

ARTÍCULO



Martín Sichetti. *Deadline* (fotograma). 2019.

**THE TROPE OF THE DOGS:
QUEER PHANTASMAGORIC REALISM IN
MEMORIA (2021, APICHATPONG
WEERASETHAKUL)
EL TROPO DE LOS PERROS:
REALISMO
FANTASMAGÓRICO QUEER EM MEMORIA (2021, APICHATPONG
WEERASETHAKUL)**

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RESUMEN

PALABRAS CLAVE

*Queer Phantasmagoric Realism**Spectral Realism**Apichatpong Weerasethakul**Contemporary Latin American Literature**Horror*

The film Memoria (2021) is Apichatpong Weerasethakul's first work filmed outside of Thailand, in Colombia. The narrative follows Jessica (Tilda Swinton), a woman with a syndrome that leads to insomnia and gradual forgetting. The film explores themes of memory, oblivion, and the relationship between the past and the future. The work is analyzed through the perspective of 'queer phantasmagoric realism,' a concept that combines elements of realism and fantastic to address political and social issues. The presence of a spaceship in the Colombian jungle is an example of this, symbolizing an immemorial past and an uncertain future. The text also highlights Tilda Swinton's performance, whose queer gestuality and characterization is central to the movie. The analysis addresses the complexity of constructing reality in the film, inspired by André Bazin's aesthetics, and how Apichatpong Weerasethakul uses art to question binaries and explore themes such as gender, sexuality, and memory. The trope of dogs in the narrative is also explored, relating it to 'spectral realism' in contemporary Latin American literature.

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

*Realismo fatasmagórico queer**Realismo espectral**Apichatpong Weerasethakul**Literatura latinoamericana contemporánea**Terror*

La película Memoria (2021) es la primera obra de Apichatpong Weerasethakul filmada fuera de Tailandia, en Colombia. La narrativa sigue a Jessica (Tilda Swinton), una mujer con un síndrome que la lleva al insomnio y al olvido gradual. La película explora temas de memoria, olvidanza y la relación entre el pasado y el futuro. La obra es analizada bajo la perspectiva del "realismo fantasmagórico queer", una noción que combina elementos de realismo y fantasía para abordar cuestiones políticas y sociales. La presencia de una nave espacial en medio de la selva colombiana es un ejemplo de ello, simbolizando un pasado inmemorial y un futuro incierto. El texto también destaca la actuación de Tilda Swinton, cuya caracterización queer y no binaria es central para la narrativa. El análisis aborda la complejidad de la construcción de la realidad en la película, inspirada en la estética de André Bazin, y cómo Apichatpong Weerasethakul usa el arte para cuestionar binarismos y explorar temas como género, sexualidad y memoria. El tropo de los perros en la narrativa también es explorado, relacionándolo con el "realismo espectral" en la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea.

Introduction

Memoria (2021) is the first (and, so far, only) feature film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul to be shot outside Thailand. The spatial displacement to Colombia echoes strangeness and uncanniness in the film. Precisely, the uncanny that Freud speaks of – the strange contained in the most intimate; the most personal and secret, the most familiar, which turns back on itself, becoming unfamiliar. *Unheimliche* (cf. Freud, 2020: 33; 47-49): if the strange is already within the familiar, it is a double negation, a relationship of self-reflection, *mise-en-abyme*.

The Colombian Amazon, for Apichatpong, can be like being at home (cf. Apichatpong, 2021 *apud* Mello, 2024: 173) and, at the same time, sound alien (to Tilda Swinton in particular?, cf. Apichatong; Swinton, 2021 *apud* Mello, 2024: 173)¹. And the two things don't need to exclude each other, they don't exclude each other indeed, but overlap. It is true that they are indigenous (natives) and alien (outsiders) in those parts. In the forest, the spaceship gives the certainty of an immemorial past and a vague future, the great opening to the imaginary (fig. 1) – times that don't exclude each other, but overlap; don't annul each other, but coexist in a non-dichotomous way.

¹ As Cecília Mello points out, 'In an interview at the Lincoln Center in NYC, Swinton also suggested that, as a Scot, she could understand the question of land and trauma that is central to Weerasethakul's cinema and to the recent history of Thailand and Colombia. However, to my view the parallel between Scotland and Colombia/Thailand is not evident.' (Mello, 2024: 173)

Figure 1 – Immemorial spaceship in the Colombian Amazon



Source: *Memoria* (2021, Apichatpong Weerasethakul).

The imaginary populated by US/Hollywood spaceships (above all) finds, on Colombian soil, and in the imaginary of a Thai director, other references with which to dialogue. It is these that we will address in this text, based on tropes that appear in *Memoria* and are curiously recurrent in contemporary Latin American literature, by authors such as Mariana Enríquez and Camila Sosa Villada (Argentina), Mónica Ojeda and María Fernanda Ampuero (Ecuador), Pilar Quintana (Colombia), among others. They can be grouped, by contemporary criticism, under the concept of ‘spectral realism,’ which seems to echo, in Colombian literature and cinema, the concerns signaled by phantasmagoric realism in Asian cinemas. Such concerns include political issues around gender, sexuality, race, religion, ancestry, colonization, dictatorship, etc., with the presence of fantastic creatures and events, and often in the horror register, to address the traumas (specters) of the past, both historical and individual (*cf.* Araujo, 2022a; 2022b).

The phantasmagoric realism we speak of concerns a contemporary aesthetic of Bazinian stamp. For André Bazin (2018), the effect of reality produced in realist cinema should follow a series of assumptions, namely: use of long takes and depth of field, shooting on location, with non-professional actors, etc., all aiming at opening experience towards the ambiguity of the real. From Bazinian aesthetics, in contemporary cinema emerges phantasmagoric figures – specters, divinities, demons, saints, among other strange bodies (*cf.* Louro, 2008) – complicating the immediate phenomenological real, in the so-called phantasmagoric realism (Mello, 2015). From a non-dichotomous perspective, operating through the queering of phantasmagoric realism, we propose here a *queer phantasmagoric realism*. How does its handling of transgression and the complexification of binaries reverberate in Apichatpong's cinema and, specifically, in *Memoria*?

Part I. Jessica: the queer non-dichotomy, between memory and forgetting

In *Memoria*, the protagonist Jessica (Tilda Swinton) is afflicted with a syndrome that leads to insomnia and gradual forgetting and madness, the Exploding Head Syndrome (EHS), accompanied by severe thuds – from the center of the Earth, according to the character. Tilda Swinton's body is a queer manifestation from the start in *Memoria*, due to her neutral characterization, without prominent feminine attributes highlighted. The actress herself has expressed in interviews her discomfort with gender roles and expectations of femininity, stating she doesn't recognize herself as a woman (*cf.* Nonbinary Wiki, 2023, online). Moreover, she has played other androgynous characters, including the emblematic Archangel Gabriel in *Constantine* (2005, Francis Lawrence).

The strange physicality (*cf.* Louro, 2008; Greiner, 2023) – in the queer and political sense of the term, or properly nonbinary – of Tilda's character, Jessica, reaches moments of true camp excess in the film, paradoxically bordering on physical comedy (like Buster Keaton's) in its minimalist and almost apathetic register. It's curious that no other

filmmaker has extracted such transparency of humor from Tilda's body, leading us to think about Apichatpong's mastery of ancestral cinema traditions, including silent cinema.

Apichatpong's experimental production establishes fruitful dialogues with silent cinema, in short films like *Vapour* (2015), *Emerald* (2007), and *Blue* (2018). In *Vapour*, the protagonist is, as the title suggests, the smoke that spreads over the village, engulfing vegetation, houses, people, animals. Its mysterious origin and purposes insert a dystopian sci-fi climate dear to Apichatpong's filmography, a fan of this type of cinema since childhood (*cf.* Apichatpong, 2015). In *Emerald*, a haunted hotel, suspended in time, gives way to the memories of its ghosts, former transient presences, lasting like floating feathers, intensifying the effect of suspension and slowing down time. It reminds us, in a sense, of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003, Tsai Ming-liang), where the phantasmagoric memories of a threatened space also emerge. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the space (a movie theater) is about to close, whereas in *Emerald* the hotel already seems abandoned for some time. Dust accumulates, as memories.

Another 'haunted hotel film' in Apichatpong's filmography is *Mekong Hotel* (2012), dealing with plots of blood-sucking beings in a realistic aesthetic. All these hotel films are indebted, certainly, to Chantal Akerman and her *Hotel Monterey* (1972), which highlights the uncanniness of the persistent space, between figuration and abstraction, capable of provoking anxiety and grasping through the simple use of a fixed camera or tracking shots through corridors: it is also queer (non-dichotomous), registering genderless characters, its neutral objects and liminal spaces.

In *Memoria*, the climate of unfamiliarity in space is aggravated by the strangeness of sci-fi, reinforced by the presence of the spaceship at the end of the film, an object that further complicates the binaries Apichatpong deals with. The spaceship, which has been in the forest for an incalculable time, refers to an immemorial past, while evoking a distant

future where spaceships would be accessible. Thus, Apichatpong operates a temporal short-circuit with the departure of the spaceship at the end of *Memoria*.

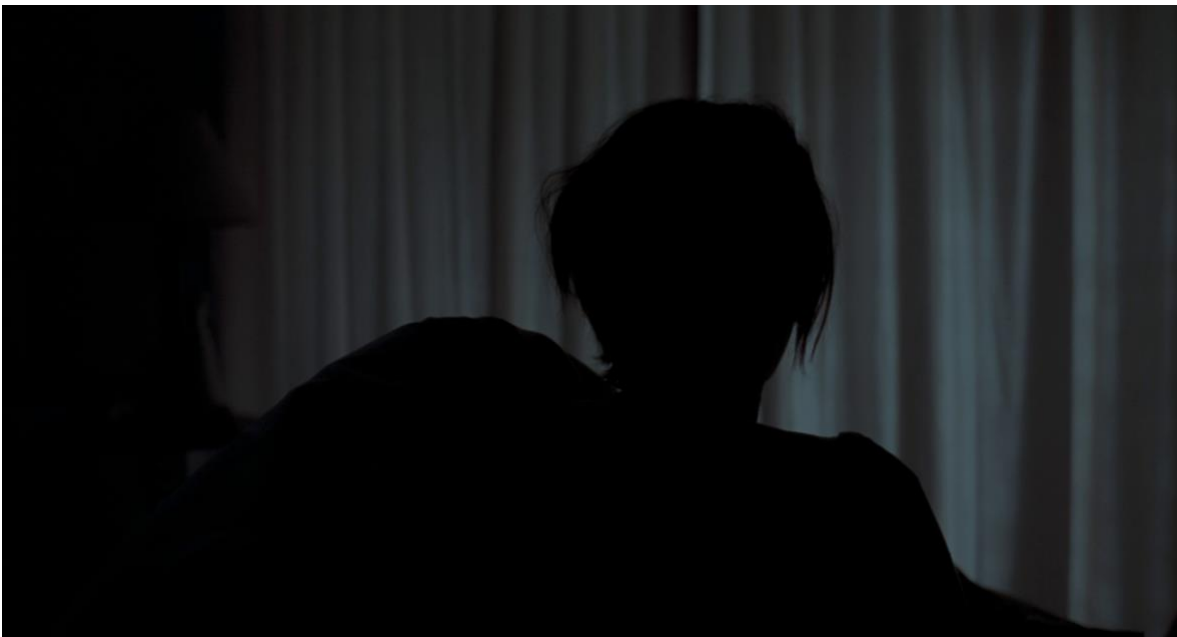
Thinking about the memory engraved on objects – like the stones in the film, for example –, we could speculate on how much violence the spaceship might have witnessed. All the colonization around it, in its Amazonian hiding place. A similar procedure was carried out by Apichatpong in the *Primitive* project, in an installation located in Nabua, in northeastern Thailand, known for past military violence, with a furious ‘hunt for communists’ in the 1970s. In Nabua, Apichatpong creates an apparatus that outwardly resembles a spaceship, a large, rounded object made of polished wood. Inside, it was meant to evoke a cave, thus reconciling the most remote past and the future yet to come. Inside this installation, Nabua’s young people began to gather to drink and chat, converting it into a space of encounter and sociability for them, signaling the total absence of leisure and entertainment offerings for the region’s youth, alienated even from the violent history of the village they inhabit (cf. Apichatpong, 2014, p. 78-89). This spaceship is documented in the short film *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009), preceding the feature film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), which is also part of the *Primitive* project. The sci-fi element contained in the spaceship is also present in the figure of Boonsong, the Ghost Monkey with brilliant red eyes, in *Uncle Boonmee* – the being that metamorphoses through the art of photography; like Boonmee, who dreams of the future, in which cinema phantasmagorizes life. The spaceship of the *Primitive* project is, like in *Memoria*, an artifact of past-future.

In *Memoria*, the only temporal marking we have is regarding the fossil skull found in the excavated tunnel. It dates back 6,000 years, a long time before the fall and collapse of Amerindian empires, pre-Columbian peoples, in the face of Spanish colonization. This historical fact, present in horror narratives as a curse on the usurpers, appears in *Memoria* as an aftermath of this, an invisible but deafening threat coming from the center of the Earth. The Earth, precisely, seems to hold the imponderability of the bloody memories

of beings, and it is in it that the records remain – a palimpsest of blood on the rock – about the political violence committed. What was believed to be forgotten, hidden, buried, erased, and disappeared forever (whether by colonial regimes or dictatorial regimes) emerges then as a ghost demanding its share of social justice. Against forgetting, meanwhile, millennial rites resurface, awakening furious entities against the deleterious Western onslaught. In Bernardo Esquinca's short story 'Tlatelolco Confidential,' present in the book *The Secret Life of Insects and Other Stories* (2023), a group of militants, killed by the police in a public square during a protest, resurrect as an army of zombies, understood as a blood sacrifice to an immemorial entity, since there was once a temple there, replaced by a church. In *Memoria*, the excavation of the tunnel advances over millennial archaeological sites – awakening who knows what ancient entities. It reminds one of the passage through the tunnels of Moria in *The Lord of the Rings*, attracting the depths' demon Balrog (*cf.* Tolkien, 2004). The demon of the fire of sleepless nights: in *Blue*, Aunt Jen is unable to sleep, and a growing flame burns from within her, enveloping almost the entire room. Apichatpong operates through the explicitness of the artifice (roll paintings alternating in the background, the mirror reflecting the fire and creating the illusion – the magic, more properly – of the interior explosion). By offering, from the desiring depths of this insomniac lady's body, the source of her nocturnal fires, Apichatpong sketches a political gesture, attributing protagonism to the sexual desire of an older woman, outside hegemonic beauty standards. In *Memoria*, likewise, Tilda does not follow femininity parameters, allowing herself to explore non-dichotomy and non-binarity at various levels. The non-dichotomy expressed in the temporal displacement (from the millennial past to the indefinite future) determines in the film's present a series of other transcended binaries. This is materially imaged from the film's first shot (fig. 2), where we see Tilda Swinton's silhouette sitting on the bed, making it impossible to say with certainty whether she is facing front or back, in a queer disorientation (*cf.* Ahmed, 2006), non-dichotomous. Such precision of the *mise-en-scène* will echo in other disorienting moments of the film,

centered on Jessica/Tilda's strange corporeality. Here, the front-back indeterminacy materially refers us to the great indeterminacy of Todorov's fantastic: between a rational explanation for supernatural events (uncanny) and the absolute impossibility of explanation before the natural laws of the world as we know it (marvelous) (*cf.* Todorov, 2019). Between one pole and the other, the dynamics of the fantastic balance unstably, like a thin line, a brief, vaporous existence always threatened with tending toward one side or the other (uncanny or marvelous, its neighboring genres). We propose, then, a queer (non-dichotomous) reading of Todorov's fantastic, where the uncanny-marvelous binary is echoed in a series of other dichotomies, both in *Memoria* and in Apichatpong's filmography more broadly, such as masculine-feminine, life-death, past-future, local-global, modern-archaic, urban-rural, culture-nature, metropolis-forest, science-religion, etc.

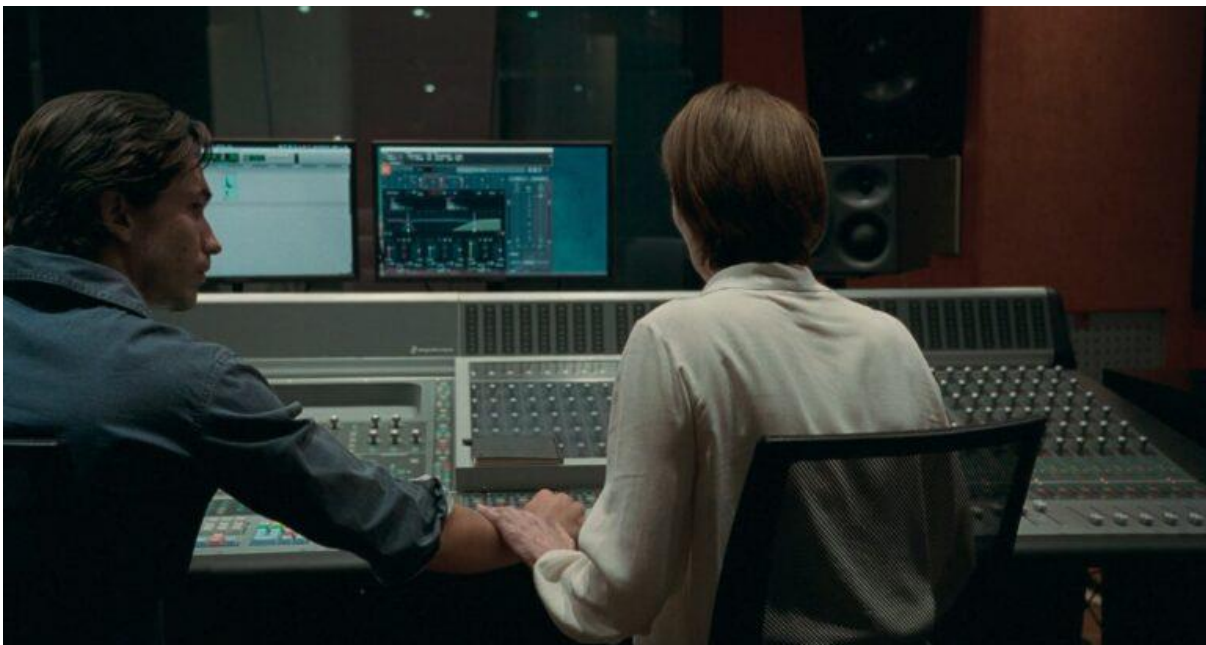
Figure 2 – Jessica (Tilda Swinton) in a position that confuses front and back



Source: *Memoria* (2021, Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

In the sequence where Jessica asks the sound engineer to reproduce the thud she hears, we see her entire performance concentrated on the nape of her neck – the complete opposite of what would be expected in a classical narrative or *mise-en-scène*, which prioritizes maximum visibility, with precise angles and lighting, of the actress's face. Here, the gesture of listening is highlighted, strongly invoked by the film. Listening not only with the ears but with the body, implying a physical sensation of the low sounds that reverberate through the spectator's body. In another scene, Jessica listens to a group of musicians rehearsing, in a sequence shot centered on musical creation and appreciation. It is a metalinguistic commentary on the complex construction of Apichatpong's soundtracks, including that of *Memoria*, with the low sound from the center of the Earth being literally produced before our eyes – and ears.

Figure 3 – The sound reverberates in Jessica (from behind)



Source: *Memoria* (2021, Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

The idealized, disembodied, mythical face, as in Harcourt's portraits (*cf.* Barthes, 2019: 26-29), is here stripped of its grandiloquent aura. This is a film more attached to the small details of everyday life, where general shots abound, where Tilda Swinton's entire body matters. In one scene, as a banal detail, she acts with her foot, as if drawing around puddles of water – a detail that, nonetheless, signals her anxious, expectant state, and connects us to her, if not through psychological identification, through sharing physical presence, of a maladjusted but affective gesture. Jessica expresses her desire to fight against the threat of forgetting, against insomnia that generates amnesia and hallucinations, until the gradual dissociation from herself. This impulse against the 'disease of forgetting' reminds us of the passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), where affixing plaques with the name and function of objects and animals seems to be the provisional solution, until the moment when the letters themselves, language itself, will cease to mean (Márquez, 2017: 56)². This process makes explicit the provisionality, arbitrariness, and fragility of language. A few generations would suffice to forget it, bury it along with the bones of the dead. It shows, precisely, the artificiality also in its idea of realism – constructed by precise rules, tireless work of language, and not a transparent translation of an exotic reality that is there, to be 'naturally' apprehended by the realist artist (*cf.* Guimarães, 2016; Coutinho, 2016).

This awareness of constructing the effect of reality through precise rules is present both in Latin American literature from the period of marvelous realism (Chiampi, 2020), among the so-called practitioner-theorists (Monegal, 2020, p. 10), which Cecília Mello (2024) highlights in her approach to Latin American Literature in dialogue with *Memoria*. The metalinguistic approach is also present in the artists and researchers associated with

² Apichatpong (2015: 134) acknowledges the influence of García Márquez on his work: 'It was hard to clearly remember the real past, so I made films without knowing how true they really were. This was an important detail; it was like waking up the dead and giving them a new soul, making them walk again. The same goes for writing, sometimes it's just our imagination, emerging from our desire to remember, as Gabriel García Márquez wrote: "Memory is clear, but there's no possibility that it's true".'

the so-called spectral realism of contemporary Latin American literature and cinema (*cf.* Martínez, 2020).

In *Memoria*, Jessica deals with the trope of dogs in the narrative, which refers us to spectral realism in contemporary Latin American literature, precisely, as we'll see. Her sister's character, who is bedridden in the hospital, believes she was cursed by a dog when she ran it over and abandoned it (out of forgetfulness, according to herself), as if leaving it to die. She believes, then, that the dog's vengeful ghost is sucking her vital energy, causing the illness that debilitates her inexplicably, day after day. Such complexification curse-illness, science-superstition, already signals the nature of the ambiguities with which Apichatpong deals. In a scene that flirts with physical comedy, Jessica is followed by a dog through the streets of Bogotá, behaving comically as she furtively flees it around a plaza's garden bed. Such everyday incorporation, but also full of symbolism and tension, of the dog into the narrative, is also found in other contemporary Latin American narratives, curiously. We highlight some occurrences where the dog, as an omen but also as a metamorphic being, the power of the other that invades the supposedly closed and secure identity of the human, appears significantly.

In the short story 'The Virgin of the Quarry,' present in *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* (2009) by Mariana Enríquez, there are figures of colt-dogs, an animality lurking around the adolescent female characters, dealing with the discovery of desire and its sometimes violent, animalistic impulses:

There was a black dog. Although the first thing Diego said was 'it's a horse'. He barely finished speaking when the dog barked, and the barking filled the afternoon, and we could swear it made the surface of the quarry water tremble. It was as big as a colt, completely black, and you could see it was ready to come down the hill. But it wasn't alone. The first snort had come from behind us, from the bottom of the beach. Right there, three colt-dogs were walking, drooling, their flanks rising and falling, their ribs apparent, they were skinny. We thought these weren't the owner's dogs, they were the dogs the bus driver had talked about, wild and dangerous. Diego went 'shhh' to calm them down, and Silvia said 'we shouldn't show that we're afraid,' and then Natalia, furious, finally

crying, shouted: ‘You arrogant bastards, [...] they’re my dogs!’ (Enríquez, 2023: 29, our translation)

In ‘Canine’ by Mónica Ojeda, featured in the book *Voladoras* (2023), the narrator’s father behaves like a dog, in an allusion to puppy play, but taken to the brink of horror: the civilized character, businessman and family man, sheds his humanity in a disturbing way for the narrator-daughter, actually hurting her. Puppy play is a practice familiar to the LGBTQIAPN+ community accustomed to BDSM practices, somehow combining sexual fetish and the playful impetus of Role Playing Game, but in Ojeda’s story it acquires an uncanny and horrifying connotation:

Sometimes, Daughter would rummage through the moon of her memory: white, round, full of things she wanted to forget and did forget, though not forever. Things like: Daddy and Mommy would drink, and Sis and Daughter would lock themselves away so they wouldn’t have to see them play around in the living room. To avoid seeing Daddy’s red sexuality with a collar.

The father with a muzzle, on all fours.

The mother with spurs.

To avoid seeing him bite the bone that Mommy would throw, that Mommy would step on. To avoid seeing Mommy walking Daddy through the hallways, putting food scraps on the floor, punishing him for peeing on the feet of the sofa or shitting under the table.

But Sis painted Daddy’s skin-coloured nails.

— Why do you care if I burn the skin or pull out all his teeth? It’s just a dog!

Daughter didn’t want to think about how her sister told her who he really was. So she bathed Daddy, fed Daddy, took Daddy for walks. That’s why, when they gave him dentures, Daughter put them in Daddy’s mouth and Daddy stopped being scared and smiled at her with those new teeth that weren’t his, but looked like him. And Daughter combed his hair, perfumed him, took him for walks with Godzilla. And while Godzilla barked at other dogs, Daddy slowly moved his jaw and showed his tongue and panted, content. And when Godzilla showed his teeth, Daddy showed his dentures, happy, and Daughter got really angry because she remembered things she didn’t want to. She remembered a tight collar, Daddy barking like crazy, drooling, hitting his knees against the tiles, scratching the floor, looking at her and Sis in the hallway, scared, shocked, and Mommy releasing the collar.

— My daughters, my poor little daughters!

— Forgive daddy!

— Forgive daddy's weakness!

Would it have been her or Sis? Sometimes she doubted: one moment she saw herself closing the bedroom door in time, saving herself from the canine teeth, leaving her sister outside for the father's dentures. Other times, in the hallway, begging Sis to open up, to let her in, and then the bite.

(Ojeda, 2023: 56-57, our translation)³

Camila Sosa Villada explores elements of horror in 'The House of Compassion,' a short story in the collection *I'm a Fool to Want You*, also featuring metamorphic dogs with horse-like paws and nuns who seem to nurture a cult-like devotion to these creatures. The main character, Flor de Ceibo, is described with details such as: 'The transvestite has a big, hairy hand, like a dog's paw' (Villada, 2022: 125, our translation). The dog's appearance is narrated as follows:

— This is where Nené found you —, Sister Rosa says to Flor de Ceibo.

— Is she a nun? [...]

— No, she's our dog —, Sister Shakira replies. — Nené! Come, Nené!

Then, a rustling is heard in the underbrush, a large animal stirring, a female whine as she stretches after a mid-afternoon nap, and the heavy footsteps of a substantial creature. Soon, a square, strong, brown snout appears through the low grass, and a paw the size of a horse's hoof. It's tall and elegant, and Flor de Ceibo startles at the sight, falling onto her back in the soft grass. Nené approaches, sniffs her, and for a second, Flor de Ceibo Argañaraz thinks she sees her smile. [...]

Flor de Ceibo doesn't breathe, doesn't blink, doesn't move a finger. Nené is right next to her. Her fierce snout is just inches from her nose. The quick-moving little nun said she's a dog, but this isn't a dog. This is something else. As if reading her thoughts, Nené backs away and lets out a witch-like howl.

³ Ojeda also developed the trope of dogs as a metaphor for female adolescence in her novel *Jawbone* (2018). There is also the Colombian novel *The Bitch* (2017) by Pilar Quintana, which explores the theme of motherhood through the figure of a female dog.

(Villada, 2023: 146, our translation)

Then, at the end of the story, we witness the ritual with the metamorphosis of dog into human:

On nights of the waning moon, the nuns take Flor de Ceibo naked to the second courtyard, the enormous courtyard dominated by the dogs. They lay her on a stone under the night sky and draw an inverted cross on her forehead with blood drawn from the hand of the Mother Superior. The temperature doesn't matter. They call Nené, who comes running. The dogs remain lying down and howl while the nuns organize the celebration. They all sing Christian psalms [...]

Nené climbs onto the stone, on top of Flor de Ceibo's body, and licks her from head to toe with her sandy tongue. [...] There, under the night sky and on the stone, Nené kisses her all over, from the front, from behind, without leaving a single spot untouched. [...] Soon, amidst the hallelujahs and the stench of dog, Flor de Ceibo sees Nené stand up and slowly transform into herself. Into Flor de Ceibo. The same hair, the same skin, the same eyes. The Mother Superior hands her the clothes they found her in at the cornfield and lovingly helps Flor de Ceibo get dressed.

Every waning moon, Flor de Ceibo Argañaraz sees herself leave the second courtyard amidst the nuns' chants. She heads straight for the road. She'd like to warn the clients that it's not her, that it's a dog with horse-like paws that's causing accidents on the road, just for fun. But she doesn't have the strength to chase after Nené, the usurper of her appearance. At some point, she'll escape when she figures out what kind of order the House of Compassion is and how to get out of there. For her, it's hard to muster the courage to leave, because the food is very tasty, and the sheets always smell so good. (Villada, 2022: 151-152, our translation)

The human-animal metamorphosis, although not occurring with dogs specifically, is also present in *Cockfight* by Maria Fernanda Ampuero (2021), which makes explicit the political subtext of these animalities expanding the human, as well as the assumption of monstrosity as a political strategy and, more than that, of survival. In the short story 'Auction,' the protagonist acts, in a desperate gesture of self-preservation, as follows:

I'm in the center of a room, surrounded by delinquents, displayed in front of them like cattle, and like cattle, I empty my womb. As I can, I rub

one leg against the other, adopting the position of a disembowelled doll. I scream like a madwoman. I shake my head, babble obscenities, invented words, the things I used to say to the roosters, about the sky with infinite corn and popcorn. I know the fat man is about to shoot me. [...]

The fat man doesn't know what to do.

— How much do they give for this monster? (Ampuero, 2021: 14-15, our translation)

The horror produced by these hybrid, interstitial beings is signaled by Noël Carroll (1990) as one of the main characteristics of the genre. These are hybridisms that produce the undecidability of the abject (*cf.* Kristeva, 2024), which confuses fixed and binary categories, between repulsion and desire. Such are also, precisely, the disturbed poles in eroticism (*cf.* Bataille, 2017).

The short stories analyzed here are all examples of an approach in Latin American literatures and Asian cinemas (although not exclusively, for sure) that offers a new perspective on the animal-human relationship. We can draw on Gabriel Giorgi's work and his notion of 'common forms' (2016) to reflect on the commonality and anonymity (the darkness, the unknown, the mystery) that we all share. These stories can also be understood through the notions of interspecific relationships, or companion species, as proposed by Donna Haraway (2021). According to the author, human beings and dogs, for instance, are co-constitutive species, that is, one is comprehended in relation to the other. From a queer perspective, Giorgi and Haraway can be seen as proponents of an approach to animals as the radical other that simultaneously constitutes oneself in its own strangeness and otherness. A similar reading is possible through Agamben's concept of 'the open' (2013), between humans and animals, as we propose a queer interpretation of it. Agamben's 'the open' is an idea that acknowledges human ignorance towards other animals' knowledge or being in the world, and by embracing this ignorance, one opens oneself to infinite possibilities (the mystery of life, once more).

Paul Preciado (2022), in *I Am the Monster That Speaks to You*, assumes the place of monstrosity as a political potency, an assumption of one's own voice, of speaking for oneself, and no longer being situated as an object of others' discourse/study (namely,

psychoanalysis). Preciado suggests, with this appropriation of monstrosity associated with queer bodies (especially trans, in the case of the author's speech), a potential blurring of human limits, which would politically include historically marginalized categories. It is, ultimately, an opening to alterity and community. Apichatpong's filmography is full of these hybrid and metamorphic figures that signal dealing with the other, from the shaman-tiger of *Tropical Malady* to Boonsong, the Ghost Monkey of *Uncle Boonmee*. Besides, of course, Boonmee himself, who transits through various identities throughout his incarnations – from buffalo to catfish to princess to servant... and back to fish, in the primal cave, where everything began for him. In Boonsong's first appearance with the family, for example, he causes no more than an initial startle, being soon welcomed by loved ones. The handling of monstrosities and phantasmagorias in Apichatpong's work in general does not occur in the key of horror. Still, he has already been included, along with Tsai, in exhibitions of 'post-horror'. There are those who oppose the term due to its commercial appeal and journalistic origin, perhaps without the desired theoretical depth. One questions, in general, this vice of the 'post-' in our times, as if horror, among other things, had simply been overcome in favor of whatever successive thing, in a chronological line desiring novelty. I, however, am not so fatalistic about 'post-horror,' not taking it very seriously, understanding that, like so many genres and subgenres and cinematic trends (if not all?), it fulfills its commercial role and niche creation. Another recurring criticism of post-horror concerns the political dimension it claims to highlight in horror narratives (*The Witch, It Follows, Get Out, Nope, Guadagnino's Suspiria, The Babadook, I Saw the TV Glow*, etc.), but this is certainly nothing new. It would suffice to refer to films of German Expressionism (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Metropolis, The Golem*) – or even before, in 18th-century Gothic literature (*Vathek, The Monk, The Manuscript Found in Saragossa, The 120 Days of Sodom*) or in 19th-century fantastic literature (*Frankenstein, Carmilla, Dracula, Wuthering Heights, Heart of Darkness...*) – to attest to the inseparability between horror, the fantastic, and political issues. These are genres

precisely conducive to discussing taboos, either because of their label as ‘minor genres,’ less important and therefore freer from certain moral vigilance (sometimes with official censorship), or because of their own transgressive nature, with bloody and criminal themes that in themselves constitute taboos and alienate a more moralistic portion of the audience.

Beyond Latin American literature, in contemporary literature from other countries (notably Asian, such as Japan and South Korea), we also find a familiar handling of the strange, of the monstrous, as in Apichatpong's work. This is what we find, for example, in the short stories ‘Take Care’ or ‘Hina-Chan,’ from *Where the Wild Ladies Are* by Aoko Matsuda (2024), where the character is encouraged by her ghost grandmother to let her body hair grow, freeing herself from the painful impositions of depilation, to the point of cultivating a completely hairy body surface, much like Boonsong, the Ghost Monkey of *Uncle Boonmee* (fig. 4).

Figure 4 – Boonsong included at the table by Aunt Jen and Huay, his ghost mother



Source: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010, Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

These familial relationships with monstrosities are not only manifested in the highlighted short stories or Apichatpong's work, certainly. In various films and directors of what we propose as queer phantasmagoric realism (notably, Tsai Ming-liang, João Pedro Rodrigues, Bruce LaBruce, etc.), such a phenomenon operates – but that is a subject for other explorations in our research.

Part II. Hernán: the materialization of the marvelous

Jessica's corporeality becomes increasingly strange as *Memoria* progresses and the thuds heard by the character intensify. At a certain point, she leans towards the earth,

summoned by its irresistible vibrations (fig. 5), and the strangeness of her gesturality catches Hernán's attention: 'Are you okay?' he says, and Jessica recomposes herself, somewhat disconcerted.

Figure 5 – Jessica's strange corporeality



Source: *Memoria* (2021, Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

The encounter between the two will trigger other marvelous events that we could relate to Latin American literature. Who knows, from Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*, 1955), with the memory imprinted on stones, for example, that the protagonist hears upon arriving in Comala, like voices from the past emanating from the soil... the voices of the dead... García Márquez himself, again, is referenced in the bizarre way Hernán sleeps with his eyes open (fig. 6). Hernán is the character who materializes, in *Memoria*, what was previously just atmosphere, vague strangeness, clues of a larger mythical substrate. It is Hernán, by sleeping with his eyes open, demonstrating the condition of his alien

species, who gives the film the certainty of the fantastic (or, specifically, the marvelous). Irlemar Chiampi (2020: 43) defends the term ‘marvelous realism’ to refer to Latin American literature produced, roughly, between the 1940s and 1970s, a period that includes the so-called ‘Latin American Boom,’ whose peak occurs in the 1960s, especially after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Chiampi prioritizes ‘marvelous’ as more suitable to the specificities of Latin America, and not ‘magical’ (an expression external to the literary field, according to the author, related to occultism, witchcraft, religion) or ‘fantastic’ (which, although internal to the field of literary theory, comes mainly from the European context, not being, therefore, specific to Latin America). The etymology of ‘marvel’, Chiampi (2020: 48) teaches us, is related to the Latin *mirabilia*, which means both *mirar* (to see) and *miraglia* (miracle). That is: miracles that are given to be seen, in our conception. However, again highlighting the queer perspective, it is not just about what is given to be seen, but also what remains hidden, invisible, the permanent mystery beneath all things. Be that as it may, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, undoubtedly, miracles are given to be seen, marvels: narratively, there is a parallel with the syndrome of *Memoria*. The inhabitants of Macondo are afflicted by the disease of insomnia and, when trying to sleep with a mixture of asphodel produced by Melquíades, they begin to see each other's dreams, but still do not sleep. Those who do not sleep and dream versus the one who sleeps (with eyes open) and does not dream. In *Memoria*, whose dreams are we contemplating? Whose are these memories? While Jessica cannot remember, Hernán is unable to forget. He recalls everything in detail, like the protagonist of ‘Funes, the Memorious’ by Borges (2007: 99-108), present in *Fictions* (1941). Both are, therefore, afflicted by dysfunctions, imperfections, strangenesses: hypermnesia and amnesia, incidentally, as queer temporalities (*cf.* Ma, 2015). Funes’ hypermnesia deprives him of social life, as the excess of stimuli and information in his memory would cause him mental collapse. The character of Hernán in *Memoria*, likewise, chooses to isolate himself from social contact, living in a restricted microcosm, where he

repeats the same actions daily, like fishing and slowly scaling fish, exposing himself to the fewest possible everyday stimuli. Like Funes, if he absorbed too much information, he could short-circuit.

Remembering everything is also a curse. Agamben (2007) reminds us that we are composed of a greater portion of forgetting than of remembrance, highlighting the active importance of the act of forgetting. What we forget constitutes us as much as (or more than) what we remember, such that the author refers to the ‘Angel of Forgetting,’ an entity necessary for an individual's spiritual and physical health. The Angel of Forgetting, we might fable, must be somewhat averse to Benjamin's Angel of History, which, a bit like Funes, witnesses everything that has passed, stunned.

Figure 6 — Hernán sleeping with eyes open ‘



Source: *Memoria* (2021, Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

There is the narrative recorded in the stone, of the worker betrayed, assaulted, and robbed by his 'colleagues'... And how many more memories engraved in the immensity of those mountains. The sonic whirlwind that invades the trail, as if the world was being born and consumed again in collapses, ecstasy of larvae, tides of fire and hot rock! Then, Jessica cries invaded by the imponderable, the primitive time of the sublime Earth – in its most dreadful and crushing sense, in its very gigantism. Both Hernán, a strange body through which memories of others pass, and Jessica, an antenna-envelope, likewise, of others' experiences, are characters who are stunningly receptive to what the world reserves. From everyday trivialities to great planetary revolutions, *Memoria* seems to point to the very cohabitation of these sublime amplitudes.

Conclusion

The similar concerns of spectral realism and queer phantasmagoric realism can be thought of as artistic manifestations of the same politically turbulent present. Whether in literature or cinema, the politicization of strange bodies, the assumption of monstrosity, the potency of hybridism and interstitiality are preponderant issues, moving through the multiforms of the fantastic – from horror to sci-fi, between the uncanny and the marvelous –, confusing any fixed categories and dichotomies, whether they are cinematic genres or strategic political identities. Everything moves, after all, like a spaceship through the Amazonian skies.

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