Jessica Balanzategui, *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*
(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018)

In his essay on the significance and relevance of the Gothic in contemporary culture, Steven Bruhm argues that we need tales of horror and the Gothic in order to understand the traumas of our cultural moment. Indeed, he suggests, 'the Gothic itself is a narrative of trauma'.[1] Jessica Balanzategui's study of children and childhood in contemporary transnational cinema might be seen to take up where Bruhm left off. Her expansive and persuasive book, *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (2018), constitutes a consideration of perhaps one of the most pervasive tropes of gothic narrative – the strange, ghostly, haunted or haunting child – placing it in the context of our understanding of national and global changes in cinema and culture over the past few decades. It is an important work, not only for its detailed examinations of a wide range of films from a range of cultural contexts, but for the ways in which it positions cinematic narrative within broader historical critical and popular discourses.

The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema is comprised of four sections: 'Secrets and Hieroglyphs: The Uncanny Child in American Horror Film'; 'Insects Trapped in Amber: The Uncanny Child in Spanish Horror Film'; 'Our Fear Has Taken on a Life of its Own: The Uncanny Child in Japanese Horror Film'; and 'Trauma's Child: The Uncanny Child in Transnational Coproductions and Remakes'. Each section consists of two or three chapters, pairing an examination of the origins of the trope in the relevant sociocultural context with its twenty-first-century manifestations. The study thus allows for an understanding of the particularities of horror in American, Spanish, and Japanese contexts, before turning to its global mutations in contemporary transfers of genre, character, and narrative.

The figure of the uncanny child is so commonplace in the Gothic as to have become a trope. From the precocious Miles and Flora in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), to the demonic Regan in *The Exorcist* (dir. by William Friedkin, 1973) and Damien in *The Omen* (dir. by Richard Donner, 1976), the child is monstrous precisely because of its unknowability and vulnerability in contrast to adult power and knowledge. In these works, the child is uncanny because it is 'an empty vessel for evil to inhabit' (p. 11) – in this subversion of the child's innocence, then, the uncanny child 'challenges normalised ideologies of childhood' (p. 9). Despite these prominent origin stories of the uncanny child,

[1] Steven Bruhm, 'The Contemporary Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 259-76 (p. 268).

however, Balanzategui's study shows that the figure is even more critical in contemporary horror films. These works employ a self-conscious postmodernity and transnational exchange of ideas that expose 'the gothic underside to the romantic conceptual entanglement of childhood innocence and adult nostalgia, as childhood is positioned as the site of traumatic, imperfectly recalled pasts that haunt the adult's present in obfuscated ways' (p. 12). That is, it is not simply that such works recognise childhood as an adult construct. Rather, in a period preoccupied with memorialising individual and collective trauma, childhood is put to work as an idealised or sacralised identity. However, this also means that the child becomes a locus for adult anxiety, a trope ripe for affective exploitation in the horror film. The uncanny child is therefore central to an understanding of gothic narrative as trauma narrative, since its association with the spectrality, disruption, and backwards glance that characterise trauma allow it to act as a challenge to the Enlightenment discourse of both individual and sociocultural narratives of progress.

The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema begins with an examination of *The Shining* (dir. by Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *The Changeling* (dir. by Peter Medak, 1980), and *Poltergeist* (dir. by Tobe Hooper, 1982), in order to show how uncanny children function as a symbol of adult trauma in North-American horror films from the 1980s. In these works, the child's experience or knowledge of trauma becomes a threat to the ontological security of the adults around them. In a number of millennial examples – *The Sixth Sense* (dir. by M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *Stir of Echoes* (dir. by David Koepp, 1999), and *Insidious* (dir. by James Wan, 2010) – however, this traumatic knowledge is taken a step further, so that not only does it threaten the individual adult, but the very 'sociocultural structures' of the nation, by revealing, for example, the way in which 'present adult society is founded on violence and oppression, and depends upon the repression of this truth to function cohesively' (p. 74). In support of this, Balanzategui points to an instance in *The Sixth Sense* in which Cole, the young boy who can famously 'see dead people', questions the authority of a teacher who asserts the history of his school building as a place upholding law and justice, since he can see the corpses of wrongly punished citizens swinging from the rafters.

This shift in the power of the uncanny child in horror films produced in the United States is seen even more powerfully in a Spanish context, in which this figure has only recently had the capacity to challenge 'Francoist trajectories of national progress that worked to suppress the cultural traumas of the Civil War (1936-1939) and dictatorship (1939-1975)', and which so often depended on the concept of childhood to convey those false narratives of

progress, hope, and futurity (pp. 96-97). In *The Devil's Backbone* (dir. by Guillermo del Toro, 2001), *The Nameless* (dir. by Jaume Balagueró, 1999), and *The Orphanage* (dir. by J. A. Bayona, 2007), we see an explicit rejection or reshaping of the collective memory and approved histories often represented by institutional sites like orphanages and hospitals. In *The Orphanage*, for example, Laura's (literal and metaphorical) desire to simply 'paper over' (p. 148) the individual and national past, rather than to acknowledge it, directly results in the disappearance and death of her son, itself an uncanny echo of the death of another child at the orphanage decades earlier. Laura must confront and commune with these ghosts in order for these symbols of a restless history to be at peace. These uncanny children thus offer a different kind of revolutionary potential than those that had dominated Spanish cultural discourse throughout the twentieth century.

Even though ghost stories have occupied a more respected place in Japanese mainstream culture than in Spain or the United States, contemporary Japanese horror cinema, including films such as *Ringu* (dir. by Hideo Nakata, 1998) and *Ju-On: The Grudge* (dir. by Takashi Shimizu, 2002), also depict the way the uncanny child constitutes a 'counter memory', a challenge to established history and discourses of progress (p. 186), often taking the form of a ghostly 'internal alien' (p. 162), a figuration of the trauma that cannot or will not be acknowledged but that forces its way back into the present. For instance, the horror of *Ringu* depends on a cursed or haunted VHS cassette tape. This invention is an example of Japan's leadership in commercial technology in the late decades of the twentieth century (p. 193). However, by the late 1990s, this cinematic medium was being rapidly replaced by the DVD. Thus, Balanzategui observes, Sadako (the child ghost), 'infect[s] an analogue device that symbolised Japanese technological supremacy at the very moment when it was tipped to be overcome by the technological paradigm shift to digital storage: an uncanny evocation of stalled progress that resonates with the anxieties of the Lost Decade' (p. 193). In this way, the uncanny child has a stranglehold on the declining power of the nation. In the final section, Balanzategui traces the way the construction of these original films and their remakes cross national and cultural lines, so that, for example, the ghostly bodies of Japanese horror cinema influence the ghosts of *The Devil's Backbone*, while *Poltergeist*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen* are acknowledged as explicit influences on *Ringu*. The 'culturally hybrid' children produced by such transnational exchanges, Balanzategui shows, only contributes to their uncanniness and their potential for traumatic disruption.

The only critique one can level at this work is that its fascinating premise leaves the reader wanting more – an encyclopaedic study tracing the appearance of the uncanny child in other national and social contexts, and perhaps even in other non-cinematic narratives. *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema* is a nuanced and insightful contribution to the study of children and adolescence in popular culture, as well as of the Gothic and horror films, transnational cinema, and trauma theory, and is worthy of attention from any scholar dealing with these themes.

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