

Cities Also Talk: Towards a Historical Film Critique of Neville's *La torre de los siete jorobados*

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The “cultural turn” in historical methodology, coeval with poststructuralist theory and linguistic analysis, has been considered a veritable paradigm shift in the practice of history since the 1970's. However, any change in the most basic assumptions of a long-established tradition is wont to cause widespread anxiety. This is especially true in the case of the New Cultural History, of which Zemon-Davis is one of the most outspoken defenders. Davis is one of many cultural historians interested in making high-caliber history more accessible to the general public, as is shown in her essay *Slaves on Screen* (2000). In the essay she looks at a handful of films that capture themes of slavery, struggle and rebellion by engaging with the symbolic meaning of particular events in history, following a groundbreaking blurb: “a major historian shows how Film Studies have a great importance to the narration of the past.” In this regard, Edgar Neville's *La torre de los siete jorobados* (*The Tower of the Seven Hunchbacks*) might be a source for innovative historical material appropriated by the Cultural History of early 20th century Madrid.

The essay that follows here will be an exploration into the growing subfield of history and film, leaving the question of

how recent innovations in Visual Studies can contribute to a pioneering understanding of the cultural dynamics of the city through the past. In the following pages, I offer my evaluation of a fruitful methodology behind *La torre de los siete jorobados*: what the new discipline of “historiophoty” aims to achieve, why its value outweighs the hazards some historians have brought to light, and why it is a vital subject at our contemporary educational institutions and specially, at the Peninsular Studies departments. To study Melville’s film as what has been called in Visual Studies “Symbolic history” entails to trace its psychological and social truths within the urban panorama at the beginning of 20th century; this dynamic toolkit might make us explore a better engagement between the subtle realities of history and film, reaching the following question: What can film add to our understanding of the past?

Edgar Neville’s 1954 film adapts a novel by Emilio Carrere first published in 1923. The story, set at the cradle of the 20th century, describes the supernatural experiences of its protagonist Basilio Beltrán. While gambling in a casino, Basilio encounters the otherworldly, murdered-ghost of the past, Robinson de Mantua, who asks him to protect his niece from something terrible that is likely to happen. This first psychical phenomenon distresses Basilio, who resolves to disentangle the mystery of Mantua’s execution. It is through this frame that Basilio discovers a tower with seven hunchbacks—a subterranean city hidden in Madrid’s central neighbourhood of Lavapiés, owned by the magician Sabatino and a group of hunchbacks who have been initiated into the occult sciences. That so-called “tower” from the start is depicted, raising architectural paradoxes, as an outlandish subterranean passage, which, on the other hand, is coupled with the hypnotic procedures and occult rites that are being held there. Robinson de Mantua’s engagement with the new occult practices and the spiritualist messages Robinson the Mantua sends to him had to be downplayed in the film, Neville says, to maintain a narrative arc familiar to his audiences

while simultaneously creating suspense in a story with a happy ending: Basilio and Mantua's niece get mercifully engaged after Basilio's struggles to get out from the occult city. Additionally troubling to the historical narrative is the "softening" of specific modernity events, underlining the metaphoric values of urban modernity bestowed in central Madrid, and particularly in that specific subterranean occult space. Neville's masterful mixing of the occult with the modern city, and in particular his depiction of the subterranean tower, makes the film rich fodder for storytellers and anthropologists alike.

Davis recognizes the potential for film to depict social history successfully, speculating about the past and its symbolic meaning. As Davis says in "Movie or Monograph?" an article relating her experiences as an historical consultant, "I think a historian should always expect to write about a film on which he or she has worked" ("Movie" 48). Her book and her film on the subject of the imposture of the 16th-century Artigat are set in constant dialogue. As she expresses in her book *The Return of Martín Guerre* and later in *Slaves on Screen*, one can powerfully depict the past by studying some visual cultural artefacts through "thick description," the hallmark of cultural history. Although Neville's film can be studied through this anthropological methodology, however, it nevertheless questions the soundness of such an approach.

Given the many inaccurate epithets hurled against cultural history, it will be useful to proceed with a clear understanding of this methodology. Davis has often cited cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz as chief amongst her influences, in particular his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Geertz highlights the relevance of understanding symbolic behavior and the irrational physiognomies of daily life, in which is couched valuable cultural meaning. Drawing from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Geertz considered a model for how ideology forges action and expanded it in his own work, which has traced the influence of many ideological systems and their expression

in culture. As colleagues at Princeton from 1978, Geertz and Davis co-taught an interdisciplinary course in history and anthropology, involving issues of performance and film. Their defining feature of writing is “thick description” of the “sights and sounds missed or ignored by most” (“Remembering” 191). The suggestive details are those then that expand into wider cultural meanings, as if they were cultural networks.

Applying this suggestive, “microhistorical” methodology, which learns from the marxist methodology of “history from below,”¹ bridges the gap between the former’s individual absorptions and the latter’s aim of macrohistorical implication. There are several elements within *La torre de los siete jorobados* that are worth to be analyzed. First, the architectural contours of the city, that relates it with a modernity that entails the meaning of the Spanish “castizo,” and a more sophisticated, centrifugal directed architecture, which is influenced by certain “Hausmanization;” second, the depiction of the popular classes “at work,” that embodies the whole visual imagery of marionettes, illusionists and ballerinas in the public life of the casino and that clearly play a dialectical counterpart with that other, occult tower, barely visible to the one who has an internal, spiritual gaze.

That urban *melange* is resolved at the end, when it seems that Basilio Beltrán has woken up for his lunatic dream of hunchbacks and spiritual messages. After all, it seems that the knocking-down of the tower with his hunchbacks inside and the spiritual messages from the other world have been “just a dream.” Enhancing Beltrán as a lunatic fails thus to take him to the jail. What is thus the meaning of that tower located in Lavapiés, which paradoxically looks more like a subterranean hub? What does the happy-end story provide to the cultural history of early 20th-century Madrid? What does the vanishing of the occult tower mean?

The occult tower represented in the movie is the only place where occult science happens, but also the depiction of a

mysterious Madrid, not visible at first sight. The monster into which the mysterious Madrid is transformed goes beyond its own characterization; those who can survive within it, like the hunchbacks in the tower, are also appropriated into cultural monsters.

The monster as a metaphor for a decadent reality condemned to its scientific materialist cause embodies, as Marxist criticism explores, a typology of those figures “from below” that feature any kind of moral or/and physical abnormality.² Of course, the details that Neville leaves, as a film writer of these occult practices, provide far less material for interpretation than what Geertz had at his disposal, as an anthropologist talking to living subjects. Some degree of “invention” is thus assumed by anthropologists and producers of particular “cultural artefacts,” since it is the imaginary universe, “the wide range curiosity and the refusal of universal aesthetic norms” that features this innovative historical methodology (Gallagher and Greenblatt 7). With the methodological precepts of cultural history in mind, I wish to respectfully engage what I judge to be the strongest objections to this methodology; let the reader play the referee.

The allegations leveled against cultural history are serious ones that any practitioner of this methodology must consider. The criticisms below target cinema and its involvement with cultural and anthropological history; they also question, however indirectly, Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism. In her essay “Toward Mixtures and Margins” Davis explores how an important number of historians feel uneasy about the term “urban and popular culture in film” since it blurs somehow the distinctions between mass culture, folk culture and the aforementioned popular culture. Davis draws from her interest in the historian Lawrence W. Levine to expound his use of urban culture as a descriptive category. Taking this feature, what interests Levine is not fighting against low and high culture, masculine and feminine, etc., but “locating the evidence for the mental world of non-elite groups characterizing its textures and

riffs,” recovering the voices of those ones who are “historically inarticulate” (“Toward Mixtures” 1413). Thus general assumptions that can be taken for granted within the umbrella of popular urban culture enrich somehow the particularity and the description of such cultural elements, such as the life in Madrid casinos that follows the first scenes, the performances that Basilio Beltrán attends and the occult practices in vogue during the Modernity period in urban Europe.

With respect to the term “historiophoty” coined in 1988 by Hayden White as the representation of historical thought through images and visual discourse, there have been a few works that reveal some difficulties towards this innovative approach. Pierre Sorlin in his essay *The Film in History* (1980) establishes what is for him the major problem for films. Specifically, he objects to film’s necessary fictionalization, since “even those based on historical evidence reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show” (21). Indeed, misinterpretation is a risk of which Davis is well aware. Nevertheless, interpretation of the words and actions of subjects remains a vital part of cultural history. It is clear enough that historians, and especially narrative film writers, expand a whole universe of presuppositions, but when orthodox historians “prune” select phrases for use as quotations in their work, the voices of the past are being made to say what the historian wants. In this regard, the work of Hayden White is particularly illuminating. As one of the outspoken defenders of the “cultural turn,” White reflects on the nature of the historical narrative as a “literary artefact,” since all historians use particular rhetorical devices in order to expound historical facts: “Most of historians did not see that for every kind of novel, historians produced any kind of discourse” (124). According to Robert A. Rosestone, there are some things—he cites city landscapes, emotions, sounds—that are represented better in film than in a mere verbal account, while the theorists of the emergent Visual Studies such as Mieke Bal, Didi-Huberman, W.J.T. Mitchell and

others, defend wholeheartedly the ontological study of images and the different relations they can generate within a larger discourse of history and culture. The deceived Basilio Beltrán and the lack of particular historical events are not as important as the characterization of the late 19th-century architectural Madrid and its dialectical modern reality provided by an architectural mixture which swings between the *art nouveau* and *Hausmanization* and the Spanish intrinsic “castizo” character.

Marc Ferro in *Cinéma et Histoire* (1976) poses another interesting objection to the interconnection between history and film: that there is no convincing platform for belief of historical events. Though Ferro sees the film as a “cultural artefact, a counter-analysis of the society,” he really re-affirms that producers “take blindly” elements of history. However, this might be an interesting example of one of New Historicism’s hazards. New Historicism, created during the 70s by an interdisciplinary group of scholars, goes beyond normative aesthetic rules and expounds a study of the artistic and imaginary world through literary texts and historical documents. By doing so, history is not the background of an aesthetic work anymore but a “co-text” that embodies a cultural representation. Influenced by Marxist studies and Post-structuralism, New Historicism has its own characteristics: the term “ideology” is transformed into “analysis of discourse” and, in a departure from Post-structuralism, it studies both historical and literary accounts. In a film such as *La torre de los siete jorobados*, Neville explores the realm of the modern occult not only as an imaginary universe but also as a powerful sordid reality that is based on the different cartographical spaces of the city. The cultural urban construction that one gets from the film embodies two features relevant to the Spanish history of modernity. Let’s check the symbolic meanings of that tower.

First, the representation of occult practices within the film, located into the Spanish background, tells us about the Spanish influence of this pseudoscientific practice, expounded along the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th

century as a European *zeitgeist*. This fact denotes that the so-called victimization of Spanish Culture after the “Disaster of the 98” and the loss of the last colonies did not have a great impact in the following years. If Spain has been always represented as a *Mater Dolorosa*, it might be time to abandon the old Rankean (and victimized) historiography in exchange for the cultural studies brought to light by some recent critics, who consider the late 19th-century Spanish Culture as a permeable place that absorbs European cultural ideas. Thus a further revision of the labyrinth occult city displayed in the film might add a larger discourse of history out of which different cultural products grow up and speak. Following Geertz’s method of arriving at cultural meaning through interpretation of “a not untypical excerpt”—those eventual particularities that are made occasionally by the artistic imagination—we arrive at interpreting new cultural approaches. Spain took part, thus, in the “modern re-enchantment” that has been recently analysed, expounding new interpretations of Weber’s notion of “European disenchantment.” As numerous studies of the modern city have argued, late 19th-century emergent practices such as spiritualism, occultism and mesmerism are not incompatible with the modern scientific progress, but products of the same “work in progress” reality. One just needs to see the works of the scientific works of the Psychological Research Society in England and the craze of urban and bourgeois gatherings of *table-tournantes* to observe how these practices are urban, fashionable and far away from the old ritual magic of the Middle Ages. In this regard, Madrid counted with the great bookshop of Gregorio Pueyo, who shed light on an important occult material within the first decades of the 19th century. Also, varieties of the hermetic philosophy were generated due to the quick widespread free-masonry lodges and Theosophical societies in other Spanish cities such as Barcelona, Cádiz and Málaga.

The second assumption, related also to the first one, entails the relationship between the occult imaginary expounded as

an “underground-tower” and the diverse theories of the “liquid modernity,” of which Zygmunt Bauman—in the same way as Rosa Luxemburg, Guy Débord, Henri Lefebvre, etc.—is the most outspoken theorist. The occult doctrine, expanded by Petrovna Blabatsky, believes that the water is the main principle of unity and the literal basis of life. This reconciliatory effect between the city and the modern occult can be displayed through the articulatory function of the concept of modernity and its approaches of the urban production of space. Georges Haussmann famously conceived the refurbishment of Paris in terms of an explicit metaphor of the motion of blood. However, it was Bauman who explained the concept of “Liquid Modernity” in Marxist terms—the “melting of the solid” derives from *The Communist Manifesto*—by noticing that a shift happened from the early 19th-century strategies of capital accumulation. Yet Bauman establishes his liquid metaphor of the modern city as a society in which the events and circumstances modify faster than the humans themselves. These “strange forces” of modernity are the ones that are illuminating in Bauman’s essay and that merge with occult theories. The fact, indeed, that those “occult” forces lie beyond human’s command is productive, once again, for Greenblatt’s New Historicism and Geertz’s notion of “the touch of real,” since the dark side of the industrial cities was a key fact explored by documentarists, historians and also by late-19th century writers—Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde, Huysmans and Thomas de Quincey among others—already wrote about the sordid reality of urban hubs. Thus those stories function as documents of a pseudoscience and as a cultural discourse of the notion of 19th-century moral monstrosity, which expanded itself within modern imagination. The tower displayed within the film is not other than a modern Babylon—in comparison with the old Jerusalem—a modern Capernaum, a new Inferno. The ones who entered that monstrous space became its replicas, as the seven hunchbacks isolated in the city-tower. However, it seems that the exhibition of 19th-century monster, starting

by 18th-century Peter the Great *wunderkammer*, and expanding itself through different types of urban spaces—circuses, theatres, stalls, fairs and even asylums—shifted at the end of the century; the quick development of scientific theories, the proliferation of “freaks” exhibitions and the theorising of the modern city as a cell of human condition made thinkers reflect on the nature of the so-called “monsters.” Was the bourgeoisie staring at itself when observing the figure of the freak? Was the modern society becoming a whole monster from which it was difficult to escape? It is precisely this apocalyptic behaviour that is captured by late 19th-century psychologists, thinkers and artists. In other terms, the dialectical reality between science and pseudo-science designates the city as a monster of the modern civilization, whose tower was not other than a degenerated space.

In order to make a good review of such a film a historian should be aware of the interdisciplinary materials. The “thick description” used by Davis and Greenblatt is a methodology that does not flatten historical distance; in fact, it emphasizes the “otherness” of the past to dissuade the reader from a naïve sense of familiarity with bygone figures. What “thick description” does attempt is highly understandable reconstruction of historical context, an alien setting into which the historian must nevertheless place him or herself. A spectator not acquainted with cultural history might wonder why there are so many details of urban features within the occult tower and within the *art nouveau* style at the casino salon, as the spectator might see. It is the historian (and, by extension, the spectator) who must make the effort to understand meaning in the past on its own terms, rather than imposing “trascendent” meanings that imply universal or timeless values. A good cultural historian does not impose or invent transhistorical significance, but instead finds a way to compare the past with the present. The “we want realities” approach, says Davis, is rife with ethical dangers. To quote Hayden White once again, “one of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which

he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record” (82).

It seems that nowadays the call for New Cultural Histories with their anthropological skills and visual studies toolkit is being taken seriously, with the proliferations of this academic courses programs at top universities worldwide. *La torre de los siete jorobados* provides students of history and visual studies with a model for scholarly work that reaches readers and spectators beyond academia, reminding the public of the wonder and possibilities of film and history; it creates new legitimations for the use of the great possibilities visual technologies offer to the cultural historian. The symbolic reading of *La torre de los siete jorobados* provides an interesting version of Madrid architectural and social modernity, in which the dialectical buildings in the Casino and the Lavapiés neighbourhood need to be allegorically understood a symbiotic world, in which the concept of the modern adapts the magic, phantasmagorical realities.

Notes

1. The perspective of counting historical details from the point of view of common people is related to the numerous changes that traditional historiography undergoes during the seventies.

2. It is Michel Foucault who writes a genealogy of the type of abnormal during the 19th century, a gathering of the monster, the masturbator and the individual who can't be corrected.

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