

## Regarding Blinded Visibility

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### Abstract:

The monograph *Haunting without Ghosts*, written by Juliana Martínez, conceptualizes and exemplifies the narrative form and aesthetics of 'spectral realism' in the Colombian arts. The book traverses literary, cinematic and artistic works from the last two decades, presenting the formal tools for expressing narratives of an armed conflict of disclaimed loss and truncated mourning. In short, it analyzes works that do not take ghosts literally but as a perceptual form of expression.

### Betrachtung von geblendeter Sichtbarkeit

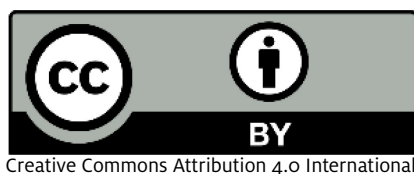
#### German Abstract:

Die Monographie *Haunting without Ghosts* von Juliana Martínez konzipiert und veranschaulicht die Erzählungsform und Ästhetik des ‚gespenstischen Realismus‘ in kolumbianischer Kunst. Das Buch behandelt literarische, filmische und künstlerische Werke der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte und zeigt formale Werkzeuge für die Darstellung von Narrativen eines bewaffneten Konflikts des geleugneten Verlusts und von abgestumpfter Trauer. In diesem Band werden Werke analysiert, in denen Geister nicht im wörtlichen Sinne, sondern als eine Form von wahrnehmenden Ausdruck verstanden werden.

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The epigraph of José Saramago's *Blindness* sums up the ethical and aesthetical calling of *Haunting without Ghosts*: "If you can look, see [vê]. If you can observe [ver], regard" (*Ensaio sobre a cegueira*. Porto Editora: Porto, 2015). It is a book written with critical patience to regard the disturbing presence of the specters of enforced disappearance, the violently and intentionally silenced or erased from Colombian history. To perform this task, Martínez conceptualizes the narrative form and aesthetics of 'spectral realism.' European 19th century literary realism, as understood by the works of Peter Brooks, is a central point of reference. Moreover, French poststructuralism carries out a remarkable function in her formulation, and prominently Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2006), to whom we owe the idea of 'spectrality.' Deleuze's and Guattari's notions of 'striated,' 'smooth spaces' and 'haptic vision' (see *Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) play an equally transversal role in her conceptualization. One last relevant point of reference in her book is anglophone Latin American Studies and particularly the work of Rory O'Bryen framed in the spectral turn (*Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture*. Woodbridge: Tamesis Books, 2008). Martínez expands his project, analyzing Colombian cultural production and representation of violence in the last two decades. The book examines how spectral realism operates in different artistic forms — literature, film and art — and applies the concept's critical potential to Colombian political and cultural history.

While the book's introduction and epilogue define spectral realism in a historical, cultural and theoretical background, the three chapters that constitute the body of the text unpack and illustrate vividly how it operates with the particular grammars of different artistic forms. The first chapter is dedicated to literary spectral realism and exemplified with Evelio Rosero's novels *En el lejero* (2003) and *Los ejércitos* (2006). Martínez foregrounds how these texts are driven by the narrative force of absence and the problem of representation of those who have been

forcefully “disappeared and the ones who continue to look for them” (p. 53). The second chapter deals with the films *La sirga* (2012) directed by William Vega, *Violencia* (2015) by Jorge Forero and *Oscuro animal* (2016) by Felipe Guerrero. The author explores how they challenge and open venues for the aesthetic dilemmas of representation of historical violence in Colombian cinema. In a similar fashion, the last chapter deals with the “spectral sites” (p. 124) presented in Juan Manuel Echavarría’s film *Réquiem NN* (2012), Beatriz González’ spatial intervention *Auras anónimas* (2007–2009), the “symbolic burials” (p. 150) of Erika Diettes and Doris Salcedo’s counter-monument *Fragmentos* (in the epilogue). These works enact spaces for symbolic reparation of “those who seek to mourn in contexts where that possibility has been foreclosed by violence” (p. 124).

The common thread that runs through the book relies on and functions within the tension generated between the two oxymoronicly coupled terms of spectral realism. On the one hand, Martínez refers to classical, European literary realism and its main “four critical axes” (p. 20) of practices of representation, which are, first, a privileging of sight which “presents vision as a neutral tool for gaining knowledge of the social world” (p. 46) and triangulates knowledge, mastery, and desire; second, a narrative operating in a mappable and nominal metropolitan space; third, a modern perception of a homogenous, calendric, fixed time in which past and present are organized linearly and clearly distinguished; and last, yet importantly, an ethical anxiety regarding the dependence of characters to historical, sociopolitical and economic forces in a secular fashion and an unrelenting social critique triggered by these. Moreover, Martínez traces the influence of this tradition comparatively in Colombian arts, setting as points of reference and difference other relevant genres, such as the telluric novel, magical realism, *realismo sucio*, the *sicaresca*, *pornomiseria*, Italian neorealism, and New Latin American Cinema.

On the other hand, the liminal figure of the ‘specter’ substantially modifies ‘realism’ by upsetting and overturning its representational practices. The real is dominated by an unreliability of vision and perspective is destabilized by an “oblique gaze” (p. 24) or “haptic vision” (p. 25) heightened by auditory perception. This perception is spatially set in “topographies of disappearance and desolation” (p. 26–27) in the countryside, where the only recognizable and unsettling familiarity is the continuity of spaces afflicted by war and where atmospheric elements such as darkness, fog, mist, and rain frustrate the epistemic privilege of

the realist eye. Moreover, the spectral makes the temporal perception of the real disjointed, and ruled by an anachronicity and untimeliness that disturbs historical discourse and “denaturalizes modern conceptions of temporality” (p. 30); in other words, these narratives make difficult to disentangle past, present and future, often appealing to a decelerated, elongated, “pensive and cathetic” (p. 176) time. Lastly, spectral realism implies an ethical anxiety of the cultural producer to develop aesthetic practices that “represent historical violence without aggravating it or oversimplifying it for commercial purposes” (p. 34) and seek “justice beyond the law” (p. 5).

Without a doubt, something is rotten in the intersection of the “*rural-transnacional*” (María Luna qtd. in p. 70) of the Republic of Colombia. However, Martínez following Derrida’s Shakespearean metaphor reasonably does not inspire us — scholars — to become Hamlet, who is impelled by the ghost to blind rage and tragic revenge, which in the Colombian context takes the form of the revolutionary violence of the guerrillas. Nor does the book encourage us to become Claudius, the silencing and murderous neoliberal para-state dressed in royal robes. Rather, Martínez exhorts us to become Horatio, who in the face of the man-made catastrophe is regarded by the tragic figure of Hamlet as “a [wo]man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards / Has taken with equal thanks [...] a [wo]man that is not passion’s slave” (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 67–8, 71). To be the one that speaks *to* and *with* those who have disappeared, not merely *about* them (see p. 179).

Juliana Martínez’ book is a virtuous — to use Estanislao Zuleta’s expression — “praise” and performance “of difficulty” (*Elogio de la dificultad y otros ensayos*. Medellín: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2005), mainly for stressing the multiple possibilities of an aesthetic of affliction that resists commodification and thwarts an erotizing and exotizing gaze while transferring to the spectator the affective baggage of being a witness to violence. The book deals with difficult works to read, to watch, or experience, and proves the political relevance of such forms of representation and reception. It resists an easy interpretation of these works as mere expressions of despair or a sensationalistic and scopophilic gaze that would judge them as ‘boring’ for their subtle action, its blurry visions and lack of dialogue. The discussed works assemble forms that encompass confusion and instability, anxiety and pain, but, as Martínez shows, they set up a phenomenology of the perception of the structural processes that produce them. Martínez’ study not only operates in clear sociohistorical and political coordinates but in

the transformations of the aesthetic forms of narration. In spite of its scholarly language, *Haunting without Ghosts* not only can teach scholars, but also cultural practitioners who wish to deal with the ethical issues of the representation of historical and structural violence. Spectral realism, as claimed by Martínez, teaches readers to see the difference between inscrutable forms of oblivion and enforced erasures, and to be able to listen and distinguish between coerced and eloquent silences. In other words, spectral realism enables an aesthetic disposition that may open up a national soul-search and sociopolitical transformation. It is a book to take to heart the harrowing muted cries of the voiceless.