Spanish Civil War Horror and Regional Trauma: The Politics of Painful Remembrance in Juan Carlos Medina's *Insensibles* (*Painless*, 2012)

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Juan Carlos Medina's *Insensibles* (2012), released in English worldwide as *Painless*, could appear to be yet another Gothic treatment of the Spanish Civil War to join previous successful and commercial ventures like Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001) and *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006) in cinema and Carlos Ruiz Zafón's "El cementerio de los libros olvidados" (The Cemetery of Forgotten Books, 2001–16; trans. 2004–18) quartet in literature. The plot follows a Catalan neurosurgeon's search for his biological parents upon learning that he needs an urgent bone-marrow transplant if he is to survive prolymphocytic leukaemia. As David (Àlex Brendemühl) begins to dig deeper into his family's past, he uncovers the disturbing existence of a secret wartime asylum dedicated to the rehabilitation of children who cannot feel any pain. Like Del Toro and Ruiz Zafón, *Insensibles* uses a microcosm, its hero and a specific locale, to explore the horrors of the war and their human cost. Unlike them, the film tells its story over two timelines: David's, in the present day, and that of one of the children, Benigno (Tomás Lemarquís), in the past. As it becomes evident, the experiments continued well after the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) ended, and both storylines eventually merge to suggest that the past can never be successfully buried, that it will always resurface. The Gothic in this horror film manifests on two levels, the architectonic, in the horrific spaces of the asylum – which eventually becomes a prison – and the thematic, especially because David's close relationship with Benigno plays out as a family curse/haunting narrative. This

is how *Insensibles* might be read by an international audience: as one more attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the Civil War through a familiar and recognisable language by a director increasingly associated with the Gothic horror subgenre.[1]

This line of thinking is the one followed by the few national and international outlets that covered the film's release. Spanish newspaper *El País* offered a genre critique largely focused on the director's (in)capacity to keep tension levels high, and Rebecca Naughten, despite acknowledging the film's exploration of "the insidiousness of Spain's post-dictatorship pact of silence," was incapable of articulating its message, noting simply that "[t]here is a great story here somewhere."[2] A good example of how the specificity of the film's powerful message was entirely overlooked by most is critic Shaun Munro's claim that the "resolute silliness" of the finale "drains the pic of much of its emotional resonance, for what begins as compelling and enigmatic eventually loses its way to a more familiar horror film scenario."[3] Those who were complimentary, such as Anton Bitel, writing for *ProjectedFigures.com*, went a little further, suggesting that the film's setting and timelines "interrogate[…] the paradoxes of Spain's genetic and circumstantial heritage, and […] the eternal struggle between freedom and repression, memory and oblivion."[4] Similarly, Maggie Lee, in a review for *Variety*, praised *Insensibles* as an "allegory on modern Spanish history" that "prob[es] the anesthetizing effects of war and dictatorship" and "demonstrate[s] on metaphorical and psychological levels how easily [self-wounding] can be channeled into sociopathic sadism and imperviousness to human suffering."[5] This article does not necessarily disagree with the points made by Bitel and Lee, or with the suggestion that the film may be read as an example of a Spanish Gothic horror absolutely shaped by the silences of the Civil War.[6] Instead, I intend to tease out the full meaning of the trauma *Insensibles* mediates to unpack the precise type of cultural work it carries out at a particular socio-

historical juncture. This is important because its message about the legacy of the Spanish Civil War, especially the persistence of quiescent centralist ideals of Spanish citizenship, has not yet been duly acknowledged and speaks to wider and timely political and national concerns.[7]

In so doing, this article positions itself alongside broader debates in horror cinema that understand the genre to be best placed to undertake "the kind of cultural work that Trauma Studies takes as its subject."[8] It aligns with what Adam Lowenstein terms the "allegorical" qualities of horror cinema, specifically its capacity to "confront" viewers with history, and follows his bid for readings of films that are "culturally specific" and "historically contextualized."[9] This is not tantamount to a call for a reductive and constricting allegorisation of all horror and its motifs. Ann Davies has rightly pointed out some of the pitfalls of "tunnel vision" in regards to historical readings of Spanish horror cinema, warning of how these can ignore production and reception processes, as well as the pleasures of genre formulae that make horror films appealing to certain audiences.[10] This is an important point: not every ghost in contemporary Spanish cinema is a war metaphor, and not all horror cinema negotiates national trauma. Having said this, a clear distinction needs to be drawn between reading the Spanish Civil War into films that do not invoke it all – say, the 2001 film *Los otros* (*The Others*) – and films set during that period or its immediate aftermath, and which therefore engage with the Civil War (and often its legacy) rather more directly – like *Insensibles*. These films are both "horror" and historical cinema at once: they are about the Civil War (this is their subject and context), yet they utilise recognisable motifs and shocks typical of the horror genre. A regional focus that centres on issues like language and the right to challenge historical silence does not just re-energise these conversations; such precisely located readings are actually required to respect the complexity of regional

realities that reject holistic models of the nation state. Although my aim is to shed light on *Insensibles*, this case study may act as a model for other films that have emerged from regions that present similar histories of anti-centralist resistance yet remain unique in those specific engagements, like the Basque Country. Due to spatial constraints, my argument does not occupy itself with regional cinema more broadly, but my conclusion is necessarily invested in this type of cinema's ability to act as a "counter narrative" that can undermine basic assumptions of countries like Spain.[11] My concern here is how paying closer attention to certain motifs can reveal complex relationships towards remembrance and memorialisation in Spanish horror cinema about the Civil War that pertain to smaller regions.

In what follows, I argue that *Insensibles*'s painless children are an allegory for Spain's post-dictatorship generations. The transition to democracy was made possible by the suppression of painful memories facilitated by the "Pacto del Olvido" [Pact of Forgetting], given legal basis in 1977, which prohibited the prosecution of those responsible for mass suffering and wartime crimes. I contend that the rendering of fascism as monstrous needs to be understood within the context of a film where monstrosity is actively connected to insensitivity.[12] Just as significant is the fact that, despite the film's fictional asylum being located in Canfranc (in the Aragón Valley), the children sent there are Catalan. This is because Catalonia was the last region to succumb to Franco's forces, suffered cultural repression and has, since the transition to democracy (1975–82), been known for its independentist fervour. In my view, the film does not simply connect the present and the past, it also suggests that the children of the war actively mediate Spain's current troubled relationship with national trauma by posing a regional form of ideological resistance. Rather than follow strict psychoanalytic models of historical repression, my reading of *Insensibles*

demonstrates the power that the horror genre continues to hold in offering a language of anxiety capable of negotiating political crises and of contributing to debates around the importance of national accountability and the condemnation of genocide. Ultimately, *Insensibles* makes a case for the need to remember the war as a painful moment and proposes that wilful forgetting of this unresolved trauma only leads to further violence and hurt.

Insensibles and Spanish Civil War Horror

The 1980s in Spain were a period of sexual and cultural liberation, partly known for the countercultural movement "la movida madrileña" [the Madrid Scene] represented by artists like Alaska (from Alaska y los Pegamoides and, later, Alaska y Dinarama) in music or Pedro Almodóvar in film. Although Spanish filmmakers began experimenting with ideas that had, up until then, remained taboo and censored, the Civil War was only the subject of a trickle of films during this decade. The war gained momentum as a cinematic subject later, at the turn of the millennium, when there was a more general "memory boom" precipitated by the publication of new memoirs, novels and short story collections. Some of these, such as Manuel Rivas's *Que me queres, amor?* / *¿Qué me quieres, amor?* (1995) and *O lapis do carpinteiro* / *El lápiz del carpintero* (1998; *The Carpenter's Pencil*, 2003) and Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001; *Soldiers of Salamis*, 2003), were adapted into successful films soon after.[13] Other original films, namely *Libertarias* (*Libertarians* 1996), written by renowned director Vicente Aranda; *La niña de tus ojos* (*The Girl of Your Dreams*, 1998), starring Penélope Cruz; and the two aforementioned Guillermo del Toro films did well at the box office and garnered critical acclaim. If this conglomeration of films could be seen as

fortuitous and, in a sense, to be commercially driven, the turn of the century and the beginning of the twenty-first were a pivotal time for Spain. The "Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica" [Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory], an association whose members collect written and oral testimonies of the Civil War and excavate anonymous mass graves for the purposes of corpse identification and reburial, was founded in December of 2000.[14] Upon election in 2004, the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party] created a commission to repair the dignity and restore the memory of the victims of Francoism, and declared 2006 the "Año de la Memoria Histórica" [Year of Historical Memory].[15] Even more momentous was the passing of the "Ley de la Memoria Histórica" [Historical Memory Law] in 2007, which formally condemned Francoism, offered rights to the war victims and their descendants and supervision with the digging up of mass graves. In this light, Spanish films about the Civil War can also be seen as a cultural response to the unresolved tensions of the war on the part of the country's filmmakers.[16]

Horror, as a genre whose mechanics often rely on that which cannot be acknowledged or even remembered, has provided plenty of scope for explorations of the cruelties and wrongs of Francoism. A film like *El espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973), released at a time when it was not possible to be openly critical of the regime, already used horror's codes of alterity to hint at the intransigent nature of the country's recent military past. In it, a little girl imagines that Boris Karloff's "monster" is her friend after watching James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) in a public screening. Her later temporary acquaintance with an escaped Republican soldier mirrors her earlier sympathy for the misunderstood outsider, the underdog who is othered by the status quo. Spanish horror's obsession with staging battles against tyrannical figures during the late years of

dictatorship (1968–75) has also been seen as a covert condemnation of Franco. For example, the zombie-like reanimated skeletons in Amando de Ossorio's Knights Templar film quartet (1972–75) have been read as "metáforas de las fuerzas represivas de la España de mediados de los 70: la Iglesia y el estamento militar" [metaphors for the repressive forces of the Spain of the mid-1970s: the Church and the military class].[17] And in the twenty-first century, the horror films of Del Toro build up a vivid iconography of stasis, arrested development and decay: an insect trapped in amber, the ghost of an innocent child in search of revenge, a ticking undetonated megaton bomb in a Republican orphanage, jars containing the preserved bodies of children born with deformities, an ages-old pale monster that lives in an opulent basement. Horror's shocking and often fantastic language has the capacity to allegorise historical trauma particularly well and even to write back against the reigning social discourse.

Insensibles chronicles some of the atrocities of the Civil War in scenes like the one where innocent medical workers who support a Communist militia are shot dead by a wandering Falangist squadron. In this respect, the film deals overtly with Spain's history of military oppression, rather than via metaphor. The main premise is that, in 1931, following a series of strange occurrences in a Catalan county, a bunch of children are found to be impervious to, and unaware of, pain.[18] Upon medical inspection, it is decided that this unknown disease "makes them extremely dangerous to others, but especially to themselves," so they are sent to an asylum where they are to be isolated and confined.[19] A few months pass, and a foreign doctor arrives who is keen to rehabilitate them by making pain intelligible. One of the boys, called Benigno (Ilias Stothart), proves to be exceptional in his surgical abilities after he is challenged to extract the tumorous kidney of a dog without causing the animal any distress. Benigno, like the other children, and as his name suggests,

is shown to be delicate, in need of companionship (he develops a close friendship with one of the girls) and receptive. Tragically, the war breaks out and fascist forces take over the area. Benigno, who manages to survive the ordeal, is later found by a marauding Nazi group and is rechristened "Berkano," a runemark that, we are told, means "rebirth" in Germanic mythology. The boy, who has self-mutilated in captivity and become a speechless, introverted version of his previous self, is trained as a professional torturer of political defectors. His intimate technical understanding of pain, yet simultaneous incapacity to emote or empathise with the effects of his actions, make him an ideal, malleable figure. These traits also make him a good symbol for our contemporary understanding of totalitarianism, especially of the tyrannical Nazism and Francoism depicted in the film, and their abuse of power and disregard for human life. Under the orders of the military, Berkano becomes a killing machine. The film literalises Benigno's transformation from prophet-like child into heartless monster by rendering him physically abject too, as his body becomes a mosaic of self-inflicted scars. The apparent transparency of this character's role and of the notion of the painless child as killer in waiting is perhaps the reason some critics found the message in *Insensibles* tired or excessively obvious. Unless children are taught the value of compassion and sympathy, they will grow to become wounded tyrants and enablers of crime.

Such an interpretation, however, ignores the film's other storyline, which offers a more nuanced consideration of the complicated process of personal negotiations of war memory and the difficulty of engaging with the legacy of national trauma. For *Insensibles* does not take place exclusively in the past, as has been noted, but also in the present.[20] In fact, the action weaves scenes from both timelines, sometimes creating straightforward visual echoes that, especially on repeat viewings, resonate with the main themes. The most

poignant of these is a match cut (figures 1 and 2) that dissolves from a puddle of blood Benigno fiddles with into an aerial shot of a winding road David is traversing in 2012. Apart from being aesthetically striking, the editing choice is suggestive of the ties that connect the characters, of their shared bloodline and of the chain of circumstances that will bring them together, since David is then travelling to the derelict asylum Benigno once lived in. The blood belongs to a nun Benigno attacks after being beaten for having smuggled a dog into his cell, which necessarily invests it with a degree of symbolism. It is hard not to think of this image as pointless bloodshed, as retaliatory violence that serves no purpose and does not heal. Additionally, the past in the film only matters insofar as it can influence present events. This is to say that Berkano's metamorphosis needs to be conceived as more than the consequence of fascist manipulation. The ending brings David and Berkano together dramatically to highlight that Berkano operates as an emblem for the horrors of the war which have thus far remained unacknowledged. The heart of the dramatic action revolves, after all, on the narrative question viewers might be asking themselves: exactly how are these characters connected?

David is introduced as an overworked surgeon who accidentally crashes his car in a sleeping spell while driving with his pregnant wife. Doctors are able to save their premature child, who is given assisted breathing, and David miraculously survives with little more than a few scratches and bruises. Unfortunately, the follow-up tests bring back the bad news that he needs an urgent bone-marrow transplant from someone compatible: his parents. What comes across as initial reticence to help on their part is eventually revealed to be guilt over David not being their biological child. He was, in fact, offered to the struggling couple in the 1960s by a policeman who worked in Canfranc. David is not satisfied that this is all there is to the story, so he sets off to visit this mysterious place of origin. Among the ruins of the

asylum he discovers an offering in front the cell Berkano once occupied (number 17) with a card from the CNT-FAI veterans association.[21] Through a meeting with its current president, David finds out about Berkano and his tortures, but the conversation also sparks further questions and prompts David to return to his adopted parents. These eventually kill themselves, apparently unable to cope with the reality that David is Berkano's son. David breaks into cell 17 and Berkano's secret lair, which he still inhabits. The film thus documents not just Berkano's coming of age, but also David's, whose immovable resolve to uncover that which has been buried ends up consuming him. His drive starts off as survival instinct, but by the end, he seems primarily concerned with the secret that has destroyed his family. David, in my reading, stands for the contemporary Spaniard, who should continue to push for the truth about the crimes of the war and to dig up the past to find a resolution. The monster in this film, who has become a bold, inhumane executioner by 1944, channels the horrors of the past, but crucially, also those that hide behind historical erasure.

David's quest for knowledge – of himself and, by implication, of the legacy of the fascist ideology that colours the postwar – is quizzed or impeded by two older men who see no value in such an endeavour or else caution against its outcome. David's father, Adán (Juan Diego), offers the most resistance. After he is interrogated for a second time and chided for not enjoying "recalling the past," he warns his son that "[w]here you're looking you'll only find death and madness. […] You're leaping off a cliff. Sometimes it's better to forget. Don't stir up the past. The past doesn't exist anymore. What do you think you'll find there?" Crucially, Adán remains obstructive. In their next and last encounter, events take a terminal turn. As David comes to confront his parents, his mother lies dead in a bathtub, either a victim of suicide or of her husband.[22] Before shooting himself, Adán tells David of the "terror" he sees in his "terrible green eyes," and elaborates: "When you were a child,

your eyes stared at me, silent and wide open, as if… As if they knew. Those eyes that are not mine and not your mother's. Try to imagine the thing you love most in the world having the eyes of… […] You wanted to know the truth. Well, here it is." Two things are worth highlighting here. The first is that Adán's incapacity to finish a key sentence – the missing word is perhaps "killer" – signals that he cannot quite articulate the thought to himself, perhaps because David's eyes make him feel guilt. The second is that there is no coming to terms with what has happened: the unearthing of that which was repressed finishes off both David's parents. In Adán's world, at the very least, stirring up the past is indeed a precursor to madness and death. Their conservative attitude, as well as their age, links David's parents to the culture of silence established by the Pact of Forgetting, and before it, by governmental censorship. The double suicide should act as a strong deterrent against going any further, but David presses on regardless.

For his part, Iván (Lluís Soler), the president of the CNT, acts as a contrasting, if at first equally cynical, counterpoint. He refers to the war in terms of the Biblical story of "Cain and Abel." A "crime of envy between brothers. Very Spanish," he explains. He also gives a short speech that is worth quoting in full:

> People think the worst happened during the Civil War. But that's not the case. The worst came after. For Cain winning wasn't enough. The old idea of "purifying the blood," you know. Exterminating the very seed. Eradicating the "red" chromosome. No one gives a damn anymore. Nobody cares about knowing the truth. Forgetting is what matters. Forgetting so you can survive. Places like cell 17 have no place in history books.[23]

The "red" here refers to the Republicans, supported mostly by land and urban workers and some sections of the middle classes. Iván makes several points that are vital to my reading of the film's political message. *Insensibles* is not about the war because it is not solely about Berkano; its interests centre on the effects of Francoism on the collective Spanish psyche. As Iván explains, the conflict did not end in 1939, and related forms of oppression carried on for decades, from the commissioning of propagandistic studies of so-called "red crimes" to the systematic eradication of any type of political or social opposition.[24] The second part of Iván's speech is just as powerful. His argument is that, in order to survive, to move beyond the impasse, people have grown accustomed to forgetting. The argument is literalised through the figure of Adán and his recalcitrant rejection of David's quest for the truth. The main consequence of this collective agreement to stop remembering and thus grieving is, as is pointed out, that the human cost is brushed out of history. Since cell 17 is the locale of Benigno's transformation into Berkano, *Insensibles* actively connects the horrors of the war with their posthumous erasure.

From this new vantage point, the painless children of the title may be best rethought less as insensitive killers in the making, as innocent enablers of ideological crimes that encapsulate the lack of humanity of their oppressors, and more as a parable for Spain's own response to its modern history. This is not to say that *Insensibles* encourages a reading of these children, and by extension of modern Spaniards, as heartless monsters, but rather as a *tabula rasa* in danger of extortion and manipulation. Much like the children need to be shown what pain is in order to be rehabilitated and save themselves from self-inflicted violence, Spain is in need of acquainting itself with its traumatic past, however much this my affect and even contravene political edicts once passed in order to ensure peace and facilitate democracy. Such a significant step is not to be taken merely individually, but

requires state supervision and support. The country's contemporary history, especially the anti-centralist challenge posed by autonomous communities like Catalonia, which have used the repression of regionalism (regional traditions and language) as ammunition for their calls for separatism, is crucial here. In order to develop this argument fully, an element that I have thus far deliberately kept out of my analysis, and which has been overlooked in previous journalistic and academic writing on *Insensibles*, needs to be foregrounded: the use of the Catalan language.[25] As was already the case with the non-supernatural *Pa negre* (*Black Bread*, 2010), this artistic choice is everything but accidental, and opens up an approach to the film that moves from the national to the regional, from representation to confrontation.

Painful Remembrance and Regional Trauma

The credits, themselves in Catalan, indicate that the film was made with "la participació de televisió de Catalunya" [the participation of Catalan television], and the regional language is indeed used throughout the film, if not exclusively.[26] To a foreign ear this is likely something that will go unnoticed, as will the tensions between Spain and Catalonia it serves to channel, for *Insensibles* never spells them out. This is where the film needs to be read "allegorically," not in its representation of horror as metaphorical of the atrocities of the Civil War, but as a comment on the impact of that event and its legacy on a specific region and its culture. The careful and consistent use of Catalan and Spanish as languages in conflict, aligned with diametrically opposite notions of freedom and oppression, reinforces the film's overall position regarding the value of remembrance. Catalan in this film is spoken by the children who are taken to the asylum and by those who show them love and understanding, like the

nurses and the "good" doctors. By contrast, the fascist groups in the film only speak Spanish and German. There is a good historical reason for this decision. Franco's brand of traditionalist and authoritarian nationalism was one that aimed to homogenise Spain linguistically and culturally, and which went as far as to outlaw the use of Catalan and to ban the "sardana," a traditional dance.[27] Part of this process of state suppression included the prohibition of the use of Catalan names, the imposition of Castilian as the public, religious and educational language, and the removal of any symbols of Catalan identity and history. Since the establishment of the "Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalunya" [Stature of Autonomy of Catalonia] in 1979, the region has developed new educational policies that have gone far in reinstating the language, even if full recovery still seems overoptimistic.[28] Catalan survived largely in the oral tradition and became associated with resistance. In this respect, *Insensibles* simply restages history. Yet, Catalan is also, from the outset, associated with nurture and with sensitivity. The nurse who teaches Benigno that it is possible to cry from pleasure and thus tries to push him to understand the power of empathy does so in Catalan.[29] In the war and postwar timeline, Spanish, like German, is almost exclusively the language of violence, imposition, torture and extortion.[30]

Catalan is also spoken by David, his wife, his mother, his colleague and Iván. As with the post-war timeline, the language is connected to the act of caring (both David and his colleague work in a hospital, where they look after other people's health) and the family nucleus. There is only one exception: David's father, the only contemporary character who prefers to ignore and repress the past and who, accordingly, only speaks Spanish. The film is at pains to create a dichotomy between the loving mother and the laconic, impassive father too. David finds out about his biological family from his mother, who tells him Adán is "not a big talker." David communicates with Adán in Spanish, presumably because this is more

comfortable for his father or because he does not speak it, a situation not uncommon for first generation Spanish migrants. David's internal monologues are, however, delivered in Catalan. The story thus establishes a binary between mother/Catalan as language of truth and remembrance, and father/Spanish as language of silence, occlusion and, eventually, horror, selfishness and self-destruction. Iván's climactic speech is also delivered in Catalan, which invests it with further political meaning. Catalan is thus depicted as a language of protest. Although Iván's points are somewhat defeatist – no one cares anymore – they encourage David to continue his quest for the truth. The interaction between the two men is, after all, appropriately placed directly before the irruption of fascist forces in the asylum in 1936 and the pivotal scene where Adán insists on the importance of forgetting. In short, the ideological battle for the right to remember and to mourn (which takes the shape of the understanding of pain) is also fought on linguistic grounds.

The closing scene captures the complexities of the legacy of the war in all its starkness and grit. This is perhaps what has made it less appealing to viewers who were after more traditional horror fare: the film does not romanticise the Republicans or the Maquis and it does not close a ghostly retributive gap of violence.[31] The ending of *Insensibles* is much bleaker and, for this reason, much closer to what horror can realistically achieve in cinema. As Daniel penetrates his father's lair, he discovers the ageless (presumably artificially preserved) corpse of her mother lying on an open casket. When an older Berkano appears, David accidentally drops a candle onto flammable litter. Berkano recognises David, but is incapable of hurting him. The last shot in *Insensibles* shows a burning Berkano reflected on David's eye – a symbolic moment whose meaning is amplified by a crucial voice-over in Catalan: "I'll never get to know you. Not even know your name. But I looked into your eyes, like my dad looked into mine. Now your story belongs to you. So

you will be free. So you will be a man. My son." This image, shown in figure 3, thus brings together the past (the dying Berkano, finally found and put to rest), the present (signified by David's act of witnessing) and the future (David's son, to whom the message is directed). The ending is only moderately hopeful because it paints the memory of the crimes committed, of those lost to history, as a scar, rather than as a wound to heal, and both the past and the present as dead and beyond salvation. The popular motto "no pain, no gain" becomes useful as a metaphor for the way in which this horror film acts as mediator for trauma. Still, the gain must be understood not as a considerable positive, not as a rectification or redressing of the past, but as an acknowledgement of the suffering of victims and of errors committed as a way of opening up future dialogue.

Approaching *Insensibles* from a linguistic angle allows us to rethink it as not just another example of how the horrors of wars, especially of civil wars, can be just as harrowing as supernatural ones. The prominence of Catalan enables an alternative or complementary reading that mounts a regional challenge to centralist ideas of a unified Spain still strongly aligned with Francoism and which has become literalised in political upheavals in the region in the early twenty-first-century century. I am referring very specifically to the declaration of independence of 2017, the resolution passed by the Parliament of Catalonia to found an independent Catalan Republic. The drafting of the document was precipitated by the independence referendum held in October of that year and which was declared illegal and unconstitutional by the Spanish government. The brutal violence used by the Spanish police force against voters received international coverage and sparked debates about the political situation in the region.[32] As was noted by the press, what truly mattered was not the relatively small victory for Catalonia over this particular public relations debate, but the way in which it became apparent that the conservative

party (Partido Popular, or PP) led by Mariano Rajoy was the last link in a long line of right-wing repression of regionalism. As academic Omar G. Encarnación put it, "historical perspective becomes necessary" in order to understand the current Spain/Catalonia crisis, especially because a drive towards regional autonomy was one of the triggers for the Civil War.[33] In fact, the goal or the Republican leaders was a federation that would have given more freedoms to Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia. It is interesting to note that, after the scuffle over the vote, some Catalan demonstrators actively paired Rajoy and Francisco Franco in their chanting of the mantra "esto con Franco sí/ya pasaba" [this was already happening under Franco] and the various memes inspired by it.[34] The ghost of the Civil War looms large over Catalonia's present identity because it was invested with new meaning during the postwar years. The re-institutionalisation of the language and a sense of exceptionalism are now inherently tied to Catalanism. Furthermore, Catalonia found a renewed sense of purpose and futurity at exactly the same time that Spain began to politically awaken to the idea of war reparations. The exhumation of Franco's remains from El Valle de los Caídos [Valley of the Fallen] by the socialist government in 2019 is further proof of just how restlessly and hesitantly this historical revisionism has manifested, not least because it was met with hostility by right-wing parties.

Insensibles is able to articulate Spain's war wounds through a narrative about the impact of the traumatic past on the present. Its insensitive children, who may grow up to be killing machines, are only a generation away from the initially oblivious David, who must realise the value of learning from pain. The past cannot be changed or rectified, there is no cure that can bring back casualties, but its acceptance and understanding is vital in order to vanish the possibility of future repetition. Such a lesson is nothing short of a call to arms for the only democracy that has failed to investigate state terrorism after a dictatorship and

where those who opposed the regime still had a criminal record nearly fifty years later.[35] As David puts it in his last few moments, trauma opens a door to freedom and selfhood. The implication is that that liberation is personal. Yet no such feat is ever less than collective, and art – horror film in particular – still has an important role to play in visualising this dynamic. It is never better to forget, as Adán claims, and people have definitely started to care, to counter Iván. *Insensibles* is quite likely the most nuanced cinematic encapsulation of the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, of the long horrific shadow it still casts over politics, nationalism and regional identity. My recuperation of the film as more than another representation of the evils of the Civil War, as a catalyst of the discourses of silence that have affected Spanish socio-political and cultural discourses since, shows how horror cinema continues to act as a mediator of forms of national trauma that remain unspeakable. A turn to the regional messages in such cinema is key if we are to shift the focus from an understanding of Civil War horror as static mourning, as a form of arrested development, towards a more mindful articulation of challenge, recuperation and futurity. The "allegorical" element in this type horror does not pertain to the war *per se*, but to the very idea of a state in tension with its constituent communities. In calling into question the very notion of the "nation," films like *Inseparables* force us to consider the scope of previous analyses of genre approaches to national trauma.

Film and Television

El espinazo del diablo (*The Devil's Backbone*). Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Mexico and Spain: Sony Pictures Classics, 2001.

El espíritu de la colmena (*The Spirit of the Beehive*). Directed by Víctor Erice. Spain: Janus Films, 1973.

El laberinto del fauno (*Pan's Labyrinth*). Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Mexico and Spain: Picturehouse, 2006.

El lápiz del carpintero (*The Carpenter's Pencil*). Directed by Antón Reixa. Spain: Sogecine / Morena Films, 2003.

Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale. US: Universal Pictures, 1931.

Insensibles (*Painless*). Directed by Juan Carlos Medina. Spain, France and Portugal: Fado Filmes, 2012.

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Captions

Figures 1 and 2. The film's two timelines intertwine visually in this match cut that emphasises blood ties and senseless violence

Figure 3. Past (Berkano), present (David) and future (David's son) are woven together in the film's closing shot

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Notes

[1] *Insensibles* was Juan Carlos Medina's first feature film, following two horror-themed shorts. His filmic and television output since, which includes the Victorian serial killer drama *The Limehouse Golem* (2016) and two episode for the series *A Discovery of Witches* (2018–), has continued to explore Gothic horror elements.

[2] García, "Ecos de género y otras delicias;" Naughten, "*Painless* Review."

[3] Munro, "FrightFest 2013."

[4] Bitel, "*Painless* (2012) Review."

[5] Lee, "*Painless*."

[6] See Aldana Reyes, *Spanish Gothic*, 215–20.

[7] Even famed Spanish film magazine *Fotogramas* conceded that *Insensibles* emerged as "una de las películas con más capas de significado del, llamémoslo así, reciente *cine de género español*" [one of the films with more layers of meaning of so-called recent *Spanish genre cinema*], but failed to specify what these meanings might be. See Trashorras, "*Insensibles* Review," italics in original.

[8] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 2.

[9] Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 8.

[10] Davies, "Pleasure and Historical Memory in Spanish Gothic Film," 398–9.

[11] Davies, *Spanish Spaces*, 61. The wide distribution of *Insensibles* makes it an international film.

[12] The original title, "insensibles," translates as "insensitive" in Spanish, that is, people who are unable to feel physically or emotionally.

[13] Rivas's novels were published in both the Galician and Spanish language. The films were *La lengua de las mariposas* (*Butterfly*, 1999), which adapted three stories from *Que me queres, amor?*, including "A lengua das bolboretas" [Butterfly's Tongue], *El lápiz del carpintero* (*The Carpenter's Pencil*, 2003) and *Soldados de Salamina* (*Soldiers of Salamina*, 2003).

[14] For an introductory overview of contemporary war commemoration in Spain, see Graham, *The Spanish Civil War*, 138–50.

[15] For more information, see Aragüete-Toribio, *Producing History in Spanish Civil War Exhumations*, 46–7.

[16] A similar point is made in Archibald, *The War That Won't Die*, 169. For more on collective identity and the recuperation of the war, see Richards, *After the Civil War*, 330–58.

[17] Pulido, *La década de oro del cine de terror español (1967–1976)*, 127–8.

[18] Given that one of the characters speaks in Valencian, it is tempting to propose that events start in Valencia, but other characters speak standard Catalan, so this may just be a coincidence.

[19] I am primarily using the English subtitles in the international DVD version of the film distributed by Metrodome in 2014.

[20] It is important to remember that the past timeline also evolves, because it follows Benigno's journey. The film starts in 1931, moves on to 1936 (the explosion of the Civil War), 1939 (the imposition of the dictatorship), 1940 (Benigno's discovery by fascist forces), 1944, 1955, 1963 (David's conception) and 1964 (David's adoption).

[21] The CNT, or "Confederación Nacional del Trabajo" [National Confederation of Labour], was a confederation of anarcho-syndicalist labour unions. They sometimes affiliated with the FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica).

[22] She is shown reflected on a bathroom mirror, with blood on her temple and floating on a bathtub full of red water.

[23] The original Catalan in the last sentence conveys a slightly different meaning to the one offered in the subtitle translation. "Els llocs com la celda 17 no apareixen als llibres d'història" would be better translated as "Places like cell 17 don't appear in history books," as this implies more strongly that they are deliberately kept out of official accounts.

[24] See Marco, "Francoist Crimes;" Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust*, 471–518.

[25] I have covered the journalistic response above. For the academic response, see Brox, "*Insensibles*;" Davies, "Pleasure and Historical Memory in Spanish Gothic Film."

[26] Catalan is its own language, not a dialect of Spanish. It is the co-official language of Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands, and the only official language of Andorra.

[27] Shabad and Gunther, “Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain.”

[28] Vallverdú, “A Sociolinguistic History of Catalan;” Miller and Miller, “Language Policy and Identity.”

[29] Since Canfranc is in the Aragón Valley, not Catalonia, the implication is that she has travelled with the rest of the medical staff there to look after the children.

[30] Dr. Holzmann (Derek de Lint) speaks in an accented Spanish, but this is natural, since the character has not lived in Catalonia.

[31] I am referring here to the endings of *El laberinto del fauno* and *El espinazo del diablo*, respectively.

[32] See *BBC News*, “Catalan Referendum;” *Human Rights Watch*, “Police Used Excessive Force in Catalonia.”

[33] Encarnación, “The Ghost of Franco Still Haunts Catalonia.”

[34] The phrase is a corruption of “esto con Franco *no* pasaba” [this would never have happened under Franco], used to condemn behaviours perceived as excessive by conservative moral standards. The corrupted phrase was already being used in the run-up to the referendum. See *El Plural*, “El grito de ‘esto con Franco sí pasaba’ se viraliza.”

[35] Burgen, “Spain Launches Truth Commission to Probe Franco-Era Crimes.”