

Discovering Reality through Body Disintegration in *Abre los Ojos* by Alejandro Amenábar

Diego Batista Rey
Weber State University in Ogden, USA

Abstract:

Many Spanish *auteurs* make use of the body in their works to criticize and expose the problems of a society in the process of economic, cultural and identity deterioration. This paper analyzes how by employing specific universal fears, *Abre los Ojos* by Alejandro Amenábar, serves as the basis for the staging of an incomplete and confusing "reality" that leads the viewers to question their existence and begin a personal search within their surroundings.

Keywords:

Alejandro Amenábar, *Open your Eyes/Abre los Ojos*, Body, Spanish Cinema, Psychological Thriller, Fears

In the last two decades, Spanish cinema has seen an overwhelming influx of films in the horror and fantasy category, which have revived a genre all but forgotten since the 70's. Many of these productions, beginning with *The Day of the Beast* (de la Iglesia 1995) to the more recent *Painless* (Medina 2013), establish the human body as an unanticipated protagonist. Through mutilation sequences, the temporary loss of the senses, or mutation, the viewer begins to identify himself with the uncertainty of characters struggling to survive the obstacles that lie ahead. At the same time, the viewer tries to distinguish the weak borders between reality and fiction. This confusion between the spaces intensifies with the loss of the physical integrity of the characters. Subsequently, *auteurs* use the body to criticize and expose the problems of a society in the process of economic, cultural, and identity deterioration. To this end, directors and writers exploit the catharsis produced by the emotions of a psychological thriller based on everyday fears. Movies such as *Los Ojos de Julia* (Morales 2010), *Abre los Ojos* (Amenábar 1997), *The Orphanage* (Bayona 2007), and *The Others* (Amenábar 2001), to name a few examples, all portray an incomplete and confusing "reality" which leads the viewer to question his existence and begin a personal search within his own surroundings. Using the movie *Abre Los Ojos* as the main focus in this

paper, we will first consider how the corporal element magnifies the audience's ability to feel and identify with universal fears, thereby increasing the psychological impact, and second, how these emotions serve to doubt, review, and challenge our environment while reflecting the nation's socioeconomic and cultural discomfort.

According to Vicente Pérez Fernández, in his paper *Estrategias de terror psicológico en el cine*, "horror cinema, next to science fiction, is the most utilized conduit to express subversive ideas in a masked way, hidden within impossible stories. That which distinguishes them from what is real is what allows them to mock censorship and prejudice, exposing difficult indigestible concepts in more explicit formats" (1, my translation). Undoubtedly, the body as a victim or object of victimization has occupied a prominent place in horror cinema in the subgenres of fantasy films, especially since the late fifties. There are countless appearances of teenagers and young adults that suffer a brutal murder at the hands of a psychopathic killer in both gore and slasher films from the United States. Carol Clover defined "body genre films" as movies that center around watching the body caught in a moment of intense emotion, such as death in horror films (189). Critics of this genre have already discussed the multiple theories on how these movies study and analyze the vulnerability, weakness, and fragility of the human body through their violent mutilation. Yet, it seems that fewer studies have been conducted on the presence of the body, not as a mere cinematographic device but as an essential vehicle to the discovery of the "truth," first of the characters and consequently the viewer himself. For Ricardo Gonzalez, "every good suspense film has something to say in the end: the thriller is, fundamentally, the radical questioning of cultural, social, moral and even philosophical coordinates upon which our worldview is based" (33, my translation). To achieve this objective, Spanish cinema, with the resurgence of the horror genre and especially the psychological thriller in recent decades, has appealed to this vehicle as an elemental factor in the common and universal fears of human beings to, first, bring awareness of our imperfection and secondly, make us doubt or question our own reality.

In his article *El cuerpo como morada del monstruo en el cine de terror contemporáneo*, Carlos Salas González explains that "the body stands as the undisputed protagonist of a large part of the new artistic trends developing in the second half of the twentieth century." Later, Salas Gonzalez also notes, that "from the varied and original manifestations of action art, back in the late fifties, to the most rabid and parodistic postmodern proposals, the body has exercised that role in the most diverse areas of the artistic universe" (49, my translation). It is not surprising then that, in recent years, Spanish horror

cinema has also placed the human body as the protagonist in a variety of films that explore that duality reality / dream, or reality / deception, to somehow make the viewers more aware of the need to explore and debate the authenticity of the society in which they live. No need to look far in American cinema, for example, to find models of films that question the credibility of the world where the characters live. *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (Rusnak 1999), or *Inception* (Nolan 2010), among other films, move around the same premise: the world we live in is not the real world. The same seems to be happening in current Spanish horror cinema. To illustrate this correspondence in the genre, we will discuss how the body, either through lack of stimulation, physical disability, mutilation, or transformation, fulfills this motivating role in the psyche of the viewer in the Spanish film *Abre los Ojos*. To help us with our study, we will refer to three of the six “terrible fears” that psychologist Ricardo Gonzalez analyzes in his article *La estética del miedo*, in relationship to horror cinema.

1. The first fear refers to the idea of "someone or something relatively close or originally trustworthy, becoming unpleasant." In the initial scene of the movie, an alarm clock wakes César and after getting ready, he leaves the house. It is soon after that Amenábar incorporates one of the first indications of the division reality / dream that will constitute the plot of the entire film. *La Gran Via*, a street in downtown Madrid, famous for its bustling atmosphere, appears completely deserted. Thus, without dialogue or apparent explanation, the director manages to introduce the idea of abnormality, which then creates an instant feeling of unease in the viewers upon recognizing that something happened in the movie that is beyond their understanding. Thus, the *Gran Via* drastically turns into an unexpected horror space, which for Ricardo Gonzalez works in the psychological thriller. In this type of film, horror spaces are "those which are part of our everyday life and suddenly take an unexpected twist that makes them 'sinister'" (27, my translation). Instead of using the typical narrative spaces in Gothic horror films: dark and dingy houses, deserted alleys, or cloudy and rough landscapes to create a feeling of discomfort in the audience, Amenábar uses spaces throughout the entire movie that we encounter in everyday life – a park, a restaurant, or even César’s bedroom – to consolidate the effect of alienation or estrangement that the audience experiences from the start. The city, familiar middle ground for the quintessential Spaniard, will consequently become a new horror space. As the movie progresses, there will be no safe or reliable location, as any space can suddenly become the scene where the protagonist’s terrors can take form.

For Ricardo Gonzalez, as regular viewers of psychological horror films, we should not expect to "find common situations. This is the genre of psychosis, of vertigo, and of all kinds of pathologies. As with the origin of social representations – mythology and classic theater – there were no common stories, for a psychological thriller to take us to the catharsis is necessary to face our worst fears, those most likely to be in our subconscious than in our conscious" (25, my translation). The common viewer of horror or fantasy cinema will soon identify with the protagonist. As Ricardo Gonzalez noted, the thriller or suspense film, produces a feeling of anxiety through "the everyday dangers that haunt the common man" (24, my translation) instead of the imagined creatures or the fictional monsters used to terrify in horror movies. Such everyday fears, present in almost all cultures, serve as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, they may be the reason the viewer will feel attracted to or identify with the protagonist, and on the other, they fulfill a cathartic function by being the conduit that forces the protagonist to overcome his own fears through assimilation or acceptance.

This catharsis will only take place as long as these daily fears, explored throughout the film, conform to the rules of the protagonist's reality as well as the viewer's. Pérez Fernández affirms that films must have "easily recognizable everyday situations" that "always retain some link with reality" in order to encourage viewers to identify with the film's characters (7, my translation). This "link with reality" causes the fear or psychological terror that catches the spectators' attention by forcing them to face the possibility that these, or similar events, may occur within the "real" world in which the viewers live. Therefore, the sense of anguish will move beyond the movie screen, since the audience will not only take with them the movie experience through the actual viewing of the film, but also the feeling that the events portrayed on screen could in some way be replicated in the immediate reality of the viewers.

2. The second fear refers to mutilation associated with castration and/or physical trauma by means of the "castration complex or castration anxiety", which according to Freud and Lacan refers to, among other things, the concept of a young child with primitive desires, in coming face to face with the laws and conventions of society. César (Eduardo Noriega) is a young man living comfortably thanks to the business inherited from his deceased parents. His money, in addition to his good looks, makes him popular and successful with women. During César's birthday party Pelayo, César's best friend, introduces him to Sofia (Penelope Cruz), a sexy theater student. César decides to go home with her, leaving Nuria (Najwa Nimri), his latest conquest, at the party. The next day, when César leaves Sofia's house, Nuria is waiting.

After forcing him to get in her car, Nuria starts driving faster and faster until they crash into a wall. Because of the accident, César's face is completely disfigured.

After the accident, César (and therefore the viewer) will begin a race against time that calls reality into question. While Alice's fall into the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* proves an entertaining dream from which Alice can clearly escape through waking, César's trip into a dream world leaves him scarred and questioning his own reality, his identity, and ultimately his mental health. Unlike Alice, he cannot distinguish between the real world and the dreamed one. Psychologist Leon Luis Eduardo Romero argues in his article *Cine de horror y psicoanálisis*, certain basic myths that underlie films of the horror genre (37). Romero's concept of the myth of "loss of identity," although mostly related to the mutation or transformation of a human into an inhuman being, is of great importance when analyzing César's behavior in *Abre los Ojos*. The disfigurement of César's face produces in the protagonist a psychological effect similar to the physical changes that mutation caused in the main characters of horror films such as *The Thing* (Carpenter 1982) or *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986). More specifically, César ceases to be the bachelor coveted by women and envied by men, and becomes a desperate, cynical, and introverted being, suspicious of his best friend, his business partners, and the physicians in charge of his case. Gradually, César's disfigurement begins to affect his self-perception. Although the rest of society seems to "accept" his appearance, or at the least tolerate it, either because of charity, pity, or social conscience, César is not able to assume his new position. The more he allows the monstrosity of his physical appearance to affect him, the more the change occurs internally until it transforms him into a true social monster, not because of the ugliness of his face, but the malice of his actions. César proves another example of a trend in horror drama that has been noted by Salas Gonzalez. Gonzalez points out that horror films encourage us "to understand evil as something inherent to the human being, an enemy not to be sought in other worlds or other entities, since it dwells within us" (60, my translation). The fact that César turns out to be the antagonist of his own story will increase the uneasiness in the spectator as the film encourages the viewers to identify with the protagonist.

César's disfigurement also holds, for purposes of this analysis, other specific objectives. Not only is it employed, as we have already mentioned, to accentuate the universal fear of the audience, associated with mutilation or transformation of their physical integrity, but it also serves to emphasize the parallelism between the deterioration of the body and society. If according to Santos Romero, "postmodernists consider the idea of progress as a mirage" (208, my translation), César's dream/nightmare works as a representation of the

breakdown of society following a period of development and prosperity. In other words, the progress that Spain had experienced since the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy in 1975 begins now a decline that is reflected in the degeneration of the body (and consequently) César's personality. Salas González refers to this same body degradation when suggesting that the body "advocated by the new art is not a proportionate body, united, beautiful and ideal. It is, however, a body that undergoes deformation, collapse, fragmentation, and punishment" (50, my translation). César, as representative of the Spanish citizen who has lost everything that he considers valuable (popularity, friends, love), faces an important decision, perhaps the most important of his life. He must accept his new situation, with all the changes and challenges that that decision would bring, or choose to live in a fantasy world where all his wishes will "materialize" at least, until medicine can evolve enough to fix the disfigurement of his face. According to De los Santos Romero, when César chooses to live in the world invented by Life Extension, "the protagonist partially loses identity, becoming completely confusing" (207, my translation). That confusion to which the critic refers to is typical of Amenábar's characters. They usually appear "distressed by an existence they fail to understand, either because they are locked in a dream, in death itself, or an immobile body" (209, my translation). At the same time, the viewer, who by now has identified with César, must also make a choice: to live in a fragmented society or to escape to a world of fulfilled dreams and desires (*vis-à-vis* the film).

According to Erich Fromm and D. T. Susuki, "only in death or insanity can the return be made [referring to a state of constant and permanent happiness], not in life or health." (qtd. in León Romero 39, my translation). This would explain first, César's decision to commit suicide and freeze his body, and second the fact that once his life returns to its initial chaotic state, César seems to lose his sanity as a defense mechanism perhaps to protect himself from the possible "reality" lurking for him should he awake. Both initiatives (consciously or unconsciously) are strongly connected to the fear that the protagonist experiences because of his disfigurement. In his thesis *Death, disintegration of the body and subjectivity in the contemporary horror film*, Peter Boss completes an exhaustive study on the body's capability as a metaphor, by which our understanding of the relation of oneself to society is articulated. According to the author, "the horror film is shown to be a genre traditionally disposed towards the interrogation of categories of human identity" (n.p.).

3. The third and final fear relates to the presentation of a "double", manifesting itself as reflections in the mirror, shadows or in other forms of duplication; "the suggestion that the more ominous threat is not in the other, but within ourselves" (Ricardo González 31). C. G.

Jung defined "shadow" as all hidden or unconscious aspects of oneself, both positive and negative, that the ego has repressed or never recognized by including it within one of the four main archetypes of the unconscious (Stonehewer 4). This unknown or unrecognized aspect of all personalities appears not only in dreams but can also be expressed in multiple ways.

The actions of the protagonist, Nuria/Sofía's murder, for example, could be justified to some extent by the possibility that César is dreaming and therefore does not have full control of his actions. Of the five basic mechanisms mentioned in Leo Romero's article, the fourth (to which the author refers to as "dreamlike") will be the most useful to analyze César's actions (41). According to Leon Barrero, the censorship or social norms that control our behavior during the day weaken overnight and then these repressed desires try to emerge in our consciousness, but in disguised form, deformed in those "symbolic confusing images, and apparently intelligible dreams, to conceal the true desires that motivate them" (47, my translation). In César's case, the releasing of his repressed desires will not be interrupted during the waking hours. The lethargic state to which he is subjected to by the company Life Extension, will also amplify the distorted perception that César's subconscious will create of his universe without being disturbed in any way. One might question then if César's subconscious is somewhat aware of the state in which it is consigned, or if his actions are really deliberate acts of a monster struggling to keep control of his recent "recovered" life.

According to Maria Josefa Erreguerena Albaitero in her article *La construcción imaginaria del miedo en el cine*, "terror towards the unknown reaches its peak when the individual impulses and fears of the viewer as a social being, belonging to a biological or historically determined group, find a common aesthetic coding that allows both to experience it and exorcize it" (364, my translation). In *Abre los Ojos*, the unclear division reality/dream, the loss of identity, the disturbing use of everyday spaces, and the disfigurement of César's face, act as mechanisms for strengthening internal focalization (Genette 74). Through this focalization, the viewer suffers the same uncertainty as César, becoming, to some extent, an accomplice of the character's actions. That is, in the same way César releases his repressed desires through dreams, the audience is simultaneously participating. The film emphasizes the identification between César and the viewer first through the physical experience of watching the film in the dark (an experience that resembles the sleep state) and second, through the empathetic suffering the viewer experiences with the character. This is what Fatima de los Santos Romero states when proposing that internal focalization "is fundamental to [spread the anguish which César constantly suffers], because the viewer plunges into the protagonist's mind, his dreams, his memories and hallucinations; the viewer knows as much

as the protagonist and consequently shares in his suffering, confusion, and shock" (8-9, my translation).

In short, and as Marcelo Vieguer effectively exposes in his paper *El cine del cuerpo. La representación del cuerpo herido: de 'Blue Velvet' a 'Irreversible'*, unlike classic cinema where the audience watched the screen as a role model to follow, "the viewer of modern cinema looks in the mirror of his own personal geography" (5, my translation). The disfigured and imperfect body will aid, as a subversive tool, in the viewers learning process to make them aware of their imperfection first, and later question their reality. Thus, the experience of *Abre los Ojos* grows beyond a mere escapist tool during a delicate economic and social conjunction. Consequently it will force the viewers to internalize the events experienced by César and adapt them to their own context, which will hopefully raise awareness of their need to become active agents and stop being mere observers.

References:

Boss, Peter John. Summary. "Death, disintegration of the body and subjectivity in the contemporary horror film." Diss. University of Warwick, 1989. Print.

Clover, Carol J. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *Representations*, Fall 1987: 187-228. Print.

De los Santos Romero, Fátima. "Abre los ojos de Alejandro Amenábar." *Frame: Revista de cine de la Biblioteca de la Facultad de Comunicación* 2008: 196-212. Print.

Erreguerena Albaiteiro, María Josefa. "La construcción imaginaria del miedo en el cine." *Anuario de investigación* 2003: 361-370. Print.

Fromm, Erich, and D.T. Susuki. *Psicoanálisis y budismo zen*. Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994. Print.

Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Trans. J. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980. Print.

González, Ricardo. "La estética del miedo: la producción de un thriller psicológico." *Actual divulgación: Revista de la Dirección de Cultura y Extensión* Jan.-Apr. 2009: 22-33. Print.

León Romero, Luis Eduardo. "Cine de horror y psicoanálisis." *Pensando Psicología: Revista de la Facultad de Psicología Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia* Nov. 2005: 36-51. Print.

Pebble, Erik. "The Artful and the Artless: Aesthetic Distance in Horror Films." *The Projector Film and Media Journal* 1.1 (Spring 2001): n.pag. Web. 2 September 2014.

Pérez Fernández, Vicente. "Estrategias de terror psicológico en el cine." Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. Cádiz, Spain. 12 July 2006. Conference Presentation.

Salas González, Carlos. "El cuerpo como morada del monstruo en el cine de terror contemporáneo." *Ars bilduma: Revista del Departamento de Historia del Arte y Música de la Universidad del País Vasco* 2012: 48-61. Print.

Stonehewer, Lila. "Six Essays on the Inner Life." Rev. of *The inner journey: Lectures and Essays on Jungian Psychology* by Barbara Hannah. *Jung at heart: Studies in Jungian Psychology by Jungian Analysts* Summer/Fall 2003: 4. Print.

Vieguer, Marcelo. "El cine del cuerpo. La representación del cuerpo herido: de 'Blue Velvet' a 'Irreversible'." Congreso Internacional de ASAECA III. Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. 10-12 May 2012. Conference Presentation.