



Routledge Advances in Film Studies

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SECRETS IN TRANSNATIONAL FILM

Deborah Lynn Porter

ROUTLEDGE



Collective Trauma and the Psychology of Secrets in Transnational Film

Collective Trauma and the Psychology of Secrets in Transnational Film advances a methodological line of inquiry based on a fresh insight into the ways in which cinematic meaning is generated and can be ascertained. Premised on a critical reading strategy informed by a metapsychology of secrets, the book features analyses of internationally acclaimed films—Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, Andrey Zvyagintsev's *The Return*, Jee-woon Kim's *A Tale of Two Sisters*, and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others*. It demonstrates how a rethinking of the figure of the secret in national film yields a new vantage point for examining heretofore unrecognized connections between collective historical experience, cinematic production, and a transnational aesthetic of concealment and hiding.

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1 New Psychoanalytical Tools for Social Science Inquiry¹

As beloved an art form as it is, film has more to tell us than it is commonly given credit for. But this is changing. The upsurge of film and visual culture studies in the social sciences over the last two decades is just one example. This book is another. In it, I use film to explore collective experience, specifically traumatic experience and collective memory. The analytic technique I demonstrate here is the culmination of ten years of developing a course in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington.

My course, *Putting the World on the Couch: Psychoanalysis and International Studies*, started out as a survey of how social science scholarship and psychoanalysis engage each other and of the new areas of research that have emerged out of that cross-fertilization.² Film was my point of entrée into collective memory formation processes.

Film serves a teaching function in the world at large, not only among scholars;³ see, for example, Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, and Ariel Duncan's investigation of how people learned about the Vietnam War.⁴ It has become an important object of social science research precisely because of this expanded role as an "influential source of historical information and perspective across family generations."⁵ In fact, some scholars have argued that since the end of World War II, cinema has been our dominant source of historical memory; in this view, it functions as a "prosthetic" memory for collective experience.⁶

My students quickly came to appreciate the opportunity that cultural artifacts offer for exploring collective aspects of trauma and memory formation that are often too diffuse or unwieldy to be studied in the world at large. But the more we explored, the more I felt the need for a clear exploratory strategy. What perspectives, what knowledge, would best enable my students to cull from these rich resources insights about collective memory formation? How should I even talk about ways to do this? Ultimately, the course developed into an effort to teach this expanded vision of cineliteracy, and that is the organizing principle of this book.

The Puzzle of Collective Memory

Before we can take full advantage of film's capacity to refract and comment on collective memories of traumatic experience, we need to have a clear grasp of what collective memory is. This is a challenge. There is no consensus among scholars on such central perplexities as how collective memory is formed or transmitted, to say nothing of "the unfathomability of traumatic experience" and how that is represented and interpreted.⁷

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is considered the founder of collective memory studies. He argues that groups have collective memories, which are manifested through social frameworks such as families, religious organizations, and schools.⁸ Because these institutions are the channels through which experience can be recollected and expressed, Halbwachs reasons, an individual's understanding of herself and her past is strongly linked to the institutional, or group, consciousness. This view also allows Halbwachs to account for the way the meanings of memory can change over time. He contends that the memories a person maintains may vary from context to context—that is, say, of family, class, or religion—and that these variants may be held simultaneously.⁹

Halbwachs's work has catalyzed an avalanche of research, but he does not give much attention to the physical and mental realities of memory or to the relationship between individual and collective memory. Individual memory involves neurological and cognitive processes that have no known equivalents in groups and appears therefore to be constitutionally distinct from collective processes. Another indication of the complexity of these issues is the fact that there is more than one kind of individual memory: "procedural" memory stores bodily skills and habitual movements, "semantic" memory stores the fund of knowledge that is acquired mentally through conscious learning, and "episodic" memory processes autobiographical experience.¹⁰ Halbwachs does not address these distinctions.

At the same time, however, Halbwachs's recognition of the linguistic basis of collective memory establishes a kinship between it and its individual counterpart. Language is certainly a collective phenomenon, and the new assumption is that it is central to both individual and collective memory processes.¹¹ Workers in the field have compared the language used in individual and collective accounts of traumatic developments and identified congruencies in the ways memories take narrative form; the congruencies reflect a system through which "institutions vested with authority, including 'stories, myths and images' but extending to the church and the law, articulate memory."¹²

This is a helpful concept for investigating how a film represents collective memory. It allows us to link concrete elements of a filmic representation to the language of cultural memory. Sensitivity to how memories of violence may be expressed through tropes of vengeance in film,¹³ or

how concepts of justice or compassion are signaled through rhetorical devices and images,¹⁴ for example, gives form to the amorphous concept of memory analysis. Nonetheless, while these approaches have refined our ability to identify the “what” of what is shared among individual and collective memories, they leave open the question of “why.”

To answer, we must explain why past experiences and the affects associated with them are preserved; we must also account for the processes by which these experiences are articulated—the processes that lead, or do not lead, to their discursive production and transmission.¹⁵ Such accounts, however, often end up derailed, mired once more in the relationship between individual memories of trauma and collective experience of the same event. Questions about how to balance out “memories of individual suffering in theory and ‘on the ground’,” and collective memory processes that “exceed those of relations between individuals,”¹⁶ still dominate the discussion.¹⁷

New Tools for Collective Memory Research

I teach in my classes, and will demonstrate here, some analytic tools that break down the binary division in collective memory research. They exemplify a psycholinguistic approach that permits the “analysis of specificity and particularity of discourses and practices” while also ensuring that these specifics and particulars are not divorced from the collective structures and institutions from which they are drawn. They are built on the work of Hungarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham, and of Abraham in conjunction with his colleague Maria Torok,¹⁸ who theorizes about *how the linguistic surround informs awareness in individuals*.

Abraham and Torok’s model of the mind focuses distinctively on *breakdowns of signification*, that is, on apparent losses of intelligibility in language. They thought that the psyche is naturally inclined to growth and expansion, which it accomplishes by feeding on, digesting, *and naming* the life experiences that people confront in development. Abraham believed that the impersonal and programmatic quality of the classical Freudian formulation involving predetermined and universal “drives” or “instincts” denies the uniqueness of individual lives.¹⁹

The processing of experience into language, in Abraham’s view, is what ultimately gives us the power to think about it. But young children’s mastery of language depends for a crucial developmental period on the linguistic surround provided by their parents, and the parents’ own past experiences, conscious or not, will have imparted an affective charge to their speech and so to the words that they offer their children. Thus, Abraham and Torok argue, mental organization is not only a dynamic response to a subject’s predictable lived experience but also a conceptual structure that is passed down in families. The authors postulate

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that when the words necessary to name a child's experience are overly laden with affect or content that is unavailable or unwelcome to the parent's awareness, the words that the child needs may be (consciously or unconsciously) withheld or transmitted to the child with an affective burden that is beyond the child's capacity to process. The child may or may not consciously perceive the parent's discomfort, but in either case, the necessary linguistic tools are not made available. The processing and naming of the child's experience fail, and a void is left in their stead. In this way, the unconscious linguistic distortions and repressions embodied in the parent's speech are reconstructed in the child's.

Abraham believed that traumatic experience interrupts or overwhelms a person's capacity to process it into language, leaving behind fragments of personal history of which the person can neither think nor speak. Inaccessible to awareness, these fragments remain present in the person's psyche and language only as an absence. Yet they *do* remain present, and in their absence may be felt, seen, and passed on to linguistic heirs. More about that in a moment.

This view disallows the idea that the so-called "real" world is a transparent, intentional, and objective correlate of subjective lived experience—an idea that, according to Abraham, discounts the role of the unconscious in shaping and informing conscious experience. He maintains that "reality" is experience that demands to be accommodated; it is experience that agitates the psyche toward the process of psychic expansion that Nicholas Rand calls *self-fashioning*.²⁰ Self-fashioning is a system of assimilation and adaptation that continues throughout life, which Abraham understood to be *the* organizing or sensemaking principle of the psyche. But the readiness of a child's psyche to digest and assimilate new experience is determined by the degree to which a parent's unconscious (in the form of words) enables or inhibits it. Self-fashioning, therefore, even while it grapples with "the stuff of our own lives,"²¹ is influenced by parental sagas transmitted by the fact of absence and is the product of an infinitely regressed family history.

This idea, that the linguistic surround colors how people process and name experience, is of course not novel to Abraham and Torok; indeed, it was a premise of Halbwachs's understanding of collective memory. Kali Tal demonstrates it from a different perspective, showing how the linguistic surround created by the sharing and retelling of individual trauma narratives penetrates "the vocabulary of the larger culture where, she claims, they become tools for the construction of national myths."²²

The same idea has been central to the development of individual memory theories, especially with regard to the transgenerational familial transmission of memory through silence; this is in stark contradistinction to Halbwachs's idea, which understood memory formation as a function of *overt* expression of individuals that was shaped by and

within a collective.²³ Affects in general, and transgenerational trauma in particular, are thought by many theorists to be transmitted by the same psycholinguistic mechanisms.²⁴ Bruce Bradfield demonstrated that parents' "unformulated experience" influences their children's development.²⁵ Other studies indicate that children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors differentiate less completely from their parents than other children: They see themselves as protectors of their parents rather than vice versa and so tend to inhibit their own impulses to establish independence and autonomy.²⁶ Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub's work has shown that "knowledge of psychic trauma weaves through the memories of several generations," passed on by parents and internalized as an unconscious organizing principle.²⁷ Studies of transgenerational transmission of private trauma attest to silent "cooperative communication" patterns that exist among family members and are governed by unspoken rules of silence.

Similar patterns have been observed in the transmission of historical traumas. For example, Rachel Lev-Wiesel saw transgenerational traumatic responses across three generations after forced relocations in 1940s Israel and Palestine, and after immigrations from Morocco to Israel following World War II; Hatsantour Karenian et al. investigated the transgenerational effects of the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915, building upon earlier work in which third-generation survivors were found to exhibit more pathological symptoms than the second generation; and Teresa Evans-Campbell established transmission among American Indian/Native Alaska communities with a multilevel framework of historical trauma.²⁸

To the limited extent that trauma researchers have taken the psychological processing of trauma into account, they have tended to explain its inaccessibility with *dynamic repression*. Dynamic repression implies the banishment of affects (desire, hatred, envy, and the like) that arise predictably in the course of psychosexual development but are rejected in compliance with parental or social prohibitions (either from without or as internalized standards).²⁹ Abraham and Torok, however, reject the notion that repression has only one structure. They postulate that repressive structures, like internal conflicts, reflect the particular conditions in which they arise. They are a response not to invariant or universal stresses but to the specific challenges encountered in individual lives—"the particularity of any individual's life story, the specificity of texts, and the singularity of historical situations."³⁰ Abraham and Torok's theories emerged out of their clinical work on the transgenerational impact of the Holocaust and the suffering of its survivors; their patients caused them to question the reigning concepts that explain the etiology of trauma disorders. The old psychoanalytic paradigms did not appear to account adequately for the wide range of symptoms observed in the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.³¹

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Abraham and Torok theorize that some situations are experienced as so shameful that they are concealed from awareness.³² *Preservative repression* is what the authors called the process of keeping a shameful experience out of consciousness. They identify shame as a silent force, an independent entity that impacts psychic development within families. They do not explain explicitly why they single out shame (as opposed to other responses to trauma) to play such a dominant role in preservative repression; they arrived at this conclusion inductively, through the evidence of their patients' language. The result of this kind of shame, however, is a secret.

Abraham and Torok use the word *secret* idiosyncratically to refer to content that is preserved unconsciously at the same time that it is banished from linguistic circulation. In their usage, a secret

is not primarily a hushed up fact, a covert plot, a private feeling, or confidential knowledge kept from others. "Secret" is not synonymous with "hidden," "unknown," or "latent," even in the Freudian sense of a person's unconscious or repressed desires, apt to reappear only in opaque, symptomatic compromise formations. In Abraham and Torok's sense, *the secret is a trauma* [emphasis added] whose very occurrence and devastating emotional consequences are entombed and thereby consigned to internal silence, albeit unwittingly, by the sufferers themselves.³³

By this definition, a secret may be transmitted across generations and into the unwitting custody of a child. Recall that the child, in his own pursuit of linguistic and psychic growth, struggles to decipher a parent's unsatisfactory communication. In the case of a secret, she will fail. But in the process, she will recognize not only that something is missing—that there is something unnamed going on to which she is not privy—but that something must be protected; otherwise, why is it hidden?

This is a powerful hypothesis that links "certain states of mental disarray, hitherto resistant to analysis, to the concealment of a secret"³⁴ and explains "how influences *outside* [emphasis added] an individual's lived experience can determine her or his psychic development."³⁵ In other words, the "invisible" psychic presence of one person's shameful experience may account for certain kinds of mysterious behavior in others—such as the enigmatic and incongruent characters whose filmic lives I will analyze later. I will concentrate on the secret psychic configurations that are established "when a shameful and therefore unspeakable experience must be barred from consciousness or simply 'kept secret.'"³⁶

Abraham and Torok call such powerful absences *phantoms*. Their *theory of the phantom*—that is, that an individual's identity may be influenced by the unwitting inheritance of someone else's secret—is a challenge to the sovereignty of dynamic repression as the organizing

principle of traumatic memory and an alternative entry into the matter of individual versus collective memory in general. The possibility that secrets, and the linguistic distortions they exact, may endure over generations obviates unsatisfactory timeworn distinctions between individual and collective memory, and identifies unspoken family (collective) history as a generative force of individual identity. Phantom theorists maintain that it is in *preservative* repression that we discover how our psyches are organized by the “psychological implant in us of our ancestor’s secrets.”³⁷

Phantoms do not occur only on the individual level. They can also be created and transmitted silently through a society, for example, in response to social catastrophe.³⁸ This is a useful perspective on social movements, ideological currents, and political motives. It suggests “the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations”; moreover, it expands the parameters of psychopathology and opens a new vantage point for investigating memory formation. It brings the idea and importance of secrets to the forefront of collective memory analysis. In short, to the extent that “unsettling disruptions in the psychic life of one person can adversely and unconsciously affect someone else,”³⁹ phantom production occurs where individual and societal memory coincide.

Backward Reading

But even as the phantom is defined by concealment, it reveals. It reveals how an individual memory is shaped by family memory, which is shaped by a family’s implication in a (shame generating) collective experience. It provides a structure for interpreting memory constructed in intimate and larger contexts. Furthermore, it resolves a perennial vexation in the interpretive analysis of traumatic memory as represented in cultural artifacts such as literature, art, and cinema: the idea that trauma, by its very definition, overpowers the human capacity to describe or represent. How does one interpret an artifact produced in the wake of an experience that is a priori “unspeakable”?

Here, I will lay out a methodology that obviates this philosophical dead-end. It is applicable in situations of both individual and collective human suffering, and is based on another concept developed by Abraham.

Abraham trained in philosophy at the Sorbonne after emigrating to France from Hungary in the late 1930s. He worked in poetry and translation before turning to psychoanalysis. His attempts to establish a methodology for studying the relationship between phenomena and the unconscious⁴⁰ led to his *theory of the symbol*, which I will delineate in detail later. As he became more deeply engaged in clinical practice, he and Maria Torok found this theory helpful for understanding their

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patients' sometimes inexplicable behavior. From this emerged a body of work investigating how silenced shameful experience impacts upon on an individual and his or her descendants. (When I discuss the theory of the symbol later, I refer to Abraham alone as its author; when I discuss theories relating to secrets, I refer to Abraham and Torok together.)

Recall that Abraham and Torok's model of the mind focuses on *breakdowns* of signification, that is, on apparent losses of intelligibility in language. I say "apparent" because they argued not only that such breakdowns *are in fact* intelligible but also that they are markers of crucial experiences of which we are not consciously aware. The obstacles that at first frustrate interpretation, they held, are the very clues that ultimately enable it. This paradox is the starting point for the method of film analysis that I teach. Confounding conventional notions of truth, illusion, and authorial intention as it does, it is a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of human motivation.

Abraham sees the subjective meaning of *all* phenomena as a product of the digestive process of processing and naming that I described earlier; subjective meaning is therefore, in his view, intrinsically linguistic. He came to construe the speech and behavior of his patients as phenomenal by-products (*worldly objects*, he calls them) of the psychic agitation that motivates growth and expansion in all of us. This vision transcends the differences that have long separated phenomenological investigation,⁴¹ sociological research, and clinical psychoanalysis.⁴² *Symbols* are what Abraham calls the phenomena—that is, the linguistic traces—that result from the breakdowns of the self-fashioning process; he believes that they stand for something and that that something can be identified, investigated, and understood. Specifically, he believes, they point to the affective disturbance responsible for interrupting the self-fashioning process. Esther Rashkin elucidates Abraham's choice of terminology and some of its implications:

For the Greeks, the *symbolon* was a piece of pottery or earthenware that was broken in two prior to someone's (usually a warrior's) voyage. One of the two pieces remained at the site of departure while the other was carried by the traveler and "voyaged" with him. Upon his return (often many years later), the traveler's piece of pottery served as a sign of recognition and as proof of his identity when it was rejoined with its complement. The word "symbol" referred to each of the two pieces together (from the Greek *symbollo* = to put together). An initial statement of Abraham's theory of the symbol can be extrapolated from these two meanings. When we read a text we read its symbols. We read fragments of semantic or phonetic elements that, if joined to their missing parts, would signify something (a drama, a scene, or simply a lexical or phonetic element) that must for some reason be kept hidden or out of circulation.⁴³

Ordinary language supposes the successful replacement of an object with a word that simultaneously marks its absence and substitutes for it; *symbolic language*, in Abraham's sense, points to failures of this process, points at which the successful substitution cannot be made.

The existence of a secret is manifested symptomatically in incongruent speech and inexplicable behavior; this very incomprehensibility, in Abraham and Torok's view, is the pointer to a concealed traumatic experience. My analyses will demonstrate what such secrets look like and the kind of symptoms they may produce. They will also show how symptoms may be reconstituted to reveal this unconscious dimension of a subject's experience and its hidden source.

Secrets are reconstructed by *anasemic*, or "backward," reading,⁴⁴ a technique that allows us to identify symbolic language, that is, the fragmented linguistic patterns that are produced by breakdowns in the processes of psychic assimilation and are thus inconsistent with the other productions of what Abraham calls a "unifying" conscious self.⁴⁵ Once these patterns are delineated, it is possible to reunite the lexical fragments with their absent complements. As in a jigsaw puzzle, the "jagged edges" that pinpoint and demarcate symbolic language not only mark the fact of a missing piece, but they also reveal what that piece must look like.

Rashkin, an expert on Abraham and Torok's theories who has applied them to the analysis of literature and film, offers an example of backward reading. She asks us to imagine a story about mail delivery in which the word "post" never appears—not in *postal*, not in *postman*, not in *post office*. Why and how should this be? In her example, it is because the writer is profoundly uncomfortable with the word "pillar," which is associated with some terrible episode in his past—a theft, perhaps, as Rashkin suggests, or we ourselves might even imagine a death. The word "pillar" is thus prohibited from consciousness, along with all its synonyms, the word "post" being one of them. Even though "post" in this story would connote mail and not columns, its affective contamination is sufficient to forbid it in its own form, and the hypothetical writer is forced away from it and to associated but uncontaminated words like the "letters, dispatches, stamps, parcels" that Rashkin mentions. These, she says, are "the 'words that hide,' the cryptonyms of the secret word 'pillar.' Each one carries secreted within it, through a process of lexical and phonetic encrypting ... the word that cannot be said."⁴⁶

Thus, we rediscover the context, hitherto unintelligible, out of which the symbol was torn. Paradoxically, our ability to reconstruct the piece implied by the jagged edge relies on our ability literally to "read" the absence that defines it, that is, to understand how lexical strategies of avoidance are symbolic in both form and meaning. This is what gives Abraham's understanding the value it has for psychoanalytic, sociological, historical, and filmic inquiry.

Phantoms are the psycholinguistic residuum of secrets that may be seen in individuals, in cultural artifacts, and in society. Study of the phantom phenomenon in film is a way to access collective memory where it contacts the individual. In sum, I posit that unspeakable traumatic secrets give rise to a characteristic representation in filmic narrative, that this process is unconsciously intended to obscure awareness and comprehension of the secrets, and that it nonetheless systematically generates and uncovers the very meaning it purports to suppress. In their elaboration of this process, Abraham and Torok give social science research an important tool, and I believe that the film analyses in this book will help to prove that.

Collective History and Cinematic Representation

I have chosen the four films I will analyze in this book as case studies of collective trauma and collective memory formation: Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El fauno de labertino*), a fantastical 2003 account of a young girl's experience in post-Civil War Franquist Spain; *The Return* (*Vozvrashcheniye*), Andrey Zvyagintsev's elegiac 2003 account of an enigmatic father-son reunion; *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*), Kim Jee-woon's sophisticated 2004 evocation of psychological horror; and, finally, *The Others*, Alejandro Amenábar's 2001 gothic sleeper hit about a woman and her children on Jersey Island in 1945.⁴⁷ Each of these films received extensive critical and popular acclaim, both in their countries of origin and internationally, and they have accrued considerable academic attention as well, fueled by their vibrant "after-life" on Internet cinema sites.⁴⁸ This familiarity across a wide spectrum of viewers made them compelling subjects for classroom analysis. Their diverse provenance, moreover, encouraged the transnational and transcultural perspective that is the very lifeblood of the Jackson School.

All belong to the category that I have come to call *phantom films*. That is, each has a protagonist whose enigmatic representation (as I will show) is driven by a secret concealed within the filmic idiom. Reconstruction of that secret will be our entrée into collective trauma. It is only after reconstructing this hidden meaning that we will be able to read the films' commentaries on collective memory and history. I will claim that the films model the fact of preservative repression and how it is transmitted. In examining this process, we will be extending Abraham and Torok's work to a new medium. They dealt explicitly with the familiar language of speech, but, as I will show, their principles apply to other idioms as well. The language of film is visual, but here too, the breakdown of signification is a marker of trauma—its concealment and its revelation.

One of the traumas that weighs on these films was caused by the dramatic increase in the proliferation of new forms of international

exchange—a phenomenon referred to as *globalization*.⁴⁹ The collective memory processes we see in them deal with the swallowing of national identity by an increasingly global culture, and the language whose breakdown we will follow is in some sense a visual language.⁵⁰ Hollywood, the dominant producer of the early film industry, greatly influenced which cinematographic techniques spread to become the paradigms for production efforts elsewhere.⁵¹ The result was a visual lingua franca, the first grammar for international cineliteracy.⁵²

A national film is a film made outside of Hollywood, out of its own society. National films are understood to be offshoots of Hollywood paradigms; they share a common language with it, but they also possess an individual language based on their own culture.⁵³ However, the advent of globalization increased Hollywood's purchase on modes of expression and imposed a greater cultural homogeneity. At best, the global paradigm suppresses the national films; more intensely, it leaves them out.⁵⁴ The products of some national cinemas represent reactions to globalization in that they manifest breakdowns of national systems of signification that once were meaningful but no longer serve as adequate representations of (national) existence. This visual breakdown of meaning is analogous to the personal linguistic breakdowns in Abraham and Torok's model, and the films we will explore will evidence both. We will see preservative repression in action, both in individual characters and their disordered behavior and speech, and in the filmic idiom itself, both of which express the affective chaos produced when language and experience do not align. This gap between them reflects a memory that globalization increasingly dominates and suppresses as unworthy.⁵⁵

The breakdown in signification can be seen in the contraposition of two languages: the globalized Hollywood visual language, in which all national directors are literate, and the language derivative of national cinematic paradigms, which had been cultivated before the global visual language became so ruthlessly dominant. The relationship between these two cinematic languages reconstructs the colonization of national memory by a global visual language. This category of film is called "transnational" because it represents a form of cinematic expression in which national consciousness (and collective memory construction) is represented in the fact of their suppression and dissolution—a traumatic loss that is enshrined, and revealed, in preservative repression.⁵⁶

Film scholars have categorized these four films as examples of transnational cinema because they illustrate how national films critique global visual language to reflect the way it "flattens" national experience. Through their visual language, they demonstrate resistance against the displacement of the nation as a viable marker of (collective) identity.⁵⁷ The films deploy global cinematic language paradoxically to interrogate the fixity of borders and they use the revealed inconsistencies to represent traumatic collective experience and its memory. Thus, Del

Toro merges the fantastical and the real in *Pan's Labyrinth*. He relies on familiar phantasmagoric tropes of children's literature to refract global "visuality" and, in this "transnational and transcultural context," to challenge memories of the Spanish civil war;⁵⁸ the gothic-inspired *A Tale of Two Sisters* also deploys global cinematic features to represent national memory as fractured and illegible;⁵⁹ in *The Others*, the visual structuring of time and space challenges notions of temporal reality to comment on subjective and collective perceptions of effaced historical memory;⁶⁰ and the journey undertaken by the father and sons in *The Return* has been interpreted as a "creation of a new structure of belonging and cultural knowledge."⁶¹

Filmic Language and Speech

Filmic language by itself, however, can take us only so far. The actual language in film has meaning too. I will demonstrate how the language of the nations, whose unraveling the films allegorize, establishes and communicates a linguistic surround that transmits a collective traumatic experience. I read the national languages of these films as a third vernacular that must be reconciled with the national and global filmic languages that, hybridized together, characterize transnational films. And I will show how the imagery of both cinematic languages can be translated into the distinct national speech of each film.

Cinematographic language cannot be separated from the words that it denotes; the more we can translate what we see into language, the closer we can get to the secrets that language conceals. I will illustrate how fundamentally, cinematography can be clarified by linguistic investigation of the visual film. Film images alone do not yield access to the event that must be hidden from view; they must be contextualized within the national language. For example, I will show how the fairy-tale imagery with which del Toro cryptically communicates Ofelia's ancestral secret tells us even more about her haunting when it is read "in Spanish." Similarly, the imagery of Zvyagintsev's film, translated into Russian, reveals startling overlaps with del Toro's, although the two works could not be more different. Demonstrations such as these support Abraham and Torok's belief, and my own, that experience is essentially linguistic.

I will argue that these four films represent a specific subset of transnational cinema. Characterized by lexical networks that both conceal and reveal shameful experience, they offer an alternative understanding of how national films express the experience of social disintegration. As we read the films backward, we will note the absences that define episodes of linguistic breakdown and so identify and decode the secrets that inform these characters' identities.

To reconcile an inherited symbol with its absent-complement is to hear what had to be silenced. The uncovering of an encrypted secret, however,