

Dear Participants of the Workshop,

Thank you for taking the time to read and provide feedback on my paper. This is a portion of the first chapter of my dissertation, tentatively entitled “The Haunted Southern Cone: Sinister Power and Political Terror in the Cultural Imaginary of Dictatorship.” The dissertation examines what I refer to as the sinister, defined as a general mood that permeates some cultural texts relating to the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Brazil) dictatorships of the 1970s-1980s, in which elements and aesthetics most often associated with (but certainly not limited to) the horror genre, ranging from the Gothic, the uncanny, the abject, the monstrous, the spectral, the fantastic, and the supernatural to the more modern serial killer or torturer, are used to convey a pervasive sense of fear and apprehension at the ominous threat of a vaguely defined evil. It is particularly concerned with examining the relationship of this mood and related horror elements to the implementation of, and resistance against, political terror.

This first chapter centers around the appearance of the haunted house in three texts: an Argentine film, an Argentine play, and a Chilean novella. The second chapter will be focused on shadowy machinations of political power, particularly esoteric groups; the third is about monstrous bodies and corpses; and the fourth discusses the torturer and serial murderer.

The excerpt we will be discussing includes the introduction to the chapter and an analysis of the Argentine film *Crónica de una fuga*. I am very interested in hearing commentary about the theoretical orientation of the chapter and the degree of success to which I manage to tease out the various theoretical strands that I am dealing with in my analysis of the film.

Thanks again for your feedback, and I’m looking forward to a productive discussion!

Best,

Laura Colaneri

## **Introduction**

An isolated, dilapidated mansion in the suburbs of Buenos Aires where political prisoners are detained and tortured. The home of a gringo and his Chilean wife where the lamps lighting their literary salons and extravagant parties occasionally flicker as a man is electrocuted in the basement. The spectacle of a mysterious house with many rooms where a roving audience witnesses isolated scenes of kidnapping and murder disguised by layers of absurdity, only to be whisked away by a threatening but friendly guide. These scenes convey the sinister nature of the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships particularly through their violent settings, utilizing elements of well-known horror tropes to represent political terror.

This chapter rests on a central premise: South America is full of haunted houses. They proliferate across cities and countrysides, populating nations with ghostly presences. They appear, unexpected and sinister, in novels, films, short stories, history, and memory. They take on an outsize role in the cultural imaginary, pointing towards what is known but unacknowledged, threatened but hidden under cover of darkness, sensed but unseen. The violent acts that took place within them continue to haunt and traumatize the space of the nation long after the dictatorships themselves have ceased.

I have argued that the point of departure for my analysis, the sinister, is a mood evoked in some texts of the Southern Cone dictatorships via the use of elements and aesthetics related to the horror genre. The haunted house and its inhabitants—both the specters and the living that must contend with them—are major ones, and serve as the focus of this chapter. Because I am concerned principally with mood—which, though often closely related to genres and their constitutive elements, transcends them—my approximation necessarily must navigate several areas of study. This chapter alone touches upon Gothic studies, spectralities studies, and

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contemporary horror studies in literature, performance, and film. Further, these approaches, all coming out of a largely European and North American tradition and tending to be deeply skewed towards Anglo texts, cannot be merely imposed upon the Latin American context: even for contemporary works that have undoubtedly been at least somewhat influenced by the global reach of English-language media, it is important to keep in mind the differing literary, filmic, and artistic traditions that contextualize Latin American works. As such, after turning my attention to the primary texts that will form the core of my analysis, I will briefly review the theoretical literature and outline my own approach in uniting these disparate fields.

### **The Hauntings at Hand**

First, we will analyze the setting of the Argentine film *Crónica de una fuga* [*Chronicle of an Escape*] (2006), directed by Israel Adrián Caetano, which tells the story of an escape by prisoners at one of the dictatorship's clandestine detention centers in 1977. Throughout Argentina's last dictatorship, which saw the installation of an authoritarian military junta from 1976-1983, the government operated around 340 such centers.<sup>1</sup> Based on a 2002 book written by Claudio Tamburrini, one of the prisoners,<sup>2</sup> the commercial film received several awards in Argentina and was one of the five highest-grossing films domestically the year of its release (Dillon).

We will then move on to a text that, although it features a haunted house of its own, treats haunting at a larger scale: that of the national collective consciousness. The Chilean novella *Nocturno de Chile* [*By Night in Chile*] (1999) by Roberto Bolaño follows the reflections of a right-wing priest, Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, as he tells the story of his life on his deathbed. This

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/conadep/nuncamas/54.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://books.google.com/books?id=fmwvrlfH9EAC&pg=PA22#v=onepage&q&f=false>

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life story includes the 1973 coup that overthrew Chile's elected government under Salvador Allende and installed Augusto Pinochet as dictator until 1990. My analysis, focusing on Urrutia's visitation upon his deathbed by a ghost and his recollection of attending literary salons in a house where prisoners were secretly being tortured, will demonstrate how the dictatorial government's actions haunt not only those citizens explicitly targeted by repression, but also collaborators who are plagued by their guilt and complicity. The conventions and omens evoking the sinister throughout the novella prove impossible to deny, despite Urrutia's insistent efforts.

Finally, we lend our attention to the setting of Griselda Gambaro's 1973 play *Información para extranjeros* [Information for Foreigners], a large home in which groups of visitors are shuffled from room to room and scene to troubling scene by tour guides as though attending an open house put on by a disturbed realtor. An avant-garde play that is non-linear and draws attention to itself as spectacle, *Información para extranjeros* nevertheless evokes the Gothic as well, playing with horror tropes in order to convey the sinister via confounded expectations and black humor. Although these three texts differ notably in form and intended audience, their treatment of the dictatorship through the haunted house serves to evoke the sinister and convey layers of meaning through the conventions and aesthetics of haunting.

It must be noted that these texts will be examined in reverse chronological order. Although the purpose of this structure is ultimately to treat each text as building up various layers of meaning in their portrayal of the haunted house—beginning with a relatively straightforward representation of the detention center as Gothic mansion, to the haunting as emblematic of national culpability, and finally to the house as curated spectacle—this temporal distance remains significant. As my discussion of the texts will demonstrate, both the historical moment in which the texts were written and the way that they may be read now, with the

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hindsight of the decades since the return to democracy, have an impact on the the way the works work to create a sinister mood.

### **Latin American Gothic**

We begin with a brief review of the Gothic, a particular literary tradition originating in England in the eighteenth century. Drawing from a combination of interests in the Dark Ages, antiquarianism, morality, barbarism, the taboo, and the ghostly—characterized by William Hughes in *Key Concepts in the Gothic* as “the darkness of the past” (3)—the Gothic, like Romanticism, grew in opposition to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress.<sup>3</sup> However, Carmen Serrano points out that unlike Romanticism, which focuses largely upon beauty, the Gothic has a singular concern for its opposite: the dark and dreadful.<sup>4</sup>

Though many of its conventions were established in the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth these elements were transformed and incorporated into other genres as the Gothic expanded beyond Britain (via both translation into other languages and the writing of new original works adapted to local settings). With the advent of cinema in the early twentieth century, Gothic conventions gained further traction as they were incorporated into early surrealist and expressionist films and became foundational elements of cinematic horror, as well as pulp fiction and film noir.<sup>5</sup> Due to this adaptability—between languages, regions, genres, and media—critics have pointed to the difficulty of confining the Gothic to generic definitions or a

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Dent, in *Sinister Histories*, also argues that the Gothic’s particular way of looking at the past arose in response to Enlightenment forms of historical writing.

<sup>4</sup> Serrano explains, “The Gothic novels that first emerged in the eighteenth century were produced during a time when the dominant neoclassical style and the corresponding ideas associated with the Enlightenment were inspiring artists to produce artworks that were beautiful, balanced, and perfect. Gothic literature represented the opposite, preferring plots marked by excess in which instances of tyranny, imprisonment, and torture evoked dreadfulness instead of beauty” (5).

<sup>5</sup> See Serrano pp. 53-67 and Hughes pp. 6-7.

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particular time or place.<sup>6</sup> However, in its most broad sense, the Gothic is concerned with the appearance of dark visions of the past that destabilize and continue to have an impact upon the present.<sup>7</sup>

This darkness is key: in the Gothic, the return of the past is not a positive event, but rather “fear-inducing” (Serrano 6). Fear, Serrano argues, is “the cornerstone emotion of the Gothic,” and it is this feeling that ultimately unites disparate texts under the Gothic umbrella (6).

Though by no means exclusively constitutive of nor necessary for the Gothic, there are a few more concrete conventions of the genre in regards to plot, characters, and setting that tend to appear repeatedly in Gothic texts. These range from monsters such as vampires and ghouls to incest plots. For the purposes of this chapter, the most relevant Gothic trope is that of setting: in the words of Carmen Serrano, “usually antiquated spaces, such as castles, abbeys, vast prisons, subterranean crypts, graveyards, and large old houses” (4).<sup>8</sup> To that, I would add other, more contemporary (and often abandoned) institutional buildings that often appear in today’s horror films, such as hospitals, orphanages, and asylums. Like the more traditional Gothic spaces, these versions of what might be termed more generally the haunted house are visibly antiquated and

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<sup>6</sup> See Hughes, Mulvey-Roberts, Serrano, Garcia, and Casanova-Vizcaino.

<sup>7</sup> To cite a few critics: Jonathan Dent writes that the Gothic is concerned with “dark stories and sinister pasts” that “return to haunt the present” and argues that “the Gothic is obsessed with the nature of the past and our relationship with it” (2). Mulvey-Roberts states that the Gothic is “a fiction concerned with the horrifying impress of past (and sometimes present) institutions and events” (8). Hughes points to “the disruptive potential that the past may have in the present day” as the one defining element of the Gothic (5), while Serrano echoes this tendency of the Gothic towards “destabilizing dominant notions about the nature of reality” (3).

<sup>8</sup> Whether certain conventions are more common or even necessary to constitute the Gothic is the subject of critical debate, and are subject to the historical context of the text. Further well-known tropes include what Mulvey-Roberts identifies as “the classic trilogy of necessary Gothic components— isolation, complicated setting, a threat possibly supernatural but more likely to be human and male” in addition to a brave heroine at the center of the story (103). Serrano additionally points to supernatural events, mysterious figures, monstrous villains, a sensitive hero, and the doppelganger. William Hughes dedicates a whole book, *Key Concepts in the Gothic*, towards a comprehensive survey of Gothic components, movements, and theories.

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serve as a setting that is frequently determinative of the plot in which “often a secret from the past haunts the characters, both psychologically and physically” (Serrano 5). In contemporary horror film, as in many traditional Gothic plots, these secrets are often related to repressed histories of violence and death (particularly abuse, torture, and murder), the trauma of which remains impressed upon the material of the house itself.<sup>9</sup> As Eljaiek-Rodriguez points out, such a setting contributes to a sinister atmosphere that can serve as a backdrop to fear and hauntings from the past.<sup>10</sup>

Interest in examples of the Gothic in Latin American literature has increased over the past decade with the publication of criticism in what has otherwise been a neglected field for Latin Americanists. Even the most obvious examples of Gothic conventions appearing in Latin American texts, such as the vampire, have largely been ignored or subsumed into examinations of the fantastic, magical realism, or even science fiction. Scholars have pointed to various reasons for a rejection of the Gothic by Latin American writers and critics, including aesthetic assertions that the Gothic is a genre of bad taste and the desire to assert regional and national identities within a global market that have led to over-emphasis on magical realism.<sup>11</sup> Critics have convincingly argued, however, that much of what has usually been examined under one of

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<sup>9</sup> Well-known examples include *The Amityville Horror* (1979), where new owners of a house are haunted by the evil spirit of a father who murdered his family there the year previously; *The Changeling*, where a mansion is haunted by the playful spirit of a neglected and murdered child; *The Shining* (1980), whose Overlook Hotel—allegedly built on a Native American burial ground—is haunted by unknown forces, including the ghosts of two children murdered by their father, the former caretaker; and *Poltergeist* (1982), where angry spirits attack a family whose house was built over a former cemetery without the bodies being properly relocated.

<sup>10</sup> “El espacio desempeña un papel importante en las ficciones góticas: se recuperan espacios perdidos en el tiempo, ruinas y castillos retornan junto con sus habitantes vivos o muertos y crean una atmósfera siniestra, adecuada para apariciones fantasmales” [“Space plays an important role in Gothic fictions: spaces that have been lost in time are recuperated, ruins and castles return along with their inhabitants—living or dead—and create a sinister atmosphere, adequate for phantasmal apparitions”] (Eljaiek-Rodriguez 20).

<sup>11</sup> See *Latin American Gothic in Literature and Culture* pp. 2-3 and Serrano pp. 9-15.

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those categories also contains Gothic elements,<sup>12</sup> and that an examination of the way the Gothic has been transformed in a Latin American context can provide fruitful insight into attempts to represent regional experiences of violence, imperialism, and the dynamic relationship between Latin American and European culture.<sup>13</sup>

As has previously been established, the Gothic is particularly malleable, and its conventions and tropes take on new shapes in Latin America. It might resemble what Latin American critics are otherwise inclined to call magical realism, including supernatural elements as part of an otherwise realistic portrayal of everyday life; however, Casanova-Vizcaino and Ordiz point out that, unlike magical realism, the Gothic doesn't normalize the out-of-the-ordinary, but rather fights (and fails) to resist it. In more contemporary works, it can be particularly concerned with "new terrors" under globalization "that often take the shape of old Gothic tropes: vampires, monsters, ghosts, witches, and zombies" (Casanova-Vizcaino and Ordiz 4). It may also undergo a process of what has been termed "tropicalization" and "defamiliarization" in which established Gothic conventions are transported into Latin American

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<sup>12</sup> Serrano argues "that Latin American writers were attentive readers of Gothic literature and were drawn to Gothic-themed films, thus becoming thoroughly familiar with Gothic literary conventions, which they then selectively employed and transgressed in their fiction" (1). Casanova-Vizcaino and Intes Ordiz point to the prevalence of Gothic elements such as ghosts, castles, time travel, metamorphosis, vampires and related monsters, the uncanny, and doubles in what has usually been termed the fantastic or science fiction.

<sup>13</sup> Serrano points particularly to the dynamic nature of literature and media, emphasizing the ways that Latin American writers traveled and consumed, experimented with, were influenced by, and influenced "European" genres via translation, publication, and participation in movements. In *Gothic Geoculture*, Ivonne M. Garcia takes a "trans-American" approach in examining Gothic representations of Cuba, again emphasizing the mutuality of literary influences in a region haunted and threatened by the American empire. Eljaiek-Rodriguez, in *Selva de fantasmas*, discusses the utilization of Gothic elements in relationship to hybridization, mestizaje, and transculturation, in what he and others have referred to as the "tropicalization" of the Gothic. In the introduction to *Latin American Gothic in Literature and Culture*, the editors argue that, in the context of the McOndo movement, we can understand Latin American literature as being inevitably influenced by European, North American, and contemporary global strains of the Gothic because Latin American consume shared elements of a globalized culture.

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contexts in which they seem out of place, denaturalizing the familiar and experimenting with tropes that may be revealed as fit or unfit to speak to a Latin American reality.<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I will emphasize how the familiar Gothic trope of the haunted house appears under the Southern Cone dictatorships, and how this use of a well-known convention in a particular Latin American cultural and political context operates and contributes to the creation of a sinister mood.

### **Gothic Specters Haunting Spectralities Studies**

Of course, as mentioned previously, Gothic criticism is not the only theoretical approximation that will inform my analysis. Spectralities studies, despite its focus on specters and hauntings, has usually not been positioned in relationship to the Gothic. In their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren define the “spectral turn”: “at the end of the twentieth century, a specific metamorphosis occurred of ghosts and haunting from possible actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance (‘he is a ghost of himself,’ ‘we are haunted by the past’) into influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academia alike” (1). That is, in the Western world, ghosts and their associated hauntings were no longer possible “actualities” to be investigated, believed in, or disproved, as they had largely still been considered in the late nineteenth century, nor even mere metaphors. Rather, the specter became a “conceptual” metaphor, a form of analysis through which to theorize the world. In this context, the haunting and the haunted house is theorized as a way of thinking through the relationship between history and our ethical relationship to past and future political projects, as in Derrida;

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<sup>14</sup> See Eljaiek-Rodriguez, pp. 13-19. See also *Tropical Gothic in Literature and Culture: The Americas*.

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collective and personal trauma across generations, as in Abraham and Torok; or a nostalgia for lost futures, as in Mark Fisher.

However, this use of the haunting as conceptual metaphor can, as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren warn, allow the ghost to become “strangely unmoored from historical contexts” (14). It is essential to remember that contemporary ideas of what the haunting is, looks like, and evokes are inevitably informed by cultural and historical context, which in a contemporary, globalized world means it is shaped by the influence of not only local cultures, but also Gothic conventions as they have been built up and adapted since the eighteenth century and transmitted through media. By informing spectralities studies with the history and significance of Gothic elements, we can be sure to situate the spectral within the cultural history that informs particular texts. As I will detail throughout this chapter, the haunted house in dictatorship-era literature is not only a way of thinking through cultural conceptions of the past or the collective traumas felt by citizens under repression; it also appears literally in the texts through the use of Gothic conventions and aesthetics that define the setting and evoke a sinister mood for the reader or viewer.

Though he does not refer to spectralities studies as such, Eljaiek-Rodriguez makes a major contribution by tying the Gothic to a foundational spectralities studies text, *The Shell and the Kernel*, by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Eljaiek-Rodriguez points out that the Gothic’s concerns with ghosts and monsters that represent an unnameable and secret past maps well onto Abraham and Torok’s concept of transgenerational haunting, in which “El niño siente aquello ‘de lo que no se habla’ como un vacío —un secreto no reconocido en el nivel consciente del niño— y se constituye en un fantasma que atraviesa el discurso y las generaciones, por lo que se instala en muchos casos como un síntoma. ...La vuelta de lo que, se suponía, había quedado enterrado —metafórica o realmente— y la dificultad de representarlo es

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un suceso al que se enfrenta y caracteriza la totalidad del movimiento gótico” [The child feels that ‘of which one does not speak’ like an emptiness—a secret that goes unrecognized on the child’s conscious level—and is constituted as a ghost that traverses speech and generations, for which reason it is installed in many cases as a symptom ... The return of that which, it is supposed, had remained buried—metaphorically or literally—and the difficulty of representing it is an occurrence which the entirety of the Gothic movement is characterized by and confronts”] (194). This is particularly apt for Latin America, in which spectrality as an analytic approach has been increasing in popularity as a way to examine historical memory and intergenerational experiences of trauma under dictatorship, as well as the relationship of contemporary citizens to their country’s past.<sup>15</sup>

Silvana Mandolessi has also worked to combine a particular attention toward the Gothic with spectralities studies in her examination of hauntings in post-dictatorial Argentine literature. She points to elements of the Gothic and fantastic that have been used to create an affective impact and narrate disappearances under dictatorship, referring to spectrality and haunting as “direct derivatives of the gothic tradition” as well as “critical instruments with which to think politically” (152). Perhaps most notably for my analysis, Mandolessi explicitly ties the haunting of entire nations under dictatorship to the existence of clandestine detention centers, of which populations were at least somewhat aware of, but were unable to refer to directly or confirm. Under such conditions, she writes, “All space becomes contaminated with terror via the spectral presence of this ‘secret’ right in the middle of public space. Space which was once familiar now

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<sup>15</sup> Examples include Raúl Marrero-Fente’s *Bodies, Texts, and Ghosts: Writing On Literature and Law in Colonial Latin America*; Maria del Pilar Blanco’s *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination*; Juliana Martínez’s *Spectral Realism: Violence in Colombia’s Recent Film, Literature and Art*; and *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives*, edited by Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen.

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becomes haunted by the presence of a secret which threatens its inhabitants” (153). Mandolessi analyzes otherwise ordinary spaces in post-dictatorial Argentine literature that acquire a Gothic aesthetic of being haunted and closed off from the world due to the presence of this secret. In my examination, I will focus on the appearance of houses more literally in order to elaborate upon the ways that the Gothic setting is adapted and evoked in relation to the Southern Cone dictatorships.

### **My Approach**

As can be seen above, both the Gothic and spectralities studies are concerned with the impact of the past upon the present, and spectralities studies’ emphasis upon the ghost and the haunting often relies on Gothic conventions and tropes. In what follows, I utilize both approaches to discuss haunted houses that are central to the settings of three Southern Cone dictatorial texts. In these works, the violence and trauma of imprisonment, torture, disappearances, murders, and other human rights abuses committed under dictatorships haunts and makes threatening the houses that make up their settings.

My intervention seeks to examine these haunted houses on multiple levels. On the one hand, like many other approaches based in spectralities studies, I examine haunting as a conceptual metaphor that says something about how we see and represent the world by asking what it means for Southern Cone texts to use elements of the Gothic and the spectral to evoke a sinister mood while representing real-life examples of authoritarianism and torture. In this vein, I follow Mandolessi in maintaining an interest in the ordinary: without the accompanying strategies for evoking the sinister, these settings would otherwise purport to be relatively normal

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domestic spaces—that just so happen to be hiding detention centers and torture sites. A focus on haunting and spectrality allows us to see the sinister that is disguised beneath the everyday.

On the other, I insist upon also following approaches based in horror and Gothic studies, which look at hauntings and related figures like the haunted house or the ghost as potentially actualized subjects having real impacts within the realm of the text or the lives of the living. More than just a conceptual metaphor, I argue, the haunted house is also made literal: even as ghosts and the supernatural remain largely absent in these texts, their settings, impressed by real-life violence, torture, terror, and confusion, deliberately evoke a longstanding literary and filmic tradition as well as a commercial Halloween spectacle. Historically situated fear of sociopolitical threats is expressed via what are usually distanced, fictional conventions. Ultimately, the sinister mood results from the utilization of the well-known aesthetics of Gothic texts and contemporary horror films, as well as the contrast felt by the reader or viewer between this aesthetic—familiar due to repeated exposure and yet always already strange—and the serious, historical subjects that are represented in these works.

### **The Detention Center as Haunted House in *Crónica de una fuga***

#### **Critical Interest in *Crónica's* Horror**

*Crónica de una fuga*, as the title would suggest, tells the true story of an escape. The film centers around Claudio Tamburrini, a university soccer player who was abducted by the Argentine government in 1977 under suspicion of being linked to a guerrilla group. It depicts his 121-day incarceration at the Mansión Seré (also known by the code name Atila), a clandestine detention center in a suburb of Buenos Aires. Certain that they are going to be killed, Claudio

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and three other men manage to escape the house and flee to (at least temporary) safety. Several of the men later detailed their experiences in testimonies against the military government in 1985. The film's plot is based on Tamburrini's recounting of the events in the testimonial novel *Pase libre: La fuga de la Mansión Seré* and the account of another of the prisoners.

Initial reviews of *Crónica de una fuga* identified it as a welcome break from earlier films focused around the Argentine dictatorship, which critics described as overly moralistic or didactic.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, they lauded *Crónica*'s use of conventions from horror, thriller, and even crime films, which lent suspense to the narrative and served to convey a sense of violence and oppression to the viewer.<sup>17</sup> They also celebrated the directorial choice to have scenes of torture take place off-screen, a strategy that differed notably from the mid-2000s tendency in horror films towards including graphic depictions of gore, as exemplified by so-called “torture porn” films as *Saw*, *The Devil's Rejects*, and *Hostel*.<sup>18</sup> By allowing violence to take place off-screen and leaving the grisly details—and the fear they evoke—to the viewer's imagination, Jonathan

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<sup>16</sup> Fabián Soborón writes, “*Crónica* es la primera película sobre la dictadura que logra escapar del didactismo y de la enseñanza moral” [*Crónica* is the first film about the dictatorship that manages to escape didacticism and moral instruction”] (n.p.), and Alfredo Dillon concludes, “Aunque la historia pueda conmover al espectador y logre su identificación con el protagonista, la puesta en escena tiende a la suspensión de la moralidad: de esa manera, Caetano elude el sensacionalismo y la espectacularización, opciones que hubieran contribuido a naturalizar esa violencia a los ojos del espectador” [“Although the story can move the spectator and achieve his or her identification with the protagonist, the staging tends to the suspension of morality: in this way, Caetano eludes sensationalism and spectacularization, options that would have contributed to naturalizing this violence in the eyes of the spectator”] (46). Schwarzböck similarly discusses horror as a genre that allows for a suspension of the normal state of morality, replaced by a morality of exception. See Risner for further discussion of critical reception of the film.

<sup>17</sup> Brescia argues, “la cinematografía de tomas angulares y color de film noir y la banda de sonido atonal crean una atmósfera de opresión que plantea las formas de la violencia como esencial a la película” [“the cinematography of angular shots and the film noir color scheme as well as the atonal soundtrack create an atmosphere of oppression that presents forms of violence as essential to the film”] (235).

<sup>18</sup> On torture porn, see <https://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/> and [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xwpddd/how-torture-porn-captured-the-violent-atmosphere-of-a-post-911-world](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xwpddd/how-torture-porn-captured-the-violent-atmosphere-of-a-post-911-world)

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Risner notes that *Crónica* harkens back to more classical horror conventions, which depended largely on the suggestion of violence rather than direct depictions of it. He also argues that such a choice “signals *Crónica*’s ethical grounding” as a film that is conscious of the possible dangers of diminishing the impact of representations of violence by over-exposure (Risner 145).

Several reviewers have highlighted the use of other horror techniques and tropes in the film, though conclusions about their significance have varied. Risner concludes that the use of codes associated with horror “are invoked and refined to forge cinematic spaces that project characters’ mental state over being kidnapped and detained,” though ultimately the movie was only able to use horror to represent the Dirty War because its use of suggested rather than represented violence “tak[es] the teeth out...of a genre that often forces a confrontation with uncomfortable realities” (141). Alfredo Dillon analyzes the testimonial novel written by Tamburrini in comparison with the film and argues that this use of horror conventions to describe the experience of terror was already present in the source material. Silvia Schwarzböck, in her critical study of the film, points to the state of exception that defines horror and makes its conventions particularly apt for representing the concentration camp and site of torture, which are notably interruptions in the normal course of everyday life. Veronica Garibotto, in contrast, argues against critics who identify the use of horror tropes as a major break with earlier films depicting the dictatorship, asserting that the representations of terror are not fundamentally different in *Crónica* as compared to the earlier *La noche de los lápices* [*The Night of the Pencils*] (1986), but rather that these images have become conventional and the emotion they evoke has become more legible for audiences over the intervening decades.

Without a doubt, the use of horror conventions has captured the attention of critics since the film’s release. Like Garibotto, I am interested in the way that these conventions, particularly

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those related to setting, incite feelings in its audience. However, where she focuses on affect and emotion and argues that representations of the dictatorship from 1986 onward have become solidified in the cultural consciousness, I assert that a much longer history of literary and filmic conventions is at play here, creating an aesthetic and experience for the viewer that will depend greatly on their own relationship to the historical events at hand.

### **The Haunted Mansion**

It is notable that, although the title of the film centers the thrilling escape, the majority of its run time is concerned not with the act of fleeing, but rather the experiences within the detention center itself. Whereas the first ten minutes detail Claudio's kidnapping and the final thirty show the escape, the imprisonment in the Mansión fills up a full hour of the film. Their experiences as political prisoners, detained under suspicion of being involved in leftist guerrilla activities, and the fear and desperation that characterized their detention, are centered; their escape is neither dramatized nor heroic, but a desperate, vulnerable act of fleeing from a source of terror. In this way, although the escape is certainly the climax of the film, the story of the Mansión Seré itself looms large.

Located at 48 Blas Parera Street, Partido de Morón, Buenos Aires Province, the Mansión Seré (Atila) operated as a clandestine detention center under the Air Force from December 1976 until March 1978. One of at least 340 such centers where political prisoners were held, tortured, and often ultimately killed from 1976-1983, the Mansión Seré—sometimes referred to as Quinta Seré—is described in the *Nunca Más* report as “An old house with two floors, surrounded by a park, with tall doors and windows on the chamfers, with the shutters always closed. On the first floor, a kitchen with natural light, a bathroom with a bathtub and various other rooms. Currently

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abandoned and semi ruined.<sup>19</sup>” As the report further explains, it was built in the nineteenth century by Juan Seré, who had made his fortune in cattle ranching, in a European style. It was bought by the city in 1949 for use as a recreation site for employees, and in 1966 became quarters for officers of the VII Air Brigade of Morón.<sup>20</sup> The history of the house itself, to say nothing of the way it is portrayed in the film, seems, in the words of Maribel Cedeño Rojas, “salida de un relato de terror gótico” [“straight out of a tale of Gothic horror”] (53).

As other critics and scholars have noted, the Mansión Seré of *Crónica de una fuga* is haunted.<sup>21</sup> To be clear, this is not to say that ghosts walk through walls and terrify the prisoners as they are tortured, nor even that, as we will see in Gambaro’s play, the setting resembles the absurd but sinister spectacle of the haunted attraction. Rather, *Crónica de una fuga* utilizes a horror aesthetic common to haunted house films, evoking well-known tropes to imbue its setting with the sinister. Throughout the film, though the terror and fear that threatens Claudio and the other prisoners’ lives quite clearly originates with the political operators that have kidnapped and imprisoned them, the sinister is associated not only with these individuals, but with the house itself that is the site of their captivity. What this rendering of a real-life detention center through a Gothic aesthetic does is serve to make legible for the viewer an experience of terror that continues to have an unsettling impact across the decades.

The hauntedness of the house is conveyed via a familiar aesthetic that relies on both classic Gothic tropes and the use of visual conventions of horror films. Our first glimpse of the Mansión comes in pieces: the car into which Claudio has been forced by his kidnappers arrives at

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/ccd/m/msonserre.htm>

<sup>20</sup> See Silvana Fabri for a chronology and in-depth discussion of the space of the house.

<sup>21</sup> In his review, Pablo Brescia refers to it as “una especie de casa Usher para nuestros tiempos” [“a sort of House of Usher for our times”](235); Fabián Soborón and Alfredo Dillon similarly refer to the house as Gothic, while Silvia Schwarzböck includes a still shot from the film of the house with the amusing caption, “¿La Mansión Seré o la casa de *Psicosis*?” [“Mansión Seré or the house from *Psycho*?”]

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a gate, overgrown with trees and vines, and enters a long drive. Various close-up shots at low, skewed angles show portions of the house (Fig. 1): as Cedeño Rojas points out, such shots, using what is known as a Dutch Angle, are common to horror films and indicate the presence of the abnormal by conveying a sense of disorientation and instability to the viewer.<sup>22</sup> The close-ups, which initially prevent a totalizing view of the Mansión, both reflect what a prisoner might glimpse out of the corner of a blindfold and deny the viewer the familiarity and comprehension that a typical establishing shot would otherwise allow. They also indicate a fragmentation of space that evokes both isolation and a certain sense of dismemberment.



Figure 1

Finally, the car arrives up the drive and the captors lead Claudio inside. Here, we receive the first full shot of the house, though still at a low, off-center angle (Fig. 2). Though no longer in pieces, there is no comfort in the shot: rather the Mansión looks imposing and threatening, and Claudio is made to look particularly small as it looms over him and swallows him up through its dark, forbidding door. Though the sun is out, the colors are washed out and bleak, bland rather than warm: the sun seems to exist only to go down on that house, leaving it in darkness.

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<sup>22</sup> Pp. 52-53.



Figure 2

The appearance of the Mansión is particularly notable for several reasons. Like its real-life counterpart, it has tall doors and windows and an aristocratic, European air: as Cedeño Rojas describes it, “se escenifica como una mansión antaño aristocrática que está habitada pese a que su estado es inhabitable y sus habitantes son ‘invisibles’” [“It is staged like a formerly aristocratic mansion that is inhabited despite the fact that its state is uninhabitable and its inhabitants are ‘invisible’”] (55). However, that is where the resemblance largely ends (Fig. 3). Unlike the historical Mansión Seré, the film version, which consists of multiple stories with wraparound porches and imposing columns, make it appear decidedly more Gothic—as Schwarzböck points out, much like the house from the Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). In an interview of Caetano by Schwarzböck, the director reveals this resemblance to have been purposeful, also citing John Carpenter and George Romero as influences, particularly the film *Night of the Living Dead*, which features the main characters holed up in the darkness of a house. He also notes that Guillermo Fernandez, one of the men who was detained in Mansión Seré who consulted on the film, had commented that the detention center had seemed like an asylum

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because of the nature of the psychological torture being conducted there. The aristocratic mansion, the asylum, an antiquated space that is mysterious, dark, and closed off: however threatening and sinister the Mansión Seré was historically, here it is quite deliberately dialed up to extremes through Gothic and horror conventions. It is also made more legible as an object of horror: by selecting an architecture that looks more typically like the haunted houses of mass horror films with which audiences are almost certain to be familiar, Caetano is able to rely upon a viewer's past experiences of what the haunted house is and what feelings it evokes in order to establish the detention center as a locus of sinister terror.



Figure 3. The Facade of Mansión Seré, in ruins, sometime in the 1980s.

As if its outward appearance was not enough to convince us that the house was the site of horror, as we see Claudio being brought into the house, we hear the pained, echoing extradiegetic yells of the following scene begin: Claudio's screams as he's strapped down to be tortured. The imposing nature of the house, its exterior hauntedness, is directly keyed to the torture taking place inside. Terror occurs in a place that is outwardly terrifying.

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The horror aesthetic and use of Gothic conventions is maintained throughout much of the film, including interior scenes. The camera continues to deny the viewer establishing shots, instead setting the frame uncomfortably close upon prisoners and guards. In the initial interior scenes, we rarely get a wide shot of the rooms, and cuts prevent us from gaining a sense of how the rooms connect to one another. The house appears in pieces, segmented off not only from its otherwise normal Buenos Aires neighborhood by its overgrown grounds, but also from and within itself. In one instance, the camera follows the guards and torturers down the hall closely as they open doors where we can only briefly glimpse the partial forms of tied-up prisoners. The viewer is made aware of a proliferation of abused forms, each just barely in view, suggesting but not elaborating upon the extent and nature of tortures that take place behind closed doors.

Anything could be happening just off screen; the viewer, like the prisoner, is denied a comprehensive view that would allow them to make sense of their mysterious and threatening surroundings. As Schwarzböck points out, this limited visual field, which reflects the experience of the blindfolded prisoner (who can only see partially, if at all), serves to create a sense of “lo ominoso” [“the ominous”], a sinister threat felt by the viewer due to not only what can be seen, but also what cannot. It is in this way that the choice of having torture take place off-screen contributes to evoking the sinister in a particularly Gothic way: it is what is unknown, what we cannot see, what we can detect indirectly—through sound or its consequences upon the tortured person’s body—that is deeply frightening. The detention center is both legible as a site of horror presented via familiar conventions, and yet remains impossible to assess or comprehend directly.

The film similarly makes use of contrasts in lighting to employ a horror aesthetic in its presentation of the detention center. More deliberate close-ups and the manipulation of perspective and lighting turn torturers into, for example, ominous, faceless, shadowy figures in a

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doorway in one shot, even as they are entirely exposed, all crowded into a tiny bathroom to observe Claudio being tortured, in the next. They are equally threatening and dangerous in darkness and in light, sinister in both their shadowiness and their claustrophobic visibility. In another scene, the guards suddenly erupt with noise and throw the doors of all the prisoners' rooms open: the light itself from the hall seems to attack Claudio's exposed, defenseless body before the men come in to drag him out, violating the little private space that the prisoners have and invading their dark rooms with terror. It is both what we do see and don't see, what is lit and obscured, that is sinister.

On occasion the camera does provide more totalizing views of the setting, but even then, the shots contribute to the horror aesthetic. In one scene, after the prisoners have been dragged out of their rooms and into a hallway, then forced to pray together, the shot zooms out and down the stairs away from them, traveling as if through a maze into another part of the otherwise empty house as we continue to hear their voices praying and the guards and torturers yelling. Even as the image on screen serves to provide, finally, some establishing context as to the layout of the house and the location of the prisoners' rooms, rather than familiarizing the setting, the camera seems to be fleeing, pursued by the agonized voices of the house's occupants. Even the more quiet and distant, unused rooms of the house are haunted by the torture taking place within its walls.

### **Sinister Time**

In addition to establishing a sense of place, the appearance of the Mansión, as well as other strategies used in the film, work to comment upon what the haunted house and the detention center do to time. Recall that the Gothic is particularly concerned with material

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impresses of the past. Both the exterior and interior of the house are shabby and deteriorating. The paint is chipping, the plants are overgrown; it seems abandoned, lacking upkeep, uninhabited (or perhaps inhabited by something does not belong to this era). The antiquated nature of the house speaks to its state as a witness of the passage of time.

But what past has returned to haunt it? Although a Gothic aesthetic is clearly evoked, the film makes no explicit connection to the Mansión's former history (previous to its time as a detention center) as somehow influencing the events of its plot, unlike in a typical Gothic setting. It is here where we must turn to spectralities studies for answers.<sup>23</sup>

In "To Give Memory a Place: Contemporary Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition," Ulrich Baer reflects upon photographs of unoccupied landscapes that were the sites of former Nazi concentration camps. As he explains,

In every photographic image, the viewers' here and now—their ability to draw on different explanatory contexts—is read against the photographed moment's then and there. Regardless of subject matter, photographs show a moment of the past as inalterable, as something that has been brought back against time's passage. ...all photographs (and not only Holocaust images) signal that we have arrived after the picture has been taken, and thus too late (428).

Like the photographs Baer analyzes, and although its representation of the historical detention center is deliberately and clearly fictionalized, the deterioration of *Crónica*'s setting serves to draw the viewers' attention to its distance from us in time. The dictatorial past is

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<sup>23</sup> Cedeño Rojas interprets the state of the house as evocative of ruins, which often symbolize cultural decadence in the Gothic, and argues they function as a metaphor of the moral decay of the Argentine government and elites during the dictatorship. While a valid interpretation, I am more interested in pursuing what the ruined state of the house implies about time for the contemporary viewer.

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unalterable and unreachable, and yet it reaches out to to us through our act of viewing and our knowledge of its history.

In this sense, *Mansión Seré*'s hauntedness is not only a function of its Gothic aesthetic or even of the terrible events that take place there before our eyes over the course of the film. When Claudio enters, the audience's implicit background knowledge of the Argentine dictatorship means that we know it is already haunted, not by the house's pre-1976 history, but by the events that have yet to occur and yet of which we are aware. Although we as viewers are witnessing the originary trauma over the course of the film, the violence that impresses itself upon the setting and echoes across decades to reach us in our own present, the *Mansión Seré* immediately haunts us because we already know what is haunting it. The sinister disrupts the logic of chronological time.

For this reason, it is particularly notable how the film indicates the passage of time. When Claudio enters *Mansión Seré*, a subtitle marks the moment as "Day One." Throughout the time remaining until the escape, the film marks days, but at irregular intervals. As Schwarzböck points out, this intermittency serves as an ellipsis: entire days and weeks go missing within the detention center, both for the detainees and for the viewer. The prisoners themselves, cut off from the outside world and blindfolded most of the time, are only made aware of Christmas—when their guards insist upon toasting champagne with them—and Argentina's World Cup win, which they hear on the radio. Under isolation and torture, time becomes warped and irregular. As Silvan Fabri notes in her analysis of the space of *Mansión Seré* as a detention center, "El funcionamiento del CCD quebró la lógica cotidiana. Reconfigurado como campo de concentración, el espacio material se vio fracturado y cerrado a la práctica del *día a día*" ["The operation of the Clandestine Detention Center broke everyday logic. Reconfigured as a

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concentration camp, the material space became fractured and closed to the practice of the *day to day*] (172). The normal, everyday nature of both space and time no longer applies in the detention center, and we see this distortion reflected in its representation on film.

### **The Neighborhood Haunted House**

Although, as I have indicated above, the haunted house of *Crónica de una fuga* is presented as being isolated and abandoned, we must not forget that it is actually part of a populated neighborhood. A description from Schwarzböck is illustrative about the role the Mansión might play within this wider geography: “El interior confirma las leyendas que, en cualquier barrio, los vecinos menos favorecidos suelen alimentar sobre este tipo de casa que, tal vez solo por una cuestión de tamaño y estilo, si están habitadas, parecen abandonadas, y si están abandonadas, parecen habitadas” [“The interior confirms the legends that, in any neighborhood, the least favored neighbors tend to feed about this type of house that, perhaps only due to a question of size and style, if they are inhabited, seem abandoned, and if they are abandoned, seem inhabited”] (50). That is, Schwarzböck points out Mansión Seré fits into yet another category of haunted house: the spooky, abandoned building that is often the stuff of neighborhood or urban legend.

Of course, before becoming a detention center, the historical mansion did not occupy this place in the neighborhood imaginary. As Fabri writes, before the 1976 coup it was an officer’s quarters, and previous to that a recreation site. Neighbors were used to having access to the property, utilizing it for recreation, and having it open to view. Its transformation into a detention center necessitated its being closed off and restricted from view from the neighbors, thus implicitly involving them in its act of terror. Fabri further recounts, “Los testimonios hablan de

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un túpido perímetro de ligustrina, la presencia de reflectores durante la noche para impedir ver hacia el interior del sitio. Las zonas de parque estaban extremadamente descuidadas aborde, pues esto dificultaba la visión desde el exterior y contribuía, de alguna manera, a pasar un tanto más inadvertidos. Asimismo, la frondosa arboleda, en su mayoría pinos que aún circundan las calles internas en el predio, impedían la mirada de los transeúntes” [“The testimonies talk about a bushy perimeter of privet, the presence of reflective lights during the night to prevent one from seeing the interior of the site. The areas of park that surrounded it were extremely neglected, which also impeded vision from the exterior and contributed, in some way, to allowing things to pass somewhat more unnoticed. Similarly, the leafy grove, mostly pines, that still circle the internal drives near the building, impeded the view of passersby”] (177). But just because the location was closed-off does not mean that neighbors were blind to what was happening: one resident, cited in a newspaper after the end of the dictatorship, noted that they could hear the screams of prisoners as they were brought into the house. Another pushed back against those who might be inclined to claim that they didn’t know what was going on in there, referring to how it was a well-known house in the neighborhood and that they would often hear the sound of gunshots. Fabri explains that this recognition, speculation, or outright denial of what was going on in their own neighborhood was part of how the government inflicted terror upon those Argentines who were not otherwise directly subjected to military force: “La acción específica de represión y disciplinamiento de la población se solapaba con las construcciones imaginarias de ciertos sectores de la comunidad sobre lo que ocurría en el predio. Esta doble articulación alteró prácticas cotidianas de los vecinos de la zona y los obligó a evitar el tránsito por las veredas adyacentes, a hacer caso omiso a los sonidos de disparos, a la entrada y salida de vehículos de la fuerza aérea, etc.” [“The specific action of the repression and disciplining of the population

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overlapped with the imaginary constructions of certain sectors of the community about what happened in the building. This double articulation altered the daily practices of the neighbors in the area and obligated them to avoid walking on the adjacent sidewalks, to ignore the sounds of shots and the entering and exiting of Air Force vehicles, etc.”] (177-178). Neighbors took to avoiding the Mansión like the haunted house of urban legend. Even after the Mansión was abandoned by the Air Force and burnt down, the memory of the haunting remained: “El predio abandonado fue considerado por los vecinos en la zona como un lugar fantasmal, se cargó de historias transmitidas en la oralidad” [“The abandoned building was considered by the neighbors in the area to be a phantasmal place, charged with orally transmitted stories”] (Fabri 181). Fabri adds more in a footnote: “No nos detendremos en este punto pero muchas de las entrevistas realizadas hacen referencia al espacio como generador de miedos, el abandono como algo que abonaba los relatos fantasmáticos” [“We will not detain ourselves on this point but many of the interviews that were conducted reference the space as a generator of fears, the abandon as something that fertilized phantasmic tales”] (181).

Unlike Fabri, I will take a moment to dwell on this point, for it is particularly significant to our conceptualization of the detention center as haunted house to note that the sinister is generated and has an impact not only textually, but historically. Even outside of the concentration camp itself, time and space is distorted: the phantasmal awareness and, subsequently, memory of a traumatic event, suspected even if unconfirmed or outright denied, haunts the residents in its proximity across space and time.

This fear generated in the populace is, of course, part of the point of state terrorism, allowing the government to both act with impunity and regulate the behavior of its citizens. As Diana Taylor argues, this resulted in “percepticide,” a self-blinding of the general population

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toward the abuses occurring under the dictatorship. Even as the neighbors hear the screams of the prisoners and gunshots, they are made powerless to do anything about it: they see without seeing, hear without hearing, know without knowing. The detention center becomes a dark secret that cannot be acknowledged or addressed: an abandoned house haunting the neighborhood, to be avoided and discussed only in whispers.

### **The Escape**

The percepticide affecting the residents living nearby the Mansión Seré is aptly demonstrated by the daring escape from the detention center that comprises the end of the film. After the military discovers that Guillermo, one of the prisoners, has been feeding them false information, he, Claudio, and two other prisoners are moved to a room on the top floor of the house. The shot is particularly eerie: we see a man coming up the shadowy stairs, dragging a blindfolded prisoner behind him. Again, a play of light and shadow serve to turn both the guards and the prisoners into threatening, unknown shapes. More men and prisoners follow, going the deepest into the house that they've ever been, into a room where they are forced to strip naked and tied to beds under harsh lighting, then shown the image of themselves in a mirror. "Este sos vos...¿te reconocés? Como afuera tampoco te reconocen" ["This is you...Do you recognize yourself? Just like outside they don't recognize you either"], they are told. The men are unrecognizable, shadows of their former selves. This room, deep within the haunted house, is where the prisoners ultimately realize that they will die if they don't hatch a plan to escape.

The night they decide to escape, the horror aesthetic of the film reaches its peak. The camera shows a quick establishing shot of the house, one of the most complete images of the detention center of the whole film. Outside, it is a dark and stormy night, and we are able to see

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nearly in its entirety the brooding, dilapidated mansion: it's such a familiar horror trope as to be almost cliché.

Inside, Claudio and the others are keenly aware they are under threat. We see an interior shot of the door to their room, from a low angle, which then zooms slowly out until the four naked men strapped to beds can be seen. This, too, is a textbook horror image, reminiscent of the elevator in *The Shining* as it is about to open and let its wave full of blood wash over the hotel hallway. It's accompanied by a typical horror soundtrack, violins with scraping strings. The following shot, of the window through which they are planning to escape, captures a flash of lightning and thunder, the play of light and shadow menacing the men from the outside even as their torturers are an omnipresent threat on the other side of the door. Finally, we are privy to another classic horror shot: the men ask one of the prisoners to watch the hallway and he lays down to look out under the crack of the door. We see, from the other side, a shot of his bulging eyes searching in terror. The haunted house has reached its most menacing, and the mood its most tense and sinister as the men face their imminent deaths.

It is at this most menacing moment when Claudio and the other men make their escape. The house appears most haunted when their very existence is most threatened. Guillermo knows that if he doesn't escape, he will die: "Ya estamos muertos, Gallego," ["We're already dead, Gallego"], he explains to one of the men who is too afraid to flee. "Ya está. Yo no pienso estar acá cuando vengán a matarme. Estamos desapareciendo" ["It's over. I'm not going to be here when they come to kill me. We're disappearing"].

Estamos desapareciendo. We are disappearing. The house is haunted by demonic torturers and monstrous guards, and it is turning its prisoners into specters.

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Many scholars of spectralities studies have theorized the Argentine *desaparecidos*—an estimated 30,000 people kidnapped by the military junta whose bodies were never found, and thus could not be determined to be dead or alive—as specters. Avery Gordon has written at length on the subject in her seminal work *Ghostly Matters*, asserting that “Disappearance is a state-sponsored procedure for producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission” (115). The liminal nature of their absence—neither dead nor alive, neither here nor there, remembered by family and friends but unacknowledged by the state apparatus—is what makes the disappeared phantasmal. Further, this ghostliness, Gordon argues, makes its mark on all those who were disappeared: both those who remain missing and those who returned from the detention centers. Even as the former class can only come back as apparitions, evoked in memories or photographs held by their relatives at marches, the latter “always bears the ghost of the state whose power is the defining force of the field of disappearance...the traces of the state’s power to determine the meaning of life and death” (127).

In this moment of *Crónica*, the prisoners have fully recognized their own spectrality at the hands of the Argentine military government. That is, Guillermo’s words demonstrate an awareness of their position as *desaparecidos*: placed into a non-class of citizenry and existence by their sojourn in the detention center (itself a non-place in the Argentine nation), they have already experienced a form of social death. Escape is their only option.

As their time in the Mansión passes, the prisoners begin to resemble specters more and more. By specter, I mean not to evoke a particular vision of what a ghost may or may not look like, but rather to emphasize that the men’s visual appearance begins to become unrecognizable, marking both the evidence of their torture and their state-imposed distance from humanity. They are covered in wounds and sores, pale and filthy, blinking in the light. When they manage to exit

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the house from the window and must sneak their way off the property, the viewer sees fully how thoroughly otherworldly they are: naked bodies, crouched down, crawling after one another, looking wild and animalistic in the rain. The horror, however, comes not from the abjectness of the men themselves, but from what has been done to them—the way the rain beats against their naked skin and they limp along in their bare feet, pained victims of sinister forces. It is notable that their bodies are presented particularly materially, with the effects of torture emphasized where, earlier, visual depictions of torture were not. They are spectral not because they are in some way immaterial, but in fact the opposite: because, to reiterate Gordon above, they carry “the traces of the state’s power to determine the meaning of life and death” (127)

When they finally exit the grounds, we see fully the absurdity of their condition. Four young naked men, skeletal, filthy, bleeding, dripping wet, appear from nowhere in the middle of a residential street. They have come from elsewhere, the “netherworld,” as Gordon might say, of disappearance, and are distinctly out of place on the plane of the everyday. A bus drives past them as though it’s the most normal evening in the world. A businessman carrying a briefcase and exiting his car sees them, looks around nervously, nods in greeting, and backs away. This is an example par excellence of Taylor’s percepticide, the self-blinding of citizens under the Argentine dictatorship: a man who sees four apparitions one night, blinks, and when they do not disappear again like figments of his imagination, greets them and moves on. The blatant evidence of imprisonment and torture, just like the gunshots and screams coming from the house, goes unacknowledged. The prisoners are visible, but their experiences are made spectral but this act of looking without seeing. It is further notable how soundly this man’s actions—undoubtedly compelled by the terror imposed by his political environment—completely reject Derrida’s ethical imperative to learn to live with ghosts, and even Abraham and Torok’s advice to exorcise

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it by addressing the secret trauma it represents. Under conditions of percepticide, these apparitions are neither to be drawn attention to nor exorcised nor avenged nor aided, but rather determinedly ignored.

Of course, though the sinister impact of the Argentine government's political terror was general throughout the population, some people still help ghosts. After the men escape and must figure out their next move, Guillermo rings a bell in the neighborhood and asks for help from a woman, claiming he was robbed. She brings him some clothes and money for a taxi and sends him along, insisting she can't help him further. Later, she sees the other men exit their hiding place when the Gallego's father, alerted by Guillermo, comes to rescue his son. She is silent, and watches them go. She helped a man who she probably knew was not robbed. Did she know there was a haunted house in her neighborhood? Did she know, as the jeep with floodlights passed through the street searching, that they were hunting ghosts? A specter rang her doorbell and she answered and she gave him a little of what he needed. This appears to begin to answer Derrida's ethical imperative, by gesturing towards the ability of citizens to act, even under conditions of extreme terror, to perhaps begin learning to live with ghosts.

## **Conclusion**

The film ends with the captives not yet in safety, but, at the very least, out of immediate danger, and we receive the remainder of the details via subtitles. Guillermo and Claudio both escape abroad and later give testimony about their experiences. El Gallego also leaves the country, never to return. El Vasco is able to hide away with a relative, but is later tracked down by the government and kidnapped again, before being released in 1983 and also giving testimony

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of his experiences in 1985. It is to *Crónica*'s credit that it continuously acknowledges the escape as exceptional, a story that was exceedingly rare for an era where the ultimate fates of the vast majority of those who entered detention centers remain unknown.

The haunted house, Mansión Seré, receives a final update just as though it were one of our main characters. In a final shot of the house, we see uniformed men moving furniture out and into trucks. Our view of the house is partially obscured by a tree branch, and the shot pans until the branch obscures it entirely, disappearing it, the image then transitioning into an interior shot of the window from which the prisoners escaped. The subtitles inform us that, thanks to the escape, on March 31, 1978, the remaining prisoners in the Mansión Seré were moved to “unidades penales” and finally released. The house was lit on fire, eliminating all evidence.

It is important that the destiny of the haunted house is to be obscured, eliminated, disappeared like the bodies of the military government's victims. For the Mansión Seré to burn at the end of the film plays into both its haunted aesthetic and a historical need. On the one hand, the haunted house ending up in flames is yet another Gothic horror trope, one which often serves to exorcize the evil and the trauma experienced there.<sup>24</sup> However, in the film we are denied this catharsis, since we never see the building go up in flames, only the military moving out. Their activities will continue on elsewhere, perhaps somewhere less outwardly sinister, hiding instead in plain sight, like the other clandestine headquarters that was featured in the film.

On the other, the fire erases all evidence in the event that the escaped prisoners were able to bring media or political attention towards the abuses and identify the detention center. The military disappear the site that bore witness to their torture, eliminating the possibility that it might reveal its dark secrets. The state's goal in disappearing people is eliminating the evidence

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<sup>24</sup> Notable examples include *Rebecca*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and *The Changeling*.

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of its abuses and denying their very existence “to ensure that everyone knows just enough to scare normalization into a state of nervous exhaustion” (Gordon 64); the same is true of the disappearing of the detention center. Only the ruins remain, a phantasmic presence in the neighborhood contributing to the mobilization of haunting as a technology of state power.

However, Gordon’s assertion that haunting is ambivalent—rather than being a source of power only for the state—also rings true. Today, several former detention centers serve as memorial and educational sites. As Fabri discusses, in the decades following the closing of the detention center, the land began to be reclaimed by neighbors, who used it to meet and play outdoors, “un uso que redimió, de manera rudimentaria, la utilización como territorio de terror” (182). This initial use normalized the site, though the national politics of erasure and forgetting ultimately intervened in 1984 when the ruins were demolished. But even in the face of demolition, there were initial attempts at memory-making, through graffiti marked upon the very material of the haunted house itself: “Aquí se torturó a muchos argentinos, no se olvide” [“Her many Argentines were tortured, don’t forget”].<sup>25</sup> By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the relationship of both everyday Argentines and the state to the memory of the dictatorship had changed significantly, and in 1997 the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida [House of Memory and Life] was built nearby where the Mansión once stood and inaugurated as a site for collective memory in 2000.<sup>26</sup> An archaeological investigation and research project was conducted to identify the original foundations of the house and recreate the center from archival and oral sources.<sup>27</sup> In 2013 the Espacio Mansión Seré was built over the foundations of the Mansión, and it was declared a national historic site in 2015.

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<sup>25</sup> San Julián 2014, p.3, as cited in Fabri p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.moron.gob.ar/nuestra-gestion/derechos-humanos/casa-de-la-memoria-y-la-vida/>

<sup>27</sup> Fabri.

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This active attempt to reinaugurate geographical space as a site of memory is key for challenging haunting, and the deployment of the sinister, as a technology of state power. As Gordon points out, the specter is an unruly figure, and it can't always be managed: to encounter the phantasm, even when one is frightened or repulsed by it, is to encounter what the state has tried to repress. This is the power of the haunting, she continues, at it is "the mode by which the middle class, in particular, needs to encounter something you cannot just ignore, or understand at a distance, or 'explain away' by stripping it of all its magical power" (131).

The same holds true for the haunted house of *Crónica*, and the detention centers throughout Argentina. By representing the Mansión Seré through the use of a Gothic horror aesthetic, the film is able to make apparent to the viewer the sinister nature of power under the dictatorship. The use of familiar conventions makes legible this experience of terror, while nevertheless highlighting the strangeness of space and time when horror lurks, detected but unacknowledged, beneath the everyday. The aesthetic and sinister mood evoked also engages us on an emotional level, forcing us into encountering and confronting the haunted detention center when we might otherwise be inclined to look away.

As a space of memory, the Mansión Seré now serves this insistent purpose of the revenant, that dark past which returns and demands acknowledgment. It both poses and responds to the imperative: "Aquí se torturó a muchos argentinos, no se olvide." So, too, is *Crónica de una fuga*'s representation of the detention center as haunted house able to transform the sinister and the haunting from part of the apparatus of state power to a way to understand, feel, and confront the Argentina's past.