mushrooms in the German forest. The boy finds some poisonous ones. The mother explains that there are good mushrooms and poisonous ones, and, as they go home, says:

"Look, Franz, human beings in this world are like the mushrooms in the forest. There are good mushrooms and there are good people. There are poisonous, bad mushrooms and there are bad people. And we have to be on our guard against bad people just as we have to be on guard against poisonous mushrooms. Do you understand that?"

\textsuperscript{76} As Richards observes, under Franco, “The country was to be remade in the image of the myths of the Spanish essence, encapsulated in the ‘Crusade of Franco’ to save Christian civilization as represented by reconquering Catholic Spain, In defence of this essentialist conceptualization of the \textit{Patria}, the idealized division of the people into ‘Spain’ and ‘Anti-Spain’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, was exacerbated by the regime. The sin of association with the ideas and organizations of the Republic was not only to be confessed but recanted, suppressed and negated at a personal level. An associated dualism between the spiritual self and the ‘evil body’ to be punished was also imposed as a daily psychological torture, ‘with the deliberate purpose of transforming the Spanish masses into a herd of mutilated beings’. “ (\textit{A Time of Silence} 7)
"Yes, mother," Franz replies. "I understand that in dealing with bad people trouble may arise, just as when one eats a poisonous mushroom. One may even die!"

"And do you know, too, who these bad men are, these poisonous mushrooms of mankind?" the mother continued.

Franz slaps his chest in pride: "Of course I know, mother! They are the Jews! Our teacher has often told us about them."

The mother praises her boy for his intelligence, and goes on to explain the different kinds of "poisonous" Jews: the Jewish pedlar, the Jewish cattle-dealer, the Kosher butcher, the Jewish doctor, the baptised Jew, and so on.

"However they disguise themselves, or however friendly they try to be, affirming a thousand times their good intentions to us, one must not believe them. Jews they are and Jews they remain. For our Volk they are poison."

"Like the poisonous mushroom!" says Franz.

This is relevant to *El espíritu* in numerous ways. First, the implication is that the mushroom is poisonous by nature, by birth, by “race”—and not by some flaw in the environment or in the way it was “raised”. In this way, it is likened to the misguided view that what makes Frankenstein’s monster truly monstrous is his criminal brain rather than his mistreatment/abandonment by his father and society. Though Ana’s father applauds this type of deterministic thinking, Ana rejects this view, as symbolized by her desire to reach for the poisonous mushroom at the film’s closure rather than crushing it.

It is also important to consider that Spain, despite its desire to remain isolated from the world, was inevitably influenced by the ensuing fascism of other countries, and particularly that of Germany. The obsession with “purity of blood” which Franco inherits from the “golden past” of the Inquisition is reflected in scientific tests that, according to Michael Richards, Franco endorsed--tests which attempted to prove that all Spanish Communists and Republicans had impure, Moorish or Jewish blood (*A Time of Silence* 57). In this sense, they were not “true” Spaniards, but rather a foreign disease. Clearly,
for Franco, the Jew is both religiously/culturally and racially inferior. Yet, of course, this idea that there is a pure “Spanish race” is patently absurd. Under Franco, Spain, one of the most racially eclectic countries in Europe, becomes a country in which, ironically, racial mixture is most repressed. As Ignacio Prado comments,

El concepto franquista de raza es también, al igual que el rostro, un simulacro, un intento de sustituir una carencia y un complejo de inferioridad personal y colectivo. Como indican Deleuze y Guattari toda raza es impura, inferior y minoritaria. Este generalísimo bajito, de voz aflautada y ojos mortecinos, este gallego castellanizado que pasa de la provincia marginal al centro para volver al margen colonial de África, este habitante de un país mestizo de ‘judíos, moros y cristianos’ (Américo Castro) es, ironía de la historia, el autor del único film de la cinematografía mundial llamado Raza. (“Raza y rízoma en el cine español” 103).

In this way, we might argue that the mushroom, much like the Frankenstein’s monster, represents not only the murdered and exiled outlaws of the 1930s-40s but also the repressed racial and ethnic alterity that Franco’s concept of Raza/Race wipes out from both the past (history) and the present\(^\text{77}\). This becomes especially true if we consider the fact that the idea that a mushroom is poisonous by nature rather than nurture is an idea upheld by Franco, Hitler, Dr. Waldman (of Frankenstein) and sadly, Ana’s father, who, much like the disillusioned Dr. Frankenstein, eventually becomes convinced of this lie.

Yet Ana does not. Rather, she attempts to rewrite those “poisonous mushrooms” stomped into oblivion by the Franco Regime back into historical time—or, at the very least, into her own personal memory. Though she achieves far more than her fictional

\(^\text{77}\) As is well known, Franco ordered Jaime de Andrade (as scriptwriter) to make a propagandistic film, entitled Raza: Espíritu de una raza. In this light, the very title of Erice’s film, El espíritu de la colmena becomes somewhat of a parody, or at least, highly ironic—for it suggests that Franco’s race of spiritually elite men are, quite the contrary, dehumanized by this very exclusionary, repressive attempt to conflate spirituality and race. This becomes even more evident if we recall Frye’s use of the beehive as a symbol of the non-spiritual, as mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. He declares, “[…] if man were really natural he would be a simple being like an animal in whom selfishness and self-development are the same thing. Most apologies for tyranny are based on analogies from nature, based in their turn on the assumption either that man is essentially natural or that nature is divinely ordered. But the politics of the wolf pack and the beehive are not good enough for us. (Fearful Symmetry 64).
counterparts (Henry or Victor Frankenstein), it is important to remember that she does not actually rewrite history—neither literally nor substantively. The fact that she revives the forgotten others not through words but through performances—performances which, moreover, she must keep secret from those who have any appreciable power in the real world--leaves her without the power to effectively and collectively rewrite and remember the forgotten. In a sense, she is, like those poisonous mushrooms, monsters or “Frankensteins”, the subaltern who cannot speak. Furthermore, though she rewrites the past, she herself has secrets she would like to suppress, forget, even kill—the likes of which include her father, the monster and perhaps even the refugee himself.

To be exact, though it is clear that Ana, unlike her father, finds “poison mushrooms” redeemable, rather than inherently flawed; this does not mean that she views them to be unambiguously acceptable (as they are). This ambiguity is revealed in her decision to “help” the maquis outlaw by giving him her father’s clothes, pocket-watch and food. On the one hand, not only does Ana help this man survive by providing him with food, warmth, riches and company, but through her act of charity, Franco’s repressive, stagnant time (equated with Fernando’s watch) is symbolically given back to the exact type of man that the Franco Regime has erased from history—the unwanted, the “criminal”, the maquis, the “red”. The fact that the maquis makes the pocket-watch magically disappear and reappear is significant (in addition to the reasons previously stated) not only because it reinforces his almost godlike/subjective power over time but more crucially, because it playfully mocks or softens Fernando’s rigid conception of time and his correspondingly serious use of the pocket-watch. In this way, the maquis’ use of the pocket-watch parallels Ana’s playful imitation of her father’s shaving technique.
At the same time, it reinforces the degree to which (though silence remains, in many ways, problematic) silence can be at least partially overcome through performance and non-verbal communication—a gift that Ana, the *maquis* and the monster all have in common. On the other hand, the fact that the pocket-watch appears and disappears in the wink of an eye may also suggest the flickering ambiguity and instability of life in post-war Spain. What appears to be reality one day (for example, a burgeoning Republic) may turn into its opposite (i.e. a fascist state) before the people have a chance to even fathom what has happened. A son may be taken from his parents, a husband killed, a brother disappeared—all within the flash of an eye—and without explanation.

Hence, the fact that Ana gives this stranger her father’s pocket-watch, though it may symbolically reinsert him into historical memory, could just as easily be interpreted in a negative light—and not only for these reasons. Rather than liberating the *maquis*, Ana’s gesture/gift confines him to a “rigid, patriarchal, time” which ultimately kills him. Rather than define him, this gesture confuses his identity even more by likening him to Ana’s father and, in a sense, to Fernando’s oppressive, rigid notion of time (even as the *maquis* mocks such rigidity). In this light, it may be useful to consider the lucid connection Sandra Harper makes between time and death in this film,

The concept of childhood in the film is closely associated to the theme of time. For example, childhood is associated with timelessness and an awareness of time with disillusion, consciousness of cruelty, and the loss of childhood. Awareness of time is generally associated with adults who relate it to death, destruction, and the futility of action (Jones 36-37). For example, the father’s preoccupation with time is evident in the frequency with which he consults his watch, and his descriptions of the glass apiary—which he constantly observes and which he likens to the main hairspring of a clock—underscore the hive’s emphasis on usefulness and conformity like the meshing of a clock’s parts as well as the futile frenzied activity of the bees that ends in death […] The association of time with death and destruction is further suggested by the scene in which a member of the Civil Guard is shown winding the father’s watch that was taken from the
murdered refugee’s body, and set descriptions emphasize the ravages of passing time on the family’s house and its surroundings (Erice and Fernández Santos 46). (“The Concept of Childhood” 84)

The fact that Ana’s father is, on the other hand, a highly ambiguous character himself further complicates his symbolic fusion with the refugee at this moment (when Ana gives him her father’s belongings) as it makes both characters even more ambiguous than they already are. This too may be seen in a negative light, for it underscores the fact that, even if this already highly ambiguous and anonymous stranger is remembered or reinserted into history, it will be as just one more nameless victim of the Spanish Civil War. In short, this act of identification between the refugee and Fernando highlights not only this man’s fundamental anonymity, but also his parallel function/role to Ana’s “monster/spirit” since he too becomes, primarily, a mirror reflection of all those who surround him (especially of Ana) and even of society as a whole. Yet, this only intensifies the ambiguity given that the monster himself dies.

For all these reasons Ana’s desire to “help” this exile is itself questionable. First, her desire to save him by giving him her father’s clothes may reflect her own ambiguous feelings towards him. That is, a part of her may want to “save” the refugee precisely by converting him into someone more like her father—although even this “symbolic death” might be better than her father’s more brutal alternative, as suggested by his ominous black boots. On the other hand, another, perhaps stronger part of her probably wishes even more for her father to become like the refugee rather than the other way around. But this too proves equally lethal. For though Ana may help this refugee to survive in the short-term, the fact that in so doing she equates the refugee to both the monster (who
dies) and her father is ill-fated—especially if we entertain the possibility that Ana may, indeed, have some numinous power to influence reality.

The ambiguity is heightened still more if we believe, as film critic, Marsha Kinder argues, that, “The secret relationship with the fugitive becomes another Oedipal substitute that she [Ana] can act out and also embellish in her imagination. When her father learns about this relationship, he strongly disapproves, causing her to flee in passionate rebellion. (“The Children of Franco” 60). Even if this is not, strictly speaking, an Oedipal issue (and I would, in fact, argue that it is more essentially symbolic78), there is, no doubt, a fundamental relationship between the two men. Yet, this relationship derives just as much from their differences (or different roles) as their similarities, whether imposed or projected by Ana or not.

Precisely because, as Robert Miles argues, Ana may occupy a border position between wanting to grow up, experience sexual desire and perhaps even rebel against her absent and semi-oppressive father (as reflected in her Adam-Eve like sequence when she offers the exile an apple) and wanting to stay a child (which would imply the need for her to stay young, innocent and connected to her father), she may very well impose contradictory roles on this man who, precisely as a “spirit” (which Ana truly believes him to be), holds unlimited potential in her eyes to be whatever she wishes—or alternatively, fears. Either way, the fact that Ana’s father is not only repressed but estranged from Ana might presage the fact that the stranger dies. Ana’s double-loss of two “fathers” is further supported through Kinder’s remark that Ana,

78 Even to the extent that an Oedipal reading may be valid, this is true primarily in a symbolic sense. As Julia Kristeva has noted, incest in literature is almost never about actual incest. Rather, it is about the symbolic need to transgress the current, repressive Law and thus, become “reborn.” Incest is, indeed, a perfect symbol if we consider that it is the ultimate taboo, at least in modern, Western societies (of which El espíritu is both part and product).
feels guilty for helping the stranger because it implies a romantic identification with the outlaw rebel and a betrayal of her father and other patriarchal authorities; yet she also feels guilty for not preventing his death, which in light of her fantasy projections is associated with the monstrous crime of patricide. (“The Children of Franco” 60)

Kinder’s observation regarding the guilt that Ana feels is crucial, especially as she uses it to argue that the “monster” represents Ana’s guilt rather than her desire. Actually, Kinder fails to mention the word “desire” in relation to the scene at the lake (when Ana’s reflection merges with the monster’s after the maquis’ death). However, it is important to consider that the monster most likely represents both Ana’s guilt (for allowing his/her “double” to die) as well as her desire, both sexual and otherwise. This reading not only fits in with the film’s general ambiguity, but it enables us to see that Ana’s desires make her feel guilty, regardless of whether they are incestuous or not.

In fact, the incest reading bears appreciable relevance to this film, even if it is nothing more than an expression of the symbolic need to overcome the oppressive Law of the Father (Freud’s totemic father) rather than a literally incestuous urge. This becomes particularly compelling in view of the fact that Victor Frankenstein’s monster seems to carry out his subconscious wish to kill Elizabeth so as to avoid an incestuous relationship. Likewise, Ana, as she grapples with her own “monstrous fears”, may wish for the exile’s death either because he literally represents her father (and thus, the potential for incest) or, far more likely, because he does not resemble Fernando--in which case the outlaw still embodies a temptation perfectly symbolized by incest/Fernando. In other words, because the refugee is not like Ana’s father (as symbol of authority and patriarchy), but rather the ultimate exile, the ultimate taboo, the ultimate expatriate, the symbol of incest becomes
an ideal symbol of Ana’s desire to transgress the laws of her Father (whether as Franco, Fernando or Frankenstein) through her illicit relationship with the refugee.

Yet, even in this case, Kinder’s guilt argument holds up since Ana obviously views her own transgression as being as serious as if she desired sexual relations with her own father. Consequently, it would make sense that a part of her would wish for his death—much like a part of Victor Frankenstein may have wished for the murder of the very person he most loved. In short, both Ana’s desire for the maquis and her consequent desire for his death would, in all likelihood, make her feel equally culpable. After the outlaw’s death, it is only natural that her guilt would become further compounded—especially if she really believes that wishes can influence reality. Given that Ana believes in monsters, spirits and perhaps even that she actually wished the maquis into existence, it would make sense that Ana would truly believe that she is responsible for his death. This too finds grounding in Frankenstein (including the version Ana herself watched) since Dr. Frankenstein’s monster appears to carry out his subconscious wish to kill Fritz and Dr. Waldman, as well as serving as a manifestation of his subsequent guilt.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that the fact that the monster represents Ana’s father (even to Ana) does not make her relationship to him via the monster only or necessarily incestuous—even on a symbolic level. After all, the monster represents, in one way or another, all the characters in this film, including Ana’s mother and sister—but this does not mean Ana has an incestuous link to them. Rather, they are all tied to the monster (and thus, Ana) because they all carry very similar repressions, as they are from the same culture, town and even family. As a result, they also hold a special function in molding and mirroring Ana’s own internal repressive mechanisms.
Finally, these characters are all related to the monster, independently of Ana, to the degree that the monster is a symbol of everyone—and thus, everyone’s repressions and desires. From Ana’s perspective, her father becomes even more tightly associated with the monster through her act of linking him to the refugee. At the same time, when the monster’s face appears in the lake, it becomes not only a reflection of Ana’s face, but of the face of her father, mother, sister, and even (in fact, perhaps especially) the maquis.

With this in mind, Frankenstein, as both film and monster, becomes associated with the “poisonous mushroom” in various ways. As we have seen, he is, like both Ana and the refugee, an absolute outlaw, an exile, a “creature” who, at least in the film version, never even learns to speak, much less communicate. Like the truck which carries this film/monster into Ana’s desert-like town, Frankenstein represents the modern, the foreign, the poisonous other. Yet, more generally, Frankenstein represents the muted silence of all the characters who have lost their voices. The equation between Frankenstein and the poisonous mushroom is further reinforced by the fact that Frankenstein, like the mushroom, represents both the feminine (repressed other) and the threat of female mobility. As an incarnation of that which is most scorned and shunned by society, the monster not only embodies the absolute exile of Shekhinah, but, more concretely, he is, like the maquis exile, “feminized” by his isolation, abuse and traumas.

As explained in my introduction, men who undergo trauma are often “feminized” as they become, like women scorned, voiceless and abject through their abuse and loss of power. Cultural and literary critic, Jean Franco, argues further in her article, “Gender, Death and Resistance”, that their feminization also makes these men, much like women, more acutely aware of their bodies—an idea reflected in El espíritu by the maquis’ dirty,
disheveled, “broken” appearance, his ravenous hunger (as he devours Ana’s apple), and
his badly broken ankle. For all these reasons, male victims of extreme trauma, terror
and/or exile often identify with females. Yet, while their so-called feminization is an
expression of their loss of power and respect—or even their state of exile from society—
this feminization, as an expression of the in-between, non-space of exile, is also
potentially liberating. It is exactly this ambiguous space that both the monstrous
Frankenstein and the poisonous mushroom represent.

As we have seen, the monster’s ambiguous, “exilic” status is reinforced by the
monster’s affinity to both Ana and Miriam’s well and the moon as a biblical symbol. It is
important to note that even in Shelley’s novel, this so-called “creature” is likened to the
moon. When “the creature” first went out into the “real world” he claims, in his own
words that, “All was confused. I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness;
innumerable sounds rang in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me: the only
object I could distinguish was the bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with
pleasure.” (Frankenstein 106). Likewise, in El espíritu, as critics like Robert Miles
observe, Ana “invokes the spirit as image of the moon/mother”; for, in a sense, Ana’s
“spirit” is the moon. As Miles additionally points out, among other “fundamental
elements of this personal ritual” is “the sound of the train/fugitive” (“The Possible Subplot
in El espíritu” 111). While tightening the link between the monster, the moon, the train,
and the mushroom this also reveals that Ana, the “spirit-monster” and the maquis are, on
a spiritual plane, one and the same.

79 As each chapter of my thesis increasingly supports, they often choose to present their traumas through
the lens of female heroines or protagonists.
With this in mind, it may also be of interest that the poisonous mushroom—and by extension the monster—appear to express not simply female abjection but, more critically, the threat of female sexual *transgression*, as suggested by Fernando’s need to crush the poisonous mushroom, in part, due to its relation to Teresa’s possibly illicit affair or untamed sexuality. The idea that there is an inherent link between sexuality and spirituality in this film reinforces this connection, especially if Ana truly is on the cusp of adolescence. This would indicate not only that she occupies an in-between, uncertain space as a preadolescent, but that she is perhaps on the brink of a sexual awakening, which, particularly in repressive post-war Spain, may be difficult for her to accept. As we have seen, the fact that Ana’s invisible monster/spirit is likely, among other functions, a manifestation of these new desires is reinforced by his association with the sexual-mystical symbol of the well. Because the desires he embodies are so new and thus, perhaps difficult for her to unambiguously accept, they appear to Ana as something outside of herself—or radically Other\textsuperscript{80}.

For this reason, the monster, as long as he remains monstrous looking, must also represent Ana’s guilt and fears as much as her desire. This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the monster’s own reflection merges with Ana’s right as she reaches for the mushroom. Yet, the fact that Ana does ultimately reach for the mushroom implies that, despite her doubts, she genuinely desires to seize it. Even though Ana may learn at this moment that this desire is not reconcilable to her reality, her attitude still starkly contrasts with her father’s rigid determination to destroy the mushroom. Indeed, Ana’s hunger for

\textsuperscript{80} In Fernando’s world, this alterity is reflected in the fact that the voiceover for his thoughts is usually done in someone else’s voice, which may reflect his refusal to recognize his own desires (particularly those related to fantasy or myth) as his own. Yet, since he is an adult, we get the sense that this is not because they are new or transitional, but rather clearly unacceptable to him.
the mushroom is not only suggestive of her affirmation of desire but of her zeal to defend all the marginal, repressed alterity which her Father (both as Fernando and Franco) wish to crush. On the level of desire, specifically, I would agree with Celestino Deleyto that it “suggests her reaching out towards Teresa, but not so much towards her as a mother as towards the forbidden sexuality that she has been made to represent by the film, and which she is at this very moment renouncing for the sake of the patriarchal family…” (“Women and Other Monsters” 49).

The idea that Ana’s nascent sexuality is viewed as monstrous is also upheld by Robert Miles who quotes, “As well as citing Linda Williams, Swanson concurs in principle: ‘The leaky body of the young or adolescent woman newly experiencing menstruation and bodily and sexual transformations represents a particular marking of female monstrosity’ (Swanson, 1999: 489)” (“The Possible Subplot” 102). Though I personally find it difficult to believe that a six year old girl may be on the brink of menstruating, this error brings Miles and Swanson to the valid and crucial conclusion that Ana is, properly speaking, neither a child nor an adult. Rather, they locate her in a borderline, “leaky position” which identifies her even more with the “monster”.

In truth, Ana’s decision to reach for the poisonous mushroom reflects her ability to at least tenuously accept what may very well be an intermediate, “leaky” position—though not in the literal sense of menstruation. We must not forget that the moment Ana reaches for the mushroom the monster’s face blends with hers only to disappear again into her own. Given what both Newton and I have said about monstrosity, this would suggest that Ana no longer sees her desires as monstrous--though in light of the highly ambiguous final scenes, this triumph may be short-lived. In this way, though Ana
partially identifies with her mother’s own “monstrous/adulterous” desire, she simultaneously defies her mother who is ultimately incapable of embracing it.

In any case, despite Ana’s shortcomings, her attempts to raise the monster from the dead (or to reconstruct the trampled mushroom) are far more sympathetic than those of her father, Fernando, or Victor/Henry Frankenstein. More crucially, her way of doing this, whether successful or not, aims at sexual and spiritual liberation rather than even more repression. The first obvious example of this occurs when Ana is out by the abandoned hut and well where her sister, Isabel, told her the “monster”/“spirit” dwells. At one moment, Ana is seen peering into the well almost as if she is looking for the “spirit”/“monster” deep within. While remaining alongside the well, she then squats down and jumps up as if she herself could raise him up from beneath through her “performance”; or through showing rather than telling—a technique which, significantly, not only reflects the monster’s own muted performances but which will come to characterize Ana’s nonverbal relationship with the maquis (Ana mends his wounds, ties his laces, offers him an apple, etc. without words. He too responds through gestures and magic tricks rather than words).

Shortly after Ana tires of pumping her body up and down, she raises her hands in the air in way that mimics the “creature’s” own movements in the film, Frankenstein. Indeed, her melodramatic arm movements and the dismal shaking of her head resemble those of the monster as he gestures upwards towards the rays of light that seep into the womb-like dungeon in which he is created and “born”. Yet, for this very reason, we might argue that even after Henry animates him, he is not truly born until he escapes from Henry’s dungeon/“womb” and becomes integrated with other humans.
Unfortunately, although he finally escapes from the “dungeon”, this “monster” is never effectively integrated with the rest of humanity. As mentioned in an earlier “theoretical” section of this chapter, as Ana attempts to raise the monster/spirit out of the well, she is also immediately likened to the biblical Miriam, Moses’ older sister. Miriam’s well, aside from being associated with the greatest prophetess in the Judeo-Christian tradition, becomes, much like Ana’s, a source and a symbol of hope within the midst of despair and exile. On the one hand, Ana fails where Miriam succeeds (since Ana only manages to water the dry and empty fields of post-war Castile in her own mind). Yet, her imagination and faith are truly inspiring—and perhaps that is the point. The fact that Ana keeps hoping and loving, despite the fact that her own family has, in a sense, become the very archetype of repression against which she fights, makes Ana herself a model of unconditional love, courage, perseverance and hope.

In addition to serving as the prototypical model of hope, Ana, by likening this well not only to Miriam’s but also to the monster of Frankenstein, is successful in rewriting, reinterpreting, or adding layers to what the biblical well symbolizes as well as what gender and monstrosity signify in life as well as in fantasy, fiction and dreams. In fact, she likens the monster and the well not only to Miriam but also to the biblical King David, who also is associated with Malkhut/Kingdom. Curiously, David is the only male biblical figure associated primarily with this (semi-female) rung of the mystical godhead. This link between the monster, the well and David is further established through the harp.

81 As is well known, “Miriam’s well” followed the Israelites throughout their exile, granting them water in mysterious, mystical ways, particularly in the most desperate or hopeless situations. The fact that Ana’s magic well is located in the midst of a vast, monotonous field (the field being, moreover, a mystical symbol of evil, especially when empty and dry) both likens it to Miriam’s well, while simultaneously highlighting its difference.
music that erupts when the wind blows through the well in combination with Ana’s voice. As Higginbotham explains,

By far the most pervasive voice of nature in the film is the sound of the wind. It sweeps the furrowed field at the site of the abandoned farmhouse, and blends with harp notes as Ana shouts into the farmhouse well. The sound of wind is associated with Ana and is heard nowhere else but at the site of the farmhouse, in the woods when she runs away, and in the final scene, when she resumes her search in her imagination. Like the train whistle, it is a lonely but powerful sound signifying, at a literal level, the inhospitable nature of the village and, metaphorically, the considerable force of a determined and lonely child’s imagination.(37)

What Higginbotham omits mentioning, however, is that, though the wind certainly reflects the harshness of post-war Spain, the fact that the wind is associated with Ana and her magical hideout suggests that it also offers hope—and even spiritual awakening. The fact that the wind blends with harp notes reinforces this idea, especially since it happens precisely when Ana calls into her mystic wishing-well. This idea reflects the mystical account of how King David would rise to the sound of music.

According to kabbalistic tradition, King David awoke every night at the stroke of midnight in order to pray (in lament of Shekhinah’s exile from the world). Since he could not awaken by means of a (modern) alarm-clock, instead, a gust of wind would blow through his harp at this exact hour, wakening him. This example not only reinforces the overwhelming evidence of El espíritu’s mystical tendencies, but also its ability to dismantle gender constructs.

By equating the supposedly male monster with not only David but also Miriam (and by extension, Shekhinah) and even Ana herself, Ana redeems the monster as a character who, despite appearing monstrous, is actually, at heart, quite the opposite. At the same time, by establishing this connection, Ana complicates gender in a way that not
only further confirms the monster’s “feminization” (much like the exile’s), but also highlights the essential androgyny of Miriam, David and the monster. Being that the monster, Miriam and David all symbolize the essentially androgynous yet “feminized” Shekhinah, and being that, like Shekhinah, they function as mirrors of Ana’s own identity, Ana, through this equation, underlines her own essential androgyny (which is, nevertheless, also “feminized”). In this way, she implies that the implosion of the male/female gender dichotomy is central to the transcendence of other binaries such as self and other, reality and fantasy, the material and spiritual, voice and speech, etcetera.

Yet, given Ana’s failure to ultimately “water the fields” or voice her desires, whether she will be capable of publicly expressing her androgynous nature remains ambiguous.

The other, more crucial reason the well is of such interest to us is because, as previously noted, in biblical tradition both the patriarchs and Moses found their lovers here. Unlike these biblical figures, Ana does not meet her lover at the well but rather her own monstrous projections. Yet, if this is true, it constitutes one more compelling reason why we might believe there is a sexual component to Ana’s sudden need to explore mysticism and, more specifically, the well. This becomes especially convincing in view of the fact that the monster represents not only Ana’s newfound desires but also her corresponding guilt and fears. In addition to the manifold parallels already established between mysticism and sexuality both in the Bible and in this film, it may be useful to keep in mind that, though Ana may still seem a bit young to be exploring her sexuality, the biblical Rebekah was herself only three when Isaac saw her at the well, fell in love
with her and subsequently married her. Of course, she could not possibly have been three. Rather, I would argue, her age is symbolic.

In short, Ana’s sexual-symbolic function, suggested by this numeric reading, also supports the more central idea that she is, above all, a symbol of Erice’s/Fernández Santos’ own childhood post-war repression (and perhaps later sexual struggles). This reading becomes both powerful and hopeful if we consider that through the making of El espíritu Ana’s silences are turned inside out. Not only do Erice and Fernández Santos demonstrate that they have survived the dictatorship, remembered it and poignantly communicated it, but, what is more, it is largely through portraying the silences of 1940s Spain that the repression and silence of the Franco Regime is finally and effectively shown for what it is—or rather, was.

Yet, even within the confines of the film itself, Ana becomes a role-model in several ways. The fact that Ana tries mimicking Frankenstein’s arm motions right after peering into the well suggests that she is both identifying with his urge to become reborn while also using these gestures to raise him up from the earth, and perhaps even integrate him into a human(e) society. In this respect, her manner of animating him is far more powerful than Henry Frankenstein’s, whose only goal is to give this creature literal, biological life—and to keep his so-called “experiment” tamed and contained.

Furthermore, when Ana’s teacher asks her to put eyes on the wooden cut-out doll, “Don José” (who obviously symbolizes “the monster”), Ana not only plays the role of Dr.

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82 In Kabbalah three is the age of ripeness for trees—a tree also being symbolic of humanity (The Zohar: II 323). Within this context, Ana’s age (six) is also “liminal” since it remains on the edge of becoming complete (seven). Seven is not only a highly referenced number in the Bible, but kabbalistically, it reflects the number of accessible sefirot (which also parallel the more popularly known “seven heavens”), and thus, it is extraordinarily significant. Even a mystic is not considered “complete” until he has passed through all seven sefirot. In a biblical sense, Ana’s older sister, Isabel, also remains on the cusp of becoming complete, for her age (nine), is on the brink of becoming ten (the number of all the sefirot, from Shekhinah to Keter).
Frankenstein as she literally puts this “fake human” together, but she achieves exactly what the mad scientist was unable to achieve. As Susan Martin-Márquez suggests ("Monstrous Identity" 53), it is through this act that Ana gives him “awareness”.

Linda Willem similarly remarks on the significance of Ana’s act of giving him eyes, for in Whale’s film version the credits open with what Willem describes as “a sinister-looking face with rays of light coming from the eyes, and then the remaining credits feature a dizzying array of disembodied eyes revolving around the screen.” ("Text and Intertext" 724); yet, she adds, Ana ultimately “settles the doll’s eyes into place”(724). If we scratch beneath the surface we will see that what this more fundamentally suggests is that Ana achieves what Henry Frankenstein himself could not. She bestows upon the creature (and, by implication upon herself) consciousness and thus, I would add, true life.

Moreover, it is important to consider that in Mary Shelley’s original version, it is not until the creature opens his amber eyes that his creator, Victor, flees from it in horror. Yet, unlike Victor, Ana does not run from her “double”/“monster”, much less try to tame or kill it. Rather, she gives it the life it always wanted, and in return, this monster gives Ana the life she has always yearned for—namely, a life filled with fantasy, one that stretches beyond the stifling borders of post-war Spain and reality itself. Of course, the fact that this imaginary world is never fully integrated into reality points to the film’s pessimism. Nevertheless, this symbiotic relationship between Ana and the monster is highlighted early on when Ana’s sister explains to her that if she wants to invoke the spirit, all she needs to do is state her name “Soy Ana” (I am Ana).

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83 As Linda Willem describes him, “this doll is pieced together by students who place his lungs, stomach, etc. in their proper positions. Thus, don José is reminiscent of the monster, who too is made up of isolated parts” ("Text and Intertext" 724).
At the same time, it is, in great part, for this very reason that the film’s ambiguity culminates in its final scenes. After the death of Ana’s refugee friend, her father, Fernando, is called in to identify the body of the maquis (as he is found with Fernando’s possessions). After the pocket-watch and coat are returned to their rightful owner, Fernando heads home in silent defeat. The next scene features the four family members as they gather silently around the kitchen table for tea, coffee or possibly breakfast. While the two girls smile puckishly at each other as they sloppily drink out of their oversized cups, Teresa delicately stirs her petite coffee cup with her back properly erect, though the tips of her shoulders are mildly hunched and her face slightly lowered in feminine demure. As her lips remain tightly locked, opening only to take short, ladylike sips, the severity of her face reflects the probability that she knows what Fernando has discovered. Fernando, by contrast, sits majestically at the head of the table bathed in a halo of cigarette smoke and a vague golden light that emanates from the honeycomb window directly behind him.

The girls do not notice his serious, castigating gaze until he suddenly opens his pocket-watch (which immediately plays its simple, fairytale tune) and looks sharply at Ana, who immediately grasps what has happened. At this moment, Teresa nervously holds the cup to her mouth and moves her eyes awkwardly downward so that she appears momentarily cross-eyed. Rather than respond to the situation with words or emotion, Teresa’s cup, which she keeps at her mouth for an unnaturally long period of time, serves as a mask. Rather than open her eyes to reality, Teresa’s cross-eyed fixation on her coffee cup literally reflects her refusal to face reality. Meanwhile, Fernando’s fierce gaze incites Ana to run away from home and head straight to the shed. After learning that no
one is there, she examines the shed more closely and finds a stream of blood in place of her *maquis* friend. As she leaves the shed, she finds her father, Fernando, glaring at her with penetrating authority. Rather than heed his call to come over to him, she darts away into the wilderness. Later that night she camps out in a nearby forest.

At this moment she is pursued by search-dogs and torches, much like the monster in Whale’s *Frankenstein* in the scenes leading up to his death. After a quasi-mystical experience in which Ana encounters the monster at a lake (whose reflection symbolically blends with her own), she falls into a deep “traumatic” sleep. When she is returned home, she begins to recover, but will not talk or communicate with anyone--though the doctor expresses the sincere hope that, as she is still young, she will most likely “forget”.

In the very last scene, Ana, bathed in the bluish glow of the moonlight, rises from her bed and opens the symbolic windows of the beehive. Though she has opened the windows of the stifling beehive to the fresh outdoor air, she herself cannot move beyond the threshold. As the moonlight caresses her, Ana looks up towards the moon longingly before closing her eyes, just as she did the night before the *maquis* arrived to town—suggesting, perhaps, that a similar change will take place. We viewers then hear the echo of her sister’s voice as it proclaims the magic words, “Soy Ana”, followed by the murmur of a distant train. Though this voiceover is intended to portray Ana’s own interior voice, it is, rather, a direct *memory* of what Isabel said to Ana at an earlier point in the film. As Sandra Harper notes, “Some critics have interpreted her final invocation: ‘Soy Ana’ followed by the faint sound of a train, as the culmination of a journey of self-discovery and affirmation of her identity” (“The Concept of Childhood” 88). Yet, though the train reminds us of movement, liberation and the spirit himself, Ana remains trapped in her
beehive--and though the words “Soy Ana” are uttered both clearly and poignantly, Ana’s lips remain immobile and mute.

More critically, though Ana, at this moment, remembers and connects to both her sister and her spirit-monster, it becomes unclear as to whether this constitutes a step towards a more radical remembrance or whether Ana’s newfound internal voice signals a step towards resignation. Naturally, we viewers are pleased to see that, despite all the defeat and negativity that Ana has suffered, she is still capable of remembering and desiring the fantasy world of her “spirit”. Perhaps more importantly, she realizes the need to make those around her (for example, Isabel) a part of this world. Yet, this in itself reflects a fundamental and irreconcilable paradox; for, as said, Ana can only embrace this Otherworld in secret, in fantasy, and, most problematically of all, by separating from her own community. On the other hand, the fact that Isabel’s voiceover, as a memory, comes from the past not only implies that Ana is capable of remembering but, more crucially, it ties the film’s end back to its opening scene, which similarly juxtaposes two separate times and modes of temporality, the mythic and the historical.

Yet, even this may be problematic; for though it suggests that the past will be both remembered and repeated, for this very reason, we might infer that Ana will end up just as repressed as her mother. It also serves to remind us that this “spirit” with whom Ana wishes to join, though he cannot truly die (at least not in the realm of imagination), is, in another very real sense, dead. In any event, although the film truly does end as it begins, it is important to remember that it begins in a place that is itself transitional (or on the brink of change). It begins, in short, with that very medium which can bring about real change—namely, the arrival of film, fantasy and Frankenstein.
What is most disturbing, however, about the ending (and what truly distinguishes it from the beginning) is the fact that Ana’s voice has, as this final voiceover indicates, become muted, internalized--much like Teresa’s and Fernando’s. As far as we viewers can tell, even Ana’s older sister, Isabel, has not yet been forced to create her own internal voice. Moreover, Ana’s dreamy position at the edge of the window accompanied by a voiceover which is not only unspoken but filtered through the voice of another (Isabel’s), recalls a similar scene in which Fernando stands by an open window, his thoughts filtered through the voiceover of Henry Frankenstein. Thus, though this final act reveals Ana’s inseparability from these characters, this inseparability is itself ambiguous; and though this final act shows the great extent to which Ana truly desires to break free from her oppressive beehive, this desire itself remains little more than a secret fantasy.

Nevertheless, as we are now about to see, even Ana’s connection to her father is ambiguous, for in many ways, it serves just as much to remind us of Fernando’s own positive side as it does Ana’s negative side.

Indeed, Fernando’s ambiguity as both bee and beekeeper, victim and victor is presaged from the first time we see him in his ambiguous beekeeping suit. As we have seen, although Fernando is the patriarch both of his literal beehive and his actual beehive-house, his control of his family is not as absolute as he may ideally wish. Like Victor/Henry Frankenstein and even his own daughter, Ana, what he wants more than anything is to break free from the stifling honeycomb. Throughout this film, the longing to connect with some other world is signaled not only by fleeing the home/beehive but, more specifically, by opened windows. In a crucial scene in which Fernando looks

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84 Though Ana’s decision to run away from home is the most obvious example, the fact that Teresa enjoys sneaking off to the train station and Fernando too, prefers to spend his time away from suggest a similarity between all three characters.
outside an open, honeycomb window, we simultaneously hear a voice-over from the film, *Frankenstein*, which we imagine is playing simultaneously. Fernando has just found out from the maid that his daughters are watching *Frankenstein* when this voiceover begins to play. At this moment he is connected to his girls, as they watch the movie, as well as to Henry Frankenstein, whose voiceover appears to echo Fernando’s own subconscious desires as he sits pensively in his armchair before moving towards the window.

The fact that Fernando has just come home (from beekeeping) further likens him to Henry, the “mad scientist”. In this scene Fernando’s own ethical ambiguity is likened to Henry’s as both mad scientist/uncaring father yet also as the loving father who, like the very “monster” he creates, starts off well-intentioned. As mentioned elsewhere, though Dr. Waldman insists the monster is a danger and must be destroyed, Henry initially urges him to be patient, defending his right to exist. More crucially, as Fernando moves to open the window, Henry’s voiceover cries out,

¡No ha querido hacer nada peligroso? ¿Qué pasaría si no fuéramos más allá de lo descubierto? ¿No ha echado en falta mirar más allá de las nubes y las estrellas o saber lo que hace crecer los árboles y cambiar las sombras? Pero hablando así le llaman a uno loco. Ahora que si yo pudiera descubrir alguna de estas cuestiones, ¿qué es la eternidad?, por ejemplo, no me importaría absolutamente nada que dijeran que estoy loco.

Have you never wanted to do anything dangerous? Where should we be if nobody tried to find out what lies beyond? Have you never wanted to look beyond the clouds and the stars or to know what causes the trees to bud and what changes a darkness into light? But if you talk like that people call you crazy. Well, if I could discover just one of these things, what eternity is for example, I wouldn’t care if they did think I was crazy!”

Immediately afterwards, we hear Waldman snap back with the claim that Henry is young, that his success has blinded him and, most critically, that he should “Wake up and face reality” (“¡Despierta y vea la realidad!”). In this light, we can sympathize with both
Henry and Fernando as people who started out with more or less noble intentions as well as a desire to explore new horizons, to embrace the Other, and to father something new. Yet in their struggle to find a way out of the beehive, they have not only become neglectful fathers and even oppressors themselves, but they too have become imprisoned in their very own microcosms (or “beehives”) of suffering and fear. Though they desired to create something new and liberating, this creation itself becomes distorted by their own fear, which in turn trickles down from and reflects the fear of society at large.

In effect, the creation/beehive/monster becomes appropriated and remolded by the larger prison-beehive-world of “reality”—or in this film, the Franco Regime.\(^5\) This idea is reinforced by the fact that this voiceover ends with Waldman’s dramatic declaration that the brain stolen from the laboratory was the brain of a criminal. Immediately afterwards, we viewers catch a glimpse of the girls, Ana and Isabel, accompanied by other townspeople in the makeshift theatre as they gaze in awe at the scene in which the “monster” kills the young girl, Maria. This juxtaposition reflects, even as it critiques, the common assumption that the monster kills the girl simply because he has the brain of a criminal--or as Fernando would put it, because he is a “poison mushroom”.

Yet, though both Fernando and Henry ultimately become disillusioned cynics who are quick to judge and to crush the poisonous mushroom (or to hunt down the “monster”), it is obvious that both of them are, at heart, far more ethically ambiguous than downright “evil”. Despite Henry’s moments of madness\(^6\), despite his irresponsible drive to push beyond the limits of life itself, his desire to “destroy and recreate life” (as it

\(^5\) Though, at the same time, the beekeeper himself also gets remolded—particularly if we consider that the beekeeper and bee are actually “doubles” of one another.

\(^6\) Henry is a bit over the top in his explicit, at times almost maniacal ambition to play God. At one moment he even feverishly exclaims, “Now I know what it feels like to be God!!”
is put in the 1931 film version) is not all bad—especially if we consider that the
“monster” he creates is, at least potentially, a symbol of unity and altruism, just as Ana is
Fernando’s own potential symbol of altruism—not to mention rebirth. Accordingly, as
Ana’s mother warns, spirits are good with good girls and bad with bad girls. Yet, if this
is true, why then does Frankenstein kill the little girl, Maria, in Whale’s film?

This is precisely Ana’s question. On the one hand, the sincere playfulness of “the
monster” right before killing Maria would seem to suggest that the monster is not quite
aware of what he is doing when he, perhaps accidentally, drowns the girl. On the other
hand, the fact that he stares at his own hands with a look of anguish right before doing it,
sadly comparing them to the girl’s pretty, delicate hands, might imply that he kills her for
the very reason that he is reminded, at this moment, of his irreparable monstrosity and
alienation. As the monster himself famously suggests in Shelley’s Frankenstein (and as
cited at the very beginning of this section), “Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone
am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me
happy, and I shall again be virtuous.” (103) Of course, if he is truly a reflection of those
around him (and thus, the embodiment of justice itself), he would not, could not, kill an
innocent girl—and neither could the townspeople kill him. This highlights even further
the accuracy of Isabel’s response to Ana’s questions (Why does the monster kill the girl?
And why do the people kill the monster?) by explaining that neither the girl nor the
monster is killed “in reality”. The fact is: the monster cannot be killed, for he represents
the return of precisely that which the people have already killed. He is, in short, the
prototypical symbol of rebirth. Or rather, the symbol of that which is about to be reborn.
“Back to the Future-Past”: Invisible Hauntings

From the film’s opening scene, this danger, this hope, this monstrous return-of-the-repressed, though invisible, lurks within the truck that carries it through a landscape of death, through a terrain of invisible hopes--and an equally invisible past. The truck hides within it a film which, through its very monstrosity, and, in particular, through a monster who literally embodies the rebirth of the dead, “haunts” and (re)fills this land of absence and erasure—a land which is secretly stuffed with anonymous bones, invisible corpses, and collective “fosas” or graves. Appropriately, the monster who represents these anonymous bones and collective graves comes from the space and time of exile, a timeless, simultaneous non-place that lies everywhere and nowhere and somewhere in between (death and rebirth). Of course, this haunting is not necessarily “bad”, for, as just mentioned, spirits, including Frankenstein’s monster, are “very good with good girls, but very, very bad with bad girls”. The implication then is that “the creature” is monstrous not so much because he is innately bad but because he is feared—in particular, by those very people who are bad themselves, or, at the very least repressed.

More precisely, the fact that the monster is perceived as a monstrous phantasm in both Frankenstein and El espíritu locates the film and its viewer in a transitional place that, while fearful of the monster, recognizes some hidden, unsightly secret that must be remembered, refigured, or retold. It is that indefinable place that the monster represents. He is that which has been both literally and symbolically unburied or unmasked. Yet as a monster who is neither truly alive nor truly dead, he has not yet been fully integrated into life. Rather, he is abject, feminized, un-dead—much like the characters in El espíritu.
In introducing the monstrous, *El espíritu* gazes both beyond and beneath Spain’s (and particularly Castile’s) empty terrain. Metaphorically speaking, it seeks to remember what lies beneath the desolate surface of the earth. Yet, on a literal level too, it seeks, through this very symbolism, to recover and uncover the memory of the thousands of Spaniards who were kidnapped, killed and literally “disappeared” as they were secretly thrown in the mass graves (or “fosas”⁸⁷) dispersed throughout Spain in the late 1930s and 40s. In this respect, Frankenstein is the perfect symbol of these lost corpses, for as a monster composed of various human parts, he represents not only the multitude of the disappeared (as opposed to just one individual), but, specifically, the fact that they were all buried together, anonymously. Though as I write, some of the mass graves in Spain are finally being dug up by Spaniards and foreign volunteers alike, until recent years, not even the relatives of the “disappeared” knew where or how to find the corpses of their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons. Even today, the struggle to prevent the exhumations continues—and so does repression. Yet, as manifested in the recent and very public polemic over whether or not to exhume the corpse of famous writer/poet, Federico García Lorca, there are strong voices on both sides of the debate⁸⁸.

In this context, the monster also expresses what critic, Jo Labanyi, defines/quotes as ‘haunting’, when she says that “Haunting, as Gordon puts it, is the result of ‘improperly buried bodies’” (Labanyi, “History and Hauntology” 79). The monster may be further likened to what Jacques Derrida describes as *hauntology*—or in Jo Labanyi’s

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⁸⁷ For further information see, for example, Emilio Silva and Santiago Macías’ book, *Las fosas de Franco*, or documentary films such as, *Las fosas del silencio*.

⁸⁸ In addition to academic works (such as Ian Gibson’s *El asesinato de Federico García Lorca*, 1979) or Emilio Ruiz Barrachina’s documentary *Lorca: El mar deja de moverse* (2006), there have also been (very recently) more public/collective attempts to recuperate memory as reflected in Jesús Ruiz Mantilla’s article “No impediremos exhumar los restos de Federico, aunque no nos gustaría.” (*El País*, 2008) and Tereixa Constenla’s “Franco deja de ser un secreto” (*El País*, 2010).
words, “the past as that which is not and yet is there—or rather, here.” (“History and Hauntology” 66). In short, we might say that the monster is both nowhere and yet, nowhere. As Labanyi puts it, this monster is able “To give the past a ghostly embodiment” (“History and Hauntology” 70), which, as we have seen, is reinforced by his link to various protagonists, whether dead, exiled or “alive”. Because this monster expresses the renewal of the (repressed) past within the present, he becomes the perfect example not only of “haunting” but, I might add, border-subjectivity and even border-temporality.

Yet, what is even more noteworthy than the fact that the actual victims of the mass graves were buried together is the fact that they must also be revived together. Though this is obviously true in a literal sense (as their bones are dug up collectively) it also functions in a more metaphorical fashion—for, as this film continually suggests, in order for the cycle of terror and silence to end, the Spanish people, and people in general, must learn to work together—that is, to define themselves not against each other but with each other. Accordingly, the monster of Frankenstein, by being equated, throughout El espíritu, to father, daughter, sister, stranger, Spaniard, exile, friend and foe, reinforces the inseparability of various identities. In this way, El espíritu suggests that the only way that both past and present may be effectively re-membered is through solidarity.

This is further reinforced by the fact that the disappeared are, like Frankenstein’s monster, nameless—-and they are nameless because they are unwanted, shunned, and forgotten. Yet it is in their very namelessness that they become potentially everyone. Just as Frankenstein is both monstrous yet invisible, so too are these phantoms of the past—phantoms who, nevertheless, haunt both the present and the future-to-come in

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89 In reality, the creature known as “Frankenstein” is referred to as “the monster” in the original novel by Mary Shelley. It is only through popular culture that the creature itself becomes referred to as Frankenstein—after his creator, Victor Frankenstein.
“monstrous” yet invisible ways. One of the key ways in which ambiguity is used in this film is through the enigma of whom it is that Teresa (the mother of Ana and Isabel) writes to. On the one hand, it is helpful to know that he is almost certainly a maquis or huído (both guerrilla fighters)\textsuperscript{90}, most likely Teresa’s ex-lover (or more improbably a lost son), and perhaps even the biological father of Ana--as both her uncharacteristically “dark” appearance and the arrival of this fugitive by train might suggest. Indeed, Ana’s very monstrosity may symbolize, among other (sexual) things, her perceived biological illegitimacy.\textsuperscript{91} Yet, regardless of whether or not Fernando truly is her biological father, what matters most is Ana’s feeling of estrangement from him—a feeling which not only intensifies her “monstrosity” but makes her representative of the spiritual and often literal abandonment of Spanish children and adults alike from the 1940s onward. The fact that we can reasonably doubt that Fernando is Ana’s actual father reflects concrete problems related to the anxiety of origins and the real separations of parents from their children during the post-war period in Spain.

\textsuperscript{90} As Paul Preston explains, “[…] between 1939 and 1947, the PCE [Partido Comunista de España/Spanish Communist Party] was virtually torn apart by internal conflict. Within this gloomy overview, there were two groups of anti-Francoists who, for different albeit related reasons, managed to avoid the worst consequences of internecine hostilities and concentrate on a single primordial task, the struggle against the dictatorship…They were the so called huidos or stragglers, Republicans separated from their units during the civil war who opted to take to the hills rather than surrender, and the Spanish maquis, the exiles who played a crucial role in the French Resistance and, with the gradual collapse of the Germans, were able to turn their gaze to Spain.” (“Resisting the State” in Spanish Cultural Studies 230). Indeed, this fugitive, either as maquis or huído, is the perfect example of the “return of the repressed”. In the first case, he obviously represents the returned exile; but also in the second case, for he has, in a sense, returned from the “exile” of the mountains.

\textsuperscript{91} Because Ana does not resemble her parents, she falls into the ominous category of “monstrous births” as defined by Marie-Hélène Huet and Dominique Russell. We must keep in mind that these births include not only children with physical handicaps or abnormalities but also those who simply fail to resemble their parents. As Dominique Russell explains, according to Marie-Hélène Huet, “monstrous births were ‘signs and portents,’ omens and threats from beyond that focalized anxieties about paternity.” (“Monstrous Ambiguities” 182). She adds, “monsters were long thought of as creatures that did not resemble their father” (182). Thus, Ana’s father may be both literally and symbolically somewhat of a “fake”.

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In the years immediately following the civil war, not only were children separated from parents who were exiled, killed or imprisoned but, as suggested in the documentary film, *Los niños perdidos del franquismo* or in Javier Rodrigo’s, *Cautivos: Campos de concentración en la España franquista, 1936-1947*, there were also concentration camps where the children of communist, republican, atheist, anarchist or otherwise ‘undesirable’ parents were sent. When they were finally discharged they were often misplaced (with the wrong parents) or adopted by new parents more openly supportive of the Franco Regime and National Catholicism. Many others were put in orphanages even if their parents were alive. Though this does not appear to be the case with Ana, her general estrangement from her parents combined with the doubt and ambiguity that her specific case of estrangement entails, enables her situation to invoke or resonate with all of these situations of loss. In a similar sense, though we can gather some important yet rather general information regarding who Ana’s fugitive friend might be, the fact that it remains unclear exactly who this person is only adds to the film’s richness. Not only does it highlight the ambiguity, silence and secrecy of the 1940s but it also enables this man to represent, somewhat like Frankenstein, all of those marginal subjects who were killed, exiled or disappeared by the civil war and its aftermath. In this respect, the film’s ambiguity is unambiguously redemptive and useful—especially from our perspective as viewers and critics.

At this juncture, it may also help to more extensively explore the idea that, though the monster himself is equated with the vanished dead or the phantoms of Spain’s past, we might say that he is likened even more to the living—that is, to those Spaniards who physically survive the initial terror and violence of the Franco Regime. This is true not
only because they are the ones who are equated throughout this film to the monster, Frankenstein, but also because they are the ones who, like this monster, occupy a liminal space—for though they are physically alive, their souls have been crushed, swept away, destroyed by an oppressive silence—a notion further highlighted by their animalistic, beelike qualities as opposed to true human beings. Yet, because they are capable of recognizing the monstrous, they are not yet hopeless. It is, in fact, their obligation, their responsibility, as “survivors”, as physically living, breathing subjects, to remember rather than remain silent. Much like the monster who represents them (and in many ways, us viewers), they are the ones who stand at the crossroads between past, present and future.

As indicated earlier, Franco’s Spain looks back to the time of Cervantes, the time of the Inquisition, the time of the conquistadors as its model for the eternal present (or the present-past-future). Rather perversely, it is because this time marks the epitome of terror and exclusion that it is visualized by Franco as the ideal time, the prototype of the “pure” Spanish essence. As we have seen, Spanish identity is, for Franco, defined, ironically, in contradistinction to all that it is not—and, in the spirit of the Inquisition, particularly that which is non-Catholic. In Franco’s urge to blend the reality of the 1940s with that of the sixteenth century into one homogenous whole, everything in between is erased--and along with time, along with hundreds of years, all of Spain’s alterity and plurality, all of its Jews and its Moors, are negated, denied. Yet, through the revival of Frankenstein, that which has been repressed is finally reawakened through a retelling of the past which not only pieces together the plurality within Spain but also blends Spanish and foreign traditions in a more liberating way.
It is hardly coincidental then that the monster of Frankenstein could be read not only as a synthesis of distinct cultures (insomuch as he is a patchwork creation) but also as that exact genre which never really flourished in Spain—namely, the gothic novel. It is, arguably, precisely because the gothic novel and all it represents (for example, the contradictions of modernization, the Industrial Revolution, and even the Enlightenment) is so stifled and repressed in the relatively backwards Spain that it swings back around like a boomerang with such great power and momentum in the twentieth century.

Furthermore, though the film turns its central paradoxes on their heads primarily through its examination of monstrosity and the corresponding fluidity of identity, as highlighted in the films’ very first scene, temporality is also important—not to mention, equally related to monstrosity. On a general/theoretical level, this is true because the monster represents the meeting place between past, present and future. More concretely, Ana’s crucial decision to steal her father’s pocket-watch and give it to the fugitive she secretly aids is, as we have seen, symbolic of her need to reformulate the identities of both her father and this strange man. Notwithstanding the fact that, in the process of transferring the watch, this fugitive may be identified as Ana’s “new” and perhaps “true” father, this move identifies them both not only as father figures but also as monsters.

The fact that, as Sandra Harper suggests, temporality is more restrictive than liberating in this film (and perhaps even linked to death) highlights another crucial way in which time becomes inseparable from identity. Indeed, though Ana’s object-transfer seems to be linked primarily to the question of identity, her decision to use a pocket-watch (a symbol of objective, masculine time—and more specifically, her father’s obsession with it) is hardly accidental. Despite Ana’s apparent attempt to escape the
oppressive time of her father by going to the well (a symbol of boundless time), she at least partially concedes to the overarching importance of “objective”, manmade time when she gives the “spirit”/maquis her father’s pocket-watch. Time becomes even more essential to the film if we consider Harper’s lucid suggestion that childhood time is linked in *El espíritu* to the boundless (as opposed to Fernando’s clockwork time); an idea further supported by my observance of Ana’s obsession with her mystical well and the moon itself. Whereas the moon (aside from being a symbol of Divine Presence) is a symbol of what Kristeva calls feminine, cyclical time, the time symbolized by the well (as a doorway to mystical experience) is appropriately boundless and simultaneous—like mystic time. Thus, it is only fitting that the well be a meeting place, a window through which the ghosts of the past creep into the present—as the present, in turn, attempts to re-imagine the future. In truth, mystic time corresponds very much to the fairytale phrase “Once upon a time” with which the film opens and which Harper links to “childhood time”. As she points out, since “children’s time” is not bounded to a specific time it could thus refer to any time.

Accordingly, the importance of time is prefigured in the very first scene when we are told that it takes place “once upon a time”, “around 1940”. The film, by inserting a specific time period within a mythic one prefigures the degree to which this film truly functions as a crossroads, a window, a meeting place between various dichotomies, such as childhood and adulthood, history and myth, the mystical and the real, among many

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92 By contrast, though the pocket-watch appears in *El laberinto*, and though it similarly represents “masculine”, clockwork time (since it belongs to the girl-protagonist’s evil, fascist step-father), the young girl, Ofelia, uses what Kristeva would call “feminine”, cyclical time (represented by the moon) to counteract her step-father’s rigid “masculine” time. Unlike Ana, who imposes on her monstrous interlocutor a temporal symbol/gift from her own repressive world, Ofelia receives from her monster (the faun) the gift of “feminine” time (the moon) among other elements from his world. She then uses these gifts to partake in a more meaningful and complete (yet still somewhat ambiguous) rebirth.
others. More critically, perhaps, by embedding a very specific time period within a
mythic one it anticipates the degree to which the film will expose the contradictions of
Francoism, while largely turning these paradoxes inside-out. On the one hand, the fact
that “once upon a time”, “around 1940” is a contradiction in terms points to the futility of
Franco’s God-like pretensions of making his own time synonymous with the stagnant,
mythic time of the conquistadors, the Spanish Inquisition and Eternity itself. On the
other hand, this curious juxtaposition turns out to be true in a way that Franco himself
would not have envisioned, much less intended.

First and foremost, it resists his belief that the ghosts of the past, the victims of the
Spanish Civil War, the disappeared bodies and exiles--or even the eclectic racial mixture
that continues to pump through the veins of modern Spaniards--can ever be truly
suppressed or forgotten. Moreover, this insertion of the mythic into the specific presages
the extent to which the particular Spanish crises represented in this film intersect with
more global issues and traditions. Thus, it shatters Franco’s illusion that that which is
“truly” and “uniquely” Spanish may be separated from the foreign or the strange—or
even the gothic Frankenstein himself. As I will now more duly explore in this next
section, modernization is pivotal to debunking Franco’s paradoxes, to overcoming
repression, and to expanding Spain’s borders both spatially and temporally. Though the
redemption of modernization occurs, ironically, through a rereading of the past, we must
remember that precisely as re-readings, the past becomes both transformed and critiqued,
even as it is imbued with modern meaning and relevance.
Modernizing the Monstrous--From Victor Frankenstein to Víctor Erice

Despite the striking similarities between *Frankenstein* and *El espíritu*, there are, in fact, some major points of departure, particularly with respect to their treatment of modernization. The very title of Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* suggests, as does much of its content, that Victor Frankenstein’s great mistake (even more than abandoning his own “son”) was the very creation of this “monster”. As a so-called “modern Prometheus”, Victor Frankenstein is equated with the tragic hero who plays God and is punished for his act. Prometheus, who stole the sacred fire from Zeus to give to mankind, is eternally punished by being bound to a rock while an eagle eats his liver (which is renewed each day only to be re-eaten).

Likewise, Victor is punished for mimicking God in his audacious attempt to create life by being incessantly haunted by his very own creation. Rather than perpetuating life, he perpetuates death, for (at least in Shelley’s novel) his entire family is killed by his “monster”. In this way, the novel suggests that Victor is not only punished for “playing God”, but, more specifically, for doing so via modern technology, science and modernization. Yet, what is paradoxical, even contradictory about this in the context of *El espíritu* is that the story, the legacy of Frankenstein, could not be absorbed by the children who view it *without* modern technology—that is, without the medium of film or even the vehicles that transported it into this small Spanish town. This paradox is reinforced in the introduction to Whale’s *Frankenstein*, which Ana and Isabel are pictured viewing in one of the film’s first scenes. Embedded within the film is a cautionary introductory note given by an elderly man dressed in a tuxedo. This man
appears on stage from behind a curtain and announces to an invisible audience (one
which reflects the real audience composed of Ana, Isabel and other townspeople) that:

Mr. Carl Laemmle [the film’s producer] feels it would be a little unkind to present
this picture without just a word of friendly warning. We are about to unfold the
story of Frankenstein, a man of science who sought to create a man after his own
image without reckoning upon God. It is one of the strangest tales ever told. It
deals with the two great mysteries of creation: life and death. I think it will thrill
you. It may shock you. It might even horrify you. So if any of you feel that
you’d not care to subject your nerves to such strain, now is your chance to…
Well, we warned you!

Or, in the Spanish translation—which is, naturally, the one the audience hears,
including Ana and Isabel:

El productor y los realizadores de esta película han querido presentarles antes una
advertencia. Se trata de la historia del doctor Frankenstein, un hombre de la
ciencia que intentó crear un ser vivo sin pensar que eso solo puede hacerlo Dios.
Es una de las historias más extrañas que hemos oído. Trata de los grandes
misterios de la creación—la vida y la muerte. Pónganse en guardia. Tal vez les
escandalice. Incluso puede horrorizarles. Pocas películas han causado mayor
impresión en el mundo entero; pero yo les aconsejo que no la tomen muy en serio.

Significantly, the Spanish translation, though fairly accurate overall, notably
“distorts” the final two sentences, which read (when translated back into English) roughly
as, “Few films have caused a greater impression in the entire world. But I advise you not
to take it very seriously”. Yet, despite this warning, the imagination of the young girls is
ignited by what follows. Ana, in particular, takes her new fantasy world very seriously.
In reality, El espíritu appears to be more critical of the second “sin” committed by Victor
Frankenstein—that is, the abandonment of his own creation, the abandonment of his own
“son”, the abandonment, in fact, of his very own (repressed) self. This is conveyed, first,
in the film’s emphasis on the theme of abandonment through a cold mother, an equally
estranged father, and a society who scorns and represses that which is different, that
which it fears. It is silence, terror and repression that turn people like Teresa and Fernando into both the distant Dr. Frankenstein and his monstrous counterpart.

Moreover, it is clear that Ana reinterprets the monster, at least partially, as a tragic victim—an outcast who must be embraced rather than scorned. Through the film’s rewriting of him, he becomes the symbol of that which is most repressed yet also potentially “most good”. If we consider that, even within Mary Shelley’s novel, the monster is not monstrous because he was born so but because he was shunned by his very own creator, we can conclude that the flaw was not so much in creating him as in abandoning him. The monster’s rejection from both his father and the world is, perhaps somewhat like Ana’s, the true reason he becomes monstrous, as he fills his inner voids with envy and aggression. Thus, it is repression—not modernization—that is to blame.

Finally, this film clearly differs from Shelley’s novel, for, as presaged in the film’s first scene, though technology may be “dangerous”, it is a danger that must be embraced rather than shunned. It is a danger, moreover, that has the potential to reconnect and revive different people and different cultures. Film becomes a symbol of this capacity to unite not only because it symbolizes modernization but also because it symbolizes “monstrosity”—which, in turn, is linked to “feminization” and female experience and, as we will see in a moment, childhood. In this way, much like monstrosity, film is capable not only of representing and empowering the “powerless” (specifically, females and children) but of bridging the distance between past, present and future. More generally, modernization bridges the gap not only between people from distinct cultures but also between different temporalities.
With this in mind, it is important to consider, first, that film, though it serves as a potential site of re-membering, is, like monstrosity, equated with the female experience, both in positive and negative ways. Yet, even the more traditionally “negative” associations between females and film, though they remain intact, even intensified in *El espíritu*, are simultaneously inverted. As Xon de Ros explains, during the advent of “talking films” many avant-garde circles and other groups, particularly the Russian montagists, warned against the evils of such films (“Innocence Lost” 29). He clarifies,

In the statement signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, they warned against the new technology in whose development they saw the ‘facing virginity and purity of [its initial] perception. Aesthetic and sensory categories were articulated in terms of gender. Silence was perceived to be as natural to film as it was to women: words and sounds should be subordinated, feminized.” (28-29).

This equation is turned inside out in *El espíritu*, which reinforces the connection between silences, film, monsters and women only to transform these silences and “fetishized” objects into active agents of at least potential rebirth. Not only does Ana fill in many of the film’s silences with her actions and performances but in so doing she at least partially rewrites the past while connecting to others in a more “global” way—that is, through viewers like us, or through directors like Guillermo del Toro who, as we will see in Chapter 2, find relevance in Ana’s struggles despite being both temporally and spatially distanced from the film’s horrors (much like Erice from *Frankenstein*). As we have seen through the monster’s capacity to represent “border-temporality” (or the haunting of both the future and the past in the present), film too represents the conflation of distinct temporalities and thus, is indirectly linked to female experience by way of its connection to “Frankenstein” as well as to Teresa’s symbolic train. The train, like film, is a modern device that not only produces movement and boundary-crossing but in so doing
condenses space and time. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch puts it in his intriguing book, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*,

‘Annihilation of time and space’ was the *topos* which the early nineteenth century used to describe the new situation into which the railroad placed natural space after depriving it of its hitherto absolute powers. Motion was no longer dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on a mechanical power that created its own new spatiality. (10)

I might also add that the experience of both the railway and of film (and, in many respects, of all forms of mechanized transportation) have in common the almost magical, paradoxical ability to both shrink and expand time and space. In this sense, it is fitting that the train would be linked not only to film, but to the monstrous—as it represents the conflation of past, present and future and the familiar/particular with the foreign/strange.

Furthermore, just as film is used in *El espíritu* in a way that both stresses the abjection of females *as well as* their potential empowerment, the same can be said of childhood, as it is explored in and through this film. On the one hand, cinema has been linked to the child in the same way degrading way that it has been linked to females—that is, as a means of fetishizing the (already) abject. Insofar as the sexuality of children (and especially girls) is assumed to be innocent and passive, girls’ bodies may be exploited in perversely fetishistic ways. Yet, *El espíritu* contests this fetishizing function not only through Ana’s ability to become the gazer rather than the gazed upon (as

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93 As Schivelbusch elaborates, “The diminution of transport distances deemed to create a new, reduced geography, yet it did not actually alter the size of the spaces between the points connected by the new mode of transport. ‘Yet by a sort of miracle,’ says the Quarterly Review article, after describing the shrinking process, ‘every man’s field would be found not only *where* it always was, but *as large* as ever it was’.” (35) He adds, “The notion that a French town could fit into a Paris street demonstrates that the alteration of spatial relationships by the speed of the railway train was not simply a process that diminished space, but that it was a dual one: space was both diminished and expanded.” (35). Indeed, we might add that film serves a similar function in two distinct yet interrelated ways. Not only can it reduce an entire city to the size of a screen or the passage of several years to two (screen) minutes but it also transports people/actors from foreign lands and times to the particular land and time of the spectator. In this way, though both time and space have been “shrunk” in order to fit within the narrow confines of the viewer’s world/screen (in this context, a makeshift theatre in provincial, 1940s Castile), they are also at the same time expanded insomuch as the viewer’s own world (of 1940s, Spain, for example) is opened up to radically new horizons.
reflected by her wide eyes and imaginative ability to remake the film, *Frankenstein*), but, more specifically, through the fact that, as we have just seen a few pages back, she actually dares to do exactly what the introductory note cautioned her against.

Aside from Ana’s active rather than passive engagement with the film, *El espíritu* more generally resists the trend to exploit film as a means of fetishizing women, children and especially girls, by demonstrating just how much the medium of film is, in essence, akin to the experience of childhood. As Vicky Lebau points out, cinema, in a deep, almost innate way forges a positive bond to childhood in the sense that it depicts “the spontaneity and immediacy of ‘life’ itself” (*Childhood and Cinema* 13). 94 Furthermore,

Closer to the state of infancy, or *infans* (literally without language), the small child tends to be discovered at the limit of what words can be called upon to tell, or to mean [...] By contrast, when it comes to the representation of the child, cinema, with its privileged access to the perceptual, its visual and aural richness, would seem to have the advantage: closer to perception, it can come closer to the child.” (*Childhood and Cinema* 16)

In truth, this kinship between cinema and childhood imagination, experience and representation make it even more appropriate that Ana, our protagonist, not only be a child but that her means of communicating with her monster-spirit-refugee be through muted performances, gestures and acts rather than words. At the same time, because film serves as a medium of imagination, boundary crossing and the new, it comes as little surprise that film may also serve as a symbol of sexuality—and, particularly, the discovery of sexuality (and, more generally, the self)—themes which are clearly fused in *El espíritu*. Vicky Lebau’s analysis of the use of film as a means of sexual/self discovery in Pedro Almodovar’s *Bad Education* is especially useful in establishing this point. As

94 Lebau adds that, “[…]’Small children’, wrote Henry James, in the well-known Preface to What Maisie Knew in 1897, ‘have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary.’” (*Childhood and Cinema* 16)
the film reflects back on the childhood of its adult protagonist (who is himself a filmmaker), it includes a pivotal scene which connects sexuality, creativity, transgression and, more generally, self-discovery with the experience of film. In Lebau’s words,

[…]With his childhood friend-lover, Ignatio, Enrique Goded, who will become the director of this film-within-a-film, makes his escape from the paedophilic coercions of a Catholic boarding school for boys to the sensual space of cinema: absorbed in the spectacle of cinema, but also using it, the boys masturbate one another, discovering their sexuality—an important moment in their self-fashioning—through complex miming, and displacement, of the image on screen. *(Childhood and Cinema 15)*

Needless to say, the fact that the discovery of sexuality and selfhood (via film) is contrasted to the repressive and corrupt environment of an *all boys Catholic boarding school* immediately evokes the same sort of inverted dichotomies communicated in *El espíritu*. Aside from the fact that the school is, significantly, Catholic (and therefore invokes the hypocrisy of Franco’s National Catholicism) the fact that it is a boarding school implies that its children, who are effectively “abandoned” by their parents, are left to either replace these parents with corrupt authority figures or discover their own authority within themselves. Even more importantly, the fact that it is an *all boys* school (presumably to prevent boys from becoming sexually involved with girls) backfires, much like the repressive mechanisms examined in *El espíritu*—for the boys not only become sexual anyway, but they do so (at least some of them) with other boys. Yet, even so, they depend on the freedoms proposed by and through film to achieve this subversion.

Just as crucially, like film, childhood sexuality is liberating, pluralistic and open in the sense that, as Lebau observes, “The wager of the concept of infantile sexuality is that it is the prototype, or paradigm, of an adult sexuality ‘put together’ from its diverse sources and pleasures. The sexual pleasures are, precisely, pluralized, sensual, but particular. Children’s interest in reproductive sex […] may be there, but it is not the only, certainly not the privileged, idea of a young child’s libidinal pleasure.”(101)
Indeed, this is a fundamental point since the notion that sex should be conceived of primarily as an act of reproduction is central to the authoritarian rhetoric of both Spain and Argentina—and with especially repressive effects for women (as they are responsible for reproducing), and for homosexuals (as those incapable of doing so). In this respect, children and homosexuals become similarly equipped to embody a sexuality capable of contesting and transgressing such repressive sexual “laws”. Thus, it is not surprising that the Argentine novel, El beso, not only similarly critiques this reproductive understanding of sex (via homosexuals rather than children) but, furthermore, it explicitly equates sex with innocence (as proclaimed by the protagonist, Valentín, after he has made love with his cellmate, Molina, and effectively lost himself in him).

In short, the relationship between film and sexuality is vital to El espíritu in several ways. It not only symbolizes the innocently open and pluralistic nature of childhood sexuality—and, albeit rather indirectly, its connections to (the discovery of) homosexuality--but also the liminal state or transition from childhood to adulthood. Both are mirrored in Ana’s symbolic engagement with the monster-maquis, the mystical-sexual-wishing-well, the poison mushroom and, above all, the film, Frankenstein, which, in truth, is responsible for birthing Ana’s discovery of these other, interconnected symbols of sexual, spiritual and self-discovery.

To summarize, this film as a film (rather than narrative) is subversive in various ways. First, it represents movement, secondly, modernization, thirdly, female experience and liberation and, more generally, the desire for that which is foreign as well as the desire for the cinematic experience itself. At the same time, it represents exactly that which, within the realm of narrative, largely resists (linguistic) representation—that is,
the silences themselves—as well as their link to childhood “innocence”, imagination, ambiguity, plurality, freedom and openness. All of these features have yet another common denominator--they are products of modernization, for better or for worse. Though *El espíritu* is defined by its ambiguity, some may argue that the “worse” or negative ramifications of ambiguity seem to overshadow their “better”, more positive side—at least within the context of the 1940s reality depicted in this film (as opposed to that reality that Ana and her viewers remake through the film).

Yet, even if this is true, the specific benefits of modernization certainly outweigh its disadvantages *both* through the new “reality” created by the film and its viewers and *within* the 1940s reality it portrays. It may also be useful keep in mind that, as the film’s opening scenes emphasize, the experience of film happens in a *collective* place—one that, moreover, encourages running commentaries or dialogues. In reality, the act of viewing films in the 1940s was, by necessity, a public experience—and, as reflected by the diverse faces in the makeshift theatre, it invited the young and old, male and female, rich and poor to gather together. Just as the act of creating film is a joint effort, involving cameramen, directors, actors, etc. as well as, increasingly, an international endeavor, as it employs workers from all over, the act of viewing film elicits *group* interpretations, performances and retellings—and, perhaps more importantly, *mixed* groups.

In this respect, *El espíritu de la colmena* further explores the ways in which modernization, and more especially film, becomes an apparatus that, much like the “monstrous Frankenstein”, precipitates both the death of the individual subject and its potential rebirth or transformation into a more inter-subjective being. At the same time, this film encapsulates the ways in which the medium of film not only complements and
enriches any theory of a “narrative ethics”, but also takes on an important historical and sexualized dimension within the context of Spanish terror and repression. Above all, film and, more generally, modernization symbolize movement, the foreign, the strange and, more exactly, the integration of the foreign or the strange into the familiar. For all these reasons, film achieves what narrative cannot. This desire to fuse the strange and the familiar is reinforced by the film’s ability to unite different characters through the symbolic yet silent stranger/monster who dwells deep within—and yet equally far away.

**The Other Side of the Window (Beyond the Beehive)**

As we have seen throughout this chapter, it would appear that virtually every character besides Ana (who is, herself, imperfect) is flawed in some major way. Yet to condemn all these characters for their shortcomings would be to miss the point--more specifically, it would miss Ana’s point. Not only are these characters defined, above all, by their ambiguity, but insomuch as they are ambiguous they are also monstrous, strange, and yet, as such, curiously familiar. As Ana demonstrates throughout the film, even that which is most monstrous and strange--or rather, precisely that which is most monstrous and strange--is what we need to embrace above all, and, in the process, remember or remake. Thus, if we write off these other characters as lost causes, monsters, beasts, and beekeepers, we are missing the point that Ana wishes to make. Ultimately, what really makes the presence of Frankenstein so symbolic and so necessary from the very start is the fact that virtually every scene in El espíritu reworks both what it means to be Frankenstein and why—not only in the specific context of post-war Spain but, to a great extent, globally. In this way, each character offers something distinctive and new.
Far more than their personal flaws or inadequacies, it is the construction of the beehive itself, the “walls” and “barriers” established by Franco, that keeps these characters from escaping--though as Ana helps reveal, many of these walls are themselves mere illusions, and many of them, precisely because they are either illusive and/or self-destructive, can be turned inside out. Considering the beehive-like construction of the family’s house, it is worth considering that, as Xon de Ros states, “In most cases the bees are taken as models of virtue, industriousness and selflessness, but these social insects, which instinctively embody the often cruel, unthinking laws of nature, can also evoke images of an impersonal and mechanical existence.” ("El espíritu de la colmena" 142) As reflected by both the film’s title and, in particular, Fernando’s own ambiguous relationship to the beehive, which he both obsesses over yet yearns to escape, the characters have truly become like bees—at least on the surface.

Fernando’s pocket-watch, which he likens to the mechanical, methodical precision of the beehive, would seem to further support this notion. The fact that, even in the privacy of his own mind, Fernando cannot bear to hear his own voice (for example, it is Henry’s voice that reflects his tenuous desire to both flee the beehive and his equally “heretical” desire to replace Franco as God/Beekeeper) reinforces the general mood of repression. It is almost as if Fernando, by distancing himself from his most private thoughts can somehow convince himself that they are not really his. In fact, the only time Fernando’s voiceover is his own (that is, not filtered through the voice of another) is when he takes notes on his beehive in his study, late at night--though even in this case he refuses to speak these words aloud. Yet, more than once, we hear him write/think,

El movimiento de esta rueda tan visible como la rueda principal de un reloj; alguien que veía a las claras la agitación innumerables de los panales, el zarandeo
Curiously, even when speaking of his bees and how mechanical they are, Fernando’s description is more poetic than robotic, betraying his own true voice or inner “spirit”. This finds support in Teresa’s letter (quoted earlier), in which she laments that the overwhelming repression, loss and absence has made everyone a bit inhuman. Yet, in so doing she also reflects their unconquerable sorrow, desire and essential humanity:

A veces, cuando miro a mi alrededor y descubro tantas ausencias, tantas cosas destruidas y al mismo tiempo tanta tristeza, algo me dice que quizás con ellas se fue nuestra capacidad para sentir de verdad la vida. Ni siquiera sé si esta carta llegará a tus manos. Las noticias que recibimos de fuera son tan pocas y tan confusas.

Aside from accurately portraying the general repression, isolation and loss of post-war Spain, this quote reveals that Teresa, though repressed, detached and even a bit irresponsible as a mother, is not, by nature, cold unintelligent or unfeeling. Rather, she has been made that way. More importantly, the letter indicates that she is both in tremendous pain and incredibly repressed—and yet, it is not because she is insensitive or incapable of being introspective. Her very desire to write these letters, not to mention the insightfulness and perceptiveness they display, is proof to the contrary. Thus, even if it is possible that Teresa could have tried harder to reunite with this man, or to be a better mother or wife, we must sympathize with her situation—for it is a situation that, truly, has no perfect solution. She simply cannot replace all by herself everything that has been taken from her nor can she break through all the barriers that have been thrust in her way.
At the same time, Teresa’s letter also provides hope—for, at the very least, it constitutes a means of remembering those very “outlaws”, “undesirables” and “exiles” who Franco hoped to erase not only from life but also from memory. As we have seen, though Teresa never gets a response from her lost love, in some sense, her daughter does. In this light, Teresa not only positively influences her daughter, but enables her daughter to positively influence Teresa herself. For these reasons, her letter-writing, in addition to being personally therapeutic, is not nearly as futile or solipsistic as it might at first seem. As should now be obvious, aside from the fact that her letter-writing serves as a means of escaping from the house, it is also likened to modernization via its association with the train-station as well as the medium and experience of film itself. Furthermore, it parallels what Erice himself does as he recovers the lost past through the making of this movie.

Yet, what is most interesting about this letter-writing is that it is associated not only with modernization, movement and remembering, but also with the magical/spiritual realm created by Teresa’s daughter, Ana—and by extension, monstrosity in general. The fact that Teresa’s letter connects her both to Ana (who, in turn, also remembers the past through her silent performances) and the “monstrous” fugitive who arrives to town on train in what almost appears to be a response to these letters, makes them truly hopeful—despite the fact that she burns them in the film’s final scenes. Not only do these letters connect parenthood and childhood, self and other, fantasy and reality, the mystical and the material, but all the other binaries which the mother-daughter divide (or bond) represent—from future and past to history and myth. Let us end then, with that character who offers the most hope, especially in relation to Teresa: Ana herself.
As the pivotal scene in which Ana reaches for the poison mushroom suggests, though she may not be able to fully and permanently remake herself, she certainly desires it—and for a moment, she may have even achieved it. Shortly after grasping the mushroom, Ana, significantly, sees her own reflection in the lake. As her gaze penetrates deep into the waters, the face of the monster appears, suggesting that the pursuit of her very self requires, simultaneously, the pursuit of her Other, the poisonous mushroom, the Monster. If the mushroom is, in fact, poisonous or lethal, it only kills the shell, the mask of the person one truly is, freeing the spirit within. What happens to that spirit, next, however, remains both dangerous and ambiguous—even more so in the world of Ana, a world of silence. Appropriately, after Ana is rescued from the wilderness she falls into a deep sleep—perhaps even a symbolic death. When she awakens she neither speaks nor eats for days. Yet, as the doctor declares to her mother, “Lo importante es que vive. Poco a poco irá olvidando” (“What’s important is that she lives. Little by little she’ll forget”).

Though we can only hope that she won’t forget, the fact that she lives offers hope. Unlike the little girl, Maria, from Whale’s film, Ana’s encounter with the “monster” at the lake does not truly kill her, though it may effectively silence her. Yet, at least for a moment, it enables her to become somewhat renewed, as her reflection merges with the monster’s. At this moment, she is capable of facing, confronting, accepting, even loving
what is most repressed, shunned, exiled, and Other, rather than seeing it as monstrous. Yet, since this trauma causes her to fall into a deathlike sleep so severe that even when she awakens from it she recognizes no one, speaks to no one for weeks⁹⁵, it is obviously not a relationship that she finds easy to incorporate into a world of repression. Thus, we viewers cannot be sure how long, to what extent, and under what circumstances she will remember. In fact, if it is true that Ana becomes renewed at the lake, this renewal is itself ambiguous. Given that the monster reflects society, Ana’s ability to merge with him is necessarily ambiguous—for it strengthens Ana’s interconnectedness to this very society that wants her to forget. In this respect, Ana learns to grow up in the most tragic of ways.

Yet, Ana’s status as a child throughout the movie and her unwillingness to let go of her fantasy world (even at the end) provides hope for her entire generation. As a child, Ana embodies the hope of future generations—a generation that, for all its darkness, includes thinkers and artists such as Erice himself. Like many others, Erice proves through his very capacity to make this film that he can remember the past and all its monsters—though perhaps only after a long period of distance and silence comparable to Ana’s. On the other hand, if it is true that Ana represents future generations, we could just as easily argue that Ana’s parents, as adults, also represent, albeit in an even more limited way, Ana’s own projected future. As we have seen, this ambiguity regarding Ana’s status as a figure of hope is further emphasized in the final scene, when the symbolic windows of the beehive/house open as Ana summons “the spirit” in the exact way her sister, Isabel, instructed her to--by proclaiming the words, “Soy Ana”.

⁹⁵ In fact, though Ana finally rises from her bed in the final scene, the movie ends before we find out if she ever fully recovers.
In addition to the ambiguities already explored with respect to this final scene, I would like to follow up on the implications of the notion that Ana merges with her sister. On the one hand, the fact that Ana’s closing words are dictated by Isabel seems to indicate not only that Ana’s identity has fused with Isabel’s but that Isabel continues to maintain control over Ana. Yet, on the other hand, much ambiguity remains—including the chance that Ana may succeed in making Isabel more like Ana herself rather than the other way around. Isabel, by pronouncing the words “Soy Ana” is, in a sense, giving up her own identity by asserting that she is not herself but rather Ana. The fact that these words “Soy Ana” are heard while Ana stands at her mystic window (that is, at the threshold of her Other, magic world) while looking out at the moon reinforces this ambiguity. At the very least, this suggests that Isabel’s words, regardless of what they might mean for Isabel (most probably, that she can control or manipulate Ana), can potentially take on another, more liberating and constructive meaning for Ana herself.

In any event, what we know for certain is that Ana accomplishes far more, and certainly strives much harder than anyone else in the film to remember the past and, in the process, to remake both her community and herself. The fact, however, that she can even partially remake herself is a consequence not only of the fact that she is still a child, but the fact that she occupies a profoundly transitional time period (not just as an adolescent but as a Spaniard). Though the Franco Regime is now (in the early 1940s) in full, “legitimate” command, not all Republican soldiers and exiles have been completely obliterated or forgotten. More importantly, though it may seem implausible that a mere girl be capable of remembering what her own parents cannot, it is largely because she is a mere girl that she is capable of achieving this. After all, what better symbol of absolute
abjection, absolute marginalization, absolute powerlessness than a little girl? How much better then, that this girl be an “orphan” living in post-war Spain--a little girl who, much like the monster, “Frankenstein”, is both voiceless and abandoned? Naturally, it is because of her situation as a voiceless, abandoned, girl that Ana manages to perfectly embody not only absolute exile but also the equally great desire for renewal.

This leads us to one final ambiguity that Ana embodies. As a child without a voice (or who has not yet developed a voice), it is highly appropriate that Ana embody the silences and repression of post-war Spain. And yet, it is exactly because she is a child that she has the imagination or creativity to fill these silences—not to mention the innocence and the openness necessary to integrate the strange(r). In a sense, we might say that she loses her voice at the very moment she acquires it. Unfortunately, however, Ana’s ability to fill the silences, while herself remaining silent and even secretive, is highly problematic for it highlights her failure to integrate others—and, in particular, those with power, pens and audible voices--into her own fantasy world. What Ana, like many children, ultimately forgets (that is, until the final scene) is that, though it is good to try and reconcile fantasy and reality, one cannot simply impose one’s fantasy-world on reality and believe that any good will come from it. From the film’s perspective, this appears to be the main drawback of childhood; and yet, it is the one (ambiguously) “positive” lesson Ana seems to learn, as the final scene reveals her newfound ability to finally separate reality and fantasy, like her older sister, Isabel.

Of course, this is also tragic. Still, we must not forget that it is from Ana’s unprivileged, abject position that she is capable of both empathizing and identifying with the foreign monster. Her ability to empathize with him derives not only from the fact that
he too represents absolute abjection but also because, as a mere child, Ana has not yet learned to be racist or prejudiced—or to blindly hate or polarize or shove people into neat little categories (or “mushrooms”), as her own father symbolically does. Ana’s decision to reach precisely for the poisonous mushroom, “the worst of them all”, confirms this. Rather than preconceived ideas and prejudices, she has questions.

In this context, a child’s perspective is not only more innocent, inviting and emotionally provocative but also, in a curious sense, more intelligent and open. As further supported in Chapter 2 (via the film, El laberinto del fauno) children are, arguably, those beings who are most apt to be spiritual, for they have not yet become disillusioned by the harsh realities and cynicism of the world. It is, in fact, as a child that Ana is able to entertain the possibility that a fantasy world really can exist—and, what is more, that this fantasy world may actually have some impact, some essential relationship to the real world. Though Ana, as a mere child, does, of course, have much to learn about the limitations of the real world, her recognition of this (as a child) pushes her to ask questions, to ask why—even to questions that adults have lost interest in considering. In truth, one might assume that only a child prodigy would be able to hit the nail on the head, as Ana does, by asking the essential questions—questions like: Why is it that the monster kills the girl?--and: Why is it that the villagers then kill the monster? Yet, in reality, the right questions are not so hard to find for someone willing to look deep inside oneself—deep inside the child he/she once was—or still is. These questions would, of course, seem pointless, even ridiculous to the cynical Fernando. For him, all that matters is reality. And the reality is that the monster kills the girl because the monster is bad. It does not matter how or why. He has a criminal brain and that is enough.
Yet, if nothing else, the fact that Ana chooses Frankenstein’s story over the story her father tells her offers hope. As a child capable not only of being interested in mythic stories, foreign stories and even films but also of reformulating them, Ana also subverts what Helen Graham calls, “The Francoist concern with forming the minds of the young—through its manipulation of children’s literature and other forms of indoctrination—[which] reflects a view of the populace in general as minors in need of supervision” (“Gender and the State: Women in the 1940s”, 185). The fact that Ana, if anything, gets very little supervision from her parents highlights the extent to which Franco’s repressive laws, violence and other forms of erasure and control are, as we have repeatedly witnessed, self-defeating. In fact, it is as an innocent child that Ana, while perhaps more impressionable, is also more open to both asking questions and reformulating answers.

It is through Ana’s openness and creativity that she also, as Luis Arata suggests, becomes more focused on the process of self-discovery as opposed to preconceived objectives (“I am Ana: The Play of the Imagination” 31-32). In this sense as well she becomes the ideal symbol of rebirth--or a new beginning--even for adults. It is, finally, as a child that Ana represents both the future and the past--and thus, like the creature of Frankenstein, she highlights the interconnectedness of remembering and rebirth. As previously mentioned, Ana represents the future since children, by virtue of being young, necessarily symbolize the future. Yet if we consider Curry’s observation that, “Spain’s narrators were themselves children during the war and experienced the conflict with the partial understanding of a child…” (“Clarifying the Enigma” 274) it becomes even more clear why Ana, as a young girl, becomes the perfect heroine. She embodies the lost past
not only of Spain, but, more specifically, of Erice and Fernández Santos themselves. Yet, if this is true, then why tell their story through the lens of a girl rather than a young boy?

In reality, the possibilities are numerous. As we have seen, a young girl represents that which is most abject and thus, paradoxically, that which holds most potential for rebirth. In this sense, she is symbolic of the way in which her entire generation was both “feminized” and “infantilized” by the Franco Regime. For this same reason, a young girl might actually better reflect the way in which someone like Erice felt as a child growing up in post-war Spain—that is, utterly powerless and voiceless, perhaps even abandoned and repressed. Furthermore, if we incorporate Jungian theory regarding “shadows” and “anima/animus” into our analysis, it would make perfect sense that the protagonist be a young girl—for as such she represents absolute alterity (or the repressed side and, especially “spirit”) of men. In any event, what is most crucial to consider is that children often have just as much to teach their parents as their parents have to teach them—if not more (and especially in climates of authoritarian terror and/or exile).

El espíritu is not unique in this. Many other retrospective attempts to recover the post-war moment through film (see, for example, José Luis Cuerda’s 1999 film, La lengua de las mariposas) suggest that adults in these contexts often become even more easily and more completely destroyed by fear than their children. As a result, adults must make an effort to learn not only from children in general, but, more specifically, from the little child that lurks deep within each one of them—and us. It is this child, above all others, who holds the key to reconnecting to who we really are, to remembering both ourselves and our Other—whether we live in Spain or in any other corner of the world. It
is, in short, this child who will offer us not just an apple but a poisonous mushroom. The elixir may kill us, but ultimately, it will remake us—hopefully, for the better.

Conclusion

Of course, this does not refute the fact that, in this film, the monotonous solitude of post-war Spain is not itself defeated but, in many ways, absorbed like a disease. Even as our young-girl protagonist, Ana, dreams of another, freer, more loving world, her dreams are crushed by the onerous weight of reality and the death or abandonment of any true role-model or friend. Her parents, though physically alive, are more like ghosts than humans, and though, like many characters from other works I analyze in this thesis, Ana attempts to replace these parents, her replacement never really becomes a real, tangible, permanent figure. Though Ana’s parents are both (former) Republicans, they are portrayed from the opening scenes as distant, repressed and repressive—stripped of all their former ideals, and all remnants of the joy and love they once had are locked away in secret places that, ultimately, they choose to categorically burn or erase. Thus, *El espíritu* is a disheartening reminder that repression and loneliness not only kill life and love but, oftentimes, they transform loving beings into killers themselves—if not literally, metaphorically.

Indeed, though *El espíritu* is the film which most realistically portrays the varied faces or nuances of the repression and spiritual isolation of post-war Spain, unlike many of the other primary works that I analyze in this thesis, it does not need violence or bloodshed or even physical death to reveal this. And yet, *El espíritu de la colmena*, despite being the most grimly realistic of all my works, is also the most hopeful, in part, because it transcends both the time and space of post-war Spain, as it reaches both into a
past filled with foreign fantasies and forgotten ghosts as well as into a future that is defined, largely, by its potential viewers themselves. Indeed, the film transcends time not only because it is, above all, a trip into the past but also because it ignites journeys into the future, including those of filmmakers heavily indebted to *El espíritu*—the likes of which include Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro Amenábar.

Like the yellow honeycomb windows that serve as a focal point of desire and transformation, both the film’s characters and we viewers are located neither inside nor outside the symbolic beehive-nation-house, but in a time and a place that is neither here nor there, self nor other, past nor future, female nor male, reality nor fantasy. In this respect, the film itself remains in a state of exile waiting to be reborn. In the ambiguity of its silences, the film points towards a monstrous rebirth that only the viewers themselves can amply fill. As the final scene literally suggests, the film both begins and ends at the window between the national and the international, the familiar and the strange, the public and the private, female and male, self and other, and, perhaps most importantly, fantasy and reality. The crucial question is whether this in-between space is a space of liberation or a space of loss. Though arguments may be made for either case, strictly speaking, it is neither—or rather, it depends on one’s perspective. Though the film may end in loss, as our next film, *El laberinto*, reveals, it has truly paved a road to liberation.

Like all my novels and films, *El espíritu*, despite its marked differences, stresses the importance of re-membering both the past and the present and, in the process, redefining the future. This not only enables those who have suffered from trauma to heal, but, more specifically, to engage in a relationship of “give and take” with one’s interlocutor or “double” and thus, blur the boundaries between self and other, male and
female, desire and responsibility, reality and fantasy. Moreover, as evidenced not only in this film but in others (for example, *Abre los ojos*) when these inner stories or characters are foreign, the universal, mythic resonance of the work helps engage a more global audience. More importantly, it invites the viewer/reader to participate in the same sort of ethical retelling in which the characters themselves are engaged. In the case of *El espíritu* we viewers are invited to pick up right where Ana leaves off.

Yet, above all, these foreign stories, figures or myths reveal the limits of authoritarian constructions of nationhood and selfhood—a construction which is, of course, predicated on the exclusion of all that is foreign or strange. In *El espíritu*, this is achieved through the figure of Frankenstein, both as a foreign import and as monster. Like little Ana, and like all the forgotten stories, people, races and traditions of the past, this monster called Frankenstein will continue to haunt the future. In fact, as we are now about to see, his legacy continues on (albeit somewhat indirectly) in this next chapter, through its treatment of Guillermo del Toro’s film, *El laberinto del fauno* (2007).

Curiously, despite being a Mexican-American production, *El laberinto* finds this very Spanish, yet equally “universal” film worthy of retelling. By rewriting many aspects of *El espíritu*, *El laberinto* not only pays tribute to *Frankenstein*, both as film and novel, but also to *El espíritu* itself, in all its monstrosity.
Chapter 2:

“The Key, the Keeper, the Girl and the Beast: Resisting State Terror through ‘Fantastic’ Realities”

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Guillermo del Toro’s *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan’s Labyrinth*, 2007) is, in many ways, a mirror image of Víctor Erice’s 1973 *El espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*). On the one hand, the resemblances in theme, symbolism and structure are overwhelming, and they reflect important similarities between the political corruption and cultural repression of modern and contemporary Mexico and that of post-war Spain. At the same time, they reveal important parallels between Erice’s direct experience of post-war Spanish terror and del Toro’s own childhood and adult struggles, such as the traumatic influence of his ultra-repressive and religious (Catholic) grandmother, the abduction of his father and del Toro’s consequent experience of self-exile. Yet, *El laberinto’s* circumstances of production and, particularly, the fact that it is directed, written and produced by a Mexican exile living in the US (rather than a Spaniard living at the tail-end of the very dictatorship he wishes to portray), also correspond to crucial differences in the films’ style, setting, technique and frame as well as their overarching goals and effects on their viewers. Curiously, it is largely because of the disparities in context and production that the contemporary Mexican-American remake is capable of turning *El espíritu’s* voids, silences, and even death itself into movement, renewal and hope.

Even *El laberinto’s* transformative use of symbols taken from *El espíritu*, such as the moon, the pocket-watch, and the monsters, express *El laberinto’s* relative optimism and ‘safe’ distance from the terror portrayed in *El espíritu*. Yet, ironically, this optimism
may be equally rooted in the very hardships and, specifically, the condition of exile, both physical and psychological, that del Toro has endured. Following *El espíritu, El laberinto* sheds light on the extent to which the repression/erasure of memory, identity, spirituality and alterity find their most sublime expression in the paradigm of authoritarian rule--and perhaps especially in the earlier (isolationist) phase of Franco’s National Catholicism (1939-1953). At the same time, both the film as well as its mode of production reveal how and to what extent the experience of alienation and exile may, particularly when represented through fictional or fantastic retellings, both clarify (perhaps even intensify) yet potentially overcome the repressions and binary thinking endemic to authoritarianism.

In short, this film elucidates the extent to which exilic fiction (and perhaps especially exilic film) offers a model for resolving the artificial separations or antinomies on which authoritarian repression, terror, and trauma are based. Moreover, through the film’s eclectic ability to transcend national, temporal and generic (“high” and “low”) borders, and specifically, through its capacity to rewrite and reframe previous traditions, fictions and history itself, *El laberinto* pulls a wide variety of viewers into its very own creative and ethical processes of re-membering identity and thus, expanding responsibility. In so doing, it urges its viewers to rethink what defines exilic film at the same time that it points to the very potential for exile film to become the most widely accessible, unifying and hopeful genre of the near future.

Accordingly, *El laberinto*’s greatest paradox lies in the fact that, in its very effort to generate hope, it leads its viewers through a labyrinth of explicit, often explosive violence, trauma and death, echoed, in the film’s alternate fantasy world by aggressive, often repulsive monsters and beasts. Throughout the film, the narrative jumps constantly
between the violent reality of 1944 (post-war) Spain and the corresponding fantasy-world created by a young girl named Ofelia, who finds herself caught in the midst of this brutality and violence after her recently widowed mother remarries a bloodthirsty captain in Franco’s army. Because Ofelia retreats into her fantasy world as a way of dealing with the terror that surrounds her, it is hardly surprising that the two worlds of fantasy and reality parallel each other in symbolically similar yet transformative ways. Appropriately, two types of “monsters” dominate Ofelia’s alternate world—those beastly ones which reflect the corruption, brutality and repression of Ofelia’s fascist stepfather, Capitán Vidal, and the ostensibly frail yet highly subversive ones modeled off of Ofelia’s allies in the “real world”—that is, her step-father’s enemies; mainly women and rebels.

In keeping with del Toro’s general belief in the transformative power and beauty of monsters, El laberinto’s monsters, women, rebels and outcasts are the ones who—in direct contrast to the ideology of Franco’s National Catholicism—hold the keys to true spirituality and to radical change. Rather than suppressing fantasy, alterity, memory, and choice for the sake of Franco’s ideology of terror, these monsters stimulate the use of fantasy not only as a means of mirroring, understanding and remembering the “real” world but also as a means of improving it. Yet, because they represent all that is repressed in the real world, these creatures, whether demonic or angelic, necessarily lead Ofelia and her viewers through a path of darkness, destruction and danger.

It is only fitting, then, that the film’s historical narrative be set not in the empty, silent plains of civilian Castile—but rather in the volatile mountains of the North, where

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1 Both types of monsters prove equally necessary to Ofelia’s journey towards womanhood and heroism and reflect del Toro’s attraction to what he refers to as “graveyard poetry”, which, he explains, expresses a melancholy beauty in the gothic tradition; that is, one which speaks of loss and fragility through horror and sometimes brutality. As he further explains in the same interview, “you need the one for the other to exist” (Fresh Air with Terry Gross).
Ofelia’s step-father is bent on wiping out the last vestiges of the rebel resistance that has fled to the mountains. The story begins when, shortly after the death of Ofelia’s biological father, her mother, Carmen, remarries the wicked captain, who forces his pregnant wife and step-daughter to move to the mountains. In so doing, he puts his wife’s health in jeopardy so that his son (the only person he truly cares for) may be born “wherever his father is”. It is here that the captain, an embodiment of all that is corrupt in the Franco regime, sacrifices his wife (who dies in childbirth), persecutes innumerable soldiers and civilians (including his own doctor and maid, Mercedes), and ultimately murders his very own step-daughter, Ofelia, who, after suffering and witnessing brutality upon brutality, takes her baby brother and attempts to run away. The movie both begins and ends at the moment of Ofelia’s death.

Yet, as the film’s use of color, biblical symbols and, above all, as its parallel fairytale narrative suggests, it is out of the film’s voluptuous violence that a new hope is born. In truth, though Ofelia’s literal journey through post-war Spain ends in her own death, her metaphorical, fairytale journey of exile and oblivion ends in remembrance and return. Because the film’s outer frame consists in this “alternate” reality, primacy is given to this fantasy world even over the historical one—though, curiously, the fantasy world not only reflects “reality” but also the fairytales Ofelia obsessively reads in this “real” world. The importance and significance of Ofelia’s alternate world is highlighted from the film’s very start, when the death of Ofelia’s father is introduced to us in mythic fairytale terms. In this alternate reality in which Ofelia becomes ‘Princess Moanna’ (and her father becomes King of the Underworld), Ofelia’s father’s death in the real world is translated not in terms of his own departure from earth but rather in terms of Ofelia’s
exile from His kingdom. Appropriately, Ofelia’s mythic journey of return, which, according to the fairytale narrative, requires that she remember this world, is analogous to the actual journey to the mountains on which she has concurrently embarked.

Ofelia can only return to her father’s paradise by first completing three essential tasks ordered to her by a magical faun whom she meets shortly after moving to the mountains. These tasks not only reflect and anticipate the real struggles of the rebel resistance—and, in particular, those of the undercover (rebel) maid, Mercedes—but, more specifically, they require that Ofelia overcome her step-father’s Francoist need to rigidly separate self and other, male and female, materiality and spirituality, fantasy and reality in the name of order, sacrifice and blind obedience. As a reward for her heroism, Ofelia is finally reunited with her deceased father and mother, portrayed as King and Queen, Goddess and God of a warm, radiant Underworld. As Ofelia’s spirit is pulled from her bloody corpse/reality and transported into its peaceful, heavenly abode, these regal figures effectively replace the tyrannical rule of Ofelia’s step-father as well as the pseudo-God he represents; namely, Franco’s National Catholicism—and perhaps even Franco himself. As a loving androgynous pair, they represent a form of spirituality that resists the repressive and terrifying warrior-religion of the Franco Regime.

Yet, above all, in the process of unfurling, *El laberinto* enables its viewer to see that fantasy, rather than serving as an escape from reality, is, in truth, the best, most radical means of confronting and rebuilding it. In addition to establishing numerous parallels between reality and fantasy, *El laberinto* clarifies these parallels by literalizing, bifurcating, polarizing or making explicit much of what is vague, hazy or ambiguous in *El espíritu*. The film uses these techniques not only as a means of interpreting *El espíritu*
as well as the traditions and histories on which *El espíritu* is based and, in turn, rewrites, but also, ironically, as a means of offering both unification and choice to Ofelia and her viewers. The film’s use of color to distinguish the vibrant fantasy world from the “real” world further enables it to suggest the need to unite fantasy and reality as well as fantasy’s ultimate predominance over reality. In *El laberinto* the fantasy world is far more colorful, nuanced, textured and real than “reality” itself. And yet, towards the film’s closure, the warm red and golden hues of the fantasy world begin to seep into the washed out, industrial blues and greens of “reality”, suggesting that the fantasy world, though still far from being reconcilable to the real world, has at least begun the process of integration. In this way, the film offers hope, even as it ends in death--yet it is a process that only offers radically *real* hope by eliciting a parallel response in its viewers.

**The Mirror of the Beehive**

Before more closely examining the ways in which fantasy remakes reality in this film, whether through the content itself or through the film’s engagement with its viewers, it will be helpful to move on to a more comprehensive comparison of *El espíritu* and *El laberinto*, technically, contextually and otherwise. Now that we have a basic grasp of the film’s plot, structure and context, this will enable me to accomplish two vital tasks. First, it will allow me to provide the context necessary to fully understand and appreciate the film and my reading of it; and more specifically, it will help clarify why *El laberinto* is the most appropriate film for this chapter not only because of its themes, symbols, style, and structure but also because of its origins in a Catholic-raised Mexican-American exile who self-identified with monsters as a child (particularly the Hunchback of Notre Dame.
and Frankenstein) due to his deep feeling of isolation and solitude--not to mention his
daily encounters with corruption and death. Monsters, though a symbol of alienation and
awkwardness, simultaneously became, for del Toro, a symbol of hope and spirituality far
greater and more redeeming than any institutionalized form of religion.

In fact, on Fresh Air with Terry Gross, he jokes that, though he accepted Jesus as
a child, for him, Jesus was Godzilla. Certainly, the repressive influence of his highly
conservative Catholic grandmother (who, ironically, intensified his affinity with monsters
because of her severe hatred of them and, particularly, del Toro’s fascination with
drawing them) will become an absolutely crucial element in understanding del Toro’s
views towards fantasy, monstrosity and spirituality as evidenced in this film. On the
other hand, just as crucial to comprehending the film’s unconventional, “fantastic”, even
anarchic notion of spirituality is del Toro’s more general claim that, as a Mexican,
he has learned to become immediately distrustful of all institutions and of all forms of blind
obedience (see Special Features disk from El laberinto del fauno).

Yet, in order to grasp the full significance of these historical and biographical
factors, let us begin by taking a closer look at some of the major parallels and differences
between the films themselves. Though I will defer my analysis of the details regarding
the films’ differences in character doubling, polarization, literalizing, symbolism, and so
on to subsequent sections of this chapter, at this juncture, it will help to at least examine
the most general and basic ways in which El laberinto rewrites and reframes El espíritu.

On the most obvious level, both films, though directed by grown men, portray the
repression of 1940s post-war Spain through the lens of young-girl protagonists. In the
midst of post-war violence, repression and loss, these “orphaned” girls represent the
quintessence of powerlessness and invisibility—and as such, the personal struggles of their respective directors. Yet, it is at the height of their abjection and exile that these girls encounter a fantastic, “monstrous” interlocutor (in Ofelia’s case, a faun; in Ana’s case, Frankenstein) who not only replaces their absent parents, but also helps them embark on an intense inward journey which is simultaneously a journey outwards. By holding up a mirror of their repressed collective and individual demons and desires, these monsters help the girls connect more deeply to both themselves and the world. This is achieved by blending reality and fantasy. It is the girls’ obsession with fiction and fantasy that gives rise to their respective fantasy worlds, which in turn, influences reality.

In both films, the ability to connect to an alternate world and to the monsters or ghosts that inhabit them is mirrored by meaningful and potentially subversive interactions in the real world. For Ofelia, this primarily happens not with or through a *maquis* (as in *El espíritu*) but rather with an undercover female spy for the “reds”\(^2\) (or, more precisely, the *huídos*), named Mercedes.\(^3\) Mercedes, the captain’s maid, not only serves as a replacement for Ofelia’s relatively weak-willed and submissive mother, but also as a psychic double or mirror of Ofelia and, in particular, her transformation into womanhood. By contrast, despite Ana’s subversive and almost liberating ability in *El espíritu* to

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\(^2\) Though the term “reds” is used primarily to refer to communists, Republicans and, in the post-war context, loosely anyone who does not fit squarely into the box of conformity molded by the Franco Regime, throughout this film the term “reds” (or “rojos”) is consistently used by Capitán Vidal to refer to the residual presence of *huídos* who are hiding, precisely, in the surrounding mountains of northern Spain.

\(^3\) Whereas the anonymous exile from *El espíritu* is most probably a *maquis*, the men pursued by Capitán Vidal and his troops are more likely to be *huídos*. As Paul Preston explains, “between 1939 and 1947, the PCE [Communist Party] was virtually torn apart by internal conflict. Within this gloomy overview, there were two groups of anti-Francoists who, for different albeit related reasons, managed to avoid the worst consequences of internecine hostilities and concentrate on a single primordial task, the struggle against the dictatorship…They were the so called *huídos* or stragglers, Republicans separated from their units during the civil war who opted to take to the hills rather than surrender, and the Spanish *maquis*, the exiles who played a crucial role in the French Resistance and, with the gradual collapse of the Germans, were able to turn their gaze to Spain.” (“Resisting the State” in *Spanish Cultural Studies* 230).
momentarily connect to both her monster and her newfound *maquis* friend, *El espíritu* ultimately ends just as pessimistically—or rather, just as ambiguously—as it begins.

Even more important than the fact that, while Ana survives, her *maquis* friend does not, it appears that Ana, following in both her mother’s and older sister’s footsteps (and to some extent, her father’s), has, at least in her public behaviors, learned to become more repressed rather than less so in her journey toward adulthood and, especially, womanhood. Though *El espíritu* ends in a highly ambiguous fashion, suggesting that Ana does, indeed, hold on to some remnant of her alternate reality, it remains an essentially secret world (much like the letter writing and related activities of her mother, Teresa). Ana’s mother, on the other hand, ends in an even worse place than she initially began as signaled by her decision to burn her last letter to her anonymous love(r).  

At best, the film offers proof only that this potentially optimistic fusion of Ana’s identity with Isabel’s lies within Ana’s mind (and perhaps the viewers’)—but not Isabel’s. In any case, though the characters in *El espíritu* are, as we have seen, all realistically and complexly interconnected (far more so than in *El laberinto*), they are, like Frankenstein himself, connected more by their shared abandonment, repression and isolation from each other and even from themselves than they are by love. Of course, it is primarily this complex and extreme ambiguity that, as further discussed in chapter 1, enables *El espíritu* to transcend the boundaries of space and time and to connect with contemporary viewers in radical and hopeful ways; and yet, within the film itself, there is no concrete indication that this can or will happen. In this respect, Ana’s trajectory is,

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4 In truth, though the movie ends with a voiceover (in which Isabel pronounces the words “soy Ana”) as Ana defiantly yet furtively summons her monster/spirit at the symbolic window or threshold of her fantasy and real worlds, this gesture could just as easily imply that Ana will become like Isabel (the more pessimistic reading) as it could that Isabel will become more like Ana (the more optimistic one).
truly, a mirror-image of Ofelia’s; for, though she survives in the real world, her spirit effectively dies—or, rather, remains in a state of solitude, repression and exile.

It should also be noted that, though Erice’s ability not only to survive Francoism but to consequently direct a film which critiques it suggest that Ana (as a possible echo of Erice’s own childhood traumas) does, eventually, manage to re-member society in productive ways; if we look within the boundaries of the film itself (and not at its ethical effects or its retrospective value), *El espíritu* comments more on the loss and isolation of post-war Spain and the ease with which good people can become bad through pain, suffering, terror and exile. Though this essential difference reflects *El espíritu’s* in many ways more nuanced treatment of post-war reality (as well as the way in which *El laberinto* concretizes and literalizes theories or ideas that vaguely, even ambiguously emerge in *El espíritu*) it is also mirrored in the two films’ varying approach to fantasy. Though fantasy serves as a means of influencing reality in both films, it does so to a far lesser extent in *El espíritu*. Notwithstanding Ana’s minor “quasi-magical” abilities (for example, it appears that she literally wishes her ghost/maquis friend into existence), the onerous weight of reality in *El espíritu* ultimately crushes or overshadows the power of fantasy—for, eventually, Ana’s maquis friend dies. And Ana is left alone.

In short, though fantasy is capable of influencing reality in both films, the power of fantasy in *El espíritu* is ultimately subordinated to the inescapable repression of post-war Spain—particularly for females. Whereas in *El espíritu* the secrecy that accompanies

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5 It is important to keep in mind here that Ana’s parents, neglectful and repressive as they may have become, were former Republicans—as opposed to Ofelia’s wretched stepfather.

6 In this case, the retrospective ability for past suffering to lead to present or future rebirth, an idea theorized in *El espíritu*, is literalized by *El laberinto’s* explicit ability to, both magically yet unrealistically, inject the reality of 1940s Spain itself with fairytales hope/rebirth. This also literalizes or makes concrete (through presenting a “fantastic reality”) the philosophical idea that true reality is itself timeless.

7 This maquis serves not only as her new father figure but as the concrete or human link between Ana herself and her spiritual world-ghost-monster.
female transgression is what keeps such transgressions from becoming truly subversive, permanent and public, in *El laberinto*, even wishes that are carried out in secret can become powerful and effective, both privately and publicly, largely because they go unnoticed. In fact, secrecy and invisibility, though correctly portrayed as distinctive problems of the Franco Regime, are largely turned on their heads in this film. This is particularly true with respect to women, whose power is essentially invisible to the wretched Capitán Vidal and, for that matter, to all the men in his army. Yet, it is, in great part, Vidal’s lack of appreciation for female power and ability (and, to a lesser extent, that of the entire resistance) that leads to his demise.

In reality, the Captain, though he punishes, degrades, tortures and kills women, “reds”, and, essentially, anyone who disobeys or contradicts him, is ultimately undone by his own egotism, pride and, in particular, his disregard for the power of dissidents and females. Not only does his female maid, Mercedes, deceive him by covertly helping the *huidos* right under his nose, but when he finally catches her and attempts to torture her she escapes by stabbing him and then slicing his face. In addition to deceiving, eluding and wounding the captain on various occasions, Mercedes is also the character most directly responsible for his death in the film’s final minutes. Following *El espíritu*, *El laberinto* highlights the contradictions and ultimate self-destructiveness of Francoism, particularly in its underestimation of females. Yet, in *El espíritu* there is not a single enduring, unambiguous example of liberation or victory over Franco’s forces of terror.

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8 Though, technically, it is Mercedes’ brother who kills him, this in itself is highly significant for, in many ways, her desire to protect and ultimately be reunited with her brother represents Ofelia’s parallel relationship with her brother. Without the help of Mercedes and Ofelia, both the baby boy and Mercedes’ guerilla brother would be condemned to the wiles of Capitán Vidal (including suffering and death).
By contrast, *El laberinto* more immediately envisages both the downfall of the Francoism and the corresponding liberation of rebels, females and all other victims and outcasts.

In truth, the self-destructiveness of the dictatorship is not only concrete and unequivocal in this film, but is presaged early on. This happens, for example, when the Captain, while shaving, flicks his razor at his hand-mirror in a sudden burst of frustration or anger. Curiously, he nicks the mirror in a spot that corresponds (in his mirror reflection) to the same part of his cheek which Mercedes later severs with a dagger. Because he himself inflicts this pseudo-wound, it anticipates the ways in which his egotism, pride and, specifically, his scorn for females are, in essence, self-destructive. The Captain’s foolish underestimation of women is further highlighted (and related explicitly to his repression of memory) insomuch as the scar that Mercedes gives him leaks blood when he tries to numb the pain by drinking whiskey. The fact that the blood seeps through the bandage at this moment is significant in that the bandage (like the alcohol) represents his desire to cover up or forget the damage he received from a mere woman. More crucially, the fact that the blood oozes through the bandage at the precise

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9 Though the viewer witnesses several scenes in which the exceedingly vain Captain is shown admiring himself in this mirror while shaving himself slowly and tranquilly, this occasion stands out, for he not only suddenly and inexplicably thrashes at his own image but right before doing so, he becomes uncharacteristically nervous (after looking at his pocket-watch). It is worth noting that, as William Ellos efficiently summarizes, “In the first [Lacanian] or mirror stage the child utters single words or holophrastic utterances which serve as markers to separate the child from the world. Objective names of things do this quite well. The second stage is the Freudian-Lacanian castration awareness. All of the objectification of the mirror stage is summed up in a powerful phallic image of power. But with this comes a fear of losing this power, a fear of castration. Freud will make this a matter of crucial problematic. Lacan and Kristeva see it as productive and salvific. The trick is to note that it is quite all right not to have a phallus. The castration fear is empty. More than that it is fertile and productive. Recall that just at this time the child is dealing with distancing from the mother. She is now perceived as not possessing a phallus. But it is fine and healthy to be so. We do not have to leave the undifferentiated wealth of the maternal womb. We can remain and revel in the indeterminacy of its promise.” (*Narrative Ethics* 53). Yet, while this may be the case, and, more specifically, while the castration fear is, indeed, “empty”, it is certainly very real for those who value (and thus fear loss of) that which is itself essentially empty. The Captain’s need to (s)lash out at the mirror confirms just this.
moment he gulps down his drink implies that this urge to forget will, at some point, backfire—and as his eventual death confirms, it does.

In a more concrete way than the captain (yet perhaps more indirectly than Mercedes), Ofelia is equally pivotal, if not more, in bringing about the captain’s death. Like Mercedes, she achieves this by making positive use of her very marginality, invisibility and secrecy. Aside from the fact that Ofelia mimics much of Mercedes’ behavior and struggles throughout the film (both in reality and, even more so, through her fantasy world), many of her “spiritual tasks” actually anticipate Mercedes’ behavior rather than simply repeat it. Moreover, Ofelia protects Mercedes by helping conceal her true identity as a rebel informant. Contrary to the type of secrecy found in El espíritu (for example, Teresa’s furtive letter writing), Ofelia’s secret subversions have concrete and collectively productive effects in reality. Rather than suggesting her possible deviousness or lack of loyalty, Ofelia’s capacity to stealthily guard information underscores her loyalty and courage, whether to the faun and his magic world or to Mercedes and her political cause. Yet, Ofelia also shows her courage by directly eluding the Captain in the ‘real’ world; most notably, when she steals her baby brother from his office, drugs him, and forces him to chase her into her own territory/labyrinth. This act mirrors Mercedes’ flight into the woods after she too outwits and wounds the Captain. In both cases, these females were able to conquer him due to his inability to recognize their power as females.

It is, perhaps, for this same reason that Ofelia is guided, initially, into the spiritual/fantastic world by a female fairy who appears to her under the guise of a cricket-like insect. Ironically, it is this ugly, fragile, seemingly powerless creature that becomes a doorway into beauty, solidarity and true power. Similarly, though the faun, who
becomes Ofelia’s ‘spiritual mentor’, appears to be downright evil at times, both in action and appearance, his purpose is, paradoxically, to help her by acting as a sort of spiritual challenger or mirror of all that is corrupt in society and thus, potentially, in her. Because Ofelia must choose to be good rather than simply obey, the faun tests her integrity by setting up the various temptations and dangerous tasks which reflect the challenges Ofelia and her community face in reality. Though he gives Ofelia all the tools she needs to defeat the various demons or monsters (symbolic of her step-father), his final test is the most challenging since the faun himself (who Ofelia has learned to trust) must mimic the captain’s authoritarian impulses in order to put Ofelia’s sincerity to the test.

Sadly, Ofelia ultimately sacrifices herself as a result of this final trial; and yet, she does so precisely because she rejects the Francoist notion of sacrifice based on egotism, exclusion and blood rather than unity and love. Instead, Ofelia embraces an altruistic form of sacrifice in order to avoid the selfish sacrifice of her baby brother that the faun commands her to carry out. While Ofelia literally dies for her brother, Mercedes, on a parallel narrative, is rescued by her “red” comrades and reunited with her own brother, thus, offering hope, however ambiguously. In truth, Ofelia’s resistance throughout the film becomes central not only in bringing about the Captain’s death, but to some extent, in saving the entire community. Though Mercedes is technically saved by and reunited with her brother and his comrades when she escapes to the forest, it is not until Ofelia drugs the Captain, forces him to chase her, and, sadly, sacrifices herself that the entire community can (yet again) be saved, if only temporarily, by killing the Captain.

Accordingly, El laberinto, despite being structurally and even literally cyclical (as it begins and ends with Ofelia’s death), reveals dramatic change--even within the “real”
world. Unlike Ana, who is ultimately incapable of saving her *maquis* fugitive friend in *El espíritu*, both Ofelia and Mercedes save their brothers and, at least for the moment, an entire “red” community. Though Ofelia’s own cyclical death marks the beginning and end of the historical narrative and thus, presages the final extermination of everything she represents (including the entire community of reds/*huídos*), a fundamental, structural inversion takes place which enables *El laberinto* to offer far more hope than *El espíritu* in constructing a more utopic reality. This occurs on two levels. First, it occurs on a temporal/filmic level, as the faun orders Ofelia to complete her three tasks before the moon becomes full if she wishes to return to the Underworld. According to the logic of the faun’s temporality, Ofelia’s cyclical *return* to her true self and home is just what enables *change* to occur in the “real” world. In other words, it is Ofelia’s return to herself, symbolized by the full moon, that signals Ofelia’s spiritual fullness as well as the completion of her journey to womanhood. Ironically, this self-affirmation happens at the moment of Ofelia’s death, which is also, in fact, a moment of deep altruism.\(^\text{10}\)

\[^{10}\text{It is also important to consider here that the faun’s time (which becomes Ofelia’s time) is, contrary to the Captain’s, is guided not by a modern, man-made yet rigid and oppressive clock but rather by the moon itself—a symbol which is, simultaneously, “natural”, mystical, cyclical, and, as we have seen in Chapter 1, often associated with the feminine. More specifically, Ofelia’s use of this alternate world both incorporates yet resists the Captain’s oppressive/masculine/egotistical time, particularly since her actions in this fantastic world repeat, anticipate, and even potentially change the real future. In this sense, the time of Ofelia’s fantasy world is likened to mystical time—a place which, among other qualities, comments on the inseparability of past, present and future. Because mystical time is fundamentally simultaneous, we could argue that Ofelia’s ascent to a heavenly world at the film’s end reveals what the film envisions as our future paradise. In effect, the film ends by both looking towards the future (from an earthly, teleological perspective) while explaining how the future is, in a sense, already coexisting with us—yet, much like the blossoming flowers featured at the end, “visible only to those who know where to look”. This dual temporal function not only adds layers of meaning to the fusion of the fantastic and real worlds but, in turn, explains how the apparently contradictory opening phrase of *El espíritu* (<<Once upon a time>>, <<around 1940>>) is not at all contradictory from the perspective of simultaneous, mystic temporality. This also strengthens the link between Ofelia’s apparent metamorphosis and her capacity to remember since, from a mystical perspective, everything is, in essence, simultaneous, and thus, must return to that place where it began (or begins). In this light, the film’s cyclical structure is effectively optimistic. This is further reflected in the fact that the moon’s time is, like the film itself, cyclical—an attribute reinforced by the moon’s need to constantly “die” only to become renewed. This cycle of death/rebirth is further mirrored not only by the symbolic flowers but, ultimately, by Ofelia herself, who finally returns,
Yet, more fundamentally (though no less ironic), it is because of the fact that the real world is nestled into a wider fantasy frame that *El laberinto* offers the possibility, or at least hope, of radical change *on earth*. Rather than following *El espíritu*’s model of embedding fantasy within a bitterly real frame (which, given the historical reality of post-war Spain, must necessarily end more or less the same way it begins), *El laberinto*’s fantasy-world-frame ultimately points towards a future world and corresponding hope not limited to the temporal or physical borders of 1944 Spain. This is especially true if we consider the impact it has on its viewers, who may use the film itself in much the same way that Ofelia uses the fairytales she so compulsively reads as the model for her own fantasyland. In truth, this parallel between Ofelia’s use of fantasy and the viewers’ use of *El laberinto* is of utmost importance, for it radically influences the way we interpret the film. If achieving spirituality means death and sacrifice in the real world, then Ofelia is no different from Franco, who believes just that.

Yet, we know this is not the film’s intent or message, nor is it Ofelia’s. First of all, this would be inconsistent with the film itself, since Ofelia’s tasks (including her final one) all consist in disobeying Francoism, in great part, by uniting the spiritual-fantastic world with reality. Just as crucially, however, the spirit world is a fairytale-fantasy and thus, a *metaphorical* world. As such, it must be actively interpreted rather than simply taken at face value. For this reason, Ofelia’s death, though it reflects the actual historical,

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like the moon, to her original splendor. Though the moon, like Ofelia, is a characteristically feminine element, the fact that Ofelia must complete her tasks before the moon becomes *full* highlights the need for Ofelia to find a balance between linear and cyclical time and, by (symbolic) extension, between the so-called “feminine” and the “masculine” elements within herself in order to become truly redeemed or “reborn”. As noted in Chapter 1, a full moon is, in both Judeo-Christian and many other (primarily indigenous) religions, the symbol *part excellence* of the union between the symbolically masculine (sun) and the symbolically feminine (moon). This need for harmony between “male” and “female” elements is not only symbolically but literally reflected in Ofelia’s need and ability to be both sensitive and tough, creative and “dirty”, loving and courageous in order to complete her three essential tasks.
pessimism of the post-war era, also speaks of a renewal which is not only spiritual but which invites real humans from the real world to take off where Ofelia leaves off; that is, to use *El laberinto* itself as a stimulus to create a new world where fantasy and reality, the spiritual and the material, self and other meet in harmony.

On the other hand, though *El laberinto* maintains some of *El espíritu*’s necessary, interpretive ambiguity, and though it quite accurately portrays the real terror of post-war Spain through the evil incarnation of Capitán Vidal, *El laberinto*, nonetheless, loses much of *El espíritu*’s ultra-realist edge channeled through its oppressive silences and nuanced, ambiguous characters. Far from emphasizing the fluidity of identity and the monotony of life captured by *El espíritu*, *El laberinto* is marked by vertiginous action and largely polarized characters—characters who, especially within Ofelia’s inner fantasy world, morph into archetypal fairytale figures such as ogres, fauns and fairies. Though this polarization of good and evil simplifies the moral complexity of post-war Spanish identity (which perhaps only a Spaniard, like Erice, who lived through the entire dictatorship could fully appreciate), it is through *El laberinto*’s capacity to represent an epic struggle between good and evil that it is successful in demonstrating the psychological terror and warfare that occurred inside each Spaniard of the post-war period. In this way, it is actually by polarizing characters on a narrative level that, on a larger scale (and particularly with respect to the film’s viewers), unification occurs.

In fact, insomuch as fairytales are universal (or at least, transnational), this fairytale framework captures, to a great extent, the psychological battles that occur for any victim of institutionalized terror, trauma and/or exile (including del Toro’s own personal struggles); thus, rendering it accessible and relevant to a wide variety of
audiences. It is, furthermore, through the polarization of characters—for example, the traditional, obedient mother (Carmen) versus the radical, rebel female (Mercedes)—that Ofelia, the heroine, who is herself defined in contrast to the wicked captain/anti-hero, has the opportunity to make a choice as to which type of model to follow. By contrast, this capacity for choice is lacking in *El espíritu* precisely because all of its characters are so much the same—and it is *necessarily* lacking because choice is the very thing that authoritarian terror does not permit. Of course, as I will later explain in more detail, even in *El laberinto*, Ofelia must die for her choice not to sacrifice her brother, at least within the film’s inner historical narrative. Yet, though Ofelia dies, it is by dying that she passes the third, final and most important task of them all—that is, the need to disobey.

This need to disobey not only reflects Mercedes’ similar victory in the real world but the equally important, parallel need to remember which explicitly defines Ofelia’s mythic, fantasy world; for it is only by disobeying that Ofelia may remember and return to her Underworld palace. Needless to say, to the same degree that Ofelia’s heroism reflects her ability to remember, the captain’s anti-heroism represents his desire to forget. As a manifestation of ultimate evil, Capitán Vidal loses the realistic, even sympathetic complexity of Ana’s father, Fernando. From a fairytale perspective the wicked captain becomes the quintessential “Big Bad Wolf” or “Evil Step-mother” (turned

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11 In addition to the examples already given (for instance, the captain’s need to drink as a means of forgetting), the Captain’s desire to forget, particularly as a means of avoiding responsibility, plays out on a variety of levels, from the most personal plane to the most openly political. On a personal level, this tendency is revealed when a few guests inquire as to how the Captain met his new wife (Ofelia’s mother). He becomes nervous and irritated when his wife innocently explains that they knew each other while her first husband was still alive and immediately tries to silence her. When the guest further suggests that it is “extremely curious” that they “coincidentally” met up again after her first husband’s death, he becomes enraged, and instantly tries to change the conversation. Curiously enough, it is at this same dinner that the Captain denies that his father smashed his pocket-watch upon dying so that his son could remember not only the exact hour of his death but also how he died “valorously” in battle. The Captain, however, not only uses his father’s very same watch (as evidenced by the fact that the glass on its face was shattered and mended) but he repeats the same mentality through his explicit claim that dying in battle is the only respectful way to go—and by attempting to repeat his father’s wish to break his watch at the hour of death.
male). From a historical and even psychological perspective, he becomes a human embodiment of all the evil urges, impulses and realities that plague post-war Spain. He is the terror, the nightmare that haunts the Spaniards at night; and he is the ominous shadow that keeps them silent, mute and repressed throughout the day. Yet, for this very reason, Fernando’s transformation into the wicked captain makes sense, particularly if we consider the film’s overall need to avoid ambiguity—at least on the level of good vs. evil.

In effect, by presenting an epic battle between good and evil in an explicit, polarized yet poignant way, El laberinto succeeds not only in emphasizing the need for choice and hope, but also the need for remembrance. To a great extent, the film achieves this act of remembrance by portraying the actual, unspoken violence largely forgotten or repressed not only by the civilian survivors of post-war Spain depicted in El espíritu, but perhaps even more so by many contemporary Spaniards. Accordingly, the centrality of memory to the film (and its relationship to fantasy) is highlighted from the very first scene when Ofelia’s biological father’s death is explained through the fairytale myth featuring a Princess who, exiled from her King-Father’s subterranean paradise, is doomed to roam the earth. It is here that she becomes blinded by the sun (a recurrent male symbol) and consequently loses her memory. Thus, it is obvious from the very start that the essential spiritual challenge for Ofelia is to open her eyes and remember this other, truer world. Yet, because fantasy and reality are so intertwined, the need to remember one world becomes just as important as the need to remember the other.

Thus, this film is not only about the need for Ofelia to remember or even for the Spaniards, as a whole, to remember the brutalities of post-war Spain. Just as fundamentally, it is about the need for them—and for the whole world--to remember who
they are as individuals, so that they can think for themselves, question what they are told and ultimately follow not what they fear but what they know deep inside to be right and wrong. This underscores yet another of *El laberinto’s* advantages over *El espíritu*.

**The Con-text and Non-text of (Dis)obedience**

To be sure, as a contemporary production made (in 2007) by a foreign exile and framed in a ‘universal’ fairytale accessible to anyone, young or old, Spanish or not, *El laberinto* urges the world to remember not on one but two levels. While *El laberinto* asks Ofelia and all Spaniards to remember in a way that transcends the particularities of their cultural traumas or terrors, it also incites them to remember the very specificity of their traumatic past. Similarly, the film reminds the world itself of what it chose to forget when it turned its back on Spain’s Civil War. Not surprisingly, when asked by Terry Gross (NPR) to explain why he picked the setting of post-war Spain to tell his tale, one of del Toro’s primary reasons was that the Spanish Civil War was forgotten by the rest of the world.

He adds that 1944 was a particularly interesting year since the Spanish resistance was working with the allies to vanquish fascism throughout Europe, sabotaging mining operations, and much more. In return, the resistance in Spain expected help from the allies, which it never received. However, not only was the Spanish Civil War essentially forgotten, but, he adds, internationally, all of a sudden it was better to make diplomatic ties with Franco to defeat the USSR than to help the resistance. Thus, by making a film that speaks not only to Spaniards but, to a large extent the world, *El laberinto* not only gains modern-day relevance, but it stimulates the world to forge a better future precisely by remembering the forgotten ghosts of the past.
At the same time, as del Toro himself notes, one of his reasons for choosing authoritarian Spain as the backdrop for his film is because, as a Mexican, he grew up in a climate of utter corruption and violence where it was a commonplace, even daily experience for him to witness people being murdered on the streets. He explains that, “Society has a certain political strata, and some of the police are as corrupt as you can imagine. And once the rock is lifted and you see the underbelly, you never see reality the same.” (“Fresh Air with Terry Gross”). This violence and corruption took on a more personal, perhaps even traumatic quality when del Toro’s father was kidnapped and held for ransom in 1997 and released after 72 days (only after del Toro and his brothers paid up). It is because of this incident that del Toro, out of fear for his own safety and that of his family, became a so-called ‘voluntary exile’, and has remained in the US ever since.

At a later point in this same interview del Toro explains that he remembers going to the bank (during his father’s abduction), but that he wasn’t able to open a safety deposit box even though he had a key because they were afraid that if his father didn’t survive the kidnapping, they wouldn’t repay the loan he had taken—which, he adds, is completely illegal. When del Toro questioned the authority of the person who refused to grant him access, he was told, “I just follow orders, I don’t make them.” Del Toro’s own reaction to this excuse is that he finds that kind of obedience, whether political, religious or anything else, to be “such an absolutely despicable cowardice”. Not surprisingly, for del Toro, *El laberinto* is primarily a film about disobedience and choice--in fact, the protagonist’s ultimate choice *is* to disobey. It is also worth noting that, according to del Toro, not only is Capitán Vidal “inhuman” but he makes the others around him inhuman by robbing them of their very capacity for choice. This becomes especially relevant if we
consider that, though the various monsters which Ofelia must defeat are modeled off the captain, the reason why her triumph is so heroic and important is because she herself, like any “victim” of state terror, is, at some moment, asked to accept, perhaps even participate in this very terror. In exposing this, El laberinto becomes as much about inward psychic processes (and broader ‘universal’ themes) as it is about the reality of post-war Spain.

In fact, this further clarifies not only why the use of a fairytale frame (which, in accordance with del Toro’s own life, gives a more global relevance to the specific terrors of the Spanish Civil War) but also why the use of monsters is so appropriate to this film. Aside from the fact that del Toro claims to have found many parallels with monsters throughout his life, he adds that, “I think monsters were created to explain the universe around us--and when we became civilized the universe within us.”12 Of course, I am quick to add that, both within the context of the film and within the context of del Toro’s own life, monsters, fantasy and the corresponding pain they reflect, are just as useful a means of changing the world as they are for comprehending it. In reality, the idea that monsters and ghosts mirror our realities (and, in particular, our crises and traumas, both inward and outward) is one that recurs in mostly all del Toro’s films from Mimic to Blade II to El espinazo del diablo (The Devil’s Backbone) to El laberinto.

Often, the power of these monsters flows from their ability to mimic our suppressed errors, flaws and responsibilities (this would correspond, for example, to the monsters reflective of the captain in El laberinto). Yet other times, they reflect the very beauty we repress due to external terror--and thus, wrongly view as monstrous (much like El laberinto’s cricket, fairies and faun). Much of the beauty and power of these monsters

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12 Similarly, del Toro adds that fantasy (and, in particular, fairytales) are attractive to him because they reflect the way we humans, even from the time we are children, comprehend reality.
derives, as we have already begun to see in this film, from their very state of brokenness, fragility, and abjection. Indeed, this may also account for del Toro’s fascination with insects both in *El laberinto* and in other films. In any event, this paradox, that beauty, renewal and power may come out of alienation, violence, death and fragility not only reflects del Toro’s predilection for what he calls “graveyard poetry” but also his belief that “We live our lives believing we are mortal and we are not, and our lives actually gain more sense when we believe in pain and death and mortality. I believe it makes us better people when we connect to this dark side. I believe so.” (Fresh Air with Terry Gross).

In fact, this belief may not only have influenced del Toro’s concern with showing how hope can sprout out of darkness and pain (particularly through monsters) but also his decision to use the specific context of 1944 Spain for his film. In speaking with Terry Gross (Fresh Air), del Toro explains that 1944 was an ideal year in which to set the film since, among other reasons, he wanted to show a resistance past its prime. Five years after the end of the Civil War, the resistance was certainly not at its height, economically or otherwise. In fact, by 1944 it had, in many ways, already hit rock bottom (and, as del Toro reminds us, the resistance had by then sunk to its lowest point of disability).

Perhaps more crucially, del Toro’s attitude about hope coming from the hopeless and about beauty and pain being intertwined reveal his own ability to learn from his own experiences of trauma and exile. It was, after all, his grandmother’s attempt to suffocate his active childhood imagination that not only led him to identify with monsters but, most

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13 Curiously, del Toro’s own interest in insects (evident in mostly all of his films) dates back to his childhood in Mexico, where he was surrounded by (often enormous) insects, which he learned to both admire and fear. He adds that, “Listening to bible tales, I always though that archangels would look like insects, because they were the tough guys of God’s army”, because they were “shelled, armored creatures” (Fresh Air with Terry Gross) and perhaps also because they evoke an almost primordial, forgotten charm (which he indirectly attributes to them through his portrayal of them in his various movies).
likely, inspired him to imagine his own magic faun. As a kid, del Toro had a ‘lucid dream’\textsuperscript{14} of a faun that came out from behind his grandmother’s armoire at midnight almost every night—but, he adds, it only happened in that room and it only happened at midnight. He notes that the faun in this dream is the faun that they designed for the film. At the same time, he also confesses that growing up with his grandmother made him feel like an outcast, and that anything that resembled imagination she found to be the work of the devil. His grandmother was, in his own words, “like Piper Laurie in Carrie. She was obsessed with purity. When I was a kid she used to put upside down bottle caps in my little shoes for me to mortify the flesh as I walked to school.” She also terrified him by introducing him, at a young age, to the concept of original sin, hell, purgatory, and all that awaited him after death. She even tried to exorcise him twice for drawing monsters rather than “beautiful things”. And yet, he confesses, it was fantasy that, despite getting him into even more trouble, allowed “his brain” to survive. (Fresh Air with Terry Gross)

Indeed, del Toro’s attraction to monstrosity, though viewed as heretical by his grandmother, brought him closer both to himself and to a deep feeling of spirituality. Curiously, not only \textit{El laberinto} but virtually all del Toro’s films feature or make references to Catholicism, the religion of his childhood—yet they do so in nonconformist, even “monstrous” ways. For del Toro, “There’s a point in our childhood when literature and fantasy have as strong a presence in our soul as religion would have in later days. And it’s a spiritual reality as strong as when people say they accept Jesus in their heart”. He adds that as much as people accept “Jesus” in their heart, he accepts ‘monsters’ in his. It is no wonder then, that what Ofelia sees is, for del Toro, “a fully blown, spiritual reality

\textsuperscript{14} Del Toro, who says that he has often experienced lucid dreaming (and was especially prone to this experience as a child), describes the process as going to sleep and waking up in the dream in the exact same situation that he was when he went to sleep. (Fresh Air)
and not just a reflection of the world around her”. He confides that, in his eyes, she *really* turns into the princess of the underworld. Of course, at the most fundamental level, this is only possible because she uses the very *real* terror, repression and consequent feelings of powerlessness and alienation as a stimulus for igniting her imagination and, in turn, for transforming darkness and emptiness into fullness and light.

Not surprisingly, yet another reason why del Toro claims to have picked the exact year of 1944 is because, as he asserts in an interview from ign.com, this was an especially pivotal time not only for Spain but for the world itself (due to WWII). As he puts it, “Both Spain and the world are at a crossroads. Likewise, each of the characters is at a crossroads”. More specifically, “The girl is on the crossroad of becoming a woman, the captain is on the crossroad of suffocating a rebellion and the daughter is on the crossroad of either becoming a hero or becoming a full coward”. Appropriately, the magic book the faun gives Ofelia when he meets her (and which, despite serving as a guide, rather significantly, turns out to be blank), is also named “the book of the crossroads” (“el libro de las encrucijadas”). The fact that the characters are all at a crossroads is vital not only because of what it says about the year, 1944, but because of what it implies about the condition of exile and its relationship both to the film and to this dissertation as a whole.

One of this dissertation’s most recurrent concerns or themes is how exile serves both as a place of safety and of greater fracture and alienation. Yet, it is for both these reasons that the exilic situation offers enormous potential for a type of renewal that, much like Ofelia’s encounter with her Otherworld, reaches both deep within the individual while simultaneously reaching out to the world and to other human beings. It is, in short, from this place of exile that a space of both liberation and integration can be found.
This state of exile is reflected not only in *El laberinto*’s need for a fairytale frame—which, by virtue of being the outer frame, essentially transcends the particularity of any given historical context (whether Mexican, Spanish or anything else)—but also in the degree of violence, death and isolation that Ofelia experiences in her path to becoming a woman. In truth, the disadvantage of the exilic experience is, as both this film and its making suggest, its ultimate (potential) advantage— for the exile belongs nowhere and thus, potentially everywhere. The story of an exile is always the story of an outcast, the story of someone who finds himself at a crossroads because he has been forsaken, disillusioned, betrayed by his very own society and culture. Thus, the guidance and safety that come from the illusion of having a single, secure path or a protective, omniscient society with just institutions has effectively fallen. Yet the story of exile is also, necessarily, the story of someone who, as a person who belongs nowhere in particular, must find a way to remake himself on his own as he chooses his own paths. The exile is, to be sure, at this very crossroads of which del Toro speaks; and, as del Toro so emphatically puts it, he must make a choice. Thus, the story of the exile is, just like the story of Ofelia, one of both abandonment and self-affirmation, isolation and reconnection, repression and choice. Though the isolation is extreme, the chances for an even greater connection and self-affirmation are also extreme—extremely positive.

Because *El laberinto* depicts the same sort of crises that Erice’s *El espíritu* does—but with the additional outer fantasy tale of successful rebellion, hope and choice—both del Toro’s identity as a non-Spaniard as well as his feeling of deep personal connection to the post-war period of Spain become equally crucial factors in making sense of the film, its context, its mode of production and even the condition of exile itself, among other
socio-cultural dilemmas. By considering these factors, we learn, for example, that modern Mexico may, in some respects, share more in common with post-war Spain than perhaps even contemporary Spain. That being said, del Toro also admits that part of his interest in Spanish authoritarianism is a result of Mexico’s very willingness, in the 30s and 40s, to open its borders to exiles of the Spanish Civil War—leading him to befriend prominent Spanish exiles and to learn about their struggles. In fact, Mexico is one of the countries most popular for offering refuge to these exiles. As we will continue to see (specifically, when I explain the influence of Mexican fantasy film on del Toro’s style), both his negative and positive experiences of Mexico/Mexican culture shape his work.

Yet, of all these experiences, that which strikes me as most important, even more important, perhaps, than del Toro’s physical exile, is the alienating influence or ‘inner exile’ that his extremely conservative and religious grandmother had on him as a child, and how this influence may have stimulated his interest and even personal connection to monsters, in general, and to the Franco Regime, in particular. Certainly, though any authoritarian regime requires blind obedience, terror and trauma, the terror of the Franco Regime is specific in its distortion of spirituality itself, as it is based on the suppression of fantasy and choice, the degradation of the material, and the analogous need for sacrifice.

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15 This fact becomes especially relevant when we consider both the influence of conservative Catholicism as well as the death, corruption and corresponding tendency to blindly submit to power and authority which defined del Toro’s impression and experience of Mexico as well as his consequent distrust in institutions.

16 In his interview with Terry Gross, del Toro explains that right after the death of Franco, in the 1980s, there was an explosion of underground comic books from Spain that dealt with the war in a harrowing manner. He remembers reading those comics and seeing those movies, and it was from this experience that he began to realize that Mexico had a strong link to Spain since they gave refuge to many of its refugees. As a teenager, he also became strongly influenced by several key figures in cinema in Mexico. One of them, Emilio García Riera, who happened to be the most prestigious film historian of the time, became like a father figure to del Toro. He also talked about his life and how the war affected him and his family. Del Toro also became close to his wife and daughter and, in a way, became part of that whole family.

17 Curiously, del Toro sets yet another film, El espinazo del diablo (The Devil’s Backbone) in post-war, (1939) Spain. This film is also interesting in that it too may be considered a rewrite of El espíritu. Del Toro’s obvious and personal connection to the Spanish post-war becomes even more undeniable if we consider that all his other films take place in either Mexico or the US—the two places he has actually lived.
If we keep in mind both del Toro’s grandmother’s attempts to suppress his imagination, for example, by exorcising him, and her desire to torture and degrade his flesh (by making him walk to school with overturned bottle-caps in his shoes), it becomes obvious that, in many ways, she represents much of the same sort of Francoist repression that *El laberinto* so poignantly captures in the figure of Capitán Vidal. In fact, though del Toro compares his grandmother to Piper Laurie from *Carrie* (1976), perhaps a still more suitable comparison would be Ofelia’s own wicked stepfather. Yet, before more fully exploring this connection, it will help for me to more adequately elaborate a few crucial characteristics of Francoism that are both reflected and, to a great extent, subverted in this film. Above all, it is essential to keep in mind that authoritarian terror under Franco is based on the degradation of the material as a means of accessing the spiritual\(^\text{18}\).

This split carries with it the need to degrade all Others (in particular, communists, feminists, Masons, Jews and all “foreign” elements imported to Spain) insomuch as they are deemed responsible for the moral depravation, vulgar materialism, and decadence of the *Patria*. Though all internal otherness is explained, through Francoist rhetoric, as the result of foreign influence or contagion, it must be eliminated, often through brute force. As Michael Richards comments, “For Franco, there could be ‘no redemption without blood’”\(^{14}\), a problem which not only reinforces the self/other, material/spiritual, and other splits, but also highlights the centrality of gruesome sacrifice

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\(^{18}\) As Michael Richards observes, under Franco, “The country was to be remade in the image of the myths of the Spanish essence, encapsulated in the ‘Crusade of Franco’ to save Christian civilization as represented by reconquering Catholic Spain. In defence of this essentialist conceptualization of the *Patria*, the idealized division of the people into ‘Spain’ and ‘Anti-Spain’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, was exacerbated by the regime. The sin of association with the ideas and organizations of the Republic was not only to be confessed but recanted, suppressed and negated at a personal level. An associated dualism between the spiritual self and the ‘evil body’ to be punished was also imposed as a daily psychological torture, ‘with the deliberate purpose of transforming the Spanish masses into a herd of mutilated beings’.” (*A Time of Silence* 7).
to the Franco Regime and its implementation of terror\textsuperscript{19}. Furthermore, this destruction of all that is imagined as “Other” or detrimental to National Catholicism requires not only the physical destruction of human beings and their so-called “propaganda” but also the erasure of history itself. As we have seen in Chapter 1, in place of history, Francoism constructs a “timeless”, eternal notion of the nation grounded in false unity (that is, one that is both exclusive and repressive). In order to re-construct this unifying myth Franco harks back to the time of the conquistadors as emblematic of the true Spanish essence\textsuperscript{20}.

All of these characteristics of Francoism are manifested in \textit{El laberinto} through Ofelia’s stepfather. Both through actions and words, he perfectly embodies the attitude that a clean and healthy Spain depends on the extermination of others, especially the ‘reds’. His exclusionary vision and disdain for all forms of alterity as well as his belief in the need to separate the physical from the spiritual are necessarily implied through his involvement in Franco’s military. They are also more directly suggested by his thirst for blood, his distaste for Ofelia’s interest in fairytales and his analogous need to crush the symbolic chalk which enables her to link the worlds of fantasy and reality, among many other examples, culminating in his destruction of Ofelia’s “magic (mandrake) root.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} As Richards points out, “Symbolic renewal meant ‘purification’ and destruction. Falangists were charged with ‘the obligation of persecuting and destroying Judaism, freemasonry, Marxism and separatism’”\textsuperscript{(9)}. He also adds that, “The regenerationist symbolism of essential Spanishness coincided with the ascetic regimen that Francoism imposed. Communism was the ‘gravedigger of history’. A whole way of life, culture tradition itself was at stake. By the time of the Civil War these essences had almost been lost…and were only to be recovered at the expense of an enormous sacrifice. One of the foundational principles of the Falange, the Spanish fascist party, was a ‘revaluation of violence’. War was seen as an ‘element of progress’ and violence as ascetic, as ‘creative and purifying’.”(\textit{A Time of Silence} 3-4)

\textsuperscript{20} As Richards further explains, “The symbols used by Francoism were borrowed from the fifteenth century era of Ferdinand and Isabella, when Spain had before ‘triumphed over malignant foreign powers’, when Islam was defeated and the Jews expelled.”(\textit{A Time of Silence} 9)

\textsuperscript{21} This root is a gift to Ofelia from the faun. She is instructed to use it to save her baby brother and pregnant mother (who has fallen morbidly ill), by caring for it as if it were human. Ofelia’s methods of caring for the “magic root” parallel the doctor’s means of caring for her mother in the real world. Miraculously, it appears that Ofelia’s magic treatment is working. This is further confirmed by the fact that
On the other hand, the Francoist notion that the salvation of the country can only be achieved through violence, blood and the sacrifice of Others is reflected not only in the Captain’s extreme violence (which includes torture), but more specifically, through his attitude that fighting and killing is, to use his own words, “la única forma decente de morir” (“the only decent way to die”). It is essential to note that when the super-macho captain finds that his pregnant wife’s health is in danger, he tells the doctor that if he has to choose between saving his wife and his son, he should save the son, for only his son will bear his name and legacy. When the doctor responds by asking him what makes him think his child will be male, the captain scornfully retorts, “No me jodas”/“Don’t fuck with me”. In this way, we see how egoism, machismo, blood and sacrifice, particularly at the expense of communists and women, are central to authoritarian thought and rhetoric.

The value the Captain places on his son also points towards another key aspect of Francoism—namely, time and, as I will later explain, (symbolic) language. Like Franco, the Captain, is obsessed with linear, clockwork, “masculine” time. This is communicated through his fixation with repairing, carrying and obsessively looking at his pocket-watch, which he repeatedly uses to harass those who fail to accomplish certain tasks within his own established time limits. In this way, the clock embodies Vidal’s egocentric desire to control the time of others by imposing his own temporal standards. However, Captain Vidal, like Franco, is also concerned with making his own time or legacy of violence and exclusion eternal. This is represented by the fact that, like his own father before him, the Captain’s last (dying) request is that his pocket-watch be smashed at the moment of his death. This need to be remembered by his son is emblematic of the Captain’s desire to be

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it is right after Carmen casts the root into the fire (at the dramatic urging of the Captain) that she begins to bleed profusely, goes into labor and dies.
regenerated through his offspring—in fact, his desire that the clock be *shattered* specifically comments on the extent to which he wants his son to be little more than a clone of himself--stagnant and eternal. On the other hand, it also expresses the paradoxical fact that, both for Franco and the captain, the capacity for their own vision of themselves, their country and their legacy to be remembered is largely dependent on the erasure of true historical fact and memory. Indeed, this is further symbolized by the captain’s refusal to discuss or remember his own father, who similarly smashed his clock at the moment of his death—a fact which the captain denies (see footnote 11).

As we will continue to see, remembrance, for the Captain, serves the very opposite function that it does for Ofelia. Of course, the fact that the “reds” refuse to grant the Captain this last wish provides hope, however ambiguously, that his legacy will not endure\(^\text{22}\). Still, the Captain’s use of his pocket-watch is very tightly tied to the explicit and chilling violence that occurs throughout the film and which will continue to occur long after the year of his death in 1944. Every time he looks down at his pocket-watch with a scowl, we viewers can anticipate a violent outburst such as the one Ofelia and her mother receive when they arrive late to their new home. Not surprisingly, Ofelia encounters blatant violence related to time-limits in her fantasy world; for example, when the “pale monster” chases her and almost kills her while her magic hourglass runs out of sand (much like the Captain chases and attempts to kill Mercedes in the real world).

Nevertheless, as suggested not only by the film’s recurrent womb and moon imagery, but more crucially by its eventual dominance over macho repression, gender

\(^{22}\) At the same time, however, Mercedes’ extreme response to the Captain that “he [the son] will not even know your name” implies that the “reds” have, albeit for more noble purposes, repeated the mistake of erasing history. Indeed, as Ofelia’s tasks demonstrate, history must be confronted no matter how ugly.
binaries and linear time\(^2^3\), Ofelia’s transformation, unlike Ana’s, ends not in her ability to cave into societal repression (or its source in Franco’s paternalistic rule) but, quite the contrary, it affirms a full and genuine transformation by means of what Julia Kristeva calls the “maternal receptacle”. This is evidenced by the fact that all Ofelia’s tasks take place underground and oblige her to enter a series of underground “wombs”, and which is foreshadowed by the fact that she is first introduced to the faun by entering a large womblike pit at the center of a labyrinth. The first “womb” figures in Ofelia’s first task which requires that she enter a metaphorical “tree of life” which has turned into a “tree of death” precisely because the evil step-father (toad) lies deep in the tree’s roots-womb-cervix. The womblike imagery is reinforced not only through the visual portrayal of the tree trunk, which is separated at the bottom in a way which resembles a giant vagina or labia, but also because, once Ofelia enters, she must crawl like an infant through narrow underground tunnels--which strongly evoke the inside of a vagina.\(^2^4\)

Similarly, in her second task, Ofelia will be required to enter into an underground lair where she will battle the infamous “pale man”, who also represents her stepfather. All of this culminates in Ofelia’s final task, where she must defy the faun, as he mirrors the captain’s demand for blind obedience. Except for the final task, which significantly

\(^2^3\) The moon not only governs time for Ofelia in her magical realm (and symbolically becomes full at the hour of her death) but it also appears, in the form of a tattoo, on her left shoulder (reflecting the faun’s remark that Ofelia would find a mark on her left shoulder which would confirm her status as princess). Ofelia first notices the moon-shaped mark in the bathroom mirror as her mother yells for her to hurry up with her bath, so that she can put on her new dress, which, she adds, will make her “look like a princess”. In response, Ofelia softly whispers to herself, “una princesa”? “a princess”. Though Ofelia echoes her mother’s words, in the process, she subversively transforms them. What her words imply is that she does not need to look like a princess, for, in truth, she is a princess; and she needs no dress to prove this.

\(^2^4\) Though Ofelia’s battle with the gluttonous toad who lives deep inside this ‘vagina’ would, at first glance, seem to support an Oedipal reading of Ofelia’s need to destroy or castrate her evil step-father, we must recall, as discussed in Chapter 1, that incestuous symbolism in literature is almost always metaphorical rather than literal. This is true not only because, when directed at the mother, it literally reflects re-entry into the womb (and thus, what Kristeva defines as “rebirth”), but even when directed at, for example, one’s father it signifies the transgression of the symbolic law itself--and thus, this very desire to be transformed.
occurs at the mouth of the ‘vagina’/pit, all Ofelia’s tasks require that she enter the bowels of the earth (construed as the “maternal receptacle”), where she must defeat her wicked stepfather in all his monstrous emanations. Yet, Ofelia’s final task differs from the others since, not only does she die, but in dying the blood from Ofelia’s corpse flows into the ‘vagina’. This reversal of the maternal paradigm, where blood flows out of the vagina at the moment of birth, ironically reflects Ofelia’s full transformation into womanhood—as a creative, birthing agent. As reflective of her unselfish sacrifice, Ofelia is capable of remembering/re-birthing herself through her very capacity to creatively “birth” others.

This, of course, is presaged by the faun’s decision to refer to Ofelia in the second person plural (vosotros) form, which he consistently does from the moment he first meets her. In truth, this use of the vosotros reinforces not only Ofelia’s fairytale status as arch-heroine but also reminds the reader of the film’s deeper message about the inseparability of self and other. After all, this “fantasy” world is not, technically, Ofelia’s own world, for, though it is, in essence, her own creation, as the various parallels between fantasy and reality suggest, it reflects the real struggles that involve not only Mercedes but many other figures, whether wicked or good. Just as crucially, the faun’s need to address Ofelia in the vosotros reflects the fact that she becomes capable of representing female generative power or the ‘maternal receptacle’ only because she manages to identify with her entire community, whether male or female. Not only does she sacrifice herself for a male, but she explodes the very categories of female and male behavior as she defiantly and literally casts off the female roles and clothes cut out for her by a misogynist, repressive society. Rather than wear pretty silk dresses and remain locked in her bedroom, she chooses to run away, tear off her clothes, and dirty herself while battling
swarms of insects, an enormous slimy toad, a terrifying pale-man and, eventually, her own stepfather. As we will continue to see, all of Ofelia’s tasks, whether they take place in fantasy or reality, require, much like Mercedes’ tasks in the “real” world, a heroism and valiance commonly associated with masculinity, especially as defined by Francoism. Thus, as it turns out, Kristeva’s “maternal receptacle” is essentially androgynous.25

Yet, just as the film suggests that socially defined ‘masculine’ qualities should not be erased but rather balanced with the equally artificial ‘feminine’ ones, this is also true with respect to time. Though Ofelia’s cyclical time triumphs over the captain’s rigidly oppressive ‘masculine’ time, just as she neither rejects heroism nor valor nor the need to privilege action over vanity--all commonly associated with masculinity--she is no less attached to the concept of progress. Though the film begins where it ends, with Ofelia bleeding to death over her magic pit, the following scene begins as a flashback which then unfolds chronologically throughout the rest of the film. This suggests that though cyclical, feminine, and even eternal/simultaneous time prevail, clockwork/manmade time can serve an equally useful purpose as it coexists alongside it. Whereas in the beginning, a trembling Ofelia looks terrified as she lies dying at the mouth of the labyrinth in a green sickly haze; the final scene, though it returns to this same moment/place, adds a fleeting smile to Ofelia’s lips right before her spirit ascends to an-Otherworld.

This smile is accompanied by a bright golden glow that signals Ofelia’s entry into paradise. Thus, Ofelia’s journey is, in a sense, both cyclical and linear. In this way, El laberinto not only presents fresh and stimulating views on temporality, but it rejects the postmodern assumption that selfhood is a mere construct. Or rather, it suggests that

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25 For Kristeva, becoming a full subject of either gender requires blending the thetic with the semiotic.
though the societal self may, indeed, be a social construct, behind the shells or masks of conformity, a deeper, truer self yearns to be remembered, reawakened and refined.

Thus, despite the very real horrors expressed in this film, it shows how these horrors may be transformed through a mere child—who, as we will continue to see, is the only character to *fully* resist Francoist logic. Yet, it is equally imperative to consider that the captain’s severely warped, repressive and unimaginative notion of spirituality, is, to a lesser extent, reflected in all the adults’ disbelief in magic/fantasy. Not even the defiant Mercedes, who, nevertheless, claims she believed in fauns and fairies as a child, trusts in the power of fantasy. Thus, in a way that is highly reminiscent of Ana’s ambiguously hopeful characterization in *El espíritu*, the fact that Ofelia, a mere child, is able to fuse fantasy and reality in subversive, even spiritual ways can be read as both optimistic (in the sense that if a mere child can do it, anyone can) but also pessimistic insomuch as it implies that the process of “growing up” is, at least within the context of post-war Spain, a process of disillusionment, even blindness. At the same time, if we consider del Toro’s own personal traumas and experiences growing up in Mexico, it becomes clear that, like Erice, he is a living example that it is possible to physically survive terror *without* losing one’s true self or sacrificing one’s spirit to fear and repression--at least not permanently.

In effect, it is through the making of the film that del Toro’s own traumas, much like Ofelia’s, are transformed. Yet, I would like to jump back to these words, “not permanently”, as they suggest that both del Toro and Erice may have actually ‘lost themselves’, much like Ofelia does as she is exiled from her father’s kingdom, before re-discovering themselves. Though Erice technically directs *El espíritu* within the temporal and physical borders of the regime, as noted in Chapter 1, the regime of the 70s (when
the film was made) is significantly different from that of the early 40s. In short, both directors create their work from a distance that enables them to look upon their own experiences both from the inside, as people who have intimately felt what their characters feel, yet also from the outside. It would perhaps be reductive to say, as is so popular in trauma theory, that they produce their works from a “safe” distance, though this is also somewhat true. More precisely, their distance, more than being “safe”, is productive, for it allows them to put their experiences in perspective with the hindsight of someone who has learned from the past and who sees, so to speak, a bigger picture--specifically, one that comprehends both childhood and adulthood.26 In short, the directors’ distance from the terror they portray suggests that, perhaps, they did forget themselves in much the same way that Ofelia lost or forgot who she was. Yet, if this is true, it reinforces my earlier point that, even more vital than del Toro’s physical exile is the inner exile brought about in his youth—above all, through the repression of his Franco-like grandmother.

As should now be obvious, for personal as much as historical reasons, it is highly fitting that del Toro choose a fairytale frame in which to situate both his own story of terror, trauma and exile and that of 1944 Spain. Specifically, his choice of a fairytale frame that is both exilic and anarchic (rather than dogmatic), and yet, for this reason, powerfully spiritual, is especially appropriate. Just as El laberinto turns monsters, insects and, essentially, everything abject, ugly and powerless into its opposite, it does the same with spirituality, fantasy and “low culture”, which are placed at the same level, if not higher, than traditional religion, politics and “high culture”.27 In this way, the film is

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26 I might also add that, though the girl protagonists are the heroines of both films, the other “supporting” characters are not just secondary but literally support the girls’ leading roles.

27 Del Toro explains that, for him, there are two kinds of fantasy stories or fairytales—those pro-establishment and those against it. The type that interests him are those that generate what he calls “a
anarchic not simply because Ofelia blatantly defies the pseudo-spiritual values of her stepfather, but because, in so doing, she blends those very binaries and even genres that supposedly cannot be mixed. Yet, above all, it is an anarchic struggle because a mere girl, accompanied by mere fairies, insects, fantasy and chalk is ultimately capable of defeating a grown man armed with real soldiers, horses, strategy and guns. This is not only anarchic, but, more importantly, it is an anarchy with power and purpose.

The power and purpose behind Ofelia’s spiritual anarchy is reinforced by the fact that fantasy is portrayed not as an escape from terror but, on the contrary, as a means of remembering the past while powerfully influencing the present and future. The fact that the film is filled with biblical references—which it, nevertheless, uses in blatant contrast to the dogmatic interpretations wielded by the Franco Regime—is equally crucial, for it not only reflects del Toro’s ability to mix and equate what are commonly assumed to be “high” and “low” categories but it also corresponds to this specific sort of anarchy which affirms the self, the present, the future not by rejecting the other, the past or the old but by reweaving them into a synthetic tapestry which is both new and old, traditional and innovative. Indeed, it is important to remember that Ofelia’s world-vision promotes a form of anarchy that is radically anarchic for the very reason that, as her final sacrifice suggests, it cares for others as much as it does for the self.

In truth, the film’s use of fantasy enables it to rewrite traditions as diverse as the bible, Erice’s *El espíritu*, and the vast array of fairytales and children’s tales used for the liberating sense of anarchy*. He also explains that those are the movies completely in favor of the monster. Because of his sympathy for monsters (which, like insects, he has felt a deep connection to since childhood), he tries to make the monster as attractive or beautiful as possible—“not in a miss universe way but in a nature way” (Terry Gross).

28 As should already be quite obvious, the captain’s world of obedience, though it pretends to stand on the highest, sturdiest values of religion, order, humility and sacrifice, is, ironically, far more self-interested and irresponsible than Ofelia’s more anarchic world.
film. Though del Toro makes no specific reference in any of his interviews to his use of biblical imagery, he does emphasize that for him, fantasy should not be put below other, more ‘serious’ domains like politics or religion. As a close examination of the film reveals, del Toro does not at all attempt to degrade biblical traditions by mixing them with “low” genres but rather, enhances them by the very act of “contaminating” them with monsters, fairies and heroic little girls. To be sure, even del Toro’s style resists the Francoist phobia of foreign contagion and impurity—which brings me to my final point.

It is important to consider that del Toro’s eclectic style and easy accessibility to a wide range of modern audiences are due not only to the biographical experiences and influences already mentioned (for example, his experience of exile) but in particular to his broad exposure, influence and affinity for Hollywood, mass culture, comics as well as popular trends in Mexican cinema. In his interview with Terry Gross, del Toro explains that “Mexican fantasy films are a completely different beast. They have an almost free-style association.” He asserts that, “It can go from one style or genre to another without any semblance of a transition”. This style has, he unabashedly admits, deeply influenced his work. At the same time, the ease with which he embraces “low culture” has much to do with American influences—*Hellboy* is, after all, based on an American comic. A quick look at del Toro’s work, which includes Hollywood films such as *Hellboy*, *Mimic* and *Blade II*, reveals that, though he is pretty consistently attracted to insects, monsters,

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29 According to del Toro, though there is no specific fairytale on which *El laberinto*’s fairytale narrative is based, he tried to make a popery of themes and threads in fairytales that repeat themselves again and again, for example, in tales such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and more generally, in the works of authors like Hans Christian Anderson, Oscar Wilde, and in classic children’s literature such as Charles Dickens’. On the special feature disk from *El laberinto*, he also equates Ofelia to Little Red Riding Hood.

30 Admittedly, del Toro’s first experience working in Hollywood (on *Mimic*) was somewhat negative (he felt that the film was, despite corresponding more or less to his general vision, compromised in certain detrimental ways). As a result, he returned to Mexico, where he formed his own production company,
vampires and underground tunnels and lairs, as del Toro himself echoes in his interviews, he has no problem incorporating not only low culture and even “vulgar” genres (adding that, even if it’s a non-prestigious genre, he “loves it”) but also riveting action sequences which, for example, completely offset the extraordinarily slow-paced *El espíritu*.

At the same time, it must not be forgotten that, unlike most Hollywood directors, del Toro always treats “low” culture in a politically charged and often unconventional way—as reflected in the fact that he is not only sympathetic towards monsters, vampires, insects or outcasts but that these monsters, even when truly dangerous, are mirrors of human action and error, whether they are vampires (as in the *Blade* trilogy or *Cronos*) or enormous insects/cockroaches (eg. *Mimic*) or the faun from *El laberinto*. This is crucial to consider since *El laberinto*, in part by following the perhaps over-simplistic yet action-packed style of Hollywood, not only seduces viewers of any age but exposes, literalizes and makes explicit much of what remains subtle, implicit or silent in *El espíritu*.

On the other hand, Víctor Erice’s film is also, as we have seen, highly spiritual and itself uses monstrosity and fantasy to rewrite earlier traditions from Frankenstein (both Shelley’s and Whale’s) to the bible. Curiously, Erice, though not a physical exile, portrays a deep inner exile (and repression) in *El espíritu* that, as further explored in chapter 1, leads him, ironically, to explore not only the self but its relationship to radical alterity. It is, moreover, an inner exile which, in many ways, parallels del Toro’s own feeling of alienation as a child—a connection which is further reinforced by the very fact

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31 Tequila Gang. Nevertheless, he returned to work in Hollywood and has had far better experiences with Hollywood productions since then.

31 This might also explain why the most important monster in *El laberinto* is neither a fairy nor a demonic incarnation of the captain but rather the faun himself. As del Toro explains, a faun is “a neutral creature, a creature that can bring destruction or it can bring life. It’s obviously a creature of the woods that is savage and unmerciful but at the same time as benign as nature. They care for the trees and the plants, and the life in the woods, but at the same time can be instruments of savagery.” (Fresh Air with Terry Gross).
that del Toro felt such a strong attraction to Frankenstein—the very same monster featured in Erice’s film. Yet, despite the similarities between El espíritu’s ability to rewrite and/or reframe spirituality and that of El laberinto, there are major differences. Most notably, Erice’s young girl protagonist, Ana, ultimately submits to authority (at least “on the outside”) and thus produces an interior voice that reflects, via voiceover, what she dare not speak—not to mention an insurmountable schism between desire/imagination and reality. By contrast, Ofelia, though she dies as a consequence, is not afraid to fully and unequivocally rebel, as revealed in her final and resounding “no” (which she pronounces in refusal to carry out the captain’s command that she sacrifice her baby brother).

In part, we could argue, Ana’s failure to fully rebel is reflective of Erice’s only partial distance from Ana’s terrors and traumas, as reinforced by the fact that the film was produced under the restraints of censorship. But, clearly, Erice also lacks the physical distance (of exile) as well as exposure to the wave of Mexican, Hollywood and even mass culture that define del Toro’s personal life and artistic evolution. This too is reflected in El espíritu, for though Erice incorporates a childlike aura and fairytale narrative into the film, and though the protagonist is a child herself, stylistically, Erice is, unlike del Toro, very averse to Hollywood technique. Aside from the fact that a popular children’s song “Vamos a contar mentiras” plays in the background, quite frankly, Erice’s film would be next to impossible for children to appreciate, even if they were children living in post-war Spain. Erice’s film is, in fact, difficult for college students at top ranking American universities to make sense of or even watch all the way through—though, certainly, this says as much about the limitations of contemporary American culture as anything else.
By contrast, though *El laberinto* swings between the extremes of utter violence and utopic hope, it is through its action-packed (Hollywood) style, Mexican-American eclecticism and, above all, its fairytale polarization of reality and fantasy, good and evil, among other binaries that the film so successfully debunks, even inverts, the common supposition that fantasy is beneath, below or embedded within reality. In so doing, the film not only both reveals and overcomes the binaries of authoritarianism but, more generally, the very binaries that constitute oppressive, separatist ways of thinking and pigeonholing people anywhere and everywhere in the world. As del Toro reminds us in his interview with Terry Gross, unlike people who demean fantasy, hold it in low esteem or simply believe it to be a low concern for humanity, politics and religion are, for him, equal inventions. In fact, his film rightly suggests that, as not only other writers and artists but numerous trauma theorists and psychologists have been advocating for years, the only way to successfully remember and remake the past--particularly a traumatic one--is through fantasy and retelling. Let us now look more closely at how this happens.

**Re-Membering ‘Fantastic’ Realities**

Immediately after the initial scene in which the mythic, fantasy world and the protagonist’s corresponding journey of exile and return are established, Ofelia and her mother are introduced to the film’s viewers in a shiny, black limousine (Bentley) with a fascist insignia on it, as they make their way to the mountains on a parallel journey. The

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32 He adds that religious groups, republicans, democrats, geography, borders are all conceits, all created. He reminds us that from a satellite picture there are no borders and that all these groups of humans are fundamentally indistinguishable. Not only do the look alike, but they have the same cravings and needs.

33 As mentioned in my introduction, various theorists, psychotherapists and experts on trauma and recovery ranging from Cathy Caruth (*Explorations in Memory*) to Judith Herman (*Trauma and Recovery*) have confirmed that, even from a clinical perspective, fantasy, fiction and retelling are the most effective ways of overcoming traumatic experience.
Captain’s easy access to slick, contemporary cars in a time and place where such machines were sparse to say the least highlights his power; and is further reinforced by the fact that this car strongly contrasts with the horse and buggy used by Fernando (the Captain’s counterpart) in El espíritu. Yet, despite traveling in such ostensive comfort, in reality, the journey is not at all pleasant for either the sick and pregnant mother, Carmen, or for her daughter, Ofelia, and it anticipates their future struggles that will culminate in their deaths. Indeed, whereas El espíritu opens with the image of a symbolic vehicle of change (the truck which transports the film, Frankenstein, into Ana’s bleak reality), by contrast, within the Captain’s prison-like Bentley, an unhappy Ofelia commences on a journey marked, at least on a literal level, by even more oppression, violence and a corresponding lack of physical movement.

Yet, despite the fact that, unlike El espíritu, the film opens with a symbol of modernization that signals repression and immobility rather than movement and liberation, this does not imply that El laberinto critiques modernization. Rather, it more openly and literally critiques the scarcity, uneven distribution (or control) of not only modernization and modern technology but of all goods under Franco. More specifically, the movement and abundance associated with the world of the captain stands in stark contrast not only to Ofelia’s world and all women’s but perhaps even more so to the

34 As Virginia Higginbotham notes in her book on El espíritu, “The truck that brings the movie to town and the lone train that passes through are the only motor vehicles in use.”(The Spirit of the Beehive 21). She further observes that, “Fernando and Teresa either walk or ride bicycles, reminding us of postwar shortages of petrol to power cars and motorcycles. With his luggage strapped to a horse and cart, Fernando seems like a man from a prior century as he leaves on a trip out of town.”(21) This difference between Fernando’s economic situation and the Captain’s not only emphasizes his excessive power but is further significant in that it anticipates both the similarities and differences between Fernando and the Captain in their parallel roles as well as El laberinto’s more dichotomous characterizations in general.

35 We must keep in mind that these two women are traveling against their own will and against the doctor’s advice that Carmen not travel at such an advanced stage of pregnancy.

36 However, it is important to keep in mind that, in a symbolic sense, El laberinto ends in a far more radical rebirth than El espíritu; and, in this sense, it highlights the degree to which rebirth may truly arise from the depths of exile and death.
poverty, infirmity and filth of the *huídos*, as well as their incapacity not only to move, but to live, breath, eat and exist. Even the slightest sign of movement or visibility could result in death for these outcasts. Appropriately, the Captain’s avaricious nature is the first ‘monstrous’ element of reality transported into Ofelia’s fantasy world--in the form of a gluttonous toad that she will be forced to confront and defeat in her first ‘spiritual task’.

Yet, at the same time, Ofelia’s imprisonment in the Captain’s sleek vehicle ironically presages not only her own lack of mobility but her lack of access to any form of modernization or vehicle of movement. This makes sense if we consider that, first of all, Captain Vidal alone controls this vehicle and, moreover, once Ofelia reaches her new mountain house, unlike Ana, she will be completely isolated from trains, movies, and even other children. In fact, her dusty, old bedroom in which her stepfather essentially imprisons her lacks any modern devices or even metal. The scant objects (a bed and dresser) are a monotonous brown that blends with the wooden floors and cement walls. Though Ofelia manages to escape on foot numerous times from this dull, oppressive ambience, she is castigated severely for this--and eventually killed. This is the extent of her movement. And yet, in many ways, it is because of the very bland emptiness and physical (almost “exilic”) restrictiveness of her physical world that Ofelia becomes stimulated to create a far more colorful, creative, and active fantasy world.

Thus, though on a literal level, the initial car scene anticipates Ofelia’s own lack of movement, it also reflects the fact that, on a deeper level, the film truly is a journey—and one which is both transformative and liberating, despite being cyclical. With this in mind, it makes sense that the film introduces Ofelia for the first time as she reads fairytales while locked in her stepfather’s Bentley. Ofelia’s book is her one and only
(external) source of diversion and fantasy—and she reads it (in the car) against her mother’s will. Yet, her mother’s own discomfort, throughout this voyage, is obvious and suggests that she is equally oppressed by the situation. Her anguish culminates in her demand that the driver stop the car as she is about to be sick. Ofelia takes advantage of this moment to wander through the beautiful green foliage that surrounds them. Almost immediately, she stumbles upon a stone “eye” which she picks up, and which leads her to its corresponding stone sculpture (with a missing eye). In an act highly reminiscent of Ana’s capacity in *El espíritu* to give symbolic life to both the monster and herself (by putting eyes on the cut-out doll, Don José), she fits the missing piece (or “eye”) into place. In so doing, the journey begins that will enable Ofelia to symbolically open her own eyes as she binds reality to fantasy—and, in the process, transform them both.

The fact that it is right as she begins to put the eye into place that a cricket jumps out of the “eye socket” is itself significant, for this insect follows Ofelia to the Captain’s mountain-house where it transforms into a fairy modeled off the fairies from Ofelia’s books. It then guides her to a secret “labyrinth”—itself modeled on a real labyrinth that Ofelia encounters by means of this same cricket in the area surrounding her new ‘home’. At this point, the fairy takes Ofelia to a large pit at the center of a labyrinth, which becomes, much like Ana’s well in *El espíritu*, a place of renewal and awakening. Yet, unlike Ana, Ofelia, rather than attempt to pull the monster out of his underground abode, decides to enter it herself. It is here, inside the pit, that Ofelia meets her magical faun, who returns the favor by subsequently taking the initiative to visit Ofelia several times in her ‘real’ home. Indeed, unlike Ana’s “Frankenstein”, by instructing Ofelia to complete the various anarchic “tasks” previously mentioned, the faun clearly and *actively* inspires
her to rebel insomuch as these tasks mirror the problems that the “reds” encounter in their battle for survival against Ofelia’s stepfather.

Indeed, the captain’s ominous role is underscored from his very first appearance in which he greets Ofelia by crushing her hand after grunting to himself that they arrived fifteen minutes late. Rather than kissing his wife or asking how the trip went, his first move is to touch her large, pregnant stomach—in a cold gesture that clearly emphasizes the concern and primacy that he gives to his son. Ofelia, who seems to be immediately distrustful of the Captain, runs almost instantly after meeting him into what appears to be a military fort or “labyrinth”. Later that night her “fairy” will guide her into this very same, yet “magically” transformed, maze of both warmth and terror.

Significantly, Ofelia’s first explicit effort to resist the Captain’s terror-ridden world happens right before her fairy leads her into the labyrinth. While lying in bed with her mother, Ofelia complains about the Captain and asks her mother why she remarried. Her mother explains that she was lonely. Ofelia reacts by telling her unborn brother (via her mother’s belly) a fairytale about a magical rose. Sadly, this beautiful rose could never share its love or magic with anyone else since it was placed on the summit of an enormous mountain, in utter solitude. No one dared to approach this rose because the mountain was filled with poisonous thorns and because the men “only thought about fear and pain, but never about hope”. The rose withers each night out of solitude and pain, and is renewed each morning only to die again each night. Clearly, by telling this story Ofelia has already begun to import elements of reality into a fantastic plane; for the rose is, in a sense, a symbol of her mother’s loneliness—a solitude which is only heightened by her marriage to the Captain, who himself represents the thorny mountain.
The mountain, insomuch as Ofelia links it to fear, pain and the Captain himself, is also indicative of how the ideals of Francoism have become characteristic of society in general, just as the rose may, in a similar fashion, be extended to those few pure souls, who, like Ofelia, challenge such thought and behavior. The fact that Ofelia also tells this story to her brother (in fact, it is directed primarily to him in Carmen’s womb) suggests that she, unlike both the fascists and the “reds” (and even Mercedes) is concerned with helping not only herself but also her baby brother in their quest to re-member. Ofelia, contrary to the men who “think only of fear and pain”, confronts this symbolic mountain through the very telling of it and, more generally, by embarking on tasks that force her to face and conquer the various monsters/masks of Vidal, Franco, and authoritarian terror.

The next indication that Ofelia transports elements of reality into her “alternate” world happens right after the fairy leads her to the faun, who informs her of her first task and who gives her a magic book which will, in turn, guide her throughout her subsequent tasks. The presence of the fairy is, aside from being a projection of Ofelia’s role as a small, underappreciated, female, significant insomuch as it reflects not only Ofelia’s feeling of helplessness and isolation but also her fascination with fairytales. We must not forget that from her very first appearance, Ofelia is absorbed in her book of fairytales. The fact then, that the faun gives her a “magic book”, in addition to being the first concrete indication of how real objects are transported into Ofelia’s fantasy world, specifically reflects her love of fantasy. More importantly, however, the book, which is blank and which she can only use when she is alone, reflects the equal emptiness and solitude of Ofelia’s life, both physically and metaphorically. At the same time, the fact that the book is both blank and can only be used in solitude more generally reflects and
anticipates the ways in which, it is often at the very crossroads of loneliness and exile, that a path to redemption, fullness and connection is opened up.

Thus, by this point in the narrative the experience of exile is likened both to an empty book and to a thorny mountain. Yet it is also associated with the promise of a beautiful rose to those capable of overcoming the thorns of fear and repression. Just as the rose is, undoubtedly, the most well-known symbol of mysticism in Western culture, the fact that the book the faun gives Ofelia contains only blank pages similarly suggests that true spirituality requires the active, perhaps even anarchic engagement of the reader, rather than mindless obedience to authority and dogma. Yet, it also requires a certain degree of trust and faith—not in a worldly mediator but rather in oneself (and/or one’s own personal relationship to the divine). In truth, the fact that the pages are blank renders Ofelia’s decision to trust the faun (who acts as a spiritual mirror more than as a mediator) even more of a leap of faith. Even after Ofelia has accomplished her first task, though the faun tells her she must complete two more tasks before the moon becomes full, he fails to specify what they are. Ofelia, nevertheless, faithfully accepts his offer/challenge.

The spiritual, even mystical tone of Ofelia’s relationship to her Underworld ‘guides’, tools and symbols is more concretely established the first time Ofelia opens and reads from her magic book. At this point magic ink seeps onto the empty pages, instructing her to defeat an enormous toad that lives beneath the roots of a (former) “tree of life” (symbolic, among other things, of Ofelia’s mother), which has turned into a “tree of death” due to the gluttonous amphibian that has sucked out its life\textsuperscript{37}. Clearly, this

\textsuperscript{37} Aside from the obvious biblical allusion to the “tree of life”, this tree both reflects a sort of “fall” from grace as well as the potential for redemption. If, moreover, we consider the fact that Ofelia’s true father is (in her alternative world) given a godlike status, the fact that Ofelia insists that the Captain, as mere step-father is not her true father, reinforces the Captain’s role as an imposter of God. In fact, this may also be
creature represents the Captain’s egotistical desire to take, kill and keep on taking at the expense of others, particularly from women as well as his so called “reds”. Furthermore, it is essential to keep in mind that in order to defeat this monster, Ofelia must enter its “womb”, get filthy, wet and even cover herself with slimy beetles and insects before finally confronting the toad and reemerging from the ‘womb’. Though this obviously suggests that Ofelia must conquer her newfound fears and solitude, her ability to get dirty also forces her to embrace a gender role normally associated with boys—one which Ofelia, nevertheless, seems to desire taking on from the film’s start (specifically, when her mother scolds her during the car-trip not only for reading but for soiling her shoes).

A similar juxtaposition between reading and getting dirty is suggested right before Ofelia embarks on this first task. The night before, her mother promises her a great present. Ofelia enthusiastically expects it to be a book, but her mother tells her it will be something far better. Yet, when her mother gives her the present (a green, silk dress and patent-leather shoes), Ofelia looks vaguely disappointed. Rather than bathe herself and put on the dress (as her mother requests) she prefers to sit in the bathroom and read her “magic book”. In this sense, her desire to enter the tree (itself a mythic, biblical symbol) not only reflects her spiritual, creative side but also highlights her desire to resist gender stereotypes. Indeed, the fact that the book prompts her to take off the dress and shoes to enter the tree, where she then proceeds to roll around in mud and slime, inverts (and resists) the bathroom scene where she was ordered to get clean and then put on the dress. In this way, she uses the fantasy world not only to become more “androgynous” but as a way of contesting those elements of the real world that she finds unpleasant or wrong.

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read as a critique of the hypocritical (spiritual) pretensions of National Catholicism, (in that the Captain encapsulates all the most fundamental and destructive aspects of Francoism).
The fact that Ofelia’s defeat of the giant toad provides her with a key similarly reflects a prior scene in which Mercedes was ordered to return to the Captain her copy of the key to the supply-house. What the Captain failed to see, however, was that Mercedes had already made extra copies of it, which she would use to aid the “reds”. Ofelia, like Mercedes, will use her key to defeat the next monster/Captain in her second task. After Ofelia’s first victory over the toad, the faun gives her some tools that she will need in order to defeat a terrible “inhuman” monster. In addition to the key, Ofelia will need a piece of chalk (which symbolically enables her to draw portholes between the “real world” and the “fantastic”), three “fairies” (companions), and an hourglass (symbolic of the Captain’s rigid time). She is instructed to complete her task before the last drop of sand falls; and, above all, she is not to eat anything she finds, no matter how tempting.

When Ofelia enters this world she finds an exquisite banquet of food with a vast array of tempting fruits, yet with a grotesque, eyeless monster sitting at the head (much like the Captain, who had just had a formal banquet himself38). The monster’s lack of eyes, which are sitting in a plate in front of him, reflect both the Captain’s faulty memory (as evidenced in the parallel dinner scene) as well as his inability to see the ways in which Mercedes (and Ofelia) are fooling him—and perhaps more generally, his inability to see women at all. It is not until Ofelia eats the “forbidden” fruit that the Captain “wakes up”, puts in his eyes, kills two of the fairies and chases Ofelia.

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38 Early in the film the Captain brutally kills a man and his son—by gauging out his eyes—after being notified (by his “inferiors”) that they formed part of the “red” resistance hiding in the nearby mountains. As it turns out, they were simple farmers hunting rabbits. When, after murdering them, the Captain looks through their bag and finds a dead animal, rather than accepting responsibility for his mistake (or lack of “sight”) he blames one of his men for not going through the bag more carefully before wasting his time. In Ofelia’s parallel fantasy world, it is, appropriately, the Captain’s eyes which have been gauged out.
In short, this scene not only reflects and subverts past events in the real world\textsuperscript{39} while also making subversive use of biblical and stories\textsuperscript{40}, but it anticipates events that have not yet occurred. Perhaps more obviously, it rewrites a similar scene in *El espíritu* where Ana offers her *maquis* exile an apple. To begin, both films appear to rewrite the biblical “fall” in similar ways. Though they equate Ana and Ofelia with Eve, their roles are far more sympathetic as they rebel not so much against God but against Franco’s status as self-proclaimed pseudo-God. Furthermore, whereas Ana steals food from Fernando to give it to the exile (perhaps resulting in his death as well as her own symbolic death when she runs after him), Ofelia steals food from her stepfather (who plays an analogous role to Fernando) in order to help the refugees. Yet, though Mercedes is consequently pursued by the Captain and though Ofelia is similarly hunted down as a result and dies (not symbolically, as does Ana but literally), the community of outlaws which both females protect and aid is saved—though only temporarily.

More crucially, Ofelia’s symbolic act of transgression (though it occurs, unlike Ana’s, in the spirit world rather than in the real) more clearly and subversively affects reality in the sense that Ofelia’s acts in her fantasy world directly impact the real world.

\textsuperscript{39} In addition to the obvious parallels with the dinner banquet, the Captain’s lack of eyes, among its other functions, also serves as an ironic subversion of the much earlier scene in which the Captain gouges out the eyes of one of the hunters (who he mistakenly assumes is a “red”). Yet, as previously mentioned, this brutal act only reinforces the Captain’s own blindness and general lack of responsibility.

\textsuperscript{40} Like the biblical ‘tree of life’, the scene at the banquet table evokes the “Edenic fall” of humankind. Whereas Ofelia uses the biblical “tree of life” imagery in a redemptive way, as evidenced by my analysis of the banquet scene just mentioned, this myth of the “edenic fall” or “original sin” is, to a large extent, subverted precisely through the monster’s clear association with the evil Captain/stepfather and, by extension, Franco. Though Ofelia perhaps made a mistake by eating the “forbidden fruit”, the laws against eating it are revealed to be arbitrary and unfair—especially since her desire to eat this fruit runs parallel to the desire of the persecuted ‘reds’ to receive medicine, food and other supplies from the Captain’s storage. If we consider the fact that Ofelia’s true father is (in her alternative world) given a godlike status, the fact that Ofelia insists that the Captain, as mere stepfather is not her true father, further reinforces the Captain’s/ Franco’s role as an imposter of God. More generally, this may also be read as a critique of the hypocritical spiritual pretensions of National Catholicism, (in that the Captain encapsulates all the most fundamental and destructive aspects of Francoism). After all, the monster who chases Ofelia is not a representation of God but rather a manifestation of the evil Captain (who, in turn, represents Franco, the false-God).
The fact that Ofelia, before eating the “forbidden fruit”, uses the key to open a box with a dagger portends (and perhaps even influences) the way in which Mercedes will later stab the Captain after he has discovered he has been deceived by her. At the same time, Mercedes is only able to stab him and escape because, even at this moment, the Captain still undervalues her powers as a mere female. The fact that it is by eating “forbidden fruit” that Ofelia wakens the Captain foretells the way in which the Captain will discover Mercedes’ complicity with the reds. Though Mercedes uses the key to break into the storage room and help her comrades, in so doing, she is, in a sense, stealing “forbidden fruit”—an act which the Captain makes explicit when he empties Mercedes’ bag of stolen provisions and tells her, patronizingly, that he would have given her these items had she only asked for them. To complicate matters even more, after Mercedes wounds Vidal, she, like Ofelia, is forced to flee into the woods, an act which, in turn, prefigures Ofelia’s final flight into the labyrinth, where, motivated (like Mercedes’ heroism) by love for her community and, more specifically, her brother, she eventually dies (unlike Mercedes)\(^4^1\).

With this in mind, it is important to emphasize the function of the fairies in this scene, particularly inasmuch as Mercedes’ “salvation” in reality is ultimately dependent on the aid she receives from her comrades. In many ways, Ofelia transports Mercedes’ need for communal help to the fairies, who, precisely because they are small, spiritual and invisible to the Captain, become great allies for Ofelia. On the other hand, both in Ofelia’s world and Mercedes’ ‘real’ world two of the three fairies are sacrificed due to the consumption of “forbidden food”. For Ofelia, though it is clear that the surviving fairy is Mercedes, the other two fairies appear to be Ofelia’s mother and, perhaps, Ofelia herself.

\(^4^1\) As we will similarly see in Manuel Puig’s, *El beso de la mujer araña*, the fact that Mercedes does not die is, in part, necessary because, as Ofelia’s double, she represents the part of her that lives on in the world (or conversely, the part that dies from the perspective of Ofelia’s fairytale/fantasy world).
For Mercedes, likewise, though her bravery ultimately proves to be more liberating than destructive, her desire to “eat” this “fruit” results directly in the doctor’s death, and perhaps, that of the captain’s stuttering torture victim, among countless other casualties. Indeed, like Ofelia, Mercedes puts her own life on the line.

All of these parallels are further reinforced by the fact that Mercedes gives her brother a copy of the Captain’s key right after Ofelia escapes the monster’s pursuit. It is worth noting that though the hourglass runs out, and thus, the magic door/porthole closes right before Ofelia can escape (reflective of Mercedes’ and Ofelia’s inability to escape within the temporal limits set by the Captain), Ofelia nevertheless escapes by creating another doorway with the chalk. On the one hand, this predicts the way in which Mercedes, though incapable of escaping before the Captain catches on to her game, ties her up and attempts to torture her, ultimately triumphs over him by using a dagger to cut the rope binding her hands, wound the Captain and run. Likewise, though Ofelia is incapable of completely escaping from her stepfather in the real world, she is, at the very least, able to momentarily elude him, as she leads him into the labyrinth, where he is finally defeated.

Though Ofelia herself dies (perhaps also symbolic of the fact that the hourglass does, in fact, run out), her ability to create a porthole may also suggest that, within the larger frame-story/fantasy-land, Ofelia is, nevertheless, the ultimate winner. In fact, Ofelia continues to use the magic chalk in the “real” world in ways that would seem to make it the most significant symbol of them all. It is only by using this chalk to sneak into the Captain’s study that Ofelia is able to steal her brother and poison the Captain. Furthermore, aside from being in itself a symbol of creation (the act of writing, drawing, etc.), the chalk also implies, through its subversive use in this film, that creation is the
ultimate means by which one can reunite fantasy and reality and thus, the spiritual and material. By way of contrast, the Captain, upon finding the chalk in his study, immediately crushes it, highlighting his resistance to anything otherworldly or creative.

In addition to the other symbolic devices or tools used to navigate between the fantastic and “real” worlds in this film, I would like to comment, finally, on Ofelia’s use of her “magic root”, which the faun instructs her to nourish and secretly place under her mother’s bed and to which the captain, upon finding it, has an outrageously hostile reaction. Like the other elements that appear in Ofelia’s “alternative” world, this root appears as a way of dealing with her mother’s sickness, which has put both her mother’s and brother’s lives at risk. By nourishing this root (which, the faun claims, aspires to be human), Ofelia can, nevertheless, hope to bring life and good health to them both. The fact that she is instructed to give it two drops of blood a day not only reflects the doctor’s efforts to save her mother by giving her daily drops of antibiotics, but proves to be vital in her mother’s temporary yet sudden recovery, which happens, significantly, almost immediately after Ofelia begins nursing her root in accordance with the faun’s directions. The mysterious power of this root is further confirmed by the fact that the mother dies almost immediately after she angrily chastises Ofelia for believing in magic and casts the root into the fire. Yet, even Carmen’s hysterical response is precipitated and magnified by the wretched captain’s hostile reaction upon discovering the root under Carmen’s bed.

Curiously, this scene rewrites Teresa’s symbolic death in El espíritu, signaled by her decision to throw her final letter to her beloved exile into the fire (rather than send it). Of course, in del Toro’s version, Carmen literally dies as a result of casting away her last and only hope of recovery—both physically and spiritually—thus clarifying what is only
subtly and metaphorically suggested in *El espíritu*. On the other hand, it is important to note that though Carmen’s act is based on Teresa’s in *El espíritu*, Teresa’s act, in turn, reflects the monster’s death in Whale’s film version of *Frankenstein* in which the monster burns to death as the townspeople set his windmill on fire. This, in turn, mirrors the so-called creature’s projected death in Shelley’s novel, who, upon encountering his creator’s corpse, vows to burn himself to death (though we readers never actually get confirmation that this happens). In any event, this connection makes perfect sense given that Frankenstein’s monster, both as a manmade-man and as a mirror and/or spiritual double of men (or humankind), functions exactly like the mandrake root in *El laberinto*.

Nevertheless, one of the reasons Ofelia is given a root (rather than some other symbol) is because this root evokes the image of the “tree of life”, whose roots have been exploited by the enormous, selfish toad who monopolizes its power. In this sense, the need to nourish a root is not only a means of subverting the selfish toad/Captain, but is also symbolic of Ofelia’s desire to (pardon the pun) get to the “root” of all her familial and, by extension, social problems—namely, selfishness itself. In this light, it is crucial to keep in mind that a root gives life not only to one individual human but to various humans or “branches” of the same “family tree”. According to Ofelia’s magic book (or “el libro de las encrucijadas”/*the book of the crossroads”), the tree of life was originally healthy precisely because it lived in harmony with other trees or “families”.

Yet the arrival of the gluttonous toad not only sapped the tree of its life but made it wither in isolation like the solitary rose on the peak of its dark mountain. Accordingly, it is not until the Captain dies that Ofelia’s brother may truly be given life. In this way, the film underscores the fact that, though Ofelia’s sacrifice is a sad reflection or effect of
the specific historical time period in which she lives, her sacrifice is not, in any essential way, a true or necessary element of communal rebirth. Quite the contrary, the only person who had to “die” or disappear in order for Ofelia’s brother to live (or any other family member, for that matter) was the Captain himself. Yet, as we will continue to see, Ofelia’s death was necessary for other historical, structural and symbolic reasons.

To summarize, despite the film’s ambiguous, even tragic ending, its ability to transport elements of the ‘real’ world into the ‘fantastic’, such as the root, the rose, the key, the book, the dagger, the fairies, the hourglass and others, enables it to show how elements of terror may be subverted in the real world through opening oneself up to the ‘fantastic’. In so doing, the film underscores the need to unite reality and fantasy (or the material and the spiritual) as well as the ways in which these unifications are intimately tied to other separations. It is, indeed, the suppression of the ‘fantastic’/spiritual that engenders death, repression, terror and, ultimately, the rigid separations of male/female, material/spiritual/, fantasy/reality, future/past, self/other so endemic to Francoism.

Colorful Fantasies

As we have seen in Chapter 1, despite being a film largely about fantasy, El espíritu remains locked in a frame that is grimly real. El laberinto, by contrast, not only blends the fantasy world with reality, but suggests that the fantasy world can affect reality in radical ways. Yet, in order to crisply demonstrate the degree to which fantasy can merge with reality, El laberinto must first polarize the two worlds, which it achieves, in part, through its use of color. Though both films manipulate color in an attempt to mark the boundaries between different “worlds”, El laberinto makes more of an effort not only to
sharply differentiate between the real world and the fantastic through its diametrically opposed uses of color, but, in the process, it portrays a fantasy world that is warmer as well as more textured, nuanced and shaded than the so-called real world.

Before more closely examining these differences, it will be helpful to establish the extent to which the two films use color in similar ways. Notwithstanding their disparities, color is as significant to El laberinto as it is to El espíritu. In both films the real world is marked by relatively monochrome, dim, washed out colors. In El espíritu, the world is reduced to eggshell white, browns, grassy greens and grays. As Carmen Arocena agrees, “Dentro de la iluminación de los exteriores hay que destacar el papel del cielo, grisáceo y plomizo, que parece encerrar a los personajes en su ambiente, en el que ocupan una pequeña porción espacial” (Víctor Erice 91). She continues,

La iluminación que caracterizará la colmena social [citing Jesús Goznes Requena] ‘está dominada por tonos marrones, cremas y grisáceos que excluirán tanto el azul como el rojo y el negro y que sólo podrán matizarse con verdes apagados: universos visuales amplios pero atmosféricamente cerrados, pesado, de rugosas texturas, simétricos y carentes de dinamismo’”(91).

In El laberinto, the outer world is similarly marked by cold industrial grays, greens, browns and also blues, whereas the internal, “fantasy” world is warm, reddish and as del Toro himself explains in an interview, is intended to lend the fantasy world a womblike quality. This makes perfect sense given the fantasy world’s larger function as a place of rebirth. Yet, this fantasy world, despite its warmth, does not give off the suffocating yellow glow of El espíritu’s beehive. As Arocena notes, “El ambiente cromático que se desarrolla en el interior de la colmena familiar encierra a los personajes dentro de tonalidades que oscilan desde el amarillo al anaranjado” (Víctor Erice 94).

Arocena further describes the interior of the beehive as being marked by, “Colores

42 See the special features disk of El laberinto del fauno.
This is due in great part to the fact that, whereas the world of *El laberinto* is divided into warm colors, corresponding to the fantasy world, and cold colors, analogous to the real world, *El espíritu* is, technically, divided in three parts, colors or “worlds”. Much like *El laberinto*, *El espíritu* features a cold, dull, exterior “real” world; yet rather than pitting this world against just one, clearly defined fantasy world, it is opposed to two worlds—the world of the beehive-house (or the other half of “reality”), which is marked by a suffocating yellow, and the fresh fantasy world, defined by a vivid electric-blue.

Thus, the fantasy world, rather than emanating a warm red, is necessarily cool and vibrant because it stands in opposition to the stifling yellow of the beehive. This is consistent with *El espíritu’s* general skill in highlighting the complexity of reality; for though it segments the world into conflicting parts or colors, unlike *El laberinto*, it resists dichotomizing. In so doing, *El espíritu* effectively reveals how the ‘real’ world of post-war Spain is harsh, cold, uncaring and yet, like the microcosmic beehive, re/ oppressively warm. The electric blue fantasy world stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming warmth of the beehive and, more generally, to both the inner and outer ‘real’ worlds as it is the only world that contains not only bold color but a decent degree of shading and contrast. This implies that it is a relatively balanced, liberating place that escapes both the oppressively hot and confining aspects of authoritarian terror as well as its frigidly isolating effects. Yet, this liberation is always short-lived, serving as a marker of entry to the fantasy world rather than a place where Ana may dwell for any protracted period of time. As a result, entry to this world occurs under the bluish glow of the moonlight.
Yet, as a mere child, Ana spends relatively little time up at night. In fact, unlike Ofelia, Ana spends no time in a markedly different magical world. In keeping with the film’s realistic aura, all Ana’s battles are fought in the ‘real’ world. Nevertheless, the fact that the liberating world is a nocturnal one subtly suggests that it is the oneiric world of dreams and fantasy that truly set one free. It is only here that one can break free from the oppression of the day--literalized in *El laberinto* through the “blinding sun”.

On the other hand, though the bluish fantasy world of *El espíritu* contains a good deal more contrast than the “real” worlds of the beehive or the lackluster external world, it is crucial to note that this is only because these other worlds are so exceedingly void of contrast. The filters used in *El espíritu* minimize contrast within the beehive, reinforcing the idea that, far from being a place of ‘rebirth’, it is a place of conformity, monotony and repression. Yet, though the fantasy world is, even in *El espíritu*, far more liberating, its color-contrast is relatively and appropriately subtle, rather than extraordinary. To the contrary, the reddish, womblike ambience of *El laberinto*’s underworld not only protects one from the cold, monotonous repression of ‘reality’, but it emphatically suggests that this is the place where one can become dramatically liberated/reborn. The fact that this warm ruddy world is far more grainy and detailed than the ‘real world’, where everything blends into a cold, steely blur is equally significant. It indicates that not only that the fantasy world is actually more ‘real’ but that it is only by re-membering this world that Ofelia can make sense of so-called ‘reality’. It is only here that her eyes are truly opened.

*El laberinto*’s ‘real’ world, though deprived of the yellow filters used in *El espíritu* to minimize contrast, has relatively little contrast and design when compared to the almost baroque nuance and brilliant color of its corresponding fantasy world. Though
this fantasy world, in addition to its strong chromatic contrasts, boasts extravagant designs and lavish detail, the real world is characterized not only by dull, frigid, earthy colors, but by a definite lack of detail. Even the monochrome brown furniture in Ofelia’s room is, like the matching walls and floors, plain, simple, sparse, and decrepit. The fantasy world’s marble floors, ornate rooms, and bejeweled objects, which include the King’s and Queen’s crowns and Ofelia’s sparkling red shoes (reminiscent of Dorothy’s shoes from the *Wizard of Oz*) which she sports, significantly, after dying, sharply contrast with both the dullness of reality and our assumptions about death. By associating death with a lavish world of brilliance and splendor, the film emphasizes the degree to which death itself is not only a site of rebirth but Dorothy-Ofelia’s (and humanity’s) true home.

And yet, though a strong contrast between the fantasy world and the ‘real’ one is necessary in order to accentuate the film’s dual structure and fairytale simplicity, it is for this reason that *El laberinto* is also able to clearly convey the degree to which darkness and repression may be conquered as fantasy and reality are interwoven. This happens not only by means of Ofelia’s ability to literally draw portholes between the two worlds or, more generally, transport elements of reality and fantasy back and forth from one “world” to another, but through the corresponding use of color to demarcate each world. In short, it is only by illustrating clearly which colors, tones and forms belong to each world that we viewers can appreciate, in the final scenes, how color is used to signify the fusion of both worlds. As del Toro himself notes in an interview⁴³, though the film’s final scenes in which the Captain chases Ofelia to the labyrinth take place in the characteristically bland “real-world”, its cold grays, greens and blues are pierced by golden-red explosions which enable the fantasy world to, quite literally, bleed into reality.

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⁴³ See Disk 2 (Special Features) of *El laberinto del fauno/Pan’s Labyrinth*.  

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Of course, given that the “real-world” storyline must stay true to historical fact, the two words never fully merge--at least not within the historical storyline of 1944 Spain; for this would falsely imply that Francoism was defeated. Nevertheless, the fact that these violent explosions ironically imbue the film with a hint of fusion (and hope) suggests that a more radical process is underway. Certainly, within the film’s broader fairytale framework the synthesis between not only reality and fantasy but all the major dichotomies characteristic of Francoism are amply realized. As supported by the film’s final and literal explosions of violence and boundaries, the ironic fact that the synthesis of the two worlds occurs despite and, in many ways, because of the film’s violence reflects the film’s general capacity to turn the paradoxes and death of authoritarianism inside out.

**Re-Framing Francoism: Demons, Doubles, Fairies and Fascists**

Contrary to *El espíritu*’s gritty realism, as a film that is essentially fantastic or fairytale-like in nature, *El laberinto* not only uses explicit violence and color to enhance its fairytale aura but, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it literalizes or polarizes many of its characters, monsters and themes. Not only does this further reinforce the film’s fairytale structure but it often adds an explicit interpretive layer to the film. As a result of these differences, there are far more characters in *El laberinto* than there are in *El espíritu*; yet they are also more polarized and typified. This does not, however, make the relationships between them any less complex. In fact, even as *El laberinto* serves as an interpretation of the original film, and even as it exaggerates and simplifies character traits and themes, it often complicates them in the very same gesture of simplification. At this juncture then, I will now further examine these paradoxes and their ramifications.
To begin, it is essential to understand that almost everything that is subtle, hazy or possible in *El espíritu* becomes amplified, clarified, polarized and/or literalized in *El laberinto*. In *El espíritu*, though we have no evidence that Ana is a literal or orphan, her parents are so distant and silent that she is *like* an orphan. Though we suspect that Ana’s father, Fernando, may not be her biological father, the truth remains concealed, muted, ambiguous. By contrast, Ofelia’s stepfather in *El laberinto*, is unambiguously despotic. He is not *like* a fascist. He *is* a fascist. Alternatively, Ofelia is not like an orphan; she *is* an orphan. Biologically, spiritually, psychologically, and in all other ways, Ofelia’s true father is clearly not this captain, but rather her deceased biological father. In a somewhat less extreme way, Ofelia replaces her weak and repressed biological mother (who is nevertheless more of a victim than an oppressor) with the defiant maid, Mercedes. Yet this too is an exaggeration of the maid’s role in *El espíritu*.44

Much like Fernando, Teresa plays a highly ambiguous and absent, almost neglectful role in *El espíritu*. Though Teresa, unlike Carmen, does not literally die, she is so absent and repressed that, in many ways, it is as if she were dead. Yet, in *El espíritu*, though the maid seems to be more present than the mother (for example, Ana runs to her for help when she believes her sister is hurt or dead), she provides no radical hope or role-model for Ana. If anything, the fact that the maid is always home almost makes her less of a radical figure than Teresa, who becomes unavailable in her very attempt to defy Francoist repression by writing letters and sneaking out to send them.

Sadly, *El espíritu’s* most subversive example of women’s resistance consists in Teresa’s secret letter-writing, which, nevertheless, is kept secret perhaps even from her

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44 As noted in Chapter 1, Ana, like Ofelia, spends far more time with the maid than she does with her own mother; and in both cases (or films), this is crucial in demonstrating the lack of maternal care that the Franco Regime inadvertently promotes—ironically, by attempting to immobilize and domesticate women.
own daughter, Ana--and which eventually dissolve into nothing, as Teresa decides to burn them. Though Teresa’s own symbolic death at the moment she burns her last letter is literalized in *El laberinto* through Carmen’s death, because Teresa’s ambiguous role is bifurcated into the two polar characters of Carmen and Mercedes, we find a far more revolutionary hope in the figure of Mercedes. In *El laberinto*, the letters which Mercedes writes, though similarly written and transported in secret (she hides them from the Captain just as Teresa hides her letters from Fernando) and though similarly directed to persecuted outlaws (although in *El laberinto* they are directed to a group of “reds” rather than to just one person), are far more blatantly subversive than Teresa’s, as they contain crucial information which may help these outcasts to physically survive. Thus, it is by virtue of being secret that they have the potential to concretely affect reality.

On the other hand, however, these secrets must eventually and literally explode into action in order to become truly effective—and they do, in *El laberinto*, both through and for women and ‘reds’. Indeed, *El laberinto*’s interpretive quality is also suggested through its very portrayal of violence, which, in many ways, accounts for the silence and repression that abound in *El espíritu*. In this sense, the violence is itself an *interpretation*, for it makes clear that the alternative to silence is nothing short of death. Like the barren, monotonous plains of Castile featured in *El espíritu* and home to the mass-graves and ghosts of innumerable victims of the Spanish Civil War, the mountains of the North also hide an invisible power or presence—namely, that of females and “reds”. Yet, in *El laberinto* the reds and the females hide only to suddenly, unexpectedly, even literally explode with acts, words, daggers and guns. This is due, however, not only to the film’s emphasis on action but also to its need to be more explicit than its predecessor.
As a result, this invisible presence is not entirely invisible but both silent and violent, seen and unseen. It appears only to disappear—and then reappear again just when it has finally been forgotten. Thus, Mercedes is an ideal role-model for Ofelia not only because she is both “red”/rebellious and female but because she is capable of both bold brave action and sly, undercover plotting. Though Mercedes wears an appropriately gentle and submissive mask around her boss, Vidal (who, for most of the film, naively believes she is nothing more than a maid), the reality is quite different. Mercedes’ true identity and work as an undercover ‘red’ enables and obliges her to eventually show a side of herself that is anything but subservient. In fact, her silence, immobility\footnote{As a maid, Mercedes is mainly confined to the kitchen and to handling typically “female” chores.} and feminine demure, accentuated throughout the film by her lowered head and shifty eyes, contrast sharply with the cheeky comments and brutal violence she directs at the Captain as well as her liberating movement (or escape from him) at the film’s end. Thus, as in \textit{El espíritu}, women are portrayed in this film as being potentially deceptive—especially toward men and figures of authority. Ironically, however, their underhanded behavior is mainly a result of their repressed roles and limited movement and freedom.

On the other hand, though \textit{El laberinto} hints that a major reason why the females of \textit{El espíritu} failed to fully rebel is because they failed to unite and to \textit{act} publicly (and to some extent, even privately), \textit{El laberinto} also more explicitly reveals the degree to which even Teresa was, in fact, a fairly subversive model. Indeed, the fact that half of her role morphs into the heroic Mercedes implies just this. In short, \textit{El laberinto} suggests that, though true subversion can only come to completion through public action, its true power lies and must begin in the mind, fantasy and words. It adheres to the notion that the power of the pen is fundamentally greater and stronger than the power of the sword.
As I more exhaustively note in Chapter 1, Teresa’s letters are already mildly subversive in the sense that they enable her not only to recuperate from her own personal traumas but to hold on to, however secretly, the past and the “Others” that the Franco Regime fiercely attempts to blot out from history and memory, whether collective or personal. Yet, what *El laberinto* more crucially elucidates is the importance of the fact that Teresa’s letters (along with Ana’s rituals) seem to function almost magically to bring a *maquis* exile to town. More generally, though the power of magic and fantasy is only subtly yet unequivocally suggested in *El espíritu*, this power is brilliantly highlighted by *El laberinto’s* use of magic and fantasy to patently transform reality. In truth, though the examples through which fantasy alters reality are far more obvious, unambiguous and numerous in *El laberinto*, they may, in fact, be read as an interpretation or exaggeration of *El espíritu’s* more ambiguous and craftily concealed messages regarding the power of fantasy to transform reality—and, by implication, to undermine Francoism, bit by bit.

Thus, as should now be obvious, *El laberinto* not only interprets and literalizes characters but also larger themes and ideas found in *El espíritu* such as the ability of fantasy to transform reality as well as the various protagonists’ interior exile and repressed desires, expressed in *El laberinto* through the fairytale frame of literal exile and oblivion. Though the overarching purpose of Ana’s quest in *El espíritu* is, much like Ofelia’s in *El laberinto*, to remember that which has been destroyed, erased or taken from her (including her “true” father), in *El laberinto* this is made explicit from the very start through the outer narrative of a magic, forgotten world where Ofelia’s forgotten father

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46 In *El laberinto*, however, the situation is somewhat inverted since the adult, Mercedes (rather than the child, Ana) is the one who provides physical nourishment and protection to the outlaws. Ofelia, conversely, has more in common with Teresa, who aside from biking off from home on a few occasions, influences reality without directly doing or sharing that reality with anyone but herself.
appropriately dwells—and from which she has been literally exiled. As we have seen, both *El espíritu* and *El laberinto* similarly suggest that the only way to move forward is to look back towards the past. Yet, even this notion, along with *El espíritu*’s cyclical plot, are literalized in *El laberinto* insomuch as it literally begins and ends with Ofelia’s death—a death which, unlike Ana’s symbolic death in *El espíritu*, is also literal. In these ways, *El laberinto* serves as an interpretation (albeit an exaggerated one) of *El espíritu*. However, though it makes literal and explicit that which is only subtle and symbolic in *El espíritu*, it simultaneously complicates reality by encasing the entire “reality” of post-war Spain in a framework which is itself symbolic—and thus, in need of interpretation.

Thus, as we have already begun to see, the film’s need to interpret occurs on many different levels and necessarily bends or changes as much as it keeps the same or even exaggerates. The most obvious change, however, is that more characters are added or multiplied in *El laberinto*—and yet, this superficial difference rather ironically corresponds, at least in part, to *El laberinto*’s tendency, whether intentional or not, to faithfully interpret *El espíritu*. In an obvious way, both the refugee and the monster from *El espíritu* become pluralized in *El laberinto* as evidenced by the numerous *huidos* gathered in the forest as well as the film’s manifold monsters. This is appropriate considering that both Frankenstein, as a patchwork creation, and the *maquis* soldier from *El espíritu* are symbolic of society as a whole and, especially, of those subjects most repressed, persecuted and forgotten by Francoism. In this way, the multiplication of these rebels and monsters serves as an interpretation of *El espíritu*’s symbolic monster and refugee, reminding us that, in reality, not just one but many outcasts suffered, disappeared and were forgotten as a consequence of the Civil War and its aftermath.
Of course, *El laberinto*’s multiplication of characters occurs in a few different ways, some more straightforward than others. On the one hand, *El laberinto*’s rebels are all essentially the same since they are modeled off the *maquis* from *El espíritu*, who, as the film’s most symbolic/typological character, serves an important yet relatively one-dimensional role. On the other hand, *El laberinto*’s treatment of monsters is, obviously, far more complicated since the various monsters reflect the ambiguity of Frankenstein’s monster and, to a great extent, Ana’s father, Fernando. In accordance with the film’s need to polarize, and in much the same way that Teresa’s role is bifurcated into the dual roles of Carmen and Mercedes, most of the monsters are, unlike Frankenstein, either wholly evil (like Ofelia’s step-father) or wholly righteous (modeled off the rebels/Ofelia). Yet, *El laberinto* makes one notable exception by introducing the faun, whose mirror-like ambiguity approximates him most closely to *El espíritu*’s “Frankenstein”. Appropriately, the faun is the most influential monster for Ofelia, just as the “creature” was for Ana.

47 Nevertheless, despite the faun’s mirror-like quality, he leans more heavily than Ana’s monsters to being actively good since he is as much of a guide as he is a mere reflection of society. Among the other more obvious examples already explored, the fact that the faun inspires Ofelia to change her name to “Princess Moanna” is highly significant since it signals her metamorphosis--and, more specifically, the faun’s ability to precipitate this change. In fact, if anyone is symbolic of society as a whole it is Ofelia, who, as previously mentioned, is, accordingly, addressed by the faun in the vosotros.
former true love of Teresa is, as we have seen in Chapter 1, as much of a victim as he is a victimizer. Yet, in addition to being, like the Captain, a sort of ‘false’ father, the film’s prime figure of authority, and the main person from whom one must guard her secrets, Fernando also constantly checks his remarkably similar looking pocket-watch in an almost equally obsessive way. Unlike the Captain, however, we never witness Fernando becoming violently strict if someone fails to conform to his own time limits or standards. In fact, Fernando’s authoritarian rigidity is largely nullified, or at least balanced by the fact that his pocket-watch, though a symbol of rigid, patriarchal time, plays a soothing, childlike tune consistent with his relative ambiguity as “oppressor”.

Much like the highly ambiguous Fernando and Teresa, Ana too, despite being El espíritu’s most redeemable character, is haunted by the inescapable fluidity of identity which links her to every character and which binds her to the dark shadows of her older sister, Isabel, her mother, Teresa, and even her father, Fernando. Not surprisingly, Ana’s role also becomes bifurcated or doubled in El laberinto on several different levels. Yet, since Ana is, despite being ambiguous, the character that comes closest to true heroism in El espíritu, it is little wonder that her closest counterpart in El laberinto is the young protagonist, Ofelia—who is, despite being literally orphaned, unambiguously innocent and heroic. Ironically, Ofelia’s innocence (or rather, her ethical purity) is equated not with her capacity for obedience but rather, as should now be clear, through her ability to choose the rebel Mercedes over her own mother, Carmen. This is appropriate since, as an eleven year old girl, she is literally on the verge of adolescence—and thus, much more clearly than Ana, she is on the cusp of a sexual-spiritual awakening.

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48 In fact, his authoritarian imposition of clockwork time is only subtly hinted at in El espíritu when the girls, who have stayed up past their bedtime one night, frantically blow out their candles at the sound of their father’s footsteps approaching their room (at which point one of them yells “¡Que viene papa!”).
Yet, whereas Ana’s sexual-spiritual development, as a six year old girl, is more symbolic than literal (see Chapter 1 for more detail), Ofelia’s “awakening” may be understood in more literal terms since girls commonly begin menstruating as early as age twelve; or in rarer cases, even earlier. As a result, both girls are in need of finding an appropriate interlocutor or double through which their metamorphosis/transition towards womanhood may happen. Though both girls use their relationship with mirror-like monsters to facilitate this process, unfortunately for Ana, virtually all the concrete role-models in her life are significantly flawed (Teresa and Isabel). Yet, as we have seen, Ofelia is capable of encountering an almost perfect role-model in Mercedes. The fact that she uses Mercedes to remember her forgotten world, her “true” father and even her own true self, implies that it is through her self-doubling that she achieves remembrance. Thus, by bifurcating, polarizing and thus, apparently, simplifying roles, *El laberinto* actually succeeds in revealing the complexity of psychological processes such as personality doubling and ‘rebirth’ as defined by Kristeva (see chapter 1 for more detail).

In fact, Ofelia is “doubled” in more than one significant way. In addition to Ofelia’s self-doubling with Mercedes, she similarly self-doubles with her own projected fairytale self. Just as Teresa and Fernando are bifurcated into opposing, polarized types, the ambiguous Ana is split into a dead corpse/self “Ofelia” and a transformed self “Princess Moanna”. In fact, she is also doubled in one more crucial way—a way which highlights the film’s focus on time. Specifically, Ana is split into both Ofelia, as “Princess Moanna”, who represents the mythic world as well as the future (for all humanity) and her baby brother, who lives and thus, like Ana, symbolizes the immediate
future of Spain (and hence, our/humanity’s past). Thus, the film’s tendency to double and bifurcate roles truly complicates ideas and characters as much as it simplifies them.

In the same way that El laberinto literalizes various elements of El espíritu (including characters, general themes and relationships) its capacity to bifurcate similarly encompasses not only its treatment of characters but also general ideas, themes and relationships. Though Carmen is, like Teresa, married not to the man she loves but to the man whom she feels she must marry (or, in Teresa’s case, remain married to) even this is less ambiguous in El laberinto. Whereas Teresa’s husband, Fernando, has some redeeming qualities—and it is clear from the pictures in their photo-album that the two were once genuinely in love—Ofelia’s mother is married to a man who invites absolutely no sympathy. Her true love is and has always been Ofelia’s recently deceased father. Thus, the ambiguity of the parents’ relationship in El espíritu is itself bifurcated, polarized and literalized. Moreover, whereas the Captain embodies Fernando’s tyrannical qualities and rigid temporality, just as Ofelia’s biological father (and to some extent, the faun himself) replace Fernando’s softer qualities, the moon itself serves as a replacement for feminine, cyclical time. That is, just as El laberinto splits Fernando’s role from El espíritu into Ofelia’s evil ‘false’ stepfather and her recently deceased ‘true’ biological father49, in El laberinto, rather than make the Captain or his pocket-watch ambiguous, the roles are again bifurcated into the Captain and the moon itself.

The fact that del Toro uses the moon (and, secondarily, the faun) rather than another human being as the Captain’s “temporal” counterpart highlights the lack of an appropriate person or model on earth. As a consequence, this literally otherworldly, inhuman symbol becomes an ambiguous symbol of both hope and hopelessness during

49 Ofelia’s true/deceased father is, however, also equated with the maquis Ana encounters in El espíritu.
the Franco Regime as well as a sophisticated, philosophical commentary on how that which is most self-defining is, simultaneously, that which is most radically foreign and strange—for Ana, for Ofelia, and for the world. It is Ofelia’s encounter with her own “moonlike” qualities (as Lacan would say, that which is strange to her but simultaneously at the heart of her) that teach her, paradoxically, a lesson about who she has always been but forgotten. The fact that, as previously mentioned, Ofelia finds a tattoo of the moon on her shoulder (and, more crucially, that this helps convince her to trust the faun) literally symbolizes that which *El espíritu* far more subtly suggests—namely, that Ofelia’s inward journey is simultaneously an outward one—in more than one way.

Though the moon symbolizes this ambiguity as well as all the film’s general, apparent paradoxes, the moon is, on the other hand, a far less ambiguous symbol in *El laberinto* than it is in *El espíritu* in an essential way. Though the moon similarly functions in *El espíritu* as a guide and as a symbol of Ana’s entry into her “spiritual”, fantasy-world, there is never any blatant explanation of its function or even any verbal reference to it at all. By contrast, in *El laberinto* the faun clearly tells Ofelia that she must accomplish her spiritual tasks before the moon becomes full. The moon, moreover, plays an overwhelmingly positive role in this film since, whereas the faun gives Ofelia the gift of cyclical time (the moon), in *El espíritu*, Ana gives the *maquis* exile (and by extension, the monster she mistakes him for) her father’s more ambiguous pocket-watch, and which results in his death. In short, the moon (and, in general, cyclical time), though it remains a symbol of something ultimately intangible and distant is also, ironically, a symbol of Ofelia’s ability to connect fantasy and reality. As we have seen, it ultimately conquers the Captain’s oppressive pocket-watch in *El laberinto*, at the same

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50 This is also a highly ambiguous act for additional reasons discussed in Chapter 1.
time that it incorporates this pocket-watch and the hierarchical time it reflects into the film’s larger, more comprehensive, cyclical fairytale-frame. The triumph of cyclical time is further highlighted by the moon’s capacity to remain undisturbed by the various clouds or fog that obstruct *El espíritu*’s moon. In truth, the moon is likely *El laberinto*’s most potent symbol as it reflects Ofelia’s fulfilled and positive transformation—in contrast to Ana’s impartial or ambiguous change. In the film’s final scenes the cycle becomes complete, with the full moon shining on Ofelia, as she dies amidst absolute radiance.

To summarize, though *El laberinto* takes the viewer one step beyond the world of *El espíritu*, and though it follows a plotline which is more or less invisible in *El espíritu* (for example, as it literalizes *El espíritu*’s theme of inner exile and its cyclical structure) it also literally suggests much of what *El espíritu* only vaguely or metaphorically hints at. At the same time, in the process of literalizing, polarizing or even simplifying, it also complicates and even inverts many themes and symbols, primarily by embedding them in a fairytale frame. In this way, (and specifically, because Ofelia’s death is itself symbolic), the film reveals the extent to which *El espíritu*’s doctor was seriously mistaken when he affirmed (to Teresa) that “lo importante es que vive”//“what’s important is that she [Ana] lives”. As *El laberinto* makes crystal clear, what truly matters is not *whether* she lives, but *how* she lives. As I will now further explore in this next and last section of the chapter, *El laberinto*’s exaggerated or polarized use of biblical references, symbols, and themes not only further enables it to serve as an interpretation of *El espíritu* but, more crucially, it reveals how, even as *El laberinto* serves as an interpretation of *El espíritu*, it gives the original film a more hopeful and creative twist.
Exile, Death, and Re-birthing Tradition

*Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens* (Song of Songs 2:2)

The bible is filled with stories of death and rebirth ranging from Noah (who enters his “womblike” arc for 12 months) to Jonah (who is swallowed by a whale, which itself momentarily dies and is reborn) to Jacob, who fights a dark stranger[^1], significantly, right as he goes into exile. Upon conquering this stranger Jacob becomes remade and “renamed” as “Israel”. He is no longer the “trickster/supplanter” (Jacob) but rather “he who struggles with God”. In countless other religions, rebirth is also tightly tied to spirituality and, in particular, the mystical experience. However, this idea that self-transformation is essential to mystical experience is at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition—and, in fact, it marks the beginning of its existence as well as its collective culmination (at Mt. Sinai) when, for the first time, Jews, as a collective group rather than just individually, temporarily died and were again reborn.

Of course, the idea that rebirth follows death is also implicit in Christianity not only due to its Jewish tradition but also because of the central figure of Jesus, who dies only to be resurrected. In many ways, this rebirth is different from the other types of rebirths found in the bible since it has less to do with the inner transformation of Jesus himself (who is presumed to be enlightened even before his death) and more to do with the idea that, much like Frankenstein in *El espíritu*, his resurrection signals the collective hope and rebirth of all those who believe in him (it is, after all, only his followers who recount seeing him resurrected). In short, Jesus’ literal rebirth signals the spiritual rebirth

[^1]: This nameless stranger is, supposedly, the demon Samael (for he represents Esau, from whom Jacob flees), though it could also be the archangel, Michael, or even God. It is important to consider that even evil has its purpose (in fact, it is called “very good”) because it justly punishes the wicked and, in so doing, often inspires the wicked to turn to the path of righteousness. In any event, this stranger, whether he is an angel, God or Jacob’s own psychic projection/shadow, is, in some sense, the Other that is deep within him.
of his followers (including contemporary believers) who are transformed precisely through his literal resurrection and, specifically, their ability to perceive and appreciate its significance. At the same time, inasmuch as it might be argued that Jesus himself does not fulfill his messianic duties until he sacrifices himself for others—much like Ofelia in *El laberinto*—we might conclude that he too becomes transformed only after his literal death and the corresponding spiritual exile associated with his betrayal and crucifixion. It was, in truth, only by dying that he was put to the test, as he was compelled to put others before himself (or at his own expense) while simultaneously becoming a symbol of the capacity and need to love unconditionally even those who hate, persecute, betray and kill.

In this sense, we could maintain that it is not until his death that he himself becomes fully realized/reborn—precisely through his ability to help others, to sacrifice, to forgive and to love. As he himself says, it is easy to love those who love us—and thus, of little merit—yet what is truly praiseworthy is to love even those who hurt or hate us. In any event, it is exactly this unselfish type of sacrifice (as opposed to the Francoist understanding of sacrifice, which depends, conversely, on the persecution and sacrifice of Others rather than oneself) that permits Ofelia to become reborn, as she chooses to shed her own blood over that of an innocent. Furthermore, like Jesus, the trauma and isolation that Ofelia suffers embody a type of exile that is not literal but spiritual. In this way, her plight forces us to rethink terms such as exile, rebirth and spirituality while also shedding light on their relationship to authoritarian terror, particularly in post-war Spain.

On the other hand, the similarities between this final scene in which Ofelia sacrifices herself and the biblical story of Abraham and his son, Isaac, provide novel insights and ways of interpreting this old-testament story—ways that reconcile
Christianity and Judaism rather than pitting the two against each other. In truth, this scene permits the viewer to harmonize not only Christianity and Judaism but also Islam, at least in its more mystical variants. To be exact, though the Sufi interpretation of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac varies from the others I will offer (all of which, nevertheless, examine the sacrifice in non-literal, non-traditional ways, including Al’Arabi’s), each of them highlights distinct yet compatible, even complementary ways of understanding and learning from this biblical story.

Though, rather unfortunately, most contemporary Abrahamic religions are quick to ignore it, the idea that the bible should be open to interpretation rather than closed to just one meaning is central to Jewish exegesis, which privileges the oral tradition as much as the written and, more loosely, one’s own personal encounter with divinity and scripture, as reflected, for example, in the Torah’s lack of vowels (intended to further encourage pluralistic readings). This need to open the text up to meaning rather than encage it is reinforced in El laberinto through Ofelia’s creative use of her blank magic book and, more generally, through her paradoxically “rebellious obedience” to the faun.

Yet, before we delve into a deeper analysis of these ideas (and, in particular, this climactic sacrificial scene and its various implications), it is essential to consider the ways in which several other biblical references are both repeated and transformed (relative to religious dogma and popular belief) in this film. El laberinto, though it resists and rewrites traditional and/or popular biblical interpretations, simultaneously highlights other biblical messages that are typically diminished or ignored by dogmatic analyses, and specifically those pertaining to National Catholicism. Rather than stressing the need for stagnant obedience, del Toro’s film chooses to privilege what perhaps he views as the
more redeeming and useful qualities of the Judeo-Christian tradition—namely, change, heroism and hope. This is conveyed not only through Ofelia’s spiritual “anarchy”, as she refuses to sacrifice her brother, as well as her parallel metamorphosis or rebirth, but also, on a more minute level, through her name change.52

Indeed, what is intriguing about *El laberinto’s* use of a name change to demarcate Ofelia’s journey between two worlds is not simply the fact that she is given a new name, but rather the peculiar way in which naming is used in this film. On the one hand, much like the bible, *El laberinto* highlights the centrality of naming to the process of death and rebirth inasmuch as Ofelia, like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob and many others, is given a new name analogous to her personal and spiritual metamorphosis53. Like the biblical Jacob, Ofelia keeps both names even after she is first referred to by the faun by her new and true name: Princess Moanna.54 However, aside from more significant differences, Ofelia is a girl, not a man—though, like Ana from *El espíritu*, Ofelia was created by men and may even be regarded as their psychic projections (see Chapter 1). Yet, as opposed to Ana, Ofelia’s more full-fledged and positive rebirth is indicated not only by mystical symbols

52 It is important to remember that the very first Jew, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, were formerly named Abram and Sarai. It is only at the moment of conversion that they, like Jacob, Saul and many other characters of both the old and new testaments, are given new names to match their new identities. As I more thoroughly argue in Chapter 1, all of the biblical persons mentioned above from Noah to Jonah to Abraham to Jacob to Moses (to even Jesus, symbolically) must go into exile before they are reborn. Even the mass of Jews at Mt. Sinai are, significantly, in exile when their collective death and rebirth occurs. Yet, unlike most modern works, *El laberinto* is relatively unique in that it elucidates how spiritual rebirth is not only marked by the condition of exile, which necessarily precedes it—and yet, which is not necessarily a literal exile—but also, quite often, by a corresponding and highly symbolic change of name. At the same time, this name change also corresponds to the need to reconcile the series of dichotomies enumerated throughout this thesis as well as the need to be willing to sacrifice not an Other for oneself, as Franco would have it, but, conversely, oneself for the Other. The fact that, as we will further explore in just a moment, Ofelia’s self-sacrifice parallels Abraham’s (and to some extent, even Jesus’) further suggests that the only way to overcome darkness is to learn to truly love others—even at one’s own expense.

53 By contrast, this name change is, appropriately, lacking in *El espíritu*—or rather, to the extent that it occurs, it corresponds to a negative change which likens Ana not to a positive role model but rather to her sado-masochistic older sister, Isabel. See Ch.1 for more detail.

54 Though Jacob becomes reborn as “Israel” he also continues to be known as Jacob so that God may use him in a balanced way—sometimes to provoke judgment, at which times he is referred to as Jacob; and other times to promote peace or to reward the world with love and mercy, at which times he is called Israel.
such as the unobstructed full moon that accompanies her death and rebirth as well as her general capacity to more adequately explode the series of binaries noted throughout this chapter but, most clearly, through her new name, “Princess Moanna”. At the same time, the fact that Ofelia keeps her “old” name until the process is complete may very well reflect the fact that the people of post-war Spain are not yet ready to accept her for the person she really is or has become. No matter how wholesome she is, Ofelia cannot be fully transformed or redeemed while immersed in a community filled with depravity.

With this in mind, Ofelia’s need to use both names in different contexts (one in reality and one in fantasy) may be superficially different from Jacob’s case since both his names are used constructively and on earth (or in “reality”) to reflect God’s alternating need to use love/grace and judgment/rigor. However, these two situations are not all that dissimilar if we consider that in both Ofelia’s and Jacob’s case the need to continue using their “old” names reflects their society’s imperfections even more than their own personal flaws; thus, even when Jacob acts as “Jacob” (that is, in a fittingly devious way), he does so in the service of his god. On the other hand, contrary to Jacob, Ofelia is never once called “Princess Moanna” by anyone in the “real” world. This bitter truth is hardly shocking given the rampant violence, repression and loss that surround her. Still, the fact that her new name, “Princess Moanna”, is supposedly her “true name” and, moreover, that she only unambiguously and permanently becomes or re-becomes Princess Moanna in her Otherworld underline both the film’s historical pessimism/accuracy as well as its

55 Thus, at the same time, it is important to note that individual and collective identity or merit can never be wholly detached. Even though Jacob performs a service to God by being sneaky, impure, and violent, he is, nonetheless, sneaky, impure and violent. He must act this way not only to punish the unworthy but also to protect the relatively pure (such as himself). In short, he must be “sneaky” and thus, slightly impure in order to protect himself and his people precisely from those who are radically evil, devious and impure. After all, certain types of knowledge (and even, to some extent, truth) can be dangerous when they fall into the hands of the utterly corrupt.
hope that, in the long run, a better world is coming. In short, the use of names serves as a prime example of how this film both builds on and yet “rewrites” traditions as old as the bible in a way that lends them a strongly ethical, contemporary, even subversive function.

Indeed, *El laberinto*’s apparently simplistic use of naming further reveals its ability to straddle many issues such as salvation and redemption or the relationship between rebirth and remembering in a sophisticated and enlightening way. Though redemption can, as this film suggests, only occur collectively, individual salvation can, on some level, be attained regardless of what others do—that is, as long as one acts in accordance with the benefit and good of others rather than out of purely egotistical drives. No matter how corrupt most people become, an individual can, to some degree, resist inheriting or internalizing their patterns of behavior, as suggested by Ofelia’s model role. This individual may not have a long or successful life, but she can, nevertheless, successfully withstand violence, oblivion and deceit—even more so if that society contains at least one other decent enough person or “double” with whom this individual can establish a model give-and-take relationship. In *El laberinto*, that ray of hope is the appropriately named Mercedes (Mercedes is a name for the Virgin Mary meaning “Our Lady of Mercy”). As *El laberinto* insists, no one can be completely redeemed, least of all on earth, if there is no one else with whom to share that redemption—which, by nature, rejects solitude and emptiness in favor of collective love and peace. It compels people to be truly and deeply invested in the well-being of each other and thus, to be connected to God through their very connection to others (and, by extension, to their own selves).

Nevertheless, it is the presence of egotism, oblivion and temptation that, as we have seen through the central character of captain Vidal, helps enable a more meaningful
and full-blown rebirth to occur. By holding up a mirror of everything one may be
tempted to be but should not be, it is, paradoxically, evil characters (or our confrontation
with them) that help make us good. In fact, Vidal’s character is perhaps even more
essential to the film than Mercedes’, since it is his terrorizing behavior that ignites
Ofelia’s imagination. At this juncture then, it will be useful to more adequately explore
the novel way in which El laberinto endorses the idea that rebirth requires that one first
dig deeper into death, exile and destruction. As I have already discussed through
manifold examples and symbols, rebirth, in El laberinto, requires a confrontation with the
Other—and, in particular, with the “monster” within one’s very own self. More
generally, this idea that rebirth may erupt from death is further supported by the film’s
mystical symbols and tendencies, such as the moon, the rose, the ‘kabbalistic’ keys, the
‘tree of life’, its womb and, above all, the mystical pit at the center of the labyrinth.

Yet, what distinguishes El laberinto from other films and texts which similarly
contrast exile to rebirth is this notion that the process of redemption ideally requires not
only the experience of exile, but more specifically, first knowing good, then knowing (or
confronting) evil, and then choosing good—a recurrent biblical theme ranging from
Abraham’s to Job’s to David’s struggles. The underlying moral is that one can only
become genuinely good if one has freely chosen it for oneself. In turn, one is only
sincerely free to choose if one is first tempted and confronted by evil. In this light, the
captain’s repressive terror coupled with his demand for blind obedience are exactly what
allow Ofelia to become so heroically good. Ofelia’s rejection of the faun’s command that
she sacrifice her brother is, accordingly, her most glowing accomplishment. In this sense
(and through other examples\textsuperscript{56}), the film maintains that goodness is, at heart, the opposite of or resistance to authoritarian terror/demands—in particular, pure, blind, unwavering obedience. Yet, rather than simply reject authority, Ofelia strikes a balance between obedience and trust, on the one hand, and the ability to think for herself, on the other.

She achieves this balance between independence and faith when she sacrifices herself instead of her brother. As a result, her need to save the baby boy resonates on various levels. On the one hand, it reflects the need to defy authority, which del Toro himself explicitly denounces in several interviews. Yet, at the same time, one might ask, if maintaining a balance between obedience/trust and independence is necessary in order for a society to thrive in peace, wouldn’t it be just as effective for Ofelia to go ahead and sacrifice her brother instead of herself? Moreover, by sacrificing herself, isn’t she giving in to the very Francoist belief that women should be the ones to sacrifice themselves for men? Though these are certainly legitimate queries, if we delve beneath the surface, the answer is clearly negative. Ofelia dies not by giving in to female passivity but, quite the contrary, by actively fighting against it, as further supported by the manifold examples of her heroic courage, disobedience and fluid gender roles offered throughout this chapter.

The fact that she, as a female, must die, does, of course, reflect the degree to which the ‘real’ world she leaves behind is still impure, corrupt, and degraded. Yet, for this very reason, Ofelia’s sacrifice does not render her a loser but rather a winner, as she leaves behind a violent, ugly, terrible existence for a better one. More importantly,

\textsuperscript{56} Perhaps the best example occurs when the Captain discovers that the doctor has been secretly aiding the “reds” by giving them medical attention and drugs. Immediately afterwards the Captain finds that the doctor has lethally injected his only “red” prisoner and torture victim (both to put him out of his misery and to keep him from talking) upon the prisoner’s own request. When the Captain asks the doctor why he disobeyed his orders by killing this man, the doctor responds that, obeying for the sake of obeying, without question, is something that “only people like you do, Captain.” (“Obedecer por obedecer, así, sin pensar; eso sólo hace gentes como usted, Capitán.”) After emphatically making his point, the doctor then turns to leave; yet after taking just a few steps the Captain shoots him in the back, leaving him for dead.
Ofelia’s sacrifice is necessary because it is only by altruistically sacrificing herself that she effectively resists the fascist, selfish notion of sacrifice that requires the blood of others (in this case, her brother). And finally, for practical, structural reasons, Ofelia’s death is necessary so that she can become symbolically transformed. In this way, Ofelia’s sacrifice is also in line with her role as heroine; for to be truly heroic, she must first save herself (become renewed) while at the same time embracing altruism over egoism. Thus, in a sort of inverted way, Ofelia’s challenge is the same as (yet opposite to) the biblical Abraham’s when he is commanded by God to sacrifice his son. Contrary to Franco’s literal and terrorizing interpretations of the bible and, in particular, of biblical sacrifice, this film offers us alternate lessons. Just as Abraham and Isaac were forced to find a balance between mercy and severity by offering up Isaac as a “sacrifice”, Ofelia too must find her own balance between independence and obedience (or faith) by rejecting Franco’s horrific understanding of sacrifice, as mimicked by the faun.

As is well known, in biblical tradition, God asks Abraham to build an altar, place his son on it, and sacrifice (kill) him to demonstrate his profound faith in God. On a superficial level this would seem to be an uncharacteristic, even unthinkable request for a

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57 It is essential to consider that Ofelia has, by the film’s end, already shown an extraordinary amount of trust in the faun, whose authority she never questions up until this point. If anything, all she has left to prove is her capacity for independent thought and freewill.

58 Though a superficial reading of the bible (Franco’s interpretation for example) would view Abraham’s offering of Isaac as proof that God is a wrathful warrior-like figure, who requires sacrifice and blood in order to enter his gates, we must at least entertain the (kabbalistic) idea that Abraham is tested precisely because, whereas he is exceptionally loving (yet, perhaps, incapable of balancing this love with judgment and justice), Isaac, his son, is, on the contrary, exceptionally judgmental and harsh. Thus, by showing God his willingness to sacrifice his son, Abraham is forced to embrace harshness while his son, Isaac, is forced to counter his own severity with trust, altruism and grace (it is important to keep in mind here that Isaac willingly allowed his father to tie him up and sacrifice him). Admittedly, this situation is somewhat different from Ofelia’s since her baby brother (unlike Isaac) is too young to have any personality, whether harsh, loving or whatever else. Yet, it is perhaps for this very reason that Ofelia has no right to sacrifice such an innocent being. Moreover, Ofelia, like Abraham, is forced to maintain spiritual equilibrium (though in a slightly different way) by proving that she can be not only faithful and trusting (as she has been up to this point by completing all the other tasks without questioning the faun) but, through her act of self-sacrifice also independent and courageous.
loving God to make, especially of his most favored disciple—and it is, in fact, one of the foundational arguments used by many “Christians” to absurdly pit themselves against Judaism (in short, they view the “old testament god” as a god of wrath and the “new testament god” as a god of love). Yet, the actions of the “old testament God” become more comprehensible if we consider that what God wanted from Abraham was not the literal sacrifice of Isaac but a symbol of his faith—and, perhaps, above all, a demonstration of Abraham’s capacity to find balance and wisdom—rather than Franco’s literal, “doom and gloom” interpretation of the scene, as mirrored by Ofelia’s faun.

This makes sense in light of the fact that in Jewish mysticism Abraham represents love and Isaac severity (thus, Isaac overcomes his severity by freely offering himself up to Abraham, while at the same time Abraham learns to balance his unbounded love with the rigor implicit in his potential sacrifice). On the other hand, since the only person most people would claim to love more than their own selves are their children, the sacrifice of one’s own son could also be a mere symbol of the ultimate Sacrifice one could possibly make. For Ofelia, by contrast, this ultimate Sacrifice can only be represented by her willingness to give up her own life, as she has no children of her own.

In this light, a still more compelling interpretation of Abraham’s sacrifice (compared to the kabbalistic one) is that advanced by the medieval Spanish Sufist, Ibn Al’Arabi, which explains this sacrifice on even more symbolic terms. Essentially, Al’Arabi claims that it was never God’s intention for Abraham to offer up his own son, but rather for him to be willing to make what he refers to as the “Great Sacrifice”. For Al’Arabi, Abraham’s lack of wisdom in discerning symbols prevented him from properly interpreting his vision/dream. He explains, “The state of sleep is the plane of the
Imagination and Abraham did not interpret [what he saw], for it was a ram that appeared in the form of Abraham’s son in the dream, while Abraham believed what he saw [at face value]. So his Lord rescued his son from Abraham’s misapprehension by the Great Sacrifice [of the ram], which was the true expression of his vision with God, of which Abraham was unaware.” (The Bezels of Wisdom, 99). Al’Arabi further notes,

God says to Abraham, calling him O Abraham, you believed what you saw, and He does not say, “You were right concerning what you saw,” namely [in seeing] your son, because he did not interpret what he saw, but took it at face value, although visions require interpretation. Thus Joseph’s master says, If you will interpret the vision. Interpretation means to pass from the form of what one sees to something beyond it.// Thus were the cattle [symbols] for years of scarcity and plenty. Had he been true to the vision he would have killed his son, for he believed that it was his son he saw, although with God it was nothing other than the Great Sacrifice in the form of his son. Because of this He saved him, because of the mistaken notion that had entered Abraham’s mind. […](99)

In truth, Ibn Al’Arabi’s interpretation of the sacrifice is relevant to this chapter for several reasons. First, the importance he attributes to the interpretation of both dreams and scripture are clearly in line with the basic approach of this chapter and dissertation. On the other hand, the idea that dreams are windows into the soul/oneself and even God resemble the psychoanalytic emphasis placed on dream interpretation, though many variants (for example, Freud’s), would deny the relevance or validity of any mystical significance. Either way, Al’Arabi’s approach helps reveal the degree to which psychoanalysis and mysticism share far more than is commonly presumed. In fact, as the wisdom of this great Sufist helps clarify, much of what appears to be new in Freudian, Jungian and other schools of psychoanalysis (particularly the significance of interpreting dreams as symbols of deeper psychic processes), is predated by hundreds, even thousands, of years. At the same time, if we entertain Al’Arabi’s reading of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son, the bible itself becomes far more palatable and less
contradictory. In particular, it becomes possible to reconcile the kernels of seemingly incompatible religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

This becomes still more obvious if we continue to build on (yet also push beyond) Al’Arabi’s interpretation—that is, if we view Abraham’s ability to refrain from sacrificing his son not just as a gift from God but as the second and final part of his “test”. In fact, this not only makes it possible to reconcile the three abovementioned religions (or, at least, find redeeming qualities in all three), but it also enables us to make sense, specifically, of Ofelia’s final encounter with the faun in *El laberinto*. Though her act of apparent disobedience appears to contradict Abraham’s loyalty, if we examine the situation more closely, we will see that both of them are tested in very similar ways. As Al’Arabi states in reference to the near sacrifice,

[…] Then God says, *This is indeed a clear test*, that is, a test of his knowledge, whether he knew what interpretation was necessary in the context of vision or not. Abraham knew that the perspective of the Imagination required interpretation, but was heedless [on this occasion] and did not deal with the perspective in the proper way. Thus, he believed the vision as he saw it.” (*The Bezels of Wisdom* 100).

As a result, he nearly sacrifices his son; and yet, he does not. In short, Abraham’s test consisted not only in his willingness to offer up a Great Sacrifice (which appeared to him as his son, we can presume, for the very reason that he loved him above all else), but just as crucially in his ability to finally and correctly interpret his visions. Though Al’Arabi states, “Because of this He [God] saved him, because of the mistaken notion that had entered Abraham’s mind.” (99) (parentheses are mine), it is possible to interpret God’s “salvation” of Abraham and his son (when he substitutes Isaac for the ram) as itself symbolic. That is, if everything that exists—-not only dreams but even scripture--must be interpreted rather than taken at face value, then perhaps God “saved” Abraham
not by literally offering him a ram but providing him with the proper vision or insight. Accordingly, God’s replacement of Isaac with the ram could be viewed not in literal terms but rather as another vision that occurred in Abraham’s imagination.

Finally, though it may have been God’s intention for Abraham to first believe that he must actually offer up his son, as El laberinto helps support, deception itself may serve as the best means of testing one spiritually. Indeed, this is exactly what happens in El laberinto, since the faun, as a mirror of society, serves both as a direct guide but also, at other times, as Ofelia’s “spiritual challenger”, so to speak. Because Ofelia lives in a time of absolute terror, it is only natural that the faun’s final test would require that he himself embody Francoist dogma—which, in effect, is a lie (a lie which, perhaps, is not all that different from Abraham’s initially false vision or understanding of sacrifice).

In effect, either the vision itself or Abraham’s interpretation of it was a lie—albeit a necessary one. This becomes even more compelling in light of the kabbalistic belief in the angel referred to as “the Challenger” (who, as the angel which corresponds to Shekhinah or Malkhut, is also a mirror of humanity). In the more traditional and mainstream variants of the Abrahamic religions this challenger would correspond to the devil himself. However, in Kabbalah, he is seen as either the just and rigorous side of God (who only appears to be unjust when humans sever him from God’s merciful side through their own sin) or as the angel/Challenger through whom God’s willingness to test us is conveyed—and who, despite being the bearer of pain, lies and even death, ultimately holds a necessary and ethical function in our lives.

In any case, what is most useful about this final interpretation is that it highlights the fact that what saved Isaac was not (simply) God, but Abraham’s own ability to
transform himself into a person capable not only of altruistic sacrifice but of truly seeing and interpreting the world for himself--with wisdom, discerning judgment and the ability to look beyond appearances. In truth, this lesson is perhaps even more vital for Ofelia, as she is submersed in a world of violence, blind obedience and bigotry—and, moreover, one which justifies itself largely and ironically through its perversely literal and dogmatic interpretation of the bible. Yet, by rewriting or imbuing this biblical story/scene with both modern relevance and a sophisticated understanding of spirituality and ethics, El laberinto is capable of offering new, more profound, more socially productive ways of approaching not only religion but, more generally, ethics and even life itself. Ofelia, like Abraham, does not sacrifice her brother—for, despite the temptation, she too opens her eyes. Yet like Abraham, her sacrifice is still great, altruistic and pure.

Before moving beyond this climactic sacrificial scene, it will be helpful, finally, to consider Adam Newton’s similarly symbolic, non-literal way of interpreting Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac, as proposed in his intriguing Narrative Ethics. Rather than blaming Abraham for not correctly interpreting the dream, he blames the reader of the bible for not correctly interpreting the story itself. For Newton, the sacrifice is not to be taken literally, but rather as symbolic of a covenant with language. By extension, it is symbolic of the need for each human to sacrifice his or her own power over language precisely so that it can become a means of communication rather than monologue. Not only does this make sense given the great importance attributed to ‘the word’ or language in both Judaism and Christianity, but it has implications that become highly relevant to El laberinto since the infant boy appears to have become an obsession to everyone, most notably, the Captain. Indeed, the struggle over the baby in many ways reflects the
struggle over power—and not only in terms of language but also in terms of memory, especially if we consider that the boy, even more than Ofelia, represents Spain’s next, upcoming generation. In this context, it is vital to keep in mind Mercedes’ declaration to the Captain at the film’s end that his son will not even remember his (father’s) name.\textsuperscript{59}

Of course, on a historical level, the struggle to gain control over the baby (as well as, from Ofelia’s perspective, the decision whether or not to keep it alive) reflects not only the importance of overcoming the monolithic discourse so deeply rooted in authoritarian terror but also the fact that, as explained in Chapter 1, countless babies and children were dislocated from their parents during and immediately after the Civil War—often permanently. Some of them even died in the process. In this light, it is important to consider the fact that Mercedes’ desire to destroy the baby’s link to (or memory of) his father is an inversion of what the Franco Regime did in the aftermath of the war. By extension, though Ofelia’s desire to save this baby by stealing him makes her even more subversive, it also makes her far less so. Contrary to Mercedes, who desires that the baby forget his father, Ofelia appears to wish for the very opposite; yet, by stealing the baby from her father’s office, she imitates the practice of the fascists, who similarly rob babies from their “red” parents in order to re-indoctrinate them. In Ofelia’s case, the issue is slightly more complex, however, not only because her essential task (and motive) is to

\textsuperscript{59} Though Ofelia represents the projected future not only of Spain but of humanity itself (through her symbolic death and rebirth in another world); the boy represents, far better than Ofelia, the immediate future of post-war Spain since he is not only even younger, but, more crucially, he survives. In this respect, the baby (rather than Ofelia) takes on Ana’s role as symbol of Spain’s upcoming generation. Yet, by splitting Ana’s role into two parts (the boy and Ofelia), \textit{El laberinto} manages to be both more pessimistic with respect to the immediate future of post-war Spain (unlike Ana’s case in \textit{El espíritu}, it is unambiguously clear in \textit{El laberinto} that the boy will have trouble remembering the past), yet also far more hopeful, if we consider the more distant world or future hope that is expressed through Ofelia’s ascent into an-other world. Yet, this future hope will depend on humanity itself (including us viewers) rather than history. The ethical burden this Otherworld places on us viewers might help explain why this fantasy world is, ultimately, the more important of the two worlds (or the film’s larger frame).
help both herself and her brother remember rather than forget, but also because, in a sense, the baby belongs as much to Ofelia (and her “murdered” mother) as it does to the murderous Captain. Symbolically, the boy belongs to the Otherworld and thus, Ofelia.

This is reinforced by the ruddy womb imagery, which emphatically likens him, particularly while he is still in his mother’s womb, to Ofelia (who is also, albeit on a symbolic and/or fantastic plane, experiencing a similar rebirth-ing) and which is further corroborated by her promise to make him a prince in this fantasy realm. This spiritual-symbolic link between Ofelia and her brother is further tightened by the fact that, at the center of the mystical pit stands a monument which, the faun explains, represents the faun, Ofelia and a baby (supposedly her brother). Yet, even in realistic rather than purely symbolic terms, no baby should have to endure a father who is a murderer—and, what is more, directly responsible for the death of both the child’s own mother and sister. Though these factors help legitimize Ofelia’s act, its ethical complexity (or ambiguity) is heightened still more if we consider that the obsession over the baby not only reflects the historical problem of children being separated from their parents or even dying but also the struggle to gain power and control over language via the symbolic baby boy.

To summarize, though Ofelia’s sacrifice is inevitable insomuch as it remarks on the grim historical reality of post-war Spain, the fact that she sacrifices herself precisely because she rejects the Captain’s (and, by extension, the Francoist) notion of sacrifice renders her action not only altruistic but highly subversive. Yet, the fact that the rebirth that occurs (on a personal level) is, simply, rebirth into an “Otherworld” makes it not only mildly pessimistic but necessarily, even “positively” so. Aside from the historical necessity of sacrifice, especially in light of the degree to which Ofelia’s identity is
portrayed as inter-subjective, her rejection of sacrifice might also be understood as morally ambiguous if we continue to view the baby boy in “Symbolic” terms (that is, as symbolic of the Symbolic itself) rather than as an actual human being.

In this context, Ofelia’s refusal of sacrifice (or her reluctance to even let the boy be “pricked”) signals her inability to sacrifice her own control over (Symbolic) language itself. This reading becomes especially convincing if we consider what Adam Newton describes as the “covenantal force which Levinas attributes to speech” (*Narrative Ethics* 111), which itself is based on Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac—who, in Kristeva’s or Lacan’s terms, could similarly be construed as “symbolic of the Symbolic”. As Newton further suggests, “In Genesis, what is called the *akedah* counterpoises three sorts of binding: the binding and subsequent loosing of Isaac, the compensatory binding of community to cultural narrative, and the binding nature of obligatory response” (*NE* 112).

Indeed, the very fact that God permits Isaac to live (and that Isaac becomes the *necessary* site through which the Symbolic is collectively restructured) implies that language, through its ability to mend the world, can and should be redeeming rather than oppressive. More precisely, while this interpretation remains consistent with the film itself as well as with the larger society it reflects, it confirms that Ofelia’s refusal of sacrifice is, *simultaneously*, indicative of her refusal to sacrifice exclusive control over language. Obviously, this is not at all subversive but, quite the contrary, an indication of her incapacity to fully partake in a healthy, communal re-appropriation of language.

To summarize, Ofelia’s denial of sacrifice is ambiguous since it serves both as a subversion of the egocentric sacrifice propagated by Franco’s National Catholicism as

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60 Though this reading of Abraham’s “near sacrifice” may seem farfetched, literal interpretations of any sacred text--which are, after all, poetic narratives par excellence--skew their true meanings.
well as, unfortunately, the more mystical version, which would imply that, in a perverse way, the faun is actually truthful when he suggests that Ofelia “gets what she asks for” when she dies. Yet, even on a mystical level, because Ofelia’s refusal to sacrifice her brother is essentially altruistic (and, what is more, enables her to become more spiritually balanced, like Abraham) we might conclude that, despite the ambiguity of her act, it is essentially a positive, and, at worst, necessary one. In fact, even to the degree that her sacrifice remains ambiguous, it is exactly this ambiguity, enhanced by the dubious morality of her act, that calls forth the reader’s responsibility in the recreation of the film.

All the same, the very desire for a baby is, as Kristeva suggests (*Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*), the desire for something that is one’s own yet simultaneously “Other”/different. Significantly, as William Ellos points out (*Narrative Ethics*), creative writing (and, I would add, filmmaking) produces a similar effect insomuch as “Even in writing our own text a certain distance from one’s self appears. It is rather like the feminine experience of having a child” (*Narrative Ethics* 53). In this respect, the baby may effectively function as a symbol of the way in which Ofelia’s rebirth becomes, on many levels, a desire to simultaneously connect to the Other.

Again, this function is reflected (on the level of content) by the fact that the baby ultimately belongs not only to Ofelia but to the entire community. If we duly consider Julia Kristeva’s notions about how poetic processes unfold, we might conclude that the *real* baby is the film itself. In this light, it is a baby that belongs not only to the “reds” but to the entire audience. Within this context, the degree of ambiguity, even pessimism, 

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61 This idea not only demonstrates how writing inherently “feminizes” men, but also reinforces the way in which narration is, by nature, already a means of reconciling the self/other split. Though both Ellos and Kristeva refer only explicitly to narrative, textual writing, this notion perhaps fits filmmaking even more tightly insomuch as filmmaking, even more so than narrative, requires the joint collaboration of various persons, including the actors themselves.
that exists in this film might then be viewed as an ethically positive quality, for it enables the audience to truly appropriate, nourish and create this “baby” by actively engaging with the film. In short, the responsibility the viewers have, for example, of critiquing the “reds”, mirrors—yet, in so doing, takes one step further—Ofelia’s need to critique the Captain. In this way, the film perfectly fulfills the central requirement of a “narrative ethics”, as it extends responsibility outwards to increasingly greater or wider audiences.

That being said, I find it appropriate to end this section by reminding the reader that, despite the relatively minor ethical ambiguities of Ofelia’s final sacrifice, within the structure of the film, this act was unambiguously necessary not only to the film’s structure or verisimilitude but also for Ofelia herself. Despite her shortcomings, we must consider not only the positive ramifications of her sacrifice (already mentioned), but also the fact that, as highlighted by the very ambiguity of her choice, Ofelia truly had no perfect choice. This, in turn, solidifies an earlier point I made regarding the impossibility of detaching the self from its community. Like Jacob, Ofelia cannot be utterly pure if she lives in a society that itself is corrupt—a fact which is further reinforced both through Mercedes’ and her own need to be sneaky and devious (towards the Captain). Moreover, not only is Ofelia capable of facing, battling and conquering demons, monsters, temptation and even pure evil, but, like Abraham and Rebekah, she does so despite coming from a family that is, in many ways, the very incarnation of evil (embodied by her step-father) and repression (as even her mother’s weak behavior reflects). Yet, this only makes Ofelia’s accomplishment all the more laudable, impressive, and meaningful.

As previously noted, biblical tradition teaches (through examples like the story of Job and Abraham) that one must first know both good and evil in order to appreciate “the
good” and also, in order to truly choose that which is good. However, the need to first descend into darkness is not only about freely choosing but also about “refining” oneself. Abraham is, in many ways, even more pleasing to God than his descendents because he symbolizes the potential for good to come out of evil (symbolized not only by his descent into Egypt but also by his evil father and brother, Haran), or, more radically, for good to come out of nothing at all. In this way, he becomes much like the biblical Rebekah (who, though virtuous, is the daughter of an evil, cunning man—hence, she is described as a “rose among thorns”) as well as our own Ofelia, who, like the rose perched on the summit of the thorny mountain in the story she tells her mother/brother, is not only the daughter of the evil Vidal but is engulfed in a community of fear, aggression and hate. Yet despite this overwhelming iniquity, Ofelia would rather kill her wicked stepfather or even herself than become like him.62 In spite of being surrounded by evil, Ofelia turns darkness into light. Nevertheless, because her community is essentially corrupt, she can only truly become wholly virtuous through death. This is the film’s fundamental paradox.

Nevertheless, within a spiritual/symbolic framework, the film offers hope since, contrary to the treatment of biblical symbols in El espíritu, all El laberinto’s biblical symbols are, though set in a new context, unambiguously positive or optimistic—from the full unobstructed moon63 to the mystic flowers which accompany Ofelia’s death and

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62 Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens (Song of Songs 2:2). In truth, this quote is not only perfect insomuch as it describes Ofelia’s mother (as we have seen, she is symbolically referred to precisely as a rose surrounded by thorns) but all the more so because it fits Ofelia even better since she becomes more virtuous than her mother despite being subjected to even greater suffering, loss and repression. In fact, this exact phrase is not only a famous phrase from the bible (Song of Songs) but also an image that Julia Kristeva identifies with both rebirth and the mystic experience in general in Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia.

63 Contrary to El laberinto (which ends with the full moon--symbolic of Kings David, Solomon and Messiah--shining brightly as Ofelia is reborn into a heavenly abode or paradise), in El espíritu this moon is always obstructed by fog, suggesting the failure or impossibility of full rebirth to take place. See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of mystical symbolism, particularly regarding the moon.
rebirth to Ofelia herself who, in biblical terms, becomes, like Rebekah, a rose among thorns. Thus, despite its severely realistic/pessimistic portrayal of post-war Spain, this film offers an encouraging model of what true rebirth and remembering are—even if they remain unfulfilled in the present or past realities to which the film refers and remakes.

In effect, because Ofelia literally dies, El laberinto, despite being more blatantly pessimistic, is also unequivocally hopeful. As reinforced by the film’s decidedly positive symbols (such as the full/androgynous moon), in the final analysis, Ofelia is, unlike Ana, totally transformed, healed, and renewed. Though Ofelia dies, her transformation into “Princess Moanna” is complete, thus suggesting that if she (and, by extension, the post-war community she historically represents) had not died, a similar metamorphosis might have been possible on earth. At the very least, the film ends by showing the traces that Ofelia has left behind of her buoyant, transformative existence—a blossoming flower symbolic of Ofelia’s death and rebirth as well as all the generations that will and have already come and passed. Yet above all, she offers her viewers (and especially her female viewers) a more unambiguously hopeful model for the future, ironically, by looking back to the past—and not just the post-war past but the biblical past of antiquity.

In closing, Ofelia’s decision to defy the faun not only redefines and reframes the biblical importance of sacrifice but, in so doing, it reinforces the fact that our reasons for choosing right over wrong must come from within ourselves—for we can never be right

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64 However, as I discuss elsewhere in more detail, Ofelia herself establishes a more explicit link between her mother and the mystic rose as she narrates a story of a rose surrounded by thorns in which she equates her mother with the rose and her step-father with the thorns.

65 Curiously enough, this blossoming flower was originally part of Erice’s (outer narrative) script, which revolved around an adult Ana, who is prompted to remember her past as she travels back to her childhood town for her father’s funeral. This is one of many examples of El laberinto’s capacity to literalize all that is subtle in El espíritu. Of course, the outer-framework with the blossoming flower would have been not only uncharacteristic (of El espíritu’s subtlety) but less effective in El espíritu since its framework is gritty and real rather than fantastic, mythical or symbolic.
when we blindly obey. In this way, Ofelia, much like Abraham, is defined in contrast to the biblical Haran (Abraham’s brother), who, according to rabbinic tradition, chose “good” or the right answer for the wrong (opportunistic) reasons and was thus killed. In short, by keeping and reframing these biblical lessons, del Toro effectively shows how a newer and brighter future depends not on rejecting or repressing the past and its traditions but rather on giving them new perspective and meaning. In this way, just as his work blends high and low genres, it also resonates not only with the most ancient of traditions but also with the most contemporary and new.

**Conclusion**

If this chapter has succeeded in its goals, it has offered new perspectives not only on *El laberinto* but also on exile, authoritarianism, memory, spirituality and, specifically, the power of fantasy and storytelling to resist and recover from state terror and oblivion--and to a great extent, *all* terror and oblivion, whether spiritual and internal or violent and external. Through the creative act of retelling, the film offers a model of how to transcend one’s own personal traumas, and in so doing, remake oneself as well as one’s relationship to others/the world. In the process, it shows how achieving this may help elucidate and/or resolve greater social problems, including the dogmatic ways in which religion have been used not only in Spain but to a great extent throughout the world.

More fundamentally, my reading acknowledges not only the complexity of the relationship between fantasy and reality, but also its relationship to other false dichotomies as well as to exile, memory and identity. In addition to providing historical, biographical and theoretical context, this chapter considers why, how and to what end *El
*laberinto* rewrites and integrates other films and fictions. As should now be obvious, del Toro, by reframing *El espíritu*, imitates Ofelia’s need to remake the fairytales which she reads, as she then uses them to transform not only the tales themselves but also herself and the world. More crucially, however, del Toro, by re-membering this film, begs us viewers to follow his example, just as he, in turn, follows Ana’s and Ofelia’s.

To summarize, *El laberinto*, albeit somewhat less nuanced and realistic than *El espíritu*, stays true to the general spirit of repression characteristic of post-war Spain at the same time that it imagines a clearer, brighter, more hopeful future. Through its fairytale simplicity (and graphic violence) it not only manages to explain *El espíritu*’s monumental silences but also complicates many of its issues by weaving together fantasy and reality in complex and often counterintuitive ways. At the same time, though *El laberinto*’s simplicity requires that it forego *El espíritu*’s capacity to capture the nuances, complexities and fluidity of human behavior and identity, on the other hand, even in its realistic dimension, *El laberinto* complements *El espíritu* by exposing a more hidden yet also more overtly bloody and traumatic side of post-war Spain as it transports its viewers, along with Ofelia, to the verdant yet violent mountains of northern Spain.

In reality, we might say that *El laberinto* takes Fernando up on his promise (in *El espíritu*) to his girls that he would one day guide them to the magical misty mountains where the special yet poisonous mushrooms grow. It may help to remember that the “poison mushroom” symbolizes, as I more thoroughly explore in Chapter 1, the veiled threat of both female and *maquis* power and mobility—and, in fact, this constitutes yet another way in which much of that which is subtle, minor or metaphorical in *El espíritu*

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66 I am referring to a side of reality that is hidden, specifically, from the typical, civilian Spaniard of the Civil War and its aftermath.
becomes literalized and amplified in *El laberinto*. In place of *El espíritu*’s tactic of making oblique references to a symbolic poisonous mushroom, *El laberinto* directly illustrates the struggles of the people this mushroom represents. Though this murky mountain turns out to be far more dangerous and violent than we viewers (of *El espíritu*) might have imagined, it also offers a far clearer and more radical form of ‘fantastic’ hope--both through its characters and its viewers. In short, this movie is an invitation. It invites us to enter a forbidden place--in many ways, that very same one that *El espíritu* only whispers about through circuitous speech, metaphor and hushed tall-tales. Yet, *El laberinto* inverts this logic as it itself becomes the tale.

Finally, despite the fact that, unlike *El beso* or even *El espíritu* this film focuses on an “alternative” world constructed by one young girl, it is important to remember that this girl creates her alternative world as a means of confronting not only her own “demons” but those of her entire society. In truth, this world could not exist without Ofelia’s mother, brother, Mercedes (as prime collaborator), the Captain (as arch-enemy/monster) and even the doctor, the “reds”, and the remaining maids. Yet, above all, it requires *us* (viewers). As Ofelia’s symbolic fairytale “vosotros” designation suggests, the fact that Ofelia is just one person is little more than a symbolic formality reflective of the film’s fairytale structure. However, it is because of this very fairytale frame that Ofelia successfully represents not one person but *all* people; and not only the people of post-war Spain, but as the film’s outer structure ultimately suggests, people from *all* times and places; including and especially the viewers themselves. Yet, most importantly, Ofelia looks towards a time to come--hopefully, a better one.

Yet, in *El laberinto* the poisonous mother-figure (Teresa) is transformed not into Carmen but rather, into the maid, Mercedes, while the *maquis* resistance becomes the “red” *huídos* which Mercedes, Ofelia and the doctor help protect.
Chapter 3:

The Key, the Keeper, the Woman and the Beast: Resisting State Terror through ‘Fantastic’ Realities

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In the first two chapters we have learned to appreciate the power and beauty of child’s play, and specifically, of the imagination, innocence and openness that children represent, particularly in the context of authoritarian terror. It is largely children’s lack of social power (and the corruption it often entails) that enables them to serve as such commanding figures of change. Yet, even in these films, the children needed adult models and alter-egos, both real and fantastic, in order to find, remember and remake not only themselves but their relationships to others. As other retrospective films of the Spanish post-war, Civil War and pre-war similarly suggest (perhaps most notably, José Luis Cuerdas’ *La lengua de las mariposas*, 1999), though children have a stunning capacity for resilience and change, they also learn from and rely on adults—who are often not their parents.

This next chapter on *El beso* is transitional because while it follows up on *El laberinto*’s attempt to explore the ways in which fantasy can be used to actively resist state terror, in addition to other important differences, it focuses on adult male protagonists rather than children. On the one hand, its ability to focus on adulthood permits us to explore in more depth the degree to which any sort of psychological, ethical or spiritual illumination depends as much on appreciating a sort of wisdom, resilience and ‘rebirth’ that can only come with the pain of losing innocence as it does on finding one’s own “inner child”. In fact, what stands out about the girls in the previous chapters is that, despite benefiting from the openness of childhood, they, perhaps more importantly,
occupy a transitional state—one which begs them to remember their true, innocent selves while also learning from the pain associated with betrayal, desire, terror and exile that, in many ways, mark the entry into adulthood. Ironically, it is often from the very suffering implicit in adult experiences, terror and sexual desire that we are reminded of that inner child who wishes to break free.

*El beso*, in its focus on the unlikely love affair that blossoms between two outcast men who, as prisoners, are literally exiled both from society and yet, technically, within the boundaries of authoritarian Argentina, emphasizes just this. At the same time, as a work that focuses on Argentina rather than Spain, the differences and similarities between this novel and the films analyzed in chapters 1 and 2 reflect important cultural differences and parallels between authoritarian Argentina and Franco’s Spain.

Both *El beso’s* similarities to and differences from these other primary works are evident when analyzed in light of almost every major theme or aspect of this dissertation. It is important to remember that one of the core ideas that frames this project is the notion that sexual and spiritual awakenings are, contrary to common belief, not antithetical but rather tightly interwoven. Though *El beso* does not deal directly with the topic of spirituality, it does, in fact, touch on it in many indirect ways. In each one of these ways, spirituality and ethics are intimately connected to sexuality, desire and the need to reconcile what have traditionally and erroneously been labeled as masculine and feminine traits. While it is true that the urgency of overcoming this dichotomy is also present in the other works, *El beso* more radically dismantles this binary. In the process, this novel urges the viewer not just to reconcile but to completely dispose of these very categories of masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, there is a general tendency in each of
my primary texts or films to demonstrate that the path towards inward spiritual or self-illumination is simultaneously a journey outwards, an idea which *El beso* also engages. The conclusion that we might logically draw from this is that Desire is inherently reconcilable to Responsibility. And yet, *El beso* is the only work that deals explicitly and affirmatively with the complex relationship between desire, sex and responsibility.

The novel achieves this, largely, by incorporating a multifaceted, somewhat Jungian, view of sexuality and selfhood into its highly sophisticated ethical and social critiques. However, to label this novel Jungian would be to dismiss its complexity. Like the other primary works, albeit in significantly different ways, *El beso* does not limit itself to one school of thinking but rather finds a balance between ideas and theories such as Julia Kristeva’s subjective, desire based ethics and Emmanuel Levinas’ inter-subjective focus on radical responsibility and alterity. Yet, the point of departure here is sexuality itself. Much like *El laberinto*, fantasy is used in *El beso* in counterintuitive ways—that is, both as a means of remembering and of actively resisting state terror. *El beso*, however, differentiates itself from *El laberinto* inasmuch as fantasy becomes not only a means of fighting inequality, injustice and one’s own personal demons but, more specifically, as a means of fully unleashing the repressed sexual desire, love or “beast” within. Only in *El beso* do we get a clear picture or model for how this may happen.

To a large extent, *El beso*’s emphasis on sexuality and adulthood are reflective of the fact that the novel’s characters are more realistic counterparts to its author. Though the girls in chapters 1 and 2 also symbolize psychic sides of their respective directors and

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1 In *El espíritu*, for example, we see a negative example of Teresa’s inability to be either sexually liberated or responsible, but we find no positive example. Conversely, Ana’s sexual-spiritual awakening in this film is not only short-lived and incomplete but largely symbolic—as she is a mere child. Finally, in *El laberinto*, though we know that Ofelia is at the brink of adolescence (even more so than Ana, who is younger) there is no explicit mention of sexual desire.
writers, perhaps even sexual ones, because they, as simple girls, are mere embodiments/symbols, they are incapable of fully fleshing out the nuances of sexuality and desire as well as the relationship of sexuality and desire to social responsibility, retrospective memory, ethical behavior and/or spiritual awakening. At the same time, it is imperative to consider that Molina, much like the films directors treated in previous chapters, dramatizes his own experience of exile and rebirth through the use of female heroines.

In this light, it is worth considering that the retellings that occur in *El beso* are, when compared to those addressed in previous chapters, not only inverted (as the novel is a written work which retells films rather than a film which retells written stories/books) but more explicit; for the novel is based on one character’s desire to recount his favorite films to his cellmate. These factors render the novel more blatantly autobiographical—as Puig himself was not only a political exile and a homosexual but also a lover of films—while also enhancing *El beso*’s function as a sort of metatexual guide. In effect, the novel offers a model for how its readers should interpret not only *El beso*, but literature in general and even life. For these reasons, *El beso* serves as a more explicit, perhaps even more self-conscious model for using fantasy and fiction as a means of remembering and overcoming state terror and repression and thus, just as crucially, as a model for how to interpret or engage with film, fiction and life. In a far more specific way, the novel also becomes a useful guide for interpreting the particular films treated in chapters 1 and 2—since they too rewrite previous traditions and fictions, albeit in more subtle ways.

Whereas *El espíritu* and *El laberinto* are retrospective accounts of childhood trauma and survival—or at least, largely inspired by the directors’ own childhood traumas, by contrast, *El beso* features grown male protagonists who share essential characteristics
with Puig. While Valentín is imprisoned for being a political rebel, his cellmate, Molina, is thrown in jail for being homosexual. In this way, they not only represent two different people but perhaps two flip sides of Puig. Given that Puig writes his novel from exile (or from a spatial distance from the terror depicted in the text) but *not* from a temporal distance (as he continued to suffer as an adult), it is appropriate that his characters not only find themselves in the symbolic exile of a prison cell but that they are adults.

And yet, it is also important to keep in mind that, unlike del Toro and Erice, Puig was homosexual. Homosexuality not only deepens Puig’s personal or spiritual sense of exile but it makes his experience of alienation always present, always relevant, as much in adulthood as in childhood. In this way, Puig’s novel is as much about sexual alienation as it is about authoritarian terror. And yet, the fact that he chooses to intertwine the two is itself significant and, in fact, reveals much about his own experience of how, why and to what extent authoritarianism and sexuality are related. The fact that homosexuality contributes to Puig’s general sense of estrangement as well as the violence he experienced from the time he was a child (when he was beaten and teased for wearing dresses and other “female” attire) is important to consider. These experiences that accompanied his “queer” sexual tendencies and gender identities inevitably gave him unique insights into the relationship between gender, sexuality, violence, and, more simply, the unquestioning rigidity of thought that accompanies authoritarian behavior and ideology. It is this blind obedience to dogma, authority and social categories/norms that, as *El beso* illuminates, lies at the heart of Argentine authoritarianism.

It would make sense then, that of all the artists examined in this thesis, the only one to deeply explore the need for a reconciliation of sexual desire and responsibility as
well as a complete explosion of gender categories themselves is Manuel Puig. The fact that he achieves this within the context of and in relationship to authoritarian terror makes his work even more incisive, socially productive and uncommonly complex. Yet, for this to become fully clear, it will be of great use for us to examine El beso alongside of El laberinto—particularly in light of the way in which both works use fantasy to remember and resist state terror. In the process, both striking similarities and drastic differences between the two works will become apparent.

Re-framing ‘Fantastic’ Realities

In both El beso de la mujer araña and El laberinto del fauno the protagonists create alternative worlds that, on the surface, appear to be a means of escaping state terror. However, upon close examination, it becomes clear that these alternative worlds serve primarily as a means of confronting and overcoming terror, repression and, more generally, the interrelated series of separations previously elaborated. These fantasy worlds enable the protagonists to discover themselves and their world in a meaningful way. In both El beso and El laberinto the alternative worlds created by the protagonists not only mirror the outer worlds, but do so in ways that help the protagonists remember and subvert the re/oppressive elements found in the ‘real’ world, elements which prevent them from connecting to both themselves and to others. Though these “alternative” worlds of fantasy import elements of “reality” from the past and present, they also anticipate, foreshadow and even influence the future--both collective and personal. Moreover, the symbolic elements exported from the “real” to “alternative” worlds reflect both personal and collective traumas, tools, battles and triumphs.
The collective dimension of these fantasies is conveyed in the films, fairytales and myths that form the foundation for the creation of these alternative worlds. The collective aspect of these fantasy worlds is also reinforced by the fact that the tools, symbols, monsters and struggles the protagonists bring into it are reflective of real and current collective crises. These alternative worlds, though highly personalized, would not exist as such, and would certainly not be subversive, without the special collaboration of a significant partner, ‘double’ or ‘shadow’—for Ofelia, Mercedes; for Molina, Valentín.

In *El beso*, this doubling is further reflected in the films Molina chooses to narrate. This becomes clear as I address the ways in which the 1943 film, *Cat People* (which Molina renames *La mujer pantera*) dramatizes, particularly in Molina’s skewed recollection of it, the dynamic that evolves between him and Valentín in the novel’s outer frame story.

Though the tragic deaths of Ofelia (in *El laberinto*) and Molina (in *El beso*) that ultimately occur in the corresponding “real” worlds reflect the bleak historical realities that these works represent, these deaths are necessary not simply for the sake of historical accuracy. More essentially, they function (like the elements, symbols or tools transported in and out of the two “worlds”) as a means of reinforcing the extent to which personal identity cannot be detached from the collective—or even, as *El beso* solidly suggests, from the films, fantasies and myths on which their collective societies are based. At the same time, the novel, while exposing how these dynamics work, offers hope, even as it ends tragically with Molina’s death. In a sense, the prisoners are capable of inverting the very mechanisms of fear manipulated to repress them. In so doing, the men offer a heroic model for resisting state terror, which is, perhaps, based even more on fear than violence.
In order to fully appreciate this, one must keep in mind that the reason the two initially polar opposite men (a homosexual imprisoned for “corruption” of minors, Molina, and a communist political prisoner, Valentín) are thrown together as cellmates is because it was hoped that the somewhat opportunistic, romantic, even fascist-inclined yet naïve Molina could suck political secrets out of Valentín by pretending to befriend him. In compensation for reporting these secrets back to the military, Molina would be granted early release—and thus, would be free to tend to his elderly, sick mother to whom he is profoundly attached. Yet, though Molina initially plays along, in the process of feigning friendship with Molina, the two men grow to love one another—so much so that when Molina is finally released, he decides to heroically aid Valentín’s cause. Unfortunately, with the help of various surveillance techniques, he is spied on, caught and murdered.

And yet, though Molina dies, in the process, he turns the military’s attempt to manipulate him through fear into a self-defeating process—thus, presaging how its administration of terror may eventually backfire. Though Molina, much like Ofelia from El laberinto, ultimately dies, both characters leave behind positive models for remembering the past through their unique ability to reweave fantasy and reality in a way that deconstructs the aforementioned dichotomies. In fact, even within the grim historical moment in which these works are set, this hope lives on both through symbols as well as through the people these protagonists mutually helped, touched and evolved with in life. Above all, their heroism lives on, however imperfectly, in their readers and viewers as well as their psychic counterparts, “shadows” or “doubles”, without whom their reciprocal journey towards rebirth could not have occurred.
Before commenting more precisely on how the creation of alternative worlds are used to resist state terror in *El beso*, I should add that the function of doubles or shadows in both works not only highlights how personal rebirth is, inevitably, interpersonal, but it also underscores the ambiguity of hope which may arise from experiences of state terror, trauma and exile. One might also argue that these doubles are, simultaneously, symbols of an interior struggle (between self and ‘shadow’) that symbolically requires the existence of only one balanced, integrated self rather than fractured voices and desires.

Yet it is a self that, as the journey between reality and fantasy underscores, can only become whole again by seeking and achieving altruistic relationships with others--and, in the process, deconstructing all the binaries on which authoritarian terror is built.

On the other hand, it is also important to point out that, though this novel deals with many similar themes in similar ways and with similar effects, as we have already begun to see, it appears to modify, even invert, many of the relationships and paradigms

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2 To be precise, the novel features two men who, while marginalized and literally imprisoned for their rebellious attitudes, embody, above all else, rigid and repressive stereotypes. Valentin, on the one hand, is an ultra-macho communist, whereas Molina is an ultra-effeminate pedophile, generally attracted to Nazi-type fascist, “masculine” men. Both men, though apparently social rebels, are highly repressed and thus, just like the novel’s dream sequences, function as one another’s “shadow”, ideologically as much as sexually. Valentin’s communist involvement, which, like his attraction to different types of women, he has contradictory hidden feelings about, (as reflected in his dreams and internal monologues) is just as much a product of his repressive society as is Molina’s fascist attraction to Nazism. In this sense, Jung’s theories of the soul, archetypes and complexes may further help us to reconcile not only desire to responsibility but, more essentially, Valentin’s and Molina’s own contradictory desires. In effect, it is precisely because of constructed desires that they are incapable of weeding out such desires and fears from true Desire itself. In this sense, Jung’s theory on psychic (or spiritual) shadows also becomes significant. For example, Molina’s attraction to hyper-masculine, uniformed, violent men may be read, in this context, as a consequence of his own stereotypical effeminacy (insomuch as, according to Jung, people are naturally attracted to their own “shadows”). Though this would also explain how he could be, initially, attracted to Valentin for the very reason that Valentin represents the other socially constructed pole of male/ female identity, what is even more crucial to consider is that by the time the two make love, they have become inseparable soul-mates. In other words, though they still appear to “shadow” one another, their relationship is far more healthy and balanced precisely because this shadow is no longer a monstrous manifestation of repressed desire and identity but rather something akin to what the outer self (or shell of self) has actually become. In this light, we might argue that they are attracted to one another because, as Molina himself suggests (when he exclaims, after sex, that he no longer feels either male or female), it is, paradoxically, precisely at this moment of union that his identity is, in a truly substantial way, more defined than ever.
found *El laberinto*. Whereas in *El laberinto* two females “double” each other, in *El beso* two men “shadow” one another (in the sense that they appear to be polar opposites rather than mirrors of each other). And yet, this relationship is not just inverted—for aside from this ‘shadowing’, each man serves, in his own way, as a double of Puig. The characters from the films they narrate serve, in turn, as doubles of Molina and Valentín. Thus, albeit in a very different way from *El espíritu* (in which all the characters are exceedingly complex yet, at the same time, very similar to one another), *El beso* also complicates the dichotomous ‘good’ (Ofelia) versus ‘evil’ (Captain) polarization found in *El laberinto*.

Furthermore, though the process of rebirth in *El laberinto* requires entry into a ‘maternal receptacle’ (explicitly conveyed through symbols and metaphors such as trees, underground lairs, and other types of ‘wombs’), this process, though it not only occurs in *El beso* but similarly requires a reconciliation of many of the same sorts of dichotomies between self/other, masculine/feminine, etc., is conveyed in a more complex way in *El beso*. In point of fact, although there is a relative lack of womblike metaphors or images in Puig’s novel, *El beso* not only uses language in a highly ambiguous yet creative, even subversive way, but as a whole constitutes a perfect (even self-reflexive) model of how literature itself may function as a ‘womb’, a topic we will return to in Chapter 4. In truth, Valentín and Molina’s relationship not only to each other but also to the films they retell, to the reader, to the novelist (Puig) and to the larger society which these characters both reflect and refigure, perfectly embodies the crucial characteristics of a “narrative ethics” as understood in this dissertation. In this sense, Valentín and Molina might be said to represent the maternal receptacle itself, since it is through them and their relationship that author, reader, society and even the characters in the inner-narratives find a meeting place.
through which they themselves can be re-membered. In this sense, the fact that Molina is especially obsessed with his mother and that, as a consequence, the two protagonists spend much time arguing over what the “ideal” mother should be like (which, in turn, changes Molina’s own relationship to his mother as well as to others) is itself significant.

In a seemingly inverted way, whereas the ‘maternal receptacle’ is far less explicit, yet equally potent in El beso, the exilic situation of the characters is far more overt than it is in El laberinto—as the two men are, as prisoners, literally exiled from the terror of the outer world. And yet, though this may appear to be a mere inversion, the prison cell is necessary not because it makes the theme of exile explicit, but rather, because it enables a clear contrast to be drawn between the outside world of Argentina and the inner world of prison/exile. This contrast is, in turn, crucial as it demonstrates the extent to which the two prisoners, for the very reason that they remain largely shielded from outside influences and terror, have the freedom to remake themselves in a way that, in the bitterly violent and terror-ridden outer world, cannot be sustained--without death. By contrast, though Ofelia also dies and though her exilic situation, much like Molina’s and Valentín’s, has a symbolic spiritual or non-literal element, because Ofelia is never literally exiled or freed from the real world (except through her own imagination and, finally, her death), the only contrast that is made between the harsh outer reality and another world is in reference to her even far more solitary imagination.

At the same time, though El laberinto is a film that creates an alternative world based on books, fairytales and myths, El beso inverts this process as a book that creates an alternative world based on films. And yet, even here, the relationship between the El beso and El laberinto is not just inverted. This becomes particularly clear if we look at
Puig’s own account of the origins of his work. In an interview in Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier’s book, *Interviews with Latin American Writers*, when asked if he thinks that his childhood trips to the movies with his mother changed his life, Puig is reported to say,

They may have. My hometown was really stifling, and we felt the need to escape from that environment. Not only was there machismo all over the place, but there was also a total absence of landscape, just dry pampas all around us. So I needed something besides that. If it hadn’t been films, I think I would have found it in literature. I mean reading, not writing.”(222).

Obviously, Puig’s obsession with viewing and narrating films as well as his experience of living in a desert-like area filled with machismo (and thus, especially from a young homosexual’s perspective, blatant repression) are largely a consequence of circumstance—and, yet these circumstances are of further interest to us inasmuch as they vividly remind us of young Ana’s similar need and motives for watching film in *El espíritu*. The fact that she too lived in a country characterized by machismo, repression and even physical monotony (as reflected in the barren landscape of 1940s Castile) invoke similarities between her own (and, by extension, Erice’s own childhood) and Puig’s. These parallels, in turn, point to more general similarities between authoritarian Argentina and Spain. On the other hand, it is vital to consider that authoritarianism began in Argentina as early as the 1930s, albeit in much more unstable and changing variations than that of Spain—which, by contrast, is noted for having the longest dictatorship ever: Franco’s. This inevitably influenced Puig’s adulthood and childhood.

On the other hand, the fact that Puig chooses adults rather than children as *El beso’s* central characters reflects more than just his emphasis on sexuality and desire as well as the fact that, as previously mentioned, a triple layering occurs, rendering this novel more autobiographical and meta-textual than *El espíritu* and *El laberinto*. Just as
crucially, his use of grown men corresponds to Puig’s experience of authoritarianism, which, though present in his childhood, was very much heightened in adulthood, particularly under Peronism and later--immediately after El beso was written--under the even more oppressive military governments known as the Proceso or ‘Dirty War’, which began with a coup in 1976 and would last seven more years. In fact, while commenting on another novel he had just begun to write (in 1976), Puig explains in an interview that,

This was in 1976, when things in Argentina had taken a turn for the worse. We had just gone through the experience of the horrible Isabelita [Perón] and then the military junta took over and succeeded in doing the impossible: to be worse than Isabelita. So at that moment I thought, ‘Well, it seems like I’m going to be in New York forever […]’ (Interviews with Latin American Writers 221).

In truth, Puig was marked even more by the authoritarianism of his adulthood than the authoritarianism he encountered as a child not only because of the former’s greater intensity of repression and terror but also, we can assume, because it led directly to Puig’s literal exile and, more generally speaking, his need to suffer the consequences of his actions and choices. Accordingly, we might conclude that Puig’s novel is very different from, for example, Erice’s El espíritu, largely because Erice was only a child when he experienced the types of terror, repression, and solitude depicted in his film. To be sure, while the experience of authoritarian terror and repression may make the children who are subjected to it feel even more helpless than the adults (as poignantly expressed in both El espíritu and El laberinto), the adults have the additional responsibility and burden of dealing with the oftentimes ugly and punitive consequences of their actions, however noble or not they may be. In this light, it makes sense that El beso is the work that best privileges the need to reconcile responsibility and desire (an issue that may only be duly appreciated by adults) and, in so doing, offers a positive model of how to achieve this.
And yet, it is vital to remember that Puig’s novel is not only influenced by his present experience of exile and terror, but also, as we have already begun to see, his past childhood experiences and even the immediate future to which his novel almost eerily projects. The weight of the past is evidenced, primarily, by the fact that the novel’s narrative is itself built on and through films. As we have seen, film has innate links to childhood experience, imagination, representation and communication as well as the discovery of sexuality, particularly in ways that highlight the pluralistic, non-reproductive qualities of sex that might be ideally symbolized by children and homosexuals.

On the other hand, and rather amazingly, *El beso* anticipates, in manifold ways, the military coup (headed by General Videla) that occurs at almost the same time (March, 1976) as the novel’s release (also in 1976)—for everything from the torture tactics, the manipulation, the anti-Semitism, the repression, the disappearances and the surveillance to which the protagonists/prisoners of *El beso* are subjected—all in the name of “national purification”—almost perfectly depict the terror that characterized the *Proceso* (1976-1983), even more than those years that immediately precede it. In fact, I am not the only one to note this stunning parallel as many other critics (most notably, Santiago Colás in his book, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* and Julia Romero in her article, “Los manuscritos de El beso de la mujer araña”) have similarly commented on this fascinating quality or aspect of the novel. In effect, *El beso*, in accordance with its complex ability to split its characters into various doublings, shadows or even triple-identifications, combines not only Puig’s past (childhood) and present (adult) experiences of authoritarianism and repression, film and fiction, love and solitude, but it simultaneously looks to or anticipates a future whose seeds are, in fact, already planted in
the present—and perhaps even the past. In so doing, *El beso* serves the additional function of highlighting the degree to which past, present and future are interrelated.

In any case, in light of our wider debate regarding the significance of the differences between Puig’s novel and the other films explored in previous chapters (and, in particular, in view of *El beso’s* inverted structure relative to that found in *El laberinto*) it is worth noting that Puig’s choice to channel his ideas through the medium of a novel rather than put them on screen may also be due to the fact that he is writing not only within the tail end of the Latin American “boom”, but also within\(^3\) a(n Argentine) tradition especially noted for its ingenious writers, particularly in the twentieth century.

At the same time, it is vital to consider Puig’s admission that he was initially drawn more to cinema than literature but that he realized he wanted to become a novelist,

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\text{[...] after I had written the first chapter of my first novel. It was meant to be the preparation for a script. I wanted to write scripts and direct films. I thought films were a very pleasant field of work. They are not. Films are made under pressure, and I hate pressure; I cannot work under those conditions. I am too ambitious and too much of a perfectionist, and I am also very self-critical. So I wasn’t really cut out for the movies. In films, you need a big ego to impose yourself. If you are not that kind of person, your collaborators don’t believe in you and don’t follow your orders. (Interviews with Latin American Writers 222).}
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Needless to say, the fact that Puig was gay may have also contributed to his inability to have or assert (or, at least, believe he could assert) the kind of ‘huge ego’ that, from his perspective he would have needed to be a successful screenwriter/director. In any case, the fact that he was not only homosexual but a foreigner/exile in the US in the 1970s would have made his situation notably different from and more challenging than the heterosexual Erice’s, who produced *El espíritu* in his own country, or even the similarly straight del Toro’s, who, though an exile of sorts, directed *El laberinto* in 2007.

\(^3\) Of course, Puig is not physically “within” Argentina, as he writes from exile. And yet, his work itself falls within the Argentine cannon.
In any event, Puig’s earlier comment about how he viewed his experience of watching film as a child as an escape is also intriguing in light of the fact that in this chapter I argue, to the contrary, that his films are not at all escapist. Like Molina, who also interprets his experience of retelling films as escapist, Puig’s belief that film can be escapist (or at least, that his own experience of it was largely escapist) not only reinforces the link between the Puig and Molina, but it also helps us readers appreciate the degree to which, oftentimes, it is through one’s very intent to escape from reality that one is forced to most deeply confront it. Indeed, according to Puig (Interviews with Latin American Writers), another reason why films are so prominent in his novels is because,

I grew up among people who were mesmerized by films; all my generation in some way was influenced immensely by films, and so it wasn’t something I could escape if I wanted to talk about average people.” (223).

What Puig implies then, is that film, even if it is used for escapist purposes, simultaneously reflects reality since the very urge to escape from society itself tells us something concrete about that very society one wishes to escape. This argument (advanced in more detail by Santiago Colás in his book, Postmodernity in Latin America) is absolutely vital to understanding El beso. However, my work takes this argument one step further by focusing on the ways in which the escape from society not only achieves the opposite (confrontation with reality), but in so doing,formulates an incisive means of remaking it. Puig himself must have been at least partially conscious of this potentially radical influence of film and literature since he admits that he used film (in his novels) to reflect not only his own experiences but the experiences of the “average people” around him. It is, to be sure, through the fantasy world Puig creates in El beso that he and his characters reflect reality in a highly accurate way while also profoundly transforming it.
Thus, though *El beso* appears to invert many of the paradigms found in the other works we have studied (particularly those from *El laberinto*), these relationships are not just inverted but far more complex. In effect, by studying the mutual evolution of the two men, we readers come to see that they express two poles of human behavior that, while necessary, remain useless, even hurtful to society when separated from one another. It is only when Molina and Valentín recognize their true (full) selves in the face of each other (and thus blend their ‘poles’), that they become “reborn” so to speak—a process which, as Molina makes clear through his retellings, is similarly at work in the films he chooses to narrate. By contrast, in *El laberinto*, the binaries that exist are predicated on absolute good (Ofelia) versus absolute evil (the Captain). Though this has its own set of advantages, it is only by expressing two flawed poles of humanity that Molina and Valentín become capable of expressing not only the need to reconcile dichotomies but the importance of establishing give-and-take relationships—which are the basis for any truly harmonious society or relationship.

And yet, while the films Molina chooses to narrate, much like the novel itself, communicate “universal” themes and lessons which could benefit virtually any society (in fact, the films Molina narrates are all foreign, mainly Hollywood B films), on the other hand, these films are all intimately tied to the specific Argentine terror in which the two characters find themselves embroiled. Though both the fairytales of *El laberinto* and the film-narrations of *El beso* reveal something crucial about society itself, the films in *El beso* are, in fact, more elaborately, explicitly and specifically related to the particular social problems and crises of authoritarian Argentina⁴. This is necessary, in part, because, unlike Ofelia and Mercedes in *El laberinto*, the characters in *El beso* are, despite

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⁴--which, nonetheless, will only become fully obvious in light of Chapter 4’s reading of Santa Evita.
their suffering, largely isolated (as prisoners), from the violence, oppression and terror that occurs on a more communal level. Thus, rather than acting in ways that directly subvert communal terror, this novel is based primarily, though not exclusively, on illuminating avenues of (re)connection with the self, with the Other and, albeit more indirectly, with the collective itself via imaginative yet critical reformulations of films.

More specifically, the films narrated not only present problematic portrayals of women (who must often sacrifice themselves for unworthy men or for so-called love), but also other evils such as Nazism and, more generally, anti-Semitism, which was central to the construction of Argentine Nationalism and later, authoritarianism. These elements reflect the historical impulse, particularly under Argentine authoritarianism, to project all guilt and responsibility onto the Other--especially women and Jews. The films’ treatment of religion and spirituality in ways that reflect yet also contest these ideas, beliefs and social problems becomes evident through the protagonists’ reformulations of these films (and, specifically, their treatment of Christianity) via Molina’s narrations—narrations which can only be fully appreciated for their radical, subversive side by attentive readers, and even more so, by readers familiar with the films that Molina himself retells.

With this in mind, it may be helpful to consider Michael Boccia’s article, “Versions (Con-, In-, and Per-) in Manuel Puig’s and Hector Babenco’s Kiss of the Spider Woman, Novel and Film”. As he accurately reports,

[…] There is disagreement among scholars as to the exact number and titles of the films retold in the novel. Schwartz identifies only four films: The Curse of the Cat People, I Walked with a Zombie, Paris Underground, and Holiday in Mexico (57). More recently Merrim claims that there are six films narrated in El beso, three of which are based on real films, three of which are composites of several films: (in order of their appearance in the novel) “Cat People,” dir. Jacques Tourneur (1942); the invented Nazi propaganda film called “Destino”; “The Enchanted Cottage,” dir. John Crownwell (1946), what we call the “Adventure”
film: “I Walked with a Zombie,” dir. Jacques Tourneur (1943); what we call the “Mexican” film. (“Through the Film Darkly” 311)” (418).

He adds, “I do not know which of these lists is more accurate. But that is a moot point. The narrated films are meant to take on their own lives, to become entities unto themselves. They are not literal retellings but recreations to suit Puig’s and Molina’s.”(419). And yet, while on the one hand, my own analysis supports Boccia’s notion that A) they are not literal retellings and B) they become entities unto themselves, it is not completely unhelpful to know which films are referred to/remade—and thus, the question of which list is more accurate is not an entirely moot point. Indeed, as my own engagement with these films and their influence on El beso proves, the particular ways in which these films are modified, edited, embellished and received are just as important as the fact that Puig and Molina change or recreate them. Moreover, the significance of these changes cannot be fully appreciated or understood without seeing and analyzing the films, in their original form, firsthand. This constitutes one of several important reasons for which I spend a substantial amount of time analyzing the first of these film-narrations (on Cat People) in both its original version as well as in Molina’s form.

Though I agree with Stephanie Merrim that the first retelling is of Cat People and not, as Schwartz suggests, of its sequel, The Curse of the Cat People, I dedicate a good deal of space in this chapter to analyzing The Curse since many aspects of Cat People (in fact, those most relevant to El beso) cannot be duly appreciated when separated from its sequel (The Curse). Much like El beso’s various inner-narratives (or film-retellings) and even the larger relationship between Valentín and Molina, these three works (El beso, Cat People and The Curse) are deeply interconnected and mutually illuminating.
That being said, though all the novel’s inner-narratives/film-retellings are useful in exploring the central themes just listed, and though they all help illuminate one another in curious ways, due to restraints of time and space I have chosen to focus on just one film/film narration for this chapter, *Cat People*--or as Molina re-members it, *La mujer pantera/The Panther Woman*, and secondarily, its sequel. I have chosen this narrative first, because, as the novel’s opening film-narration, it underscores perhaps better than any other inner-narrative, the fundamental importance of desire and repression both within the novel itself and the larger (Argentine) society to which it refers. Like every film-narration, it reflects the current state of the two men at the moment the story is told. Yet, as the first movie-narration and thus the primary catalyst in the evolving relationship between these two stereotypical embodiments of oppressive poles/separations, the Panther-Woman, herself the culmination of repressed desire, becomes emblematic of the past, present and future struggles of Molina, Valentín and Argentine society in general.

Accordingly, the very first words of the novel itself form part of this inner story, which highlights and anticipates its symbolic significance throughout the novel. Indeed, this story stands out from other film narrations inasmuch as it serves as a commentary on the novel as a whole. In this way, it sets up key examples of the ways in which fiction or fantasy can become a place that looks towards the past while anticipating the future. Moreover, because it engages many themes addressed not only in the other film-narrations and in the novel as a whole but also in the other films examined in chapters 1 and 2 (such as sacrifice, the foreign, and the strange) *Cat People* enables us to powerfully readdress these themes as well as the films, *El espíritu* and *El laberinto*, themselves.
It is because of these factors that this film-narration is, by necessity, one of the novel’s most ambiguous. This ambiguity gets played out on various levels. On the most obvious level, it encapsulates the ambiguity of the novel as a whole, which, in turn, reflects the ambiguous outcomes of authoritarian terror and exile as well as the reader’s responsibility or role in the (re)construction of the text. At the same time, it reflects the ambiguity of Molina and Valentín’s relationship in the sense that, as the novel’s most important and pivotal story, it must set up both the protagonists’ primary differences and conflicts (thus, highlighting the long road they still have to travel at the novel’s outset), while simultaneously establishing their initial and essential points of contact or solidarity.

In effect, this story must provide more space for connection, empathy and hope than, for example, the more one-dimensional and blatantly disturbing Nazi propaganda film-narration that follows it, and which reflects, above all, Molina’s alarmingly romanticized view of Nazis, fascism and love itself (and yet, which is equally necessary as it more generally reflects the appeal of anti-Semitism in Argentine culture while also serving to define and contrast Molina and Valentín’s initial identities and viewpoints)⁵.

From this second (Nazi) narrative on, the stories become increasingly and appropriately complex and optimistic, in accordance with the growing solidarity between the two cellmates and their own individual evolutions. Yet, had the Nazi story been told first, there might not have been a second one (given the conflict that ensues between the

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⁵ On the other hand, we must not forget that even through their pessimism, these films provide negative examples of what one must avoid in order to transcend dichotomies. Though the outer-frame story of *El beso*, for example, ends tragically with Molina’s death (as presaged in the very first chapter/film-narration on the panther-woman), the stories that Molina narrates (and which form the bulk of the book) become progressively hopeful, culminating in two highly optimistic tales of female empowerment and heroism. What makes these stories even more interesting, however, is that they are not only about female self-assertion and the destruction of rigid gender categories but about saving something more than oneself through personal heroism and love. This is seen, for example, in the zombie story, where the personal freedom and heroism of one woman helps free an entire community of “zombies”.

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two men as a consequence of Molina’s fondness for it.) By contrast, director, Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 *Cat People* (or *La mujer pantera*, as Molina renames it) functions as a channel for both positive and critical connections or ‘constructive criticism’ between the characters and thus, healthy evolution. In summary, aside from this film’s great symbolic significance, Molina’s and Valentín’s intercalated dialogue on both the film and life not only molds and reflects the dynamics of this particular inner story but it establishes the general rapport that will characterize their relationship throughout the novel. Above all, it highlights the essential ways in which the two men use fiction and desire to reformulate ‘reality’ and, conversely, reality or logic to comprehend fantasy as well as desire itself.6

In order to clarify how all this functions, I will begin by briefly summarizing the plot, which centers on a foreign artist (Irena) who is obsessed with visiting her city zoo. It is here that she observes and paints panthers, whose portraits she then sells at her shop. As the story goes, she has never had sex or even kissed a man because, due to an ancient tale from her homeland, she is afraid that if she does so she will transform into one of the infamous “panther women” from whom she fears she is descended. As Molina tells it, Irena, though living in the US, comes from an unnamed exotic town near Transylvania where, because of an intense war, there was an absence of men. During this war a great snowstorm came and the women began to die of cold and hunger. As a result, a woman decided to “sacrifice” herself by selling her soul to the devil so that the community could

6 Before moving on, I might also add that, though all the films Puig chooses are “B” films, this makes sense given the fact that, as Stephanie Merrim suggests in her article entitled, “Through the Film Darkly: Grade ‘B’ Movies and Dreamwork in *Tres tristes tigres* and *El beso de la mujer araña*”, “Uncomplicated entertainments, lacking artistic pretensions, the “B” films were intended to engage the widest possible audience. The camp vulgarity for which the “B” films are notorious, then, only indicates their most attractive feature: their appeal to the vulgate, their mass popularity.”(300). Indeed, it is perfectly appropriate that he would use these films if we consider that, as previously mentioned, Puig himself explicitly states that one of his goals in writing (and, more specifically, one of the reasons he chooses to incorporate film into his works) is to examine what “regular people” do. “Regular people” (or, at least, regular Argentine people), go to movies—specifically, B grade movies.
survive. Yet, paradoxically, it is at this seemingly altruistic moment of self-sacrifice that she turns into a predatory ‘panther woman’. She can no longer have sex or even kiss a man without transforming into a panther and killing him. What is worse, more and more women become ‘cat people’, almost as if it were a sort of vampiric disease or contagion.

Thus, the story highlights the way in which female fear, repression and self-sacrifice (a common theme in all the novel’s movie-narratives) is not only self-destructive but destructive to society at large. The women resort to repressing and thus sacrificing themselves and each other for the very reason that, in the absence of men, they are unwilling to become more complete beings by taking on traditionally male roles. It is highly appropriate then, that this act of self-sacrifice be likened to selling one’s soul—for it is, in a sense, just that. On the one hand, the women kill both men and, perhaps, desire—and yet, what they sacrifice, above all, is themselves—or, more specifically, their “male” sides, which, nevertheless, reemerge in the beastly form of bloodthirsty panthers.

In effect, this film’s complex treatment of sacrifice highlights the increasing need for Molina and Valentin to find a balance not only between the two poles of the passive, self-sacrificing woman (Molina) and the active male (Valentin), but between personal desire and social responsibility. Though Molina identifies almost immediately with Irena “Yo siempre con la heroína”(31), who, indeed, becomes a panther woman, it is important to keep in mind that the panther is male (p.9). In this light, the panther functions as Irena’s shadow, fears, and repressions—which in the context of psychoanalysis makes perfect sense being that nothing can ever be truly repressed; rather, it returns in unwieldy and vicious ways. Yet, just as important as the panther story is the war that, in Molina’s version of the film, ignites it. Much like the authoritarian climate of Argentina in the 70s
and 80s, which is similarly defined by anti-Semitism, violence, repression and, more generally, hatred of all Others, the war that erupts in Molina’s film narration is born out of the villagers’ need to defend themselves from Nazis, at which point they transform into cat-people. As will become increasingly evident, this war and, more specifically, Molina’s self-likening to Irena not only prefigure Molina’s eventual ability to sympathize with the victims of fascism, despite his initial fascist leanings. but it also reflects his need and capacity to already do so, however unconsciously, when the novel begins.

What is more, this fictional war enables us readers to appreciate the degree to which the panther story serves, more generally, as a critique of Argentine state terror not only through its likening to the Transylvanian war, but also to the absent men, the need for female sacrifice, the role of fear in the perpetuation of terror, and the corresponding repression of desire. In addition to serving as a commentary on the ways in which terror breeds terror within the context of Argentine authoritarianism, the film narration highlights how Molina and Valentín have, though perhaps unwittingly and in different ways, incorporated these qualities into their own behaviors, fears and desires—and yet, are struggling to overcome this. As Laura Rice-Sayre suggests in her article on *El beso*,

[…]the control of our destinies by forces outside our own personal wills— inherited myths, war efforts, parental approval, class bias. We are inscribed by laws we may feel are alien to our more intelligent, humane, and generous selves, and yet these laws make up a large part of the submerged self we discover on reflection. (“Domination and Desire” 254).

This becomes abundantly clear through *El beso*’s film-narrations, many of which themselves include or dramatize the effects of myths, wars, parental approval, etc. In fact, what is most interesting about Rice-Sayre’s observation is not just that people are influenced by these factors, but that they are influenced by them in ways that they
themselves are not necessarily aware of—and, as El beso does an especially fine job of demonstrating, in far more complex ways than they could imagine. Though, on the surface, Molina claims to identify with the self-sacrificing “heroines” of his films due to his overly passive identity and romanticized view of the world, many of the women he identifies with, despite being, in many ways, just as passive, “feminine” and romanticized as Molina, also have a dark, aggressive, even “masculine” side that renders them far more complex. The fact that Molina is so quick to identify with a panther-woman who is both dutifully determined to be a proper American and please her husband and yet equally intrigued by her repressed, exotic, even “masculine” side anticipates the way in which Molina will evolve to a point where he will become neither man nor woman—which, significantly, occurs only when he is capable of making love to Valentín.

Though sadly, the fact that the panther woman (Irena) eventually dies as a result of “un-caging the beast” presages Molina’s own death at the novel’s end, in a sense, the panther woman dies because the panther itself dies—as it is, rather significantly, run over by patrol cars. Though, for Molina, this may serve as a commentary on how personal freedom depends on society itself, in the case of Irena, it would seem that she dies for the very reason that she is incapable of finding a balance between the various sides (or poles) of herself. And yet, even for Irena, a major reason she is incapable of finding this balance is because, as we will soon see in more detail, no one is willing to believe in her ‘mystical’ side of the truth—that is, that cat people actually exist. By reducing everything to logic, science and psychoanalysis, rather than curing her, the people around her convince her that she is crazy. By contrast, though Molina eventually dies, ironically, after being freed from prison, where he courageously takes up Valentín’s leftist cause; he
learns to find this balance, which is mirrored in the kiss the two men share right before Molina’s release. And yet, like Irena, Molina’s own death is a result not so much of his own defects but because of his authoritarian society’s inability to accept the new Molina and, by extension, the new love that is born, ironically, in the exile of a prison cell.

Indeed, though the moment in which Molina and Valentín make love is especially important (and, as stated elsewhere, causes Molina to momentarily confuse himself with Valentín), it is not until an even later moment, when the two kiss, that Molina not only fully shatters the dichotomies of masculine/feminine, self/other, responsibility/desire, etc., but that they both describe the kiss as making them feel “fuera de peligro” (238) or “out of danger.” Of course, this is ironic, given that it is precisely Molina’s love for Valentín that leads to his physical death when he is “freed” from the exile of his prison cell and set loose on the world--and yet, in a sense, though Molina’s transformation makes it impossible for him to survive in a world of terror, the fact that the kiss makes him feel both liberated and “out of danger” is crucial insomuch as it properly suggests that terror and violence exist only because fear exists.

It would, in fact, appear that Molina can kiss Valentín for the very reason that, unlike the men in Irena’s story, Valentín himself is no longer a “man” when Molina kisses him. Rather, like Molina, he is both male and female, self and other, logical and emotional—and, more generally, capable of appreciating the “irrational” truths that Molina has to offer him. In this respect, Valentín is very different from Irena’s love interest, Olly, in *Cat People*—who, like her psychoanalyst, refuses to believe in her irrational truths. With this in mind, despite Molina’s desire to identify with Irena, it is hardly surprising that he ultimately identifies even more with the “spider woman” who,
significantly, *Valentín* creates at the end of the novel. The fact that Valentín creates this story (rather than Molina) is significant since Molina’s deep identification with Valentín’s story reflects not only Molina’s ability to be influenced by Valentín but also Valentín’s ability to become more like Molina, the storyteller.

In effect, the stories themselves mirror Molina’s and Valentín’s own personal transformations and evolving inter-personal relationship in which both of them learn to transform into more androgynous beings—beings whose love culminates not just in sex or penetration, but what is even better: a kiss. Interestingly enough, it is at the moment when the two men make love that they literally get lost in one another—as reflected by the fact that, immediately after having sex, Molina confuses his own face with Valentín’s as he reaches for a mole on his own brow that he does not have—but which Valentín does. He explains, “Ahora sin querer me llevé la mano a mi ceja, buscándome el lunar.”(222). When Valentín responds by saying, “¿Qué lunar? … Yo tengo un lunar, no vos.” (222), Molina replies, “Sí, ya sé. Pero me llevé la mano a mi ceja, para tocarme el lunar, …que no tengo”(222). This leads to an even more explicit discussion about how Molina has effectively become one with Valentín. As Molina expresses it, “Por un minuto solo, me pareció que yo no estaba acá,…ni acá, ni afuera[…] Me pareció que yo no estaba… que estabas vos solo […] O que yo no era yo. Que ahora yo… eras vos.”(222).

Clearly, the relationship between the two men, which has evolved from their mutual need to be attracted to opposites to a place where they cannot even distinguish self from other adheres to Kate Bornstein’s imperative to, “Never fuck anyone you wouldn’t want to be”(*Gender Outlaw* 245). Vulgar as this might be, it indicates what it truly means to transcend the male/female, self/other divides inherent in unhealthy
relationships. In particular, it highlights Molina’s progress from a man who wished to be a passive woman--and who claimed to be turned on by ultra-macho men/“brutos” who frighten their women--to a man who no longer defines himself as either male or female.

And yet, the relationship is not fully complete until Molina and Valentín share a kiss. This inverts the common assumption that sex is more personal than kissing, when in truth a kiss is not only exceptionally personal but reflects the sort of true love that mere penetration can often mask. Moreover, a kiss is significant in that there is no active giver or passive receiver; and, more generally, there are no roles to play. It is not until the two share a kiss that they not only become inseparable but that they overcome the gender divide that they so rigorously enforced at the novel’s beginning. As Molina puts it,

Es que cuando estás acá, ya te dije, ya no soy yo, y ese es un alivio. Y después, hasta que me duermo, y aunque vos estés en tu camita, tampoco soy yo. Es una cosa rara… ¿cómo te explico? […] Y es que cuando me quedo solo en la cama ya tampoco soy vos, soy otra persona, que no es ni hombre ni mujer pero que se siente (222)

Valentín finishes Molina’s sentence with the words “fuera de peligro”. Molina, surprised that Valentín could so effectively read his mind, says “Sí, ahí está, ¿cómo lo sabés?”(238), to which Valentín responds, “Porque es lo que siento yo” (238). As this passage poignantly suggests, it is not until these men share both a bed and a kiss that they demonstrate the capacity to lose themselves in each other. In the process, they learn that this loss of self is tied to a loss of gender identity and, more crucially, a loss of fear itself.

Though this is clearly the novel’s most climactic moment--as further reflected by its choice of title, El beso de la mujer araña--the complexity of Molina’s (potential) identity is, in fact, presaged from the very first movie narration—for though Molina claims to identify with Irena, he unconsciously identifies with the architect, Irena’s love
interest, whom she nevertheless fears kissing. The bond between Molina and the architect is based on the fact that the architect has his own “issues” as he, much like Molina, is—at least in Molina’s version of the film--overly attached to his mother. Alternatively, though Valentín claims to identify with the psychoanalyst, who attempts to cure Irena of her illogical fears, he unconsciously identifies with Irena. In truth, up until the point when he learns to relate more fully to Molina, Valentín himself is caught up in an ideology of sacrifice that, in many ways, mirrors Irena’s. As he explains to Molina early on (p.33), he must sacrifice sexual desire, physical pleasure, and ultimately, his “true love” (who must come second) in order to first save the (communist) collective.

In this way, he identifies not only with Irena, but more specifically, with the “original” Panther Woman who sells her soul to the devil in order to save her community. In effect, though both Valentín’s desire to associate himself with the psychoanalyst and Molina’s self-identification with Irena reflect their own outer identities at this (early) moment in the novel, the unconscious connections they establish with other characters not only reveals their repressed desires and conflicts but also anticipates their future evolution. In order to establish the significance of these identifications and evolutions, I must now further flesh out the plot of this film-narration as well as Valentín’s and Molina’s interpretations of it. In the process, I will also identify the ways in which Molina alters the original film and why these changes are important.

The (Al)lure of the Cat People

In brief, after moving to the United States and becoming involved with painting panthers, Irena meets the architect, Olly, who quickly falls “in love” with her and wants to get
married. Yet, Irena is hesitant because of her fears that she is a descendent of the infamous panther woman—which Valentin not surprisingly interprets as a sign that she is frigid. The architect, moreover, is completely fixated on his dead mother—an obsession that Molina readily admits he has elaborated according to his own fancy. As Valentin rightly points out, this is a prime example of how Molina has projected his own issues (and identifications with his mother) onto his movie-narrations and characters. Indeed, anyone who has seen the original Panther Woman will quickly notice quite a few major disparities between Molina’s version and the original—many of which I will return to in later sections of this chapter. Yet, aside from highlighting Molina’s unconscious connection with the architect, the fact that Valentin makes this observation underscores the way in which the two protagonists use and need each other to reformulate their own identities. They accomplish this both by importing their own desires and tastes into the film-narrations and by carrying them back out through critical interpretation of the films and of each other\(^7\) as well as through their parallel acts in the novel or frame story.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that even after Irena eventually marries the architect, she continues to have nightmares about becoming a panther woman, and thus refuses to sleep with her husband. As a result, he sends her to a psychoanalyst, who helps her see that her fears are largely the product of her own repressions and shame—and perhaps even a dark “secret”. Yet, while this does, indeed, seem to be at least partially true, the psychoanalyst, Dr. Judd, is unwilling to see that her problem may also be, as Irena herself puts it, not just as problem of the mind but of the soul. This short-

\(^7\) A great example of “constructive criticism” occurs when Valentin attacks Molina for his perversely idealistic creation of the architect’s mother. As Valentin remarks scornfully, “Sí, está siempre impecable. Perfecto. Tiene sirvientes, explota a gente que no tiene más remedio que servirla, por unas monedas. Y claro, fue muy feliz con su marido, que la explotó a su vez a ella, le hizo hacer todo lo que él quiso, que estuviera encerrada en su casa como una esclava, para esperarlo…”(22)
sightedness will lead to both his demise as well as Irena’s. Valentín, of course, claims to identify with the psychoanalyst, in accordance with his desire to explain everything through logic, science or reason. Moreover, his identification with the psychoanalyst (who must listen to Irena’s dreams) parallels Valentín’s role as someone who listens to Molina’s movie-narrations. And yet, rather crucially, the psychoanalyst is, despite his pretenses of polished professionalism, science and logic, a victim of unwieldy emotion and desire. In fact, it is his very urge to kiss Irena that leads to his death, as she transforms, at that moment, into one of the infamous panther women.

This hypocrisy is mirrored, unwittingly, through Valentín’s behavior. Like the psychoanalyst, Valentín interprets Molina’s narrations almost as if they were dreams, and, like the psychoanalyst, he is often capable, as a result, of helping Molina (for example, to become less passive, more critical, more independent, less attracted to fascists, etc.). Yet, like Dr. Judd, Valentín’s reduction of life to pure science is also incomplete. In fact, his view of himself is similarly incomplete, since, like Judd, he is a person who, as the novel repeatedly suggests, is deeply attached to others.

On the other hand, there are crucial differences between Valentín and the psychoanalyst, Dr. Judd. Most notably, though the panther woman eventually kills Judd

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8 Significantly, however, this is a role that he learns to acquire precisely through his relationship with Molina. As Valentín admits during this first film narration, “me gusta la película, pero es que vos te diviertis contándola y por ahí también yo quiero intervenir un poco, ¿te das cuenta? No soy un tipo que sepa escuchar demasiado, ¿sabés, no?, y de golpe me tengo que estarte escuchando callado horas.”(21). On the other hand, the fact that Valentín turns listening into an active activity is equally crucial, as further reflected in the quote, “Pero, si no te parece mal, me gustaría que fuéramos comentando un poco la cosa, a medida que vos avanzás, así yo puedo descargarme un poco con algo. Es justo, ¿no te parece?”(22). Indeed, Molina heeds Valentín’s advice--and thus, Valentín’s suggestion presages the way in which the two men will use Molina’s narrations as a way for them to both “remake” the films, themselves and their relationship to each other.

9 Though Dr. Judd kisses Irena, supposedly, to cure her, the film insinuates on many occasions that the doctor has far more egotistical and sexually based motives. Not only does he tell her that he is “interested” in her in a very flirtatious way, but he eyes her up and down on at least one occasion with a lascivious smirk. Furthermore, even Alice (Olly’s architect friend who suggested this very doctor), notes that he has a strange and excessive way of touching people, particularly women.
when he attempts to kiss her, Valentín both makes love to Molina and successfully kisses him without dying. In reality, this is possible not only because both men have evolved into less repressed and more full individuals but because Valentín himself never truly played the role of psychoanalyst in a traditional sense. Aside from his active engagement in the creation of the film-narratives, Valentín, unlike the condescending, overly logical, paternalistic psychoanalyst, ultimately admits learning very much from Molina--despite all his previous criticism. At the same time, though like the psychoanalyst, Valentín is similarly incapable of appreciating matters of the soul (as he reduces everything to science, reason and psychoanalysis), as we are about to see, he also evolves beyond Judd even in this respect. In short, the ‘Panther Woman’ narrative is especially ambiguous inasmuch as it highlights both Valentín’s capacity to change as well as his own currently paternal, patronizing role, which, in many ways, resembles the psychoanalyst’s.

This is evidenced, first, with respect to gender roles. Whereas Valentín critiques Molina for aspiring to be a mere (womanly) object of desire and though he suggests on several occasions that men should treat women with respect, Valentín’s closest machismo comes out when he tells Molina he is too emotional and sensitive, “like a woman”. Yet, Molina’s response that there is nothing wrong with being sensitive and that if all men were like women there’d be no torturers makes Valentín think. Nevertheless, Valentín is inadvertently patronizing towards Molina even as he attempts to compliment him, “Molina…pero vos decís que si todos fueran como mujeres no habría torturadores. Ahi tenés un planteo siquiera, irreal pero planteo al fin”(35)--an attitude further reflected by Valentín’s dismissal of Molina’s desire to discuss metaphysics for lacking “rigor”.

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Of course, Valentín’s disdain for metaphysics is also suggestive of the ways in which Valentín, much like Irena’s psychoanalyst, finds spirituality to be antithetical to reason. At the same time, Valentín believes that spirituality is also incompatible with desire, as indicated by his remark (in reference to Cat People) that women are repressed because they are “too spiritual”. Indeed, though it is true that religion can make women repressed, Valentín mistakenly (yet significantly) reduces spirituality to the type of religious dogmatism and repression that flourished in authoritarian Argentina—namely, one predicated on the notion that spirituality requires chastity and, more generally, that the spiritual must be kept separate from vulgar materialism of the world. Yet, what Valentín fails to see is that true spirituality is itself deeply related to (an openness to) sexuality—in short, true spirituality is diametrically opposed to repression.

Thus, as evident from the novel’s very beginning, Valentín reinforces the authoritarian splits between materiality and spirituality as well as reason and spirituality. And yet, as a consequence of the give-and-take relationship that evolves between the two men, as well as, more specifically, the ways in which films like Cat People provoke the two men to rethink their aforementioned prejudices and dichotomous thinking, by the final stages of their friendship Valentín and Molina not only transcend these binaries but Valentín himself curiously expresses the idea that sex is innocence. To be exact, when Molina asks Valentín if he regrets having sex with him, Valentín emphatically states, “No, yo no me arrepiento de nada. Cada vez me convenzo más de que el sexo es la inocencia misma”(224). Thus, though he never quite comes around to equating spirituality and desire, he does admit that being ethical or innocent requires embracing
desire and overcoming repression. In this sense, he learns to overcome his dichotomous thinking in ways that the psychoanalyst cannot.

This becomes especially obvious in light of the fact that the psychoanalyst himself admits to Irena\textsuperscript{10} that he is impressed with her ability to encounter that subtle difference between mind and soul that even great thinkers have struggled to identify throughout history. And yet, aside from the fact that the doctor’s compliment itself seems patronizingly insincere, not only is Irena somewhat incapable of reconciling the two (as she views her problem as being exclusively spiritual) but the doctor himself, despite his own pretenses to understand himself this “subtle difference”, is even farther from identifying that subtlety than Irena since he proceeds to treat her as if her problem could be reduced to science. By contrast, as the abovementioned quote suggests, Valentín, notwithstanding his earlier affinity with the psychoanalyst (based on their shared inability to appreciate matters that exceed logic) ultimately evolves beyond him as he is finally capable of comprehending the nuances of soul, mind and their interconnectedness.

On the other hand, though Valentín’s and Molina’s criticisms of each other oftentimes reflect their own prejudices and ignorance, some of these critiques prove to be constructive in their mutual evolution—most notably, Molina’s ability to constantly call out Valentín on his arrogance, as reflected in his pungent rejoinder, “Sos muy despreciativo para hablar: ‘un planteo siquiera’\textsuperscript{(35)} in response to Valentín’s half-mocking compliment mentioned on the previous page of this chapter: “Ahi tenés un planteo siquiera, irreal pero planteo al fin”\textsuperscript{(35)}. On the other hand, though Molina has

\textsuperscript{10} This happens right after she claims that his efforts to cure her are useless because he is attempting to fix “a problem of the mind” that is, in reality, “a problem of the soul”.

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just as much to learn from Valentín as Valentín from Molina, even in this first film-narration Molina welcomes many of Valentín’s criticisms and interpretations.

A prime example of this can be seen in the fact that though Molina initially defends the architect’s relationship to both his mother and Irena, he eventually concedes to Valentín’s point that the architect treats Irena like a little girl instead of an equal—though, of course, Molina will continue to express sporadic comments about how women should belittle themselves to men to make the men feel “in charge” throughout the novel. Yet, these comments not only become more and more sparse but, as the novel progresses, they almost begin to sound more like questions than true affirmations. That is, it is almost as if Molina makes these statements so that he can be assured by Valentín’s that they are not, in fact, true—as further suggested not only by the tone or context in which they are stated but also by the fact that Valentín’s retorts about how Molina must never let a man mistreat or exploit him (or that all healthy relationships must be based on mutual respect and equality) meet increasingly little resistance from Molina. In any case, this first film-narration (of *Cat People*), both through its content and through the various ways in which it stimulates the protagonists to discuss their own experiences and views on life, exposes not only Valentín’s and Molina’s extreme weaknesses, prejudice, and ignorance but also their great potential to learn from one another and thus, to change.

In fact, the future evolution of both characters is presaged in this first film-narration not only through the two characters’ capacity to offer criticism but also praise. Though Valentín does not offer Molina sufficient praise or recognition for his observations, his ability to give him any credit at all foreshadows his evolution. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that, despite Valentín’s claim to be more keen on the
female architect in this film than Irena, ultimately, he falls more for Irena/Molina, albeit in an improved version. In truth, both Valentín’s present flaws and his potential for change are reflected in his claim to have enjoyed the story because “it’s all so logical” (28). Though, on the one hand, this reinforces his distance from Molina, who enjoys narrating the films for purely emotive reasons, ironically, Valentín’s ability to see it as “logical” comes, largely, from his own imagination (p.29).

What is more, the fact that he professes to appreciate the film at all points to his ongoing evolution throughout the novel, especially considering that just a few pages back (p.22) he claimed not to have liked the movie. In fact, by the time Molina has finished his narration, Valentín, who has become emotionally attached to it, admits being saddened that it has ended. At the same time, the fact that Valentín feels ashamed of his sadness (because he still sees emotions as a “weakness”) reveals his current need to degrade emotions and desire. Rather ingeniously then, this film-narration serves a dual function in that it both dramatizes the novel itself and the two men’s potential evolution while simultaneously representing their current (repressive) state at the moment of the film-narration itself. Puig’s ability to combine the present and future in this narration resonates with the novel’s larger ability to not only reflect Puig’s current experience of exile and the terror, but, as mentioned earlier, the imminent and unprecedented terror that is about to unleash itself on Argentina in the form of Videla’s coup d’etat in March 1976.

In any case, the fact that the story moves Valentín at all proves that his interest is not purely logical or objective, and, more generally, that there are forces at work or in conflict within him that he himself does not yet understand. Valentín’s semi-subconscious emotional connection to both the film and life (and thus, their connection to
each other) is reinforced throughout this film-narration and, in particular, through the scene where the panther woman (Irena) nearly kills the female architect, Alice, at the pool, after learning that Alice may be intent on stealing the affection of Irena’s architect husband, Olly, who works with Alice and is an intimate friend of hers. This scene makes Valentín worry that his “real-life” girlfriend might be in danger (p.48)—and thus, Valentín’s fear anticipates the way in which Molina’s narratives not only reflect real problems, both personal and communal, but also serve as a springboard for discussing and reformulating them (particularly with an-Other).

More generally, the film-narrations emphasize the need to conquer the notion that fantasy can only be used as an escape from reality. Curiously, during one of the multiple breaks Molina takes from telling his panther story, he explains (p.23) that, before the film had prompted them to discuss their differing views on the ideal mother, he had felt great, and had forgotten about the cell. Yet, because the film functioned as a vehicle for getting the two men to discuss real issues, this example highlights the way in which fantasy can function either as a mode of escape (if kept to oneself) or, quite the contrary, as a means of integrating and rethinking reality. At this juncture then, it will be appropriate for me

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11 Indeed, the story moves Valentín so much that he begins to describe his girlfriend’s life in more detail. Molina, likewise, makes a similar connection between the way in which the story (and prison cell) make him feel impotent or powerless—though not towards a lover but rather towards his elderly mother, who can no longer depend on him, as he is locked away. In this respect, the two men are already using the films not only to make sense of the “outside” reality (both present and past) but to connect to both each other and themselves.

12 As Santiago Colás points out in Postmodernity in Latin America, “Molina feels that his film narrations are prompted by their distance from the reality of the cell: ‘I’d forgotten about this filthy cell, and all the rest, just telling you about the film’ (23/17). But these films evoke, by escapist negation, the repression of their lives in the cell. And they actually reflect it in their form and content”(81). And yet, though Colás is correct in pointing out that the escapist negation this attitude reflects is just as important as the fact that, as will become increasingly obvious, Molina unwittingly undermines this attitude through his retellings, we must not forget that as Colás himself suggests (82), escape, from a psychological perspective, can never really be escape since the retreat inside of oneself does not enable one to flee from reality/oneself but rather confront it. Indeed, it is precisely because of this that the characters themselves offer hope not of escaping reality but of radically confronting it. It may also be of interest to note Colás’ explanation of how the story
to elaborate more fully on some of the ways in which Molina distorts, or rather, interprets and remakes the original film via his narration of it.

Beginning with the first and most obvious difference, in the actual movie Irena is not Transylvanian but Serbian. Yet, it is fitting that Molina make her Transylvanian given the association of Transylvania with vampires—and even more so if we consider my earlier observation about the fact that the curse of the cat people is almost akin to a vampiric disease. Though this is only a minor and seemingly insignificant distortion of the original film, it cues in the reader to the fact that Molina’s distortions tell a greater truth not only about the film itself but about his mode of interpreting it. By making her Transylvanian Molina highlights her quasi-demonic or even supernatural qualities—yet, at the same time, he comments on the ways in which terror itself is often vampiric in nature. Like Irena, who becomes an agent of terror precisely because she is a victim of...

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of Irena reflects this very impossibility—that is, the impossibility of escape. He states, “there can be no escape if one carries, like the panther and Irena, the mechanism of repression within.”(84). On the one hand, Colás is certainly right to see that the mechanism of repression is internal as much as external and, indeed, he is even more correct in suggesting that Molina and Valentín, though they have somewhat similar goals, attempt to achieve these goals in equally flawed yet opposite (binary) ways (in Colás’ words, “[…]Valentín seeks in his studies precisely the same metaphysical, utopian escape from the reality of the cell that Molina sought through his movies. To assert the transcendent value of his studies, Valentín relies on the autonomy of the written artifact.”(86)). Yet, on the other hand, as Colás himself explains, Molina’s ambiguous death (ambiguous in the sense that we cannot know for sure why he sacrificed himself at the novel’s end) “foregrounds our interpretive activity as readers. We must, denied an authoritative conclusion within the text, confront our own role in the construction of this text. This again blurs the distance between ourselves and the texts. But it also[…]parallels the position of the two cellmates at the conclusion of Molina’s last film narration”(98). Indeed, one of the features of this novel that I intend to emphasize and develop (more than Colás) is the fact that, despite the film’s ambiguity (and largely because of it), the characters themselves offer concrete and positive role-models for the readers of the novel. In fact, it is largely my ability to do so that enables me to perhaps more fully appreciate the extent to which the two characters, even as they attempt to forget the world, radically remake it. This can only become duly obvious, however, when we analyze the extent to which Molina’s retellings of the films are actually far more intelligent, penetrating and radical than his superficially ignorant, even inane comments suggest. With this in mind, my analysis of El beso will dedicate far more space to the actual films it retells/remakes than virtually any other criticism of the novel to date.
terror (and a social outcast), vampires express the more general condition of Argentine terror, which spreads like a disease, turning victims into victimizers.\(^{13}\)

Much like the films analyzed in chapters 1 and 2, Molina’s transformation of Irena into a vampy Transylvanian is a prime example of how his retellings serve as meaningful interpretations of the original works to which they refer while also commenting on (Molina’s immersion in) Argentine terror. At the same time, they reflect Molina’s more personal obsessions and issues, as evident by the fact that, as stated earlier, he attributes to the architect a motherly obsession that is absent in the real film. In so doing, he not only superimposes his obsession with his own mother onto this character, but he also inadvertently divulges his subconscious identification with Olly.

This is especially interesting if we consider that the film, like the novel as a whole, similarly draws subtle parallels between two people who, like Molina and Valentín, seem to be polar opposites. This dichotomy is introduced in the first scene when we viewers catch a glimpse of Irena drawing her panther at a zoo. Unhappy with her work, she crumbles up her sketch and pitches it to a garbage pail about ten feet behind her. After missing the hole, a squeaky clean American (Olly) who happens to be standing next to the garbage, picks up her sketch, puts it the trash and points to a sign that says “Let no one say it and say it to your shame that all was beauty here until you came”. Irena shamefully acknowledges her mistake with a shy nod and then continues to draw. Yet, just moments later, as she is about to toss away another sketch, the architect (Olly),

\(^{13}\) The psychological nuances of this transformatin are more adequately expressed in books such as Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, edited collections on trauma such as Kleber, Figley and Gersons’ *Beyond Trauma* and Corradi, Fagen and Garretón’s *Fear at The Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America* not to mention articles like Angel Rodríguez Kauth’s, “Psicosociología del miedo: La experiencia argentina reciente”, which uniquely blends the psychological and sociological effects of terror within the specific context of Argentine authoritarianism.
who has drawn close to her, grabs her arm, rips the sketch out of her hand and launches the paper squarely into the bin. He then begins to repeat the phrase posted next to the trash, giving us the impression that he is not only a proper all-American boy but also that he will continue to play the role of an ultra-rational, rule-abiding, paternalistic figure—or even something of a Freudian “super-ego”, balancing out Irena’s panther-like “id”.

This binary opposition mimics the polarity invoked by Molina’s overly emotional “feminine” role and Valentín’s patronizingly rational and paternal one. This difference is further reinforced by Irena’s and Olly’s respective professions. Though Irena is an artist (and, in the actual movie, a fashion designer), Olly is also an artist of sorts, but one whose art is tamed by math and logic. The viewer is constantly reminded of this as Olly is featured calling out numbers and angles to his assistant, Alice, who is enamored of him and who even tries to tear Olly away from Irena, especially after learning of his sadness due to Irena’s fears of becoming a cat woman. The fact that, Olly’s calculations are, as revealed in this scene with Alice, uncharacteristically wrong not only underlines the mathematical nature of his work, which has clearly right and wrong results, but also the fact that he is beginning to change due to Irena’s sway over him.

Indeed, just as Molina and Valentin are more akin to one another than they might suspect, and, more importantly, just as they learn from one another, Irena and Olly, the architect, are similarly influenced by one another—and, in fact, share more in common than their diametrically opposed roles superficially imply. This is evidenced in the scene just mentioned where, after Olly gives Alice three wrong numbers, she suggests that it’s time for a cigarette break. As the two architects puff away at their cigarettes, Olly pours his heart out to Alice. He tells her that he is very upset over Irena, and, what is worse, he
has no clue of how to handle his feelings because he has always been extremely happy both as a child and as an adult. On the one hand, Olly’s “swell” childhood (as he refers to it) further highlights his polar opposition from Irena, whose childhood was marked by dark, supernatural legends, the loss of her father (who died mysteriously in the woods) and the consequent ostracism and ridicule that this exposed her to as the other children claimed her mother was a witch (or a cat woman) and had killed Irena’s father.

This darkness pervades Irena’s adulthood as well, as she not only fears becoming a panther-woman but is, more generally, a lonely, desolate woman ridden with fears—a creature so lonely and repressed, in fact, that during her first date with Olly she somberly claims, “I like the dark. It’s friendly”. On the other hand, however, not only is her dark disposition beginning to engulf Olly, rendering them both more similar, but just as Irena is both drawn to and afraid of panthers, Olly, in turn, is both drawn to and afraid of Irena. In this sense, the two are certainly more similar than a cursory analysis would suggest.

This becomes further evident as Olly’s heart-to-heart talk with Alice unfolds. After confessing to her that he’d always been happy until meeting Irena, Alice begins to weep. When Olly asks her why, she cries, “I can’t bear to see you this way. I love you too damn much!” She then proceeds to explain that she is completely in love with him and doesn’t care if he knows it. She says she knows what love is, “No torture. No self-doubt.” And yet, Olly, rather than reciprocating these sentiments towards his fellow architect, claims that is just how he feels about Irena. He says he’s drawn to her and that he needs to touch her when she’s near. And yet, he also admits that he doesn’t really know her, that she is like a stranger to him. Rather significantly, Alice responds by exclaiming, “You and I, we will never be strangers.” Of course, Alice is utterly correct in
the sense that not only are the two intimate friends and workmates (and perhaps spend more time together than Irena and Olly). Alice is, in fact, portrayed as the all-American, clean-cut “girl-next-door”. Thus, while she embodies the flip side of Irena, she almost serves as a female double or mirror reflection of Olly.

And yet, her observation that the two will never be strangers is, at the same time, incredibly naïve. To begin, it fails to acknowledge that Olly has another, albeit undeveloped or latent side, which is very much attracted to and perhaps even akin to Irena. More crucially perhaps, in the sequel to *Cat People* (entitled *The Curse of the Cat People*), Alice is, ironically, very much estranged from Olly (whom she has married after Irena’s death), as Irena’s ghostly presence and the guilt associated with her death continues to haunt Olly as well as their six-year old daughter, Amy, whom Irena’s ghost befriends. It is largely Alice’s inability to appreciate the degree to which Olly is truly and legitimately intrigued by Irena that makes her statement so ironic and naïve.

In truth, it is Irena’s strangeness that makes her so overwhelmingly attractive to Olly—and, in a curious way, even similar to him. Not only is Irena, like Olly, attracted to that which is strange, but, as further developed in previous chapters, it is precisely an encounter with the strange that helps people to grow as individuals and even to learn who they truly are. This is especially true when that which is strange is not, actually, completely strange or different but rather strangely familiar—or in an uncanny sense, that which is strange to us, but also at the heart of us. Irena is strange to Olly in exactly this way. For this reason, though Alice views her strangeness as a negative quality that must be shunned, it is only by being strange that Irena has the potential to help Olly to deeply bond not only with Irena but also with himself. Alice, by contrast, does not hold this
potential for the very reason that she is too superficially similar to Olly and, in fact, too one-dimensional a character to stimulate any growth or change in his person.

Much like Irena, what Olly truly needs is to both unleash and understand himself. Though Alice views Olly’s unhappiness as something intrinsically evil, it is only through unhappiness, though confronting what is wrong in one’s life, that one can remake oneself in more honest and gratifying ways. Irena, though a tragic figure, urges Olly to face a side of himself and of life that he had never bothered to recognize until meeting her. Hence, his attraction to her and yet his resistance to believing her cat-legend are reflective of his wavering struggle to fully accept not only Irena but all she represents—namely, emotion, the supernatural, the irrational and, perhaps most importantly, unbridled passion. Yet, Irena, though she is more open to the possibilities of a world beyond logic, herself struggles with these very same problems—rendering her more like Olly than we initially suspect. Like an exile—and, to some extent, like Olly himself—she is between two worlds that she cannot quite reconcile.

Irena’s exilic position between cat and woman (of which she is not quite either) is further reinforced in the content and symbolism of Cat People, and, in particular, by the function of the caged panther that Irena visits in the zoo. As Molina tells it, the panther is kept locked in a cage with a big slice of meat. Because of this distraction it is normally unaware of the people outside, including Irena. Though this emphasis on the panther’s meat and its corresponding lack of awareness of the human world beyond its cage is an elaboration of Molina’s imagination, it demonstrates his keen perception and capacity for deep analysis of both fiction and life—for, in reality, the panther and the humans express two dichotomous worlds that are normally untouched or untroubled by one another.
Just as the panther is unaware of the people outside, these people are, with the exception of Irena, either unaware or afraid of the beast, which is why they lock it up. Yet, the beast, for the very reason that it is caged and feared, may eventually become deadly when it is finally released. Whereas the gatekeeper, in his simplistic, dogmatic thinking, becomes he who separates the two worlds of passion and reason, the material and the spiritual, the supernatural and the natural, etc., Irena, as the one character who is not quite panther nor woman (or rather, is not sure to which world she belongs) is the character who, by virtue of her “exilic” status, is best suited to potentially bridge the two worlds by symbolically opening the cage. Unfortunately, by the time she does this, the panther has truly transformed into a beast. He, like Irena, is rejected by the world.

This idea that Irena represents a group that is not necessarily demonic but rather made to be demonic because of her group’s repression is further suggested both by the lesbianism inherent in her character (which I will further develop in a later part of this chapter) as well as by the fact that in the initial script, a prelude was written which was far more sympathetic to cat people and their origins. Amazingly enough, Molina’s narration of the story begins in an almost identical way to the original prelude (which is either an enormous coincidence or it means that Puig was somehow privy to the original script). In any case, aside from serving as yet another example of how Molina’s narrative distortions paradoxically manage to reflect a greater, deeper truth both about both the film and the world, this prelude also reveals important parallels between the film and Argentine authoritarianism (particularly in its reference to Nazism) while at the same time highlighting the cat people’s tragic victimization and evolution. As the commentator of *Cat People* (2005, Turner Entertainment), Greg Mank, explains,
Lewton and Bodeen initially toyed with a prelude to Cat People in which a Nazi panzer division invades Irena’s snowy Balkan village, whereby nightly villagers transform into cats and attack the oppressors, one of the attackers, apparently a lady, who escapes and comes to New York City. Lewton eventually cut it from the script. (SpecialFeatures, *Cat People/The Curse of the Cat People*).

Indeed, in the revised version used in the film, all we viewers learn about the cat-people is that in her village, long ago, some people (the *marmalutes*) had turned from good “Christian ways”. When King John of Serbia arrived, he drove out these wicked people, though, as Irena tells it, “some, the wisest and the most wicked, escaped to the mountains. Their legend haunts the village where I was born”. In short, what this scene suggests is that the cat people only transform into beasts as a means of defending themselves from an even greater evil—dogmatic nationalists/fascists. Though Molina’s version does a finer job of elucidating this connection by way of the Nazis, even Irena’s version, despite being more openly critical towards the “marmalutes” stimulates the discriminating viewer to invert the evil cat-people/good-Christian paradigm given the obvious likeness between the “evil marmalutes” driven to the mountains in the original version and the refugees of both authoritarian Spain (such as the *huídos*) and Argentina (guerillas such as the *monteneros*) who were forced to take refuge in the mountains.

Molina’s addition of the Nazi detail is particularly telling if we consider the enormous extent to which Argentine authoritarianism was modeled after Nazism. Though Peronism and the *Proceso* were both influenced by Nazism and anti-semitism, as vividly portrayed by works such as Paul H. Lewis’ *Guerillas and Generals* and Marguerite Feitlowitz’ *A Lexicon of Terror*¹⁴, this link became especially pronounced once General Videla came into power, initiating a seven year period of unprecedented

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¹⁴ As Feitlowitz reports, in addition to many other terms and ideas that the *Proceso* took from the Nazis (and which I explore in detail in Chapter 4) the very term “desaparecidos” was coined by the Nazis—see p.51, *A Lexicon of Terror.*
terror: The Proceso. Among countless other examples, the sway of Nazism is evident in the numerous portraits of Hitler that decorated Argentine torture chambers as well as the fact that Jewish political prisoners were given a variety of “special treatments”. For example, though rape was not an uncommon punishment for any prisoner (particularly females), being raped by dogs was a treatment reserved especially for Jewish women.

In this light, the symbol of the cross, which is used to scare away the panther-woman in both the film and Molina’s retelling of it (see, for instance, page 39 of El beso) becomes especially provocative, as it symbolizes hatred of the Jew, and, more generally, all Otherness. And yet, though the cross seems to work as a short-term defense (and thus, superficially, as a sign that “Christianity” indeed conquers the “evil panther”), the panther keeps coming back, each time more ominously. In fact, even though both the panther and Irena die at the film’s end, it is worth noting that Irena returns, rather intriguingly, as an angel in the 1944 sequel, The Curse of the Cat People. Of course, this is highly appropriate considering that the panther (and Irena) are only demonic to the degree that they are viewed as such by the world. Thus, the failure of the cross to definitively kill or tame Irena/the panther is relevant to this chapter not only in view of its psychoanalytic ramifications (as Irena’s resilience symbolizes the “return of the repressed” and, more generally, the ultimate futility of the Argentine authoritarian impulse to forget its “disappeared” victims); but, more crucially, it reveals how Irena’s/the panther’s return and apparent invincibility undercut modern formulations of Christianity (as an institution) and, more specifically, the influence of Christianity within the context of authoritarian Argentina. Before elaborating on this notion, however, it will help to first briefly expand on the manifold ways in which Christianity is treated in Cat People.
To begin, the film sets up a dichotomy between the ‘good Christians’ and the ‘evil cat-people’—one that is, nevertheless, subtly inverted in many ways. This opposition is invoked early on by Irena herself, who, though fearing to be a descendent of the demonic cat-people, clearly wishes to be a “good Christian”. This is first evident when she invites Olly to her apartment shortly after meeting him. As he is looking over her decorations he notices a statue of a man on horseback spearing a panther—an image that immediately reminds the viewer of a sketch that Irena made of the panther in zoo in the film’s opening scene. The viewer becomes privy to this picture right after Irena leaves the zoo with Olly. As they exit, the camera cuts to a torn picture on the ground next to the panther’s cage of a panther pierced by a dagger, thus presaging Irena’s own imminent death while also highlighting her love-hate relationship with the panther and, by extension, herself.

After noting Olly’s disturbed reaction to the statue, Irena recounts the history behind it.

She explains to Olly that the statue is of King John of Serbia, a noble, courageous Christian king who drove out the so-called marmalutes (aka. the cat people), who were evil people who had deviated from “good Christian ways”. This dichotomy is further reinforced by the fact that Alice (Irena’s polar opposite or counterpart) names her kitten John Paul—a name not only reminiscent of King John of Serbia but also the Pope. This is especially interesting in view of the fact that Alice inherits the cat (which was initially a gift from Olly to Irena) when it becomes apparent that the cat is deathly frightened of Irena. In fact, we soon learn that all animals (besides panthers), but especially domestic

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15 The big cat/ little cat dichotomy is one that permeates Cat People and is potentially disorienting being that one would assume that a little cat is simply a miniature version of the bigger cat (and thus, would be less frightened of the panther than other animals rather than more so). And yet, this begins to make sense if one interprets the cat as a symbol of female desire. To be precise, whereas the small “domesticated” cat corresponds to female heterosexuality (which is, appropriately, more domesticated and tamed than the lesbian cat) the larger “wild” cat or panther corresponds to lesbian desire—an argument which will become even more convincing in light of the manifold examples in support of Irena’s potential lesbianism as
cats are terrified of Irena, supposedly because of her panther-like nature—though, of course, on a symbolic or psychoanalytic level, what they really fear is Irena’s own fear of herself—which, in turn, leads to her repressive and violent nature.

This dichotomy between the good Christians and the evil panther-people is made even more abundantly clear when Irena revisits the zoo only a month after being married. In this scene at the zoo, the keeper comments that she has not been to the zoo for a while and seems glad to see her. And yet, what he proceeds to say casts him in a polar opposite role to the one she plays as a latent cat-woman. To be exact, after Irena comments that the panther he is attending to is beautiful, the keeper retorts by saying, “No, he ain’t beautiful. He’s an evil critter, ma’am. You read in your bible, Revelations, when the book talks about the worst beast of all. It says, ‘And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard.’” Irena then dreamily responds, “Yes, like a leopard.” The keeper again repeats, “But not a leopard, but like one. I guess it fits this critter.” Though the keeper’s words boldly reinforce the film’s numerous references to the existence of a stark dichotomy between the good Christian and the evil cat-people, the viewer cannot help but feel sorry for Irena whose despondent kitten-like face and fervent, almost tragic desire to be good make it hard for the viewer to believe that she is truly evil—even if she really is explored in later sections of this chapter. Indeed, there is one scene in particular (the scene where Irena follows Alice to the pool and almost kills her) that a blatant association is made not only between Irena and the panther (as she literally transforms into one) but between Alice and her little housecat, who becomes just as terrified as Alice herself, when Irena, the panther-woman, approaches the pool. Metaphorically speaking, we could say that the heterosexual Alice/domesticated cat is frightened of the homosexual Irena/panther-woman. This becomes even more compelling in view of the fact that not only are many heterosexuals scared of homosexuality, but female heterosexuality, precisely because it is less scorned by society, becomes less enormous and fierce than the (seemingly more repressed) panther. And yet, curiously enough, the panther/lesbian is perceived as enormous, fierce, and even dangerous by the little cat even more so than by other panthers/lesbians. This, coupled with the fact that the panther follows the domesticated cat, just as Irena follows Alice (to the pool), suggests that the domesticated cat may be, in the final analysis, just as repressed as the wild cat—and in some ways, even more so for the very reason that it is domesticated or tamed. In any event, as indicated by this very scene in which Irena, the big cat, follows Alice, the little cat, the little cat will eventually need to face its fear of the panther—one way or another.
a cat-woman-to-be. Not only is her wish to be a “good Christian wife” evident in this particular scene, but, more generally, in her deep desire to please her husband.

After getting married (but while her husband is still patiently enamored of her) Irena somberly remarks to him, “I envy all the women on the street. They make their husbands happy. They are free.” Thus, she ironically conflates freedom with the very opposite of what the film’s subtext suggests that it is--namely, the freedom to let loose one’s own inner “beast”. In fact, even before the two marry Irena laments her situation with self-deprecating fears about being a cat-woman—to which Olly responds by dismissing her worries as the products of mad foreign fairytales and, much like Valentin, condescendingly compliments her by saying, “You’re so noble you fell in love with me, Oliver Reed, a good, plain Americano. You’re so noble you’re gonna marry me.” Yet, though Olly is correct in pointing out that Irena’s fear is, at heart, her greatest obstacle to happiness, he is incapable of properly defining or understanding what that fear is, much less how to overcome it. His inability to believe in fantasy (much less Irena’s story), only leads her into greater isolation and fear. In any event, the film makes clear that Olly’s inability to truly believe in the supernatural is his greatest, most tragic defect or mistake; for not only does Irena turn out to be a panther woman, but she actually dies as a result of never getting proper help or recognition. Rather appropriately, the film ends with Olly huddled over her dead body, as he softly laments, “Well, she never lied to us”.

With all this in mind, it becomes relatively easy to flip around the film’s good/evil dichotomy. Or rather, the problem is not so much that the cat-people are bad but that they are misunderstood by people like Olly and misjudged by people like the gatekeeper-

16 This theme will be further explored in the film’s sequel in which Olly similarly struggles to believe in his estranged daughter’s fantasy world, thereby further estranging her from him (Olly) and the world.
-a person whose religious preaching clearly suggests that he judges and discriminates based on what society tells him to believe. The dichotomy between good Christian and evil panther is further dismantled by the fact that, though Alice aligns herself with the apparently righteous Christians, she too is incapable of seeing that the “strange(r)”, far from being evil or unlucky is precisely that which holds the key to true liberation and happiness—though the encounter with this strange(r) may itself be unpleasant, scary, or even monstrous. Like the gatekeeper and even Olly, Alice too is close-minded.

Of course, the fact that the keeper speaks the most blatantly hateful words towards the panther is only appropriate being that he serves as an obstacle both to the panther’s release as well as entry into its cage. In this sense, he represents repression itself—and thus, Irena’s (and, in fact, society’s) own repressive mechanisms. Yet, at the same time, he must be confronted since he himself is both the obstacle to and key (or opening) to the panther’s cage. What is more, the fact that the keeper has a faulty memory, often leaving the keys in the keyhole, is not only highly suggestive but it is exactly what enables Irena to finally un-cage the beast inside. The fact, however, that before finally releasing him she returns the key to the keeper on at least one occasion reflects her own wavering relationship to the panther—or her desire to be ‘normal’ and ‘good’. Indeed, despite the film’s various binary characters, all the characters, while simultaneously functioning as types, symbols or psychic sides or parts, are more complex, even similar to one another, than they might at first seem. In this way, they mirror Valentin and Molina, who, while on the surface represent two opposite sides of the same coin, are also, even as individuals, far more complex and even akin to one another than they themselves originally suspect.
Yet before continuing with these ideas, it will be helpful to view the film’s Christian iconography in light of the novel itself and the Argentine culture to which it refers. In order to fully appreciate this, we must briefly return to our discussion of the film’s final and perhaps most important reference to Christianity—namely, the crucifix used to ward off Irena as she appears in the form of a panther. Though the fact that Olly is capable of warding off Irena with his T-square (whose shadow is identical to a crucifix) would seem to reinforce the dichotomy of good Christians versus evil Cat People, as mentioned earlier, the fact that it only momentarily works is crucial. Indeed, the fact that it is not a true crucifix but a simulacrum of one further implies that it only works because Irena herself fears it. The fact, moreover, that Irena returns not as a beast but as an angel in the film’s sequel suggests even further that the crucifix works (in the short-term) not because it is the armor of God but because it scares Irena, as it projects hatred towards her—a hatred which, in turn, may remind her of her own self-hatred.

This becomes further significant if we consider the history and origins of Argentine nationalism, which long precedes Argentine authoritarianism, and yet, whose tendency to focus on the purity of the nation (to the exclusion of alterity) finds its ultimate expression under the authoritarian rule known as the Proceso (a.k.a. “The Gentleman’s Coup”). Indeed, the so-called “ser nacional” as defined during and through the Proceso is, as Marguerite Feitlowitz helps illuminate (A Lexicon of Terror), extremely similar to the one advanced under Franco’s Spain, especially as they are both exceptionally keen on eliminating “contamination”. In this way, Irena’s focus on her biological origins or ascendancy, which she fears has determined or sealed her fate as an “evil marmaluke” is reflective of the fixation in Argentina (and especially throughout the
“(Dirty War”) on ethnic cleansing and racial determinism. In short, this film(-narration), like the novel as a whole, both reflects the prejudices, repressions and terrors of its time, while perhaps even more acutely pointing to the immense violence, bigotry and repression which is about to sprout or, literally, explode but whose seeds are already firmly planted in the very soil that has by this time forced Puig himself into exile.

At the same time, insomuch as this hatred of Irena is also a hatred and fear of one’s own repressed or inner Other (which Irena embodies) and of memory itself, it cannot be killed—rather, it will continue to haunt those who attempt to repress it. It is, in fact, this very type of abhorrence for the Other that characterizes both Argentine authoritarianism as well as the history of Christianity in Argentina—and, even more specifically, the symbolic use and meaning of the crucifix. To begin, the crucifix, rather than representing a moment of rebirth, not only symbolizes exile, persecution and death but also the violent separation (or incompatibility) of heaven and earth.

It is, moreover, a symbol not only of death but, within the specific context of Argentina, of violence and persecution. Appropriately, though also ironically being that the Christian messiah was himself persecuted on it, the crucifix has been used historically in Argentina in juxtaposition with the sword (particularly by Nationalists) as a means of persecuting alterity—as David Rock more specifically details in his book, *Authoritarian Argentina*, to which I will soon return. In view of this context, and as more generally reflected in *El Beso*, it is only fitting that the cross be used in *Cat People* in a way that is blindly dogmatic and hateful—that is, to persecute and repress Irena and all she signifies.

Yet, even on the level of sacrifice, the crucifix is used, both in the film and in authoritarian Argentina, to express a sort of sacrifice almost similar to that of Franco’s as
advanced in chapters 1 and 2, and in direct contrast to the more altruistic sacrifice offered by Ofelia in *El laberinto* and Molina in *El beso*—who both die for a political cause as much as for the people they love. The egotistical sacrifice of alterity signaled by the use of the cross to persecute others not only highlights the masses’ unquestioning obedience to rules and leadership, but, specifically, their blind acceptance of interpretations of the bible which not only encourage hateful/repressive exclusions but which, ironically, they use as an excuse for eschewing responsibility as well as more altruistic forms of sacrifice.

As is generally emphasized by most modern Christian institutions, the importance of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is that it encapsulates the deepest form of altruism—that is, the idea that one man may die for the sins of others. Though this is not necessarily wrong or even hurtful to society, the conclusion drawn by many is not that we can and should follow his example but rather that we can never be like him (for he is not only the messiah but God Himself—an interpretation which, in fact, is irreconcilable to the so-called Old Testament, as it is recorded). In effect, many Christians believe that their messiah died so that we humans can be free to sin and still be forgiven--though, of course, they have more graceful ways of putting it. This understanding of sacrifice not only reinforces the separations noted throughout this thesis but leads to the exact opposite of radical responsibility as envisaged in my introduction. At the same time, though forgiveness is a crucial component to any sort of ethical approach to the world, ironically, it is usually the very same Christians who use their savior’s death as an excuse to sin irresponsibly, who are categorically unforgiving to those who are different.

In fact, it is precisely this type of Christianity that was popularized by the authoritarian attitudes and realities portrayed in *El beso*. In virtually all forms of
traditional Christianity, Jews, Muslims and others are unredeemable for the simple fact that they do not believe that Jesus is God—and yet, though this also holds true within the context of Argentina, these Other groups are also, and even more fundamentally, seen as racially inferior or cursed from birth. Thus, if you confront these types of Christians on how they justify their hatred they will either find no need to respond (as it is a question of racial impurity, much like Irena’s “curse”) or, if they do attempt to offer an explanation, they will often say that Jesus himself said “you can only be saved through me”.

Yet, aside from the fact that this sort of thinking reflects their unquestioning faith in the recorded versions of scripture, it also demonstrates a lack of critical engagement with the words themselves or the different interpretive possibilities they yield. In short, anyone who uses this quote to discriminate interprets it as meaning that mere belief in Jesus (as not only the messiah but as God Himself) will enable one to be saved no matter what one does, but that, conversely, not believing in Him will lead to damnation (no matter how good one is). It is precisely this type of thinking that helps explain why those Christians who are so unforgiving and eager to persecute are simultaneously so capable of pardoning themselves and/or forgetting their own crimes or “sins”.

At the same time, their lack of an attempt to penetrate beyond the surface of words (or their blind acceptance of dogma) is not only what enables them to perpetrate such hatred but is more generally reflective of the authoritarian impulse in Argentina, Spain and elsewhere to blindly accept whatever one is told. And yet, even within Christianity, a more critical approach to scripture may lead its reader to a very different, even opposite conclusion about what sacrifice can and should mean.17 The problem,

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17 Even if Jesus really said that one can be saved only through him—and even if he really is the messiah—is it not possible that what he meant is that people should follow his model of forgiveness, altruism and
obviously, is people’s approach to the text itself—and not just “sacred” writings but all writings. Rather than paving a path of love and peace by critically engaging with a text, they merely repeat, like Irena’s gatekeeper, what they have learned through institutions, dogma and fear of straying from that dogma and thus, becoming the demonic Other. As is well known, many institutions emerge out of a need to dominate and subjugate others or to increase power and wealth. What Christians who blindly believe in institutions fail to recognize is that if Jesus is the messiah or simply a great prophet (as in Islam) or a bodhisattva (as many Buddhists believe) or even just a good man, his message must make us better, more loving, more open, more forgiving yet also more responsible beings. Within this context, the use of the cross (as a symbol of institutional Christianity) to fend off the panther becomes especially interesting in the context of modern Argentina, where not only is Christianity the dominant religious institution but where it is coupled with the blind obedience and terror that is inherent in all authoritarian communities.

Finally, in addition to these factors, it is important to consider that the evolution of Christianity in authoritarian Argentina and even of Christian mysticism (which was also highly popular throughout both Peronism and the Dirty War, as I further explore in Chapter 4) are rooted largely in Argentina’s Nationalist movement, which, according to David Rock, “considered their movement an embodiment of the ‘spiritual’ over the ‘material’, [and] whose mission was to prevent ‘the breakdown of the country’s spiritual unity’” (Authoritarian Argentina). Appropriately, this Nationalist movement—which, nevertheless, should not be confused with Argentine authoritarianism--was symbolized by the far more ancient juxtaposition of the sword and the cross. In effect, the Christian

unconditional love rather than using it as an excuse to sin? After all, are not all the great figures in the bible models for positive behavior (as idealistic or unreachable as they might be) rather than scapegoats?
mysticism and spiritualism popularized by the Nationalist movement in Argentina encouraged both the degradation of the material world as well as females, Jews and Others. As Rock notes, though the citizens were conceived of as forming part of one (National) mystical body, this mystical body was still limited to the Nation, and what is more, was conceived of as having “one head”, which should govern the corresponding parts. This “head” was conceived of as being the authoritarian leader himself.18

With all this in mind, we can more fully appreciate not only why the cross might become such an important symbol when exploring Argentine authoritarianism but, at the same time, why the cross cannot fully defeat the panther but instead (or in the long run) only intensify its power and fury. If we keep in mind that the crucifix functions in Argentina as a symbol not only of the need to separate the material and spiritual but its corresponding need for sacrifice of the Other, this helps clarify why the cross becomes a problematic tool of “self-defense” both in fiction and in life. What the panther, as a symbol of repressed alterity or difference, truly needs is to be reintegrated into society rather than shunned, feared or persecuted with a cross. As further evidenced by the fact that, as Molina tells it, all the panther’s victims become overwhelmed with fear and cold right before it kills them, it would appear to be fear of the panther that ultimately destroys those who encounter it. In this light, the panther, much like the monster of Frankenstein, serves, above all, as a mirror of one’s own fears and prejudices rather than as an external reaper of doom. Like “Frankenstein”, the panther is only dangerous because it is feared.

Indeed, a final similarity between Frankenstein’s monster and the panther/Irena is suggested by the fact that Irena is herself a stranger (or foreigner) in a new land. Much

18 Of course, this is a very old image, that goes back to St. John Crysostom, and is part of the Corpus Christi service, comparing the church to a body with many different members but one head. It was then translated to monarchical regimes.
like an exile or a wanderer, she belongs neither to the land she is from and wishes to escape from, nor is she a “true American”. In fact, as becomes further evident in Chapter 4 (where my analysis of Evita permits me to more fully explore the Argentine dichotomy between civilization and barbarism that dates back to *Facundo* and even earlier), Irena’s exotic affinity to the panther also makes her emblematic of Argentina’s repressed internal alterity—that is, the so-called “barbarism” of the pampas. These qualities coupled with Irena’s previously noted in-between state of being neither fully panther woman nor fully human/‘Christian’ renders her even more of an exile, outsider or monster—much like the caged panther she both fears yet adores or even Frankenstein’s monster from *El espíritu*.

Yet, even more than that, these features, particularly when combined with her possible lesbian identity not only make her an outcast but a double/mirror of both the prisoners in the wider frame story (particularly Molina, as our gay, exiled narrator) and of Puig himself, who, like Molina, is not only gay and exiled but our ultimate/outer-narrator. The fact that there is a clear and direct triple-layering/identification at work here between Puig, Molina and Irena serves as a fine example of how and why *El beso* offers a more explicit model for how to interpret fiction and meld it with life. This triple identification also reinforces the lesbian dimension of Irena’s identity since both Puig and Molina are gay. Irena’s lesbianism is, in any event, something I should and will now further defend.

**“A Blessing in Disguise”: The ‘Curse’ of the Cat People**

Beginning with the most general argument, because *Cat People* clearly dramatizes sexual repression and fear through the metaphor of panther-women, it is only appropriate that Irena be a lesbian since she not only embodies ultimate alterity and exile but, more
specifically, she becomes the quintessential symbol of sexual repression. As further noted in my introduction\textsuperscript{19} and in Chapter 4, in the context of authoritarian Argentina, the prototypical figure of sexual repression and potential deviancy is homosexual repression—even more so when lesbian in nature. The lesbian combines the shame associated with female sexual desire with that associated with homosexual desire. Not only is she breaking the sacred bonds of Christian heterosexual marriage and desire, as conceived of by traditional Argentine Catholicism, through her impure homoerotism, but the fact that she desires sex at all is itself a transgression. If a woman engages in lesbian sex (or even desires it) it is not to have babies but for pure enjoyment—an enjoyment which, in traditional Argentine thought, should be limited to men.

Needless to say, though many women truly desire sex with men, their aims may be cloaked by the fact that they can and for the most part will have babies. But the lesbian, because her desire will not yield babies, cannot hide her desire for desire itself. The cultural importance of childbearing is further clarified in Chapter 4, where we learn that Eva Perón helped solidify (albeit ambiguously, given her past promiscuity) the notion that women are and should be valued, above all, for their ability to reproduce and to subordinate their own desires and ambitions to those of their men (like Molina, Evita imagined men to be the rational, active counterparts to their passionate, emotional, and intuitive women). Indeed, given the fact that Evita’s propagandistic book, \textit{La razón de mi vida}, was required reading for schoolchildren (in what would have been Molina’s generation), it is hardly surprising that Molina, following many of the film-heroines with whom he chooses to identify, embodies a great deal of Evita’s own repressive and

\textsuperscript{19} In particular, I defer my reader to my comments on Gabriel Giorgi’s arguments regarding the abjection and persecution of homosexuality as defined in his book, \textit{Suenos de exterminio}. 
dichotomous views about women. In any event, the lesbian is not only doubly perverse (sexually) but, in rejecting the possibility of motherhood she has renounced the only virtue that, particularly in traditional societies (such as the 1970s Argentine society reflected in the frame story), makes her a valuable woman and productive citizen.

In this light, it becomes especially interesting that Irena should fall for a man who, at least in Molina’s imagination, is obsessed with his own mother--for motherhood is something she can never attain. On the other hand, Irena’s inability to compete with Olly’s mother(hood) might explain both her fear of and attraction to it. Either way, the fact that Irena comes from a land of all women and that she fears sleeping with men or even kissing them are obvious signs that she could very well be a lesbian. Of course, Irena’s fear of sexual relations with men by no means constitutes solid proof of her lesbianism, especially if we believe that what Irena really fears is desire itself. However, the fact that she fears killing men even more than kissing them--and, in fact, does attempt to kill Dr. Judd after he finally kisses her--could certainly imply that she is a lesbian.

This argument becomes still more convincing if we view the movie itself with attentive eyes. It is highly telling, for example, that when Irena laments her inability to have sex with her husband, it is never in reference to her own desire for intercourse with him, but rather due to her need and desire to please him. Furthermore, though the film’s female homoeroticism is subtle, a discerning eye will find it hard to miss—particularly in reference to the scene in which Irena is approached by another cat-woman on the eve of her wedding (a scene which appears both in the film as well as Molina’s retelling of it). While seemingly enjoying the party held at a restaurant in honor of the wedding, Irena is suddenly approached by a woman who herself looks like a cat (played by actress
Elizabeth Russell). This woman walks up to the seated Irena and flirtatiously stares at her while saying to her in Serbian, “My sister.” The wide-eyed Irena appears shocked, intrigued and terrified by this woman’s advances—so terrified, in fact, that she quickly gives the sign of the cross. She then spends the rest of the night in a deeply depressive state, leading to a debate with Olly over what he views as nonsensical legends/fears.

The question, however, is whether Irena is more frightened by the fact that this woman claimed to be her “sister” or by the fact that Irena herself was perhaps vaguely turned on by it. After all, though the mysterious woman’s claim to be her “sister” would most definitely serve to reinforce Irena’s fear of being a cat-woman, Irena had obviously been called a cat-woman before (for example, by the children who teased her throughout her childhood) and had doubtless encountered many other signs of her ‘perverse’ nature, which she clearly fears long before this incident. Some of these signs emerge within the film itself, and, in fact, serve as even stronger indications of Irena’s panther-like nature—and yet, none of them disturb her as much as her encounter with this woman.

One of these signs occurs in one of the Cat People’s earliest scenes when Irena walks into the pet store with Olly to exchange the cat he had given her as a gift (and which is terrified of her). The moment Irena enters the store, the animals all go wild (especially the cats) and make such noise that Irena, the shopkeeper and Olly are forced to leave the store to discuss what they might want with the owner. Irena, fully aware of her terrifying effect on animals, refuses to reenter the store, claiming to prefer that Olly choose the bird (the animal they agreed on) he likes best for her. However, the viewer immediately suspects that Irena is afraid to go inside because she recognizes her effect on animals. Conversely, as both the viewer and Irena anticipate, when Olly reenters the
store without Irena, the animals remain calm. Yet, though the animals’ crazed reaction to Irena constitutes even more compelling proof of Irena’s strange nature than the exotic woman’s claim to be her “sister”, rather curiously, only this woman manages to make Irena visibly upset. Thus, Molina’s emphasis on this scene with the anonymous catwoman, which, in his version, prompts the troubled Irena to spend the night staring deep in the mirror, is highly appropriate since it implies that something drastic has occurred to make her question her identity—or, more specifically, her sexuality.

This reading is supported not only by *El beso*’s larger frame story, but also by the film’s initial critical reception as well as its extraordinarily (yet still subtly) homoerotic sequel, *The Curse of The Cat People*. As noted in the film commentary (from a special feature option on the film itself) immediately after *Cat People*’s release in 1943 the producer, Val Lewton “received letters congratulating him for his boldness in bringing ‘lesbiana’ to films in Hollywood.” Lewton, who, interestingly enough, is known for the semi-autobiographical nature of many of his works and who, moreover, projected two of his greatest phobias onto *Cat People* (namely, cats and touching people) as well as his own gloomily enchanted childhood (filled with wolf-tales from his native Russia), was apparently infuriated by the public’s insinuation. He immediately demanded that his scriptwriter, DeWitt Bodeen, tell him whether the lesbianism attributed to the film by its viewers was intentional. DeWitt wisely denied it by joking that any film that has an attractive woman come up to another attractive woman on her wedding night, claiming to be “her sister” in a foreign tongue is bound to be interpreted as lesbian in nature.

However, in later interviews Bodeen admitted that the film’s lesbian dimension was, indeed, intentional. In this light, it may also be of interest that Puig himself was
perhaps both aware of and influenced by the film’s original script (and thus, Bodeen’s intentions) as suggested by his parallel use of *Cat People*’s initial prelude in Molina’s narration of the film, as mentioned earlier. Yet, regardless of what Puig may have known about the original script or the writer’s intentions, if we return to the fact that a ‘tripling’ is at play between Puig, Molina and Irena, the fact that both Puig and Molina are gay makes the argument for Irena’s own homosexuality extremely convincing. In short, Irena’s lesbianism is revealed not only through examples within *Cat People* but by external factors such as its reception (by Hollywood as well as by Molina and Puig) and even the likely intentions of its scriptwriter, Bodeen.

There is yet another “external” factor that decisively contributes to this lesbian reading—and it can be found, rather intriguingly, in *Cat People*’s sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People*—which was released only a year later (in 1944) and which shared the same writer and producer as well as many of the same actors (Olly, Irena, Alice and the strange cat-woman are all played by the same people). And yet, the sequel, which was far less commercially successful than its immensely triumphant predecessor, is also far more blatantly homoerotic. Indeed, this film is worth mentioning not only because it reinforces the homoeroticism in *Cat People*, but also because, in so doing, it buttresses several other aspects or readings of the film noted in this chapter.

*The Curse*, which begins at least six or seven years after Irena’s death, commences in Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow, where Olly has moved with his second wife, Alice (his architect co-worker from the first film). The two have a young daughter named Amy, who is in kindergarten and who has trouble making friends due to her dreamy nature. This is evinced in the first scene as Amy spoils a game of tag during a
class field trip by not paying attention. The other children are quick to complain of her generally wistful nature and her overall incapacity to play games. In truth, Amy misses her turn at tag because she is distracted by a butterfly (significantly, a paramount symbol of rebirth), which she chases, crying “Oh my beautiful! You’re my friend! Come play with me!” Meanwhile, not only has one boy just scared away nothing less than a black cat in a tree by pretending to shoot at it with an imaginary machine gun, but another boy chases Amy (who in turn, chases the butterfly) assuring her that he’ll catch it for her. Yet, instead of coming through on his promise, he squashes it between his hands and offers Amy a shattered “friend”. Amy, furious, slaps the boy on the face.

Thus, little Amy is already beginning to resemble Irena both through her dreaminess and through her aggression towards males. Because the boys almost seem to warrant such aggression, this film supports the notion that the panther-women are aggressive only because they are misunderstood or unappreciated by a violent, male-dominated society. In fact, the parallels between Irena and Amy are established even earlier in this opening scene when the teacher calls to her class saying, “Come here children, come closer. Take a good look. It may seem just a little valley with a little stream running through it. But no, there are songs and stories and lovely legends about this one blessed spot. It’s sleepy hollow.” Thus, as presaged from the first scene, Amy, like Irena, seems fated to endure a childhood characterized by ostracism from her classmates and creepy legends. As Amy will soon learn from her witchy neighbor and possible cat-woman, Mrs. Farris, who melodramatically enacts the true Legend of Sleepy Hollow (featuring the notorious headless horseman), though there are certainly songs,
stories and legends about Sleepy Hollow, they are not lovely or blessed. And yet, Amy’s one true blessing is Irena herself, who appears to Amy in her sadness as a lovely angel.

In further support of Amy’s kinship to Irena, her father, Olly, explicitly notes the similarity between the two in the film’s second scene when Amy’s schoolteacher calls her parents in for a meeting to discuss Amy’s misconduct after slapping the boy just mentioned. After the meeting, Olly (aware of why Amy slapped the boy) tells Alice that he’s worried that Amy has too many fantasies and too few real friends, adding that she’s moody, sickly and could almost be Irena’s daughter. An offended Alice responds by emphatically reminding him that she’s not Irena’s child. Olly, in any case, is angry with Amy and reminds her that being good means playing with the other children and, essentially, being popular. Olly also habitually makes clear to Amy that if she is “good”/popular, he will reward her with gifts, but if she is not, she will be punished.

This becomes especially problematic when Amy encounters a big, old, haunted looking house where a woman’s voice calls out to her from a second story window. The witchy old voice instructs Amy to come near, at which point she tosses the girl a ring on a handkerchief. Immediately afterwards, an angry looking younger woman (the old woman’s daughter) comes out to the yard and snatches away the handkerchief, but leaves Amy with the ring. Curiously, this younger woman is played by the same actress who “hit on” Irena on the eve of her wedding (presumably a panther-woman). Thus, the viewer is immediately invited to think that this is the residence of vampy cat-women.

After arriving at home, Amy, thrilled to have her new ring, shows it off to her Jamaican butler, who says that back in his country, that ring would be considered a “wishing ring”. Amy, even more enthused to hear of this makes a wish (supposedly for a
real friend), which comes true that very day as she is seen frolicking around the yard with her invisible friend. Soon afterwards Amy finds an old picture of Irena, and looks immediately intrigued by it—so intrigued that she inquires to her mother about who the woman is, adding that she is very beautiful. Her mother politely agrees that she was very beautiful, though as soon as Amy leaves the room Alice is quick to show her husband the picture and suggest that he get rid of all remaining pictures/traces of Irena so as to avoid the uncomfortable situation of ever having to explain to Amy who she was.

Olly agrees and burns all the photographs except one, which he secretly hides away in a book. Soon afterwards, we viewers catch a glimpse of Amy’s new friend (from Amy’s perspective)—who turns out to be none other than Irena, dressed in a regal yet provocative, almost kinky gown. Her attire coupled with the way she constantly dotes on Amy, gently touches her and looks at her tenderly, almost seductively, could easily make her a projection of Amy’s latent homosexual desire. Indeed, the fact that this sequel was written by the same scriptwriter, DeWitt Bodeen, makes this all the more likely.

On the other hand, though the film is appropriately ambiguous as to whether Amy was fascinated by the picture of Irena because she already recognized her (as ‘her friend’) or whether her delight was due simply to the fact that she found Irena to be extremely beautiful matters little. Though the first option would suggest an almost eerily tight spiritual connection between Amy and Irena (reinforcing Amy’s implicit lesbianism), the second option (that Amy fashioned this image of Irena after seeing her picture and liking her face) is no less suggestive of a lesbian fantasy—for clearly, Amy prefers the company of a beautiful woman (who happens to also be, most likely, a lesbian) to her ‘straight’ schoolmates. Amy’s potential lesbianism is further suggested, as she confesses to Irena
that “I shall want you for always”, and, in a way that is almost reminiscent of what a gay
couple (particularly in the 1940s) might feel about expressing their love, Amy cries, “I
wish I could show you to Mommy and Daddy. I wish you could spend Christmas with
us.” But, of course, this cannot happen because Amy’s parents would not understand.

In particular, her father, who refused to believe in Irena’s fantasies from the
original *Cat People*, is seemingly doomed to replay the same drama with his daughter,
with whom he gets particularly angry (and accuses of lying) when Amy reports that “a
voice” from a house gave her a wishing ring. And yet, just as Olly is forced to admit at
the end of *Cat People* that “She [Irena] never lied to us”, at the end of this sequel, he
finally learns to accept his daughter and her fantasies after almost losing her when she
eventually decides to run away. In fact, much like what happens in *El espíritu* (when
Ana runs away from her father after learning that her friends, both real and imaginary,
have been killed), Amy, also runs to her magic place (the enchanted Farrin house) after
being punished for claiming to know Irena. To be exact, she finds the picture of Irena
that Olly hid away in book and triumphantly shows it to her father, exclaiming, “You
know my friend!” Olly, horrified by this eerie claim, angrily explains to Amy that there
is no way she can possibly know this woman because she died before Amy was ever
born. When Amy insists that she does know her, she is punished and locked in her room.

At this point, Amy bathed in tears, is visited by Irena who claims that she must
finally leave Amy and never come back. A frantic Amy pleads for her not to leave, but
Irena explains that the only reason she came was to help Amy deal with her loneliness.
She explains, “You called to me out of sadness—and out of your sadness I appeared to
you as a guide.” Aside from the fact that this reflects the idea that spirituality and rebirth
can come precisely out of deep sadness, loneliness and emotional exile\(^{20}\), what follows is crucial because, though Irena wisely decides to disappear, she does, despite her promise to abandon Amy, finally come back at the film’s end. In fact, Amy’s peculiar bond with Irena (and spirituality) is reinforced by the fact that, just before her fight with her father, Christmas carolers knock at the door, sing and are invited inside. Yet, Amy, rather than enjoy their song and company, runs to a window through which she can see Irena in the garden where she normally appears. Irena then sings to Amy, significantly, in French\(^{21}\).

The fact that Amy prefers the solitude of her friend’s French song to that of the (larger and “real”) group of American carolers is not only in line with Amy’s dreamy, solitary nature but reflects her preference for the foreign and the strange—even and perhaps especially in relationship to “spiritual” themes (in this case, Christmas songs).

Logically, after Irena’s departure, Amy, in utter desperation, escapes through the window on this snowy Christmas night and runs to the Farrin house. Yet, she is only gone for a short time when her parents somewhat accidentally notice she is missing. In brief, Amy’s schoolteacher, who happens to be visiting the Reed house, convinces Olly that he is dealing with Amy’s imaginary friends in the wrong way, and that he needs to play along with her if he truly wants to help her. She spouts some psychoanalytic theory and then insists that by giving Amy real support at home, she will no longer need imaginary friends. With this in mind, Olly goes upstairs to apologize, finds that Amy is gone and frantically goes out to find her while the teacher phones the police. Right

\(^{20}\) This idea is further suggested by the fact that the only other person to seemingly believe in “fantasies” is the family’s black and foreign butler.  
\(^{21}\) French also happens to be the native tongue of the actress, Simone Simon, who plays Irena.
afterwards, a search team equipped with dogs and flashlights hunts down Amy, immediately reminding us of the scene following Ana’s escape in *El espíritu.*

Yet, unbeknownst to Amy, the Farrin house is far from safe. The Farrin daughter, Barbara, who is literally insanely jealous of the fact that her mother loves Amy more than her, has planned to kill Amy if she ever steps foot in the house again. In truth, Barbara’s mother, Julia, not only appears to love Amy more than Barbara, but she has seemingly forgotten that her daughter is truly hers (as Barbara suggests, she suffered an accident or some sort of trauma, which resulted in memory loss and/or madness). As a result, Julia Farrin constantly calls her daughter an imposter, claiming that her real daughter died when she was six—significantly, the same age as Amy. In this way, a blatant parallel is drawn between Amy and Barbara, especially since Amy, like Barbara, suffers a similar rejection from her own father. Furthermore, if Barbara is truly a cat-woman, the implication then would be that both Barbara and Amy are also potential lesbians—which, in turn, would also make it symbolically appropriate that they feel distanced from society and especially their parents. This argument is bolstered by the film’s dramatic ending, which establishes an unexpected triangular bond between Irena, Barbara and Amy.

To summarize, as soon as Amy arrives at the Farrin house, the elderly Julia hysterically attempts to hide Amy, aware that her daughter is capable of murdering her. Knowing that the downstairs is unsafe Mrs. Farrin tries leading Amy up the baroque stairway, but, in her old age, she can barely move. Half way up, she collapses, as she is struck with a heart-attack. At this moment, Barbara appears at the bottom of the stairs, lividly accusing Amy of stealing even her final moments with her mother from her. She then directs the frightened and tearful Amy to come to her. Amy, terrified, calls out first

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22 This escape is itself modeled off of Whale’s 1931 *Frankenstein*, as mentioned in chapter 1.
for her father and then for her ‘friend’. Just as all hope seems lost, Amy suddenly sees
Irena’s image juxtaposed over Barbara’s. Having lost fear of Barbara, Amy runs to her
and hugs her, crying out, “My friend!” Barbara, in turn, begins to put her claw-like hands
around Amy’s neck to choke her, but just as her fingers are about to tighten she is moved
by Amy’s tenderness and softly, almost lovingly holds her. Moments later, Amy’s father
shows up with the search team, and all is well. As they arrive back home, Amy’s father
asks Amy if she sees Irena in the garden (where she normally appears to Amy), and Amy
replies that she does. Olly hugs Amy and says he sees her too. Thus, despite the triple-
identification between Irena, Amy and Barbara, Amy is granted a more hopeful ending.

This becomes comprehensible if we consider both the similarities between the
three females as well as their differences. On the most obvious level, not only are the
three of them latent lesbians but the fact that, as we have just seen, Barbara symbolically
transforms into Irena further reinforces this argument as well as their overall likeness. As
this fusion of identities explicitly reminds us, Barbara, Irena, and by extension, Amy, are,
despite their apparent differences, very similar at heart—further implying that Barbara
has only become psychotically aggressive because, like Amy and Irena, she is lonely,
strange, misunderstood and even rejected by her own mother (as Amy is by her father).
Indeed, it is important to remember that Amy herself demonstrates aggressive behavior at
the beginning of the film when she slaps a boy. Appropriately then, once Amy shows
Barbara love and affection, Barbara’s aggressive tendencies, like Amy’s, melt away.

And yet, Amy’s outcome is more hopeful than either Barbara’s or Irena’s not only
because her father, finally, appears to believe in her and her fantasy world but, perhaps
more fundamentally, because Amy has Irena to guide her—and, what is more, she uses

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23 This also supports “Frankenstein’s” remarks about the bond between (non)virtue and (un)happiness.
this guide to overcome her fears of both Barbara and of her own town’s creepy legends. It is also worth remembering that Irena, while alive, refused to ‘embrace’ this very same actress in *Cat People* when the woman appeared to her on her wedding night, claiming to be her sister--though, quite ironically, she symbolically becomes one with her as her image fuses with Barbara’s at the climax of *The Curse of the Cat People.*

By contrast, Amy is not afraid to embrace this same figure (both literally and symbolically) even when she reappears as a far more explicitly aggressive character (Barbara) in the sequel. Furthermore, Amy shows great courage on her journey to the haunted-looking Farrin house, as it requires that Amy sneak out her window, bear the intense cold and snow and, finally, cross the very bridge of Sleepy Hollow where, legend has it, the headless horseman comes to claim his victims. In fact, as Amy crosses the bridge, she begins to imagine hearing the trotting of the horseman—and yet, like Ofelia in *El laberinto,* Amy overcomes her fears as she crosses the bridge, enters the enchanted house and ultimately embraces Barbara—thus, transforming the ‘monster’/Barbara into a beatific angel/Irena by finally and fully accepting and loving it. In this way, she achieves in life what Irena only does is death. Yet, above all, Amy’s courage is reflected in the fact that, despite her father’s attempt to make her privilege popularity to the detriment of self-expression (in fact, his threats to punish her for not being popular is intended to instill the exact type of terror emblematic of authoritarianism), Amy nonetheless remains true to herself—and, in so doing, heroically “saves” both herself and her father.

On the other hand, in light of this analysis, Irena’s lesbianism is not only indisputable but ingeniously supported by the interplay of the two films (*Cat People* and its sequel) along with their triangular relationship to *El beso.* As should now be obvious,
The Curse of the Cat People elucidates as much about Irena and her sexuality as it does about Amy. Yet, before moving beyond this idea, it will help to offer one more proof in support of Irena’s homosexuality, especially since it leads to several crucial points I would like to make about both the film (Cat People) and the novel (El beso).

In brief, this idea that Irena is a lesbian is supported by Dr. Judd’s notion that she guards a secret that she is unwilling to divulge perhaps even to herself. Though, as we have seen, the doctor is tragically mistaken in assuming that Irena is crazy (for believing in the legend of the cat people), we must remember that this does not mean that his analysis of her does not offer some truth, however incomplete. Indeed, though Dr. Judd would like to believe that the legend is simply a cover for her “secret”, what he refuses to understand is that the two possibilities can and must, actually, coexist—for the one cannot be understood without the other. That is, the mind needs the soul just as the soul needs the mind; and, similarly, science needs myth, just as myth needs science.

In effect, Irena’s lesbianism interests us not only for the reasons mentioned but because it highlights the fact that both the psychoanalyst and Irena are correct with respect to whether or not Irena’s fears are real or imaginary—for, in fact, they are both. Admittedly, Irena’s fears may be explained through science, logic or psychoanalysis—and, indeed, what prompts her to become a panther woman is perhaps nothing more than her fear of becoming it. And yet, she really does become it. This suggests not only that logic and emotion must be harmonized but that Valentin and Molina, like Irena and Judd, have something to learn from one another. They are both right; and yet, they are both wrong for the very reason that they cannot reconcile their own truths to that of the other.
More generally, the need to reconcile Irena’s account with the doctor’s not only reflects the need for give and take relationships, but also the broader need to reconcile self and other, reason and emotion, science and the soul, and even psychoanalysis and mysticism. As indicated not only throughout *Cat People* but also its sequel, the films’ psychoanalytic interpretations are, when explored in depth, not at all antithetical to spirituality or even mysticism but rather very much in line with them. This idea that psychoanalysis and mysticism are not only reconcilable but actually mutually illuminating or enhancing is, of course, a topic we have addressed in other chapters—and yet, it will become even more evident in the next and final section of this chapter where I explore the subtle yet very present influence of mysticism on *El beso* as a whole.

In any event, this need to reconcile science and the irrational is further reinforced in *El beso’s* frame story by the fact that, metaphorically speaking, Valentín, like the architect, uses the “cross” to defend himself from or “sacrifice” his own desires, thus reinforcing the aforementioned separations emblematic of authoritarian terror. The fact that Valentín is an atheist matters little since (at the beginning of the novel) Molina represents the same divisions, though favoring opposite poles. In fact, as we have seen, Molina also incorporates a similar concept of sacrifice as a means of maintaining these separations, albeit primarily with respect to gender. The problem is not which poles are privileged but the fact that one extreme is favored over the other. Fortunately, however, through Valentín’s symbolic encounter with the panther (representative of Molina and Valentín’s own repressed side which Molina helps him find) he is able to overcome this

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24 Examples would be the idea that Irena does not have a panther inside her but rather a ‘secret’ or that Amy does not have a mystical encounter with Irena but rather creates her image from a photo.
dichotomous thinking. Inversely, for Molina, the panther may represent the flip side of this divide (that is, Valentin or the side of Molina that Valentin awakens)\textsuperscript{25}

In effect, the dichotomy between the panther (in its cage) and Irena (as passive, frigid, repressed woman) not only represents the distance between the exilic position of Molina and Valentin in their prison cells and the outside world, but also the ways in which, ironically, it is precisely through their physical exile that the cage is finally “opened”. As I have argued elsewhere, exile, for the very reason that it is an ambiguous place where dichotomies often implode, holds the potential to produce extreme situations or effects such as ultimate rebirth or utter death. Though on the one hand, some people (symbolically) die because, like Irena, they simply cannot handle “exile” and thus become more “masculinized” or aggressive as a consequence of their suffering, the death that Molina suffers seems (despite its secondary possibilities offered elsewhere) to be primarily a consequence of the larger problems common in society itself.

Though Molina, like Irena, gets the key from the “gatekeeper” (a symbol of his ability to conquer his own repressive functions and perhaps also those of the prison guards and military\textsuperscript{26}), and though he is, unlike Irena, able to integrate this new side of himself into the old, he is ultimately killed by the “patrol cars”—that is, symbols of both society in general and, in particular, the state terror that awaits him after his release. In effect, though Molina ultimately dies when, like the panther, he is released from his “cage” and set into society, on a deeper level, it is through the evolving relationship that

\textsuperscript{25} Secondarily, however, the panther may also reflect the desires and urges that Molina already had to sacrifice (perhaps since childhood) and which landed him in jail—which, in turn, could be likened to death itself (when the panther is hit by the patrol car). In many ways then, the panther becomes the ultimate symbol of the text’s ambiguity as well as its ability to ingeniously combine past, present and future.

\textsuperscript{26} The fact that the gatekeeper, who (much like the Captain in \textit{El laberinto}) has a faulty “memory”, leaves the key in the keyhole may represent the fact that the prison guards (and military) underestimate the potential for Molina and Valentin to develop a loving relationship. Ironically, their decision to put the two in the same cell (so Molina can extract information from Valentín) backfires in the most unexpected way.
occurs between the two protagonists in the prison cell, that, in a sense, unlocks the cage before Molina is released. In this way, the “key” which unlocks the gate becomes itself synonymous with the process of narrating and commenting on films, a key which enables the two to transcend the symbolic dichotomies and worlds that the panther and Irena (as two poles) represent. Though the vicious panther-woman functions as a more pessimistic union of the two separate worlds, sides or shadows (panther and person), the possibility of a different alternative is, indeed, presaged from the very beginning of the novel/film.

Finally, the need to open oneself up to an-Other world is reinforced by the role of the mysterious “other woman” who approaches Irena while she dines with the architect on their first date. Significantly, in Molina’s version of it, Irena resisted going to this particular restaurant because she thought it would remind her of her “old country”. Yet, she goes because she knows the architect picked it to please her and she, in turn, pleases him by entering despite her initial reluctance. Again, though this detail was invented by Molina, it becomes even more significant for this very reason, as it reveals his great interpretative ability to pick up on the more subtle clues in the original film. Though, according to Molina, this altruistic dynamic makes Irena forget her fears and enjoy the evening (also symbolic of the potential for Molina and Valentin’s relationship to evolve

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27 In fact, as Molina explains early on, when Irena paints the panther in the zoo, “está como en otro mundo, ensimismada dibujando la pantera”(10). Valentin responds critically by saying that “Si está ensimismada no está en otro mundo. Ésa es una contradicción”(10). Yet, as Molina brilliantly points out, Valentin’s inability to reconcile being in another world to being deeply self-absorbed is based on his own incapacity to see not only how (repressed) desire itself can be completely alien to us (in fact, that which is most “other”), but, by implication, how it can also be that which enables us, ultimately, to open ourselves to other, real, healthy relationships. He states, “Sí, es cierto, ella está ensimismada, metida en el mundo que tiene adentro de ella misma, y que apenas si lo está empezando a descubrir.” (10). In effect, what Molina implies, consciously or not, is that this “other world” is not an escape but rather a “reawakening”. In this sense, the cage functions much like the novel itself, insomuch as it opens both the protagonists and the readers to another world where identity may be recreated. This notion that the beast/human, cage/society dichotomy represents two separate worlds which, when united may lead to either death or rebirth, is further emphasized by the fact that, when Irena finally opens the cage, as Molina tells it, “está como transportada a otro mundo, tiene una expression trágica y de placer, los ojos húmedos” (46)

28 For example, he sees that Irena is, at heart, altruistic, as she yearns to be ‘good’/please her husband.

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altruistically), the exotic woman mentioned earlier suddenly appears and speaks to Irena in what Molina describes as an extremely strange language, which Irena, nevertheless, seems to understand (16-17)--and which, in the original film, is actually Serbian.

After this encounter Irena becomes overwhelmed with fear and later confesses that the woman told her she was her sister. Though, as usual, she resists the architect’s sexual advances, Irena begs him to hold her to quell her fears. As they walk by the zoo, however, it begins snowing torrentially, thus evoking the harrowing tale of the “panther woman”. As previously mentioned, when Irena finally arrives at home, she spends hours and hours staring deep into a mirror—that is, in Molina’s version of it. In fact, the walk by the zoo, the snowstorm and the hours of staring into a mirror are all elaborations invented by Molina. And yet, like his other modifications, they reflect both vital information about Molina himself, his relationship to Valentín and, more generally, the film, the novel and even life itself.

Of particular interest, however, is Molina’s invention of the mirror. As we have seen, the fact that Irena becomes obsessed with her own image supports the possibility that she may be a lesbian—especially given that it was provoked by her encounter with the exotic Other woman. And yet, the fact that Irena, though a foreigner herself, has tried desperately to forget this Other/truer self so as to become a good all-American “Mrs. Oliver Reed” is just as significant as her struggle over her sexuality—and, indeed, it is equally intertwined with her fixation on her own mirror-image. In short, we might conclude that the “foreignness” of the “Other woman” reinforces Molina’s idea that sometimes that which is most Other is, as Lacan would say, what is “simultaneously at the heart of me”. At the same time, the fact that a mirror is used to convey this idea is
especially interesting given Lacan’s focus on the mirror as representing a crucial stage in one’s own awareness of self—a self which can only be known in alienation. In this light, Irena’s ability and need to take an-Other, deeper look in the mirror implies that she may be on the cusp of re-birthing herself.

This is crucial to consider given that, as I have intended to show throughout this chapter, the encounter with “alterity” is only incorporated in a healthy, balanced way through the protagonists’ ability to engage more deeply with themselves and with others. Indeed, what ultimately distinguishes Valentín and Molina from characters like Irena is their very ability to find this balance through subversive yet “fantastic” recreations of the films, which in turn shapes and is shaped by their own evolving relationship. Yet in order to achieve this they must import elements of their own lives and historical realities into an “alternative” world only to export these elements back out into reality in a way that transcends fear of the Other, whether physical or psychical. In truth, as all the monsters, toads, panther-women, zombies and other creatures in both El beso and El laberinto suggest, it is, above all else, fear itself that sustains authoritarian state terror and its vicious separations. Just as critically, this fear often leads not only to blind obedience but to an incapacity to critically engage with both texts and life. El beso, in the process of communicating how this tragically occurs, also presents a model for overcoming this lack of critical engagement, free thinking and, more generally, repression of oneself, one’s spirit, one’s memory and the world via its creation of ‘fantastic’ realities—realities which not only remake the world, but urge their readers to continue the process.

At the same time, though El beso is, on the surface, the least spiritual of all the primary works studied thus far, by demonstrating the degree to which institutional
religion is pernicious to society and even the soul, it often indirectly yet unequivocally points to the need for a radically different type of spirituality to flourish—namely, one that unites the mind and the soul, self and other, male and female, the young (self) and the old (self), the past (memory) and the future and, perhaps most importantly, desire and responsibility. It is, after all, only the repressed and hungry panther who hunts down both herself and others, while looming within the shadow of truth and acceptance. Not surprisingly, it is through El beso’s focus on sexuality, that it is largely capable of approaching spirituality in novel, undeniable powerful, and yet subtle ways.

The Kiss of the Spiderwoman: A Kiss of Death or A Kiss of Life?

“If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

--The Gospel of Thomas

Indeed, this need to release oneself from repression, particularly of a sexual type is, itself, a deeply spiritual notion and has been noted in mystical varieties of nearly all the world’s major religions. As we have repeatedly seen, in addition to Christian mysticism, Kabbalist and Sufi texts also suggest, in an almost Freudian/Lacanian way, that knowledge of the Other (and even knowledge of God), requires self-knowledge, including one’s innermost desires. Thus, the abovementioned quote from “The Gospel of Thomas” is especially relevant to this chapter for a variety of reasons. Aside from the fact that, incidentally, the name “Thomas” itself means twin, it is also worth noting that Thomas’ idea that only self-knowledge can save is in blatant opposition to the Christian fundamentalists and authoritarians who argue that only Jesus can save them. In effect, Thomas’ quote supports my earlier argument that, even if Jesus is the messiah and even if

29 Thus, Thomas’ scripture may be viewed as the twin/mirror of the Christian messiah’s own words.
he said “you can only be saved through me”, a Gnostic or critical Christian, would be apt to interpret this as meaning that one must follow his model of altruism, honesty, forgiveness and self-knowledge rather than use it as an excuse to “sin” and to hate.

More importantly perhaps, Thomas’ quote highlights the degree to which not only is self-knowledge central to the salvation of the self, but, alternatively, repressing one’s true self is equally self-destructive—even damning. As we have seen, both ideas are themselves dramatized in El beso, in Cat People, and, more specifically, in Molina’s retelling of Cat People (not to mention the other films he recounts). In truth, this quote from “The Gospel of Thomas” returns us to the initial act of “selling one’s soul” which, in Molina’s version of Cat People, precipitated the vampiric cannibalism (or self-destruction) of an entire community—and not just one community, but all the future communities that it would continue to haunt, sprout and spread to, like a disease.

After all, this primordial cat-woman, though she sells her soul to the devil with the noble intent of saving her community, consequently unleashes a plague of fear and terror which is passed down viciously from generation to generation—hereby suggesting that sacrifice, even if it is altruistically intended, must not result in the selling of one’s inner being. One may physically die for a just cause, as Molina does, but one must never forget who one is--or die spiritually. In effect, if one sells oneself/one’s soul, it can only be to the devil, as Molina himself implies as the creator of this significant detail. Selling or sacrificing oneself not only damages the self but, as its pernicious effects in both Cat People and El beso suggest, it hurts others as much as oneself. Thus, it is truly ‘evil’.

Hence, on the one hand, El beso distinguishes, much like El laberinto, between the selfish sacrifice of Others, promoted by the both authoritarian Argentina and Spain
and which, in a sense, is tantamount to selling or sacrificing one’s one soul, and the more altruistic (often literal) sacrifice of oneself for another. This distinction is reflected in Molina’s choice to reject egotistically sacrificing or betraying Valentín (an option seductively offered to him by the military) in favor of his more altruistic self-sacrifice which culminates tragically in his death. And yet, El beso, goes one step further than El laberinto (which similarly ends through Ofelia’s decision to sacrifice her own life in place of sacrificing an innocent Other/her brother) by more clearly differentiating between the altruistic self-sacrifice of one’s life or livelihood and the self-sacrifice of one’s very soul—which, in effect, is the same as sacrificing an-Other.

Indeed, by the story’s end, Molina’s and Valentín’s identities have become so intertwined that we readers get the overwhelming feeling that if Molina had sacrificed Valentín by betraying him in order to save his own skin, he would have also been sacrificing/betraying his own newer and yet truer self. El beso is uniquely capable of communicating this idea by setting up the two men as polar opposites (or shadows) who finally learn to converge into one better, fuller, more honest beings. For all these reasons then, El beso is not only an extremely spiritual text, but it reinforces the extent to which the self-knowledge is tantamount to knowing, appreciating and loving one’s Other.

The fact, moreover, that this journey towards reconciliation of self and other (or the very explosion of these categories) is intimately tied to the explosion of gender binaries as well as the binary between desire and responsibility, psychology and spirituality make the novel still more innovative. Of course, this emphasis on self knowledge itself lies at the heart of Lacanian, Jungian and even Freudian psychology, but what people are often quick to forget is that in most forms of mysticism there is an
equally great emphasis on the need to know oneself. Though I have provided manifold examples of this in previous chapters, I should like to add a few that poignantly confirm my argument. To begin, the great Kabbalistic text, The Zohar as well as the “Old Testament”/Torah to which it refers commands us,

> Go to yourself, to know yourself, to refine yourself” [...] “Every person must search and discover the root of his soul, so he can fulfill it and restore it to its source, its essence. The more one fulfills himself, the closer he approaches his authentic self” (The Zohar, Vol. II 9).

Likewise, this emphasis on self-knowledge not only reflects many Sufist ideas and quotes (particularly those of Ibn Al’Arabi advanced in chapter 1), but it also conforms to the Gnostic notion that, as previously cited, “If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” More generally, “The Gospel of Thomas” not only equates self-knowledge with salvation but it suggests that self-knowledge is itself deeply tied to knowledge of one’s other—as vividly implied by the following quote (translated by Thomas O. Lambdin of the Gnostic Society Library):

> Jesus said, ‘If those who lead you say to you, 'look, the Kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds will precede you. If they say 'it's in the ocean,' then the fish will precede you. But the Kingdom of God is within you and outside of you. Once you come to know yourselves, you will become known. And you will know that it is you who are the children of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty (“The Gospel of Thomas” 3, The Nag Hammadi Library)

And yet, as we also learn in “The Gospel of Thomas”, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all. [And after they have reigned they will rest.]" (The Nag Hammadi Library). As this remarkable passage suggests, the experience of looking deep inside oneself, re-membering oneself and facing one’s demons is a
process which, though often stimulated by and reflected through the experience of exile or even (symbolic) death, is a process that ends well for those who are truly willing to confront themselves and the world in all its ugliness and splendor.

As theorist Franz Rosenzweig, in his monumentally intriguing book, *The Star of Redemption*, further suggests, (true) love not only facilitates this process but is itself a process of exile and rebirth—or as he more dramatically notes, “Love is fierce as death” (499) –as fierce, in fact, as separation of spirit from body. And yet, those who are capable of surviving this “death” and becoming renewed will be rewarded, much like Molina and Valentín in *El beso*, with a kiss—a kiss of death, which is, at once, a kiss of life. Indeed, the importance of the kiss as the paramount symbol of love (which itself emerges precisely out of the darkness of exile) is powerfully supported by many mystics, as noted, for example, in the following quote, “If I found you outside—in exile, in a foreign land.// I would kiss you—so that spirit would cling to spirit.” (*The Zohar, Volume III* 123). In a way strongly reminiscent of this biblical emphasis on the kiss, Franz Rosenzweig (again, in *The Star of Redemption*), similarly focuses on the vitality of the kiss—both human and divine. After beautifully highlighting the significance of the eyes, Rosenzweig then moves on to the mouth, suggesting that it

[… ] is what completes and consummates all expression of which countenance is capable: both in speech and finally in the silence behind which speech fell back: in the kiss. It is in the eyes where the eternal countenance lights up for man, it is by the words of the mouth that man lives; but for our teacher Moses who while he lived was permitted only to see and not to set foot upon the land of his longing, He sealed this finished life with a kiss of His mouth. So seals God, and so seals man too. (446)

Aside from being a deeply moving examination of the importance of the kiss as both a messenger of reality and our link to the divine, this remarkable passage will now
become even more useful to keep in mind as we move onto a chapter that examines the complex interplay of language and silence in the context of Argentine authoritarianism, both throughout Peronism and the Dirty War. Yet, before doing so, I find it appropriate to add one more passage that summarizes the (spiritual) contributions of all the works examined thus far, but especially El beso’s. This passage itself comes from “The Gospel of Thomas” (though like many of the passages quoted from his gospel, similar variations can also be found in the gospels or scriptures attributed to other disciples).

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom." They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?" Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom. (The Gospel of Thomas 22)

In conclusion, though El beso stands out from the other major works treated in chapters 1 and 2 insomuch as it is the only primary work that makes no overt mention of spirituality, it is, without doubt, an exceptionally spiritual text. In fact, regarding its non-explicit engagement with spirituality, there are several essential points to keep in mind. First, the fact that Argentine authoritarianism was less blatantly embroiled in developing a national “unifying” religion (as in Franco’s Spain) would make Puig himself less consciously invested in revealing the hypocrisy of an authoritarian mindset that aspired to be sublimely religious. And yet, whether consciously or not, Puig’s novel is clearly capable of exposing, in a highly nuanced and sophisticated way, the perverse and dogmatic emanations of Argentine Christianity and, more precisely, the role Christianity plays in relation to Argentine terror, while at the same time advancing a diametrically
opposed version of true spirituality via its protagonists’ evolution. Indeed, despite its omission of any palpably spiritual symbolism or content, *El beso* is not only a deeply ethical text, but it is one which, in many senses, approximates most closely to the principles found in mystical variations as diverse as Kabbalah, Gnosticism and Sufism.

Because it explores to such a great degree the relationship between sexuality and selfhood, desire and responsibility, all while similarly exposing the need to establish give-and-take relationships between oneself and one’s other (or even one’s older self and one’s inner child) it manages to shed light on spirituality and ethics in ways that the other works analyzed in this dissertation do not. Finally, by virtue of its emphasis on the relationship between exile and sexual awakening as well as its relationship to Responsibility, self-knowledge and knowledge of the Other, *El beso* is, in a sense, the text that most closely approximates to the mystical notion (addressed in all my chapters) that exile itself is a place where, though one may lose oneself, perhaps even “die”, it is through this very death that one may finally become radically reborn.
The title of this chapter is both serious and sarcastic. As my engagement with Tomás Eloy Martínez’ novel, Santa Evita hopes to suggest, erasure is both liberating and monstrous, divine and deadly, everything and nothing, but above all, ambiguous. It represents a void or death that may lead to renewed life or, simply, to more death. On a purely theoretical or spiritual level, though the void of erasure may indicate the need or tendency to repress or forget, it may also express an endless, almost sublime potential, as it epitomizes the ability to fully empty oneself out for an-Other. In mystical terms, the void itself may be compared to God, to that which is unknowable, a space without space, a time without time—and thus, though nothing, it is also potentially everything.

This becomes especially relevant in a novel that is both very much about a specific point in time and yet also one which necessarily transcends time and even the borders of Argentina, temporally and spatially, literally and symbolically. Not only is Santa Evita a novel which, in some senses, is as much about post-modernity as it is about Argentina, not only is it about exile (and written from exile), but it is also about the inner exile of Argentina, about the instability of Argentine identity throughout the 20th century and, more crucially still, about the way in which the past, present and future of Argentina are themselves intertwined. Above all, it is about the infinite ways in which the blank slate symbolized by Evita’s lifeless corpse may be resurrected and rewritten in ways that summon an infinite number of subjective voices and truths that not only help re-member a repressed past, but in the process, reconstruct and reshape the present and the future.

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1 For example, in the spirit of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of alterity.
And yet, in this “real” or material world, and particularly within the context of authoritarian Argentina, erasure, most of all, entails forgetting oneself, forgetting the world and thus, forgetting one’s responsibility to it. More specifically, in Santa Evita and in Evita’s actual life, erasing oneself, sacrificing oneself, hollowing oneself out for an Other means doing so not only for the repressed and outcast Other (for example, Evita’s beloved descamisados) but also and especially, for a very specific authoritarian figure, Juan Domingo Perón, who, much like Franco in Spain, attempts to replace God in both rhetoric and dogma. And yet, unlike Franco, it is not Perón primarily who elevates himself to such Godlike status as much as it is his devoted wife, Evita. Ironically, it is through her feminine self-erasure and unquestioning faith and dedication to Perón that she becomes a far more powerful symbol of Peronism than Perón himself.

The power of Evita’s mirror-like erasure is, in fact, the novel’s central paradox—a paradox that becomes even more complicated, ambiguous and pronounced in light of the fact that Peronism is itself built on contradictions that Evita herself most transcendentally reflects. Appropriately, it is not Evita but her embalmed corpse that becomes the focus of the novel. Evita’s chameleon-like ability to reflect the projected desires not only of Perón but of everyone around her becomes even more powerful and effective in death than in life. It is in death that she not only becomes the paramount symbol of the (feminine) power of self-effacement but, accordingly, she becomes far more commanding and relevant as a myth than as a historical reality or person. And yet, in death, she embodies not only the agenda and desires of Perón, but the desires of all Argentina.

As critic Diana Taylor powerfully suggests (Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War), Evita’s corpse becomes, as the
female sacrificial corpse *par excellence*, the symbolic site over which the battle for national identity, dominance and power is waged—particularly through the military. Though many different characters become obsessed with finding and controlling Evita both literally and linguistically, it is the army, above all, that pursues this objective most furiously. Quite significantly, however, all characters who encounter the corpse become obsessed with “owning it” or keeping it for themselves. And yet, though the military has almost complete dominance over her symbolic body, it is through the novel as a whole that Evita’s mythic identity, Argentine National identity and, indeed, all identities are themselves opened up to a plurality of voices, young and old, male and female, progressive and conservative, national and transnational.

To summarize, the novel, written in 1995 in New Jersey by the Argentine exile, Tomás Eloy Martínez, revolves around a body in exile, a body that refuses to be buried, owned, tamed or even named. This body is the embalmed corpse of Eva Perón. Only it is not one body but four—three of which are wax copies that are virtually identical to the original, so much so, in fact, that great chaos ensues as a result of this. Though the copies were meant to hide and protect the true corpse from the army, they end up confusing all parties involved—a confusion which is intensified by the fact that copies are scattered throughout the world. The proliferation of bodies in many ways parallels the plethora of discourses that surround Evita both in life and death.

Shortly after Evita’s premature death in 1952 at the age of thirty-three, her body was embalmed (under Juan Perón’s orders) by Dr. Ara. The idea was to bury her embalmed corpse in a monument to Evita’s beloved *descamisados* (the Argentine rural underclass). This would help eternalize her iconic, almost saintly image as Mother of the
poor, “shirtless” rural working-class and thus, stabilize Perón’s own political power which was predicated, largely, on Eva’s own Marian image. However, Perón’s government was deposed before the monument was erected, and in 1955 (right after the coup), Perón fled the country, leaving Evita’s corpse behind. In an effort to eliminate or reduce the fanaticism associated with Evita and her memory, the new president ordered Colonel Moori Koenig of the Army Intelligence Service to capture the corpse and secretly bury it. Thus, the novel, which follows Evita’s corpse through the past, present and future, through Argentina and abroad, and through the testimonies of the people who knew her (as a child, adult or even as a corpse), employed her, wrote about her, and were influenced, touched or tormented by her raises a series of vital questions.

The novel, which itself weaves together voices from fictional stories, documents and real interviews (ranging from interviews with Juan Domingo Perón to Coronel Moori Koenig to Evita’s embalmer to Evita’s hairdresser to her very own mother--and many more) does not affirm any one of these voices as the ultimate Truth. Rather, it reframes each one of these voices in a way that forces its readers to question and redefine truth, identity, meaning, language, origins and authenticity. Among other functions, the frame narrative forces the reader to actively engage with the text since new information often debunks or contradicts previous information. By moving back and forth in chronological time, the novel also obliges the reader to accompany the text in this movement. Thus, it requires that the reader actively create the text, fill in wholes, and, as I will later explain, re-member the past in ways which are relevant to both the present and future.

The need to re-member Evita’s identity (and by extension, national and individual identity) is then, an ambiguous task, a task which, through its ambiguity conceives of the
condition of exile as both a place of potential liberation, even “rebirth” or, simply, as a place of renewed death. At the same time, while revealing truths about Argentine fear, desire, terror, and machismo the novel also begs us readers to confront the question of erasure and, in fact, all of these subjects in highly complex ways. Is Evita’s erasure subversive, submissive, hopeful, resigned, mystical or heretical? In a curious way, it is all of the above. Though the novel’s erasure and ambiguity offer hope to its reader, who may use this uncertainty, following Martínez’ model, in creative, even ethical ways, the erasure embedded within the life of Eva Perón (known as “Evita” and eventually “Santa Evita”), reflects a far uglier yet equally pluralistic reality.

It reflects the chaos, contradiction and self-effacement of Evita herself, as a woman and even more so as a myth-saint-corpse, it reflects the chaos, contradiction and repression of Peronism, and finally, it reflects the chaos, contradiction and oblivion of Argentina before, during and after Peronism—in fact, throughout the greater part of the 20th century. And yet, the novel neither demonizes nor elevates Evita, despite presenting the voices and opinions of proponents of both extremes. Thus, we readers are left to ask: Is Evita a heroine or an opportunist? Is she a saint or a whore? Is she subtly subversive or Perón’s passive puppet? Does she undermine Argentina’s dichotomies or reinforce them? As the novel complexly suggests, Evita is and does all of these things—and more.

In reality, the manifold ways in which the military attempts to gain control or dominance over Evita’s corpse, as recounted in the novel, correspond, albeit in a somewhat inverted and authoritarian way, to the multi-layered narratives that comprise the novel itself and which attempt to re-member or reconstruct Evita’s life through a plurality of voices and perspectives. The novel’s emphasis on Evita as a myth (and thus
the pluralistic mirror of all Argentina) more than as a concrete historical person becomes even more fitting when we consider that, as the novel insists, the official history of Argentina which Evita and her own life/corpse represent can never be objectively known, just as truth itself cannot be reduced to one objective Truth or Voice. Much like Evita’s body, which refuses to be stabilized, “buried” or reduced to one resting spot, the novel, as a whole, similarly embarks on a journey with no end. By weaving together a plurality of voices, the novel points beyond itself to us readers for a completion that will never be complete but always open—as open, indeed, as Evita’s blank body and empty womb.

In this sense, the novel’s focus on the multiple voices that comprise and remember Evita (and Argentina) are very much in line with the general spirit of this thesis, as it too questions objective truths or official histories in favor of more subjective, even ‘fantastic’ accounts. As we have similarly seen in previous chapters and the works they address, it is often through subjective fantasies that, far from escaping reality, one is forced to face reality in a truly profound way—one which is as intensely personal as it is external or collective. Because the very process of rejecting authoritarian, monolithic “Truth” enables one to radically remember and confront reality, thus illuminating more substantial truths about it, to label this novel postmodern would seriously limit, simplify and undervalue it. More importantly, it would deny this work its central value/ability to re-member rather than erase the violent, tumultuous past of authoritarian Argentina.

This is not to deny the novel’s clear postmodern affinities. Many critics of Santa Evita (most notably, Lloyd Hughes-Davies) logically view the inability to bury Evita’s corpse, the novel’s self-conscious meta-textual layering as well as the novel’s exposure of the way in which truth and even official documents are forged and manipulated and,
more generally, the way in which reality and fantasy are effectively fused and confused as suggestive of the novel’s postmodern critique of truth. Unlike the other works treated in this dissertation, the relationship between fantasy and reality in \textit{Santa Evita} becomes so blurred that at times one cannot tell where fantasy ends and reality begins. In \textit{El beso} and in \textit{El laberinto}, by contrast, the fantasy worlds blend with the real in the sense that fantasy affects the real world and vice versa—and yet, the fantasy worlds are clearly defined (in \textit{El laberinto} they are marked by underground lairs, reddish colors and monsters; in \textit{El beso} they are delimited by the stories which Molina narrates to Valentín).

In \textit{Santa Evita}, however, the stories not only blend into the narrative, but the reader often cannot tell whether they are fictional accounts or real interviews. The fact that Martínez himself combines real interviews with his own fictionalization of Evita’s life as well as fictional stories about her (via his integration of works composed by Argentine writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Rodolfo Walsh, Julio Cortázar, Néstor Perlongher and the Uruguayan, Juan Carlos Onetti) further reinforces the novel’s mythic nature as well as Evita’s power both within the novel and in the real world to which it refers. The novel’s postmodern quality is further expressed through the various wax copies or simulacra of Evita’s corpse created to confuse the army—which they succeed in doing—and which become, as such, perfect embodiments of theorist Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the postmodern simulacra (\textit{Simulacra and Simulation}). The fact that the simulacra (or wax copies) are virtually indistinguishable from the original corpse makes us readers question the idea of authenticity, origins and truth itself while highlighting the essential futility of the Argentine Army’s pursuit of the original corpse and the ultimate (National) dominance which the ability to capture and bury it would symbolize. Finally,
the novel’s postmodern dimension is enhanced by the fact that the very concept of exile, reflected in the corpse’s endless wanderings, is one that exceeds national boundaries and thus, is increasingly associated with the “non-place”\(^2\) of postmodern discourse.

And yet, it is for all the novel’s apparently postmodern attributes that it is also, at the same time, deeply Argentine. Indeed, most of the novel’s ‘postmodern’ tendencies are emblematic of a great part of Latin American and especially Argentine literature from the boom to post-boom, which has been keen on postmodern concepts since they not only enable the works to contest artificially constructed notions of nationalism, purity, origins, progress and history but also authoritarian concepts of truth. Inasmuch as the Latin American boom is noted for its timeless quality, its integration of modernity and barbarity, present and past, and its ability to question origins and history in favor of foundational myths, it holds much in common both with Santa Evita and, more generally, postmodern discourse. At the same time, Santa Evita’s “postmodern” features reflect the instability of Argentina’s own history, particularly throughout the 20th century, and thus not only the corresponding interior exile or lack of identity of a country in crisis but also its correspondingly large number of physical/literal exiles as reflected in the works of acclaimed writers such as Juan José Saer, Manuel Puig, Julio Cortázar, Tomás Eloy Martínez himself and many more. By reinserting/reframing the works of other Argentine writers into its own web of myth Santa Evita pays homage to these writers, particularly in their capacity to tie supposedly postmodern themes to the Argentine condition—and even more so with respect to Evita’s overpowering yet contradictory legacy in Argentina.

Though Santa Evita is comprised of multiple voices, including actual interviews of people who knew Evita and/or became acquainted with her corpse, it is equally

\(^2\) Though, of course, “non-place” is commonly used in a very different way, as we will see in Chapter 5.
founded on the (published) fictions of Argentine writers who wrote about the mythic obsessions surrounding Eva Perón—regardless of their political affiliation or sexuality. More precisely, it reunites voices as diverse as Julio Cortázar’s (from his novel *El examen*), Jorge Luis Borges’ (from his stories “El simulacro” and “La muerte y la brújula”), Rodolfo Walsh’s (from his story “Esa mujer”), Néstor Perlongher’s (“Evita vive”), among others. Whereas Cortázar, who was a communist sympathizer, was himself exiled by the Perón government, Walsh, on the other extreme, was pro-Peronist to the point of forming part of the radical guerilla group known as the Montoneros. Borges, who was “pro-democratic” and perhaps even anarchist, was both fiercely anti-Peronist and equally anti-communist. Perlongher, on the other hand, was a Trotskyite who later became a libertarian but is more famous for heading the Frente de Liberación Homosexual de la Argentina. In 1976 he was detained and processed by the military, and in 1982 he fled to Brasil, where he remained until his death of AIDS in 1992.

In fact, the extremity of voices and perspectives that Martínez reunites in his work stretches as far as to include not only Evita’s own voice from *La razón de mi vida* (to which I dedicate a sizeable portion of this chapter) but also Martínez’ earlier writings, as he refers to previous works he had written, mainly *La novela de Perón*—which, in turn, was based on Martínez’ 1969 interview of Juan Domingo Perón during the latter’s exile in Spain. As Martínez’ novel potently suggests, all these voices make legitimate and highly interesting claims about Evita, and, more importantly, the myth and obsessions that surround her life and death. In so doing, each sheds light on different dimensions of the collective crises of Argentina, some of which date back well before the 20th Century.
Indeed, many of these fictions (and especially *Santa Evita* as a totality), address problems and dichotomies found in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s pivotal book, *Facundo* (1845).

Yet, for now, I will limit myself to the works that are more directly recycled in *Santa Evita*. Perlongher’s work “Evita vive”, for example, presents a resurrected Evita in what appears to be a highly sacrilegious light, as she sucks the wart of an officer who tries to take her captive. Thus, Evita, who was known for her promiscuity (before meeting Perón) appears to have reverted to her old “degraded” ways. This portrayal of Evita highlights not only her promiscuity but also the way in which it is linked to her opportunism and corresponding desire to please everyone, especially men, and even more so military men (like Perón)—which, rather ironically, helped contribute to her eventual “sanctity”. At the same time, the fact that she sucks the wart of her very own enemy (who also happens to be an officer) presages the numerous ways in which Evita is degraded and betrayed by the Army, by men in general, and by her own husband, Perón (who was also, significantly, an officer), as he inadvertently allowed her naked body to be exposed and defiled by countless officers and men despite Evita’s utmost wish that no one so much as see her nude corpse. In all of these ways, Perlongher pokes fun at Evita’s sanctity, and by extension, the people who helped convert her into a saint.

Nevertheless, though this portrayal appears to degrade Evita, Perlongher’s “Evita vive”, much like *Santa Evita*, is marked above all, by its extreme ambiguity—indeed, the fact that Evita is willing to suck her enemy’s wart, while degrading her, also renders her a sublimely loving, forgiving being. In fact, it likens her to the Christian Messiah himself who urges his followers “to love your enemies” as he adds or rhetorically asks: “What credit is it to you to love those who love you?” Ironically, by debasing herself, Evita
perfectly fulfills this injunction—so much so that she effectively unites the sacred and sacrilegious. As other critics have noted, for example, as Sabine Schlickers explains, “[…] Emil Durkheim subraya de manera parecida que lo sagrado tiene el doble carácter de lo santo y de lo sacrílego (González 114 +117)” (“Autorreflexión erótico-estética” 120), Evita’s “deviant” behavior may actually elevate her as it forces the viewer to rethink the relationship between the sacred and the sacrilegious. This dual, apparently contradictory aspect of Evita is, as will become increasingly evident in subsequent sections of this chapter, central to her portrayal in both the novel and in real life.

In reality, the fact that Evita manages to attain fame and even sanctity despite her poor, illegitimate origins and promiscuous past not only enables her to subversively deconstruct the saint/whore dichotomy but also helps transform her into a symbol of hope for all marginalized groups. It is, of course, important to consider Evita’s function as the primary defender/mother of marginalized, poor and otherwise oppressed groups, including illegitimate, illiterate and, more generally, “barbaric” countrymen, women and children—or what Martínez humorously calls “the last fart of barbarism”. Evita provided hope to these “voiceless”, undervalued people, not only through her promise of material gifts but perhaps most of all through her ability to simultaneously represent spirituality and female sexuality in a rapidly modernizing yet still traditionally sexist country.

In truth, both Evita’s sacred and sacrilegious character become menacing to the Army, not only because these attributes are subversively, even monstrously fused in her image and corpse but also because Evita proves threatening to them as much for her sacrilegious qualities as for her ‘sacred’ ones. After all, Evita’s power and influence in Argentina are a consequence not only of her ability to empty herself out for others,
especially men, while allowing them to believe that they owned or even “made her”, but also as a result of her more subversive, yet hazy role as an icon of sexual liberation for homosexuals as much as for ‘impure’ or sexually active women. Given that Evita’s unfettered promiscuity becomes just as threatening to the Army as her sanctity, the officers consider it their sole responsibility and right to tame, name, bury and claim her.

On the other hand, Cortázar’s *El examen* is equally effective in capturing Evita’s “sacred” dimension, albeit in a slightly different fashion—one that touches on Evita’s mystical, irrational, incomprehensible and ultimately dangerous command over her acolytes. As Michael Greenberg succinctly summarizes it (“A Descamisada Diva”),

> In this novel ‘a brutish multitude appears in the Plaza de Mayo to worship a bone. People await heaven knows what miracle [and] have their hearts broken by a woman dressed in white.’ This kind of wilder, metaphoric approach comes closer to touching the root of the ‘sacred terror’ that Evita inspired. (9)

_Santa Evita_’s reference to *El examen* is highly appropriate since the positive, even subversive qualities of Evita are, though thoroughly acknowledged in _Santa Evita_, not any more emphasized or privileged than the irrationality that characterizes her sanctity.

Of course, given Jorge Luis Borges’ monumental sway over Argentine literature of the 20th Century, it is hardly surprising that not one but two of his works form part of _Santa Evita_. On the one hand, “El simulacro” tells the story of a man who holds a fake funeral for a simulacra of Evita (a blond doll) in a cardboard box for her “disciples”—an idea clearly integrated by Martínez since the novel itself revolves as much around the wax copies or image of Evita as it does around the original corpse³.

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³ In the end, it is not the body or the ‘original’ that matters, but its image, as reflected by the fact that each of the wax copies is not only identical to the original but corresponds to the texts’ own plurality as well as the different ways in which Evita has been constructed by her nation. In short, the plurality of the corpse signals the importance of myth over History and plurality over a falsely constructed Unity/the Nationalist impulse to unite by erasing difference. Though the existence of these wax copies leads to chaos and even
Borges’ other work, “La muerte y la brújula” finds its place in this novel as it similarly emphasizes the ways in which writing proliferates as well as the importance of this proliferation and its potential relationship to death. It recounts the investigation of a detective who, in the process of resolving a crime ends up encountering his own death. As Jason Cortés efficiently summarizes, “‘La muerte y la brújula’ relata la historia del detective Lönnrot quien, intentando resolver una serie de crímenes mediante un ejercicio cartográfico, encuentra su muerte a manos del asesino” (“Obsesiones necrófilas” 339).

This investigation clearly reflects the perilous journey of all the various military members in Santa Evita who, in their attempt to understand and control Evita and her mysterious power, end up encountering nothing more than themselves—and often their own madness and death. Their very need to repress and control Evita (and the National power she represents) leads to death since, in the process of pursuing this goal, they repress not only the external Other/Evita but the Other within themselves that her corpse represents.

Indeed, this is true not only because Evita, in death, functions as a blank mirror of whoever comes in contact with her but also because, even in life, Evita’s own contradictions reflect, to a great extent, the contradictory beliefs, impulses and drives of her country. It is due to both the men’s fear of and affinity with her that all the men who become acquainted with her corpse, whether married or not, become more sexually attracted to and obsessed with it than with any other woman—an obsession which itself undermines their mission to tame it. On the one hand, this fixation with Evita is partially a result of the fact that the corpse represents pure feminine alterity/materiality. By treating Evita as a mere sexual object, the men aspire to embody the “positive” side of death (mainly of the military), the copies themselves are only dangerous to those who view them as such—that is, to those who wish not to embrace plurality but rather univocal, authoritarian discourse and power as represented by the false belief that an authentic or original body/Nation exists and holds special power.
authoritarian dichotomies: male (vs. female), spiritual (vs. material), self (vs. other), active (vs. passive). What is more, they can impregnate her (as an empty vessel) with whatever meaning they desire. Ironically, however, it is precisely because they have this urge to dominate and dichotomize that, ultimately, all they are capable of projecting are their very own fears, solitude and repressions. In short, Evita’s unruly corpse, which the Army eventually begins to suspect has “cursed” them, ends up representing the exact opposite (spirituality, activity, etc.) of what it was intended or presumed to signify.

In truth, all of the men who confront, use or literally ejaculate onto Evita go mad—above all, Colonel Koenig, their leader. Every one of these men, and especially the Colonel, become obsessed with the corpse since, in addition to its symbolic, historical, and national significance it represents something that can be largely, albeit imperfectly controlled—and thus, it becomes a source of both scorn and obsession. Though Koenig is, like the rest of his officers, fixated on the body or part of Evita that gives itself up as a passive, sexual receptacle, he despises the part of her that reminds him of her promiscuous past. And yet, in the very process of owning, naming, even raping the corpse (which ironically is intended to “tame” her or demonstrate the military’s control of her), the officers are reminded of Evita’s sexually liberated, active even “wild” side—that is, the very part of her that they cannot tame. Furthermore, this unwieldy “wild side” also reminds the officers of their own deep, dark, contradictory desire for that kind of woman, the one they simultaneously despise—that is, the loose, free, sexual woman, the same kind of woman that Koenig cannot even name or who remains unworthy of naming—at least not in a human or personal way (since the Army refers to her/the corpse by way of demeaning nicknames such as yegua (mare), butterfly, etc.)
Ultimately, then, the Colonel and his officers end up resenting Evita not only for what she represents, concretely, but also for those traits in her that remind them of their own lack of control and contradictory desires. In reality, the colonel’s anxiety for control that is mirrored in Evita’s passive yet unconquerable corpse reflects not just his desire to control, dominate and tame women but, above all else, his desire to control, dominate and tame himself. On the other hand, insomuch as their own fears and repressions are molded, in great part, by society itself (and in relationship to women), much of their anxiety is a direct reflection of the contradictory roles women are expected to play.

Though women are, in many ways, reduced to mere sexual objects, they are still expected to be pure, matronly, almost asexual figures. No real woman, however, can reconcile these contradictory roles within herself—except (im)possibly Evita. This (im)possibility leads not only to Evita’s mistreatment by men\(^4\) but, to some extent, by all society—as suggested by the fact that the embalmer, Dr. Ara and even the little girl, Yolanda, become equally attached to the corpse. The fact that Eva becomes famous, even saintly, because of her very ability to express and represent contradictory roles (eg. as saint and whore) further underscores the contradictory expectations of society itself. For all these reasons, the Army develops a “love/hate” relationship with Evita—one that is only intensified by her ultimately unruly body—a body which, as I will soon more fully explain, ironically becomes a site of spirituality, irrationality, plurality and resistance.

Yet, for Martínez, unlike the military officers, the encounter with his own face (which is simultaneously a confrontation with Argentina as a whole) as reflected through Evita, leads not to death but to rebirth—or rather, if it leads to death, it is only a symbolic death. Though other critics similarly note the parallels between Borges’ works and Santa

\(^4\) This mistreatment is due to their need and desire to “tame her” because of her “promiscuous” past.
Evita, these texts offer far more than just death, nonsense and the corresponding critique of post-modernity that such death and nonsense entail, particularly in light of how they are used, reframed and rewritten in Santa Evita. According to Jason Cortés,

Aunque ‘El Simulacro’ de Borges prefigura en Santa Evita la dinámica entre la copia y el original, mediante la cual la copia ejerce violencia sobre el modelo vaciándolo de significado, “La muerte y la brújula” amplía la idea de la proliferación de la escritura, sobre todo en cuanto a la peligrosidad de ésta, ya que conduce a la muerte.” (‘Obsesiones necrófilas’ 339)

In short, though Cortés perceptively notes these parallels between the texts and, specifically, the relationship between proliferation and death, it is important to remember that in Santa Evita, proliferation leads ultimately not to death but to a pluralistic rebirth that is very much opposed to death. The wax copies, far from emptying the “original” of meaning, erase monolithic meaning (and thus, kill the authoritarian impulse symbolized by the Army) in order to give birth to a more open variety of meaning and voices. This argument becomes even stronger in light of other critics’ observations about the relationship between writing and desire--particularly masculine desire—as they are coupled in this text. On a superficial level, this bond between sexual desire and writing would seem to reinforce, as Sabine Schlickers suggests, the idea that sex, writing and death are inseparably tied. And yet, as Schlickers herself notes (“Autorreflexión erótico-estética: Santa Evita”), Martínez, though he too obsessively pursues the enigma surrounding Evita’s corpse, is the only person who is not erotically involved with it:

Sin embargo, hay que adelantar que la relación entre el narrador y el objeto de su narración no es de por sí erotica, como en el caso de Ara, de Arancibia y del Coronel, sino que adquiere un matiz erótico a través de la escritura.” (112)

Rather fittingly, Martínez is the only person who does not go insane as a result of his pursuit of and fixation on knowing “Santa Evita. As Schlickers points out,
Para el narrador de Santa Evita […], Evita se convirtió—al igual que para Ara y para el Coronel—en un demonio personal: ‘Si no la escribo, voy a asfixiarme. Si no trato de conocerla escribiéndola, jamás voy a conocerme yo’ (390); ‘la yo que era Ella’ (65), ‘ella no cesa de existir, de existirme’ (204). (“Autoreflexión” 112)

In effect, these statements not only reinforce the extent to which “Santa Evita” and her corpse become emblematic of both personal and collective (Argentine) identity, demons and desires, but, just as crucially, they suggest that Martínez’ manner and motives for chasing after the “truths” surrounding Evita’s corpse and legacy differ radically from the egocentric, power-driven motives and agendas of most Argentines, and especially the Army. Though the pursuit of and encounter with “Santa Evita” requires confronting one’s own demons (for Martínez as much as for the Army, for Dr. Ara and for everyone else), Martínez, unlike the others, is able to use this encounter to fully confront and successfully overcome his own demons as he becomes more deeply acquainted with himself and his Other, both personally and collectively.

In truth, though Schlickers perceptively suggests that there may be an inherent relationship between writing and eroticism, the eroticism of Martínez’s discourse is of a completely different and less deadly nature, particularly in relationship to Evita’s corpse. If there is eroticism in his writing, it is linked not to the corpse itself (towards which he shows absolutely no sexual attraction) but to the unlimited plurality that may arise from a symbolic and respectful encounter with it. Yet, even in this sense, this novel promotes both life and death, for, though it opens up language to an infinity of possibilities and perspectives, as I will further explain in the next section of this chapter, all writing, even “poetic”, pluralistic or “writerly” texts are limited by the encaging nature of language itself. Still, Martínez’s novel is, at heart, and even in its “eroticism”, an attempt to resist the violent nature of authoritarian language, attitudes, relationships and acts.
By contrast, the eroticism implicit in the other men’s relationship to Evita is violent and deadly, first, because these men are attracted to the corpse itself, a necrophilic attraction which becomes a symbol of their own perverse, dichotomous and egotistical views regarding self-other and male-female relationships—and, secondly, because this attitude is further mirrored by their (mis-)treatment of the corpse which they morbidly desecrate, as they rape it, urinate on it, masturbate on it and much more. Accordingly, the stories they create about Evita are monolithic, violent and egotistical in nature since they require the erasure of the Other (or the other voices that Evita’s empty corpse potentially embodies or mothers) in an attempt to elevate their own solitary Self and stories, as they inject her empty corpse (not only symbolically but literally via their semen) with nothing but their own fears, paranoia, prejudices and delusions of grandeur.

Though, obviously, there is not enough space or time for me to comment on all the fictions used by Martínez in *Santa Evita*, much less exhaustively, before moving on, I would like to comment briefly on Rodolfo Walsh’s “Esa mujer”—a story which is further suggestive of this bond between writing, sensuality and death. This story relates the narrator’s (Walsh’s) encounter with Colonel Moori Koenig (the same Colonel from *Santa Evita*) in his attempt to locate her body—a goal which similarly drives Martínez’ novel. The fact that Walsh’s story ends with the Colonel’s emphatic words, “Esa mujer es mía” is obviously recycled in Martínez’ novel, where he more elaborately shows how not only the Colonel but all men who knew Evita claimed that she was “theirs”—and, what is more, that they “made her”. In fact, even Evita’s hairdresser insisted that he not only “made her” but that the only reason he decided to help her was because he saw some
photos of her in provocative yet awkward, even ridiculous poses and that this inspired pity in him—a pity magnified by Evita’s horrible hairdo. As Martínez tells it,

Así salvé del ridículo a su personaje—me dijo--. Era más lógico un peinado de 1860 para un vestuario de 1876 que el otro corte moderno, de puntas enrolladas. Al fin de cuentas, Evita fue un producto mío. Yo la hice. // Diez años después, Perón diría lo mismo.”(Santa Evita 83).

These men’s belief that they “made her” not only reflects their egotism as well as the way in which Evita functioned as a mirror of their projected desires but it parallels the military’s treatment of and obsession with the corpse. This parallel becomes still more interesting when we consider that Martínez derives much of his own material (about how people claimed to “make Evita”) from the actual, live interviews he conducted with them.

This link between Martínez’ interviews and the fictions of other authors such as Borges, Cortázar, Walsh, Perlongher, etc. not only establishes a solid, authentic bond between fiction and reality and thus, lends worldly/historical legitimacy to the fictional claims and worlds of these authors, but it more generally highlights the ways in which fiction itself often tells truths that more objective accounts of history miss. Just as vitally, it shows how the creation of Evita, the novel (Santa Evita) and the country to which both refer depend, ultimately, on fiction and myth. In effect, not only does fiction/myth reflect reality, but it also creates reality. As Jason Cortés sharply notes,

La segunda mención de “La muerte y la brújula” surge a partir de una conversación entre Martínez y Aldo Cifuentes. Cifuentes relata el plan original de Moori Koenig para deshacerse del cuerpo de Evita y de sus copias. […] Martínez le menciona a Cifuentes la similaridad entre el cuento de Borges y el plan del coronel; sin embargo, el segundo hace notar la diferencia entre ambos arguyendo: “El ingenioso juego del detective Lönnrot en “La muerte y la brújula” es un juego mortal, pero sólo sucede dentro de un texto. Lo que el Coronel tramó debía suceder en cambio fuera de la literatura, en una ciudad real por la que se desplazaría un cuerpo abrumadoramente real”(151)// La renuencia de Cifuentes en reconocer el paralelismo existente entre el plan de Moori Koenig y el texto borgeano se cuestiona al descubrirse que uno de los puntos del tridente cae
precisamente en una iglesia a “orillas de una estación ferroviaria llamada Borges”(152). La coincidencia marca el valor del texto borgeano como subtexto no sólo de la novela sino del plan establecido por el coronel. (339)

This emphasis on the deep bond between fiction/myth and reality is, among other reasons, highly appropriate given the specific subject of the novel (that is, “Santa Evita”) and thus, the novel’s need to underscore her mythic, subjective importance over her historical self—which in the end mattered as little to Evita as it did to her country. Like everyone else, what concerned her most was how she was viewed by others, perhaps even more than who she actually was. Thus, one of the more novel aspects of this chapter is that rather than reducing the novel to postmodern chaos, as appears to be the critical trend with this novel, I argue that it is precisely because of its ostensive “postmodern” attributes that Santa Evita manages not to discard truth but, quite the contrary, to remember and illuminate essential truths about the condition of exile, authoritarianism, and terror in ways which, while gesturing towards increasingly global concerns, shed light on the very specific problems endemic to Argentine history, terror and exile. As Martínez himself asserts, “En las novelas, lo que es verdad es también mentira”(389).

This is especially vital to keep in mind in view of the fundamental issues at stake in this novel and the culture it portrays. The novel, as a work that emerges from and in response to a world of exile, terror and erasure cannot and does not simply forego truth in favor of chaos and oblivion. On the one hand, the novel, as it debunks the authoritarian impulse to construct ultimate truths and official histories, suggests that the urge for establishing such truths is built not on the quest for truth but rather on the false claim to truth—and thus, the drive to erase, lie and, above all, convert these lies into an empty facade or simulacrum of Truth. Yet, in the process of deconstructing this sham of Truth,
an even greater truth emerges through the plurality of subjective perspectives, opinions, fears, desires and experiences that unfold through the multi-layered retelling of Evita’s life, death and conversion into sainthood. In the process of making sense of the obsession and enigmas surrounding Evita’s life, death, veneration and demonization, the novel, while refusing to feign objective knowledge of Evita herself, reveals truths about the exilic condition fundamental to this thesis while also exposing the hidden, dark side of Argentine terror, its roots and the relationship of such terror to sexism, fear, male dominance and, specifically, men’s paradoxical attraction to and fear of the female.

This novel stands out from others in that it highlights the extremes of life, death, erasure, rebirth and the ultimate ambiguity that can evolve out of the experience of terror and exile that Evita and, especially, her blank, contradictory body represent. Much like the text itself, Evita’s body aimlessly wanders through Argentina and the world on a trajectory or path paved out of fear, terror and egotism. And yet, though Martínez’s novel and the body themselves share many similarities, the text incorporates a multitude of voices and genders, while only the military has access to the corpse. In this sense, whereas the text itself constitutes a sort of maternal receptacle (of positive rebirth) in that it attempts to reinscribe the voices of all Argentines, young and old, rich and poor, male and female into the history of Argentina, Evita’s corpse holds the unique and inverse function of acting as a sort of negative receptacle of rebirth.

Though the men who come into contact with her corpse are already “sick” when they encounter Evita’s corpse, which functions, quasi-mystically, as a mirror of their own deranged desires, fears, paranoia and obsessions, the encounter with this corpse offers them an opportunity to truly confront themselves and change--for better or for worse.
These men, faced with their own foul reflections, rather than attempt to overcome their demons, go completely insane as they rape, urinate on and otherwise desecrate the corpse in an effort to tame the other which, it turns out, is their own repressed Self. This self-destructive reaction, coupled with the corpse’s almost supernatural ability to “curse” the men (as spooky, unexpected mishaps and even deaths persistently follow the military and the corpse throughout their wanderings), convert Evita’s dead and vacant womb\(^5\) into a maternal receptacle of death—at least for the military.

And yet, the reason these men die, whether symbolically or literally, is not simply because the corpse is, as they begin to legitimately fear, “cursed”. Or rather, even if the corpse wields mystical powers (or forces that transcend rational comprehension), the corpse, precisely as a (mystical) mirror of its surroundings, can be just as much a blessing as a curse. That is to say, if the corpse is, indeed, “cursed” it is not due to external factors outside the military’s control but rather because, much like the “monster of Frankenstein” from Chapter 1, it reflects the military’s own self-imposed curse or violence. In effect, it is monstrous only because it is seen as such. In this way, the military curses itself via the corpse through its very incapacity to incorporate the (monstrous) Other within the Self that Evita’s body represents. By trying to tame the corpse and thus, the symbolic Other (which, in a Lacanian sense, is also the Other within oneself), the Army destroys itself.\(^6\)

In part, this is due to the Army’s extremely hierarchical arrangement as well as the top secrecy of the mission itself (to locate Evita’s corpse). In accordance with the egotism and distrust characteristic of authoritarianism, as the quest to locate Evita’s corpse unfolds, the top commanders begin to mistrust even their closest and finest

\(^5\) (which is literally empty due to a botched abortion which nearly killed her years before meeting Perón)
\(^6\) Of course, in the longer run, their failures in the Falklands / Malvinas also played a part.
officers—a distrust highlighted by the implementation of euphemisms and codes. These euphemisms not only disguise, erase and bury the Army’s true and corrupt motives, but, just like the men’s solipsistic relationship to the corpse, this type of intentionally deceptive language leads to chaos, isolation, intense paranoia, and madness.

As the novel tells it, much of what prevents the mission from being successful is the fact that the Army is suspicious of its own members—hence, the manipulation and secrecy deployed by the military against others for “self-protection” is also employed within the body of the Army itself leading to an atmosphere of distrust, unbridled egotism and, most importantly perhaps, a complete breakdown in communication. The Army, as the supreme institutional expression of authoritarianism, is obsessed with forcing unity, ironically, through secrecy, erasure and deceit as well as the corresponding need to rape, desecrate, name and thus, cage, own or claim the corpse as their own. The fact that the officers go so far as to urinate on the corpse not only underlines their hatred, contempt and fear of it but the extent to which, in their quest to dominate and own Evita they have become like animals, as they literally mark their territory as a dog would. Yet, it is in the Army’s very attempt to control the corpse that it becomes highly fragmented, disorganized, and dysfunctional. The army’s need to predicate identity, even unity on the exclusion of others only leads to more chaos: for plurality cannot be erased, only ignored.

Yet, despite the obsession with finding the “original”, what ends up being most important in this novel is not the final result, but the pursuit itself. If we do not learn anything concrete about the history or myth of “Santa Evita” (as symbol of authoritarian Argentina), we certainly learn very much about the drives, fears and ideologies that not only characterize society but are central to the creation of (authoritarian) national
narratives. These official stories are, insomuch as they attempt to be monolithic, representative of the urge to repress femininity, plurality, and otherness (in general) and thus both time and memory as well. For all these reasons, the military’s relationship to the corpse offers a negative model of what not to do, as it embodies the very types of separations between self/other, masculine/feminine, responsibility/desire, spirituality/materiality, past/future, that plague authoritarian Argentina.\footnote{Nevertheless, the military’s perverse relationship to the corpse is itself ambiguous in that the military’s ultimate inability to successfully tame it, bury it and even sanely complete the mission offers a hopeful reminder that the authoritarian impulse is ultimately self-destructive. Indeed, if Evita (like Perón) is, in life, largely undone by her own contradictions or even selfish manipulations of men, the military too is disempowered by its contradictory desires and attitudes towards women, which, after all, Evita represented to the highest degree. In this sense, the novel uses ambiguity in a more positive sense by reminding the reader that those who try to reinforce the self/other dichotomy (among others) will end up undone by their very own egotism. This fact is further significant insomuch as it reflects the way in which authoritarian leaders like Perón and Videla (of the “Proceso”) were largely “undone” by the very chaos, contradictions and corruption they helped install and on which their power was based. It is important to keep in mind that although Evita dies long before many of these leaders take command of Argentina, she functions, precisely as a timeless symbol of historical reconstruction or collective retelling, in a way which not only pulls the reader back into the past but simultaneously points beyond Evita’s own life and era.}

Thus, the portrayal of the army is both disquieting and hopeful. On the one hand, the fact that the only Argentines that have access to Evita’s symbolic corpse are, almost exclusively, military men not only suggests that only men and specifically those from the military have power over official history and truth, but is reflective of the fact that Argentine government was largely centered on highly unstable and short-lived military coups and provisional governments since 1930 to 1983. And yet, though the military’s inability to complete the mission is itself hopeful (in an indirect way), it is only the novel (as a whole) that truly offers a positive model of hope and, more specifically, for remembering the erasure, terror and repression evoked by the Army.

As Martínez’ novel subversively insists by inserting voices of the poor, of women and even Evita’s mother, Evita’s voice belongs not only to these men (mainly military men) and to their authoritarian, monolithic discourses of fear and erasure but to the world
itself. Thus, it is our duty as readers, to turn the chaos embedded in the novel into pluralistic meanings. By following Martínez’ model of retelling, whether Argentine or not, we viewers can help remember Argentina’s violent past while also learning more general and radical approaches for re-membering fiction and life. Yet, before moving on to a closer analysis of the novel and our relationship as readers to it, it is important to first acquaint ourselves more adequately with the history of Argentina as well as the history of Eva Perón, specifically as they relate to the novel.

‘Caging Rage’ and ‘Raging Cages’: The Emergence of Paradox

In order to appreciate the complexity of Santa Evita, one must first understand not only the rhetoric and contradictions of Peronism but the instability, terror and paradox that plagues Argentina even long before Perón’s ascent to power, both cultural and linguistic. This includes examining the diverse roots of Argentine authoritarianism, which can be traced to everything from cultural eclecticism, anti-Americanism/Nationalism, the corrupt oligarchic power associated with democracy (and, specifically, the Argentine Radicalism that immediately precedes it) and even the ‘cultural encaging’ of language itself.

As briefly mentioned, Argentina, from as early as 1930, is governed by a series of coups and military governments which last until 1983. And yet, as David Rock observes in his article, “Argentina: A Hundred and Fifty Years of Democratic Praxis”, even the democracy of the Argentine radicals that immediately preceded the military coup of 1930 was plagued with corruption and, in many senses, so-called democracy “[…] became a means to protect social status.” (222). As Rock further notes, summarizing Luis Alberto Romero’s extensive analysis in Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina, “The
Radicals promised new resources to an insatiable middle class, but allowed democracy to flounder in corruption.” (224). This corrupt oligarchy/elite would later be envisaged by Perón and his wife, Evita, as the ultimate enemy and oppressor of the poor descamisados. Though largely true, it certainly fails to justify the authoritarian tactics used by the Peróns to combat it. At the same time, we must consider that the ‘democracy’ of the radicals itself functioned, in many ways, much like authoritarianism--or as Rock puts it, “

A closer look at democracy will cast new light on authoritarianism. As we examine in microcosm the ties between patrons and clients, we shall continue to find many points of convergence between democratic and authoritarian systems.” (234).

Though authoritarianism officially blossoms in Argentine in 1930, to adequately comprehend it, one must dig deep into its roots in the early 20th century--and even earlier. In addition to other ways in which authoritarianism is prefigured even before the 20th Century, the Argentine conflict between civilization and barbarism and its bond to nationalism is not only addressed by the Peróns and appropriately resurfaces in Santa Evita but can be traced back to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s famous book, Facundo (1845). We might argue that the series of dichotomies endemic to Argentine authoritarianism is itself spawned by the more fundamental dichotomy between “civilization” and “barbarism” that emerged in 19th century debates regarding nationalism and, more generally, the making of a “New Argentina”.

Sarmiento himself not only submits to manifold contradictions in his masterpiece, Facundo, but, in so doing, establishes rigid dichotomies between the barbaric and the civilized, the country and the city, emotion and reason, the new world and the old world, among others. As one would expect, barbarism is associated with unbridled emotion, the country or pampas and, generally, with the indigenous ‘New world’ which is, particularly
from Sarmiento’s Eurocentric teleological perspective, infinitely more primitive than the civilized world transported and transposed on it by European immigrants.

Yet, despite Sarmiento’s need to maintain these firm dichotomies, and despite privileging modernity, civilization and reason over “barbarism” and “passion”, rather than advocating the absolute dominance of ‘civilization’, he proposes a fusion of the two. While launching an incisive attack on the barbarism of the pampas, Sarmiento also critiques the lack of passion and openness emblematic of the city. Thus, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ world are each exalted in the sense that, when combined, they offer the solution to the excesses of the other. In this way, a new and better Argentina may be conceived.

On the other hand, though Sarmiento’s desire to find a balance between “barbarism” and “civilization” is to be admired and, even more so, his ability to view modernization as both potentially productive and destructive, he not only privileges the modern, civilized world over the barbaric/indigenous but, in an effort to prove his point, he makes boldly Eurocentric assumptions while relying heavily on stereotypes and generalizations. Moreover, he presents his opinions as if they were irrefutable, objective, historical facts—or the ultimate Truth. Indeed, he explicitly acknowledges the precise and irrefutable accuracy of his work in an author’s note that immediately precedes the book. In this note he affirms, “[…] debo declarar que en los acontecimientos notables a que me refiero, y que sirven de base a las explicaciones que doy, hay una exactitud intachable de que responderán los documentos públicos que sobre ellos existen.” (17).

The false pretense of his work is reinforced by the fact that his descriptions appear to be first hand, eyewitness accounts or testimonies, when, in reality, he had never even been to the Pampas. He then uses these ‘truths’ as the basis on which to build all other
arguments—which, of course, can only end in contradiction and ambiguity. In this sense, he becomes the predecessor to a sort of authoritarian mode of thinking and establishing truth that is extremely damaging to Argentine culture, government and society.

More generally, Sarmiento expresses and prefigures the contradictions of his country, particularly under the auspice of authoritarianism, in both positive and negative ways. The contradictory nature of *Facundo* is not only reflected by Sarmiento’s more blatant verbal contradictions but, albeit in a more constructive, even anti-authoritarian way, it emerges in the fact that Sarmiento undermines his novel’s goal of establishing authoritative monolithic truth by writing a book that is not only emotional, artistic and moving in form but, in many ways, sets a positive model for how to remember, write and fuse both history and fiction. In this sense, *Facundo*’s form unwittingly betrays its content—as Evita will also do. As critic Karen Bishop further notes in her article, “Myth Turned Monument: Documenting the Historical Imaginary in Buenos Aires and Beyond”, Literary response to false history and inauthenticated newspress has an equally long legacy in Argentine letters, dating back to the 1845 publication of Domingo Sarmiento’s fictional biography *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism*. Sarmiento’s response to and invention of history laid the foundations for a literary genre that blurs the boundaries between fiction and history, political and aesthetic innovation, and as Martinez points out, imagination and truth.”(153).

Bishop adds,

False footnotes, forgeries, plagiarism and fabricated historical evidence thus became legitimate literary devices in Argentine fiction, and in their own right, powerful weapons with which to combat the creative national histories being espoused by those in power. (153).

And yet, we must be careful not to confuse, as Sarmiento himself very possibly does, the use of forgeries and plagiarism as a means of repressing and manipulating truth (as conveyed through Argentina’s authoritarian impulse) with the use of fiction as a way
of remembering precisely that which has been forgotten or suppressed. Ironically, those who pretend to make their fictions reflective of absolute Truth (for example, the military) are the very same people who use their fictions to lie, manipulate and distort reality. By contrast, those fictions that, like Martínez’s novel, play with the plurality of truth are those that are most apt at remembering reality in more perceptive and ‘truthful’ ways.

This is a subject that has been largely overlooked by critics of Santa Evita—leading them, in most cases, to erroneously pigeonhole the novel as a postmodern critique of truth that ends in chaos and death rather than as a novel that re-members identities in hopeful, pluralistic and constructive ways. For example, though Lloyd Hughes Davies (in “Portraits of a Lady: Postmodern Readings of Tomás Eloy Martínez’s Santa Evita”) correctly mentions the manipulation of fact (both by the army and Evita) as examples of the novel’s postmodern quality, in so doing, he conflates two types of fictionalization—one subversive (or helpful for remembering) and the other non-subversive (inasmuch as it leads to the repression, manipulation and erasure of memory and truth). He states,

The inaccessibility of the past is compounded by deliberate human manipulation and falsification of documentary evidence. The Peróns’ marriage certificate, seemingly a correct official record, turns out to be more fictional than factual owing to the falsifications perpetrated by both Perón and Evita: ‘En el momento más solemne e histórico de sus vidas, los contrayentes […] decidieron burlarse olímpicamente de la historia’ (p.143). Martínez’s tone is admiring rather than reproachful because he sees the pair as kindred spirits, prepared to mould reality to their own liking, novelists of a kind, like himself: ‘Actuaron como actúan los novelistas’ (p.144).

Though Hughes Davies, like Martínez himself, appears to admire the Peróns’ ability to play with truth, he does not duly emphasize or differentiate between the different ways in which the deconstruction of truth can be negative or positive. In any

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8 Though manipulation and falsification may actually be subversive insomuch as they mock and undermine the army’s pretensions of truth, we must be careful not to conflate the army’s manipulation of official
event, Hughes Davies’ quote is useful since it highlights the fact that one of the ways in which Evita becomes most subversive is through her capacity, in an almost Foucauldian way, to use the tactics of oppression against the very oppressor who uses them—a quality which the novel itself incorporates, for instance, as it injects even some of the pejorative names given to Evita by the Army with positive meanings (the most important of these is, as we will see, her designation as ‘Butterfly’). In truth, Evita’s subversion is expressed not only in her playful ability to forge her wedding documents but also her use of nicknames to replace official names, among other potentially subversive tactics I will address in a moment. This tactic, which is, in turn, used by the army against Evita (as it creates its own series of degrading names to refer to her) both foreshadows and contests the euphemisms deployed by the army during the Argentine “Proceso” or “Dirty War”.

In truth, this need to distinguish between positive and negative forms of fictionalization is also reflected in the use of naming both in the novel and the Argentine culture it reflects, an obsession which can similarly be traced back to Sarmiento’s work—and even earlier, to the time when the conquistadors first set foot on Argentine soil. At this moment, these explorers were “graced” with the privilege of renaming the objects that, from their perspective, were wholly new. Yet, from this moment on, the ability to name became associated with the ability to wield power over others. After all, naming itself is an act of caging—one which, as the analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein amply noted ( Philosopical Investigations ), reduces the plurality of language and concepts to the boxes of words. In short, since no word or concept can be explained documents (which leads to untruth) with fictional truths (such as those generated by the novel itself) or playful manipulations (as reflected, for example, in the Peróns’ false wedding certificate). More critically still, we must not confuse the quest for truth with authoritarianism—which, in reality, searches not for truth but for lies, as it erases history, replacing it not with Truth but with a false claim to Truth.
except in reference to other words, all verbal communication takes place by what Wittgenstein refers to as “family resemblances”. Though the cage-like quality of words may be diminished by chains of words or the way they are combined or contextualized all language is ultimately dependent on words and thus limited, repressive, even violent⁹. As psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva would agree, Symbolic language, by virtue of being incomplete and insufficient, is repressive and deadly.

In this sense, critic, Jason Cortés (cited earlier) is not entirely incorrect in viewing the text itself, and specifically the process of writing, as being tied to the act of violence. Yet writing is violent not because it opens itself up to plurality or because it ends in what Cortés and others might call deconstructive chaos but for the exact opposite reason. That is, writing is violent because, insomuch as it relies on language, which in turn relies on words/boxes, it is never quite open/pluralistic enough. However, language, particularly that of a “poetic” kind (to borrow Julia Kristeva’s term) or of a “writerly” kind (as Roland Barthes conceives of it) is less violent than a “readerly” text or, even worse, an authoritarian one. Certainly, Santa Evita as a whole entity is not only immensely “writerly” and poetic, but by integrating a wide range of voices, it is far less violent than the rigid, monolithic language associated with the military and, more generally, the authoritarianism it critiques and contests. It is, indeed, the text’s very openness and “writerly” nature that enables it to gesture beyond itself and to invite the reader him/herself to participate in the re-construction of the text and the world to which it refers. Not surprisingly, Cortés, who duly notes the importance of responsibility in Santa

⁹ Generally, the more context, the more the words take on their own self-referential, unique meanings.
Evita and even cites Emmanuel Levinas in reference to it, falls short of seeing that this responsibility lies as much with the reader (of Santa Evita) as it does with its author.

In this light, the Argentine obsession with naming becomes more comprehensible; for names not only symbolize the power of language but they reduce an entire concept, idea or person not just to a series of words but to a single word/cage. This Argentine fixation with naming-caging (and thus, power) becomes abundantly clear in Santa Evita in very different, even contrary ways. On the one hand, it is seen through the Army’s use of derogatory names for Evita, their use of codes to maintain secrecy and euphemisms to disguise their terrorizing behaviors. All of these uses underscore the Army’s need to reduce language, power and reality to the names/cages/truth it establishes. The fact that secrecy and erasure (and thus euphemisms) are a fundamental characteristic of and motive for naming further reinforces the Army’s exclusionary, violent use of naming.

Yet, the obsession with naming not only refers back to the time of Sarmiento (as I will further address in a moment), but also points forward to the future of the Dirty War or Proceso, which employed euphemisms in even more blatantly repressive ways than

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10 According to Cortés, “La ética del autor parte de la premisa de que existe un conocimiento en la figura autorial de que la escritura y la violencia están imbricadas de manera axiomática. Este conocimiento lleva al autor a enfrentarse a un conflicto axiológico, que por una parte, le impone la responsabilidad—es decir, el acto de responder—por los modelos de la tradición hispanoamericana que han legitimado el uso de la violencia como instrumento de poder; y por otra, hacerse partícipe de esta violencia y exhibir su complicidad con el autoritarismo de estos modelos para así adquirir su autoridad literaria. La ética del autor tiene su fundamento teórico en las aportaciones hechas por Emmanuel Levinas al campo filosófico de la ética. Levinas propone la preeminencia de lo ético sobre lo ontológico, estableciendo la responsabilidad hacia el otro como la base de la subjetividad.” (330). He then somewhat erroneously concludes that, “En el caso particular de Santa Evita, el discurso anterior del otro siempre se impone de manera autoritaria y como tal reproduce los mecanismo violentos de la tradición político-literaria argentina” (331). While it is true that Martínez must inevitably respond to and reflect the violence his work critiques, the way in which he does so undermines that very violence far more than it becomes complicit with it—and it does so precisely by remaining open both to the voices it retells/reinserts into its own as well as by being equally open to the voices it solicits from its audience/reader.

11 I use “future” in the sense that the Dirty War/Proceso had not yet occurred in the time period in which the novel is set. However, it is important to consider that when the novel was written and published (1995) the Dirty War/Proceso (1976-83) was already in the past.
the military government more directly and immediately portrayed in *Santa Evita*. It is not surprising that, much like in *El beso*, the impending oppression of the “Dirty War” is presaged in this novel given that Martínez not only writes *Santa Evita* long after the Dirty War had begun and ended (and thus, with retrospective insights about both the Dirty War and its relationship to previous manifestations of authoritarianism) but it was largely the terror of the Dirty War (1976-1983) that kept Martínez in exile (from 1975 to 1983). In short, the use of naming itself highlights the novel’s multi-temporal ability and need to weave together the past, present and future of Argentina—and specifically with respect to the ways in which the ability to name has become equated with political power and repression from the time of the conquistadors to the time of the Dirty War—and beyond.

Yet, the ability to name is also used as a way of contesting the monolithic power of authoritarian language—as evidenced, for example, in Evita’s capacity to counteract the degrading names used by her enemies (such as Potranca, Yegua, Friné, Butterfly, Bicha, Cucaracha, Estercita, Milonguita, etc.) both before and after her death by creating her own set of names—including “descamisados”, “la Fundación”, la “Secretaría” and most importantly, her own self-designation as “Evita” rather than Eva or María Eva, her birth name. What all these unofficial names/nicknames have in common is that they are intended to make Evita and the power she wields less intimidating, more personal and more relevant to the Argentine underclass (or her beloved “descamisados”).

The fact that they alone (the “descamisados”) are allowed to use and understand these names or codes makes them feel deeply privileged—and yet, precisely because only they are allowed to use these designations, these codes are highly ambiguous.

Subversive as these codes might be, they are, much like the codes employed by the Army, intended to exclude an Other (the ultimate Enemy, which in Peronist rhetoric is imagined to be the wealthy oligarchy, but in truth, the Enemy is anyone who does not support Peronism). Though these “common” names are intended to make Evita, a “mere woman”, appear to be less pretentious, formal or manly (and thus, they downplay her power), they simultaneously serve to highlight how different, groundbreaking, powerful and commanding Evita is. As Evita herself asserts, “Y en mi caso lo cierto es que como ‘Eva Perón’ represento un Viejo papel que otras mujeres en todos los tiempos han vivido ya; pero como Evita vivo una realidad que tal vez ninguna mujer haya vivido en la historia de la humanidad.” Indeed, through Evita’s capacity to rename official governmental offices, herself and her “people” she demonstrates extraordinary power.

The novel (Santa Evita) itself mimics this ability to contest and undermine the authority of the names bequeathed upon Eva by the Army as it refers to her through epithets such as Ella, Difunta, Persona, La Dama de la Esperanza, and many more—some of which (for example La Dama de la Esperanza) were given to her by her own followers. More importantly, the novel deconstructs authoritarian language/names to the extent that, as a totality, it constitutes one longer, more pluralistic name/image of her as reflected in

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12 This parallel is suggested by Evita’s pronouncement that, “No se dan cuenta de que aquí, en nuestro país, decir “oposición” significa todavía decir “oligarquía”… Y eso vale como si dijésemos “enemigos del pueblo”(La razón de mi vida 162). In fact, she more boldly makes her point when she declares, “Y conste que cuando hablo de oligarquía me refiero a todos los que en 1946 se opusieron a Perón: conservadores, radicales, socialistas y comunistas. Todos votaron por la Argentina del Viejo régimen oligárquico, entregador y vendepatria./De ese pecado no se redimirán jamás”(La razón de mi vida 162).
its title, *Santa Evita*. Rather than reduce Evita to one highly repressive name/cage, the novel creates a far more fluid cage, so to speak; one so fluid, in fact, that its boundaries lie beyond the novel itself. This ability to use the military’s monolithic way of naming against itself is similarly underlined in *El beso*, not only since this novel is equally open and dependent upon its readers for completion, but also since Molina and Valentín, much like Evita and Martínez, create their own set of codes to deceive the military. In a sense, Molina and Valentín may even be likened to Dr. Ara (of *Santa Evita*), whose wax copies or simulacra of Evita’s corpse similarly dupe the military and, more generally, play a parallel function to the linguistic plurality of the novel itself.

Nevertheless, though their use of codes reflects their capacity to connect to each other and themselves in an intimate and subversive way, the very need to use this type of language (particularly after Molina leaves prison) points to the novel’s pessimism since it reflects their incapacity to fully reconnect to society as a whole. This need to deceive a repressive other by employing coded language implies that there are still some elements of society that they cannot overcome or integrate into their own world. Just as the Army separates itself from society by employing codes, Molina and Valentín separate (or rather express their isolation) from society through their construction and employment of codes. In this respect, the codes are, like Evita’s euphemisms, only ambiguously subversive.

At the same time, this ambiguity is also reflected in Molina’s and Valentín’s use of ellipses (“…”). On the one hand, the very futility, repression, and limits (or encaging quality) of all language is implied by their use of silences or ellipses (“…”) to convey their most intimate moment. It is, in fact, at the moment of complete (sexual/spiritual)

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13 This is true not only because the novel highlights the importance of oral stories and myths (that lie outside of the novel itself) but just as crucially because the text, without a reader, is incomplete.
14 In truth, they are like everyone who pursues the illusion that there is an original corpse-Évita-meaning.
union that these ellipses are most frequently and significantly used. In truth, the power and importance of silence in *El beso* is somewhat reminiscent of the power of silence and gestures in *El espíritu de la colmena*—specifically in light of Ana’s silent relationship with her monster/spirit and refugee friend. This lack of language not only serves the additional function of inviting the reader to fill in the blanks (and thus, actively engage with the text) but it also reflects the corresponding need for Valentín and Molina to actively construct and interpret the other’s “language” (whether verbal or non-verbal) rather than passively absorbing masculine, monolithic discourse. In this way, the ellipses not only signal the limitations of socially constructed, monolithic language but also serve as a commentary on how all language, whether verbal or not, should ideally function in a pluralistic, reciprocal way—a way which, within the context of *El beso*, reflects the cellmates growing capacity to develop give-and-take relationships/identities.

On the other hand, the use of these ellipses is ambiguous insomuch as, though it reflects the ways in which Valentín and Molina learn to develop and express an acute bond or even love for one another, it simultaneously highlights the *exclusivity* of this union. Though the highly intimate, even exclusive nature of their bond may legitimately be viewed in a romanticized way, the fact that, ultimately, Molina and Valentín fail to completely connect to the rest of society is, in fact, mirrored not only in the codes they create but also in this use of ellipses. In effect, their need to use something other than words to convey their deepest feelings and desires reflects their ultimate estrangement from society—and thus, these ellipses remind us readers not only of the limits of all language but, specifically, the encaging and repressive nature of the authoritarian, monolithic language that renders the use of these ellipses so urgent.
In this sense, the ellipses are exceptionally ambiguous—and it is through this very ambiguity that they highlight the ambiguity inherent in “exile” itself. In short, like *Santa Evita*, *El beso* uses not only naming but language itself (and retelling) in subversive and pluralistic ways—and yet, in the process, both novels powerfully expose the repressive as much as the liberating uses and dimensions of language. Though, *Santa Evita*, unlike *El beso*, does not make notable use of ellipses in an effort to point beyond itself, through its plurality of voices, layered narratives and other techniques, it invites the reader to complete a story which, as it more explicitly suggests, can never truly be completed. In much the same way that language itself can only imperfectly and subjectively convey truth, truth itself can never be perfectly and objectively known—much less retold.

In reality, the link between naming and caging is of interest to us not only because it reflects the current oppression of Koenig’s Army while also foretelling the even more oppressive use of naming and language representative of the Dirty War, but also because this link between naming and caging is highly emblematic of Argentina’s past, as revealed, for example, in Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. In *Facundo*, the relationship between naming and caging becomes vividly linked to the tiger—a symbol that has been more generally equated in Latin American literature to the savage “Indian”. The protagonist’s/Facundo’s initial encounter with the tiger (introduced on page 55) is fundamental, even symbolic, as it not only reinforces this link, but in so doing, encapsulates various crucial contradictions that riddle the text as a whole. Throughout the text, Facundo is presented in a very animalistic way--first, as if he were a monkey, and then later it is almost as if,

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15 Sarmiento describes Facundo’s ability to escape from the tiger by equating him to a monkey, “Al fin, arrojando la montura a un lado del camino, dirigiése el gaucho al árbol que había divisado, y no obstante la debilidad de su tronco, felizmente bastante elevado, pudo trepar a su copa y mantenerse en una continua...
by escaping the tiger or taming it, he becomes the tiger. “También a él le llamaron “Tigre de los Llanos”, y no le sentaba mal esta denominación, a fe.” (Facundo 56).

In fact, Sarmiento himself appears to mimic Facundo’s tiger-like transformation as he too becomes something of a tiger by trying to tame one—only, unlike Facundo’s tiger, Sarmiento’s beast is not an actual tiger but the tiger of “barbarity” or even language itself (which he attempts to tame through the act of composing his book). Yet, ironically, Sarmiento becomes a tiger not because he succeeds in his endeavor but to the very extent that he fails—a failure conveyed through the text’s passionate, even poetic structure. In truth, the book’s passionate tone may be compared to the unruliness of a tiger.

Another contradiction emerges in Sarmiento’s effort to portray Facundo as a barbarian, for in so doing, he ends up demonstrating an intelligence (Facundo’s) that is far superior to the tiger’s (56). Sarmiento, who explicitly remarks on the general relationship between phrenology and the “moral disposition” of men (57), rather flatteringly describes Facundo (despite the inherently racist implications of his or anyone’s appeal to phrenology) in the following terms, “La estructura de su cabeza revelaba, sin embargo, bajo esta cubierta selvática, la organización privilegiada de los hombres nacidos para mandar” (57). Yet, above all, in presenting this description, chapter and, more generally, the book itself with such profound emotion, Sarmiento betrays his own ambiguous feelings towards so-called “barbarity”. Thus, though one of the main objectives of Facundo is to “cage the tiger”/the barbaric excesses of desire, and hence, “domesticate” that unruly aspect of Argentina which transcends European categories of
thought and reason, not only does he fail, but he simply cannot resist the seductiveness of emotional, poetic, even violent language and the reality to which it refers. He declares,

En cuanto a las verdaderas cantidades escondidas, el general La Madrid ha sospechado después que la aserción de Quiroga fuese exacta, por cuanto, habiendo caído prisionero el descubridor, ofreció diez mil pesos por su libertad, y no habiéndola obtenido, se quitó la vida degollándose. Estos acontecimientos son demasiado ilustrativos para que me excuse de referirlos (135).

At this moment, it seems as though Sarmiento himself were getting pulled into the very unbridled, barbaric passions which he supposedly seeks to tame and contain. This story, a story of passion, is a story that no matter how hard Sarmiento resists he simply cannot keep from telling. In this way, Sarmiento’s inability to tame or control the tiger (which, in fact, ultimately controls or absorbs him) is reminiscent of the Army’s inability to tame the seductive Evita who, in a sense, similarly becomes a mirror of the officers’ own contradictory desires and fears. Following Sarmiento’s model, the officers, in their very attempt to tame Evita, become the true “barbarians”. Like animals, they not only desecrate the corpse but in so doing, they lose all self-control as they cave into extreme, uncontrollable passion. In fact, their sexual and emotional attachment to the corpse becomes so intense that they are literally engulfed, even maddened by their inebriating “lust-hate” relationship with the corpse. Koenig himself becomes an alcoholic, and, as previously noted, one officer goes so far as to kill his own wife and consequently himself.

In truth, not only does this need to tame the tiger (who in Santa Evita may be likened to Evita herself) become inseparable from the need to tame language, but it also helps elucidate important dimensions of the “panther woman” story in El beso analyzed in Chapter 3. As I more fully address in Chapter 3, the panther represents unbridled emotion or passion (and specifically female/Other, even lesbian passion); and yet, at the
same time, it may also reflect the passion of the barbaric other—that is, the Other within the Self (Argentina). This parallel becomes especially credible in view of the fact that the protagonist, Irena, is not only foreign but literally becomes the savage/’barbaric’ panther. This parallel helps us to more deeply understand and appreciate why Puig would choose an American film as a means of working through Argentine problems. On the one hand, an American film is the perfect choice for a novel about repression since Argentine Nationalism and authoritarianism, specifically during Peronism, are predicated on an intense hatred and fear of foreign and especially American influences and capitalism. And yet, Argentine culture is equally based on the hatred and fear of the Other or ‘barbarian’ within, an Otherness that Irena supremely expresses not only as a foreigner living within the US, but more especially as a woman who fears her own inner “wild cat”.

Puig’s choice of this American film is further significant since, despite the fact that Argentine authoritarianism and nationalism presume an essential difference between Argentina and the US (one exaggerated by the Peróns), El beso’s use of Cat People effectively reveals that the exclusionary fears and hatred of the foreign or barbaric Other that define Argentine culture are, ironically, equally characteristic of American culture, capitalism and modernization, if not more. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the Peróns (and especially Evita) claimed to renounce American influences, in great part, for the very reason that capitalism and all it represented was perceived as a threat not only to the Patria, but specifically, to the ‘barbaric pueblo’, which they wholeheartedly supported, at least in words. Nevertheless, this in no way detracts from the irony implicit in their belief that American values were inconsistent with and even opposed to the core values and culture of Argentina—an irony which Puig brilliantly exposes in El beso.
Yet, Irena’s ability to combine sexual repression and especially female sexual repression with the repression of ‘barbarity’, the foreign or the strange is reinforced in an even more sophisticated way in *Santa Evita* through the figure of Evita herself. As will become clearer as we analyze her writings, Evita solidifies the cultural link in Argentina between female passion and the barbaric passion of the other in her own discourse (most notably, in *La razón de mi vida*) as well as through the novel itself and the myths and images that her country imposes on her. In truth, Sarmiento establishes the dichotomy between “primitive”, “passionate” barbarism versus rational urban civilization in much the same way that Evita distinguishes between the emotional (primitive) woman and the logical (civilized) man. As Evita consistently suggests in *La razón de mi vida*, like Sarmiento, she values both extremes or polarities of reason and emotion, the feminine and the masculine, the modern and the primitive—and yet, for Evita, the male, logical, civilized side is always the head which must lead the inferior emotional, feminine body. In this way, her own discourse is clearly indebted to Sarmiento’s.

Yet, above all, what is most interesting about Sarmiento (and pertinent to our study of “Santa Evita”) is his penchant for contradiction—for in many ways, his constant self-contradiction reflects the series of contradictions that will plague authoritarian Argentina, Peronism and Evita herself. On the other hand, Sarmiento’s work, even through its contradictions, helps set the foundation on which authors like Martínez may reconstruct a more open, multivalent Argentina, both in fiction and reality. Though the contradictions that plague Sarmiento’s writings are too numerous to recount (and though I have already mentioned quite a few), perhaps the most relevant example is evinced in the way in which, in his attempt to reveal Facundo’s barbarity, he inadvertently conveys
Facundo’s intelligence, valor, and, indeed, the value of something more than reason—
despite his overarching emphasis on the importance of objectivity, science and reason.

Not only does Sarmiento, in many ways, follow Facundo’s “primitive” model, not
only does he praise Facundo’s ability to lead and manipulate others psychologically and
physically, but he describes Facundo as having almost supernatural, psychic abilities—
abilities which remind us very much of the quasi-supernatural powers attributed to
Evita’s corpse in Santa Evita. More generally, Sarmiento, through his contradictions as
much as his obsessions, through his strengths as much as his weaknesses, prefigures the
contradictions and chaos of Argentina—and particularly those that helped make Evita a
saint, a whore and, above all, a national obsession of mythic proportions.

Chaos, Contradiction and a Country in Crisis

Yet, before we plunge deeper into the contradictions surrounding Evita and her legacy, it
will help to more amply delineate the contradictions of Peronism. We must first keep in
mind that prior to Perón’s rise to power, the country had already been subjected to over a
decade of authoritarian rule (since 1930). Before this, Hipólito Yrigoyen and the Radical
Party were in power (1916 to 1922), resulting in large part from the desire for liberal
politics16. To be precise, Yrigoyen was president between 1916 to 1922, when Marcelo
T. de Alvear replaced him, before Yrigoyen was re-elected in 1928. However, after the
Great Depression hit and Yrigoyen became feeble in his old age, the military began to
plot. In 1930 General Uriburu, reinstated elite rule. Every president from Uriburu
through Perón employed torture, among other authoritarian tactics, to maintain power.

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16 Though Argentina was a relatively capitalist country (for Latin America) voting, for example, was only
extended to the elite.
After the so-called “conservative restoration” that lasted between 1930 to 1943\(^{17}\), Perón rose to power in 1943 and officially won elections in 1946, becoming President. Perón would then proceed to rule Argentina until 1955, when a coup would knock him out of power and send him into exile. The fact that Perón chose authoritarian Spain as his refuge during exile is itself highly telling, as it reflects numerous similarities between Franco, Perón and the circumstances which surround their ascent to power.

To begin, Perón, though a Nazi sympathizer with fascist tendencies, was in many ways progressive, as he enforced labor laws prohibiting child labor and indexing minimum wage. Among other virtues, he set up new unions and, generally, did a great deal to promote social security and public services. Franco similarly set up laws that would protect the “poor”, despite sharing similar authoritarian and racist tendencies. In addition to the fact that Perón and Franco would combine social reform with quasi-fascist principles and militarism, both arise out of countries with a tremendously violent and unstable history, ethnic/cultural eclecticism, and uneven modernity. However, on many counts, Argentina was, arguably, even more chaotic and eclectic than Spain. Though Spain is very ethnically diverse for a European country, Argentina is far more so due not only to its indigenous or “barbaric” population but also because of its large number of immigrants from European countries other than Spain. Thus, the need to falsely unify (and to an extent repress the “barbaric” other) are not only reminiscent of Franco’s attempt to falsely unify and repress the Arabic, Jewish and regional Others of Spain, but is, in many senses, far more urgent in Argentina. Indeed, the Italian population became so great that, during the 19th Century, it threatened to separate officially from Argentina. As David Rock reports (“Argentina: A Hundred and Fifty Years of Democratic Praxis”),

\(^{17}\) See Luis Alberto Romero’s *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina*. 
Lilia Ana Bertoni’s study addresses issues of building citizenship and inculcating loyalty to the state. The author analyzes the political and cultural impact of European immigration in the 1880s and of European militarist and nationalist ideas in the 1890s. She draws most of her material from the Italian communities in Argentina at the time. In the 1880s, some of the resident Italians incurred disfavor with the Argentine authorities. They were accused of founding schools that taught in Italian rather than Spanish, raising the specter of the state within the state. In Rome, a parliamentary deputy urged that overseas territories occupied by Italian “colonies” should be annexed, causing paranoid reactions in Argentina. The late 1880s marked campaigns to accelerate cultural homogeneity. Reformers wanted to eliminate foreign schools and to impose “patriotic” teaching in public school curricula. Of the two objectives, the former failed and the latter succeeded. Henceforward, schoolchildren engaged in daily rituals of raising the flag, a pledge of allegiance, and singing the national anthem.”(228)

Though such a radical possibility is no longer a burning threat by the mid 20th Century, the fact that it was a serious possibility in the relatively recent past reveals the degree to which Argentine identity has always been precariously balanced. Not surprisingly, the need for national unity coupled with a deep anti-American/anti-capitalist sentiment would become central to Peronism, just as it became central to Francoism (particularly in its earlier years). Furthermore, though Peronism, unlike Francoism, does not emerge out of civil war, it does evolve out of a series of unstable presidencies lasting little over two years—further suggesting that Peronism arises out of as much instability and chaos as Francoism. Though Perón did not have recourse to the unifying myths that Franco did, he was, however, able to control capital and labor, all institutions, the media and even official organizations for students, teachers, women, doctors, lawyers, and more. As Lewis explains, “Every profession, intellectual endeavor, and social group was to be harnessed to the pursuit of national power”(Guerillas and Generals 7).

Also, if he could not unify the country under the banner of one ideology, as Franco did via National Catholicism, he could nonetheless, appeal to such unity precisely through his contradictions—as well as by creating more chaos among “enemy” groups.
More crucially, despite Franco’s pretensions of unity, both Perón and Franco played up the instability of their countries and the existence/threat of their enemies—specifically, communism, capitalism and, in truth, anything foreign—as an excuse for their abuse of power. Both men promoted torture, disappearances, and cleansing in order to achieve their goals—and, in the case of Perón, one might even say that he essentially paved the way for the “Proceso” (even though it happened long after his first and more protracted stay in office and, specifically, as a means of overthrowing his third wife, Isabel).

In truth, the “peronización” (or “peronization”) of society and institutions could be seen in everything from Perón’s control of newspapers and the media to schools, where Evita’s *La razón de mi vida* was made mandatory reading to the Army itself where courses of indoctrination were obligatory—as Romero observes, “La ‘peronización’ llegó a las Fuerzas Armadas: hubo cursos de adoctrinamiento justicialista, y las promociones y selección de jefes obedecieron desembozadamente a razones políticas.”(*Breve historia* 126). Needless to say, the “peronization” of institutions and even the media greatly resembles Franco’s similar control of institutions, such as the Spanish school-systems and military (where soldiers and students alike were instructed to learn the fundamental precepts of National Catholicism) and the media (via propaganda and censorship).

More generally, Franco and Perón were, despite their rigid dogmatism, both highly complex, opportunistic, even contradictory figures. Though Perón is more patently contradictory than Franco, Franco’s opportunism would, as is well known, lead him to change his policies and views in later stages of his dictatorship—as reflected in his eventual espousal of modernization and tourism, which in turn, required a certain degree of openness to foreign, even American influences. Even his unwillingness to take an
official stance or side during World War II is indicative of Franco’s opportunism—a vice which would lead him to embrace contradiction in many aspects of his rule. With all this in mind, it is little wonder that Perón chose Francoist Spain as his sanctuary in exile.

On the other hand, though the most obvious differences between Perón and Franco lie first in their treatment of religion and, secondly, in their treatment of women, even in these respects both men have far more in common than a superficial analysis of their ideologies would suggest. Admittedly, Perón, unlike Franco, does not make explicit use of religion by fusing it with his political agenda—and, in fact, Perón’s decline from power in 1955 is largely due to the Church’s displeasure with his government. Moreover, though Perón appears to be progressive towards women and even grants them the right to vote, Franco is, as I have elaborately shown in chapters 1 and 2, extremely repressive of women, and, if anything, he limits and nullifies their rights rather than extending them.

Nevertheless, Perón’s ability to superficially enhance women’s power disguises his deeper belief in the inferiority of women and their intrinsically subordinate role in the world. In Perón’s utopic vision of Argentina, women are passive, emotional, maternal, and self-sacrificing—and thus complement rather than mimic their active, rational, public, aggressive, competitive husbands. Much like Franco, Perón and Evita believed that a woman’s place is in the home, and even the social reforms they implement are, as Evita herself openly confesses, intended not only to enable the poor to eat and survive but to discourage women from competing with men for jobs while giving them a greater incentive for becoming passive, self-sacrificing housewives. In Evita’s own words,

> Cada día es mayor el número de mujeres jóvenes convencidas de que el peor negocio para ellas es formar un hogar.// Y sin embargo para eso nacimos.//Allí

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18 Contrary to what happens in Argentina under Perón, women had just been granted the right to vote under the Second Spanish Republic when Franco comes into power and annuls their freedoms.
está nuestro más grave problema. // Nos sentimos nacidas para el hogar y el hogar nos resulta demasiada carga para nuestros hombros. // Renunciamos al hogar entonces.. salimos a la calle en busca de una solución… sentimos que la solución es independizarnos económicamente y trabajamos en cualquier parte… pero ese trabajo nos iguala a los hombres y… ¡no! No somos como ellos… ellos pueden vivir solos… nosotros no… nosotros sentimos necesidad de compañía, de una compañía total… sentimos la necesidad de darnos más que de recibir… ¿No podemos trabajar nada más que para ganar un sueldo como los hombres! (149)

Evita then conludes (in this same text, La razón de mi vida) that, “La solución que yo aporto es para que no se sienta menos la mujer que funda un hogar que la mujer que gana su vida en una fábrica o en una oficina.”(152). Not only is this reminiscent of Franco’s similar ideal for the Spanish woman or “house mouse”, but the fact that Perón, unlike Franco, extends the right to vote to women is itself intended to be only superficially liberating. As Evita admits, the fact that women can vote is only useful because Perón (a man) has taught them how to vote (she brags that, under Peronism, women can now vote, and, thanks to Perón, “they know how to” (La razón 147-148).

In effect, Peronism requires not only that women embody the dichotomous passive, emotional, self-sacrificing Other of men, but that they blindly follow the lead of their husbands, like shadows. In La razón de mi vida,19 Evita describes her love and marriage to Perón in the following terms:

[…] él sabiendo bien lo que quería hacer, yo, por solo resentirlo; él, con la inteligencia; yo, con el corazón; él, preparado para la lucha; yo, dispuesta a todo sin saber nada; él culto y yo sencilla; él, enorme, y yo, pequeña; él, maestro, y yo, alumna, El, la figura y yo la sombra. // ¡El, seguro de sí mismo, y yo, únicamente segura de él! // Por eso nos casamos […] (38).

In fact, even Evita’s “feminist” movement is centered on Perón. She unabashedly states, De la misma manera que una mujer alcanza su eternidad y su gloria y se salva de la soledad y de la muerte dándose por amor a un hombre, yo pienso que tal vez ningún

19 La razón is the very same book that became required reading in Argentine schools under Perón.
movimiento feminista alcanzará en el mundo Gloria y eternidad si no se entrega a la causa de un hombre.” (La razón de mi vida 37). As if this weren’t enough, she adds,

Yo creo que Perón y su causa son suficientemente grandes y dignos como para recibir el ofrecimiento total del movimiento feminista de mi Patria. Y aun más, todas las mujeres del mundo pueden brindarse a su justicialismo que con ello, entregándose por amor a una causa que ya es de la humanidad, crecerán como mujeres. (La razón de mi vida 37)

At the same time, Evita juxtaposes the idea that women are born for passive self-sacrifice with her support of traditional women’s roles. Through her moving yet highly manipulative rhetoric, Evita effectively explains (La razón 168) why Argentina’s true heroines are the “common”, self-sacrificing women, wives and mothers of the “pueblo” as opposed to the beautiful, elegant, romanticized femme-fatales that poets and artists traditionally revere. Though her ability to elevate the common woman-mother-housewife over the aristocratic beauty is perhaps to be admired, Evita’s true intentions are much darker and calculating—for, in effect, Evita manipulates the “common woman” into believing that she is superior to these other women precisely because she is willing to sacrifice herself in a way that these other, more glamorous women are not.

Evita reminds these ‘common women’ that she makes the same sacrifices for her husband and “children”—not only through her fanatical dedication to her husband and country but even on the superficial level of always looking good for them and disguising any pain, suffering and sacrifice she bears. For Evita, female self-sacrifice involves not only staying at home, birthing children and giving up personal ambition, but enduring pain with a pretty, lively, smiling face: “Como ellas [las descamisadas] me gusta aparecer siempre sonriente y atractiva ante mi marido y ante mis hijos, siempre serena y fuerte para infundirles fe y esperanza…” (171) She adds, “Como ellas, oculto mis disgustos y
mis contrariedades, y muchas veces aparezco alegre y feliz ante los míos y cubriendo con una sonrisa y con mis palabras las penas que sangran en mi corazón.” (La razón 171).

As evidenced in these quotes, Evita manages the paradoxical task of emphasizing her absolute affinity to these women of the ‘pueblo’ while also maintaining her difference or superiority over them as the ‘chosen woman’/Marian counterpart to her godlike Perón. Ironically, Evita, a woman who herself has given up bearing children due to her ambition and promiscuity, is, nevertheless, capable of justifying this contradiction through the very fact that she becomes the symbolic mother of all her people--and, accordingly, she who embodies the ultimate sacrifice of all women. As she herself exclaims, “¿Es que me siento verdaderamente madre de mi pueblo!// Y creo honradamente que lo soy.”(172). In truth, Evita’s ideal of female self-sacrifice and passivity is so extreme that it precludes self-knowledge, as reflected in her words, “Yo he querido que, en el partido femenino, las mujeres no se buscasen a sí mismas…. Que allí mismo sirviesen a los demás en alguna forma fraternal y generosa.”(164). She justifies this with the explanation that,

La razón es muy simple: el hombre puede vivir exclusivamente para sí mismo. La mujer no.// Si una mujer vive para sí misma, yo creo que no es mujer o no puede decirse viva… Por eso le tengo miedo a la “masculinización” de las mujeres. […] Un hombre de acción es el que triunfa sobre los demás. Una mujer de acción es la que triunfa para los demás… ¿no es ésta una gran diferencia?// La felicidad de una mujer no es su felicidad sino la de otros. (La razón 164)

Of course, these words are highly reminiscent of Irena’s from Cat People, as she laments that all she wants is to please her husband and that to be able to do so would be tantamount to true freedom and self-realization. In this light, an obvious parallel emerges between Santa Evita and El beso, since Molina and the heroines to which he refers (perhaps especially Irena) perfectly embody Evita’s ideal of the self-sacrificing heroine in

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20 Her womb was removed after a botched abortion nearly killed her.
manifold ways. With this in mind, we can appreciate just how powerful and enduring Evita’s influence on Argentine culture was—long after her death. Evita’s likeness to Molina and his “heroines” will, in fact, become increasingly evident throughout this chapter, as we examine other features of Evita’s personality—including her polarization of the emotional “feeling” female versus the rational, “thinking” male.

Indeed, sacrifice, for Evita, not only involves sacrificing (professional) ambition, public mobility (in favor of family/household obligations), comfort (for appearances), but somewhat paradoxically, even a certain degree of emotion (as women are expected to endure pain stoically, energetically and with “a smile on their faces”) and passion (given that the sexual pleasure of men is invariably prioritized far above women’s). Of course, this is exceedingly ironic given that Evita, ambiguously as ever, simultaneously becomes a symbol of sexual liberation and aggressive, even “masculine” passion as evidenced in her overly dramatic, sentimental and nothing less than fanatical speeches and writings. Nevertheless, her discourse on female sacrifice and to some extent, the sacrifices Evita herself made in life both supports and reflects the way in which women view themselves and are viewed as sexual objects rather than as desiring (sexual) agents.

The fact that the novel underscores Evita’s capacity to “please” Perón even after sexual intercourse became impossible between the two\textsuperscript{21} highlights the importance of her role as a blank mirror of masculine desire—a role which is only heightened in death, as men symbolically and often literally ejaculate into her corpse. With this in mind, it is also important to consider that Eva’s desire to please men sexually ends in a botched abortion. Thus, the fact that her eagerness and ability to service them sexually ends

\textsuperscript{21} This was due to vaginal bleeding, among other complications resulting from uterine cancer--itself highly symbolic.
rather badly for her reflects the contradictory nature of Argentine expectations, particularly with respect to female sexuality. Though as a myth, Evita does, in spite of her infertility, become Mother of Argentina and even a transnational Goddess who is multiplied or infinitely reborn in her fans and enemies alike, her womb-less body remains ill-fated. Rather than producing offspring, it is limited to birthing lifeless wax copies and, at best, the baby demons of the men who inseminate her equally lifeless corpse—a corpse which, rather than loved, becomes a fetishistic, masturbatory device and obsession for paranoid, power-hungry soldiers and perverts.

In any event, as all this helps illuminate, Perón and Franco have very much the same goals and utopic images in mind concerning not only women’s place in the world and the Patria, but also with respect to their (Perón’s and Franco’s) godlike relationship to their respective countries—though the means and rhetoric that they employ to achieve these goals are somewhat different. Perón, unlike Franco, used Evita as his mouthpiece. Ironically, it was precisely because Evita was a woman that she was much more apt at achieving the appearance that Perón was pro-female rather than the misogynist that he truly and deeply was. Indeed, Perón’s misogyny is more directly revealed by Evita, who claims (in reference to why she took up her “feminist” cause) that,

En realidad yo debo confesar que si me animé a la lucha no fue por mí sino por él… ¡por Perón!”, adding “Él me enseñó en esto, como en todas las cosas, el camino.// Las feministas del mundo dirán que empezar así un movimiento femenino es poco femenino… ¡empezar reconociendo en cierto modo la superioridad de un hombre!//No me interesa sin embargo la crítica.” (144).

Despite the absurdity of this logic, both Perón’s extreme machismo and Evita’s equally great passivity/anti-feminist sentiment is even more extravagantly reflected in the following excerpt from La razón de mi vida:
Confieso que el día que me vi ante la posibilidad del camino “feminista” me dio un poco de miedo. […] Ni era soltera entrada en años, ni era tan fea por otra parte como para ocupar un puesto así… que, por lo general, en el mundo, desde las feministas inglesas hasta aquí, pertenece, casi con exclusivo derecho, a las mujeres de ese tipo… mujeres cuya primera vocación debió ser indudablemente la de hombres […] Parecían estar dominadas por el despecho de no haber nacido hombres, más que por el orgullo de ser mujeres//Creían entonces que era una desgracia ser mujeres… Resentidas con las mujeres porque no querían dejar de serlo y resentidas con los hombres porque no las dejaban ser como ellos, las “feministas”, la inmensa mayoría de las feministas del mundo en cuanto me es conocido, constituían una rara especie de mujeres… ¿que no me pareció nunca mujer! //Y yo no me sentía muy dispuesta a parecerme a ellas.// Un día el General me dio la explicación que yo necesitaba. // “¿No ves que ellas han errado el camino? Quieren ser hombres. […] No ves que esa clase de “feministas” reniega de la mujer. Algunas ni siquiera se pintan… porque eso, según ellas es propio de mujeres. ¿No ves que quieren ser hombres? (145-146)

Aside from the fact that this quote, to be perfectly blunt, reveals nothing less than Evita’s immense stupidity (at least with respect to “feminist” issues), it has the additional value of helping us see that Perón’s need to superficially grant women power (including his own wives, Evita and Isabel, who wielded unprecedented public power in Argentina) may have been largely due to his fear of feminists, whom he accused of confusing themselves with men. Yet, Perón’s use and manipulation of Evita as a means of more subtly conveying and solidifying his own views is also evident with respect to religion. Though Perón never explicitly speaks of the need to unite God and politics, Evita makes innumerable references to Christianity in her speeches and writings (see pages 27, 119, 121, 124, 125 of La razón de mi vida) and, in fact, she directly refers to the “Christian humanism” of Peronism, “[…] yo he querido hacer ver, a los que vengan detrás nuestro, que era verdad luminosa el cristianismo humanista de la doctrina de Perón”(124).

Not surprisingly, as Michael Greenberg explains (“A Descamisada Diva”) Evita would greet her charity cases at the Foundation in a room decorated with pictures of the Peróns and Christ. Yet, Evita not only equates Peronism with Christianity both explicitly
and implicitly, through her words, gestures, images and actions but, in many senses, she likens Perón to God himself, as suggested, for example, by the following quote,

No he de cometer la herejía de compararlo con Cristo…pero estoy segura de que, imitándolo a Cristo, Perón siente un profundo amor por la humanidad y que eso más que ninguna otra cosa lo hace grande, magníficamente grande.” (141).

She then adds, “[…] él [Perón] es la única cosa de la tierra en la que todavía se puede tener un poco de fe y un poco de esperanza.” (141). Appropriately, Evita begs for blind obedience to Perón, as if he were God, as evidenced, for example, in her claim that, “[…]Y eso es verdad, primero, porque lo ha dicho el General Perón y segundo, porque efectivamente es verdad.” (67) She similarly speaks of Perón as if she were speaking of God, when she affirms, “Nos une totalmente el Líder, único e indiscutido para todos.// Nos unen los grandes objetivos de la doctrina y del movimiento Peronista.”(158)

For all of these reasons, Perón is capable, via Evita, of both promoting an extremely conservative, repressive and misogynist culture while simultaneously exalting himself to the point where he becomes not only the ultimate leader of messianic proportions but the virtual God of the Patria. Thus, with respect to both gender and religion, Perón is extremely similar to Franco, who, as we have seen in previous chapters, more explicitly likens himself to God. The essential difference is that Perón often reveals his true colors, motives and agendas not through his own mouth but through the mouth-filter of his wife-shadow, Evita. As Evita herself proclaims, “[…] yo en mi obra soy…prácticamente nada…//La obra comenzó porque me la inspiró el General y porque la exigian nuestros descamisados.”(La razón 137). Evita’s adoringly divine relationship to Perón is perhaps best summed up in her prologue to La razón where she describes her absolute dependency to him by asserting, “[..] Yo no era ni soy nada más que una
humilde mujer… un gorrión en una inmensa banda de gorriones… Y él era y es el cóndor gigante que vuela alto y seguro entre las cumbres y cerca de Dios.” She concludes,

Por eso ni mi vida ni mi corazón me pertenecen y nada de todo lo que soy o tengo es mío. Todo lo que soy, todo lo que tengo, todo lo que pienso y todo lo que siento es de Perón. Pero no me olvido ni me olvidaré nunca de que fui gorrión ni que sigo siéndolo. Si vuelo más alto es por él. Si ando entre las cumbres, es por él. Si veo claramente lo que es mi pueblo y lo quiero y siento su cariño acariciando mi nombre, es solamente por él.

As these fanatical statements reveal, when speaking of Perón, Evita bears a bold resemblance to Santa Teresa de Jesús—yet another reason why her designation as “saint” is hardly surprising. Not only does Evita describe her relationship to Perón in very much the same way as Santa Teresa describes her own relationship to God, but she employs a rhetoric which approximates very closely to Santa Teresa’s, who consistently reminded her readers that she was nothing but a humble woman with no pretensions of grandeur and with no desire to disease her country with heretical, subversive or conflicting ideas about religion, God or the Church. And yet, as Sta. Teresa’s works suggest (for example Las moradas or El libro de la vida), beneath the surface she was highly subversive.22

In truth, though Evita’s self-erasure likens her very much to Sta. Teresa, Sta. Teresa was far more radical than Evita. This is true not only considering the fact that Sta. Teresa wrote centuries before Evita and under the threat of the Spanish Inquisition, but more crucially because, in the final analysis, Sta. Teresa’s passivity, erasure and humility was directed to God rather than men—and much less to one single “Man” who aspired to be God. In relative terms, even Santa Teresa’s need to constantly degrade herself is somewhat justifiable if we consider not only that it permitted her to write and speak, but

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22 It is also worth noting the enormous difference between Sta. Teresa’s humble rhetoric and her vigorously independent activity in founding convents, courting wealthy supporters, etc.
to disguise how very yet subtly seditious she was—even more so being that she was a ‘mere’ woman (in fact, the only woman) writing in an exclusively male-dominated world.

And yet, albeit to a lesser extent, we might also say that Evita herself resembled Sta. Teresa as she too was more subversive than her rhetoric or even her words alone suggest. Indeed, one of the features of Evita’s personality that was most ferociously attacked by her detractors was the fact that she was passionate to the point of being aggressive and unladylike. Thus, in this sense, Evita, whether it was her intention or not, transgressed boundaries and gender lines (and even social and racial lines, as I will further discuss in the next section of this chapter) while, on another level, she simultaneously reinforced these very binaries. Following Sarmiento, Evita’s aggressive style and brutal passion contradicted, to some extent, the more explicit, conservative messages she wished to send. And yet, it was through her ability to absorb and embody so many contradictions that Evita, like her husband, was hated by so many diverse sectors of society while, at the same time, loved and idolized by just as many and varied groups.

In any event, despite Santa Teresa’s perhaps more noble and authentically (or intentionally) subversive traits, Evita shares one other crucial feature in common with this saint—one that is further suggestive of her contradictory nature. Much like Santa Teresa’s excessive humility, Evita’s modesty is paradoxical, even contradictory in several ways. On the one hand, Santa Teresa’s humility was so severe that it threatened to undermine her religious certainty, devotion and authority to speak about God, while at the same time, it was this very humility that (particularly as a woman) permitted her to speak and to be socially validated. More critically still, Santa Teresa’s extreme meekness almost paradoxically conveyed a certain degree of pride—that is, pride in her very own
humility. Evita similarly employs a rhetoric so intentionally unassuming that it perilously borders on the verge of undermining itself/her authority while, at the same time, her façade of humility is so exaggerated that it almost seems as though it is seeking to be worshipped—and in this respect as well it is potentially self-destructive.

Furthermore, Evita’s tendency to explicitly boast of her humility constitutes yet another example of how Evita’s words are, much like those of her 19th Century predecessor, Sarmiento, often betrayed by the context, motive or way in which they are said. More concretely, though Evita claims to be just a humble, weak little woman (“A mí, a una humilde y pequeña mujer, me encomendaba el cuidado de sus trabajadores, lo que él más quería”(29)), she is equally certain that she is destined to help her country, and specifically, the poor: “Débil mujer al fin, yo nunca me imaginé que el grave problema de los pobres y de los ricos iba a golpear un día tan directamente a las puertas de mi corazón reclamando mi humilde esfuerzo para una solución en mi Patria.” (16). And yet, her unwavering belief that her role as “Mother of the Patria” is not only her Destiny but her Vocation are unequivocally clear, as she affirms, in the spirit of Santa Teresa,

No, no fue el azar la causa de todo esto que soy, en mi país y para mi pueblo. Creo firmemente que he sido forjada para el trabajo que realizo y la vida que llevo. […] Por fortuna, gracias a Dios las cosas suceden de otra manera que unos llaman Destino y otros Providencia y casi todos atribuimos a Dios. (La razón 30)

In short, despite all her ostensive humility, Evita is absolutely certain of her special destiny and ability to help her country, specifically through her unique capacity to feel pain and to sympathize with others, as further suggested by her ‘humble’ affirmation, “[…]yo tengo, y ha nacido conmigo, una particular disposición del espíritu que me hace sentir la injusticia de manera especial, con una rara y dolorosa intensidad” (La razón 15).
In truth, Evita’s false humility appears to signal a greater farse or mask—namely, her saintly erasure and devotion to the Patria and Perón. One of the things we must consider when analyzing Evita is that, though perhaps in a less socially productive or progressive way than Santa Teresa, she too manipulated men precisely by enabling them to believe that they made her—an idea constantly reinforced throughout Santa Evita. Her self-erasure is, in this sense, deeply intertwined with her social ambition and desire for power, prestige and grandeur. Thus, while Perón manipulates or uses Evita for his own purposes, Evita also uses Perón, albeit in a more paradoxical way. Not surprisingly, though Perón’s “manipulation” of Evita is far more subtle and, in the short term, effective than Franco’s more straightforward methods and approach, it is for this very reason that Evita’s untimely death proves to be highly detrimental to Perón’s government.

To be sure, the fact that the entire novel, Santa Evita, revolves around the military’s frantic pursuit of her corpse proves, ironically, how much more important she had become than Perón himself. Moreover, though Perón exploits Evita, his “shadow” (a designation which Evita herself proudly flaunts) in order to claim an almost divine grandeur, this also backfires as the Catholic Church begins to resent Perón due to Evita’s monopolization of charity (see Paul H. Lewis’ Guerillas and Generals) as well as the Church’s own increasing recognition that Peronism bordered on heresy (Breve historia).

This tension was further heightened when the Church tried to organize trade unions in competition with Perón (Guerillas and Generals). Perón eventually forbad processions, expelled priests and, in short, the Church’s struggle with Perón “provided a rallying point for all opponents” (Guerillas and Generals 8). Moreover, Perón’s government had already begun to self-destruct as the economy began to crumble as a
result of excessive regulation and inflation (Guerillas and Generals 7). It is important to keep in mind that one of the reasons the Peróns were able to bestow gifts and charity on the poor while establishing minimum wages and maximum prices, better public health, social security and other services, not to mention their impressive ability to construct schools, colleges, shelters and orphanages, was due to the wealth of the government when Perón rose to power. As Michael Greenberg observes,

The success of Perón’s populismo was built initially on the country’s huge store of wealth from food exports during the war. In 1946, the year he was elected, Argentina was a creditor nation, in a position of economic fortitude rare in the history of Latin America [...] (“A Descamisada Diva” 3-4)

Yet, as Perón’s years in office extended, this money began to run out. In addition to Perón’s growing economic and religious problems and enemies, his contradictory, opportunistic talent for pleasing groups as diverse as Nazis and Jews, liberals and conservatives, and many more also began to backfire. In the end, it was by being the friend of everyone that he was also, to the same degree, everyone’s potential enemy (Guerillas and Generals 8). Originally, Perón was not only able to win over the left through his support of the working class and their unions but also the right, especially the Army and the Church, due to his dedication to repressing communism and to establish religious teaching in schools (Breve historia 102-103). Aside from the abovementioned tensions that Perón would develop with the church (and, in truth, his relationship with the church was always distant at best), the decisive blow would come when Peronism began to be viewed as an immediate threat to the Church. As Romero explains,

[…] la Iglesia, con la que inicialmente se había establecido un acuerdo mutualmente conveniente, era irreductible a él, y por eso potencialmente enemiga, máxime cuanto en la compleja institución tenían un lugar no despreciable viejos enemigos del régimen—identificados con la oposición—y nuevos disidentes […] (Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina 129).
Indeed, the Peronist State and the church began to express conflicting interests.

La Iglesia era sensible a los avances de aquél en el terreno de la beneficencia, a través de la Fundación, y en el de la educación; aquí, al desagrado por el creciente culto laico del presidente de la Nación y su esposa se agregaba la preocupación por los avances del Estado en la organización de los estudiantes secundarios, en un contexto de sombrías sospechas de corrupción. (*Breve historia* 129).

Finally, a series of violent manifestations leading to Perón’s decisions to separate the Church and the State, legalize prostitution, detain many priests and publish horrible accusations about the Church in government-run newspapers grimly sealed his fate. In his zest to crush and ruin the Church, Perón effectively dealt himself his own deathblow. Rather than cowering to Peronism, the Church responded with equal aggression23.

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23 As Romero more elaborately explains, “El conflicto estalló en septiembre de 1954, cuando en Córdoba compitieron dos manifestaciones celebratorias del Día del Estudiante, una organizada por los católicos y otra por la UES. En noviembre Perón lanzó su ataque contra la Iglesia; el enfrentamiento pareció enfriarse en seguida, pero se agudizó en diciembre, luego de la multitudinaria procesión en Buenos Aires en el día de la Inmaculada Concepción. El ataque mostró la verticalidad alcanzada en el aparato político oficial: todos a una, con escasas disidencias descubrieron los tremendos vicios de la Iglesia. Aunque se intentó limitarlo a “unos pocos curas”, fue un ataque feroz, asombroso para una sociedad que desde 1930 había retrocedido tanto en su aprecio por los valores del laicismo. Se prohibieron las procesiones, se suprimió la enseñanza religiosa en las escuelas, se introdujo—en una ley en vías de aprobación referida a otra cuestión—una sorpresiva cláusula que permitía el divorcio vincular, se autorizó la reapertura de los prostíbulos y se envió un proyecto de reforma constitucional para separar la Iglesia del Estado. Muchos sacerdotes fueron detenidos y los periódicos se llenaron de denuncias públicas y comentarios groseros sobre la conducta y moralidad de prelados y sacerdotes. //La defensa de la Iglesia no fue menos eficaz y demostró su poder como institución. […] Atacada por los medios de comunicación, monopolizados por el gobierno, inundó la ciudad con todo tipo de panfletos […] El 8 de junio, el día de Corpus, se celebró una multitudinaria procesión; el jefe de Policía—luego se demostró—hizo quemar una bandera argentina y acusó de ello a los opositores católicos. El 16 de junio se produjo un levantamiento de la Marina contra Perón. […] El proyecto de los marinos […] consistía en bombardear la Casa de Gobierno para asesinar a Perón; su ejecución, totalmente defectuosa, culminó en el bombardeo y ametrallamiento de una concentración de civiles reunida en la Plaza de Mayo para apoyar a Perón, que causó unas trescientas muertes. […] Perón declaró solemnemente que dejaba de ser el jefe de una revolución y pasaba a convertirse en el presidente de todos los argentinos. […] El 31 de agosto, luego de presentar retóricamente su renuncia, [Perón] convocó—por última vez—a los peronistas a la Plaza de Mayo, denunció el fracaso de la conciliación y lanzó el más duro de sus ataques contra la oposición: por cada uno de los nuestros, afirmó, caerán cinco de ellos. […] Poco después, el 16 de septiembre, se levantó en Córdoba una sublevación militar que encabezó el general Eduardo Lonardi, un prestigioso oficial, conspirador de 1951. Aunque los apoyos civiles fueron muchos, especialmente entre los grupos católicos, las unidades del Ejército que se plegaron fueron escasas. Pero entre las fuerzas “leales” había poca voluntad de combatir a los sublevados. […] El 20 de septiembre de 1955 Perón se refugió en la embajada de Paraguay y el 23 de septiembre el general Lonardi se presentó en Buenos Aires como presidente provisional de la Nación […]” (*Breve historia* 129-131)
Before moving onto a deeper analysis of Evita’s contradictions and how they resonate in *Santa Evita*, it will help to become familiar with what happened after Perón’s fall from power in 1955. Though General Eduardo Lonardi was presented as the new provisional head of the government in 1955, within barely two months Lonardi was replaced by general Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, whose ideals were more in keeping with the “liberal” and fiercely antiperonist sectors of Argentina. Aramburu, who remained in power until 1958, did everything possible to destroy the Peronist apparatus and even outlawed its existence as a political party. Aramburu’s reign was followed by the shortlived governments of Arturo Frondizi, José María Guido, and Illia, who was finally deposed in 1966 by general Juan Carlos Onganía and his men. In a country already plagued by authoritarianism, Onganía would bring an unprecedented level of repression and terror, particularly against communism. A pivotal example of his repression occurred on July 29, 1966, when police raided various departments in the University of Buenos Aires, beating students and professors alike (*Breve historia* 170). This act of aggression is even more significant in light of the fact that the university setting had become Argentina’s one main island of democracy—or “isla democrática” (*Breve historia* 172)—by the late 1950s. At the same time, censorship had also become culturally ingrained and sexual in nature, as suggested by the fact that, as Romero reports,

La censura se extendió a las manifestaciones más diversas de las nuevas costumbres, como las minifaldas o el pelo largo, expresión de los males que, según la Iglesia, eran la antesala del comunismo: el amor libre, la pornografía, el divorcio. (*Breve historia* 171).

This helps shed light on why, how and to what extent sexual repression continued to live on long after Eva Perón’s death and demise—and thus why neither *Santa Evita* nor *El beso* may be understood in view of just one government. At the same time, Onganía’s
extreme authoritarianism is, curiously enough, precisely what enabled Perón to come briefly back into power after his protracted exile in Spain. The accusations that Onganía was excessively authoritarian culminated in Córdoba in May of 1969 when a student protest was disrupted by the Army. Between twenty and thirty people were killed, over five-hundred were injured and another three-hundred detained (*Breve historia* 176). This infamous “Corobazo” (as it was nicknamed) initiated a wave of social mobilization that ended with a curious (false) polarization between “el poder autoritario” (authoritarian power) and “el pueblo peronista” (*Breve historia* 181). Thus, by the beginning of 1970 Onganía was taken out by the military and replaced with Roberto Marcelo Levingston. Levingston was not very well known, and, as it turned out, had his own ideas about how to run things. Consequently, he remained in office only a short while.

In 1973 Héctor J. Cámpora became president, on June 20th Perón was welcomed back to Argentina, on the 13th of July Cámpora and his vice-president renounced their power, in September new elections were held and Perón and his new wife, Isabel (neé María Estela Martínez) were elected with 62% of the votes. Of course, Perón only enjoyed his newfound power for one year before dying. At this moment, his highly unstable wife, Isabel, who was the official vice-president, became president of Argentina, bringing the country to unprecedented levels of chaos. As Romero explains, Isabel

[…] se lanzó a construir una base propia de poder, rodeada de un grupo de fieles, de escasa tradición en el peronismo, que encabezaba la extraña y siniestra figura de José López Rega, a quien apodaban “El Brujo” por su gusto por las prácticas esotéricas. […] Isabel se propuso homogeneizar el gobierno, colocando a amigos e incondicionales en los puestos clave y rompiendo una a un alas alianzas que había tejido Perón, que en el futuro esperaba reemplazar por otras nuevas con los militares y empresarios. […] En 1975 la crisis económica urgía a tomar medidas drásticas, que terminarían de liquidarlo: los problemas de la balanza de pagos eran muy graves, la inflación estaba desatada, la puja distributiva era encarnizada y el Estado estaba totalmente desbordado (*Breve historia* 200).
In effect, Isabel’s government was so chaotic and destructive that even many peronists anticipated her fall and almost everyone, regardless of political affiliation, welcomed the military coup that displaced her. As Romero puts it,

Muchos peronistas se convencieron de que la caída de Isabel era inevitable, y pensando en el futuro prefirieron evitar divisiones, acompañándola hasta el fin, el 24 de marzo de 1976, cuando los comandantes militares la depusieron y arrestaron. Como en ocasiones anteriores, el grueso de la población recibió el golpe con inmenso alivio y muchas expectativas. (Breve historia 205).

Yet, sadly, the “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional” (or the “Proceso” for short) led by General Jorge Rafael Videla and later by Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera would bring unprecedented terror, corruption, violence and repression to Argentina. As Luis Alberto Romero, Paul H. Lewis Marguerite Feitlowitz and many others explain, the Army (much like Franco in Spain) employed a rhetoric that likened the country’s problems to a cancer that threatened to quickly spread and thus, it envisioned the solution through metaphors that equated the Army to the surgeon who would remove the sickness, tumors or cancer (that is, everyone from Communists and Socialists to Peronists and Jews) as efficiently as possible. Unfortunately, this meant that the cancer/dissidents and even potentially “cancerous cells” would need to be completely eradicated or eliminated through the implementation of an extreme degree of terror. As Feitlowitz reveals, “It is no accident that official ‘germ theories’ concerning ‘subversion’ yielded a host of tortures bearing medical names” (A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture 50).

As Romero explains (Breve historia), the administration of terror was divided into four crucial stages or moments--sequestering dissidents, torturing them, detaining them and executing them (208). Of course, in an effort to eradicate the cancers of the country or round up potential “dissidents” a variety of methods were used including unlawful
surveillance; at the same time, these unlawful kidnappings, murders, etc. were covered up through the Army’s denial that these activities had ever taken place. Indeed, all of the executions were clandestine. As in Franco’s Spain, the bodies were burned in fosas colectivas (collective/mass graves) and effectively disappeared (Breve historia 210).24

In its spirit of utter erasure, the Army developed a sophisticated series of euphemisms to refer to its clandestine and highly illegal activities, many of which were borrowed from the Nazis. In fact, the so-called “Enfermería” (infirmary) was, as Marguerite Feitlowitz explains, “[…] a central hall with three or four small torture chambers, all decorated with swastikas” (A Lexicon of Terror 55). The most important of these euphemisms is, perhaps, the term “desaparecidos” (the disappeared) since it not only reflects the Army’s utter lack of responsibility (inasmuch as its passive construction “the disappeared” implies no subject or agent), but also the deep tie between the terror of the Proceso or Dirty War and that employed by the Nazis. As Feitlowitz more adequately describes it, “The concept of individuals made to vanish originated with the Nazis, as part...

24 As Romero summarized it, “Fue un verdadero genocidio. La comisión que las investigó documentó nueve mil casos, pero indicó que podía haber muchos otros no denunciados, mientras que las organizaciones defensoras de los derechos humanos reclamaron por 30 mil desaparecidos. Se trató en su mayoría de jóvenes, entre 15 y 35 años.” (Breve historia 210)

25 To name just as few of these (as recounted by Marguerite Feitlowitz in A Lexicon of Terror): “Terapia Intensiva” (Intensive therapy) meant “torture”; “Asado” (barbecue), referred to the bonfires of burning bodies at night (53); “La Cacha” was a “nickname for La Cachavacha, a television witch who made people disappear. The name of a camp in Buenos Aires Province” (53); “Rectóscopo” (rectoscope) was an anal torture device (58); “Comida de Pescado” (fish food) referred to prisoners thrown from planes with their stomachs slit open (55); “Vuelo” (flight) meant death flight. “Death-flight duty was rotated to virtually all officers, who were ordered to load desaparecidos onto planes, undress them, and throw them into the sea” (60); “Huevera” (egg carton) was a torture chamber “whose walls were lined with egg cartons to blunt the sounds” (55); “Submarino” (submarine) suggested a “Form of torture in which the prisoner’s head was held under water befouled with urine and feces” (59); “Submarino seco” (dry submarine) referred to a “Form of torture in which the prisoner’s head was covered with a plastic bag until he was about to expire. He would be unwrapped and allowed to get his breath, so torture could continue” (59); “Quirófano” (operating theatre) meant “torture chamber” (57); “Avenida de la Felicidad” (Avenue of Happiness) was “The corridor that led from the tubes to the operating theatre” (53); “El Olimpo” (Olympus) was a “Camp in Buenos Aires named by Lieut. Col. Guillermo Minicucci. In the main ‘operating theatre’ there was a sign that said: ‘Welcome to the Olympus of the Gods. Signed: The Centurions.”’ (56); and finally, “Trasladar” (to transfer, move) meant “to take prisoners away to be killed” (52). As Feitlowitz adds, “For survivors of the clandestine camps, trasladar carries more terror, more grief, than any other single word” (52)
of the doctrine of Night and Fog. ‘The prisoners will *disappear* without a trace. It will be impossible to glean any information as to where they are or what will be their fate.’ (Marshall Keitel, explaining Hitler’s decree to his subordinates.)” (51)

In effect, it is important to consider the repression, erasure and even the euphemisms of the Dirty War not only because Martínez himself was affected by it and writes Santa Evita after it had ended, but also because, as we have seen, the terror, erasure and even euphemisms reflected in the Army’s pre-Dirty War dealings presage this terror. More generally, the novel not only points beyond itself, spatially, temporally and even textually, but the multi-temporal dimension of the novel can is reflected in the wanderings of the corpse itself. Indeed, the corpse’s instability not only functions as a literal symbol of exile (and thus, reflects the novel’s ability to transcend the spatial borders of Argentina), but it also signals the novel’s ability to transcend the specific time period. As other critics of *Santa Evita* have noted, the novel presages the disappearances associated with the Dirty War not only through its use of (sub)-texts and other features but also through the Army’s obsession with burying Evita’s body and thus suppressing and erasing her legacy throughout Argentina. As Jason Cortés astutely observes,

Como se sabe, Walsh, cuyos escritos de inclinación comprometida y de denuncia cuestionan la realidad política de la Argentina de los años setenta, fue una de las muchas víctimas de la “guerra sucia” durante los años del “Proceso” argentino. La imagen del escritor “desaparecido” anticipa la desaparición del cuerpo de Eva Perón, el cual a su vez, como señala Zuffí, “marca las conexiones con las futuras ‘desapariciones’ en Argentina” (872). Si consideramos que en su cuento “Esa mujer” Walsh, como se nos indica en el texto, decide iniciar la búsqueda del cuerpo, podríamos inferir que en *Santa Evita* Martínez intenta recobrar las voces desaparecidas como resultado de las dictaduras militares. (“Obsesiones necrófilas” 345)
Now that we have a good idea of the histories and subtexts surrounding the novel, Peronism and Evita’s life, it will help for us to take a closer look at the contradictions that she embodies and her analogous yet equally ambiguous rise to sainthood.

**The Making of a Myth:**

*For I am the first and the last.*
*I am the honored one and the scorned one.*
*I am the whore and the holy one*
*I am the wife and the virgin [...]*
*I am the barren one, and many are her sons [...]*

*I am the bride and the bridegroom.*
*And it is my husband who begot me...*
*I am the silence that is incomprehensible...*
*I am the utterance of my name.* --*The Thunder: Perfect Mind*

Given our extensive analysis of Evita’s history, life and her own writings, this quote (from the “Gnostic Gospels”), describing the female deity or “feminine” aspect of God would appear to almost perfectly describe the adoration, fanaticism, scorn, disgust and general image surrounding the figure and legacy of Evita in Argentina. Indeed, if this quote fits the highly ambiguous Evita in life, as the saintly whore, the passive transgressor and the motherless Mother of the Patria, it becomes her far more so in her death, far more so as a myth. In truth, Evita’s influence became even more acute in death largely because it was in death that she was capable of fully emptying herself out—and thus absorbing whatever society wished to project onto her. And yet, for this very reason, her corpse becomes a mirror-like weapon whose very passivity reflects back or returns the violence meted out on it back on its “violator”—in much the same way that a master of Aikido uses the power and violence of his attacker against him. This paradox is symbolically expressed through the extremely ironic fact that Evita’s lifeless corpse, in
its pure materiality, simultaneously becomes a symbol of spirituality not only through its “saintliness” but, more crucially perhaps, through the mystical “curses” and “blessings” that it bestows on all those who come into contact with it or simply attempt to “know” it.

Evita’s ambiguous nature manifests itself on various levels. First, it reflects the contradictory titles, images and descriptions attributed to her by different people. As Luis Alberto Romero reports,

Confrontaron dos versiones antagónicas e igualmente estilizadas, frente a las cuales el verdadero personaje se fue esfumando: como ha mostrado Julie Taylor, a la Dama de la Esperanza se contrapuso la Mujer del Látigo, dos versiones de la misma imagen de la mujer y de sus funciones, elaborada por las clases medias, de la cual unos y otros pretendían apropiarse (Breve historia 121).

Yet, at the same time, Evita’s incongruous reception reflects the internal tensions within all Argentine subjects on an individual, perhaps even subconscious level—as reflected in the Army’s ambiguous love-hate relationship with her corpse. Though the very existence of Evita’s embalmed corpse and its resistance to being buried renders it, particularly from the Army’s perspective, a monstrous transgression (as the corpse becomes a symbol of death’s attempt to invade and fuse with life), the Army is nevertheless both repulsed by its ‘monstrosity’ and intensely attracted to it. As suggested by one officer’s need to lock himself in his attack with the corpse and compulsively masturbate on it (the same officer who ends up killing his own wife and himself), the Army becomes obsessively attached to it. It is little wonder then, that they all go mad.

Of course, Evita’s chaotically ambiguous status is, in addition to these factors, largely symbolic of the contradictions that, as noted earlier, define Peronism--and which Evita integrated into her own discourse, as reflected in her speeches and writings, particularly in La razón de mi vida. And finally, her contradictory image is true to her
own ambiguous nature, since, much like Perón, Evita is not only inconsistent and self-contradictory but she intentionally crafts an image of herself predicated largely on lies, omissions and erasures. This image necessitates repressing much of her own personal past of which she is acutely ashamed. Not only is she, like Perón, the product of an illegitimate union in a highly Catholic and conservative country, but she is also a woman who, despite her saintly pretensions, led a life of undisputed promiscuity before meeting Perón. The fact that her promiscuity led to a botched abortion (and her consequent infertility) only reinforces the tensions that define Evita—for though she becomes the ultimate “Mother” of the poor, she herself cannot and does not have children of her own.

In reality, we have already analyzed many of Evita’s self-imposed contradictions-among others, we have seen that in her very attempt to appear exceptionally humble and self-sacrificing, Evita precariously borders on displaying extreme pride. With this in mind, it is not surprising that though her ostensive humility would be appreciated by some groups as just that (humility), many others, and specifically, those capable of penetrating beneath the surface of her rhetoric, could find it false or even offensive. More problematically still, in order to play “Mother” to the descamisados, Evita unstably positioned herself as their equal while also asserting her superiority to them. Though Evita, the defender of the poor, accordingly demonstrates a certain degree of pride in her modest background (thus, helping her to self-identify as a woman of the “pampas” or “pueblo”), on the other hand, she sets herself above them by suggesting that, as Mother of the Patria, she not only sacrifices more but has a greater capacity to feel pain, injustice and thus, to sympathize with others. This capacity to raise herself above the poor or
distinguish herself from them is reflected, on a physical level, through her bleach-blond hair, her snow-white skin and, perhaps most importantly, her exceedingly elegant attire.

At the same time, her contradictory self-construction is also manifest in the way in which she both attacks the elite oligarchy while also attempting to imitate them not only through her attire and manners but also through her speech. On the one hand, she consistently belittles the elitist oligarchy who, she claims, is not only the ultimate Enemy and oppressor of the poor but is incapable, for all its verbal and rhetorical elegance or sophistication, of ever being as verbally moving or sincere as her illiterate descamisados. On the other hand, she sets herself apart from the oligarchy not only through her highly, almost “inappropriately” passionate speeches but also by employing her own series of names and codes. To some extent, these linguistic innovations may reveal Evita’s need to highlight, respond to and rebel against the oligarchy’s more hypocritical and corrupt use of language. Evita herself intelligently notes the hypocrisy implicit in the oligarchy’s manipulation of euphemisms—and, in particular, she launches an incisive critique of their use of the word “descender”, (La razón de mi vida 71-73), a euphemism used by the oligarchy as a way of expressing scorn for the “descamisados” and specifically, Evita’s need to stoop to their level by befriending them. As she indignantly notes,

> La gente oligárquica, que cree que ‘desciendo’ por tratar con los obreros, aprendería mucho de ellos y tal vez—aunque esto lo digo sin ninguna esperanza--, tal vez ‘subiría’ un poco en honradez y en dignidad.” (La razón de mi vida 72).

In this light, Evita’s employment of her own series of codes and names analyzed earlier gains even greater, more radical significance. And yet, even in her subversive critique of the oligarchy, Evita’s contradictory nature comes to the fore, especially considering that, despite all her resentment of oligarchic pretenses and snobbery, she
dedicated an inordinate amount of time to learning to “speak properly”. As is well known, she was intensely ashamed of her working-class background, particularly inasmuch as it was reflected in her undeveloped and unrefined vocabulary, speech and overall literacy. At the same time, Evita’s emphasis on passion and emotion, as evidenced both in the content of what she said and the way in which she said it, rendered her highly contradictory in light of her various attempts to defend herself against accusations that she was overly sentimental or “cursi”. She responded to these attacks by affirming, “Tal vez porque mi más profundo sentimiento es el de la indignación ante la injusticia, yo he conseguido hacer mi trabajo de ayuda social sin caer en lo sentimental ni dejarme llevar por la sensiblería”(101)—adding that her love (for Perón and the Patria) had nothing to do with “sentimentalism”(134).

And yet, if anyone could be accused of sentimentalism or *cursilería* it was Evita. In any case, though Evita’s passionate speeches and writings distanced her from the oligarchy—to some extent, purposefully—they were, to a great degree, counteracted by her longing to disguise her working-class roots and education. As Michael Greenberg notes,

[…] despite the ostentation of her Jewels and Parisian gowns, and her absurd, invented queenliness, she too was a descamisada who had come to Buenos Aires with nothing, like them. (“A Descamisada Diva” 4).

Aside from the fact that these contradictions betray Evita’s blatant hypocrisy, they also reflect the degree to which both in her personal and political life, Evita’s self-constructed ‘divinity’ or sainthood is, much like Peronism, predicated on erasure. In this light, the novel’s focus on “Santa Evita” is highly appropriate given that Evita and, more specifically, the myths that surround/“make her” both presage and become emblematic of the unprecedented erasure that would explode during the “Dirty War” of the 70s and 80s.
Indeed, “Evita”, by expressing the ambiguities, erasures and contradictions of Peronism and of her country, in the present, past and future, and in life as well as (and even more so) in death, almost monstrously unites the mystical dimension of erasure with its more repressive, materialistic side. As we have seen, a close look at her works reveals many rhetorical parallels with the most important female saint in Hispanic tradition—Sta. Teresa de Jesús. Despite their differences in motivation, these parallels help explain why Evita becomes so easily sanctified—and even more so, in light of her innumerable other “saintly” attributes, many of which Martínez explicitly notes in his novel (183-205).

Among other examples, Martínez notes the fact that she died when she was thirty-three, was a self-sacrificing Robin Hood of the poor “Fue el Robin Hood de los años cuarenta” (186), rose from absolute anonymity to “a throne in which no woman had ever sat” (183), was enormously adored and fetishized, “para mucha gente, tocar a Evita era tocar el cielo” (193), innumerable people wrote about her (as previously addressed), made musicals about her (Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber), sung about her and much more. Even the fact that Evita is hated and demonized by so many Argentines helps her, in a counterintuitive way, to become a saint—for, after all, one of the defining features of sainthood is persecution. In addition, as Michael Greenberg notes,

To the growing cult of “evitistas” her cancer seemed to clinch the argument for her sainthood. She not only gave to the poor, the argument went, but like Christ she embraced their rounds, taking on their pain as if it were her own. Evita encouraged this interpretation; to understand the people, she said from her sickbed, one must “become one body with them, so that every pain, every sorrow and worry, all the joys of the people is as if it were ours. This is what I did… in my life (“A Descamisada Diva” 7).

And yet, as I will soon analyze in more detail, her cancer also made her, in a somewhat subversive way, not a saint but a monster, specifically in the eyes of those who
loathed her. It represented a sickness, an unnatural deviance or a ‘cellular mutation’ that threatened to spread throughout the body of Argentina, destroying the Patria from within.

On the other hand, and in a far more conformist way, Evita was, indeed, somewhat of a monstrosity--for whereas Evita developed a rhetoric that made her (appear to be) the empty abject, passively absorbing side of Divinity, Perón, as God Himself, was portrayed as Divinity’s actively injecting side. As a careful analysis of her propaganda reveals, Evita, even more than becoming one with her descamisados, “becomes one” with Perón. Or rather, if she unites with the descamisados, it is through their common purpose or ability to “become one” with Perón as they blindly follow his lead.

As we have seen, Evita achieves this by both representing Perón’s passive polar opposite and, more generally, by emptying herself out for him. In this way, she becomes remarkably ambiguous, for, as we will continue to see, though she transgresses the boundaries of her race, class, and even the frontier between life and death, on the other hand, Evita not only reinforces certain artificially constructed and highly repressive dichotomies, but, in particular, her treatment of gender is both highly subversive and equally conservative. The conformist way in which she embodies and promotes gender binaries is evident not only in her belief that women are the passive, self-sacrificing counterparts to their active, competitive men but, above all, in her belief that whereas women are highly mysterious, emotional and intuitive, men are rational. She notes,

Cuando la gente suele atribuir ‘intuición’ a las mujeres como virtud misteriosa, no se acuerda que nosotras tenemos que ver las cosas, las personas y la vida de una manera especial. Nosotras sentimos y sufrimos más el amor que los hombres. En nosotras la inteligencia se desarrolla a la sombra del corazón y por eso la inteligencia no se ve sino a través de los cristales del amor. Y el amor, cuyo misterio sí que es infinito, le hace ver la inteligencia cosas que ella nunca podría conocer por hábil que fuese. Los hombres no sienten ni sufren tanto el amor como nosotras las mujeres. Esto no necesita demostración. (43).
In truth, even Evita’s reluctance to demonstrate her points with argumentative rigor—as evidenced by her frequent use of statements such as, “Esto no necesita demostración” (43) o “No me interesa sin embargo la crítica” (144) etc.—reinforces this dichotomy between the emotional, intuitive woman versus the active, rational male. Yet, more critically, her ability to embody the quintessentially passionate, loving, and intuitive woman is what enables her to complement Perón, as (according to Evita) he makes social reforms while she cures the “dolor” (or pain) of the “pueblo” (La razón de mi vida 92). Though Evita clearly (almost subversively) values and elevates the faculty of emotion, she is equally adamant that it belongs exclusively to the sphere of female knowledge—and thus, it is ultimately subordinate to the rational sphere of men and leaders. On the one hand, her self-proclaimed incapacity for logic is reflected in her admission that,

Yo solo podía concebir soluciones caseras, resolviendo problemas a la vista, soluciones simples y no complicadas teorías económicas; en fin, soluciones patrióticas, nacionales, como el propio pueblo que debían redimir” (20).

And yet, it is her almost “supernatural” pretense of “just knowing” or “feeling” the truth that enables her to effectively rally the people to blindly believe in Perón as they would in God. As Evita tells it, “Yo sabía poco pero me guiaba mi corazón y mi sentido común” (20). Though she admits that, as a mere woman, she cannot fully comprehend or rationally defend why she believes in Perón, she is entirely confident in and, indeed, absolutely certain of her ability to just “feel” the truths that Perón stands for. Ironically, it is thanks to this very flaw or weakness that Evita effectively underlines her divine relationship to Perón; for, in reality, she demonstrates unwavering “faith” in Him (Perón) in very much the same way and to the same degree that Santa Teresa expresses absolute
faith in God. If either one of them could rationally verify or comprehend this faith, it would invalidate or detract from the very potency or authenticity of such faith.

Throughout *La razón de mi vida*, Evita emphasizes her special ability to “feel” the truth (rather than arriving to it through reason) by consistently referring to it between quotations marks—for example, she states, “[…] cuando yo estoy absolutamente convencida, cuando ‘siento’ claramente que la idea tiene que salir bien, me lanzo a realizarla a pesar de todos los augurios: ¡y son las mejores realidades de mi vida!”(41). In support of this argument, she further adds, “Recuerdo que alguien en una oportunidad me preguntó: ‘¿Por qué confió usted en mí la primera vez que habló conmigo?’ Yo no supe darle una respuesta lógica. Si le hubiera dicho la verdad debí responderle: --Porque ‘sentía’ que en usted era posible confiar.”(*La razón de mi vida* 42). In fact, Evita dedicates an entire chapter of her book to the importance and power of “intuition”.

To summarize, Evita’s intensely emotional, loving, intuitive features not only enable her to further support and complement Perón but they simultaneously elevate her to an almost saintly status—for in addition to expressing a “saintly” degree of faith in her God /Perón, Evita also demonstrates an almost psychic or supernatural (female) talent “to feel”. This attribute enables Evita to become the supreme symbol of female altruism since her capacity to feel not only permits her to convey a deep degree of faith as well as an equally great knowledge or wisdom (albeit of an irrational kind) but, moreover, this emotional faculty, as Evita tells it, is what enables her to sympathize with the poor and thus, to become inspired and motivated to help them. Of course, in the process, she not only espouses a highly repressive, traditional and dichotomous view of the woman’s role in the world, but she affirms an even more pernicious stereotype regarding women—
namely, the idea that they are intrinsically and unalterably mysterious. In short, by affirming an intrinsic bond not only between femininity and emotion but, accordingly, between femininity and the irrational-psychic-mystical counterpart to masculine reason, Evita supports the highly repressive idea that women are enigmatic by nature. And yet, this idea is both further reflected and undermined throughout the novel, *Santa Evita*. By focusing on Evita’s corpse, the novel juxtaposes the two great “mysteries” of Western Culture—namely, death and femininity. As Sabine Schlickers keenly observes,

> Para Sigmund Freud, la muerte y la feminidad eran los dos enigmas mayores de la cultura occidental. Elisabeth Bronfen advierte que el cuerpo femenino representa en el discurso psicoanalítico dos momentos diametralmente opuestos: absoluta confirmación y absoluta desestabilización del sujeto (Bronfen, *Over her dead body* 23). Mientras que el cuerpo maternal simboliza unidad y atemporalidad, los genitales primarios femeninos simbolizan una falta, castración y fisura, y representan tropos de decadencia, enfermedad y muerte. En *Santa Evita*, estas imágenes no se inscriben solo a través de estas asociaciones metonímicas, sino también literalmente: Eva, que no fue madre, sufre de un cáncer de la matriz y los médicos le extirpan el útero. (“Autorreflexión erótico-estética: *Santa Evita*” 117)

And yet, as we will continue to see, the novel itself turns “Santa Evita” into a receptacle of both death and rebirth in ways that Evita herself could not have foreseen. Admittedly, Evita does, in fact, become a receptacle of death for the Army—and yet, it is important to consider that she becomes a receptacle of death for them not only because of their unwillingness to overcome their egotistical and perverse drives (reflected in their treatment of her corpse), but also because, in their sublime misogyny, they themselves view women—and especially the female body and genitalia—as incomprehensible, mystifying symbols of death, lack and erasure. Consequently, for the Army, Evita’s corpse cannot possibly function as anything more than a receptacle of death.

On the one hand, the idea that Evita should embody not only the “enigmas” of femininity but also of death is appropriate given that she herself not only subscribes to
many of the same misogynistic dichotomies that the Army does, but, what is more, she happily empties herself out for her husband, Perón. This idea that she becomes the maternal receptacle of death gains even more weight when we consider that, in a sense, Evita becomes negatively “reborn” on the day that she meets Perón. Just as Santa Teresa or any mystic might describe the mystical experience as one of rebirth (in which one empties oneself out in order to be filled with Godliness), Evita conveys her initial encounter with Perón in analogous terms. And yet, whereas the mystic foregoes the Self (or rather, the façade of a false Self) for the ultimate Otherness of Divinity, in so doing, he or she supposedly unites with and affirms a truer Self which is also not only the absolute Other but also one’s own inner Other (that which is strangely familiar).

By contrast, Evita’s self-erasure reinforces the Self/Other dichotomy insomuch as she represents herself as bleeding out her own ego not so much to affirm a truer, deeper self, but to affirm and absorb the identity of a very specific Other—Perón. In relationship to Perón, Evita portrays herself as a mere vessel, voice or shadow. Yet, the rhetoric that characterizes Evita’s divinization of Perón is so consistent that she, following the pattern of mystics, describes her union with Perón as one which simultaneously enables her to connect or unite with the collective Other (which she equates with the descamisados).

Following the rhetorical model of mystics, Evita claims that it was from this day on (the day she met Perón) that she, the reborn Evita, began her ‘true life’.

Todos, o casi todos, tenemos en la vida un ‘día maravilloso’. // Para mí, fue el día en que mi vida coincidió con la vida de Perón. // El encuentro me ha dejado en mi corazón una estampa indeleble; y no puedo dejar de pintarla porque ella señala el comienzo de mi verdadera vida.” (La razón de mi vida 21).

And yet, rather significantly, even here, she depicts her transformation or rebirth in terms of a great sacrifice.
En aquel momento sentí que un grito y su camino eran mi propio grito y mi propio camino. // Me puse a su lado. Quizás ello le llamó la atención y cuando pudo escucharne, atiné a decirle con mi mejor palabra: Si es, como usted dice, la causa del pueblo su propia causa, por muy lejos que haya que ir en el sacrificio no dejaré de estar a su lado, hasta desfallecer. // El aceptó mi ofrecimiento. // Aquél fue “mi día maravilloso”. (La razón de mi vida 23)

Though the novel, Santa Evita, reflects the various ways in which the Army (ab)-used Evita, in accordance with her own self-effacing view of rebirth--thus rendering her (body) a receptacle of death--on the other hand, by demonstrating the false assumptions and prejudices that underlie this (ab)use of her corpse, the novel simultaneously deconstructs and gestures beyond the prejudices, misogyny and dichotomies that characterize not only the Army and Evita but Argentina as a whole. In so doing, it reconstructs or at least envisions a new type of Argentina—one that is symbolized by the plurality of voices and inter-subjective relationships that constitute the novel itself. This becomes further evident in light of the following quote by Georges Bataille,

[T]he violence which by striking at the dead man dislocates the ordered course of things does not cease to be dangerous once the victim is dead. It constitutes a supernatural peril which can be ‘caught’ from the dead body. Death is a danger for those Left behind. If they have to bury the corpse it is less in order to keep it safe than to keep themselves safe from its contagion. (Eroticism: Death and Sensuality 46)\(^{26}\)

This quote is almost perfectly suited to the novel, Santa Evita, as Evita’s body does just what this quote suggests that dead bodies do—it contaminates, curses and kills all who come into contact with it. In this respect, Evita’s corpse possesses the subversive quality of transgressing the boundaries between life and death. Indeed, the transgressions

\(^{26}\) I should add, however, that recent Lacanian work demonstrates that it is sexual division itself that makes death inevitable for all complex organisms.
of Evita’s body and, more specifically, its capacity to deconstruct dichotomies, becomes even more evident in light of the fact that she died of cancer. As Jason Cortés suggests:

Por un lado, la noción del contagio está imbricada a la enfermedad, es decir, al cáncer que de buenas a primeras es la causa principal de la muerte de Eva Perón. En cierto sentido, el cáncer es la enfermedad que devora y destruye el cuerpo de Evita, pero también refiere de manera implícita la enfermedad del estado (Davies 418). La malignidad del cuerpo, por otro lado, tiene su raíz en el hecho de que Evita es mujer, en su feminidad. De hecho, el cáncer del cual padece Evita devora precisamente su sistema reproductivo y sexual, lo que de algún modo representa un ataque a su feminidad. En este caso, la feminidad como tropo discursivo recuerda la mortalidad, pues se muestra como recipiente de la enfermedad. (“Obsesiones necrófilas” 340).

Thus, though Schlickers is correct in suggesting that Evita’s corpse interweaves the central enigmas of femininity and death, as Cortés’ quote helps us see, in a strange sense, the corpse both reflects the prejudices and dichotomies of Western culture and especially Argentine culture, while also transgressing and deconstructing the very lines or dichotomies to which it refers. In short, though Evita’s cancer, death and vacant womb render her--and, above all, her corpse--an even more perfect symbol of the abject, the mysterious and the dead-ly (as Schlickers notes, all of these attributes--her femininity, her death and her lack--symbolize, in Western discourse, the mysterious and the abject), on the other hand, Evita’s vacant womb also makes her somewhat monstrous. She is monstrous not only because she threatens to contaminate the living male (both through her femininity and her death) but, more importantly, because, as Julia Kristeva suggests (Powers of Horror), her death crosses over into the realm of life--a transgression reinforced by the fact that Evita’s corpse is not only embalmed and thus resists death, but, more crucially, refuses to be buried and thus, fully separated from life.

27 Cortés, rather tellingly, also cites the above quote by Bataille, which he uses as the heading to his article “Obsesiones necrófilas”—albeit without ever directly explaining its significance.
The corpse’s lack of a womb renders it further monstrous inasmuch as its absence of a womb detracts from its femininity. To be exact, though Evita’s cancer, death and lack of a womb may be viewed as enhancing her femininity (specifically in the sense that they render her more abject, terrifying and mysterious), they also make her less feminine precisely insomuch as females are defined by their wombs—and, more specifically, by their reproductive abilities. In short, it is for both reasons (Evita’s excessive femininity as well as her insufficient femininity) that the corpse becomes, particularly for the Army, a monstrosity. And yet, despite its truly monstrous capacity to serve as a negative receptacle of death, it is through its very monstrosity or transgressions that it serves, potentially, as the ideal vehicle of positive rebirth. As in the other works examined in this thesis, the monster of “Santa Evita” is only monstrous because it is viewed as such.

Though Evita’s corpse becomes more monstrous in death than Evita herself in life, Evita, whether willingly or not, defies and conflates numerous supposedly natural boundaries and categories while alive. For starters, the cancer that eventually kills Evita makes her ‘repugnantly transgressive’ even before she dies. As Hughes Davies observes, She suffers from cancer, which is not just a death sentence but, according to Sontag, also ‘obscene in the original meaning of that word, ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses’. This is precisely how her enemies see her. Cancer has been described as the ‘barbarian within’, a metaphor for what is more ‘ferociously energetic’, an ‘insult to the natural order’. The disease of Evita’s body becomes the disease of the body politic: the one is invaded by cancer cells, the other by the wild hordes attracted by her. Eva’s disease is corporeal, an insult to the senses […] (“Portraits of a Lady” 418)

Indeed, Evita’s cancerous body literally reflects and anticipates the way in which the internal enemy of the state (that is, the Enemy within the borders of Argentina itself) will be envisioned and described, particularly throughout the Dirty War, in reference to medical metaphors which liken this enemy to a vicious cancer. And yet, while reflecting
the ‘cancer’ of Argentina as a whole, Evita’s cancerous nature also becomes a metaphor for her own subversive transgression of racial, gender and class lines, among others.

Despite her highly submissive and traditional views regarding women, Evita’s extreme passion makes her both ultra-feminine and dangerously un-feminine. In effect, Evita’s passion, though it helped reinforce the dichotomy between the emotional woman and the rational man was so colossal that it almost made her seem “masculine”—as it not only revealed great courage and inner strength but an acute aggression “unbecoming” of women. Moreover, unlike a “proper”, civilized woman, Evita displayed her passion in a very active and public way—and, in so doing, the president’s wife rather monstrously became a “barbarian”. Indeed, Evita’s aggressively and publicly passionate discourse not only transgresses gender lines, but, just as significantly, social ones. At the same time, however, Evita’s passionate style (in the tradition of Sarmiento), also unwittingly undercuts her own explicit intentions or content—that is, to the extent that her emotion undermines the traditional, even misogynist content of her sermons and writing. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Evita, despite her explicit desire to pass off as the passive shadow of Perón, was just as much his leader as his follower—so much so that her death proved catastrophic for his government. As Hughes Davies notes,

Her unseemly background in illegitimacy and provincial squalor may suggest a ‘natural’ vocation in prostitution, but by marrying the future President she violated the natural order. For the writer, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, her fatal sin was to disturb the gender balance by dominating Perón: ‘En realidad, él era la mujer y ella el hombre’ (p.184). Her colossal will-power also suggests masculinity while her status as a latter-day Joan of Arc places her alongside one of the most deviant women in history. Her speeches, though devoid of substance, are spell-binding even to a scientific ear (Ara, p.44). Their often violent imagery and naked passion made Perón’s rather pale by comparison. Her disease extends to language where her ‘dicción indecisa entre el arrabal y la cursilería’ (p.215) is recognized even by the untutored cinema projectionist, Chino Astorga. Her contagious subversiveness infects her followers, who have the ability to overturn
conventional meanings: ‘Los descamisados no rechazaron por completo la
invectiva, pero dieron vuelta su sentido. Evita era para ellos la yegua madrina, la
guía del rebaño’ (pp. 22-23). Her embalmed body invokes not the marvels of
science but more the possibilities of magic (p. 27) (“Portraits of a Lady” 418).

Clearly, by crossing gender boundaries Evita became subversive on a variety of
levels. Most notably perhaps, her marriage to Perón enabled her not only to invert gender
dichotomies since, as Hughes Davies asserts, she (a woman) ends up controlling him (a
man), but just as crucially, her marriage enables her to transgress social and class lines.
On the one hand, Evita’s marriage to Perón elevates her to a higher social class, which, of
course, would be viewed by conservatives as a betrayal of her “natural” place in the
social order. On the other hand, after climbing up the social latter, Evita then “descends”
back down (as the elite themselves refer to it) both intentionally and perhaps, to some
extent, unintentionally. Though, as we have seen, Evita purposefully “descends” to the
level of the descamisados in an effort to win over their trust, she also inadvertently
“lowers” herself through her inability to fully conceal her rural, working class education,
as suggested by her rough, somewhat unsophisticated diction. In short, in terms of class,
Evita is doubly defiant, for she not only transgresses her lower-class roots by “marrying
up”, but she also betray her upper-class status by descending back down.

The “snow-white” Evita becomes doubly defiant on a racial level as well. On the
one hand, her bleach-blond hair is suggestive of Evita’s desire to literally erase her own
Spanish roots in an effort to become anglicized—perhaps even Americanized, as implied
by her adoration of actresses such as Bette Davis (who is named in Santa Evita as Evita’s
ultimate aesthetic idol). Of course, this would render Evita contradictory not only given
her ostensive scorn for everything American or even non-Argentine, but even more so
given her desire to “descend” or become one with her beloved descamisados. Evita also
defies her white race not only by associating with the *descamisados* (a.k.a. ‘greasers’ or ‘blackheads’), but also through her excessive, almost aggressive passion, which, as said, was generally viewed in Argentina as being more characteristic of “barbarians” than of ‘civilized’ white people—and even less so of *white* females. As Greenberg maintains,

> Her “captivating whiteness,” as Martínez calls it, would become one of the salient aspects of her myth and of her power. To those who adored her it was emblematic of her frailty, her glamor, and finally, her saintliness. To her enemies it was a confusing source of intimidation; while attracting them, Evita’s fairness also suggested a sort of primeval racial betrayal. “The Black Book of the Second Tyranny”—published by the junta after the 1955 coup that deposed the Peróns, in an effort to exorcise their memory from its virtually ungovernable domain—pays Evita unwitting homage: “That strange woman was different than almost every other white woman. She was vehement, dominating, and spectacular…[with] a passion and courage unnatural in a woman. (3)

Among other reasons, this quote is highly powerful not only because it clearly delineates the ways in which Evita betrays her race, but in the process, it suggests how the dichotomies between male and female, white and non-white, civilized and savage are interrelated. Still more importantly, it implies that in authoritarian Argentina of the late 1950s the dichotomies on which “civilization” itself depends are not extended to the so-called “savages”. To be precise, the fact that Evita’s dominating, passionate courage is viewed as a transgression not simply because she is a woman, but even more so because she is a white woman implies that non-white “barbaric” people are perceived to be less concerned with maintaining these dichotomies, particularly with respect to gender.

Even if this is not a completely accurate perception, the fact that it is believed to be true highlights the degree to which the series of dichotomies endemic to Argentine authoritarianism take root in a far earlier discourse surrounding the urgency of making Argentina a “civilized”, “proper”, “developed” country. In an effort to do so, a new and civilized Argentina must distance itself from the supposedly chaotic and disordered world
of the savages. Evita, by transgressing not only gender dichotomies but racial, class and others, submerges herself in this world of chaos. It is little wonder then, that she was, while loved by many, equally abhorred and reviled by others.

And yet, what must have been most perplexing (and, indeed, infuriating to Evita’s critics and enemies), was Evita’s capacity to blur the very lines between sainthood and heresy—which she does in both positively subversive and disturbing ways. On the one hand, the fact that she employs an almost mystical rhetoric to describe her relationship to Perón would be considered not only blatantly heretical to conservative groups but equally misguided and repressive to liberals. In short, this mystical discourse was potentially offensive to both liberals and conservatives alike. And yet, it was also highly effective among various sectors of society—so much so that it helped elevate Evita into sainthood.

On the other hand, Evita’s ability to achieve saintly status despite her promiscuous past and humble origins, while a monstrosity to conservatives (and perhaps especially religiously conservative groups), does, in fact, render her quite subversive. By collapsing the dichotomy between saint and whore Evita (as “Santa Evita”) offers a more humanistic, open and realistic model for female (or even human) behavior, as it acknowledges the complexity of the human condition—perhaps especially for females. And yet, for some, Evita’s juxtaposition of these two extremes only adds to her contradictory and highly ambiguous nature. As Hughes-Davies explains,

[…] as well as deviance Eva also embodies her own opposite, the Virgin Mary, who represents the redemption and triumph over the sin and decay introduced by Eve. As Sebreli puts it: ‘Ella es la misma, la diosa madre, y a la vez la mujer demonio, la mandrágora, la manta religiosa’ (p.107). The circumstances of Evita’s death are significant, since they are reminiscent of Mary’s. Marina Warner points out that there was no knowledge of Mary’s grave, no body to venerate, no relics to touch: ‘The disappearance of Mary’s body[…] inspired the most fertile imaginings […] For the symbol of purity could not rot in her grave.’ Mary is
placed from the start outside the feminine realm of material time and bodily decay and inside the masculine symbolic realm of eternal unchanged forms. In both her negative and positive incarnations Evita encroaches on the masculine sphere. Even her subversiveness blurs into its opposite, submission, since her feminine mutability that threatens the male appears to be neutralized in her immobility as an embalmed, cleansed, and purified corpse. The dying Evita, who implored her mother to ensure that no one should see her naked body, becomes the defenceless focus of the male gaze […] ("A Portrait of a Lady" 418-419)

And yet, it is important to note that Evita’s “defenseless” body is not completely passive or defenseless for, precisely as a mirror of the Other or the male gaze, it effectively turns the gaze, the violence and even the contradictory impulses of he who gazes, rapes, urinates on or otherwise desecrates the corpse back against that very gazer/violator. Thus, the corpse’s weapon of defense is, as I briefly suggested earlier, its very own passive “defenselessness”. What is more, Evita’s paradoxical ability to gain power through her self-erasure or even death mimics her correspondingly subversive ability in life to become more important and powerful than Perón through her rhetoric of sacrifice, self-degradation, submission and erasure. Though Evita raises Perón high above herself and all humanity, in so doing, she leaves him without a mystical model to follow. In truth, one of the reasons Perón cannot attain the saintly status that his wife achieves is because, as the leader/God of his country (and of Evita), he does not have recourse to a suitable mystical rhetoric. After all, “God” Himself cannot employ the passive and sublimely humble language of mystics--for to do so would be inappropriate.

Yet, the paradoxes and ambiguities that surround Evita’s self-effacement in both life and death do not end here. We must not forget that Evita, in addition to her paradoxical affinity for self-deprecation and erasure becomes further ambiguous insomuch as she is also a very liberating figure—and thus, a dangerous one. Just as her portrayal of gender is both repressive and liberating, so too is her use of Christian
rhetoric—and her corresponding saintliness. In a fairly obvious yet perverse way, we have seen that Evita manipulates Christian rhetoric and content as a means of justifying Perón’s authoritarian power. In addition to likening Perón to God, one of the primary ways in which Evita manipulates Christian rhetoric is through her disturbingly conformist and traditionally repressive understanding of femininity and especially female sacrifice. And yet, she also uses Christianity in ways that enable the concept of sacrifice to gain a more genuinely altruistic flavor—in direct contrast to Franco’s and Perón’s egocentric notion of sacrifice (which is predicated, largely, on the sacrifice of an Other).

Indeed, it is not only Evita’s mystical rhetoric but her apparently sincere ability to sacrifice herself for the Other that make her more suited to attaining mythic, saintly status than her husband. Even if Evita’s notion of sacrifice was flawed for the very reason that it was limited to women, Evita herself was relatively faithful to her Christian understanding of sacrifice. As Michael Greenberg tells it (“A Descamisada Diva”),

[…] she didn’t content herself with the bestowal of gifts. “I saw her kiss those who were suffering from TB or cancer,” said an observer. “I saw her embrace people who were in rags and cover herself with lice.” Other witnesses confirm these claims. Fraser and Navarro quote a Catholic poet who watched Evita at work at the Foundation and saw her “touch the most terrible things with a Christian attitude that amazed me…placing her fingers into [people’s] suppurating wounds. There was a girl whose lip was half eaten away with syphilis and when I saw that Evita was about to kiss her and tried to stop her, she said to me, “Do you know what it will mean when I kiss her?” The poet goes on to credit Evita with curing him of his “literary perception of the poor,” allowing him “to become a Christian in the profoundest sense. (5-6)

In truth, Evita, for all her horrible, manipulative, repressive and even hypocritical attributes, admirably relates sacrifice to the need to follow the model of her Christian messiah rather than using Him as a scapegoat28. Of course, the fact that, within Evita’s logic, women are the ones who must sacrifice themselves for men is contradictory given

28 That is, rather than using His Self-sacrifice as an excuse for ‘sinning’/sacrificing an Other.
that the ultimate model of sacrifice to which she refers is the Sacrifice of Jesus himself—a God/Man. This contradiction is, however, not only in keeping with Evita’s, Perón’s and even society’s more general proclivity for contradiction29, but it boldly underlines why Perón (ironically, by virtue of being a man) could never become as saintly or important as Evita. Perón’s own contradictory discourse and beliefs (as filtered through Evita) prohibit him from following his messiah’s model of sacrifice.

Yet, despite the fact that Evita’s and Perón’s notion of female self-sacrifice is both contradictory and repressive—as it is largely intended to keep women in passive, subordinate, traditional roles—, Evita, not only through actions but through words, nobly equates sacrifice not with passive resignation but with the courage of the martyr who is willing to fight for what he believes in rather than cower in fear. Her courageous understanding of sacrifice coupled with her own resilient ability to overcome the immense hardship and suffering that she endured throughout her life not only subversively implies that women themselves must be valiant and strong but is vividly expressed in the following quote in La razón in which she compares the poverty of the poor (oppressed by the rich), to her own humiliating encounters with her detractors:

> Esto fue lo peor de mi calvario por la gran ciudad! La cobardía de los hombres que pudieron hacer algo y no lo hicieron, lavándose las manos como Pilatos, me dolió más que los bárbaros puñetazos que me dieron cuando un grupo de cobardes me denunció gritando: --¡Esa es Evita! […] Por cada golpe me parecía morir y sin embargo a cada golpe me sentía nacer. Algo rudo pero al mismo tiempo inefable fue aquel bautismo de dolor que me purificó de toda duda y de toda cobardía.(27).

On the one hand, this quote reveals the extent to which Evita almost likens herself not just to any saint but to the Messiah himself—and thus, though she

subversively crosses gender boundaries by comparing herself to him she also exposes the

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29 This contradiction is, in fact, fully consistent with the gender role imposed on women versus men by the institutional church and patriarchal society.
paradoxical and excessive pride she takes in her own sacrifice and humility. And yet, this quote also demonstrates Evita’s ability to rightly acknowledge the degree to which suffering, degradation and sacrifice may all productively contribute to one’s ability to appreciate, feel and care about others—and thus, through this suffering become positively ‘reborn’. In spite of Evita’s innumerable negative qualities, she did seem to truly care about the poor, and undoubtedly, her own suffering and humiliation throughout life helped her in this capacity. One of the more laudable, even progressive ways in which Evita uses Christianity is evidenced in her following attack of the oligarchy, for whom, the gates of heaven will be difficult to enter, “[…] las puertas del cielo son muy estrechas para todos los ricos. ¡Estrechas como el ojo de una aguja!”(121). Conversely, she reminds her audience that God is with the poor, “[…] lo quiero a Cristo mucho más de lo que Ud. Cree: yo lo quiero en los descamisados. ¿Acaso no dijo Él que estaría en los pobres, en los enfermos, en los que tuviesen hambre y en los que tuviesen sed?”(119).

She then uses this rhetoric to bolster her more general argument that there are poor people only because there are rich people. She declares, “La mayoría de los hombres y las mujeres saben que hay pobres porque hay ricos pero lo aprende insensiblemente y tal vez por eso les parece natural y lógico” (14-15). Indeed, the fact that Evita became important not only to the poor but to many marginalized groups is essential to keep in mind, as Martínez himself continually suggests throughout Santa Evita, where he even equates Evita with “the last fart of barbarism”.

It is important to consider that these particular aspects of Evita also become, as we have seen, sources of extreme anxiety, particularly for the military men who in trying to tame/control her, only tamed, encage and weakened themselves. The fact that they

30 Of course, the Perón’s own personal, even hypocritical enrichment seriously undermines Evita’s rhetoric.
have paranoias about being “cursed” by her body or by the notion that it may have secret powers that exists beyond death highlights the degree to which Evita did come to represent not just the material but, paradoxically, the repressed spirituality of military men and society in general. It is through Evita’s function as mirror that the very urge to make her purely material turns the men themselves into mere animals devoid of spirituality. The men who violate her literally ejaculate out all the repressed spirituality they have onto Evita herself rather than keeping it for themselves. Even as mere material object, Evita’s body is powerful since, precisely as a blank slate, it forces the men who try to control her to face what they are: empty, fearful, alone. To summarize then, the search for origins/control becomes an obsession not only because the Woman is devalued and objectified but also because she becomes, precisely as such, extraordinarily powerful.

With this in mind, one last aspect of Evita worth considering is her ambiguous role as both passive, sacrificial woman but also as deceitful seductress who uses men to get ahead—and in particular, military men. As previously mentioned, masculine desire (conceived as the active urge to dominate) cannot be separated from feminine desire—which, though theoretically passive, is also fearful and, in a way, selfish. In this light, it is worth considering that even the young girl, Yolanda (who obsesses over Evita’s corpse and calls it her “doll”), represents the selfishness and isolation of Argentine identity. More importantly, both types of desire (“masculine” and “feminine”) are, precisely inasmuch as they do not conceive of healthy, reciprocal love, ultimately self-destructive.

As previously mentioned, just as the military men are undone by their desire to control Evita, Evita’s manipulation of men also ultimately backfires, for she is betrayed not only by the army but by Perón himself. In this way too, she serves as the ideal mirror
of Argentine chaos, contradiction and sickness. In reality, Evita’s life was extraordinarily ironic not only because it was, to a great degree, her very powers over men that largely “did her in”, so to speak, but also because it was, above all, military men that she used to promote herself or to get ahead in life. Yet, it was military men who most desecrated and betrayed her in death—and not just men like Colonel Koenig, Arancibia and the rest of his corrupt military but, most ironically of all, her own husband, Perón. Despite his promise to protect her corpse, he leaves her body naked and vulnerable to the unsettling wiles of madmen and perverts. In this way, Evita becomes the perfect, most empty vessel onto which the rest of the country may project their solitude, fears and madness.

In summary, Evita is, in almost every aspect of her life, being, works, and reception highly ambiguous. Not only is Evita’s use of Christianity overwhelmingly corrupt but the fact that her notion of self-sacrifice, even to the extent that it is truly altruistic, applies mainly to women makes Evita’s treatment of sacrifice ultimately more repressive than liberating. Sadly, Evita’s promotion of self-sacrifice requires not simply renouncing worldly pleasure but also, much like the ‘panther women’ from El beso, it entails selling one’s ‘soul’/Self. Because Evita becomes a national icon, her ‘original’ sacrifice, following the legend of the Cat People, almost vampirically spreads.

Inasmuch as Evita is the self-proclaimed shadow of Perón, Perón’s own notion of sacrifice appears to be predicated on the sacrifice of women (Others) for men (the Self/Patria). Either way, Evita’s ability to represent and care for the poor and blur boundaries or transgress dichotomies makes her a truly complex figure—and thus, the ideal symbol or reflection of her country’s own contradictions. In truth, it is for her positive as much as her negative attributes that she becomes the obsession not only of the military but of
all Argentina. Yet, in the end, all the military can hope to find is the chaos Evita represents—that is, *their own* chaos and contradiction—staring them back in the face.

In the face of all this ambiguity, however, it is neither Evita nor the Army who is ultimately responsible for remolding the future. Rather, it is the text’s ability to re-appropriate Evita in more radical ways that matters most—yet this can only happen through the engagement of its readers. As Sabine Schickers notes,

> Al igual que Blancanieves para el príncipe, Evita, una vez muerta, se vuelve un objeto deseado, un fetiche, incluso para los militares que la odian y desprecian. Pero al contrario del príncipe, que se apropia de Blancanieves con su Mirada, en *Santa Evita* los hombres se apropan físicamente de su cadaver”(117).

On the one hand, Schlickers is perceptive in detecting the solid link between Evita and Snow White. Indeed, in addition to becoming the ultimate female fetish and, more generally, a symbol of feminine passivity and erasure, Evita, who herself was noted for her porcelain skin also shares the additional quality of becoming more important as a myth (or in the case of Snow White, a fairytale) than as a real person. And yet, it is for this very reason that she can also be used, particularly via the novel in highly subversive, pluralistic ways—ways that encourage the exact opposite of fetishistic, egotistical relationships. Thus, what Schlickers neglects to consider is that, though the Army temporarily appropriates Evita’s body, there is no closure, no happy ending. And yet, while the military, unlike “Prince Charming” is incapable of bringing the corpse back to life, Martínez effectively revives her. As Schlickers herself observes, the novel not only helps Evita to “come back” in “millions”31 but its ability to achieve this is reflected in the palindrome of EVA/AVE/VEA that the text constantly plays with. She states,

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31 As Martínez observes, “En *La razón de mi vida* se lee esta frase misteriosa: “Pienso que muchos hombres reunidos, en vez de ser millares y millares de almas separadas, son más bien una sola alma”. Los mitólogos pescaron la idea al vuelo y transformaron los millares en millones. “Volveré y seré...”
Sin embargo, el orden narrativo parece ser solo a primera vista caótico y desordenado: El primer capítulo comienza el día de la muerte de Eva Perón en 1952. Desde este punto cero, el tiempo narrado se bifurca, reflejando estructuralmente el palíndromo EVA/AVE (64) y refiriéndose al mito del Ave Fénix y el eterno renacimiento (Kopp 187) (65). Es como si el narrador jugara con el anagrama, diciendo VEA para referirse a la clave del texto en otro de los tantos comentarios autorreflexivos: “[…] esta novela se parece a las alas de una mariposa—la historia de la muerte fluyendo hacia adelante, la historia de la vida avanzando hacia atrás […]” (65) De hecho, el primer hilo accional pertenece a la odisea del cadáver de Evita y al intento del narrador de reconstruirla. El Segundo hilo se presenta en contrasentido: trata de la vida de Eva Perón, cuando tiene 33 años, hasta terminar en el penúltimo capítulo con su infancia y otro cuerpo muerto, el de su padre. (“Autorreflexión erótico-estética: Santa Evita” 114)

In truth, the metaphor of the butterfly is central to this novel in more than one way. To begin, it not only as serves as the quintessential symbol of rebirth (since butterflies, by nature, transform out of mere caterpillars into colorful winged creatures who can fly) but a type of rebirth that is deeply liberating. Not only are butterflies capable of flying (and thus, symbols of freedom), but because they can fly they represent the instability and plurality of the text (Santa Evita) as well as Evita’s analogous ability to evade or, as her name suggests, “evitar” (avoid) being buried, defined or pinned down to one meaning, place or time. The fact that one of the butterfly’s wings points towards the past while the other points towards (or symbolizes) the future is crucial not only because the two wings represent the novel’s ability to go backwards and forwards both with respect to Evita’s own personal life as well as the past and future of Argentina, but in so doing, the novel suggests that the past, present and future are deeply interrelated.

millones>>, promete la frase más celebrada de Evita. Pero Ella nunca dijo esa frase […] Pese a que la impostura fue denunciada muchas veces, la frase sigue al pie de los afiches que conmemoran todos sus aniversarios. Nunca existió, pero es verdadera.”(Santa Evita 66). This quote is significant for several reasons. First, it indicates that the myths surrounding “Saint Evita” are as much as a reflection of her country and what others think of her as they are of her own life. And yet, as the final words of this quote suggest, “Nunca existió, pero es verdadera”, in the final analysis, it does not matter that Evita didn’t really say “Volveré y seré millones”—for the very fact that these words were attributed to her is what matters most. Indeed, the very reason that they are true (that is, the very reason that she is able to return “as millions”) is because she returns as something more than her(historical)self.
Indeed, the fact that the two wings are attached to the same body implies that the past, present and the future are utterly inseparable. In this sense, the butterfly, like the novel itself, embodies both “mystical time” and “exilic space”—that is to say, it reveals the extent to which exile itself, despite temporarily alienating, even destroying the subject, can be ultimately and potentially liberating and unifying. Not only does the non-space of exile enable a multitude of places, times, voices and perspectives to unite, but, as we have similarly seen in previous chapters and works, by robbing the individual of a stable identity or place to which he or she belongs, the symbolic death and alienation implicit in exile ultimately frees the individual to define him or herself in more meaningful, complex and plural ways. As Hughes Davies suggests, “The motion and drama of her [Evita’s] life are suggested by the butterfly maneuverings of the text, which moves nimbly from citation to citation, from perspective to perspective, representing in its own body some of the drama and excess characterizing Eva herself.” (419). He adds,

The historical Eva, who refuses to stand still for Martínez despite his attempts to freeze her image by action replay (p.192), has been subsumed within another timeless, mythical being who represents the myriad longings and recollections of others […] She is removed from the everyday reality of time and place, occupying instead a sphere that is ‘sin tiempo y sin lugar’ (p.11) (“Portraits” 417)

With all this in mind, Evita, as the “butterfly” that Martínez helps resurrect, not only represents the liberating paradoxes and richness of exilic (non)space and mystical time(lessness), but she represents, above all, the vast and unifying identities, meanings and memories that can emerge precisely from the emptiness of erasure. Indeed, the fact that the term “Butterfly” was initially coined by the Army as a pejorative nickname for Evita reflects degree to which Martínez effectively transforms or “rebirths” Evita by injecting her (names) with radically different, expansive, and liberating meanings. Like
the wandering butterfly, Evita—if not as a person, certainly as a myth—is everywhere and nowhere, everyone and no one, nothing in reality, and yet everything in potential—that is, everything that we writers and readers allow her to be. It is precisely in this capacity that “Saint Evita”, the butterfly, positively and unambiguously attains sainthood (or the sanctity of erasure) as she is resurrected not as her(historical)self but rather “as millions”.

In reality, the novel itself gestures towards both the positive and negative outcomes of terror and exile, for while Evita, the mere corpse, becomes the monstrous demon of death for the Army, Evita, the butterfly, becomes the redeemer of anyone who can see her, appreciate her and resurrect her as such. This does not mean that we must forget, neglect or attempt to disguise the historical Evita by projecting ourselves onto her. What it does mean is that the national and transnational identities that “Santa Evita”, as a symbol, has come to represent depend on and reflect who we are, were and will become as writers, readers and survivors in life. Perhaps this constitutes the novel’s greatest paradox: though Evita’s embalmed corpse expresses the desire to control, fixate and even stop time or eternalize one moment in time (much like the Captain’s shattered pocket-watch in El laberinto) Evita’s body, in its embalmed, eternal state, ends up representing its exact opposite—namely, the fluidity, plurality and unity of time. Yet, this is only possible through Martínez and his readers’ ability to reframe and remake her.

**A Language Beyond Language, A Text Beyond Text, A Time Beyond Time, A Space Without Boundaries**

In *Santa Evita* ambiguity functions through language, structure and metaphor in apparently contradictory ways. In a critical sense, it reflects the chaos endemic to
authoritarian Argentina, a chaos heightened by the experience of “exile”, whether literal or figurative. Yet it also functions as a place of hope. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, fiction is the best vehicle for resisting authoritarian narratives or “official stories” precisely because it is ambiguous, creative and open by nature. In this way, it contests the monolithic, official stories reflective of authoritarianism as well as the concept of language as an essentially masculine tool of control. Yet it does so not simply by destroying language and meaning but by showing how identity, meaning and language, through its very ambiguity/plurality, may become a place of rebirth and reconnection. That is, language and storytelling become, rather than simply a means of authoritarian or masculine control, a place where various voices/identities intersect. It is, moreover, a place where future and past are re-membered within the present.

Analogously, the fact that the corpse and its copies wander throughout the world in a scattered disarray helps break down the false dichotomy between the National Self and the dreaded “Other”. The fact that the body resists being buried not only offers hope but it is what enables the novel as such to be written. As we have seen, linguistically, this exile is reflected not only in the novel’s pluralistic layering, but in its subversive use of names. This is, perhaps, most efficiently suggested by the fact that the etymological roots of “Evita” indicate that her name, like her body, resists being limited to one ultimate meaning, cage or resting place. The paradox is intensified if we consider that the name “Eva” evokes the primordial woman, Adam’s wife. Thus, the paradox lies in the very fact that the “Root of all roots” or “Mother of all humanity” (Eve) avoids being named, tamed, or controlled. While, on the one hand, this resistance to meaning drives

32 While most men approach “exile” by becoming more hyper-masculine, narcissistic, controlling and empty, the ultimately liberating plurality of the text itself also arises from exile, both textual and literal
33 As Martinez notes within the novel itself, “Evitar”, in Spanish, means “to avoid” (Santa Evita 131).
the military mad (and provokes even more chaos), on the other it provides hope precisely because it offers, as Root of all roots, endless possibilities. In this light, the seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of “Evita(r)” and “Eva” is actually quite natural. The problem is that the military (and, in fact, the vast majority of society) fails to see it as such.

On the other hand, the possibility of hope is itself ambiguous, in part, because rebirth is stimulated through a confrontation with “death”; that is, with the void that emerges from authoritarian terror and repression and is exacerbated by factors such as the trauma of displacement. It is, moreover, vital to consider that the authoritarian impulse itself develops out of the desire to impose order on chaos, ambiguity, plurality and language itself. Yet, as Santa Evita suggests, this imposition of order backfires in the sense that it generates even more chaos as well as a form of plurality that is repressed, isolated, and disconnected. Historically, much of this “chaos” emerges, in Argentina, out of the rapid social change and immigration that occurred in the early 20th century—a change that not only reinforces and generates Nationalist, exclusionist and even authoritarian impulses but which, as we have seen, is greatly magnified by the series of transient and unstable authoritarian regimens that define Argentina from the 1930s to 80s.

These facts, combined with the nationalist drive rooted in federalism and the church, and aided by nascent ideologies of anti-semitism, among other influences, helps clarify why chaos could lead to either a disconnected, egocentric “Tower of Babel” type pluralism or a unifying pluralistic rebirth. As David Rock points out, “The Nationalists became most powerful in periods of extreme political strain or breakdown, particularly

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34 (conceived of as the juxtaposition of the sword and the cross). This is important to consider as, in many ways, this symbol reflects the fact that, according to David Rock, “The Nationalists considered their movement an embodiment of the ‘spiritual’ over the ‘material’, whose mission was to prevent ‘the breakdown of the country’s spiritual unity’”. Paradoxically, of course, neither true unity nor spirituality are achieved by this split but rather further isolation, egotism, chaos and death.
during the eleven military coups in Argentina between 1930 to 1982” (*Authoritarian Argentina* 244). In a similar vein, Edward Said observes that, “all nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement” (*Reflections on Exile* 176).

Though we must be careful not to conflate authoritarianism and nationalism, it is this very same estrangement that, in the context of authoritarian Argentina not only heightened ambiguity but also reinforced the separations explored throughout this thesis. This estrangement helped spawn a deranged and paradoxically egocentric/exclusionary sense of unity as well as trends of historical revisionism and even mysticism that were themselves perversely exclusionary. In fact, each of these concepts (unity, revisionism and mysticism) are, themselves, highly ambiguous and they can, depending on how they are envisioned or construed, lead potentially to freedom, true unity and rebirth or, on the other end of the spectrum, to further exclusions, repression and terror.

35 Obviously, we must be careful not to conflate nationalism with authoritarianism; particularly in the case of Perón. Though Perón perfectly embodied the nationalist drive for a spiritual revolution rooted in (false) unity, a good dose of anti-semitism, the degradation of women, and the centrality of the army in imposing order, he also resisted certain aspects of nationalism (for example, his ambiguous relationship to the church, his accusations of being, paradoxically, both socialist and capitalist, not to mention too foreign-oriented and modern—in spite of his hatred and distrust of foreigners and particularly Americans and his equally strong desire to unify). On the other hand, it is equally crucial to consider that the authoritarian impulse both in Argentina and elsewhere could not have existed without strong nationalist drives. In particular, the ties between authoritarianism and the military in many ways mirrors and even evolves out of the tight connection between nationalism and the military as well as nationalism and the church (see, *Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History and Its Impact*).

36 This is reflected in Isabel Perón’s insanely dichotomous and exclusionary espousal of Spiritualism—which she used, apparently, not only as a justification for oppressing various “dissident” groups and sectors of Argentina but as an excuse to wholly disregard and demean reason in favor of pure “spirituality”.

37 The Christian mysticism and spiritualism popularized by the Nationalist movement in Argentina encouraged both the degradation of the material world as well as females, Jews and Others. Though the citizens were conceived of as forming part of one (National) mystical body, this mystical body was still limited to the Nation, and what is more, was conceived of as having “one head”, which should govern the corresponding parts. (Of course, this “head” was conceived of as the authoritarian leader himself). Moreover, though friendly towards historical revisionism, Argentine Nationalism used this school of thought not to question oppressive, traditional readings of history but rather to manipulate history even more; for example, by erasing everything “ugly”, unwanted or subversive, as seen, above all, in *Santa Evita*. The myths that were popularized to replace actual history are, in many senses, similar to the myths around which *Santa Evita*, both as novel and “saint”, were created (and which, as a novel, it critiques). On the other hand, *Santa Evita*, as a totality, explores the flip side of historical revisionism precisely through its capacity to ultimately use linguistic/narrative ambiguity in a positive, liberating, unifying way.
In reality, the notion that nationalisms already embody some sort of estrangement (and even more so under the auspice of authoritarianism) reinforces the idea that the roots of authoritarianism lie not only in the dichotomies dating back to the time of Sarmiento and even earlier, but, more generally, in socio-cultural as well as political chaos. Chaos and estrangement not only plant the seeds of authoritarian attitudes and governments but are further intensified by the actual implementation of authoritarian terror—which itself is magnified by the consequent experiences or states of exile it produces, both external and internal. And yet, it is this very estrangement that, as Santa Evita helps suggest, may also lead to a more positive “rebirth.” Santa Evita focuses, perhaps more than any other text, not only on the possibilities of such rebirth through the ambiguity of language/retellings but also on the dangers of ambiguity and its particular relationship to Argentine terror.

In a negative sense, we might argue that Evita’s ambiguity reflects the absence of a positively unifying discourse in authoritarian Argentina—a lack which, in turn, stimulated an even greater (Nationalist) impulse to pit oneself against the threatening Other. As reflected by the egotism and alienation portrayed in Santa Evita, in authoritarian Argentina there were simply too many different ethnic, political, and other groups (including guerrillas) vying for power and no truly stable, successful political or economic plan attached to any particular regime. Hence, unity was particularly difficult to achieve, as indicated, for example, by Perón’s ability to win most years in power precisely by appealing to so many different groups on both the right and the left, including Nazis and Jews. Yet, as we have seen, this desire to appeal to so many contradictory groups created internal conflicts within his own party, and thus helped
precipitate his own demise; for, in the end, it would be difficult for him or his successors to find a definitive enemy against which to fight, much less any solid alliances.

Despite the fact that when the “Gentleman’s Coup” arrived it was generally welcomed, even applauded, as the fastest and surest way out of the chaos of the Perón regime\(^\text{38}\), the ability of the coup to temporarily legitimize/define itself against the chaos of Peronism was, by necessity, a short-sighted tactic. Thus, to some extent, this “Other” against which the “Process” defined itself (Peronism) was, at least in certain respects, nothing but a mirror, so to speak, of the very void, fears and lack of memory which characterized (post)modern Argentina. In this light, one might imagine the dynamic between these two regimes as two mirrors facing each other, each reflecting nothing but an infinite number of mirrors—that is, (the erasure of) Argentine authoritarian history.

Most importantly however, the novel, as a whole, redefines history, truth and reality by showing how they are multiplicitous and, more specifically, how they function on a variety of levels for a wide array of people. Indeed, it suggests that even though no absolute Truths may be attained, any history or story which hopes to even approximate to meaningful “truths” or “realities” must include both the oral and the written, both history and myth (or the personal and the mythic) as well as accounts from the poor and the rich, men and women, the old and the young, and even, as Martínez puts it, “the delirious ravings of [so-called] losers and madmen”. The fact that the text is multilayered pulls the reader into this plural recreation of the text and, even more so, in the spaces that lie in-between the various characters. Just as Evita’s body and copies are scattered throughout the world, the recreation of identity becomes a global enterprise. This potential for

\(^{38}\) In particular, it was seen as a desperate alternative to Isabel Perón’s pure incompetence.
remembering on a personal, national and global level, hinges on the (in)capacity to reformulate the self in relationship to the wandering/’exiled’ female body/narratives.

With this in mind, it is important to consider that the author, albeit a man, not only becomes “feminized” through his own experience of terror and exile, but what is more, he claims that he was only capable of truly encountering Evita herself (and thus, the novel) through a woman\textsuperscript{39}, thus reinforcing the importance of the feminine aspect to this particular (exilic) type of storytelling. As we have seen, there appears to be an intrinsic link between the multi-vocal account of reality and its attempts to absorb the feminine voice without which there would be no story. The fact that the feminine voice requires a male mediator, author or filter in order to be represented in written language, albeit problematic, is less so in light of the potentially “feminizing” aspects of exile (which Martínez himself had experienced firsthand) as well as his active desire to develop his own “femininity” through his encounter with “the maternal voice”.

Julia Kristeva’s notion of how rebirth happens through the ‘maternal receptacle’, complicates yet clarifies the ambiguous, feminizing function of exile. As the novel conveys how “Santa Evita”, as corpse-myth-novel, actually becomes this receptacle, the novel’s ambiguity is intensified. For the symbolic penetration of the men who desecrate her ends not in rebirth but in madness/death, making “Evita” a ‘receptacle of death’. Yet, Martínez, through his ability to reweave metaphor and language into a less exclusive narrative, approaches such death in a way that enables the novel as a whole to become a “receptacle of rebirth”. Nevertheless, in order for the text to accomplish its life-giving functions, it must include all the ugliness involved in the destruction and (re)construction of national narratives—and thus, its own shadowy opposite (or ‘receptacle of death’).

\textsuperscript{39} He claims, “only when the mother’s voice made me give in was there a story”
It is important to remember that one of the central functions of the text is not just to point within itself at the problems of truth, trust and language but also to point beyond itself—that is, to the text’s own limitations, to all that is left unsaid, and, more concretely, to the oral histories, rumors and other means of communication to which the novel itself can only imperfectly and somewhat superficially elude. Despite the intimidating power of official histories and language, and despite their efforts to erase the voices of women, the poor, and, more generally, the marginalized and the oppressed, these official, written histories cannot, ultimately, silence the oral histories, rumors and voices that continue to be passed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, from father to son. Nor can the dark, repressive side of “historical revisionism” stop the rumors that circulate, for better or worse, within a variety of public and private spheres/communities.

These oral stories, traditions and rumors, even if they remain unrecorded in official texts or documents, will continue to be heard and felt in the privacy of homes and in small, isolated communities or “pueblos” as well as in a more public, national, political and far-reaching way. After all, these stories, though their direct or immediate influence is felt in an almost exclusively personal, familial or small communal fashion, as Martínez suggests, they will influence the way these people vote, think and act. In this sense, they hold power and influence on a highly political and public level. Last but not least, they will continue to affect listeners and readers in all parts of the world who themselves will use these voices to recreate their own stories or “Evitas”. Of these stories, the stories will remain most powerful are stories like Santa Evita--stories that not only tell a story but invite their readers to partake in the reconstruction of past, present and future.
Chapter 5:
The Awakening

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When Muhammad said, “All men are asleep and when they die they will awake”, he meant that everything a man sees in this life is of the same kind as that which one sleeping sees; in other words an apparition that requires interpretation.

--The Bezels of Wisdom 196-197

Of all the works examined in this thesis, Alejandro Amenábar’s film, *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (1997), stands out as the most jarringly different, and, indeed, as the most outright perplexing. It not only inverts and conflates past and present, self and other, reality and fantasy, male and female but it does so in a way that radically challenges our assumptions about reality, time, truth and selfhood. Appropriately, this film is the only work that represents themes such as exile, rebirth, and monstrosity through the futuristic nightmare of virtual reality rather than retrospectively, through the paradigm of authoritarianism. Yet, in so doing, *Abre* not only sheds light on the more contemporary and global dimensions of border subjectivity, alienation, authenticity and exile, but in its attempt to “look ahead” it subtly yet powerfully uncovers the enigmas, memories and ghosts of an authoritarian past cloaked and repressed by the mask of oblivion.

In the process, *Abre* enables us viewers to acknowledge the extent to which the past, present and future are just as profoundly interconnected as self and other, fantasy and reality, and even male and female identity. In the tradition of the other works studied in this thesis, the film’s narrative is driven by the need to re-member the past, which in turn, requires a confrontation with one’s own inner monstrosity—symbolized by the protagonist, César’s monstrous face. Yet, ironically, the past can only be fully revived and understood by plummeting into the (post)virtual future that Amenábar imagines.
In its dizzying journey through space and time, *Abre* not only interweaves dream and reality but previous traditions of film and literature, both national and transnational, ancient and contemporary, while suggesting, much like the other works featured in this thesis, that it is only through understanding others and one’s relationship to them that one can understand oneself. And yet, the disintegration and fluidity of identity portrayed in this film is, like its ability to utterly dissolve the frontiers between fantasy and reality, unmatched by that of any other film or text addressed in this thesis. Not even *El espíritu*’s sophisticated exploration of identity is as radically fluid as that encountered in César’s virtual world. César’s immersion in his virtual nightmare not only literally and symbolically reveals how different identities are interconnected, as César’s love interest, Sofía, morphs into Nuria (his psychotic ex-lover), and as his own face erratically projects flawlessly handsome features and hideously deformed ones; but, more importantly, it explores the extent to which all these characters and their mutability are reflective of César’s own alterity and monstrously repressed connectedness to each one of them.

In the highly unstable world of virtual fantasy, people not only transform into one another in accordance to César’s desires and fears but, in compliance with Freudian dreamwork, their fluidity is reinforced by the fact that everything they say is unoriginal—that is, a repetition of what someone else said in César’s previous non-virtual “reality” of 1997. Thus, just as the distinction between self and other quickly degrades, the boundaries between past and present, dream and reality are similarly undone. The conversion or debasement of paradise into nightmare constitutes the film’s central apparatus or mechanism which enables all the film’s binary oppositions to explode into their opposite—and, in the process, compels the viewer to question not only the
sustainability of such dichotomies but to also question and redefine concepts typically taken for granted—such as truth, authenticity, desire, selfhood and reality itself.

To summarize, César, who pays to live in virtual reality after his once handsome face is destroyed in a car crash, soon discovers that his dream has turned into a nightmare not because of technical glitches in the VR (virtual reality) system but for the very reason that his virtual reality flawlessly--in fact, all too perfectly--reflects what he believes to be his true desires. The transformation of César’s paradisiacal dream into a hellish nightmare not only highlights the false pretenses of science but it also reveals society’s false assumptions about reality and selfhood, which, ultimately cannot be separated from fantasy and the other. Through his virtual journey of self-discovery César learns that what he falsely mistakes for his desires are, in fact, his deepest fears. Conversely, his deepest and truest Desire is to be connected to others in an authentic, reciprocal and altruistic way rather than through the self-centered and superficial artifices, manipulations and masks on which he has depended throughout his life. Ironically, it is in the exile of virtual reality that César is forced to realize his interconnectedness with others—even his enemies. In fact, the only way he can escape from his alienating nightmare is by confronting and accepting the repressed monstrosity or alterity that he finds in the face of the others—a face, which, quite literally, becomes his own.

The film’s various poetic ironies boldly underline this interconnectedness—specifically as they are manifested in César’s ambiguous relationship to Nuria, the psycho-lover responsible for destroying his face, and Pelayo, César’s best friend turned rival. After César’s accident not only is the relationship between the two youths curiously inverted (as Pelayo plays César’s former role of successful woman-snatcher
whereas César takes on Pelayo’s more pathetic, sexually frustrated and even drunken role), but, more crucially, as César’s self-integrity, superficial contentment and sanity begin to unwind, striking parallels emerge between him and his arch-enemy, Nuria. Yet, to duly appreciate the nuances of these relationships it will help to offer a more extensive plot summary. Though the film is narrated, for the most part, retrospectively, from César’s ‘virtual’ prison cell, rather than following the film’s erratic temporal trajectory (which I will address at a further point), for now I will stick to the film’s chronological timeline, as it permits me to more effectively and concisely trace César’s psychic and physical evolution from a handsome, rich, carefree “don Juan” of just twenty-five years of age to a tormented “monster” and ultimately, to a 175 year-old cyborg/virtual assassin.

César’s journey begins just before his 25th birthday. At this point, César has been orphaned for over 15 years and is relatively disconnected from his father’s business partners, whom, in spite of their intended role as parental surrogates, he resents more than he trusts. Notwithstanding this generational alienation, the young madrileño has few needs that the attractive face and immense wealth and freedom that he has inherited from his deceased parents cannot satisfy. Everything comes easy for this dashing youth who, expectedly, values his good looks, debonair charm and material riches above all else. Yet, though the appearance-obsessed César is largely a product of his society, on the eve of his 25th birthday, the very beliefs and values instilled in him by his society begin to crumble as two women, Nuria and Sofia, dramatically change his life. In the process, César learns that a life built on appearances can fall to pieces, quite literally, overnight.

Ironically, only days after boasting to his best friend, Pelayo, that he never sleeps with a girl more than once and that the “girl of his dreams” doesn’t exist, César meets a
young actress/mime, Sofía, at his birthday party whom he later confesses to Pelayo may, in fact, be “the girl of his dreams”. Yet, adding to the irony, César loses his winsome face the very next morning when he accepts a ride from an ex-lover turned stalker, Nuria. Frustrated by the fact that César is unwilling to pursue a relationship with her, Nuria catapults the car into a concrete wall, killing herself and leaving César’s face mangled beyond repair. Though the wealthy César can afford the most advanced operations, his repeated surgeries are incapable of restoring his severely disfigured face to its former beauty. In fact, not only does César find it impossible to seduce Sofia, but the once obsessively pursued César has, in his futile fixation on Sofía, become a stalker himself.

The pathetically sulking and self-involved César appears to be unaware of these ironies—that is, until he ingenuously attempts to reconstruct a life of appearances through VR. Due to recent leaps in technology, though César is capable of rebuilding his life of illusions just as quickly as his former one fell to pieces (that is, instantaneously, by immersing himself in VR), as it turns out, this world of illusions is far more profound than he banked on. Yet, before we can appreciate the unexpected profundity of VR, we must examine César’s intermediate life—that is, his ‘post-crash-pre-virtual depression’.

Indeed, César’s pre-virtual unawareness of his hypocrisy or the poetic ironies that have already begun to plague this ‘post-crash-pre-virtual’ period of César’s life culminate in a bar when César desperately attempts to woo Sofía by imitating or repeating his initial come-on to her on the night of his birthday party. In the original scenario, after spotting the beautiful Sofía (played by Penelope Cruz), who arrives at César’s party as Pelayo’s date, César flees to her to as a pretense to escape from Nuria, who has shown up to the party uninvited. César immediately begins flirtatiously pleading with her to help him
escape from a crazed stalker (Nuria), urging Sofía to pretend to be discussing something intriguing and to look excited. Though Sofía was initially charmed by César’s advances, his drunken and pitiful attempt to reenact this situation at the bar is an obvious failure. In a way, the viewer may sympathize with his rejection since it appears to be due, in great part, to his disfigured face—a sympathy which is heightened by the fact that César is consistently ridiculed in public where people convey their scorn for him through means as subtle as avoiding eye-contact to shouting insults like “Go change your mask, man!”

And yet, our sympathy for César is mitigated by the fact that his former beauty and wealth yielded him effortless and varied gifts (particularly of the sexual sort) that, for years, he reaped without sowing. In fact, he took them for granted. César’s former success, popularity and overall good fortune were, in a sense, just as unmerited as his newly acquired derision and alienation. The viewer is not only privy to these ironies, but, like Sofía, (s)he may also be put off by César’s inappropriate drunkenness, his stalker-like refusal to leave Sofía in peace (he has, by this point, been following her for weeks) and, above all, by his blind hypocrisy. Indeed, César appears to be remarkably unaware of how ironic his reenactment of their initial encounter is, especially considering that he is now the one pursuing Sofía, who herself needs to be saved from César.

Adding to both the gloom and irony of César’s situation, his misery peaks this very night when he jealously suspects that Pelayo has secretly planned to hook up with Sofía. Though César feels betrayed by both Sofía and Pelayo, in his drunken and jealous stupor he does not seem to appreciate the poetic irony of the situation—for on the night of his birthday César himself was disloyal to Pelayo by pursuing Sofía, who had come as Pelayo’s date. Pelayo, who himself indulged in heavy drinking to deal with the situation
went home early to sulk—and, indeed, his feeling of betrayal was greatly and
legitimately magnified by the fact that César had always had a far easier time picking up
women than the more plain-looking and sexually frustrated Pelayo.

Thus, in many ways, César’s life, even before he enters VR, has already become
inverted. César is no longer the betrayer but the betrayed, no longer the stalked but the
stalker, no longer the handsome, popular, carefree youth but the outcast who, as
suggested by the prosthetic mask he has begun to wear, cannot even show the face that
once granted him so much success. And yet, though César may, to some extent, deserve
this dark twist of fate, society’s mistreatment of him is due not to its appreciation of his
former guilt but to his monstrous bodily appearance. Though César has already begun to
reap the negative “karma” of his selfish behaviors, it is not until he becomes submersed
in his virtual nightmare that he is forced to genuinely face his inner monstrosity. With
this in mind, we can hardly blame César for his decision to live a dream.

Indeed, after his night of heavy drinking, disappointment, humiliation and
betrayal the heartbroken César passes out on the street where he spends the night, and, as
we later learn (in the film’s final minutes), he retreats home and never sees Sofía again.
Rather, after locking himself in his apartment for several weeks, he finally commits to an
eternal dream of her in an alternate (virtual) world in which Sofía professes her undying
love for César, his face is miraculously reconstructed, and his friendship with Pelayo is
similarly and fully restored—that is, before the dream turns into a full-fledged nightmare.

Rather appropriately, it is this same night during which César lies abandoned in
the gutter that is chosen as the ideal moment to splice or superimpose fantasy over reality.
Thus, César’s memory of everything that lies in between, including all knowledge and
contact with the company, Life Extension, are erased. All the César who dwells in virtual reality can remember is that, after passing out on the street, he is awakened by Sofía who greets him with a kiss and the key words “Abre los ojos” (“Open your eyes”), signaling César’s death and rebirth into a new (virtual) world. Immediately afterwards, while he still lies in the street, hung-over, disheveled and deformed, Sofía declares that she loves him. Since most of the film is narrated retrospectively before finally moving forward again as César begins to reexamine his virtual ‘reality’, eventually opting for a final/third option-world-rebirth, we viewers, who follow César on his journey, similarly believe that César’s encounter with Sofía is real—that is, until the film’s final twist unfolds.

And yet, from the very beginning of César’s VR experience, there are clues that something is wrong. Aside from the fact that Sofía’s uncharacteristic declaration of love makes little sense (given her obvious and consistent indifference towards him), the fact that the same surgeons who just weeks earlier proclaimed the futility of further surgery suddenly offer César a completely perfect facial reconstruction seems incredible or even, as César puts it, “suspicious”. Indeed, the first sign that something is off happens the moment that César opens his eyes to virtual reality—for a brief moment, he sees a blurred image of Nuria in place of Sofía, thus presaging the various ways in which César’s subconscious fears and desires will not only control and undermine his virtual fantasy but also highlight the dreamlike interconnectedness of identity that his virtual world reflects.

Indeed, soon after César’s face is restored, his fantasy, supposedly created and controlled by science, transforms into the type of mystical world that one might associate, in religious or spiritual terms, with heaven or hell. Given that César, much like Nuria, enters this “afterlife” by killing himself (as a result of his similar inability to cope with
reality and, in particular, with sexual rejection) it is only appropriate that he encounter
this world as a hellish nightmare rather than the paradise that he falsely believed money
and technology could buy. César’s hypocrisy and corresponding lack of self-awareness
are highlighted not only through the ironic fact that, like Nuria, César has become a
suicidal stalker who cannot deal with rejection, but even his method of suicide ironically
recalls the moments leading up to the crash. Immediately before soaring towards death,
Nuria pops back a handful drugs, at which point César punitively criticizes her decision
to mix drugs and driving before arrogantly adding that he doesn’t need to get high to have
a good time. And yet, after the crash, not only does he need plenty of alcohol but,
ultimately, he too depends on pills to carry himself into another, less material world.

Moreover, following Nuria’s pattern of psychosis, when César’s virtual reality
evolves into a nightmare he kills Sofía (who by this point has become completely
interchangeable with Nuria), thus likening him even more to the vengefully destructive
and mortally jealous Nuria. In short, everything that César believes makes him different
from or better than others is simply a result of circumstance. What is more, everything
that he hates about Nuria is really a projection of all that he hates most about himself and,
to an extent, the world that has molded them. Accordingly, though César rightly blames
Nuria for his physical monstrosity, his true ‘psycho-spiritual’ monstrosity is revealed to
be the work of his own hands. And yet, it is a confrontation with his own monstrosity
(which is also the monstrosity of an-Other/Nuria) that finally saves him. As it turns out,
Nuria not only embodies César’s repressed demons, which he must nevertheless confront,
but she also represents far more wisdom and even virtue than he could have ever
recognized in her or appreciated in his previous “real” life. Moreover, as a female, she
manifests César’s repressed and thus ‘monstrous’ female side. For all these reasons, Nuria’s monstrosity, like César’s, reflects not only an ugly, neurotic, irresponsibly repressed dark side, but also the good or positive alterity that César nonetheless views as monstrous and thus represses or rejects—thereby making it even more monstrous.

In fact, just before colliding with the wall that destroyed César’s face, Nuria asked him two vital questions--questions which, at the moment, César expressed little to no interest in discussing. After taking her pills, Nuria first demanded, ¿Qué es para ti la felicidad?, which she then followed with the even more serious ¿Crees en Dios?, immediately before stepping on the gas pedal that would launch them both into a very different world. Yet, despite César’s blatant disregard for his enemy/Nuria’s questions, these questions reappear in César’s virtual reality in far more potent and relevant ways. César’s own subconscious recycles and privileges them by putting them in the mouth of the more sane, paternal figure, Antonio, his psychiatrist (who, as César later admits, is superficially modeled off of his father). Yet, above all, Antonio is, like everything else, a psychic projection of César and thus, the fact that Antonio is also likened to Nuria is hardly surprising. In short, all of César’s relationships in his virtual world force him, ironically, to explore more authentic and repressed relationships between himself and others—and perhaps especially to more deeply explore precisely those relationships that he has previously chosen to run from, repress or forget, as evidenced, above all, by the virtual reemergence of Nuria (as Sofía) and his father (as Antonio).

At the same time, fantasy and reality are similarly fused since it is only through ‘dreams’ of his former reality, in which César remembers fragments of the repressed past, that he has any hope of escaping/becoming reborn once again into another, perhaps more
hopeful world. Just as the self can only be comprehended in relationship to an Other, it is only by remembering the spiritual/ fantastic world of César’s own buried memories and dreams that he can make sense of “reality”. Inversely, César can only make sense of these dreams by examining and using clues from his own so-called “reality”, which itself turns out to be a dream. To understand how all of this plays out, it will be useful for me to provide more detail regarding the events that lead up to César’s virtual murder and imprisonment as well as his consequent discovery that he is living a dream.

Unmasking the Monstrous

César begins his pursuit of truth from the double exile of a prison cell in his virtual reality where he wears a mask that symbolizes his estrangement from the other characters in his virtual world. Though he does not yet know that he is living a dream, he is distrustful of appearances, of others, and even claims that the floor is the only thing that seems real—and, indeed, it is. Accordingly, though everyone, including his therapist, assure him that his face is beautiful, he insists on wearing a mask, he insists that his face is monstrous.

Yet his real monstrosity, just like his imprisonment and the reason for it (murder), symbolizes a deeper, more soulful stain. Though César is not technically a monster or a killer, he is both since, metaphorically, he makes a habit of killing the alterity that is also his own (symbolized by his “murder” of Sofía/Nuria), a habit which leads to habitual isolation (symbolized by his imprisonment). It is only when this isolation climaxes that César is forced to face the inner monster—and eventually remove the mask. It is fitting then that César’s pursuit of truth begin when he is accused of killing Sofía, whom he claims to have killed because she was not truly Sofía, but rather Nuria, the psychopath.
He even tells Antonio, his psychiatrist at the psychiatric penitentiary where he is locked up while awaiting trial, that he never saw Nuria’s body and that perhaps she never really died in the accident. César also entertains the idea that his estranged business partners, who have been manipulating him from the time his parents died, may be playing an elaborate trick on him to gain control of the company César inherited from his parents.

Aside from the fact that nothing in his reality adds up, he remarks to Antonio that he has been “suspicious” of it almost from moment his life began to turn around. After all, he went from having lost everything overnight to just as suddenly, almost miraculously, gaining everything back, including Sofía, Pelayo and even his face, only to lose it all just as quickly when his monstrous face begins to reappear and Sofía is supplanted by Nuria.

The first time this happens is while he is in bed with Sofía. While sleeping he has a nightmare in which his monstrous face has returned. The startled César goes to the bathroom to examine his face, and after confirming that it is still perfectly handsome, he returns cheerfully to bed. He then gets under the covers to fool around with Sofía, whose body and head are covered by the sheets. Only moments later, however, he notices that her hair is short like Nuría’s and to his absolute horror, he soon discovers that Sofía’s entire body has mutated into Nuria’s. César frantically ties her up, hits her, and demands to know what she has done with Sofía. This woman, who certainly appears to be Nuria, tearfully pleads with César to recognize that she is, indeed, Sofía—and that she loves him.

In the next scene, César is at the police station, attempting to press charges against this woman, whom he claims is attempting to pass off as Sofía and has done something to (perhaps murdered or kidnapped) what he significantly calls the “real Sofía”. Yet, the officer, who has verified her documentation and actual address, not only confirms that the

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1 This moment is, as we later learn, the precise moment he enters virtual reality.
woman who César believes to be “Nuria” is, in fact, named Sofía, but that, for a reason he himself is unable to comprehend, she is unwilling to press charges against César for the physical abuse which she has obviously endured. In light of these hard facts, César’s argument to the contrary holds little weight, especially considering that, as he admits to the officer, he does not even know the last name or address of the woman he claims is Nuria—further reinforcing the film’s poetic irony. As César storms out of the police station, the officer suggests that he see a doctor and that the woman “Nuria” to whom he refers does not exist except in his own imagination—an understatement considering that, nothing exists outside of César’s mind, not even the very officer who conveys this truth.

Immediately after leaving the station, César encounters Pelayo, who rather than sympathize with César’s condition furiously throws him against a wall and fiercely admonishes him for abusing Sofía, the woman he himself once loved. Yet César insists that Sofía is not the “real Sofía” but Nuria. In a frenzy, Pelayo then pulls a picture out of his wallet, featuring César, Pelayo and what appears to be Nuria in place of Sofía (though, as we viewers have witnessed in previous scenes, Sofía was the woman photographed). The horror-struck César cries out that this must be an elaborate trick or scheme (perhaps devised by his “socios”) and he wrathfully pushes Pelayo to the ground, demanding to know if he truly believes that the woman in the photograph is Sofía, the woman of his dreams. Pelayo despondently cries, “Yes! And you stole her from me!”

At this point, César, mystified and miserable, visits a bar. Yet, rather than helping him to numb his sorrow and escape from reality, his trip to the bar, much like his entry into virtual reality, ironically compels him to face the truth rather than erase it. As César sulks quietly in solitude, the French representative of the American corporation (“Life

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2 "¡Sí! ¡Y tú me la robaste!"
Extension”) responsible for offering César his virtual dream sits down at César’s table uninvited. Though this is the same man who César had seen on TV (and thus, had prompted César to investigate the company) César, unable to recognize this man (as his memories of the company have been purged), rudely asks him what he wants. The Frenchman tells him that he must first calm down, overcome his fears and regain control. Yet, as we soon discover, his advice, despite being true, is equally misguided—and thus, essentially false. Though César’s dream has become a nightmare because, as this “talking head” suggests, he lacks control and is haunted by his own fears, the irony of this man’s advice lies in the fact that the subconscious, by definition, defies all control.

Thus, the Frenchman’s counsel highlights the responsibility of both César and the company (L.E.) for creating a nightmare that would never had occurred had science not pretended to control a realm of life that, by nature, transcends it (science). César, clearly offended by the intrusive advice of this strange man, accuses him of being mad—yet, the man counters with the question, “But what would happen if I told you you’re dreaming?” When César insists that he knows what is real, the Frenchman, in a way reminiscent of philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, and Berkeley, virtually all mystics and writers ranging from Borges to Calderón, asks, “How? You don’t know you’re dreaming until you wake up!” He then urges César to look at the people in the bar, but César cuts him off by declaring, “What I want is for them to be quiet—and you too!” At this moment, everyone at the bar becomes silent and immobile. César then cries, “What’s going on here? Somebody tell me the truth!”, to which the Frenchman responds, “The truth? You might not be able to handle it.” Indeed, César is clearly not ready to handle the truth, since just moments earlier this man hand-fed it to him but to no avail. Rather, César
needs to discover the truth for himself if it is to have real meaning and weight. But first, the deranged César must sink even deeper into his downward spiraling ‘madness’.

Curiously enough, right after César narrates this event to his psychiatrist, Antonio suggests that César undergo hypnosis, as he reminds César that he repeatedly calls out an enigmatic name “Eli” in his sleep, which César is unable to recognize. As it turns out, the name Eli is not a name at all but rather the initials (L.E.) of the company Life Extension for which this Frenchman works. Thus, without realizing it, Antonio (as César’s own subconscious representative) establishes a connection between the event César has narrated and the company responsible for his virtual dream. To be precise, after subjecting César to hypnosis, César remembers fragments of reality that were supposedly erased by the company, Life Extension/L.E. In particular, he remembers researching a company, entering its office (at L.E.) and signing documents.

Though, at this point, César is not yet able to identify the company as L.E., he remembers going home, overdosing on pills and waiting to die. These details prompt Antonio to accuse César of being a drug addict, adding that the drugs may have affected his ability to sanely view/interpret reality. An enraged César insists to Antonio that he’s never taken drugs and that his memory of taking pills was nothing more than a dream, ironically yelling, “Don’t you know how to distinguish fantasy from reality? I do!”

Not only does this echo César’s previous assertion to the Frenchman, Mr. Duvernois, but likewise, Antonio’s insinuation that César is incapable of distinguishing dreams from reality is comparable to Duvernois’ suggestion that César is living a dream. This further reinforces Antonio’s role as a mirror/echo of all those people, voices and experiences that are most important to César and, more generally, Antonio’s role as

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3 Duvernois’ statement similarly implies that César cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality.
César’s psychic double. Indeed, it is vital to remember that Antonio not only repeats Nuria’s famous lines, “¿Qué es para ti la felicidad?” (What is happiness for you?) and “¿Crees en Dios?” (Do you believe in God?), but in a climactic final scene, he recycles César’s own advice to Pelayo when the two were playing tennis in one of the first scenes.

César originally used these words of wisdom to make Pelayo feel better about his looks, stating “Many people would change their face for yours. You’re completely normal… You’re like the girls who believe they’re fat and end up becoming anorexics.” Though the context has now changed⁴, as Antonio uses these words to convince César that his face is not monstrous (and that he is not living in a dream, but rather in reality), he nevertheless repeats these lines almost word for word. And yet, ironically, by trying to convince César that he is handsome and that he lives in reality, he proves to César just the opposite. Though, at this point, César has already experienced various moments of déjà vu and, specifically, has heard various phrases repeated in the mouths of characters who are not the original speakers of these phrases, this particular repetition of Antonio rightly stands out as the catalyst for César’s decision to remove himself from his ‘dream’.

In truth, not only do Antonio’s recycled words serve as further clues that César’s reality is a dream (which, at this point, the L.E. representative has just fully explained to a somewhat incredulous César and an even more unbelieving Antonio), but, since they were originally César’s own words (and not, for example, Nuria’s), they have the additional function of making César aware of his own hypocrisy⁵. Yet, above all, what

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⁴ As the film is drawing to an end, César and Antonio have finally made it to the L.E. headquarters where they are informed that César is actually dreaming rather than ‘living’ and that this would explain his monstrous view of himself. Antonio, in an effort to convince him that this is ridiculous begs César to take off his mask and look in the mirror. Yet, though Antonio sees a handsome face, César still sees a monster.

⁵ The only other phrase that similarly recycles César’s own words is his reference to Jules Verne (“They also laughed at Jules Verne”). César mentions this to Antonio in the waiting room of L.E. only to have his
really makes this situation uniquely significant is that Antonio, by recycling César’s own words blatantly reveals his own primary role as César’s psychic double or self-projection.

Hence, it is no wonder that at this moment César resolves to run outside, start shooting at people (who appropriately disappear) and, most importantly, beg and scream that he wants to wake up. Soon after César pleads to wake up, the Frenchman reappears, and explains to him that they first met 150 years ago; he then confirms that César has been living a dream-turned-nightmare for this entire time but that he could not save César from his nightmare until César explicitly asked to wake up. However, he makes clear to César that now that he understands his situation and has overcome his fears, he can give virtual reality another try. When César insists that he has had enough dreaming, this man nevertheless assures him that in 2145 (the current year), César would not believe the things that surgery can do. He adds that he can live in “the future”, like a “real” person.

However, in order for César to return to reality he must commit symbolic suicide by jumping off the top of the building. Despite the risk and uncertainty, César opts for a “real” future—that is, a future without masks. And yet, though he must make an enormous leap of faith as he commits his virtual suicide, what makes the ending truly ambiguous is not so much that we viewers doubt whether César will return to ‘reality’ and live like a ‘real person’ (whatever that means), but rather that we cannot be sure whether he has fully conquered his demons—or even thrown away his masks. After all, when Duvernois asks him if he has any final requests, César, still sentimentally hooked to Sofia, Pelayo and even Antonio, asks the man to record his mind as he says goodbye to his friends and gazes out one more time at a radiant image of his once beloved Sofia.

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own words repeated back to him almost immediately afterwards by the L.E. representative after they enter the office and are informed (by this L.E. employee) that César’s life is a dream.
In any event, as the ambiguity that remains stimulates questions not only about César and his future but about the uncertain future of humanity, it also highlights the audience’s own responsibility in actively creating this future, both in fiction and in life. And yet, for all this ambiguity, it is clear that César has evolved. Though he may still have a way to go, he has only been capable of entering a new, perhaps more “real” world by accepting that the world in which he lives/dreams is a mere façade and, more crucially, that reality is only real when one is connected to others. Accordingly, he must first ‘unmask the monstrous’--which Antonio, above all other characters, helps him do.

Indeed, one of the crucial ways in which Antonio achieves this is by pushing César to accept his guilt by urging him to narrate how he abused and killed Sofía/Nuria. Specifically, after listening to César’s flat out denial of both his madness and guilt, Antonio proceeds to ask César if he remembers what he did to Sofía. César narrates a maddening story in which the identities/faces of Nuria and Sofía become intertwined. Once César has finished his story, Antonio further (yet inadvertently) supports the idea that César might be living a dream as he elaborates on the similarities between César’s experience of reality and dreamwork. He reminds César that when dreaming you often imagine being with someone and that person turns into another person--and yet “you feel like you’re talking with the same person”. He adds that sometimes the mind functions as if it were dreaming, a phenomenon called “derangement”. Antonio then attempts to convince César to plead temporary derangement, which, not surprisingly, César (who stubbornly wishes to plead innocent and to remain lawyer-less) categorically rejects.

Of course, the fact that Antonio is the character who, in the film’s final moments, is most resistant to accepting the fact that he himself doesn’t exist is, while appropriate
(as Duvernois explains, to have him accept the truth would be “virtually incorrect” given his paternal and sentimental role in César’s life), also highly ironic given that Antonio is the person most responsible for helping César make sense of his ‘reality’/dream.

In effect, just as all the characters of César’s dream fuse into one, within the isolation of César’s prison cell, Antonio serves as the spokesperson for them all. As he recycles all the most important or significant (yet repressed) events, sayings and people from both César’s virtual and fantasy world, he essentially functions as César’s double or mirror self through whom César is finally capable of becoming reborn. Much like Ana and Ofelia from \textit{El espíritu} and \textit{El laberinto}, who also created parental surrogates, both real and fantastic, César replaces his real father with a new, fantastic father who is, nevertheless, more significant and real as he represents both the external and internal alterity which César has suppressed. On the other hand, the fact that César must ultimately discard this “fantastic father” is equally significant, for it emphasizes César’s ultimate need and goal to move on to more real and fulfilling relationships—one which will be guided not by a paternal role model (or the illusion of one) but by César himself.

Yet, before César can appreciate this he must first understand how intertwined he is to others and, perhaps especially, Sofía and Nuria. Thus, returning to the storyline, after César’s “virtual chat” with Duvernois at the bar, the crazed César decides to break into Sofía’s apartment, where he discovers indisputable proof that his world has been turned upside down. Though the apartment is identical to the way he remembers it from the first night he met Sofía, there is one notable difference. The pictures hanging on the walls that once featured Sofía, the very same pictures that initially warmed César’s heart to the point that he felt he was falling in love with her, are replaced with images of Nuria.
Even more conclusive proof that Nuria is Sofia emerges when César, after rummaging through her drawers, discovers a drawing that he himself created and signed the night he met Sofia. Though the drawing retains César’s artistic style and signature, it figures not Sofia but Nuria. While César is still holding this portrait in a state of shock, Sofia enters and, mistaking him for a thief, hits him on the back of the head with a ceramic pot. After realizing her “mistake”, Sofia hunches over him and tells him she loves him--yet, not surprisingly, when César opens his eyes he sees Nuria rather than Sofia. Though, as we expect, this woman maintains that she is Sofia, when César insists otherwise, she cries, yet, remaining devoted to him as ever, runs to the kitchen to fetch him water. When she returns, an almost mystical white light surrounds her as she appears to César as the original or “real” Sofia (played by Cruz). The two then make passionate love, and yet, this passion is significantly kindled, in part, by the fact that, soon after they begin having sex, Sofia unexpectedly stops and tells César that if she wants him to move he must put a coin in her. César enthusiastically plays along.

Though, superficially this game is simply suggestive of the playful nature of their relationship, it has the deeper function of revealing the fact that, in truth, César has literally had to pay for Sofia’s love. Thus, contrary to the liberating type of role-play found in *El espíritu*, which enables the characters to creatively change the roles they have been told to passively accept, the role-play that César and Sofia indulge in reinforces the fact that in a world that revolves around money and appearances, their own lives and love have become mere façades/masks. In a more metaphorical light, it may even suggest that while men are willing to pay not only for sex but even the appearance of love, women are willing to passively accept this role and thus, in a sense, prostitute themselves.

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6 To be precise, he has paid L.E. to make Sofia appear (to love him).
In any event, it becomes clear that the “real” Sofía is even more of an illusion than her supposedly fake imposter, Nuria—who, for all her faults, not only truly loved César (or at least believed she did), but was far more sincere with her feelings than Sofía. Rather expectedly then, in the middle of their “lovemaking” session, Sofía abruptly changes into Nuria. At this point, César, who has been pushed to his limits, smothers her with a pillow, while repeatedly screaming ¡Quiero verte! (I want to see you!). Killing her, however, does little to mend his broken heart, mind, and sprits; and as he races down the stairs of the apartment building confused, angry and utterly distraught, he passes a mirror in which, appropriately, his monstrous reflection reappears. While lying dejectedly on the floor, César smashes it to pieces with his feet in a fit of madness.

The Exile’s Mask or ‘The Monster of Redemption’?

In fact, César’s violent intent to suppress or “kill” his own monstrosity (via Nuria) has only reinvigorated his inner beast, as reflected in the mirror. Yet, at the same time, the extremity of César’s murderous actions lands him in a prison where he ironically finds salvation, as he is finally forced, somewhat like the protagonists in El beso, to make sense of himself, his previous reality and, of course, the nonsensical virtual world which he himself has created. In truth, the fact that César is incapable of comprehending a world of his own making reflects the degree to which he is isolated/exiled not only from others but from his own inner self and subconscious desires. In this way, the prison cell represents not only a doubly but perhaps even a triply exilic space, for while it isolates César from the outer world, this outer world is itself already an in-between space devoid of real people—that is, a space of solitude that is neither death nor life but rather a virtual
hell exiled from both worlds. And yet, the more cut off César becomes from others, the
more he is forced to truly remember and understand them and, by extension, himself—
thus highlighting the extent to which rebirth, remembering and reconnection can,
paradoxically, often emerge from the depths of (symbolic) death and exile.

At the same time, reconnection and rebirth are never complete until one
reconciles oneself to the need to make new and genuine connections with others and the
world, as César himself ultimately resolves to do as he commits a final symbolic suicide,
launching him into a new (third) reality where, yet again, he must “open his eyes”. On
the other hand, despite his desire for this new, more interconnected reality, César never
has the chance to actually reconnect to other ‘real’ humans within the limits of the film
itself. Perhaps it is for this reason that, although he is eventually capable of unmasking
and facing the monster, he is incapable of seeing it as anything but monstrous. This
becomes comprehensible in light of my previous theorization of a narrative ethics and,
specifically7, how, as Adam Newton suggests, the very word ‘monster’ is not only linked
to ambiguity but to the verb, “to show”. Because it shows that part of the self that has
been repressed or estranged, it appears monstrous—as that which is me, but should not be.

Since César, upon discovering that he is more like his enemies than he ever would
have imagined, would be naturally horrified, it is appropriate that he convey this horror
through the metaphor of monstrosity. Indeed, César’s monstrosity makes even more
sense in view of my altered version of Levinas’ notion of the face (as explored in Chapter
1), as that which symbolizes the capacity to find not just radical alterity (as Levinas
insists) but to find this radical alterity within oneself. In fact, César’s obsession with both
his face and its monstrosity not only combines these two ideas but it further implies that

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7 See page 86 of this dissertation for more detail on ‘monstration’ and its relationship to ‘the face’.

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if the face (which represents this link between the self and other) is monstrous it is so precisely because this link has been damaged or repressed. And yet, at the same time, César’s very capacity to see it as monstrous suggests that he occupies an in between space where he is at least haunted by his own repression—that is, increasingly aware of it. Yet, it is only when he finally decides to become reborn into a third reality at the film’s end that he has the chance to truly conquer the monstrous (or rather, transform it into beauty) by reconnecting with the world and thus, affirming his own truer self.

Indeed, the ambiguity of César’s monstrosity is mirrored in the various rebirths or layers of reality embedded within the film. Though the other films and texts convey both negative and positive rebirths (and though Santa Evita does a fine job of examining both types), Abre is the only work to explicitly dramatize both moments within one individual. In so doing, it not only helps us to more clearly appreciate the processes of death and rebirth that may plague any one individual, but it also adds levels of ambiguity that more accurately reveal the complexity inherent in exile, estrangement and the corresponding journey of remembrance that they either inspire or kill. Though César’s virtual reality appears to function somewhat like Evita’s body (as a maternal receptacle of death and separation) and, though it similarly leads to a confusion over what is “real” and “fake”, in truth, this “womb of death” is more ambiguous than deadly since it indirectly leads to César’s final and more illuminating rebirth, as he opts to reawaken into a third reality.

Thus, it might be more accurate to say that the receptacle of death is not virtual reality but rather the pills César’s takes to get there--or more generally, his resolve to enter a dreamland, which is never, in any case the paradise he expects it to be. Though virtual reality forces him to suffer the monstrous consequences and solitude of his
deluded actions and beliefs, it also pushes him out of this hell by showing him his true face and thus, in this respect, it is actually a receptacle of life. Nevertheless, since César himself believes that his world is real, the only way the film can achieve this task of rebirth is by inserting an extra level of exile into César’s virtual world—as symbolized by the exile of the prison cell. As in El beso, prison itself becomes the key necessary for one’s own release from the larger, more authentic prison of society, culture and the mind. Thus, just as the dichotomy between the real and the fake is undermined in manifold ways, the actual prison cell becomes (in both works), more of an illusion than the metaphorical prison that society has built and reinforced in the minds of its subjects.

Yet, in Abre los ojos, the fact that the prison cell literally turns out to be an imagining of the mind helps us more clearly appreciate this point. For all of these reasons, it is appropriate that everything we learn of César’s past “life” or reality as well as his virtual past emerges as memories recounted in prison. Again, it is here that César ominously laments in one of the film’s first scenes that the floor of the penitentiary is “lo único que parece real” (“the only thing that seems real”). Given the fact that “in reality” he is cryogenically frozen, this proves to be far truer than we viewers or even César himself could have ever imagined at this early moment in the movie. Indeed, even though Abre is the film to most powerfully critique the solipsistic and superficial uses and artifices of fantasy and even role-play, it is, nevertheless, the film that most strongly advocates for a recognition of the deep meaning, importance and relevance of fantasy, spirituality and dreams—which in, in the end, are every bit as real as our so-called reality.

Yet, though César relies on “dreams” to make sense of “reality” (which itself is revealed to be a dream), he also depends on clues from his ostensive reality in order to
make sense of his dreams (which, inversely, are revealed to be fragments of the repressed “real” world of 1997). Indeed, though Antonio’s hypnosis has clearly helped César to remember these fragments of his past life (thus suggesting that, no matter how fiercely or even scientifically memories are erased, the subconscious will always seep through--and, moreover, help one to comprehend reality), these fragments do not add up until one day, while in prison, César hears the voice of the Frenchman on TV and is reminded that he works for a company called L.E. This event triggers a vague yet strong familiarity in César’s consciousness that motivates him, for reasons he is not fully capable of comprehending, to get Antonio to convince the guards to let César and Antonio visit the offices of L.E. in Madrid. It is here that César finally discovers that his life is dream.

Thus, though, as it turns out, César needed clues from reality to make sense of his dreams and vice versa⁸, even more important to keep in mind is the fact that reality itself and thus all the clues that César finds in it are elements that César’s own subconscious has conjured up since, ultimately, he is the creator of his own virtual world. In short, all the clues that César finds, both in his “dreams” and in his (virtual) “reality”, are messages that his own subconscious sends to his conscious self. In much the same way that César needs to use memory and reason to comprehend these clues, he must also rely on a feeling or intuition akin to faith. As said, even after viewing the Life Extension commercial he was not sure why he had to go to their offices or what he would find there—and yet he had an irrepresibly strong feeling, instinct or premonition that he must go. This premonition not only leads to his discovery that his life is a dream (thus, permitting him to wake up), but it is, in fact, this very same sort of instinct or “faith” that

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⁸ This obviously suggests the inseparability and mutual importance of the two (reality and dreams).
inspires César to finally awaken from his nightmare by jumping off the highest skyscraper in Madrid—that is, by literally taking a leap in faith.

Just as crucially, however, this leap requires faith not only in the transcendent but in other humans and in reality itself, which, it turns out, is just as tenable as belief in heaven and hell. Above all, it requires putting faith in science while also recognizing its limits—for if science/logic were sufficient, not only would faith itself be unnecessary, but the virtual reality in which César dwelled would have truly been a paradise. With all this in mind, it is suiting that César’s alter-ego, Antonio, transcribe the word L.E. (Life Extension) as the name “Eli”. Eli is the shortened form of the biblical name, Elijah, the angel who, according to Abrahamic religions, mediates or flies between heaven and earth, delivering all mystical experiences, dreams and revelations to humans. In short, Elijah is the angel/messenger who helps humans to remember the divine world that they are forced to forget at birth. Though this relationship between fantasy/the transcendent and reality is somewhat inverted in Abre, this very inversion only further solidifies the inseparability of fantasy and reality (or spirituality and materiality), as it suggests that the Otherworld of mysticism, the subconscious and fantasy is just as real—in fact, perhaps even more real and more powerful—than the world which we humans call Reality.

In view of the film’s spiritual dimensions, we can better appreciate why César must not only literally remember the events of his past ‘real’ life (as evoked in ‘dreams’) but, more fundamentally, he must remember the people of this past life for who they really are. The only way César can “wake up” from his self-imposed inferno is by finally confronting his own demons, which, manifest themselves in a mindboggling confusion of beauty and monstrosity, Sofía and Nuria, self and other, male and female. Sofía and
Nuria become confused not only because they are both counterparts to César’s own subconscious but also because, as such, they hold far more in common than César’s previous polarization of them suggests. Though César demonizes Nuria and idolizes Sofía, upon close analysis, the women are revealed to be extraordinarily similar.

In many ways, Nuria’s ambiguous monstrosity is reflected in her name, which means “luminosa” (luminous, bright), or in its original Aramaic, “God’s light”. In fact, though Nuria is reborn in César’s virtual nightmare as a monster, it is by forcing César to confront such monstrosity—which is, after all, his own—that she effectively leads him down a path of redemption. On the other hand, though Sofía means wisdom (and, in Gnosticism, it denotes the feminine aspect of God), Nuria’s key questions, ¿Qué es para ti la felicidad? and ¿Crees en Dios? render her equally wise and enlightening. The fact that these phrases are recycled by Antonio, César’s psychic double, further proves that, subconsciously, César does, in fact, appreciate her wise and illuminating questions.

On the other hand, Sofía, in keeping with her name, also forces César to face himself or to “open his eyes” and, hopefully, change for the better. The night she first meets César she not only reminds him that it would be wrong for them to do anything (sexual) since it might hurt Pelayo, but she also forces César to confront his own defects, for example, by playfully drawing a caricature of him in which he is surrounded by moneybags and a flashy car. Even her warm yet non-luxurious apartment decorated with pictures of friends and family, among other personal items, strongly contrasts with César’s cold, ultra-modern home, which, as I will soon further address (and as other critics have noted), makes him, in a sense, homeless. César himself remarks on this
difference—and, in fact, it is at this moment, as he recognizes the value of personal warmth over trendy, pretentious riches that he confesses to falling in love with her.

And yet, though Sofía represents the crucial Other who may open up a path towards true love and “rebirth”, César’s obsession with her is based not only on her ability to embody this alterity (both external and internal) but, perhaps even more on her superficial beauty. After all, not only does Sofía herself harbor a dark side (which likens her to both Nuria and César), but César only knew her for less than a day before proclaiming to love her. This, coupled with the fact that, after “losing” Sofía, he continues to dwell on her face (by obsessively drawing it, talking about it, etc.) even more than her personality suggest that what truly makes her stand out from other girls, including Nuria, is her appearance/body. Indeed, for César, Sofía’s very identity is bound to her image/body, as evidenced by the fact that, in César’s virtual world, though Sofía’s physical body and face morph into Nuria’s, the Nuria who appears in Sofía’s place is just as loving, kind and devoted as Sofía. Clearly, César is frightened not by anything that Nuria/Sofía says or does (for, in truth, Sofía’s changed physical aspect is accompanied by absolutely no change in her personality) but rather by her face.

This is appropriate given that it demonstrates not only the superficial importance that César, like his society in general, attributes to the body/face but also because it highlights the psychic interconnectedness of the three characters. Like Nuria, the “real” Sofía also has a hidden side that matches César’s own repressed monstrosity—as evidenced, primarily, in Sofía’s and César’s use of masks in their pre-virtual reality. Just as Sofía lightheartedly pokes fun at César’s defects, César too flirtatiously criticizes Sofía’s aspirations of becoming an actress. He jokes that actresses are false and even
dangerous, as they are capable of conveying emotions that they do not have. Though not all actresses are fake or dishonest, César’s point is valid, and, if nothing else, it underlines Sofia’s own affinity to him—as he too wears masks, both literal and figurative. Even before César’s accident, leads him to wear a prosthetic mask before opting for the ultimate mask (of virtual reality), César’s physical face itself served as a mask, for his superficial beauty and charm disguised his inner darkness. When Sofia remarks to him\(^9\) that it would be wrong for them to hook up because she came to the party as Pelayo’s date, further suggesting that César does not value friendship, César assures her that he does, indeed, value friendship above all else. He adds, with a mischievous grin, that it is for that very reason that he would be sure not to let Pelayo find out about their romance.

Clearly then, for César, his entire world revolves around appearances and masks, even long before he is compelled to literally wear one. And yet, Sofia too is almost just as much a hypocrite, for though she finally offers César a kiss at the end of the night, after César’s face is destroyed she fails to call him and even pretends not to recognize him when she is first forced to confront him in a park. Immediately after César’s crash he is featured in this park on a sunny day holding hands with Sofia. The two seem to be in love and César tells her about a horrible nightmare he had in which, the day after meeting Sofia, he got in a car with the psychopath, Nuria, who tried to kill them both by slamming her car into a wall with him inside it. The worst part, he insists, was that he didn’t die, but rather became grotesquely disfigured—like the phantom of the opera.

Sofia then asks him what his apartment looked like the night after the party—at which point César is reminded that he is actually dreaming and awakens into a reality that, as he laments to Antonio, makes him wish he was dead. Nevertheless, the

\(^9\) This happens the night they first meet at César’s party—the same night Sofia arrives as Pelayo’s date.
disfigured César returns to this same park to gaze at Sofía who works there as a mime. After finally mustering the courage to approach her, César offers her a few coins and stares at her intensely as the emotionless Sofía, by contrast, avoids making eye-contact with him. Not only does her role as mime--and, more specifically, the white mask of makeup and stone-cold expression she wears--permit her to play a role in which she can easily avoid dealing with César, but when it begins to rain and her makeup/mask runs off, she immediately turns her back to him and begins to pack up her things. It is not until César directly addresses her that she is forced to confront him. He asks her if he’s changed so much that she no longer recognizes him, because he surely recognizes her.

Yet, even at this point, the embarrassed Sofía keeps her gaze awkwardly lowered. César adds to her discomfort by telling her that she could have at least called him to say she was sorry about what happened. When Sofía replies that she didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable, he suggests that perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she herself did not want to feel uncomfortable—as she obviously is at this point. Admittedly, the viewer can, to some extent, sympathize with Sofía, who, after all, only knew César one night before his accident and, as Pelayo later confirms (when he attacks César for badgering Sofía), she is, nevertheless, being relentlessly stalked by him. On the other hand, however, it is abundantly clear that Sofía is far less perfect than César previously assumed in his idol imaginings of her. Indeed, Sofía’s role as actress, mime and mask-wearer suggest that she too shares many of the same defects/masks as César.

The recurring theme of masking, which symbolizes both the excessive emphasis on appearances in an increasingly superficial, even “virtual” world as well as Spain’s tendency to forget the demons of its past, both individual and collective, becomes even
more blatantly yet complexly problematized in light of the rain that accompanies the post-crash encounter between César and Sofía. After being subtly rejected by Sofía in the park, César explains to her that he had a dream of this moment (the moment when he would meet up with her again) in this very same park—yet, he somberly adds, in his dream it wasn’t raining. Though the rain evidently mirrors César’s inner sadness, tears, solitude, rejection and monstrosity, much like the confrontation with monstrosity and exile, it is a painful yet potentially enlightening experience. Not only is rain necessary for growth to occur (and thus, a likely symbol of spiritual maturation), but it literally washes away the mask that Sofía wears and, by extension, the false hopes that César has of being with her. In short, the rain, much like one’s own subconscious, forces César and Sofía to confront the truth no matter how ugly or uncomfortable that truth may be.

Thus, in view of the ambiguity that underlies the superficial polarization of Nuria and Sofía, César and Pelayo (and which the rain symbolically brings to the surface), it comes as little surprise that Nuria, Sofía and César all become curiously linked or intertwined in César’s virtual world. In fact, though Nuria is, arguably, the most destructive character in the film, given all the character inversions that occur between César and Pelayo once César becomes the “ugly duckling”/social outcast, it is hard to say whether Sofía would not have become more like Nuria had she been the rejected one. Yet, what we do know for certain is that Nuria, despite being the film’s most dangerous and even fatal character, is, nonetheless, the most authentic person in César’s life. Though she is excessively aggressive, she never lies to César, wears masks or dwells on superficial concerns. On the contrary, she urges César to reflect on the most profound,
metaphysical questions regarding God, the afterlife and happiness itself—questions which César’s own subconscious recognizes as necessary and eventually forces to the surface.

In the process, not only are the dichotomies between the self/other, fantasy/reality, the real/fake and many others dissolved, but the male/female divide is weakened by the fact that Nuria and Sofía not only share similarities with each other but also with César—who himself can only attain self-realization once he appreciates these women as humans rather than mere objects. Indeed, in a rapidly modernizing world, this film distinguishes itself from other works treated in this dissertation since men themselves are becoming increasingly fetishized and thus, enca ged to their bodies. In this way, Abre reveals the increasing urgency of understanding the link between female and male identity. The fact that these two women (Nuria and Sofía) have spiritual names whereas César and Pelayo both bear the names of kings does not undermine this similarity (between men and women) but rather serves as a symbol of the need to integrate not only self and other, male and female but, more generally, any aspect of oneself that is repressed or polarized. In short, these names suggest that, in the process of blending self and other, not only must feminine and masculine attributes explode but also the boundaries between earth and the heavens, the material and the fantastic, and even the conscious and unconscious.

While Nuria and Sofía represent the (repressed) kingdom of fantasy, dreams and transcendence, César and Pelayo, who, as we have seen, are also far more similar than a superficial analysis of their bodies and actions may suggest, represent the kingdoms of earth. Moreover, they represent not just any kings, but extraordinarily powerful and important ones. Whereas the Roman Consul/Dictator, Julius Caesar (who was essentially responsible for igniting and solidifying the Roman Empire), needs no introduction, it may
be worth noting that Pelayo/Pelagius, was the first (Gothic) king and founder of the kingdom and Asturias, credited also with beginning the *Reconquista*, which consisted in re-conquering the Spanish Peninsula from the Moors\(^{10}\). And yet, as *Abre* continually suggests, these worldly ‘kings’ are essentially powerless without their ‘spiritual queens’.

To summarize, despite its similarities with other works analyzed in this thesis *Abre los ojos* adds a magnificent twist since, as it turns out, César’s so-called dreams appear to be fragments of a past “reality” (of 1997) while reality itself is revealed to be a dream/VR. Though this inversion of fantasy and reality effectively undermines any solid belief in reality, what it more crucially suggests is that fantasy, dreams and otherworldly drives, fears, and desires are just as real and truthful as what we perceive reality to be. Indeed, though the world of virtual reality turns out to be insufficiently authentic since, ultimately, everyone but César is a mere image or fantasy, it is, in many ways, more authentic than the world César previously inhabited—the “real” world of 1997 Spain—a world in which all that seems to matter is good looks, money and, in short, appearances.

In this world of appearances, the handsome, rich, parentless César is, despite being surrounded by actual people, never forced to appreciate them as other human beings, much less as people who are, in a deep sense, interconnected to his own existence. He treats people, and especially women, as mere props; and yet, because he is rich and beautiful he is granted all he wants—or thinks he wants. By contrast, though César’s virtual reality turns out to be an illusion, it is in this in-between “exilic” space of utter solitude that César, somewhat like Ana from *El espíritu*, learns the true value of

\(^{10}\) It may also be worth noting that Pelagius was also the name of a fourth century heretic who denied the concept of original sin, advocating instead the notion of free will—which, curiously enough, becomes a central concern in César’s world of masks, appearances and role-play. Originally viewed as a saintly man, he was later accused of heresy by the Council of Carthage and spent most of his later life defending himself against the Catholic Church. He was then exiled from Rome, and most probably died in Palestine.
real, reciprocal relations. Though no one in his world is real, the subconscious relationships he creates with them reveal truths about his own solitude, narcissism and mistaken beliefs about identity and desire.

Thus, truth and authenticity are not entirely discarded in this film, but rather reframed. Paradoxically, it is in this place of no-place that César learns to appreciate and value not only others but also his own alterity and inherent interconnectedness to the world. Thus, though *Abre los ojos* questions what is real and authentic in perhaps even more profound ways than *Santa Evita*, though it is driven by an even more explicit need or quest for truth (or to make sense of oneself and one’s world), and though it leaves the protagonist and his viewers in an even more ambiguous and uncertain place than where they began, the film does not abandon us to hopeless skepticism, chaos and confusion, as many critics argue (perhaps most notably, David Laraway in his article, “Alejandro Amenábar and the Embodiment of Skepticism in *Abre los ojos*”).

Rather, it uncovers meaningful truths about society, the self and the human condition that may help us understand, reframe and even overcome the underlying problems endemic to both Spain’s authoritarian past as well as its global future. Though the film examines a vast range of cultural issues including topics as diverse as exile, global capitalism, the post-modern non-place, male narcissism, simulacra, virtual reality and the specific problems that plague Spain’s Generation X as well as its inheritance of oblivion, what really stands out is the problem of estrangement—and this estrangement is due, above all, to a disconnectedness of self from other, male from female, present from past, father from son (or, more generally, an estrangement between distinct generations) and last but not least, a disjuncture between fantasy and reality.
Timeless Solitude—Non-places, Non-homes and Non-being

In truth, this is presaged in the film’s first scene, which opens with a blank screen accompanied by Sofía’s voice as she utters, “Abre los ojos” right as César’s literal and spiritual alarm-clock goes off. After showering, dressing and heading out of his home, César gets in his car and drives around the uncharacteristically empty streets of a typically busy and bustling Madrid. As César drives past one abandoned street after another, his face reflects an increasing degree of disorientation and anxiety. Yet it is not until he arrives at the Gran Vía (Madrid’s most busy and well-known avenue), that he becomes truly perplexed and terrified—so much so that he jumps out of his car and races down the streets in terror. Moments later, as the film shifts to César’s virtual prison cell, we learn that this was just a dream that César was recounting to his psychiatrist, Antonio.

Yet, as this opening scene foretells, the fundamental problem that César (and to a great extent, society) faces is solitude. César’s problem is not that he lives in a dream but that he lives without others. Though César’s dream is largely about his own narcissism and disconnectedness from others, the abandoned streets of Madrid are also a symbol—or rather, a suggestion that the city and its subjects are not fully present or alive even when they are physically visible/present. In this way, a bold parallel emerges between Spain’s rural, post-war past and its superficially different yet equally alienated urban present.

Indeed, César’s dream of an empty city is highly reminiscent of the opening scene of Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena*—in which the journey of a single truck penetrates an empty, solitary landscape. Though the vacant land of post-war Castile reflects a lack of urbanization, modernization and, consequently, a literal lack of people/human interaction as well as Spain’s isolation from other countries, as I have demonstrated in chapter 1, it
also symbolizes a deeper, spiritual and human alienation that, in many ways, highlights similarities between César’s world and Ana’s. As Nathan Richardson explains, in reference to what Gaston Bachelard has named “topoanalysis”:

[...] that is, a systematic psychological study of the intimate spaces of our lives. In this image, the empty pavement of the road dominates. Roads are spaces that according to landscape historian J.B. Jackson have traditionally united people and brought them home (189). Here, however, the role of the road is contradictory, offering only separation and alienation. It is a path away from home that, in its monotonous recession towards the horizon, promises to continue its alienating march. (“Youth Culture, Visual Spain, and the Limits of History in Alejandro Amenábar’s Abre los ojos” 332)

In spite of Spain’s undeniably great changes including its urban, metropolitan shift, it increasing focus on “visual mapping” as well as its technological, scientific and communicative developments that have marked Spanish history and culture from the post-war period to the present, some things have not changed as much as they superficially appear to. This subtle link between Spain’s repressed past and its equally untruthful, alienating present conveyed by the similar openings of Abre and El espíritu becomes further evident when we consider that El espíritu examines many analogous themes to those presented in Abre—for example, exile, monstrosity, solitude, repression, the reliance on fantasy to understand reality, the estrangement of youths from their parents (and the consequent need for surrogates), the use of doubling, the fluidity of identity and more generally, the need to debunk all the false dichotomies examined throughout this thesis as well as the inter-relatedness of all these themes. For these reasons (and many others), I respectfully disagree with Nathan Richardson’s thesis that.

La película Abre los ojos (1998), del joven director Alejandro Amenábar, muestra, en vez de una preocupación con el pasado temporal, un encuentro importante con un presente dominado por experiencias visuales y virtuales, las cuales subrayan la importancia de la conciencia geográfica sobre la historiográfica. (“Youth Culture, Visual Spain, and the Limits of History” 327)
Though Richardson is correct in pointing out that the film reflects the alarming degree to which the past has become increasingly unimportant to Spain’s youth, one of the main concerns or goals of Amenábar’s film is precisely to critique this problem and to demonstrate the need and urgency of remembering the past—a task it can only achieve, paradoxically, by omitting any references to Francoism. On the other hand, not only does Abre reveal the impossibility of visual orientation as a replacement to history or as a basis for making sense of the world, but on the contrary, it implies that, ironically, the more culturally dominant and important vision and images have become, the more they have become capable of deception. Though its treatment of new problems (related to Spain’s treatment of technology, science, globalization, etc.) separate Abre from films of the past, it nevertheless suggests, in a variety of ways, that as long as the demons of the past remain unexamined they will continue to reappear, albeit in even more twisted ways, as present-day problems are piled on top of those from the past. Thus, notwithstanding the numerous invaluable insights in Richardson’s article, I dispute his assertion that, *The history-charged names of the film’s male leads, César and Pelayo, first alert allegory to the past, however, the story that unfolds brings the film again to the specificity of 1990s Spain and its youth culture in particular.*(337).

*Abre*, far from limiting itself to one time, transcends time and space, both structurally and thematically, even as it addresses the specific problems of 1990s Spain. Indeed, its very ability to both rewrite and recycle traditions dating back to Calderón’s *La vida es sueño* and further still to the bible while nonetheless inserting itself into a futuristic sci-fi framework is perhaps its most salient quality—and one which begs the viewer to consider connections between Spain’s past, present and future. Moreover, as I will soon address in more detail, the film’s ability to weave together distinct temporalities
permeates virtually every aspect of the film, which itself vacillates between past, present and future--and in the process, defies our assumptions about time itself. Yet, the film’s ability to reweave past issues, erasures and demons into present crises or concerns is perhaps most effectively portrayed through the symbol of the mask, as it reflects both the tendency to suppress Spain’s authoritarian past as well as its more uniquely contemporary obsession with appearances, simulacra and the need to keep up with the technological and scientific advances of other ‘civilized’ countries—or, at least, appear to.

As I briefly commented at an earlier point, after various operations have failed to restore César’s once flawless face, he decides, in reluctant desperation, to wear a mask that his doctors offer him—a mask which, though it fails to revivify César’s social life, becomes significant in many ways. To begin, the mask reflects the superficial pretenses of Spanish technology, which, modern as it may be, still lags behind other European countries and especially the US; a fact highlighted by César’s ultimate decision to replace the Spanish mask with an even more sophisticated illusion—the virtual reality offered to him by an American company filtered, significantly, through a French spokesman. In this way, the film evokes many other works composed by or about Spain’s Generation X, the generation to which both César and Amenábar belong. José Ángel Mañas’ novel, Historias del Kronen (1995), for example, almost perfectly reflects the plight of a generation (X) defined by excessive leisure time, promiscuity, irresponsibility, vanity, alienation from previous generations and its past and, just as critically, the attempt to absorb American (popular) culture without understanding it. The fact that various American phrases, song lyrics, etc. are used in this novel in ways that show that they are not understood by the young Spaniards who embrace them reveals how devoid of
meaning they have become.\textsuperscript{11} In a world that revolves around an axis of appearances and style, meaning is devalued as truth and substance are replaced with masks and simulacra. \textit{Abre} critiques this problem not only through César’s reliance on masks, his entry into VR and his obsession with appearances, but even through seemingly random details which, upon close analysis, attest to the growing importance of simulacra in Spain.

Perhaps most importantly, after viewing the commercial for Life Extension, César thoughtlessly remarks on the fact that Walt Disney was himself cryogenically frozen. Though César does not appear to have any particular agenda in mind when making this seemingly innocent observation, it becomes of particular interest in light of the fact that the theorist most renowned for examining simulacra, Jean Beaudrillard, himself points out (in \textit{Simulacra and Simulation}) that Disneyland has become the paradigmatic example of post-modern simulacra, as it is itself nothing more than a shell of the paradise it pretends to be/offer. Not only are the superficially beautiful and “happy” people who work there all handpicked with an elitist eye and capitalist agenda, not only are they all actors who are scripted to \textit{appear} to be eternally content, carefree and friendly, and not only do many of them (Mickey and friends) wear actual masks, but the castle and most of the buildings themselves are not only uninhabitable but they are literally mere facades.

Yet, though Disneyland is an American phenomenon, like all things American (and like virtual technology), the fakeness that, to a great extent, is born in the US becomes exacerbated in its voyage to Spain. Thus, inasmuch as Spain \textit{pretends} to be American it is, in a sense, more American (that is, more false) than its US imports--or the US itself. In this light, César’s mask becomes emblematic of the Spanish fixation on

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\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps the novel’s most notable example of this disturbing process of ‘reterritorialization’ is the way in which series of words or lyrics are consistently transcribed as though they were just one word.
appearances. After all, the prosthetic mask that the Spanish doctors offer César is not only a highly unsophisticated, unscientific solution that clearly represents their false pretensions, but the fact that they offer it to him in an ultra-modern and urbane building (el faro de Moncloa), a building that ironically evokes an atmosphere of cutting edge technology, only makes their gesture all the more hypocritical and false.

And yet, perhaps more fundamentally still, the mask is supremely suggestive of the Spanish impulse to cover, bury or forget the truth and the past. The fact that the doctors represent an older generation of Spain (the same generation that lived through Francoism but refuses to remember it or share it with younger generations) is crucial to consider; for in bequeathing upon César this mask the doctors effectively symbolize this tendency towards erasure and, specifically, the shallowness of the gifts that they have passed down to their youths. To be sure, this attitude has deeply affected Amenábar’s entire generation, which has little or no memory of its country’s authoritarian heritage, due in great part to no fault of its own. As Nathan Richardson tells it,

That the events of the story commence around César’s own present tense (1997 or 1998) twenty-fifth birthday bash identifies César and his friends with Spain’s generation of the nineties, part of a growing youth culture noted for their excess of leisure time and their lack of political and historical sentience. César’s birth date situates this group beyond clear memories of dictators or transitional politics. The year he was orphaned, to extend the allegory, coincides precisely with the rise of Spain’s socialist government, an event that marks both the end of the intense historical focus of the transition as well as the beginning of the 1980s “arrest of history” as described by Umbral.” (“Youth Culture” 338).

Yet, while this is certainly true, I would not conclude, as Richardson does, that, “[…]the few links we find to César’s narrative only serve to underline the absolute absence of historiographic sensibility that characterizes his generation.” (338) nor, would I deduce, as do many other critics (including the renowned, Paul Julian Smith), that the
film could just as easily have been set in any other time or place (for example, the US). Though *Abre* certainly addresses increasingly global, trans-historic and transnational concerns, Richardson’s very need to make reference to the abovementioned historical events supports my notion that the film is just as Spanish as it is global. Furthermore, the fact that Generation X’s inheritance of oblivion is generated by the equally irresponsible and forgetful generation of its parents is revealed not only in the doctors meaningless gift/mask in *Abre* but, more generally, by César’s lack of parents and estrangement from his older business partners. Though Ana and Ofelia (from *El espíritu* and *El laberinto*), are, despite being at odds with their parents, capable of finding parental replacements in other adult figures from their parents’ generation--for example, Ana’s refugee and Ofelia’s friend, Mercedes--César’s replacement is, by contrast, a man who is not real but rather a figment of his own imagination. In view of Antonio’s existence as a mere collage of other people who have affected César’s life, and, above all, as an alter-ego of César himself, it becomes hard to espouse Richardson’s belief that, again, “[…]the few links we find to César’s narrative only serve to underline the absolute absence of historiographic sensibility that characterizes his generation.”(338), much less, his following assertion,

That this past comes to us at all, significantly, is due to the work of only two adult figures of any consequence in the movie. Thanks to the efforts of the psychiatrist, Antonio, César recounts his life story, acquiring through the search of his memory a historiographic sensibility, that is, a desire to explore the past and discover what exactly has placed him in his cell and behind his mask.”(338).

In truth, not only is Antonio a creation of César, but even to the degree that he serves as an avatar of the repressed Others from César’s past, it is his ability to serve as the mouthpiece of Nuria (another child of Generation X) by resuscitating Nuria’s interest in questions regarding happiness, God and the transcendent, that truly make César rethink
his life and remember his past. On the other hand, despite Antonio’s superficial likening to César’s father, the only quality he appears to share in common with him is the fact that, as César complains, they both “preach to him all day long”—and, in so doing, Antonio nearly pushes César away rather than drawing him closer. In effect, Antonio serves as a parental surrogate not because he is similar to César’s father (who was never that close to César), but rather because, as a person who patiently cares for César and is loyal to him, Antonio is radically different from César’s now literally absent father.

At the same time, this lack of connection to previous generations is heightened by Spain’s rapid technological advances—advances which not only force Spain to appear to be more advanced than it is but which themselves enable and encourage more estranged relationships to occur not only between father and son, but, more broadly, between self and other, as reflected in César’s very decision to immerse himself in VR. In many ways, this gap is conveyed, as Richardson astutely remarks, through the reduction and replacement of history with the mere image. Yet, Richardson is equally incorrect in maintaining that since César uncovers his own history through “visually charged moments”(338), for Generation X “[…]history can only be uncovered through interaction with the visual and the spatial”(338). César’s memories are, no doubt, intertwined with visual and spatial images—which may be true for any generation. Yet, his memories cannot be reduced to, much less explained through these images.

In fact, one of the more interesting and novel dimensions of this film is the way in which it problematizes visuality, the male gaze and the power typically associated with it. On the one hand, the problems and power of seeing is a theme that has been examined in Spain, particularly through film, dating back to the release of El espíritu and even earlier.
As I more fully addressed in Chapter 1, Ana, to some extent subverts the ostensive power of the male gaze by rebelliously viewing and even reinterpreting films like *Frankenstein*. On the other hand, *Abre* is the only work to fully undermine the power of seeing in general and, specifically, the power of the male gaze. Though César appears to have trouble letting go of such power even in the film’s final moments (as revealed by his “last wish” to look upon the beautiful yet virtual Sofía once more), the power of this gaze as well as its focus are simultaneously revealed to be nothing at all. Deep down, despite his hesitancy to move beyond the virtual allure of a world of appearances and its artificial power, César finally acknowledges this need as signaled by his decision to commit to virtual suicide. In any event, the irony of César’s belief that he could control reality or even make sense of it through his eyes resides in the fact that, as Dennis Perri suggests, Jason Zepel, an early creator of virtual realities, explains the attraction for kids of virtual reality gaming: “‘you’re sort of in this God-like state where you just have to imagine something and it’s real’” (Garreau 201). Amenábar’s film, then, creates a protagonist, or hybrid man-child, for whom the concepts of unity, homogeneity, and rationality cannot adequately define the human subject and its evolved capabilities. (“Amenábar’s *Abre los ojos*: The Posthuman Subject” 92)

This quote not only helps us appreciate the fact that the godlike role of virtual gaming is, despite its pretenses, devoid of all true power, but it also leads us to consider, especially in light of the similarities between César’s pre-virtual and virtual worlds, the parallels between the artifices of VR and those of a world that in many ways enables men to falsely believe that they create or control women through their perception or visual imaginings of them. As *Abre* potently suggests, the very desire to wield such power not only makes men monstrous but further distances them from any true connection or power over the real world/real-world relationships. It is, in short, self-destructive. Yet, while Perri’s quote offers numerous insights, it is crucial to remember that what makes César a
“man-child” is his inability to let go of his mask and embrace the monster that virtual reality itself makes accessible, paradoxically, in order overcome such monstrosity. In short, César is a “man-child” not because, lost in a sea of VR, he may no longer hold on to a unified, homogeneous, moral and phallic identity but rather because he falsely believed that he had one to begin with. Perri argues that the César of 1997

[...] personifies a conception of the self corresponding to almost all the traits of the liberal humanist subject: It is singular, rational, unified, centered, autonomous, self-willed, homogeneous, moral, powerful, and, predictably, phallic…and in virtue of his self-willing autonomy refuses ambiguity, contradiction, doubt. (Knight, 48). (“The Posthuman Subject” 92)

Yet, in truth, the liberal humanist subject is itself an illusion or mask—much like the prosthetic mask César uses to hide his monstrous face. Though his face is itself a physical façade, it is transformed into a metaphor of his inner being once he exchanges it for the mask, which effectively becomes his new symbolic and literal outer shell.

The irony of César’s virtual attempt to control both reality and women is, indeed, presaged from the film’s opening scene where, in keeping with the film’s ambiguous, “writerly” structure, the viewer is the one who, even visually, is positioned in a place that stresses his or her godlike power over César’s reality and the film itself--a fact which corresponds to César’s final re-awakening into a world which ends, ambiguously, just as he opens his eyes. In truth, the film is incomplete without the viewer’s imaginative input. As Richardson himself observes, “Our own vision turns divine as we tack with the camera upwards, gazing down on the protagonist standing at the heard of a deserted cityscape.” (331) He adds, “The logic of the shot itself underlines the purely imagistic quality of this cityscape. Upon arrival at the Gran Vía, cinematography breaks us from César’s point of view with a crane shot that lifts the spectator into the position of the all-
seeing eye of an aerial camera.”(332). He then concludes that this puts us in the position of God himself or “[…] more broadly, of some ultimate signified”(332)—an opinion shared by other critics such as David Laraway, who similarly observes that the high angle shot from which the viewer looks down on the lost César aimlessly trying to find his way through the empty streets of Madrid gives the spectator an almost godlike perspective (“Alejandro Amenábar and the Embodiment of Skepticism in Abre los ojos”).

The essential question that remains, however, is whether our godlike position is simply an extension of César’s corrupt, despotic yet ultimately empty power or whether it may provide a more radical, even subversive power. My opinion is that it depends on the viewer, who is free to choose either option, yet who is urged, through the film’s own capacity to undermine César’s false pretenses and power, to choose a more enlightened route. Richardson, faced with this same dilemma, quotes a variety of theorists, such as Nicholas Mirzoeff, who, he claims,

[…] points out that different systems of representation serve different ends and that these ends are always tied to a particular system of power/ knowledge(40)” and Donna Haraway, who “warns of vision in general, ‘the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity…to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power”(191). Foucault states more succinctly, ‘visibility is a trap’(Mirzoeff 50). Indeed, the privilege-producing shot of the Gran Vía sutures us initially into identification with the appropriately named César, then later places us above him into the lone regal position of single-point perspective that Mirzoeff identifies as once reserved for Enlightened despots (45). Hence, we are empowered, but in such a manner that we sense the artifices of that empowerment. (332).

I both agree and disagree. Though we viewers are the ultimate “gods” of the film, our power is not necessarily artificial. But it can only be truly powerful and meaningful if we use such power in open rather than despotic ways—that is, ways that help us understand our connectedness with others—including César. In this way, true power is
redefined as the ability to achieve real (non-solitary) relationships with the self and other rather than to attempt to assert control over others by manipulating them and reality. The fact that César continues to wear his prosthetic mask in VR (in prison) helps reinforce my point—for it not only conveys his doubly exiled and false relationship to reality and to us, but it also enables us viewers to actively imagine what it both conceals and represents. Much like virtual reality and even the film as a whole, the mask invites the viewer him/herself to play an active, almost godlike role in the construction of the film—one that, nevertheless, must distance itself from César’s artificially divine or despotic role. Not only does the mask, as Marina Martín similarly expresses (“Entre lo real y lo irreal”), require the active imagination of the viewer, but as David Laraway more sufficiently explains, despite the central function of the body and the face in this film,

*It is unclear to us viewers whether the mask conceals a disfigured face or the intact, handsome one we had seen earlier in the film. […] we expect the face behind the mask to break our interpretive stalemate with regard to the nature of the protagonist’s experiences.*/ However, the final sequence of the film, in which César removes his mask in the presence of Antonio, does not provide us with the anticipated resolution. With alternating reverse angle shots, Amenábar juxtaposes the reactions of Antonio and César as the mask is finally removed. Their responses could not be more dissimilar. First we see by Antonio’s nondescript reaction to César’s face that he find it completely normal; next, with César we gaze into the mirror to find it disfigured. Far from providing interpretive closure, the scene only reinforces what now appears to be an unbridgeable gap, a fatal asymmetry between the first-person perspective and the third. (72-73)

And yet, I would argue, it is this very ambiguity that enables us viewers not to resign ourselves to chaos and skepticism (as Laraway concludes) but rather to embrace our crucial role and responsibility in the construction of the film/reality. In truth, Laraway’s error is to believe that the film’s emphasis on corporality suggests that it accedes to the ultimate (yet arbitrary) power of the body-face, when, quite the contrary, the centrality of the body/face in this film ultimately reveals how superficial its ostensive
“power” is. The fact that the viewer is provided with no definite answers only further implies that César’s view of himself, though symbolized by the body/face, is no longer reduced to his body or face—much less the gaze of one “despotic” viewer or viewpoint, whether that viewer be César or some other person. Though, in a sense, we ourselves become this viewer, we do not have to become a despotic One.

With this in mind, Richardson’s overarching emphasis on the ability of visual mapping to effectively replace other modes of knowledge is not a central message of Abre—and, in fact, Richardson undermines his own argument by rightly affirming how deceptive visual experiences have increasingly become. In Abre not only do visual images prove to be more deceitful than enlightening for César, but what enables César to remember his past and to escape from his nightmare are not images but rather memories and dreams. Moreover, contrary to popular belief, Generation X is not the generation that most perfectly embodies erasure, technology and virtual reality, but rather it is a generation that is marked by transition and placelessness. It is a generation that (even in the US) was not born into a world of cell-phones, cable TV, laptops or even home computers (which is more characteristic of the “Millennium” and later generations), but gradually became accustomed to these technological advances. Similarly, César’s generation is not one that never knew how to talk to people face to face (rather than through texting, facebook and other virtual encounters) or that never knew how to memorize phone numbers (rather than using cybernetic self-extensions, such as cell-phones and Blackberries) but rather, it is a generation that has had to learn how to forget.

The main problem is not just that Richardson polarizes the issue and generations to which he refers but, more fundamentally, that he misunderstands Generation X. I
know because I belong to this it, albeit of the American variety, as do most my Spanish friends. Given that so many of my Spanish acquaintances from Generation X are, contrary to Richardson’s assumptions, very much involved in resurrecting Spain’s buried past, I am reluctant to concede to his over-generalized observation that,

While older generations argue for the preservation of collective memory and declare the recent past the ‘década de la memoria,’ the new Spain of a youth culture that now extends its reach into the mid-thirties of Spanish demographics may be indifferent. Is there anything near a traditional historiographic sensibility left to build upon the youngest generations in Spain? (342).

As Amenábar proves through a film bent on remembering--and a protagonist who, despite epitomizing all the superficial, egocentric and irresponsible features of his generation, ultimately rejects visual oblivion--though Generation X’s historiographic sensibility is far from “traditional”, it certainly exists, perhaps in even more sophisticated ways than it did in previous generations. And yet, Richardson stubbornly maintains,

Through my analysis of this film I explore the question of national history and memory as posed within a context increasingly influenced, if not defined, by visual, virtual and spatial properties. While writers and intellectuals of Spain’s older generations continue to express the need for their nation to face its past, the cultural production and consumption of its multiplying youth generations problematize the historiographic quest. These difficulties, I argue, arise not only because of distance from that which ought to be remembered (the Civil War, the Franco years, the Transition) but more crucially, because of deeper structural changes in modes and media of perception. (327-328).

Though he validly observes that “changes in modes and media of perception” have made Generation X more alienated from certain modes of remembering and, certainly, from their authoritarian past, if any polarity may be drawn it is between academics and artists versus the general public rather than between generations. This is not to say that significant generational gaps and values do not exist, for they surely do. But the divide that exists between those who wish to forget and those who are intent on
recovering memory has been (since the post-war period) and continues to be not a
generational divide but rather a split between academics, artists, writers, directors etc. and
the non-academic/non-intellectual world that César himself represents.

Just as Víctor Erice lived in a culture of repression and erasure (which, as an
artist, he aspired to critique and overcome), the same can be said of Amenábar. One of
the most basic mistakes that a film or literary critic can make is to confuse the values and
worldview of the artist with the subjects he or she conveys through his or her art—an
error which Richardson nevertheless commits. Though he may be at least partially
accurate in concluding that, “Apparently, history and historiography are in
jeopardy.” (329), this is a cultural more than an artistic, academic or even generational
problem. If anything, it is not that history and historiography have lost relevance or
meaning but rather that their meanings have changed—and they have changed for
Generation X as much as for all of Spain, regardless of age.

In many ways, a peak into Amenábar’s own personal history not only helps
confirm my theory but permits us to better understand why he was so adept at weaving
together the extraordinarily rich and complex historical, cultural and philosophical
phenomena that coalesce in Abre—and, above all, in stringing together the central themes
of exile and alienation in a way that is intensely Spanish at the same time that it is

Ironically, Richardson himself helps illuminate my point, as he accurately reports, “Michael Richards
argues that ‘an element of ‘forgetting’ was intrinsic to Spain’s peaceful transition to democracy” (44). The
consolidation of democracy in the elections of 1982 and the concurrent cultural movida, in fact, are more
often viewed as part of a period of historical forgetting. This era saw the commencement of a cultural
amnesia encouraged by political polemics of the Franco era. The split of forgetting was then spread by a
generation of youth who had little time to contemplate the sufferings of their parents (Allinson 269).”
(“Youth Culture” 329). Of course, though this is true, it is also heavily critiqued by the innumerable
Spanish films, novels and other forms of literature that analyze this problem. As Richardson himself notes,
“Still, in spite of this conscientious embrace of the culture of amnesia in the 1980s, historical and memory
based cultural production appears to effect a comeback in the following decade. Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas
points to the proliferation of historical films, for example, as evidence of “an obsessive concern with the
past [that] continues to have a strong presence in the 1990s” (111)” (329).
unmistakably global. As I now intend to prove, Amenábar’s specific identity not only as a Spaniard of Generation X, but as an exile on various levels (more levels, perhaps, than any other author or auteur treated in this thesis), is, combined with his own innate genius and perseverance in the face of adversity, what has enabled him to create a film with such singularly powerful achievements. As Paul Julian Smith summarizes Amenábar’s life,

Amenábar’s brief history is well known. Born to a Chilean father and Spanish mother in Santiago in 1972 and taken to Spain as a child just before the fall of Allende, Amenábar attended the film school at Madrid’s Complutense University, where he famously failed to complete the course (Heredero 1997: 89). […] his revenge at the age of just twenty-four was Tesis (1996) [Thesis], a sleek, taut thriller on the theme of snuff movies in which the serial killer, a professor of media studies, was given the same name as one of Amenábar’s unlucky teachers. After winning no fewer than eight Goya awards, including best picture, Tesis proved a sensational debut, gaining almost one million admissions in Spain and attracting an overwhelmingly positive press. (94)

Though all of these facts highlight Amenábar’s alienating struggles, it is for all these same reasons13 the film has been pigeonholed as one that erases both history and uniquely Spanish issues in favor of post-modern “mapping” and global concerns. Yet, in truth, what all these features point to is Amenábar’s own liminality and ‘exilic’ condition, a condition which, while helping to explain the global appeal of his works, in no way detracts from his ability to engage themes with historical and Spanish relevance14. On the contrary, Amenábar’s exilic position and potentially alienating obstacles have enabled

13 A few examples would be Amenábar’s hybrid Spanish-Chilean identity, the fact that he was born at a time that locates him within Spain’s supposedly oblivious Generation X, and even the fact that, after struggling with his own Spanish institutions, he became quickly and internationally successful.
14 In fact, Abre los ojos was more successful in Spain than in the US, particularly relative to its American remake, Vanilla Sky, which, in turn, only garnered one-third of the viewers that Abre attracted in Spain. As Paul Julian Smith notes, “Vanilla Sky received a mixed critical reception but its box office benefited from a world promotional tour by its stars (a documentary is included as an extra on the US DVD). Proving the exclusion of foreign-language films from US distribution, Abre los ojos had been seen by only 72,976 Americans. Conversely, Vanilla Sky had grossed over $100 million in the US and had been seen by half a million people in Spain (www.IMDb.com). In spite of the media blitz, however, the numbers reconfirmed the relative independence of Spanish audiences, who do not always succumb to the seductions of Hollywood. Amenábar’s original had been seen by 1,794,037 Spaniards, more than three times the audience of Crowe’s remake. Unsurprisingly the Madrid premiere was controversial.”(100).
him to more fully appreciate the urgency of remembering, particularly for Spain’s youth. Like Puig, Amenábar’s (inner) exile is enhanced by his homosexuality.

And yet, unlike Puig and other authors and auteur’s examined in this thesis, though Amenábar does not witness terror firsthand, in addition to suffering the institutional terror, rejection and isolation that could have destroyed his career (at his film institute), he is, as a Chilean-Spaniard, not only a sort of double-exile (as the child of exiles and the product of two authoritarian lands), but the quintessential border subject—that is, as a man who does not properly belong to either country. Indeed, with the increased number of immigrants that have moved to Spain over the past thirty plus years (which, while making some Spaniards more open to foreign influence has also led to heightened prejudices and phobias), it is hard to imagine that Amenábar ever felt truly and completely Spanish—and yet, this very feeling of not belonging makes him all the more Spanish, particularly as a member of Spain’s alienated Generation X. In a way, Amenábar’s entire generation is one marked by a sense of exile since, as previously mentioned, it occupies a deeply transitional or liminal position. This becomes further evident in view of the critic Carlos Javier García’s observation that,

Refiriéndose a los años de la Guerra Mundial, Benjamin argumenta que la dificultad de transmitir experiencias no era sorprendente, pues una generación “que todavía había ido a la escuela en tranvía tirado por caballos, se encontró súbitamente a la intemperie, en un paisaje en que nada había quedado incambiado, a excepción de las nubes. […]” (“Horizontes discursivos y desconcierto en la película Abre los ojos” 375).

To be sure, García’s citation of Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” (entitled “El Narrador” in the Spanish version to which he refers) undoubtedly reinforces how César’s difficulty in narrating or confessing his problems to his psychiatrist reflects the sudden and disorienting changes of his society. Despite García’s somewhat misguided use of
this quote to confirm his more general argument regarding what he views as Generation X’s consequent disinterest in truth or even comprehension in favor of chaos and confusion (a thesis with which I wholeheartedly disagree), his quote is, no less, of vital importance. Not only does it underline César’s general abandonment by a certain way of life (a process which, as Benjamin suggests, is not, in any case, wholly unique to Spain’s Generation X), but it stimulates us to examine the different ways in which César’s generation is forced to undergo not just one but several rapid and disorienting changes.

The necessity of constantly readjusting to new technological advances and the cultural changes they evoke is dramatized in Abre by the fact that César must readapt to new ways of life not only once, but, in a sense, every time he is urged to “open his eyes”. Aside from the fact that he not only loses his parents but that his face is suddenly yet radically disfigured (a theme which, as Paul Julian Smith suggests, may also symbolize male anxiety over aging\textsuperscript{15}—a rapidly growing anxiety given the increasingly superficial values of all post-modern societies), equally great and perplexing shifts occur when César must adapt, first, to a virtual world and then, finally, to a post-virtual world which, in the film’s final moments, we viewers are invited to imagine. In summary, these disconcerting cultural shifts are not only especially appropriate or rather, symbolic of a generation which itself has trouble defining itself or attaching itself to any one cultural paradigm, but they become even more appropriate in light of Amenábar’s own exilic

\textsuperscript{15} Admittedly, Smith makes this observation in reference to Vanilla Sky, which features an appropriately middle-age man (Tom Cruise) rather than a mere 25 year-old. He states, “Certainly Cruise’s star profile, based on hugely profitable good looks now threatened by age, makes the theme of male narcissism and disfigurement all the more pertinent.”(101). Nevertheless, if we consider the degree to which not only all fiction but especially Abre uses symbols, images, themes and even characters in highly symbolic and metaphorical ways, we might argue that Vanilla Sky, as a remake of Abre, simply makes Abre’s symbol treatment of male narcissism and anxiety (in the face of aging) more explicit. Indeed, just as El laberinto, by making explicit many subtleties found in El espíritu, serves almost as an interpretation of it—one which nevertheless, creatively remakes it in the process—we may easily argue that, to a degree, a similar relationship defines Vanilla Sky’s relationship to Abre.
position not only as a member of Generation X but as a literally exiled, gay, Spanish-Chilean filmmaker who has achieved success despite being rejected from film-school.

I might add, however, that the rapidly shifting changes that Generation X must endure do not in any way undermine my argument that virtual reality, while representing these shifts, simultaneously reveals continuity with the Spanish culture of 1997. Even if it turns out that there are more similarities between the superficial world of 1997 Spain and César’s virtual dream than there are disparities, these differences are, nevertheless, substantial enough to provoke a radical disorientation in César—and, in fact, this is exactly what happens when he enters his virtual world. Furthermore, aside from the fact that the virtual reality of Abre is intended to function as a symbol (and thus, is open to a wide variety of interpretations), the fact that virtual reality represents both striking change and equally conspicuous similarities is itself of vital importance. Not only does it underscore the degree to which history often repeats itself in subtle, almost invisible ways, but it helps us understand that, unless the past and present are amply understood, their crises will continue to be recycled in perhaps even more pernicious and dramatic ways in the future. Indeed, it is virtual reality’s capacity to represent both an arresting rupture and an equally strong yet deceptively invisible continuity that makes the film capable of both transcending time and space while remaining deeply involved with questions of historical significance, space, time and memory itself.

Abre’s impressive ability to straddle both sides of this seemingly oceanic divide is further reinforced through a final argument in support of Amenábar’s exilic or in-between position (and one that, to a great extent, characterizes his entire generation)—that is, the emergence of so-called ‘non-places’, entities which, notwithstanding their ‘non’ prefix,
have become increasingly characteristic of all modernized cultures. Though other critics of *Abre*, most notably Nathan Richardson, have remarked on the prominence of these ‘non-places’ in both the film and the (non)-culture it represents, these arguments are, for the most part, used to reinforce *Abre*’s non-Spanishness. Paul Julian Smith, for example, compares *Abre*’s relative lack of emphasis on culturally or historically-charged sites or, as he puts it, identifiable buildings, landmarks and places to the remake, *Vanilla Sky*’s use of far more recognizable and culturally significant places. In the process, however, he mistakenly concludes (like Richardson) that the film could have been made anywhere.

Yet, what he really ends up demonstrating is not that the film is non-Spanish but rather, that, as Richardson more explicitly and correctly notes, the places evoked in *Abre* are, overwhelmingly, non-places. As I will now clarify, though the overwhelming presence of these ‘non-places’ and their increasing appeal to Spain’s younger generations reinforce the film’s global relevance, far from undermining its ‘Spanishness’, they reflect the homelessness or placelessness that characterizes Amenábar’s own generation of Spanish nomads. In so doing, they both broaden and deepen our understanding of Amenábar’s own experience of alienation and exile.

However, before proceeding with this argument, it will be of use for me to first define what a non-place is and how it is featured in *Abre*. As Richardson concisely summarizes, Marc Augé’s non-places are “anti-anthropological spaces empty to meaningful social relations, history, and identity, surrendered to solitary individuality, to fleeting, temporary, and ephemeral exchange typical of the alienating elevators, malls, hotel chains, and hyper-marts of global culture (77-79)”(336). They are, in fact, featured

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16 This argument is intended to further illuminate his central thesis that remakes are often more real and complex than their originals and thus, the anxiety that accompanies their release/reception is unfounded.
from *Abre’s* first scene in which César leaves his cold, impersonal Die-Stijl apartment (which itself almost embodies a non-place), gets in his car and travels to Spain’s shockingly abandoned Gran Vía, which as Richardson points out, is “[…] arguably Madrid’s—and perhaps Spain’s—most recognizable avenue.” (333). He adds,

> Moreover, drained of life, the Gran Vía—and thus Spain itself—becomes as it were a signifier without a signified, a slippery, elusive, and easily manipulable concept. Without its typically teeming populace, it is a geography devoid of history or society. While crowds and a story will arrive in time, this opening sequence ignores traditional disciplinary tools; rather than history or sociology, the scene foreground a visual, spatial logic to César’s and the spectator’s Spain. (333)

And yet, since the Gran Vía is itself filled with non-places, its lack of people, albeit surprising, becomes appropriately symbolic of the fact that the street, the people who typically fill it and, certainly, the relationships between them that occur on this street are all, in a sense, non-entities. In this respect, this initial scene not only presages César’s imminent alienation in his virtual world, but it reveals what the city has already become in his pre-virtual time. As Richardson further notes, the moment César arrives at the abandoned Gran Vía and jumps out of his car in astonishment, the screen features a VIPS (a highly prominent Spanish chain restaurant) and a McDonalds, which ‘signal the consumerism and multi-national capital of contemporary Spanish youth culture’. (333). These non-spaces continue to dominate the film, and, in fact, most of César’s meetings with Sofia (whether real or imagined) take place in the park—which, as Richardson suggests, has almost supplanted the home—at least for César.  

17 According to

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17 As Richardson elaborates, “If changes in “communication” have always effected changes in “community,” the erasure of a sense of place of stable identity, of subject/object distantiation, and of the very concept of time that has been attributed to virtual technologies promises a radical revision in the meaning of community, public life, city life, and subjectivity (Hillis, xix). Significantly, it is the park or plaza, along with major shopping boulevards like the Gran Vía, that guard through their socio-spatial effects a traditional Spanish order against the onslaught of global non-place culture (López Casero 123). Indeed, Liz Greenlaugh and Ken Worpole have shown the very space of the park to function in many
Richardson, the park’s function as a non-place is reinforced by its almost excessive beauty (he states, “[…] it is this very beauty that empties the site of its quality as a place.”(334-335)), as well as the dizzying camera effects which similarly capture its status as a visual “simulacra” rather than a socio-cultural or historical reality.18

Of course, given that the park’s beauty and disorienting aura are at least partially created through artificial camera effects, the camera, rather than literally portraying the park, manipulates “reality” in an effort to illustrate the fact that the park that César perceives forms part of his fantasy/VR. Though this might appear to undermine Richardson’s argument regarding the park in the sense that the camera itself cannot be trusted to faithfully portray it (and, after all, the park, which the camera artificially reflects, is not the “real” park but César’s virtual perception of it), the distinction between the real and the fake is itself untenable. What makes the park significant (as a non-place) is not its literal appearance but rather the way in which it is used and perceived—and, indeed, the camera, precisely through its fake or artificial rendering of the park, accurately captures its function as the quintessential non-place, particularly for César.

On the one hand, the park becomes the privileged site of César’s dreams and fantasies (and, thus, symbolizes his false relationship with Sofía). Though it is here that his deepest fantasies get played out, they are all eventually revealed to be lies. On the other hand, it is no less true that, in “reality”, Sofía works/acts as a mime in this very same park—which also makes her relationship to it somewhat inauthentic. As we have

cultures as a home-like space more intimate than home itself (Morley 57). Consequently, the definitive trip into virtuality and cyberspace commences within the very space of the park—an extension of the problem of radical displacement explored earlier in the “house” scenes.”(335)

18 As Richardson more amply suggests, “The dizzying, continuously circling camera that follows César and Sofía through the park, the often blinding light, and finally, the trajectory along a geometrically organized pathway leading in one point perspective towards a distant vanishing point suggest that indeed, once again, we are before more a highly spatialized, visual simulacra than any historical/social reality—we are in something akin to what Marc Augé has called a non-place.”(335)
seen, Sofía’s mask, costume and acting all alienate her (or distance her “true self”) from the world. Thus, since she herself is never really present, and even less so when in the park, it is appropriate that César’s fantasies of her (which similarly turn her into something she is not—namely, his lover/soulmate) occur in this (non-)place.

In short, though the artificial camera techniques manipulated to make the park seem like more of a non-place clearly transform it into something that it is not (superficially), much like the symbolic emptiness of Madrid’s city streets in the film’s opening scenes, this physical deformation, nevertheless, accurately symbolizes or reflects what the park truly stands for or has become. Though it is potentially a place of history, monuments and public gatherings, Sofía’s symbolic acting/“mimicry” and César’s one-sided fantasies render it (and thus Spanish history and public life itself) a place of erasure. Similarly, though the park is intended to be an island of verdant plants, grass and natural life in a city dominated by increasingly tall skyscrapers, technology and simulacra, by becoming the focal point around which César’s fantasies are based, the park is, ironically, fused with its own opposite—that is advanced technology, simulacra and, perhaps most ironically of all, the highest skyscraper in Madrid (where the L.E. offices are based).

Even as César imagines strolling down the park with his lovebird, Sofía, he is strapped to a machine in what is probably the biggest and tallest skyscraper in all Spain. Of course, in César’s fantasy, Sofía is not a mime but a beautiful soulmate who lovingly holds his hand on an equally beautiful, sunny day, a day which itself strongly contrasts to the overcast and rainy day when they actually do meet up in the park. In this “real” scene not only is Sofía disguised as a mime, but, as previously suggested, César’s face is monstrous rather than handsome. To top it off, he is not Sofía’s lover but her stalker.
Yet, the park is the ideal spot for César’s utopic imaginings not only because it is false but also because it is potentially the most real. Not only is it the one place that is, in theory, free of technology and simulacra, but as a new ‘home’ that is neither César’s nor Sofía’s it may represent a new future/identity as well as the corresponding compromise between two people that permits a new loving and reciprocal relationship to be formed.

With this in mind, César’s choice of the park, though ultimately ironic, reveals, through this very irony, that César is more complex than his superficial trappings and desire to live a dream suggest. Deep down, there is a side of César that wants a loving, reciprocal, authentic relationship, and that wants to understand his reality or at least see it for what it truly is. It is, no doubt, for all these reasons that he finds himself ultimately incapable of living in a virtual world devoid of memory, truth and, above all, true companionship. Though by the film’s end, so many layers of reality have been peeled away that one can no longer be sure of what “reality” is, as Dennis Perri puts it, all Abre proves is that reality is a place where you are not alone. And perhaps that is enough.

And yet, it is also for all these reasons (that is, for all the park’s potentially unifying, authentic and ‘natural’ qualities) that César’s imaginings of it become so ironic; for, as we have seen, his green, utopian park is just as false and technology based as his relationship with Sofía. Not only is César’s vision of Sofía in the park as his radiant, non-masked lover a mere one-sided fantasy and thus, completely non-reciprocal, but one of the main attributes about Sofía that makes her a true Other to César is, as previously suggested, the fact that, unlike César’s home, Sofía’s retains a unique warmth and an inviting personal flavor filled with memories and, more specifically, memories of relationships with others (as reflected in her photos). In this sense, Sofía too (albeit in a

19 (“Amenábar’s Abre los ojos: The Posthuman Subject” 89)
different way) is just as conflicted as César; for though she may be warmer, more centered and less “homeless”, this does not detract from her symbolic acting and mask wearing in the park and elsewhere. Richardson himself wisely remarks on this difference between César’s and Sofía’s homes as well as its significance, particularly in light of Gaston Bachelard’s understanding of the home as the focal point of modern culture and life. Richardson further illuminates the importance of the home in Abre as he recounts the way in which Sofía reminds César of his own ‘homelessness’,

Appropriately, then, the initial VR/dream sequence in the park comes to an abrupt conclusion when Sofía asks César about the state of his home following the birthday party. The reference once more to home launches the film into a series of dark, claustrophobic locales inhabited by the monstrous figure of the post-crash César. Sofía’s ill advised question sets up an abrupt call back to César’s cold, now unkempt flat in which we discover the protagonist’s face to be monstrously disfigured. (336).

Though this detail regarding César’s home serves, above all, to remind César of what really happened the morning after his party (since he spent the morning first in Nuria’s car and then, supposedly, in the hospital, he could have no recollection of the condition of his apartment on this particular morning), it is certainly no coincidence that Sofía chose this reference to “the home”, though, in truth, she could have chosen any number of other references. The blank César draws as he attempts to remember his non-existent arrival at home the morning after the party more generally evokes the emptiness

20To be exact, Richardson explains that “Bachelard,[…] locates the unconscious organized in life’s most intimate spaces. For Bachelard the most intimate space of all is the home: ‘For our house is our corner of the world…a real cosmos in every sense of the word’(4); ‘one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind’(6). Appropriately, then, as César’s story begins to unfold—and especially as its romantic plot begins to take flight—its action abandons the vast spaces of metropolitan Madrid to move indoors. César meets Sofía within the walls of his Madrid chateau. There, surrounded by cold Die Stijl architecture, César plays the part of calculating seducer, never hesitating in hitting on his best-friend’s date. When the story moves to Sofía’s cozy, more typically Spanish apartment, César suddenly transforms into a bashful boy-in-love. Amenábar produces this change through a play of shot-counter shots and soundtrack music that commences precisely when the two begin to compare their respective homes. The conversation draws our attention again to the problem of space as a possible origin for César’s opening-scene nightmare.”(334).
of his home and thus, his homeless state. In fact, it is highly appropriate that Sofía allude
to the home not only because, like Nuria, she serves as a double/mirror of César’s
repressed memories but also because, unlike César, she has a true “home” (and not just a
convenient place to eat, sleep, shower, have sex, and so forth). On the other hand, Nuria,
in keeping with her subtle yet penetrating wisdom, criticizes César’s cold, non-place/non-
home oriented thinking—and, in so doing, helps make him aware of his “homelessness”.
As Richardson perceptively notes, after César accepts a ride from Nuria, “[…]Their banal
conversation turns tense when Nuria punctuates César’s indifference to their relationship
by raising the very issue of home: ‘ni sabes donde vivo’”(334). He adds,

Nuria, the lone character in the film unafraid to wear her psychic imbalance on
her sleeve, underlines in her brief assertion of self the allegorical problem of what
could be called a ‘homeless’ Spanish youth culture, reminding us of Bachelard’s
statement that without the home ‘man would be a dispersed being’(7) (334)

And yet, though the ways in which the two women force César to confront his
own “homelessness” differ, the fact that they both succeed in this endeavor not only
highlights the central opposition between the home and the non-place, as dramatized in
Abre, but also the parallel roles and intersecting identities of Nuria and Sofía—who, as
we have seen, are far more similar than a cursory analysis suggests. Of course, the fact
that Sofía reminds César of his homelessness in a mere (pre-virtual) dream, may make
her less obviously powerful or honest than Nuria. And yet, the fact that this dream occurs
in César’s pre-virtual reality may also suggest that César himself is already aware, albeit
on a deeply subconscious level, of the similarities between the two women.

In any case, what we do know for certain is that, even if César does have or gain
some subconscious understanding of his homelessness (as revealed in this pre-virtual
dream) and perhaps even a desire to overcome it, this subconscious knowledge/desire
does not prevent the conscious César from continuing to embrace the innumerable non-places that saturate the film with their “nothingness” (including César’s own apartment).

Indeed, Richardson is correct in observing that,

The action of the film continues in a series of equally dark, cold spaces as César stands before indifferent medical experts in an upper level suite of a highrise medical complex, drinks and dances in a darkened nightclub, and collapses on dark, deserted street. These locales bare again the stamp of Marc Augé’s non-places […]” (336).

However, what makes Richardson’s argument truly innovative is his remark that

The small amount of human interaction that does occur in these locales centers around and often passes through a prosthetic mask that the doctors have offered to César to conceal his scarred features. The prosthesis obscures the final potential source of place-establishing communication, converting every locale he enters into a personal non-place. If the body is itself a place, indeed, the original place and space of identity, “the existential ground of our being,” “our home” (Sobchak 46), and “the geography closest in,” then, by way of the mask the very body itself becomes a non-place (Rich in Soja 123). At the same time, the wearing of a prosthesis in a film marked by the presence of cyber-technologies suggests what Katherine Hayles has named the ‘posthuman’.”(336)

Thus, César’s use of the mask, in addition to its various other symbolic functions, transforms the body itself into a non-place—and in this respect, yet another parallel may be drawn between César’s mask and his virtual reality, which, strictly speaking, is even more of a ‘non-place’, albeit of a different sort. And yet, for all the apparently ‘post-human’ attributes of both VR and the prosthetic mask, it is important to remember that though they are, themselves, non-human devices, in the end, they are incapable of truly making César post-human or non-human himself. Quite the contrary, though they temporarily intensify his borderline ‘non-human’ estrangement from others and himself, they not only underline the ultimate unsustainability of a “post-human” world, but, in the process, they help César face true (human) alterity. In the end, they help him to reaffirm a place in the world that, despite being in the future, simultaneously returns to the past.
As should now be evident, the fact that Amenábar belongs to Generation X does not make him oblivious to concerns about the recuperation of memory but rather more heavily invested in it. Though critics are quick to label this film as one that departs from the post-Francoist obsession with remembering, and what is more, as one that could have been made anywhere and by anyone, the truth is far more complex. Among other reasons or considerations, though Abre’s futuristic quality makes it transnational, its very ‘globality’ is emblematic of exilic fiction (which, by nature, transcends boundaries) and thus attests to Amenábar’s own exilic, hybrid identity—an identity which, much like César’s placelessness in the virtual world, belongs nowhere. Though, ironically, Paul Julian Smith insists that Abre los ojos is far less concerned with the specificity of location than its remake, Vanilla Sky, he indirectly suggests the ways in which it is undeniably Spanish in his following remark regarding the culture of the Spanish viewing public:

In spite of isolated cases of hugely popular coarse comedies, there was a certain drift upmarket, which can also be seen in the case of Spanish television, where domestically produced quality series drama began to draw higher ratings than American product. (Smith 2003: 22). // This rise in quality corresponded to changes in audience demographics. Far from dumbing down, as the stereotype suggests, Spanish audiences for both film and TV have been trickling up. Recent research has shown that cinema audiences in Spain are now wealthier and better educated than before. While they remain relatively young (Spanish audiences tail off after age forty-five), they are now overwhelmingly metropolitan and benefit from higher education. Moreover, domestic product is favoured by such choice demographic segments as women and graduated (SGAE 2000: 148-9). (94)

In reality, this quote is useful to us primarily because it supports my argument that Amenábar’s film, despite having been labeled as a “global” film that could have been made anywhere, is actually very Spanish—in large part, because of its very attempt to focus on the metropolitan concerns of an increasingly urban Spanish public. Abre’s ability to treat Spanish affairs is further reflected in the fact that, as noted in footnote 14,
it was three times more successful in Spain than its remake, *Vanilla Sky*, whose very existence nevertheless substantiates *Abre*’s global appeal. Moreover, *Abre*’s popularity both with the general public and with critics (by contrast, the critical reviews of *Vanilla Sky* were more mixed) not only blurs the traditional high/low opposition often imposed on artistic works but it confirms that *Abre* hits on the contemporary concerns and interests of its Spanish viewers. As Smith himself suggests, in order to appreciate a film in and for its content, one must examine not only direct cultural indicators but also the viewing public for whom it is made. Despite the fact that he lists various features that typify Amenábar’s films, Smith insists, what makes Amenábar most representative of recent directors is his “ability to marry art and commerce”(94), thus catering to both the critics and the public. In so doing, Smith unwittingly helps sustain my argument that *Abre* is, in spite of its global agenda and relevance, intensely “Spanish”.

Yet, though I concur with Smith’s assessment of Aménabar’s skill in marryng art and commerce, Smith mistakenly attempts to support his argument by adding,

  Marketed as part of a new generation of film-makers, Amenábar openly proclaimed the industrial context which produced and welcomed him: the professor-cum-serial killer of *Tesis* famously makes a speech claiming that Spanish cinema must please the audience if it is successfully to compete with Hollywood. (94)

  In reality, this is a poor example since not only is the professor the villain of the movie, but moreover, he is willing to sacrifice art and even ethics to entertain the public and thus, make a profit—something that Amenábar not only avoids but actually critiques.

21 As Smith observes, “A recent book on Amenábar rehearses the main features of his short career: his contempt for an artificial or ‘orthopedic’ cinema, his ‘curious recycling’ of earlier films and genres; the power of the public over his vision; the difficult balance between US and European influences; the closeness of his youthful characters to his audience; the solidity of his narrative structure and stylistic resources; and finally his unashamed editorializing on issues such as media violence and urban alienation (Sempere 2000: 35-45).”(94-95).
In fact, the point of including the professor’s speech in *Tesis* was to underline its inanity. This is similarly evidenced in *Abre*, as the film subtly yet sharply critiques the invasion of Spain by global forces. Not only is L.E., as an American company, representative of the forces of US/Global Capitalism, but does not even come to Spain directly, as it is filtered through France (Mr. Duvernois). Thus, though *Abre* successfully conveys Spain’s rapidly increasing modernization, it also points to its still marginal or subordinate roll as a relatively passive receptacle or mirror of the forces of global capital and culture. And yet, it is in this very capacity that *Abre* indicates its true “Spanishness”.

Of course, though Spanish culture is greatly defined by its assimilation of American and even other European influences, it would be wrong for me to suggest that it is solely defined by a vapid absorption of foreign influences and simulacra. Spanish culture is more properly defined by two opposing trends. On the one hand, there is a growing tendency (particularly via visual media) for the public to passively ingest whatever images it is fed. This tendency is critiqued not only in *Abre* but in other Spanish works (eg. *Historias del Kronen*) as well as Amenábar’s own film, *Tesis* (1995). And yet, these works, through their ability to reflect the growing passivity of many Spanish viewers, prove that some members of Generation X are heavily invested in doing just the opposite—that is, actively assessing and denouncing such thoughtless behavior.

One of the best examples of these trends emerges in the final moments of *Tesis*, when the protagonist, Ángela, gives her friend, Chema, a book. Chema, who is currently in the hospital, asks his roommate (an elderly man) to read the dedication that Ángela has written. Yet, instead of just reading the dedication he includes the copyright material, suggesting that he has become so used to passively consuming material that he is no
longer capable of viewing information with a critical eye. This cultural critique is reinforced by the fact that, immediately afterwards, room after room in the hospital is shown to be teeming with human automatons who blankly stare at their televisions, even as the newswoman hypocritically warns them that the images they are about to see are perhaps too grotesque and disturbing to view—and yet, she adds the final words, “These are the images/Éstas son las imágenes” (which are, significantly, the film’s final words).

Clearly, though the film suggests that a great portion of Spanish society has become passive, non-thinking, non-critical machines, there are many who depart from the norm. What is more, the fact that many of these people are elderly (e.g. Chema’s roommate) implies that, contrary to what many critics argue, the increase in passive, non-critical, visually oriented Spaniards is not limited to Spain’s Generation X, nor does it define them. In fact, as explored in previous sections of this chapter (and as corroborated by Paul Julian Smith), Spain’s viewing public, which is younger, better educated and more urban than previous generations, has proven to be far more critical than its predecessors and, at least in many cases, more resistant to blindly accepting the fashions of Hollywood (as supported by the fact that *Abre* was more appreciated and lucrative in Spain than *Vanilla Sky*). In truth, part of what may make Spain’s older generations so susceptible to passively accepting whatever they are handfed could very well be their nearly half-century long training under Franco’s severe instruction/supervision.

Indeed, though Carlos Javier García argues that the Spanish youth, unlike previous generations, likes to be confused, if there is any weight to his argument, it is not simply because (as he suggests) they have given up on the pursuit of truth or because they have become incapable of attempting to understand what they perceive—although this

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22 They are recordings of snuff videos and the associated scandal which Ángela and Chema just uncovered.
may be the case for a good number of them. For all the passivity that has accompanied an increasingly visually oriented world of simulacra, technology and rapidly moving, superficially exciting visual stimuli, there is an equally great backlash driven by people, like Amenábar, who like to confuse and be confused for the very reason that they are sick of being handfed oversimplified truths or being passively told what to think and see. Thus, García is correct (though not for all the right reasons) in maintaining that if the desire to understand one’s reality characterizes our film and literary tradition, *Abre* is different in that it alludes to the new growing attraction to the “incomprehensible”, which for him, defines the contemporary mindset (“Horizontes discursivos” 372).

He then goes on to quote Vicente Molina Foix in his essay “Nuevos Novísimos”, who comments on the enthusiastic reception of the film by some young viewers (about the age of Amenábar himself) who claimed to enjoy it because, “¿no lo sabías?, a la gente de mi edad les encanta no entender las cosas que ven’ (“Nuevos Novísimos”)” (“Horizontes discursivos” 373). In effect, García and Foix are both correct and incorrect. Though there may certainly be a growing attraction to the “incomprehensible”, it is balanced by a correspondingly great desire to make sense of the incomprehensible or at least—to make sense of one’s own relationship to it. It is, indeed, this quest for truth that defines both the César’s journey as well as the film and its viewers’ own journeys—as critics such as Marina Martín and even Amenábar’s own mentor and producer, José Luis Cuerda, would agree. To be sure, the lure of the incomprehensible signals a new kind of

23 As Marina Martín explains, “Abre los ojos comienza y termina con la misma escena: una pantalla oscura y, de fondo, la suave voz de una mujer diciendo, “Abre los ojos”. Es, sin duda, un final simbólico… Y también un principio. Podría representar la búsqueda de la verdad, ejemplificada en el constante esfuerzo de César por encontrar una salida al laberinto de su vida. Y, de hecho, según el cineasta español José Luis Cuerda—amigo y mentor de Amenábar, así como productor de sus tres primeras películas—, el centro de tal producción fílmica solo puede ocuparlo ese incesante deseo: ‘Desde mi punto de vista last res películas de Alejandro Amenábar tratan, a fin de cuentas, de la búsqueda de la verdad, de cómo esa búsqueda es muy
understanding of truth—a truth that not only defies oversimplified or monolithic notions of Truth, but one that, as *Abre los ojos* effectively suggests, cannot be reduced to, tamed by or fully explained by science and logic. As García himself notes,

> El mismo Molina Foix escribe en otro ensayo ("El templo perdido") sobre la presencia que lo irracional y lo sobrenatural tienen en la mentalidad contemporánea. Brujos y adivinos, magos y divinidades de distinta naturaleza circulan por los discursos de nuestra época. Frente al discurso de la razón, guiado por el principio de causalidad y la secuencia lógica y coherente de hechos, se invoca allí la presencia de lo oculto y el efecto hipnótico de las religiones.(373-4).

And yet, *Abre* powerfully reveals that reason and science are not necessarily antithetical to the supernatural--rather, they depend on the supernatural and even the irrational. Thus, in more than one way, *Abre*, while refusing to give up on the quest for meaning and authenticity, nevertheless, proposes radically new ways of understanding concepts such as reality, authenticity, truth, desire and selfhood. Curiously enough, the quest for truth is made possible by the very fact that as Amenábar himself confirms, the film breeds more questions than it answers. As Marina Martín puts it, “Lejos de ser, pues, una obra de ambigüedades frivolas, *Abre los ojos* ha de valorarse por su inclinación hacia el planteamiento: ‘Mi cine no es de respuestas, sino de preguntas’ asegura Amenábar (Rodríguez Marchante 87) […]” (“Entre lo real y lo soñado” 97).

**A New Narrative Ethics**

With this in mind, it is appropriate that the film heavily involve its viewers in the reconstruction of reality as well as the completion of the film itself. In so doing, *Abre* sets the stage for a radically new type of narrative ethics. Following the pattern of other texts and films studied in this thesis, *Abre* engages and reframes a wide variety of texts
and films. Yet, rather than simply weaving together meta-textual layers, ambiguous silences, ellipses and other multivalent or ambiguous symbols and themes, *Abre* additionally explores alternate methods including its inimitable manipulation of camera techniques and even time itself. In the process, it reveals not only why and how exile fiction promises to become the most powerful vehicle for ethically engaging its viewers/readers, but, continuing a tradition ignited by Erice’s *El espíritu*, it demonstrates new ways in which the specific medium of film may engender a narrative ethics with an unprecedented and commanding sway over its viewers.

As *Abre* reveals, the cultures of Spain and the world have become increasingly visual, thus making it all the more urgent that visual media actively involve its viewers—especially considering the ever growing rift between those who allow themselves to become passively seduced by visual (and all) media and those who continue to search for complex meaning and truth—a search which, as Mr. Duvernois reminds César, one must discover for oneself. Though an ethical film cannot tell its viewer what to think, it must responsibly remind him/her of his/her own responsibility to make sense of the world.

We have already begun to see how César’s mask itself actively engages the imagination of its viewers, who, even in the closing moments of the film, are unable to use the reactions of either César or Antonio to construct a solid Truth. This ambiguity is not only vital to any narrative ethics, but it serves the dual function of critiquing a world of appearances in which people are consistently urged not to think for themselves but to make judgments based on appearances—often in accordance with the way in which other people, especially those with power, view these appearances. The fact that Amenábar uses a visual symbol (the mask) in a way that parallels the use of multi-layered narratives
in other works not only highlights the unique power of film to complement written ambiguity with visual ambiguity, but it is especially useful, powerful and necessary given the increasing centrality of visual stimuli in Spanish and global culture.

Thus, though the mask represents the urgency of incorporating visual symbols into social or even visual critiques, it simultaneously serves as a symbol of the superficial ways in which these visual stimuli are typically absorbed. And yet, though the mask (by virtue of being a mask) symbolizes all the negative, superficial and repressive qualities previously analyzed, Abre effectively transforms it into a symbol of ambiguity, openness and thus, unity, plurality and hope. In so doing, Abre urges its viewers to do the same with even the most seemingly simplistic objects, words, meanings and symbols.

Abre’s capacity to demonstrate the rare ability of film to ethically engage its viewers in the remaking of fiction and the world does not end here. The camera itself sutures us into César’s reality in a way that highlights our analogous need to search for our own answers in a world of readymade truths and deceptive “realities”. At the same time, the camera separates us from him in a way that reinforces our need to discover our truths rather than simply accept César’s decisions, viewpoints, or even those of the camera. As mentioned earlier, the ultimate layer or reality in César’s multilayered world turns out to be our own—thus, the film finds it necessary to establish a delicate balance that enables the audience to both approximate, even meld with César while, nevertheless, maintaining a solid distance. Amenábar’s ingenious ability to achieve this, largely via camera techniques, becomes evident in light of Richardson’s keen observation that,

Amenábar’s film commences with a voice in the dark of the theater that calls to the audience as it were to ‘open their eyes.’ Slowly the black screen illuminates to reveal the fuzzy, tilting image of an alarm clock. Dizzying cinematography combines with traditional shot/reverse shot technique to produce a classic
Hollywood style suture between audience and protagonist, César, whose alarm clock voice had been inviting us to awaken. With César we descend the stairs of our Die Stijl-inspired home and ride in our original-era Beetle out onto the [abandoned] streets of Madrid. […] At last, we turn onto Madrid’s unmistakable Gran Vía. César stops cold while a reverse shot breaks us from his point of view. Our own vision turns divine as we tack with the camera upwards, gazing down on the protagonist standing at the head of a deserted cityscape. (331)

Yet, though the film uses innumerable techniques to envision a dramatically different variety of a narrative ethics, its ability to do so depends not only on its capacity to exploit the medium of film in unparalleled ways, but also because it approaches the theme of exile and alienation in a newfangled and highly complex fashion. Amenábar’s ability to do this appears to be a consequence of his own uncommonly varied and multifaceted experience of exile, as a Chilean-American border-subject, homosexual, institutional outcast and even as a member of Spain’s notorious Generation X. This becomes especially evident when we examine the film’s convoluted manipulation of time—one that accords to the intricacies of both mystical and exilic time. Time’s disorienting complexity not only further requires the active engagement of the viewer (who becomes, perhaps, just as confused as César—and thus, more empathetically drawn to him), but in so doing, it encourages the viewer to become aware of the connectedness and disconnectedness of Spain’s past, present and future. Indeed, it invites the viewer to understand and remember César’s (and Spain’s) repressive past, rather paradoxically, by imagining a distinctly new future—one that involves not only César or Spain, but the world itself and, most certainly, its viewers. In this way, the very distinction between self and other dissolves--or rather, is absorbed in a timeless future which contains all times.

In truth, the fact that Abre los ojos is as much about resurrecting the past as it is about understanding the present or future is reflected in the film’s treatment of time. Just
as César’s perceived reality turns out to be a dream, in this virtual world, time is similarly twisted—or collapsed. In the outer reality in which César’s virtual dream is embedded, 150 years have elapsed. And yet, in César’s eyes 150 years have collapsed into one. In this way, the film not only explores deeply spiritual/philosophical questions regarding time, but it implicates its audience in the reconstruction of the film in much the same way that the various narrative layers of texts like El beso and Santa Evita bid their readers to partake in the same processes of retelling in which their protagonists are embroiled. In short, the fact that César condenses 150 years into approximately one is a process that is mirrored and condensed in the viewer’s own experience of time, which further reduces or compresses César’s year-long experience (of 150 years) into less than two hours (the film’s runtime). In this way, the viewer becomes more profoundly enmeshed in César’s journey of making sense of the world, the self and one’s responsibility to it.

More generally, time not only becomes chaotically intertwined, as the film vacillates between past, present and future, but it expands and contracts in bewildering ways—for the viewer as much as for César. As we have seen, for the most part, the film unfolds in the undefined time of Cesár’s virtual “present”—however, in his quest to make sense of a world that has literally turned into a nightmare, it sporadically moves back to the historical present/immediate past of 1997 via a series of flashbacks, memories and “dreams”, before finally launching César and us viewers into a (post)virtual world of the 22nd Century. This effect not only reinforces the sympathetic bond between the baffled César and his equally perplexed audience but, in an analogous way, it underscores the specific ways in which different characters and perhaps the different times they represent

24 Indeed, though the film offers no definitive answers about what this reality will be, it ends the way it opens, urging the protagonist and, by extension, its viewers to “open their eyes”.
are likened to one another. Moreover, César’s erratic time travel not only has the additional function of reflecting how reality and fantasy are just as interconnected as self and other (and male and female) but also how memory functions. In truth, the dizzying, almost butterfly-like wanderings of the mind and memory expose the ways in which time and history are themselves composed of ruptures, regressions, and repetitions. It is for this reason, as much as any other, that Abre, despite its ostensive difference from the other works examined in this dissertation, serves a special and necessary function.

Indeed, as I have suggested through manifold examples, this text serves as an ideal example of the ways in which history remains relevant to the present and future—both for its similarities as well as its departures. Though authoritarianism is no longer an immediate concern, its legacy of erasure and even its imposition of blind obedience or passive acceptance of monolithic truths are refigured in Abre in ways that highlight both the ruptures and continuities of Spain’s past. Much like the characters themselves, who recycle (in a new context/time) what other characters said in another reality-time-world, the film itself resurrects the demons of Spain’s past, albeit with new faces, masks, contexts and crises. In a sense, history/time itself becomes another character with new and changing faces—yet these new faces are, upon closer analysis, reminiscent of older ones--ones that may, in fact, represent another “lifetime”, “reality” or historical moment.

Accordingly, these similarities and differences manifest themselves with respect to the film’s very treatment of time. Like Santa Evita, Abre, for the most part, works backwards before cycling back around to the present. Thus, while, in a sense, it follows Santa Evita’s backward function or inverse sense of time (highlighting the importance of

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25 As we have consistently seen, for example, many of César’s flashbacks are prompted by the fact that someone in his virtual world has repeated or done something that someone else said or did in his pre-virtual world, immediately forcing his mind to remember/re-imagine this pre-virtual experience.
memory and its relationship to self-realization), it also mirrors *El laberinto*’s (and to some extent *El espíritu*’s) cyclical quality—one which, nevertheless, enables the protagonists and their viewers to arrive at a new destination even as the film, literally, ends where it begins. Just as *El laberinto* both begins and ends at the moment of Ofelia’s death, *Abre los ojos* begins and ends with the phrase “open your eyes”.

Yet, whereas time expands for Ofelia (in the sense that the entire movie constitutes a sort of flashback that takes place at the moment of Ofelia’s death), for César, time contracts. In other words, though only several minutes have passed in *El laberinto*’s “real time”, an entire century and a half have passed in *Abre los ojos*. Yet, above all, *Abre*’s resuscitation of the past can best be appreciated through its ability, following the tradition of the other works analyzed in this thesis, to explicitly reframe or reinsert other fictions and fantasies, both international and Spanish. Indeed, given the film’s underlying moral dilemma—which, significantly, pretends to be a scientific one—

the film, perhaps more than any other work in this thesis, highlights the urgency of cultivating a truly effective narrative ethics. As Marina Martín explains,

[... ] La red de posibles conexiones intertextuales es amplia. En literatura valga nombrar a Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Pedro Calderón de la Barca y Franz Kafka. En filosofía René Descartes, George Berkeley, y David Hume pueden también establecer lazos sugerentes. Pero, en definitiva, la elaboración de un diálogo intertextual depende en su totalidad de la receptividad y lectura que el espectador dé. Lo que sí ha quedado constatado por el mismo Amenábar es su interés, desde muy joven, en la literatura de ciencia-ficción y en el cine de intriga. En lo que respecta al impacto ejercido por ciertas películas o técnicas cinematográficas existe ya una línea de investigación. En *El cine de nuestros días*, José María Caparrós mantiene que Amenábar contrae, en verdad, fuertes deudas con el cine norteamericano, pero señala que todas sus películas llevan un sello propio distintivo. De hecho, según asegura este crítico, *Tesis* contiene ya rasgos que aparecerán en *Abre los ojos* y *The Others*: Narrado a modo de thriller, se nota tras la cámara a un cinéfilo y amante del cine norteamericano. De ahí que en la película esté presente el ‘suspense’ psicológico de Hitchcock, y la sombra de

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26 That is, insomuch as César’s VR nightmare is blamed on a technical “glitch” rather than a moral one.
Spielberg, Coppola, Kubrick y James Cameron—de quienes el joven cineasta se considera deudor—aunque todo ello, sin perder el estilo propio y su personalidad como autor.(76) (“Entre lo real y lo soñado” 93).

And yet, I would argue, though these strong and varied international influences are, no doubt, present in Abre (and necessarily so, given the fact that exile fiction is, in essence, transnational and thus, open to a variety of subjectivities and voices), it is just as crucial to note Amenábar’s indebtedness to Spanish authors and auteurs such as Víctor Erice himself. Indeed, both tendencies are reflected in Martín’s observation that,

Stanley Kubrick ha sido una gran inspiración […] Amenábar admira en él la técnica meticulosa y los enigmáticos desenlaces de sus películas a través del silencio y de las metáforas visuales, como ocurre en 2001, Space Odyssey. Elogia, a su vez, a Víctor Erice, en El espíritu de la colmena, por su técnica perfeccionista y la manera como apela a la imaginación del espectador: ‘Para mí Víctor Erice es el Kubrick español’(Rodríguez Marchante 94). (96).

Amenábar’s likening of Erice to Kubrick, which is about the highest compliment one could pay Erice, certainly suggests Erice’s profound influence on Amenábar, particularly through El espíritu. Appropriately, El espíritu’s influence is reflected in everything from Abre’s extreme ambiguity, its corresponding appeal to the viewer’s active and creative engagement with the film, the centrality of monsters and imagination, the solitude, repression and alienation of an “orphaned” protagonist, the sophisticated play between reality and fantasy, the fluidity of self and other, the integration of spiritual themes into scientific ones, and the rewriting/reframing of national and international, futuristic and mythic, contemporary and ancient fictions and histories. Even the fact that both films begin by featuring an abandoned and solitary landscape/cityscape is, as previously mentioned, suggestive of Abre’s indebtedness to El espíritu.

At the same time, the striking similarities between Abre and the other works treated in this dissertation make us acutely aware of Amenábar’s indebtedness not only to
exile fiction and film in general, but specifically, to those inspired by authoritarian terror. However, in order to fully appreciate the degree to which Amenábar is bound to these particular traditions, it will help to examine his less exhaustive or notable links to a countless variety of other types of fiction. As Martín explains, an intriguing parallel may be drawn, for example, between Amenábar’s *Abre* and Borges’ “Las ruinas circulares”

[…] Tal y como ocurre en “Las ruinas circulares”, el final de *Abre los ojos* revela, con inquietante ironía, que todo es un sueño, personajes incluidos. Antonio se niega, de esta manera, a aceptar su destino. La revelación de que su ser no es más que la ficción de otro le resulta inaceptable. O, según la voz narrativa al final de “Las ruinas circulares”: ‘No ser un hombre, ser la proyección del sueño de otro hombre, ¡qué humillación incomparable, qué vértigo’ (Borges, *Obras completas I* 454). (“Entre lo real y lo soñado”)

And yet, though this parallel between Borges’ story and *Abre* pales in comparison to the multifarious links between *Abre* and the primary works examined in previous chapters, it serves the special function of helping us to appreciate the fact that this “incomparable humiliation” is precisely what virtually all women in both Argentina and in Spain have suffered for hundreds of years, perhaps especially in authoritarian climates. Indeed, though all of the works analyzed in this dissertation share the common goal of addressing female repression, abjection and even objectification, *Abre* does an especially fine job of welding this historic problem (of human objectification) to its increasingly genderless emanations; that is to say, the impulse to objectify has increasingly affected not only women but also men, such as Antonio (as a mere projection) and even César.

And yet, while exposing the recent cultural shift which has now made men the victims of their own objectifying gaze, *Abre* simultaneously reminds us (unlike Borges’ work) of the fact that the problem of objectification has largely evolved out of the macho need to control and objectify women—which not only still exists, but is, after all, what drives

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27 César, though not a mere projection, is enslaved to his body and, more crucially, what others think of it.
Abre’s narrative itself and, more specifically, César’s fetishistic imaginings or solipsistic projections of women. At the same time, it is worth noting that, as Martín adds,

Una situación paralela puede verse también en Augusto Pérez, el personaje que Miguel de Unamuno crea en Niebla. Esta imagen atmosférica y ambiental encarna, como ocurre en The Others, una sugerente metáfora metafísica, pero en Abre los ojos la intensidad de los colores, la brisa y el cielo azul de la última escena, las personas y los objetos percibidos no dan la menor indicación de su entidad fantasmagórica. No cabe duda que la película evoca también la figura de Segismundo, de La vida es sueño […]”(95)

The fact that clear, albeit limited, parallels emerge between Abre, Niebla and Calderón’s La vida es sueño is worth considering since it further elucidates the degree to which Abre, while apparently commenting on highly global, contemporary problems, cycles back to the past, resurrecting the ghosts that, much like Nuria and friends, are revealed to still haunt a seemingly new and disjointed reality in profound and penetrating ways. In so doing, it not only exposes the degree to which many problems of the past have yet to be overcome, but, more generally, helps illuminate both the historical and literary genealogies to which Spanish culture, history, literature and film are indebted.

Rather gratuitously, Martín goes on to include a disproportionate number of vague and dehistoricized comparisons including everything from Pedro Páramo to The Matrix. Though her effort privileges the obvious fact that almost all literature is interconnected, it is for this reason somewhat unnecessary to explore such relatively shallow connections, which, in any case, are so numerous that an exhaustive analysis of them might prove interminable. Still, given the abovementioned importance of time, Martín’s recognition of the similarities between the way in which “El milagro secreto” and Abre ‘subjectivize’ or morph time and even their similar use of symbolic alarm clocks are vital to consider.28

28 She explains, “En el cuento “El milagro secreto”, Borges presenta un tema paralelo. El tiempo se bifurca cuando el protagonista Jaromír Hladík, al frente de un escuadrón a punto de ejecutarlo, vive internamente
Yet, despite the many similarities that Martín perceptively underlines, one crucial difference she fails to note is that time expands (not contracts) in *Abre*. In this sense, “El milagro secreto” is, perhaps, more easily likened to *El laberinto*, in which time is not only similarly condensed, but the entire film constitutes one great oneiric flashback, which, just as in “El milagro”, occurs the moment before the protagonist’s death. By contrast, *Abre*’s inverse use of time is far more unique than “El milagro’s”—in fact, as far as my film and literary knowledge spans, it has no precedent. Amenábar’s special capacity to invert the temporal logic at work, for example, in “El milagro” is of interest to us not simply because it creates a new temporal paradigm, but because it highlights the film’s rare capacity to reflect the fluidity and repetitions of history itself.

Specifically, by inverting Borges’ temporal framework, *Abre* manages to span over 150 years of change and rupture while nevertheless exposing the unceasing repetition that continues well into the future (and which is reflected, for example, in the repeated mandate to “open your eyes”). Adding to the complexity, the injunction to “open your eyes” indicates, simultaneously, both repetition and change—for, as said, almost every time we viewers hear this phrase it signals a radical rebirth or reentry into a world which is both unexpectedly strange and, yet, strangely familiar.

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el periodo de un año en tan solo una fracción de segundo. […] De nuevo, la superposición y el trueque de lo real y lo onírico permiten el cuestionamiento de los cánones cotidianos y la apertura hacia el enigma: La noche del 14 de 1939, en un departamento de la Zeltnergasse de Praga, Jaromir Hladik […] soñó con un largo ajedrez […] en los relojes resonaba la hora de la impostergable jugada; el soñador corría por las arenas de un desierto lluvioso y no lograba recordar las figuras ni las leyes del ajedrez. En ese punto, se despertó (*Obras completas* I 508)

En *Abre los ojos*, el protagonista César, corre también por un desierto, aunque en este caso es urbano: la imponente desolación de la Gran Vía con sus luces y semáforos, sus edificios y su cielo raso. También aquí el protagonista despierta a la realidad cotidiana de su alcoba y a la alarma de su despertador. Pero la línea narrativa de la película, quebrada y desdoblada en tantos reflejos pasados y presentes, apunta a un futuro irremediable, aunque no menos incierto. *Abre los ojos* desemboca, pues, en un desafío intelectual. Difícil es resistirse a su fascinación.” (“Entre lo real y lo soñado” 101).
In this sense, the passage of time itself becomes somewhat akin to Lacan’s notion of the uncanny. Accordingly, though Abre’s cyclical use of time (reinforced by its repetitions) echoes the cyclical structure found in other works (including “El milagro” and El laberinto), it gains a very different, new, and almost ironic significance—for its cyclical structure exists not because (as in these other works) in “reality” only several minutes or seconds have passed, but in spite of the fact that over a decade and a half has transpired. Thus, though Amenábar’s distortion of time shares the similar function of forcing its viewers to re-examine our assumptions about what time is, means and/or how essentially subjective it is, it differs from the way in which time is used in “El milagro secreto” since, by virtue of reducing 150 years to a year-long dream rather than expanding a single moment into a year-long dream, we viewers can appreciate, among other functions, just how much history literally repeats itself.

Nevertheless, this should not detract from the fact that Amenábar’s decision to play with or “distort” time is, as Martín implies, most definitely inspired by works that, like “El milagro”, ingeniously revamp our beliefs about time. Moreover, it becomes unequivocally clear, particularly as Martín tells it, that Amenábar’s film shares other notable similarities to “El milagro”, including the use of alarm-clocks, which, in both works, are used to convey a radical “awakening”--or the opening of one’s eyes, spirit and mind not only to new truths and realities but also to new temporalities. And yet, just as Abre treats time in perhaps even more complex and innovative ways than “El milagro secreto”, the alarm clock (in Abre) serves an equally complex function. On the most obvious level, because the alarmclock is used to privilege the film’s repetitions and change, monotony and difference, on a personal, subjective level as well as on a more
historically charged one, it is capable of stressing, in yet another way, both the repetitions and ruptures of history/time. This ambiguity is further reflected in Martín’s assertion,

Las imágenes de relojes en el mismo comienzo de la película, por ejemplo la imagen repetida del despertador de César en la mesilla de noche, el sonido de su alarma, la consulta de la hora en su reloj de pulsera al conducir por las alles de la ciudad, apuntan, en fin, a una representación mecánica y cotidiana del tiempo. Se dibuja, así, un sendero de opciones que, una vez tomadas, son irrevocables. Por otro lado, sin embargo, el tiempo se interioriza y se funde en la material de los sueños, convirtiéndose en ficción.” (“Entre lo real y lo soñado” 100).

To summarize, Abre’s reconstruction or re-imaginings of time, reality and other fictions not only helps dissolve the frontiers between self and other, the common and the strange, reality an fantasy as well as past, present and future but it adds a level of ambiguity that renders the film particularly relevant and open to (post)modern audiences, whether Spanish, American or whatever else. With this in mind, it is little wonder that this film, which itself rewrites a series of traditions ranging from biblical antiquity to futuristic sci-fi, not only becomes both literally remade (via Vanilla Sky), but also mentally reconstructed by every viewer who is fortunate enough to watch it. If the viewers extend the ethical impact of this remaking into their real lives, we might maintain that, to the extent that the film is mentally re-erected by its spectators, it also restructures or remakes their lives—that is, the lives of any viewer capable of ethical re-imaginings.

Yet, before making some final conclusions regarding the general relevance of Abre both to my project and to life, I should first explore Abre’s uncommon ability to reframe works which are themselves, in a sense, “timeless.” The film’s interlacing of the bible and science fiction (two apparently opposite genres, which, moreover, spring from two extreme points in time) reveals that, under the surface of these ostensive oppositions, these genres have far more in common than meets the eye. After all, when the map of
humanity is molded into a globe, the opposite extremities of East and West are revealed to be, much like the extremities of time, essentially one and the same. *Abre* achieves an analogous effect not only by creating a similar warp-hole in which 1997 becomes 2145, but, by demonstrating just how similar science fiction and biblical stories are (as well as science and spirituality), it similarly folds together the extremities of past and future, reality and fantasy, the spiritual and the material, self and other and many more.

In truth, Amenábar’s self-professed attraction to sci-fi is not only reflected in *Abre*, but of all genre’s that have influenced this film, its indebtedness to sci-fi is undoubtedly the most obvious, particularly given *Abre*’s futuristic engagement with virtual reality, cryogenically frozen bodies and its literal ability to leap into the future. Like virtually all science fiction, *Abre* imagines technological advances that anticipate yet also critique the ways in which the current “laws” of time, space, reality and selfhood may be broken or simply rendered obsolete. Dennis Perri’s article on *Abre* begins with a reference to an episode of Star Trek in which, much like what happens in *Abre*, not only are the lines between fantasy and reality blurred, but, what is more, fantasy has the upper-hand as reality is transformed according to human fancy. As Perri puts it,

> On Stardate 41263.1 the U.S.S. Enterprise accelerates mysteriously and ends up over a billion light years from its previous location. To make matters worse, the crew finds itself in a galaxy where the boundaries between the mental and the physical disappear. Individual thoughts spontaneously and often terrifyingly take material form, threatening to cast the entire ship into chaos.” (89).

The backdrop for such terror is, not surprisingly, explained through the greedy, power-hungry pretensions of the US government. As Perri adds,

> The US government is funding investigations “[…] involving telekinetics, human enhancement, engineered human evolution, and brain-machine interfaces. The ultimate goal of one such project is ‘to seamlessly merge mind and machine,
engineering human evolution so as to directly project and amplify the power of our thoughts throughout the universe’ (Garreau 20) (“The Posthuman Subject” 89)

The parallels between this future world and the world into which César plummets into in Abre are obvious. Indeed, in Abre the appropriately American company, L.E., achieves its goal, as it is responsible for granting César his wish to live in a world that perfectly conforms to his desires. And yet, though César’s paradise turns into an inferno, the reason this happens is not because of any technical glitch or scientific error but rather a moral and spiritual one. Not only is César responsible for creating his own nightmare by confusing his superficial desires and lusts for Desire itself, but L.E. is equally responsible for professing to control the uncontrollable—namely, the subconscious. Though science, technology and the film itself appear to enter a post-human realm, we learn, along with César, that no human can ever really transcend or escape from his humanity. Ironically, in defense of his company’s capacity to responsibly offer its services, the French spokesperson for L.E. insists on a TV show that, We have the means to do it, the technology. But, above all, we have sufficient moral maturity to understand what this new step in human evolution means, to look at the future and do away with certain meaningless taboos inherited from ancient religious traditions and old and useless memories.

And yet, ironically, not only do “ancient religious traditions” prove to be just as central to this film as technological advances, and not only do “useless memories” become more powerful and important than science itself, but, more critically, despite L.E.’s contention to the contrary, what they have least of all is the moral maturity to make good on their promises. Though science cannot fix problems of the mind or the soul (and does not have to do this in order to be ethically responsible), it must at least recognize its limits. By failing to do so, it/ L.E. does, most definitely, become unethical.
Indeed, one of many the reasons why it is appropriate for Amenábar’s film to cast its problems through a futuristic paradigm is because, in view of the ever progressing technological advances that characterize the modern world, it is ethically necessary to consider how we deal with and understand science and technology—in fact, Duvernois’ opinion regarding the obsolescence of religion and even memory are, whether true or not, ever more popular and representative of the contemporary world/mindset. Furthermore, because technology and science have become so increasingly dominant in culture and cultural debates, Abre’s use of a futuristic paradigm enables it to appeal to a wide range of audiences and their respective concerns. By resonating with real, everyday people, Abre may more powerfully engage its audience in a “narrative ethics”.

Perri himself supports my point as he notes that, “An ever growing body of literature imagines and evaluates this future, in which technological and medical advances result in mentally and physically enhanced humans.”(89). In addition to the growing number of films, television series and even written fiction that examine these issues, Perri rightly observes that, in academic theory/cultural studies, the trend is similar. He cites, for example, the renowned Donna Haraway’s popular yet academic treatment of “cyborgs” and how “Not surprisingly, debate has intensified in many disciplines over what being ‘human’ means and what categories will describe and define subjectivity.”(90). He also quotes Ray Kurzweil (“Virtual places”), who envisions how “[…] we will meet other people there [in virtual places], both real people and simulated people. Of course, ultimately there won’t be a clear distinction between the two.(49)”(90).

Abre, to be sure, not only engages precisely these questions, but in so doing, it redefines not only what reality is but what it means to be human. Although, unlike most
critics of the film, I maintain that Abre resists the belief that we are in danger of entering a truly and definitively post-human realm, our former assumptions about humanity, reality and even truth are revealed to be in desperate need of revamping. If it is true that, as Perri himself concludes, reality is a place where you are not alone, it is perhaps even more accurate to conclude that to be human is to be connected to others—or at least, to desire such a connection. Though César’s entry into a purely virtual world temporarily distances him from authentic connections with others, his separation from them is not only short-lived and ultimately unsustainable, but it is never, strictly speaking, purely virtual since, as David Laraway reminds us (“The Embodiment of Skepticism”), even as César’s mind remains disconnected from the concrete reality and inhabitants of planet earth, César’s cyborg-like body-machine helps generate his virtual fantasies. In this way, César remains bound to the world in various ways. More critically, just as exile is, as we have seen throughout this thesis, necessary for rebirth to take place, César’s temporary isolation from society actually helps him reconnect to society in more meaningful ways.

In this respect, César’s entrance into a virtual world is deeply reminiscent of mystical experience, not only because such occurrences are themselves defined by exile but also because they force the subject to encounter his or her own demons, monstrosity and solitude. As I have more fully analyzed in previous chapters, the bible is replete with stories of exile and rebirth—in fact, it is utterly dependent on them. Moreover, according to biblical tradition, characters who must go into exile are often persecuted by monsters. For example, after Jacob goes into exile, he encounters a ladder between heaven and earth. In order to become “reborn”/renamed as “Israel” Jacob must ascend the latter and wrestle a dark stranger. Though this beast could be anyone from the archangel, Michael,
to Satan/’the challenger’ to Esau’s own guardian angel[^29], he symbolizes Jacob’s own monstrosity—a notion further suggested not only by Jacob’s previous sin and trickery, as reflected in his name, Jacob/‘trickster’, but by Jacob’s new name ‘Israel’, which suggests that he has “struggled with God”. Similarly, César must also battle with monsters and even God throughout his (virtual) exile from the world. Yet, in so doing, César is finally become reborn into a new world where the ladder between heaven and earth may be more solidly erected—appropriately, through the monstrous angel, ‘Eli(jah)’/L.E.

In light of this, it becomes easy to see that, ironically, the Spanish (post)-modern culture examined in Abre, in its very attempt to escape the “irrational burdens” of religion or even the soul, is compelled to face them. In this way, Abre demonstrates how science, though increasingly conceived of as a replacement to spirituality, when pushed to its limits, unwittingly explodes into its very own opposite. Indeed, it is not because of scientific error or imperfection but rather because César’s virtual apparatus works all too perfectly that, while failing to live up to its promises, VR nevertheless succeeds in becoming a quasi-divine moral apparatus. That is, rather than taming or transcending the psyche, desire, morality or even the soul it transforms into a perfectly oiled karma machine. This becomes still more obvious upon close examination of Nuria’s and César’s respective suicides and ‘afterlives’. Though Nuria’s suicide is more traditional than César’s (which, in turn, might enable her to enter into a more traditional afterlife), not only do both characters opt for a (social) death as a result of their inability to cope with reality, but Nuria’s more traditional afterlife may not be all that different from the technological yet karmically oriented afterlife that César suffers in his nightmarish VR.

[^29]: This makes sense if Esau, Jacob’s ‘evil twin’, is viewed as Jacob’s alter-ego rather than as a separate man.
Indeed, César’s self-imposed hell very much corresponds to the type of gloomy afterlife that many spiritual or religious persons might imagine—the only difference is that César actually paid money to live his nightmare. In any case, this notion that people are incapable of dealing with life is not only an increasingly pertinent concern given the radically isolating features of (post)modern society that Abre poignantly depicts, but it is a recurring motif in virtually all Amenábar’s works. As Perri astutely observes,

*Mar adentro* (2004) dramatizes the biography of Ramón Sampedro, who judges that his life as a quadriplegic lacks the dignity required in his notion of being human. In two other films, Amenábar suggests the implications of an evolution toward a posthuman condition. *Grace in The Others* (2001), unable to cope with the loss of her soldier-husband, suffocates her children and kills herself […] The protagonist of *Abre los ojos* (1997) cannot bear living with a deformed and scarred face. Brought back to life by a cryogenic company, César represents Amenábar’s conception of an individual struggling to grasp the nature of subjectivity in the future and to comprehend his own identity in radically new circumstances.”

And yet, just as the other works treated in this dissertation suggests that memory, responsibility and truth cannot be truly or definitively erased, *Abre* takes this one step further by implying that not even suicide permits one to escape one’s demons, crises and sufferings. Much like memories, the self cannot be killed or suppressed, for it keeps coming back. This notion of rebirth, clearly, has many spiritual resonances, as it evokes the idea of both otherworldly afterlives as well as earthly reincarnations—which, of course, César’s own rebirths could easily symbolize. As we have seen, in order to escape his hellish afterlife César must, in accordance with spiritual or religious precepts, make an enormous leap of faith—yet it is simultaneously a leap of faith in science itself.

On the other hand, the dissolution of the boundaries between science and faith is itself necessary largely because the divide between self and other (or a life of protracted solitude) itself proves unsatisfactory and, indeed, untenable. As Dennis Perri explains,
The Russian theorist Bakhtin explains that the mirror image can never provide the individual with a complete or necessary view of itself. According to Bakhtin, the self requires something more, namely, what the other sees of the self. Bakhtin claims that the other possesses a ‘surplus of seeing’ unavailable to the self even by means of the mirror (“Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” 23-26). (93).

And yet, mirrors also prove crucial to confronting oneself—that is, if one can truly open one’s eyes and see oneself for who one is. Though the physical mirrors of César’s pre-crash life mistakenly assure him of his beauty, the more symbolic (yet also literal) mirrors that César just as repeatedly encounters in his virtual world serve a very different function, as they force him to confront his own alterity and repressed monstrosity. Unfortunately and rather ironically for César, it is not until he is separated from reality and all others that the mirrors in his virtual world effectively show him the monstrous, egotistical face that only others, particularly the others he has (ab)used, have seen. It is for this reason that César dreads looking into his virtual mirror almost as much as he dreads facing Nuria, who, much like “Evita” in Chapter 4, becomes something of a mirror herself. Yet, even as he fears them, César’s virtual mirrors offer him redemption—much like the mystical mahazeh/mirrors examined in Chapter 1.

On the other hand, what makes Abre particularly sophisticated is that, while it reinforces the notion that the mirror is useless until it incorporates the way in which others see you, it is just as dangerous to view yourself based on the often objectifying and self-alienating gaze of others. This is suggested not only by the fact that César cannot trust others (such as Antonio, who mistakenly tries to convince him that his face is beautiful) but also by the fact that the very reason he commits to a “virtual afterlife” is because his once superficially handsome face no longer pleases others. In short, though one’s vision of oneself must incorporate the perspective of others, this external viewpoint
must itself be subject to criticism—particularly when it is based on superficial factors rather than deep or ethical ones. It is for all these reasons that I disagree with Perri’s conclusion that the essential problem with César’s virtual world is that, “All the characters in César’s world are his creations and therefore can not provide him with the missing point of view. In fact, César himself confirms their insufficiency […]”(95).

Admittedly, though these characters are far from being ideal or authentic others--and for this very reason, César must return to “earth”--these characters do in fact serve as more trustworthy judges than the even more superficial people or ‘others’ of César’s pre-virtual world. In truth, they are not so much others as they are cloned automatons. Besides, even though these phantomlike others are not physically or literally present, given that everything they say or do is based on what they (or someone else) actually did say or do in Cesar’s pre-virtual reality, César is capable, albeit on a limited level, of more truly engaging with these others in his virtual world than he did in the “real” one. In point of fact, though Perri makes use of a highly appropriate quote from Bakhtin, he somewhat oversimplifies its relationship to Abre:

> I am conscious of myself and I become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness. (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 287).

Indeed, though an encounter with alterity is necessary in order for one to truly see oneself, evolve and grow, what is most necessary is not alternate or other bodies, but an alternate way of thinking and seeing. Ironically, César encounters more of this type of alterity in his virtual world than in the “real” world of 1997, Madrid. Yet, this becomes less ironic when we consider that the encounter with the strange is, fundamentally, something that is, to a great extent, already deep within us (albeit latently). In light of all
this, we can better appreciate just how much César’s virtual reality approximates very closely to mystic experience—for it, it not only draws its subject away from the world only to eventually lead him back to a new and better one, but in the process, it enables this subject to explore an inner alterity that is simultaneously the alterity of an-Other.

At the same time, it is the very fact that César’s virtual reality becomes, in a sense, more real than the real world that reveals the extent to which fantasy/spirituality is ultimately just as important as reality, particularly in enabling one to truly see the world and re-member the past. Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, what is most essential for fully “opening one’s eyes” is the ability to synthesize fantasy and reality. If César had simply accepted his virtual nightmare rather than using clues from his previous life/reality to make sense of his fantasy, he would have never been capable of escaping into a third world in which reality and fantasy, self and other, science and faith are effectively fused. On the other hand, the entire paradigm may be turned on its head. That is, inasmuch as fiction is, by nature, metaphorical and symbolic, we might argue that the virtual world (at least on one interpretive level) could represent reality and reality could represent the forgotten world of Platonic Forms or the supernatural abode of Judeo-Christian, Islamic or any number of other religions. Yet, this inversion, far from weakening the film’s emphasis on the need to blend fantasy and reality, strengthens it.

In truth, the film’s overarching emphasis on spirituality is reflected not only in its treatment of exile, faith, the relationship between dreams and reality and even monstrosity, but also through its religiously loaded invocation to open one’s eyes—an invitation that becomes all the more spiritual in nature given Abre’s numerous other mystical, religious and spiritual allusions. As David Laraway reminds us (“Alejandro
Amenábar and the Embodiment of Skepticism in *Abre los ojos*), the film begins by beckoning César and its viewers to open their eyes in a way that is reminiscent of Adam and Eve’s eye-opening experience of eating from the tree of good and evil. He states,

> To open one’s eyes is to know that the world is still intact; it is to know that others are still there; it is to know that one yet has a place in the world. The history of the metaphor is venerable, for it draws us back to the dawn of biblical history in its echo of the words directed to Adam and eve: ‘then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’ (Genesis 3:5)” (66).

And yet, though the desire to eat from this tree led to mankind’s fall from grace, a fall that might symbolize the danger of putting too much trust in science and reason, as *Abre* suggests through its ambiguous and varied use of the phrase “open your eyes”, this fall from grace may ultimately be enlightening since science, when pushed to its limits, is forced to recognize these very limits—and thus, the necessity of faith. This idea is not entirely new. As thinkers such as Sarah Schneider propose (*Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine & Feminine*), humanity’s fall from grace may have been a necessary “sin” since it enabled that which was already “perfect” to become “even more perfect(ed)”. After all, it is only by being offered the choice between good and evil (that the tree of knowledge represents) that humans, though they lose their innocence, gain something better—namely, the capacity for moral choice and thus, the opportunity to become *truly* good (by choosing good over evil). Though they may be tempted and even “fall” into “evil” ways, ultimately, they may open their eyes to an even greater, truer, more redeeming reality. For this reason, I cannot consent to Laraway’s overwhelmingly pessimistic interpretation of the film’s most famous axiom (and title), “abre los ojos”/“open your eyes”. In reference to this phrase, he concludes,

> I mentioned earlier the biblical provenance of the phrase; it is instructive at this point to recall not only these words but their broader narrative context. They are,
of course, the words uttered to Eve by the serpent, the Evil Genius par excellence. Even as they entice with the promethean promise of unbounded knowledge, the manner in which they are uttered—and their less-than-trustworthy source—suggests that such knowledge must always lie beyond our grasp. Indeed, in the biblical story, to open one’s eyes is to become subject to a kind of fall: it is to seek a kind of knowledge which, because of, rather than in spite of, our bodily condition we are condemned to seek in vain. (74)

On the one hand, he is correct in suggesting that, as long as we attempt to gain utter control of the world and ourselves through the domain of science we will be destined to fail. Indeed, this misguided trust in science, reason and technology may very well represent César’s eye-opening entry into virtual reality. And yet, as religion, mysticism and the film itself suggest, through their varied and ambiguous use of visual metaphors and “eye-opening” experiences, opening one’s eyes is not just ambiguous but necessary—that is, provided that the eyes can see beyond appearances. Throughout the bible, the injunction to open one’s eyes is not only used to suggest mankind’s fall from grace but also to reflect one’s ability to “truly” see and appreciate divinity and truth. In mystical traditions as well (Islamic, Judaic and Christian) it is conveyed through the metaphor of the mirror as well as, more generally, through the kabbalistic notion that truly seeing requires the ability to peel back various layers of reality.

In fact, if we refer back to Ibn Al’Arabi’s quote on the first page of this chapter, it becomes obvious that for Islamic (Sufist) mystics as well, true reality (or “paradise”) is disguised by layers of simulated realities which are associated with dreams. In this respect, an undeniable bond is forged between Abre and mysticism. Just as Reality is like a body disguised by false layers of clothing/“dreams”, the Self is cloaked by false layers, masks and monsters. In order to truly awaken into paradise, these shells or layers of both self and reality must be recognized for what they are before they can be cast off.
Accordingly, though *Abre* begins and ends with the same command to open one’s eyes every time we viewers hear this phrase, it signals a radical change or “rebirth”. Thus, somewhat like what happens in Martínez’ *Santa Evita*, rebirth in *Abre* is envisioned in both negative and positive ways—30—and yet always through the metaphor of awakening.

Also, just as gender is pivotal to the monstrosity evoked in *Santa Evita* and other works, it is equally central to *Abre*, where the male/female binary is revealed to be just as illusive as the divides between self/other, fantasy/reality, science/faith, past/future, etc. To be sure, the fact that César’s own monstrosity directly corresponds to the monstrous transformations of his female counterpart(s) (Sofía-Nuria) is far from coincidental. In a sense, their monstrous interchangeability, reinforces, among other issues, the degree to which the protagonist’s “exile” from self and other, reality and spirituality, among other divides, espouses the Kabbalistic formulation of human exile as the exile of the *Shekhinah* herself—or in Gnosticism (and also Kabbalah) *Malkhut*. By exposing, much like *Santa Evita*, how male identity, fears, and desires are predicated on their (dichotomous) relationship to female identity, *Abre los ojos* illuminates the degree to which the socially constructed split between “male” and “female” identity is intimately intertwined with all other dichotomies. And yet, *Abre* also demonstrates, perhaps even more powerfully than *Santa Evita* and other works, how the desire to objectify women is not only self-destructive (to the men) but has, in an increasingly virtual world, made men the objects of what is now no longer an exclusively “male gaze” but also a female one.

In effect, this final film/chapter not only builds on the themes present in previous chapters, but it also enables us to “look ahead” insomuch as it anticipates the ways in

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30 Yet, in *Abre* even the “negative” rebirth that César experiences is ambiguous; for though his awakening into virtual reality is tantamount to a sort of deep slumber in which he effectively closes his eyes to reality, truth and authentic relationships with an Other, this slumber is itself potentially “eye opening”.
which exile, science, technology and globalization may lead to very different places when pushed to their limits. While they may further intensify the solipsism, isolation and series of separations explored throughout this thesis, they may also hold an equally great potential for positive renewal. In reality, though exile is always a consequence of particular, historical emanations of violence, terror and dichotomous thinking, exilic literature and film, are always, in some sense, already also transnational. In this way, while subverting the paradigms of authoritarian terror and “separations” they gesture towards the need to rethink identity on a more global scale. Appropriately, this film, though it subtly reflects and intensifies the problems and dangers particular to Spain, also points to the increasingly “globality” of Spanish issues and subjectivity as well as both the dangers and hopes implicit in globalization, capitalism, technology and science.

Like all my primary films and texts, Abre los ojos demonstrates the need to engage questions of memory, repression and fear in order to reformulate the future in less dichotomous, repressive and terrorizing ways. As similarly suggested in my other films and texts, this process requires facing up to a monstrous, timeless, “mystical” space in which the demons of the past are confronted and conquered through a simultaneous confrontation with the “authoritarian” separations treated in this thesis. Though these monsters and separations are first intensified by the exilic non-space (of “virtual reality”), it is in and through this ambiguous space that they may finally be defeated with the help of the audience. Yet, in César’s case, the demons of the past are, at once, the demons of the future--both metaphorically and literally. In this light, César’s “global” monstrosity is, increasingly, the monster inside us all. Whether this “monster of globalization” will bring death or redemption is, like everything else, ambiguous...
‘The Mask of Exile’ and ‘The Monster of Redemption’

The different types of exile presented in this dissertation reflect the different types of crises, ambiguities and shattered subjectivities embedded within and between my primary texts and films. It is the task of a ‘narrative ethics’ to piece them back together. Yet the multiplicity of ways in which exile functions to shatter reality, meaning, subjectivity, and (perceived) truth directly reflects the ways in which a ‘narrative ethics’ has the potential to reunite the self/other dichotomy and thus, overcome all other violent separations through the various types of ambiguity that correspond to these distinct forms of exile.

Through both theoretical and fictional explorations of how exile functions in this last chapter and in others, I have demonstrated how the exile of the author, the exile of poetic language, the exile of the characters and even the content itself are not only interrelated but lead to a process of death and rebirth which involves not simply the author’s own experience of exile but also the exilic status of the society that is subsumed in the inter-subjective creation of ethical narratives. Above all, however, the reader is immediately drawn into the exilic cycle of death and potential rebirth the moment s/he opens his/her mind and eyes to a narrative, whether on screen or on paper. At this moment, the reader/viewer is not only implicated in the creation of a “narrative ethics” but s/he is, in a sense, the most responsible participant of them all inasmuch as it is the reader who literally has the “last word”—or perhaps the “last vision”.

With this in mind, I will end this thesis by returning to the crucial concept of “monstrosity”, as it is, in many ways, the ultimate symbol of the exilic need for inter-subjective death and rebirth. Though Kristeva presents new ways of looking at Levinas’ notion of monstrosity by delving into psychical desires, fears and ‘monsters’, we must
not forget that Levinas, in turn, also provides equally interesting notions of monstrosity—ones which, for example, enable the reader to go beyond reducing the toad in *El laberinto* to a mere Oedipal complex. Yet, in order to more adequately express how these two thinkers may be seen as complimentary the ‘monster’ must be unmasked.

As we have seen, these ‘monsters’ are reflective of historical, personal, collective, even mythic emanations of terror, repression and “exile”. Though many of the monsters represent pure evil/oblivion much of what is conceived of as monstrous is only monstrous because society cannot accept it or perceive it as anything else. Indeed, a good portion of the monsters/beasts that populate my primary works are of this variety.31 In effect, the need to repress this monstrous face is, to a great extent, what ends up making it monstrous—and even more considering that repression both sprouts from and leads to violence and fear. In this light, we might argue that the monster is, in many ways, a manifestation of the repressive mechanism itself, which in turn, engenders the separations mentioned throughout these chapters/essays. Trite as it may sound, *Abre* gives new meaning to the ancient cliché that to love others one must truly love oneself—not in vain, narcissistic or superficial ways, but truly and deeply. In so doing, heaven and earth, science and faith, reality and fantasy are effectively fused.

The question then to which I must return is why I have included this strange yet remarkable film in a thesis on exile and authoritarianism. Though I will attempt to quickly summarize my reasons, my most immediate response is that the film helps me engage with what is, perhaps, an even more essential question: namely, why am I writing a thesis on authoritarianism? Or, more specifically, why have I embarked on a project

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31 Even César’s monstrosity, though he is heterosexual, may have been indirectly inspired by Amenábar’s homosexuality as well as other exilic or alienating features and hardships in his life.
that examines the representation of authoritarianism through the lens of exile fiction? How, in this increasingly global age, are the problems of Spanish and Argentine exile and authoritarianism relevant to the world in which we live? What I will now briefly explain should provide an answer to all these questions—or rather, it should help clarify the fact that, throughout this dissertation, I have (hopefully) already supplied the answer.

Though *Abre* is the only film to avoid directly addressing authoritarianism, not only does it subtly and indirectly hark back to an authoritarian past, but it serves as a reminder of how the ghosts of the past continue to haunt the present and future. The very fact that it makes no reference to authoritarianism is what enables it to so potently reveal the extent to which the erasure of the past has continued to plague the present, albeit with new and even more destructive variations. In this way, *Abre* serves as a perfect example of just how urgent it is for its viewers to remember. Of course, because, unlike my other works, *Abre* does not explicitly comment on Spanish or Argentine authoritarianism, it fails to offer many of the insights that each one of my chapters and their corresponding works uniquely explore. Yet, even as *Abre* presents its own wisdoms, it underlines the need to go back and explore these other works as well as the histories and cultures they portray. In short, it reframes problems of exile, monstrosity, truth, memory and many more in ways that look towards the future while reflecting back on the past.

Just as *El laberinto* (directed by a Mexican-American exile) helps us appreciate the extent to which the authoritarian paradigm bears relevance to non-Spanish cultures, *Abre* similarly demonstrates the silent, invisible yet no-less powerful haunting of Spain’s authoritarian past in the present—a haunting which, nevertheless, has important lessons to offer us in the present. In a world ever more besieged by erasure, ambiguity, and
escapist fantasies Abre, like all the works in this dissertation, beckons the viewer to help remake film, fiction and the world itself in radical ways—not by rejecting ambiguity or fantasy but by using them in more (re)constructive, unifying and freeing ways.

In so doing, these works not only urge us to expand our definitions or understanding of exile, but of humanity, reality, truth, fantasy and much more. It is in this capacity that they also helps envision a remarkably powerful and effective narrative ethics—one which sheds new light on the unique and extraordinary ability of exile, film and fictional retellings to ethically unite self and other, male and female, dreams and reality, past and future all within a present that, if we could only truly open our eyes, we would find dramatically changed. Just when we are most in need of ethical answers, these works, rather than giving us answers, gives us the only thing that is better, truer, more honest and real—ambiguity, fantasy, and, above all, ourselves.


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**FILMOGRAPHY**


BIOGRAPHY

Joanna Barros was born in Edison, NJ to an American mother and a Chilean father. She received a BA in Spanish and Philosophy from Furman University in 2000 and an MA from Duke University in 2007. Her graduate work at Duke has been supported by departmental fellowships, teaching awards and research assistantships as well as an instructorship at Elon University for the present academic year (2009-2010). In her leisure time she enjoys travelling, music, yoga and creative writing. She is also a blackbelt in Tae Kwon Do.