

LANDSCAPES OF DICTATORSHIP IN FILM: THREE AESTHETIC AND EMOTIONAL MODES

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Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotions with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective.

William James (1902, p. 140)

Introduction

As early as 1940, critical theorist Siegfried Kracauer found that cinema's most distinctive quality derived from the ability of involving its beholders as corporeal beings, for "The material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*" (HANSEM, 2012, p. 262). In recent years, philosophers and neuroscientists have similarly emphasized the sensual and perceptual aspects of film, equating it to the apparently continuous flow of consciousness itself (SACKS, 2004), to a medium capable of rendering

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through images the very processes of thought (DELEUZE, 1989), to “not only a way seeing, but also a way of hearing, feeling, thinking, and responding” (PLANTINGA, 2009, p. 49). Furthermore, theorists have argued that if films are “ways of feeling”, they also differ in the means they affect and mobilize the viewer, i.e., on how their *filmtexts* are emotionally and “criterially prefocused” to elicit particular audience responses (CARROLL, 1996). As a result, and although during the past three decades post-structuralist thought challenged the conventional notion of genre, a renewed discussion on film genres has arisen, especially from cognition-perception-embodiment theorists (Plantinga, Carroll, and Grodal). Most significantly, philosophical film criticism has recuperated the concept of aesthetic modes to reveal how particular expressive strategies and techniques (such as point of view, camera angles, lighting, sets, montage, mise-en-scène, and acting styles) may evoke distinct effects in terms of perceptual experience, affective engagement and emotional address.

Drawing on emotion theory and genre studies, this article analyzes and compares three landscapes of dictatorship in film, namely Fritz Lang’s *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), Guillermo del Toro’s *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), and Luis Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat* (2005), as expressed by distinct aesthetic and emotional modes. The films under examination reflect upon three interrelated dictatorial rules in disparate geographical locations: the escalation of Nazi power and attendant criminal frame of mind in Germany of the early 1930s (Fritz Lang’s); the persecution of Leftwing sympathizers, accompanied by the murder of powerless human beings, such as orphaned children, carried out by General Franco’s Rightwing supporters during the final days of the Spanish Civil War (Guillermo del Toro’s); and the authoritarian rule over the Dominican Republic from 1930 until 1961 by General Trujillo, nicknamed El Chivo, or The Goat, a despot notorious for being an insatiable abuser of pubescent girls and young women (Luis Llosa’s).

In the process of activating our perceptual experience of, and emotional response to, the characters, settings and events of the dictatorial regimes depicted, the three films deploy distinct aesthetic approaches. Drawing on the distinctive expressionist mise-en-scène and exaggerated character-types of his German period, but already utilizing techniques and themes that anticipate the

emergence of film noir, in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* Fritz Lang performs a sweeping and still contemporary critique of surveillance culture, demonstrating how a social climate of fear and induced terror inspires and sanctions despotism. In a different style, *The Feast of the Goat* utilizes the typical narrative structures and character construction of psychological realism, which allow for a plausible account of historical events, for a believable portrayal of dictator Rafael Trujillo, and for the audience's empathetic engagement with Urana Cabral, one of the many women abused by the despot. In contrast, *The Devil's Backbone* relies on the supernatural and phantasmagoric imagery of the Gothic mode, to eerily expose and violently bring to the surface the acts of terror that are perpetrated during oppressive regimes.

Aesthetic-Emotional Modes in Film

The process of analyzing a text—be it a film, a play, a novel, or a performance—involves the ability to inhabit the space of its *landscape* in both conceptual and sensory terms (CORRÊA, 2011). Hence, the notion of landscape that is deployed in this article refers not only to the films' theoretical and aesthetic perspective (landscape as a concept implies a point of view, or a particular gaze), but also to the film's concrete spatial, bodily, psychic and sensory "scapes."

Any assessment of the sensory landscapes in filmtexts is evidently an aesthetic endeavor. In its original Greek meaning aesthetics (*aisthesis*) is not concerned with beauty through the appreciation of art, but rather pertains to things felt and apprehended through the senses, and therefore to a domain of human perception and sensation that contrasts with that of conceptual thought. We aesthetically engage with a film by sensorially experiencing its material qualities and letting it interact with our own lived body-psyche and imagination.

An analysis of a *filmtext's* sensory-aesthetic landscapes allows for the exploration of its emotional modes. Indeed, several philosophers have emphasized the role of emotions in aesthetic experience, and have even associated particular emotional states to specific aesthetic genres, starting with Aristotle's claim in *Poetics* (4th century B.C.E.) that tragedy elicits *catharsis*, or the purgation of negative feelings through pity and fear. Aristotle associated

pathē (the Greek term for emotions) with the world of imagination, and thus provided a basis for further reflection on the relation between aesthetic features and emotional modes (PLAMPER, 2012, p. 13-15). His observations on the emotional effects of epic, lyric, and dramatic modes were adopted prescriptively by Renaissance scholars, and in the ensuing neoclassical period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “when literature was divided into more and more categories, or “species,” as they were called, each with its own proper tone, form, and subject matter” (BUSCOMBE, 2012, p. 12).

Current discussions on how distinct film genres affect viewers differently include Christine Gledhill’s article, “Rethinking Genre”, in which the author defines genre as “first and foremost a boundary concept” that helps stake out kinds of fictional worlds and demarcate aesthetic discourses (2000, p. 221). As aesthetic practice, each genre represents a body of rules, a horizon of expectations, and a form of narrative engagement, thereby guiding the audience’s interpretation.

Attempting a “philosophy of movie genres,” Brian Laetz and Dominic McIver Lopes hold that not only do “movie audiences deploy genre concepts as they interpret and appreciate, [but] filmmakers also work with an eye to genre as long as they aim to make movies to be interpreted and appreciated” (2008, p. 152). Genres are partly defined by setting, by subject, by affect, by format, and still others by style; but this “does not imply that every movie belongs to no more than one movie genre” (p. 155).

The most sustained investigation on how particular film genres elicit related emotions has been Noël Carroll’s, through the publication of several articles and books, such as *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990). According to Carroll, the structure of our emotional involvement with narrative fiction films comprises a *criterially prefocused film text* that embodies a conception of a situation from an emotive point of view, and is apt to elicit predictable responses (including emotive focus) in standard audiences. “Which particular dysphoric or euphoric emotion is engaged, of course, depends upon the way that the film text is criterially prefocused” (CARROLL, 2006, p. 223). Hence, in order to analyze the way a film arouses emotional responses, one needs to first determine the way in which the film is criterially prefocused, i.e., the ways the

cinematic material is articulated so as to engender “pro and con attitudes” in viewers about what is going on.

Similarly engaged with the means by which movies stimulate emotions and affective experiences, Carl Plantinga appeals to “cognitive-perceptual theory,” distinguishing it from a cognitive fundamentalist perspective that emphasizes conscious evaluations in the genesis of human emotion. On the contrary, he argues that much of what leads a person to have an emotion occurs at the level of the “cognitive unconscious,” which embraces “unconscious perception, unconscious affect, and unconscious conation (pleasure and desire)” (2009, p. 49-50). Like other cognitive theorists, Plantinga distinguishes affects from emotions: whereas the former are bodily states automatically felt, the latter “are intentional states expressive of a relationship between a person and the environment; they therefore have objects, that is, they are directed at something or someone, whether real or imagined” (p. 79). Films are emotionally “prefocused” because they have built into them a particular way of seeing events and characters, a specific order and duration to those events, and a built-in perspective that elicits a particular sort of emotional response.

Rather than reflecting upon the emotional responses elicited by film in terms of their *genre*—which presupposes the categorization of uniform types with stable aesthetic effects—I suggest we think of emotion in film in relation to aesthetic *modes*, i.e., to modalities of camera shots and movement, of lighting, sets, montage, *mise-en-scène*, and acting styles that both express and stimulate distinct emotive systems. As Gerard Genette argues, the “generic criterion” and the “modal criterion” are dissimilar, since genre defines itself essentially by a specified content, whereas mode pertains to expression and production (1977, p. 417-418). The concept of mode allows us to distinguish identifiable aesthetic qualities and techniques that evoke and provoke distinctive emotional effects. It enables us to perceive a film as a compositional score of ideas, sensations, and emotions that is open to new configurations through the interaction with the sensual, social, emotional, and moral coordinates of each individual viewer. This encounter between a film’s modes of enunciating, seeing, feeling and thinking, and the spectator’s own constructs at a given time of her existence, does not culminate in a final coherent idea-message but rather in an open-

ended process of forever *becoming*, of ontological transformation, for both film and viewer. Consequently, in the next sections I will be focusing on the aesthetics traits of each of the three films under consideration, so as to draw out their predominant emotional modes.

Landscapes of Dictatorship in Film

Reflecting upon the foundations of human and animal emotions, neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp notes that “There have already been too many political structures in human history that have promoted fear and aggression, but it should be possible to develop distinct social systems based on each of the emotions” (1998, p. 321). Additionally, he indicates that anger is the most likely cause of aggression (p. 187). These observations seem relevant to the present investigation on landscapes of dictatorship in film, since the predominant emotions found in all three films examined are indeed anger, rage, fear, anxiety and terror.

According to Panksepp’s theory of emotion, both the rage/anger and the fear/terror emotional systems are “pre-social,” i.e., they are elemental and originate in primitive neural circuits. Panksepp, however, is also keen to point out that the most broadly destructive kinds of human aggression (unwarranted wars, violent crimes, practice of torture, etc.) are not old instinctual potentials of the mammalian brain (they are not found in animals), but rather arise from higher brain areas through social learning (p. 188). Consequently, an exploration of dictatorships in film should contextualize the works historically, and also assess their landscapes of despotism as complex social-emotional systems. Moreover, although the same fear/anger systems of emotions prevail in the three films, their differing aesthetic modes emphasize distinct sensory dimensions of authoritarianism.

Fritz Lang’s *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, 1933)

Several critics consider Fritz Lang’s *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* one of the last expressionist movies and an early specimen of film noir. Arising out of a feeling of social crisis, especially after WWI, expressionism rejected objective

representation based on surface appearances, to endorse the expression of inner realities. Because its main goal was the projection of subjectivities marked by the primacy of emotion onto the external world, expressionism favored a formal extremism, making use of exaggeration, disorientation, abstraction, distortion, grotesqueness, and implausibility. In film, expressionism is thus characterized by low-angle and extreme high-angle camera shots, by geometrized set designs, chiaroscuro lighting, stylized mise-en-scene, and emphasized acting.² Having inherited aesthetic traits from expressionism³—such as the constant opposition of light and shadow, oblique camera angles, disruptive balance in the composition of frames and editing practice—film noir is also characterized by its choice of themes, such as the presence of crime and violence, or the feeling of alienation and moral ambivalence.

Writing on German cinema during the Weimar Republic, in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Kracauer notes that the use of expressionist techniques transforms Lang's films into "emotional visions." As a result, Mabuse becomes the personification of oppression that "is everywhere but is nowhere recognizable;" he is bred by chaos but also capitalizes on chaos, devouring the very same world he overpowers. He is "an omnipresent threat that cannot be localized, and thus reflects society under a tyrannical regime—that kind of society in which one fears everybody because anybody may be the tyrant's ear or arm" (KRACAUER, 1947, p. 82-84).

At the beginning of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the predominant emotions are the primal fear of being caught, and the terror of finding no escape from a machine-like surround. In the film's four-minutes opening

2 In John Willett's book (1970), the author considers that the Nazis' accession to power in 1933 finished off Expressionism (p. 196), because it was considered "racially impure," pathologically decadent, symptomatic of the decline of Western civilization, and associated with both the Weimar Republic and the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. The final and worst blow to the movement came in 1936, when the Nazis organized an exhibition of bad modern academic art in order "to wage a relentless cleaning-up campaign against the last subversive elements in our culture" (p. 205). The "Degenerate Art Exhibition," as it came to be called, had over a million visitors in six weeks (as much as the Tate Gallery in the whole year of 1967-1968). A purge of all museums followed. Some valuable works went into private collections (Goering's and Goebbels's inclusively), others were sold in auctions to museums, and thousands were burned or disappeared. For some unclear reason, the Degenerate Art Law of 31 May 1938 was not annulled after 1945, and was never undone (see BBC news 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26047614>; Accessed: 19 sept. 2016).

3 The affinity between noir and expressionism may be due to the fact that many film-noir directors in Hollywood were German émigrés, having started their career before WWII as expressionist film directors during the Weimar Republic.

sequence, we see a terrified man trying to find a hiding place in a workshop cluttered with tools and mechanisms, and striving to do so to the overbearing sound of clanking and unvarying repetitive beats that cover up the dialogue between the humans that seek him. As Tom Gunning observes, although the source of this overwhelming noise is never shown, “this sequence remains an aural image of the system of terror Mabuse is putting in place.”

The whole film, I suggest, may be seen as a sensory landscape of overpowering uncontrollable technology, or of a pervasive crime-generating despotic machine that produces continuous coercion, agitation and horror. After the initial sequence we see the hunted man fleeing from a passing truck, escaping from a piece of masonry that barely misses him, then from a rolling oil barrel that explodes in flames. Later on, we see another man being shot inside his car, a killing covered by the continuous and syncopated sound of car horns and engines stopped at a traffic light. The same tension and menace emanating from mechanisms is present in the printing press of counterfeit currency, where machines roar, and in the curtained room from which the invisible Dr. Mabuse issues his crime plans through a loudspeaker connected to a gramophone, and threatens a young couple opposed to his despotic regime with the exasperating pulsing of a time-bomb. The infernal workings of the Mabuse despotic crime-machine endure throughout the film, through frantic car chases crossing railroad tracks and almost colliding with fast moving locomotives, through bombings, explosions, burning factories, speeding fire engines, wailing sirens, and police whistles. A whole range of machines invented by humans to make life run efficiently, securely and regularly like a clock-mechanism, bear witness to an emotional world gone awry.

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse is infused with mechanisms because the film reflects the rise of the despotic automaton in the human soul. As noted by Gilles Deleuze, the art of automatic movement coincided with the automation of the masses:

And machines can take hold so fully on man that [the man-machine assemblage] awakens the most ancient powers, and the moving machine becomes one with the psychological automaton pure and simple, at the service of a frightening new order: this is

the procession of somnambulists, the hallucinators, hypnotizers-hypnotized in expressionism, from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* to *Testament of Dr Mabuse* via *Metropolis* and its robot (p. 263).

For Deleuze and Guattari, despotism is a social machine. As groups of social relations and desires are rendered subordinate to the guiding function of the despotic signifier (connecting the people through the despot directly to the deity), and hence integrated in an all-encompassing whole, “machinic enslavement” occurs. “What counts is not the person of the sovereign, nor even his function,” but rather that is a megamachine, with the despot at the apex as “an immobile motor” (1983, p. 194).

In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, not only has human perception become automated and non-emotional, but humans have also become replaceable components of an all-encompassing and unstoppable mechanism. For Mabuse is not really an individual but rather a crime-terror machine. In the sequel of Lang’s *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922), the tyrant Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) initially appears as a totally deranged inmate of the lunatic asylum headed by psychiatrist Dr. Baum (Oskar Beregi), who covers innumerable sheets of paper with writings towards a guide of crime and of the ultimate destruction of humankind. This “testament” of terrorism contains detailed instructions of attacks to be perpetrated on the currency system, on railways, on gas and chemical factories, and also on water supplies and harvests through biological contamination, which will instigate devastating plagues and epidemics. Shortly before dying, Mabuse exerts hypnotic influence over Dr. Baum, and eventually possesses his body and psyche. After having been criminally exposed by police inspector Lohmann, Baum flees into the former cell of Mabuse, where his own madness becomes manifest. He then restarts writing the crime-terror manual.

Not only does Mabuse reincarnate in different human bodies and possess others through ghostly apparitions, but he is also invisible and intangible, thriving on mass media networks. As Gunning observes, “He is kept alive through the technological recordings and transmissions of his voice, delivering his messages while keeping his physical presence hidden, untraceable, and therefore unseizable.” It makes little difference whether he is

alive or dead; “Crimes become less actions undertaken for individual profit or revenge than the consequences of a seemingly abstract system” (GUNNING).

As a landscape of dictatorship in film, Lang’s *Mabuse* denotes despotic madness, the willpower of controlling human minds with the sole purpose of carrying out violence and provoking terror. The rationale for such an empire of crime is none other than that of generating more crime. This is explained in *Mabuse*’s own words when he seizes mental and spiritual possession of Dr. Baum, in a scene intercut by images of primitive masks and expressionist paintings,

Dr. Mabuse: Humanity’s soul must be shaken to its very depths, frightened by unfathomable and seemingly senseless crimes. Crimes that benefit no one, whose only objective is fear and terror. Because the ultimate purpose of crime is to establish the endless empire of crime. A state of insecurity and anarchy founded upon the tainted ideals of a world doomed to annihilation. When humanity subjugated by the terror of crime has been driven insane by fear and horror and when chaos has become supreme law then the time will have come for the empire of crime.

As the film concludes and we see Dr. Baum resuming the writing of the crime-terror guide in his cell, we realize that the cycle of despotic madness has by no means ended.

In expressionistic works, characters are generally representative types, standing for kinds of people rather than for psychologically differentiated individuals, and acting is often “emblematic,” or characterized by large symbolic gestures. An exception to the world of thugs, doctors and policemen depicted in Lang’s film can be found in the enamored couple of Kent and Lilli (Gustav Diessl and Wera Liessem). Although Kent initially belongs to *Mabuse*’s gang, he decides to quit the crime business because of his emotional relationship with Lilli. They are the only characters who resist *Mabuse*’s authority and manage to escape from his death-machine. Lang thus seems to indicate that an intense feeling of deep affection between human beings is a powerful antidote against despotic machines.

By depicting in the expressionist mode typical noir themes—a landscape of rising inflation and ascending unemployment, a lawless and industrialized urban society intimidated by gangs directed by a criminal

mastermind—Lang manages to allegorize in the film his own historical moment, of Germany in 1932. In effect, the film was made when Hitler was about to become Chancellor, and an obvious parallel is manifest between an imprisoned Mabuse writing a testament of crime, and Hitler writing *Mein Kampf* in his Munich cell eight years before, after the failed Beer Hall Putsh. Lang himself claimed that he put Hitler's words into Mabuse's mouth ("I am the State"), and that in the script he explored actual incidents taking place in real life, collected from newspaper clippings—e.g., thefts of explosives from factories, of chemicals from pharmacies, and the daily criminal behavior of Nazi sympathizers (McGILLIGAN, 2013).

Conceived by Lang and his wife Thea von Harbou, together with novelist Norbert Jacques,⁴ the screenplay was intended to reflect a contemporaneous Germany in the grip of a critical sociopolitical crisis. In effect, several critics—among them Kracauer—recognized that the film “foreshadowed Nazi practices” (p. 248). When it was still being edited, Hitler became Chancellor (January 30, 1933), and a fire erupted in the Reichstag (February 27), which the Nazis blamed on the Communists and Jews, to spark public furor. A month later (March 29), the largest film company in Germany (UFA) signaled its submission to the Nazis by firing all Jewish employees. On that same day, the German Board of Film Censors (headed by the Third Reich's new Minister of Propaganda Dr. Goebbels) announced that *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was banned from exhibition, because it posed “a threat to law and order and public safety.” Four months later, half-Jewish director Lang left the country, first for France, then for Hollywood.

The fact that the Nazis banned the film seemed to confirm its effective anti-authoritarian stance. Kracauer, however, saw in Lang's film a fascination with Nazi leaders and ideology, due to its expressionist mystic-mythical iconography, and deplored the fact that the agents who fought against tyranny were insufficiently equipped to win over it:

4 The first of three Mabuse films that Lang directed, *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922), was adapted from Luxembourgian novelist Norbert Jacques's best seller. A decade later, Jacques was working on a sequel to the novel, *Mabuse's Colony* (which had a female villain, Frau Kristine, using Mabuse's testament to implement global terrorism), when he became involved, at Lang's and Thea's request, in the screenplay of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.

It is hard to believe that average German audiences would have grasped the analogy between the gang of screen criminals and the Hitler gang. And had they even been aware of it, they would not have felt particularly encouraged to stand up against the Nazis, for Lang is so exclusively concerned with highlighting the magic spell of Mabuse and Baum that his film mirrors their demoniac irresistibility rather than the inner superiority of their opponents (KRACAUER, 1947, p. 249-250).

Significantly, Norbert Grob claims that Kracauer's remarks on Lang's film "undoubtedly adhere too closely to the rational moment of enlightenment, and also too closely to the saving power of realistic representation" (2003, p. 102). In effect, it almost seems that in order to generate oppositional awareness of despotic regimes in film, the audience needs realistic narratives and a redemptive final that ensues from the objective actions of rational enlightened heroes who win over the darkness of tyranny. This raises a debate on whether we need realism as an aesthetic-emotional convention in films concerning political themes, a subject that I explore in the next two sections.

Luis Llosa's *La fiesta del Chivo* (The Feast of the Goat, 2005)

Etymologically, whereas the ancient Greek word for tyrant (*turannos*) simply refers to a monarch or ruler of a state, the word despot—meaning "head of household," i.e., the master of slaves and children—has noteworthy patriarchal connotations. Despotism suitably applies to the regime of Rafael Trujillo, the military dictator who ruled over the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, and who not only imprisoned, tortured, and murdered all those who dared to oppose his political authority, but also raped women and girls of all social classes, so as to dominate and humiliate his subjects at the most intimate level of their lives.

The title of both Vargas Llosa's novel (2000), and its adaption to a film directed by Luis Llosa, aptly includes the nickname given to the Dominican despot for his sexual voracity: the Goat. As Gene H. Bell-Villada notes,

Probably no modern dictatorship can equal Trujillo's in the extent to which the ordinary, daily governing machinery was thoroughly sexualized. Sex for El Jefe (The Chief) was as much

an instrument of power and control as were his torture chambers and dungeons. To say that Trujillo and his kind exploited women is an understatement that scarcely nips at an unsavory reality's surface. The Señor Presidente slept with a fresh bevy of handpicked young ladies each week; he also bedded down the wives and daughters of his allies, and later, in banquet speeches, vaunted his "erotic" exploits with demonic glee (2005, p. xii).

Accomplished in a realistic mode, the film highlights the mythical dimension of the despot's performance of masculinity.

The Feast of the Goat utilizes the typical narrative structures and character construction of psychological realism, which allow for a "plausible" account of historical events, for a "believable" portrayal of dictator Rafael Trujillo as a simultaneously fearful, charismatic and pathetic man, and for the audience's empathetic engagement with Urania Cabral, a fictitious character emblematic of the numerous teenage girls abused by the despot. The film intertwines three different plots: 1) the return in 1992 of Urania (Isabella Rossellini) to her home-country, thirty years after fleeing to the US due to some traumatic event, and the bitter relationship with her relatives and senile father to whom she has not spoken since; 2) the last months of President Trujillo (Tomas Milian) in 1960-1, and the dealings with the executives of his administration, including Senator Augustín Cabral (Paul Freeman), father to thirteen-year old Urania (Stephanie Leonidas); and 3) the meetings of the insurgent executioners of Trujillo's assassination (which took place in May 1961 with the support of the CIA), many of them former supporters from the military high ranks. Within the characteristic development of narrative film, the climactic scene occurs when Senator Cabral delivers his daughter to seventy-year old Trujillo, to win back the despot's favor, and the ensuing rape of adolescent Urania, which the now impotent dictator viciously accomplishes with his fingers. Soon after the secret of adult Urania's resentment towards her aging father is revealed, the film concludes with the shooting of the tyrant.

The Feast of the Goat strives for a realistic account of the events described in Varga Llosa's novel, which was based on extensive historical research. Such search for authenticity can be detected in the film's settings: all the exteriors are actually filmed in Santo Domingo, and the interiors are designed with period detail. It is

also apparent in the costumes, lighting, photography, camera composition and angles, which conform to the conventions of psychological realism. There is no sense of distortion or feeling of subjectivity in the images (as in Lang's film), but instead we are presented a view of "reality" from a non-place, through a detached Cartesian gaze that separates the observer from the observed.

According to Torben Grodal, what distinguishes realist fiction is not just its plot structure with a beginning, middle and end, but also its logic, which never generates "cognitive dissonance." Thus, "the experience of realism is linked both to perceptual specificity and to certain mental schemas that give rise to a sense of typicality and familiarity, or recognizability" (2009, p. 250). Perceptual realism is defined in contrast to the abstract and fantastic, and it has normative dimensions, because it produces mental schemas of what is "realistic," when in fact it is "not the only way in which we experience reality, just as the narrative form is not the only form that we use in order to assemble data" (p. 259).

In spite of unfolding in different time periods (1961 and 1992) Llosa's film develops actions and events in a linear clock-time typical of the realistic mode. Further, as in most classical narrative films, the action is focalized by one living being (Urania), persuading the viewers to experience her emotions and concerns. The film's built-in perspective thus elicits a particular sort of emotional response, that of a feeling of moral allegiance and value agreement with the character of Urania—both with the girl who is sexually abused by the despot and with the woman who loathes her father for having delivered her into the tyrant's hands.

Characters in *The Feast of the Goat* are not at all typified (as in Lang's film) but rather individualized with attention to psychological detail. In effect, realistic aesthetics in film usually relies upon an emotionally detailed psychological-realistic method of acting, conveyed through facial expressions that draw the spectator into the subjective world of each character. Accordingly, close-up shots of faces become central in the film, for the very purpose of involving us viewers in the characters' emotional experiences. As Giorgio Agamben observes, "The face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden" (2000, p. 91).

In this sense, actor Tomas Milian brilliantly expresses the multiple

facets of Trujillo's personality, as well as the wide-ranging nuances of his anger in the numerous close-up shots of his face throughout the film. He emerges as a sadist, a tormenter, a man who thinks he is super-human. He is inquisitive, expresses mistrust, intimidates people, shouts at them and plays on his weaknesses. His self-aggrandizement, however, seems to derive from a deep inner fear, from feeling threatened by outside forces (be it the economic sanctions of the US or the virile youth of other men). It also becomes apparent that his displays of uncontrolled anger are frequently premeditated, like strategic outbursts that manipulate others to perceive him as dominant and all-powerful. His genital pride seems closely linked to his homophobia (he often describes other men as *maricóns* without *cujones*), and the fact that he likes to be surrounded at all times by men leads us to suspect of homoerotic suppressed desires. Occasionally, his anger is passive, so as to provoke the antagonism of others in order to demean them. Most upsettingly, he can be charming at times and behave like an elegant courteous gentleman. In sum, the actor playing Trujillo believably conveys the multiple psychological facets that make up the terribly dangerous personality of a despot.

In the same manner, Stephanie Leonidas impressively conveys young Urania's fascination for the glamorous world of Trujillo's palaces, balls and courtiers; as well as her deception and resentment when she realizes her inferior condition of being female in a male-dominated society. In several scenes of the film, we are led to perceive her conventional dreams of a "prince charming," her carefree but actually fake innocence, of an oblivious conformist teenager living under a fascist regime. In the light of the overarching patriarchal system of Trujillo's regime, even the relationship of Uranita with her father becomes awkwardly ambiguous and *oedipally* charged, as her facial expressions reveal that he is the ideal focus of her yet coy sexual desire. Moreover, her fear of being "deflowered" by the elderly Trujillo seems matched by her strange attraction towards him.

Similarly to the centrality of faces, the characters' bodies in *The Feast of the Goat* acquire particular relevance to the film's sensory landscape of dictatorship. Throughout the film we see Trujillo dress in many different uniforms,⁵ maniacally

fussing about his looks, and exercising spells over both women and men. In several shots we see him surrounded by aligned rows of military men, in emblematic tableaux of omnipotent patriarchal power. He is not a mere despotic ruler of a state; instead, he is God Trujillo, the owner of both people and country. The state is his body, and his virility is firmly tied to his legitimacy as the supreme *macho* leader. Thus, when he fails to penetrate the female flesh of a young virgin, he apparently suffers the loss of the mystical basis of his rule.

An emphasis on individual psychology (through detailed realistic characterization) rather than on concrete criminal events and brutal ideological aspects of dictatorships, may somehow provide viewers with the impression that such regimes end with the disappearance or murder of the individual tyrants that led them. However, through a psychological-realistic cinematic mode, *The Feast of the Goat* effectively unveils the male chauvinist foundation of all dictatorships, or the ways authoritarian societies are based on the masculine norm, and construct femininity as an object or commodity for male consumption. In the case of Trujillo's regime, there is historical evidence that many fathers from all social classes gave him their daughters, and that some of his ministers allowed him to have sex with their wives, in order to gain his favor or simply as a way of showing him their admiration and support. As Lauren Derby states, "Trujillo's power was based as much on the consumption of women through sexual conquest as it was on the consumption of enemies of state through violence" (2004, p. 215). The film is emotionally prefocused in order to emphasize the patriarchal dimensions of authoritarianism, whereby sex becomes a tool for the domination.

Guillermo Del Toro's *El Espinazo del Diablo* (The Devil's Backbone, 2001)

As Fred Botting observes, Gothicism is about excess: excessive imagery, excessive rhetoric, excessive narrative, and excessive affect (1996, p. 1). In effect, the genre thrives in depictions of extreme emotional states, like anxiety, fear, rage, terror, and vengefulness, and makes a sensationalist use of suspense to activate affective relations with its audience.

Gothicism often makes use of the "believable" forms of the realistic

mode but directly transgresses them, not only by presenting supernatural, ghostly and alternative worlds, but also through effects of estrangement or “uncannily familiar” feelings. According to Freud (*Unheimlich*, 1919), the feeling of the strange or uncanny is triggered when we view familiar events, impressions, situations and people at an unexpected light, making us experience fear and horror due to the unknown aspects of such known phenomena.

Such an uncanny but familiar feeling is triggered at the beginning of *El Espinazo del Diablo*, when we watch a huge warhead being dropped from an aircraft becoming stuck in the middle of a courtyard, nose-down like a sculpture, unexploded. It is the courtyard of an orphanage, we soon learn, and the bomb will remain there until the end of the film, supposedly deactivated but creaking and groaning like a looming specter of the threat of war. “They say it’s switched off,” says Jaime (Íñigo Garcés), one of the orphaned children, “but I don’t believe it. Put your head against it. You can hear it breathe. She’s still alive, and she knows we’re here.”

The film narrative is emotionally focalized by another young boy, Carlos (Fernando Tielve), who is brought to the same orphanage, which is supervised by left-wing Republican partisans, during the last months of the Spanish Civil War, at a time when future dictator General Franco’s Fascist troops (the *Falangistas*) are on the verge of winning the conflict. Throughout the film del Toro frequently utilizes point-of-view editing from Carlos perspective, which, in perceptual terms, is “designed to activate our capacities of recognition in such a way that we identify the global emotional state of the relevant character” (CARROLL, 1996, p. 130). Because he is an orphaned child caught in the middle of a war, Carlos is a stock character of the Gothic, a mode known for its predilection for marginalized, dispossessed and discriminated human beings (usually women, children, and subordinate ethnic “minorities”) who are confined or imperiled, and must engage in a fight against patriarchal villains. We are thus led to emotionally empathize with a child who in turn identifies with a boy-specter that becomes his best friend.

The orphanage itself—an isolated old building set in the middle of a scorching desert, with its locked closets, long corridors, empty hallways and a narrow spiral staircase leading to a subterranean pool—draws imaginative and

emotional energies from other Gothic and horror films taking place in similar institutions, where children are viciously mistreated by depraved adults. As David Punter states, Gothic works are typically set in “a place of enclosure, a womb-like edifice” that is “both feared and longed for, as a place of confinement and/or as a place of safety”; this structure is the site for “the plight” of gothic heroes, a place from which they anxiously contrive to escape (2007, p. 29-30).

A headmistress, Carmen (Marisa Paredes), and her platonic lover, Dr. Casares (Federico Luppi), supervise the orphanage, helped by caretaker Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega) and housekeeper Conchita (Irene Visedo), but its atmosphere is of great distress and animosity, passed on from the adults to the children. Significantly, del Toro confesses in an interview that in the movie he tried to create “a microcosm of the Spanish civil war through a gothic romance with a ghost. In trying to do that, I chose that war because it was a household war. People that shared beds, shared dining tables and shared lives ultimately killed each other” (KERMODE, 2006). In effect, “Dr. Casares’s chronic impotence and Carmen’s wooden leg suggest the weakness of the republic, and like that noble, self-divided government, they are unable to defend themselves against the treachery in their midst” (SCOTT, 2001). The villain Jacinto is not only among them but has also been nurtured by them, a former pupil whose deceitful nature seems to spring from the sufferings he endured as a child. Lusting after Carmen’s gold ingots, which she frequently hides inside her wooden leg, Jacinto has been involved with her since his sexual maturity, although she feels ashamed of her carnal instincts. A living image of female submission, docile Conchita is fascinated by brute Jacinto because he promises to marry her and make her rich. As for Dr. Casares, he yearns after Carmen since his youth, but suffers from sexual impotence.

Gothicism relies on the supernatural for its emotional effects. As we see the missile falling from the sky at the beginning of the film we hear a voice over ask “what is a ghost?” and then proceed to answer: “a terrible event condemned to repeat itself many times, an instant of pain, something dead that somewhat seems alive, an emotion suspended in time, like a blurred photograph, like an insect trapped in amber...” Soon after, in the film’s first scene, Carlos perceives the ghost of Santi, a boy who mysteriously disappeared on the same

night that the bomb fell into the courtyard. From this moment on, the film becomes overcharged with a fearsome and brooding atmosphere, conveyed through sounds of sighs, droplets and heartbeats that echo in the stillness of the orphanage. Visually, “the camera replicates that primal childhood state of being poised between curiosity and dread. Is it worse to hide under the covers, where whatever it is might come and find you, or to seek it out in the murky darkness?” (SCOTT, 2001).

In the tradition of many Gothic ghosts, Santi must accomplish something before he can rest. He is determined to avenge his killer (Jacinto), but he is also an ally of the boys who warns them of their own impending doom: “Many will die,” he alerts. Santi represents a most cherished Gothic trope, that of the presence of the dead among the living as reminders of historical memory against forgetfulness. Although he is visually horrifying, with decaying cracked gray skin over a half-crushed skull from which blood continuously streams, as if he were still submersed by water (where his body was hidden by Jacinto), he also resembles a doll-like figure, with huge sad eyes that arouse pity and protection.

Similarly suspended in time and space like ghosts, swing various deformed fetuses inside jars filled with liquid, of unborn children with a malformation of the spine called “the devil’s backbone,” providing the film its title. As Dr. Casares explains, these haunting figures are “nobody’s children,” although the “limbo liquid” that preserves them is believed by superstitious people to have powerful effects, namely the cure for impotency. Other specters in the film include Dr. Casares, himself, who also ends up becoming a ghost. Having previously defined himself a man of science, an embodiment of enlightened rationalism against superstition and fear, Dr. Casares ultimately surrenders to a vision of the world that encompasses extra-human phenomena. Thus, instead of combining disgust with fear, and directing them at “impure beings,” or monsters that threaten the safety of sympathetic characters, as so many horror movies do (CARROLL, 1990, p. 189), del Toro makes us empathize with the ghosts of his film, and mistrust the living characters who actually cherish aggression and behave harmfully towards each other.

Nearer to the film’s end, after Jacinto and other thugs have killed Carmen,

Conchita, and Casares, and set fire to most of the orphanage, the boys are held captive in a small room. It is then that the ghost Santi becomes the igniting impetus of their collective allegiance, with the ghost of Casares and the flies that flutter over his corpse as powerful helpers towards their final victory and escape. As the boys band together against their oppressors—in a reenactment of the pre-historic hunt of the mammoth explained by Carmen in a history class, earlier in the film—they discern: “They’re bigger than us; but there are more of us,” thus undoing one of the foundations of fascism, namely that despots only become all-powerful because of the large numbers of people that support them.

At this stage in the film, the emotive dimension of friendship among the children has gained extraordinary power. According to Deleuze and Guattari, despotism is a social machine of concentrated power that can only be broken down by autonomous social movements or war-machines. But war is not the goal of autonomous war-machines; rather, they want to create space for difference or for particular ways of life, and are therefore “associated with the formation of special types of groups that are variously termed ‘bands,’ ‘packs’ and ‘multiplicities.’ These groups are seen as operating as dense local clusters of emotionally-intense connections, strongly differentiated from the ‘mass,’ which is a type of group based on large scale, lack of intensity and vertical integration” (ROBINSON, 2010). In *El Espinazo del Diablo* we witness the emergence of such an autonomous social movement of resistance against the concentration of political power, sustained and driven by the emotionally intense practices of self-care and care for the other, i.e., friendship.

In the film’s last shot, we see a group of shocked and injured boys emerge from the orphanage and escape from its human horror into the hot desolate desert that surrounds it. At first the image elicits our compassion, because we recognize that they are helpless beings in a country ravaged by war. Yet the omnipresent mountains that loom over the desert are a Gothic reminder of the sublime, sacred and protective power of nature, to which del Toro makes occasional allusions throughout the film.⁶

Through the Gothic mode, del Toro approaches the Spanish dictatorial past and the civil war that sanctioned its existence as if they were an open

⁶ In the film, non-human nature’s presence is especially felt through “low rank” animals such as slugs and flies, which provide crucial links between worlds, of the living and the dead.

wound, fearlessly confronting the various dimensions of the pain it encloses. As Ellen Brinks argues, the mode of the Gothic chosen for the film “attempts, narratively, ideologically, and psychologically, to come to terms with a traumatic era in Spanish national history,” and to interrogate what Spain “represses about the civil war and its ongoing legacy” (2004, p. 292-293). It allows del Toro to explore what has been hidden and disavowed during and after Franco’s dictatorial regime: the anti-fascist men and women extradited and killed in Nazi concentration camps, the stolen “lost children” of Republicans who were handed as orphans to Catholic institutions and to couples supportive of the fascist regime, the secretly buried victims whose tombs cannot be found, the disappeared that are neither living nor dead.

Conclusion

Depending on the way filmtexts are emotionally prefocused, or on their aesthetic-emotional modes, they affect and mobilize the viewers differently, even when dealing with the common theme of oppressive and brutal periods of dictatorial rule.

In Fritz Lang’s *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, we are led to experience deliberate exaggeration of mechanical sounds and actions directed at the communication of the infernal workings and impacts of the despotic crime-machine. Within Lang’s view, despotism does not have conventional motives, it consists of a global conspiracy that terrorizes, destabilizes, and manipulates entire political and economic systems.

Focusing on the personality traits and inner emotional processes of tyrants, victims, and supporters of dictatorial regimes, Llosa’s *Feast of the Goat* reveals, through a psychological-realistic aesthetic, the undercurrent of horror that lies beneath the “safe” and “clean” appearance of everyday family life in authoritarian societies. Political oppression at the macropolitical public level is inevitably tied to a paternalist system of values and male chauvinist domination in the micropolitical private domain.

Emotionally prefocused in the Gothic mode, del Toro’s *Espinazo del Diablo* brings to the surface the historical traumas that have been hidden and repressed during the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing dictatorship of

Franco. Through highly emotional Gothic techniques, del Toro persuades the viewers not only to empathize with ghosts, but also rely on their otherworldly knowledge to guide and even save the film's children-protagonists from a violent and dangerous human world.

Differing aesthetic-emotional modes in film may nevertheless mutually elicit in the audience oppositional awareness, and an ethics of resistance with regard to authoritarianism in general and the dictatorial regimes depicted. In effect, as neuroscientists have proven, emotional processes play a key role in the actions of humans, providing internal values upon which they behave. Because "emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social lives" (NUSSBAUM, 2001, p. 1), it is of vital importance to continue our investigation of the perceptual-emotional ways film and other arts may have on the viewers' political thought and action.

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