

Spectres of lost futures: hauntology and Juan Soto's Parábola del retorno

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(2024) Spectres of lost futures: hauntology and Juan Soto's Parábola del retorno. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 33 (4). pp. 667-684. ISSN 1469-9575 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2024.2424800> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/114871/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2024.2424800>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

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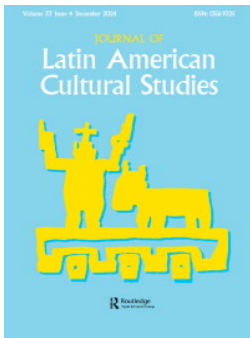
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To cite this article: Cherilyn Elston (2024) Spectres of Lost Futures: Hauntology and Juan Soto's *Parábola del retorno*, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 33:4, 667-684, DOI: [10.1080/13569325.2024.2424800](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2024.2424800)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2024.2424800>



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Cherilyn Elston

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SPECTRES OF LOST FUTURES: HAUNTOLOGY AND JUAN SOTO'S *PARÁBOLA DEL RETORNO*

*Colombian filmmaker Juan Soto has been read within recent scholarship as forming part of a significant new generation of filmmakers producing experimental works that counter dominant (extractive) representations of the country's armed conflict. Soto's experimental engagement with memory and his family's own relationship to political violence are clearly on display in his 2017 film *Parábola del retorno* (Parable of the Return), which explores the exile and disappearance of the director's uncle, Wilson Mario. This article contends, however, that the film's critical engagement with the audiovisual archive should also be situated within a recent turn in Colombian cultural production in which modes of spectrality and haunting have sought to bring to the present the silences of Colombia's history of violence in the context of recent peacebuilding and transitional justice processes. Analysing how Soto's film cinematographically enacts ideas of hauntology, the article shows that Soto deploys the modes of spectrality not to reinforce dominant discourses of historical memory or work through a violent past. Instead, it argues that Soto dialogues with recent scholarly work on spectrality that emphasises the emancipatory potential of the ghost as a means of critiquing official discourses of "post-conflict" and teleological ideas of "transition" in Colombia.*

Keywords: Juan Soto; hauntology; spectres; transitional justice; Colombian cinema; exile

Introduction

Over the last decade, Colombian filmmaker Juan Soto has produced a body of work in which he has developed a particular audiovisual language. Reflecting his practice as a film editor and preservationist, his films – which cross the boundaries of documentary and experimental modes – are characterised by their use of montage, found footage, and in particular his own family archives to explore questions of identity, self-representation, memory, and the history of Colombian political violence.¹ Discussing Soto's output in 2014, the critic Pedro Zuluaga (2014) defined it as "a work imbued with personal traits that are sustained by memory and the archive, by film and photography, by the gaze". Recent scholarship, moreover, has identified how these characteristics situate Soto's films within a new

body of Colombian cinematic production that displays a turn towards more subjective and experimental filmmaking, specifically in the documentary format,² as well as a “critical relationship to archival moving image and found footage” (Vélez-Serna 2022, 13). Juana Suárez’s research has been important in this regard, identifying a group of filmmakers born in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Camilo Restrepo, Laura Huertas Millán, Felipe Guerrero, Nicolás Rincón Guille, amongst others, whose work shares a concern with “an appropriation and suspicion of the archive (not only audiovisual), so that the resulting works escape definition” (2019, 542).

Like the rest of his oeuvre, these features characterise Soto’s (2017) film *Parábola del retorno* (*Parable of the Return*). Released shortly after the signing of Colombia’s most recent peace agreement between the Colombian state and the guerrilla group FARC in 2016, the film overtly explores memories of Colombian political violence through the lens of Soto’s own family’s personal and political history. The film, which on the surface appears to be a documentary, ostensibly tells the story of the director’s uncle, Wilson Mario, a Colombian exile living in London forced to flee the country during the 1980s as a result of the political violence against the left-wing political party Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union, UP). After thirty years, and in the new context offered by the peace accords, the film depicts how Wilson Mario decides to return to Colombia to reunite with his family who believe him dead. Yet, this information is relayed to the spectator by the film’s unique, rather experimental format. Beginning with shots of London neighbourhoods and suburbs filmed from the carriage of a moving tube train, and later progressing into an aeroplane cabin as Wilson Mario boards a plane to Bogotá, the camera takes the perspective of Wilson Mario himself, who tells us at the outset that he has bought a video camera to record his journey back to Colombia. This narrative, moreover, is shattered at the end of the film when Wilson Mario’s supposed return to Colombia, symbolised by a shot of one of Bogotá’s most famous landmarks, Monserrate, is overlaid with the dedication “in memoriam, Wilson Mario Tabora Cardona, 1967–1987. Desaparecido el 23 de noviembre de 1987 en la vía Medellín-Bogotá, Colombia” [Gone missing on 23 November 1987, on the Medellín-Bogotá national road, Colombia] (00:37:15).³ *Parábola* thus discloses that what spectators had believed to be Wilson Mario recollecting his past and time in exile was in fact fictional, constructed from testimonies of his family and friends, combined with images recorded on one of Soto’s return trips from London to Bogotá.

Scholarship on Soto’s work and the group of filmmakers within which he is situated has analysed how this experimental aesthetic style and approach to the archive can be understood as a response to the dynamics of the Colombian armed conflict over the last few decades, as well as a reflection on memory and how the conflict has been represented in recent audiovisual productions. Laura Correo Montoya and Juan Osorio Villegas state that Soto’s films, while tracing a link between his personal and national, political history, do not seek to “represent” the conflict or nostalgically recover the past. Instead, through “a poetics of compilation, namely a recontextualisation and re-signification of images through appropriation and montage” (Correo Montoya and Villegas 2021, 168), they assert that Soto explores

Colombian history to critically reflect on the present and on his own self-representation (2021, 168) and positionality (as participant, victim, witness) in relation to personal and historical events (Vélez-Serna 2022, 32). Similarly, María A. Vélez-Serna argues that Soto's generation of filmmakers resist nostalgic, explanatory, or spectacular representations of violence or the country's landscape, which have dominated recent Colombian cinematic productions; in contrast they "counter extractive approaches to the archive, by giving back other images and by questioning the filmmaker's right to tell certain stories, as well as the audience's right to consume them" (2022, 27).

While *Parábola* critically engages with the archive – problematising both the extractivist gaze and the positivism underscoring the documentary format, as the aforementioned scholars have shown – this article argues that the film's cinematic exploration of questions of memory and representations of the conflict should also be situated within an important turn in recent Colombian cultural production, in which modes of spectrality and haunting have explored the ongoing presence of the "past" in Colombia's transitional moment. Reading the film through theories of spectrality and haunting, in particular the application of Derrida's theory of hauntology to explain how contemporary Colombian cultural texts convey the absences and silences of Colombia's history of political violence (Martínez 2020), the article shows how Soto cinematographically brings to the present the silenced story of his disappeared uncle through tropes of haunting. However, while this article analyses the reparative role the film played for Soto and his family in the context of recent transitional justice processes in Colombia, it contends that Soto mobilises these tropes not to reinforce dominant ideas of haunting, memory, and transitional justice as simply working through repressed trauma or moving on from the violent past. Instead, it dialogues with Derrida's theorisation of the emancipatory potential of the spectre, as well as later scholarship on spectrality that has argued that the ghost does not solely represent past violence and trauma, but the lost futures and historic alternatives (Gordon 2011) erased in dominant narratives of transitional justice (Gray 2022) and late capitalism (Fisher 2014). In this way, the article demonstrates that *Parábola* challenges official discourses of Colombia's "post-conflict" and teleological ideas of "transition", at the same time as it mobilises the emancipatory promise of Wilson Mario's lost future in exile.

Hauntology and *Parábola del retorno*

As Juliana Martínez explains in *Haunting Without Ghosts: Spectral Realism in Colombian Literature, Film and Art*, over the last two decades numerous artistic and cultural works in Colombia have turned to "representational techniques associated with spectrality", ghosts and haunting (2020, 3). Martínez groups the cultural works she discusses under the term "spectral realism", which she argues challenges the correlation between visibility and knowledge that underlines classical realism and is instead marked by "a profound distrust of visibility" and an exploration of the "limits and unreliability of the visible" (2020, 23–24). Through exploring these limits, and "representational techniques that weave disappearance, ambiguity, and

critical reflection into the narrative fabric” (2020, 3), Martínez argues that such works address “the ethical and aesthetic challenges that historical violence poses to cultural representation” (2020, 2). Moving away from direct, and often exoticised, representations of violence, she states that these spectral realist cultural texts seek to find new modes of storytelling that explore the “unresolved absences and truncated histories” (2020, 4) and “the vanishings and silences that constitute Colombia’s recent history” (2020, 3).

Martínez’s study explicitly builds upon previous work in Colombian cultural studies, particularly Rory O’Bryen’s *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture: Spectres of La Violencia*, which analysed how several late-twentieth-century Colombian cinematic and literary productions engaged “notions of spectrality and haunting” (2008, 17) in relation to an earlier moment of the Colombian conflict, the mid-century period known as *La Violencia*. Both studies draw upon Jacques Derrida’s influential *Specters of Marx* (1994), which, as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen explain, inaugurated what they term a “spectral turn” in critical and cultural theory in the 1990s in which the ghostly or spectral became deployed as a conceptual metaphor across the humanities and social sciences “to theorise a variety of social, ethical, and political questions” (2013, 2). As Blanco and Preen emphasise, Derrida deployed the figure of the spectre not to speak about a fantastical being or literal ghost but as a metaphor for “that which haunts like a ghost” (2013, 9). Coining the term “hauntology” to refer to the haunting of this “non-object, this non-present present, this being there of an absent or departed one” (1994, 6), the aim of *Specters of Marx*, which was written in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of actual existing socialism, was to challenge celebratory declarations of the triumph of capitalism and the “end of history” (see Fukuyama 1992).

While Derrida was engaged with a specific re-reading of Marxism, the conceptual metaphor of the spectre and Derrida’s call for us to learn to live with ghosts “in the name of justice. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet *there*” (1994, xix), have been taken up more broadly as part of an exploration of the possibilities of justice for victims of past violence. Consequently, interest in spectrality and haunting has become intimately, and unsurprisingly, linked, as Blanco and Preen also point out, to the late-twentieth-century turn to history, memory, and the collective traumas of the past, as consolidated within the fields of trauma and memory studies (2013, 10–11). Echoing Avery F. Gordon, who explains that “[t]hese Specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed” (2011, 2), the spectral modes in Colombian culture that Martínez highlights could accordingly be seen as responding to the new peace-building context in the country since the mid-2000s. Significantly, this has involved an overt embracing of the language and mechanisms of transitional justice as part of an attempt to “come to terms” with the legacy of violence and provide reparations to victims (UN Secretary-General 2004, 3), as well as reinforce discourses of historical memory as an essential component of this task.⁴

This seeking of justice and memory also determined the making of *Parábola*, which as Soto explains, had reparative aims. Wilson Mario’s disappearance in 1987 formed part of one of the largest and most egregious human rights abuses in

Colombia's recent past, in which 5733 members of the UP, a political party set up as part of the peace negotiations between the government of President Belisario Betancur and the FARC in the mid-1980s, were systematically assassinated or disappeared (CEV 2022, 71). Although the political genocide against the UP is not exactly a silenced aspect of Colombian history,⁵ for Soto the emphasis on the sheer number of people who disappeared and were assassinated in human rights narratives about the case has tended to erase the story of individual lives. Correspondingly, it was important to create a film "in which the individual was identifiable" (personal interview). Inspired by archival images that were sent to Soto's grandmother after Wilson Mario's disappearance and which appear at the end of the film, depicting Wilson Mario's bedroom in Bogotá in the 1980s and a party where he is seen dancing and enjoying himself with other members of the UP, with *Parábola* Soto sought to provide a form of reparations for his own family and make this comprehensible to a broader public:

The question that inspired the film is what do I do to make these five minutes of blurry archival footage, in which you can barely identify people, mean to an ordinary viewer what they meant to my grandmother. (personal interview)

Soto's solution was to construct a narrative that imagined an alternative future for Wilson Mario, which he would give to his family on the thirtieth anniversary of his uncle's disappearance. The first showing of the film thus catalysed a process of symbolic reparations and memory-making, in which his family "organised a symbolic burial at the place where he was disappeared, on a bridge over a river, where they threw flowers and led an act of symbolic reparations" (personal interview), and its production and distribution have gone hand in hand with judicial and transitional justice processes that have begun to clarify the circumstances of Wilson Mario's disappearance.⁶

However, the decision to fictionalise Wilson Mario's story, to create a false narrative of survival and exile complicates the truth-seeking aims of normative transitional justice and memory discourses, as well as the norms of documentary filmmaking.⁷ While *Parábola* at first glance appears to be a documentary, its denouement very clearly separates the film from the documentary form's "definitive presumption of objectivity" and "impression of authenticity" (Juhász and Lerner 2006, 8) as a realistic and unmediated representation of the truth of the world or historical events. Moreover, the form and style of the film, incorporating Soto's characteristic use of montage and mediation of found footage, also problematises the reliability of the visual and the cinematic medium itself. This significantly reflects not only the suspicion of the archive noted by Suárez and others but also connects to hauntology and spectral realism's suspicion of visibility. This is established from the outset of *Parábola* when Wilson Mario tells us he is trying out his new camera. Experimenting with the zoom he films what appears to be the bottom of the sea, "Casi me parece el fondo del mar" [It seems like the bottom of the sea] (00:01:24), but as the camera zooms out it becomes clear that these grainy underwater images are in fact a poster depicting some flowers. Anticipating

the film's final reveal, from the first shot of *Parábola* Soto comments on the mediating nature of cinema and the limits of the visible; as Wilson Mario says, "Hay que ver lo diferente que se ve esto a través de la cámara" [This looks very odd through the lens of the camera] (00:01:13).

As Martínez states, works of spectral realism incorporate the "destabilizing force of disappearance into the formal composition of the works" (2020, 24) and Soto himself describes *Parábola* as an experiment in the possibilities of "representing an absence cinematographically, filming the invisible, materialising a ghost" (Carreño 2020). The film therefore does not simply create a fictional story, a fabulation of survival, but in fact enacts the Derridean spectre. This is most obviously seen in the fabulation at the heart of the film, in which a "non-present present" (Derrida 1994, 6) is narrated by an invisible, absent presence, and is constructed through the film's most conscious aesthetic decision, to position the spectator as if they had Wilson Mario's point of view, which focuses in and out on the other passengers on the tube and the plane, the landscape seen through the train window and the inflight map screen depicting the plane's arc from the UK to Colombia. The lingering presence of what cannot be seen, the disappeared central protagonist of the film, who is telling the story and who we never see in the present of the film, is furthermore emphasised by the fact that Wilson Mario has a camera in his hands and is filming his fellow passengers on the train and plane, some of whom look directly at the camera and return the filmmaker's gaze. This creates a sensation of being observed, not just for Wilson Mario's fellow passengers but for the spectators themselves. As Derrida asserts, spectrality creates a "visor effect: we do not see who looks at us" but can "feel ourselves being looked at" (1994, 7).

This sensation is juxtaposed against the limitations placed on the spectator's own vision and knowledge. Not only can we not see Wilson Mario but the film itself constantly witnesses the act of disappearance. Early on in *Parábola*, after a sequence in which Wilson Mario films first some allotments and then a cemetery from the window of the tube train and tells us "Yo desaparecí del mapa" [I vanished] (00:10:57) as all the members of the UP were being systematically killed, an archival image of a newspaper article about his disappearance when he was working as a bodyguard and driver for the president of the UP Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, who was assassinated in 1990, flashes up on the screen (00:11:35–00:12:12). While being a premonition of the film's final revelation, the fragmentary exposition of the article, Soto's overlaying of various images and inversion of the photo of Wilson Mario that accompanies the text so that it looks like a film negative – one of the few times in the film we see his actual image – both refuses to directly explain what happened to Wilson Mario, at the same time as it hauntingly illustrates his erasure. As Laura Marks explains, via Deleuze, these are "thin images", black or white screens or underexposed and snowy images, which call on the viewer to search for the hidden history behind the image (2000, 42), and are used intermittently throughout *Parábola* to represent the unrepresentable: Wilson Mario's disappearance.

Martínez argues that the limitations spectral realism places on the visual results in heightened auditory perception (2020, 28) and the "haptic reworking of vision,

sound, and space” (2020, 29). In the films Martínez analyses this is seen in the absence of an omniscient narrative voice, the interference of background sounds, incoherent conversations and unidentifiable voices, which creates a sense of “auditory haunting” (2020, 28). These features characterise the soundscape of *Parábola*. While the film does feature a narrative voice, it is a silent one. Eschewing a voiceover, Wilson Mario’s narrative is conveyed through on-screen text, which slowly reveals details about his life: his family, his childhood and youth in Armenia and Medellín, secrets of his adolescence, his hopes and expectations about reuniting with his family, and, importantly, the reason why he was forced into exile in London. The story told through the on-screen text, for which each spectator adopts their own internal voice, is juxtaposed against the ambient noise of the tube train and plane, where inaudible conversations can be heard alongside the passenger announcements and other obtrusive sounds. While these ambient noises dominate the majority of the film, at various points other extra-diegetic sounds are overlaid upon the image or it is unclear whether the sound is diegetic or not. These include a haunting musical track over the newspaper article about Wilson Mario’s disappearance, the use of other distorted sounds over the archival images of Wilson Mario’s bedroom in Bogotá and the merging of music and voices over the images of the party, where the sound sometimes, but not always consistently, seems to emerge from the image.

Additionally, *Parábola* includes two very specific examples of extra-diegetic sounds, two poems inserted over close-ups of fellow passengers’ ears as if they were listening to the poems themselves. The first is T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”, recited in English by the poet himself; the second, is Colombian poet Porfirio Barba Jacob’s “Parábola del retorno”, from which the film takes its title, recited in Spanish by one of Soto’s relatives, Federico Taborda. While the comparison between the poems indicates the exilic relationship between the UK and Colombia – either side of the parabola illustrated by the plane’s journey from London to Bogotá – they also evoke another key aspect of spectrality, its anachronism and “experience of a time that is out of joint” (Fisher 2012, 20). In Barba Jacob’s poem, this is demonstrated in the return of the speaker of the poem – an errant “I” like Wilson Mario who similarly reflects nostalgically on his infancy – to the lost landscape of childhood. Through the technique of interrogation, the poem thus creates a landscape of absence or disappearance, similar to Soto’s film, in which the present is saturated by all that is lost. In “Burnt Norton” meanwhile, the distinction between the past, present and future, alongside their hypothetical iterations, similarly collapses. As it states:

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.

In its evocation of “what might have been”, Eliot’s poem is deployed by Soto to illustrate the experiment he undertakes in *Parábola*, to imagine another present in which Wilson Mario survived. Yet the poem also, in the context of the film, points to how the spectre disrupts linear notions of time and the “ordering of time in ontological terms of a succession of ‘états presents’” (O’Byrne 2008, 23). For Derrida a spectral moment “no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents” (1994, xx), and complicates ontologies of being and presence: “What is important about the figure of the spectre, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*” (Hagglund, cited in Fisher 2012, 19). As such, Wilson Mario’s haunting presence shortly after the signing of the 2016 FARC peace agreement, hints, as we shall now go on to see, at how both the spectre and *Parábola* disturb dominant ideas of time and linear temporality at a key moment of “transition” for Colombia.

Spectres of lost futures

Parábola’s reparative role for Soto’s family and its insertion within processes of historical memory and transitional justice suggests on the one hand how the film could be situated within what scholars have termed the cinema and documentary film of Colombia’s “post-conflict”. As Felipe Gómez states, within Colombia there has been a push over the last decade to inscribe a large amount of film and documentary works, amongst other cultural products that have dealt with themes of memory and violence, within a discourse of “post-conflict” and historical memory, which is underscored by the dominant idea that telling the stories of victims can lead to peace and reconciliation (2020, 19). Indeed, as Struan Gray points out, “post-conflict” or “transitional” contexts predominantly reinforce a discourse of “working through or overcoming the ‘dark past’” (2022, 3) and tropes of haunting could be read as forming part of an affective imaginary in which trauma or a repressive psychic state must be exorcised (2022, 24).

In recent years, however, scholars of spectrality have come to critique this interpretation of hauntology as something of a cliché (Blanco and Perea 2013, 15), which itself has become so ubiquitous across various cultures and cultural theory that the figure of the spectre has been both depoliticised and decontextualised (Luckhurst 2002, 542). Moreover, as Gray argues, an uncritical reading of tropes of haunting as reflecting the return of a repressed trauma that needs to be worked through erases a key aspect of Derrida’s theorisation of hauntology: how it disturbs linear notions of time. In his study of haunting in Chile, particularly during the “postdictatorship” context after the country’s transition to democracy from the late 1980s, Gray argues that the persistence of the past in the present, “as images, promises, prophecies, ghosts, visions and affective atmospheres” (2022, 3), instead

should be read as problematising the “linear, chronological temporality” that often goes unquestioned in dominant imaginaries of transitional justice (2022, 12). Gray’s work builds on critical analyses of transitional justice within Chile, which have questioned the teleology of “transition” and pointed to the continuities between the dictatorial past and democratic present, as well as how transitional justice’s end goal assumes the hegemony of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, and to the erasure of resistance and rebellion. Consequently, he points to how haunting can make visible ongoing forms of injustice (2022, 4) and the structural continuities between time periods (2022, 8), predominantly denied within transitional justice’s frameworks of reconciliation and democratisation.

The use of haunting to disrupt ideas of transition in Chile is echoed in the Colombian context, where the application of transitional justice mechanisms highlights even more starkly the limits of temporalities of “transition”, normatively understood as moving from an authoritarian regime to a liberal democracy, as in Chile, or armed conflict to peace (Arthur 2009). As numerous scholars have highlighted, since the mid-2000s Colombia has undergone what has been termed a process of transitional justice without transition (Uprimny 2006, 14; see also Laplante and Theidon 2006; García-Godos and Lid 2010; Rowen 2017) in which the language of transition and post-conflict was adopted without substantive transformations in the nature of the conflict or an end to the multiple forms of violence in the country. As O’Byren argues in his analysis of the “continuum” of violence after the 2016 peace accords, Colombia’s long history of demobilisations and of peace attempts “turned violent pacifications” (O’Byren 2018, 418) problematise discourses of peacebuilding and transition in which the simple demobilisation of armed groups and mainly symbolic forms of reparation signify the end of the war. As he states, attempts to “turn the page” by isolating each singular conflict erase the intersection of ongoing forms of “political” and “everyday”, structural violence that disrupts settled notions of war and peace (2018, 419). Accordingly, as the country’s layering of “multiple, heterogeneous conflicts” (2018, 423) requires “*inter-temporal* forms of justice” that address such violence within a historical continuum (2018, 423), forms of spectrality in Colombia similarly disrupt the creation of an official “rhetoric of post-conflict” and a “teleological vision of the nation” where the armed conflict was consigned to the past (Martínez 2020, 30) even as violence persists.

As Martínez emphasises then, “what spectrality questions is the ‘fixity’ and ‘pastness’ of historical violence or the portrayal of violent situations as enclosed, and bygone events that do not, and should not, affect, much less disrupt, the present” (2020, 31). This is particularly significant for the case Wilson Mario’s disappearance forms part of, as well as the “paradoxical context” within which transitional justice was initially implemented in Colombia (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016, 7). Brought to the present in the film after the 2016 peace accords, the political genocide of the UP after an earlier peace process exemplifies the limits of narratives of peacebuilding – being a clear example of the violent pacification mentioned by O’Byren – and problematises the dominant narrative of transitional justice in Colombia from its emergence in the mid-2000s with the “Justice and Peace” Law. Providing for the demobilisation of paramilitary forces while creating official

memory and reconciliation initiatives, this law was implemented in the context of a “denialist politics” (Rodríguez Castro 2020, 2) during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, in which the existence of the armed conflict was disavowed and an official narrative was constructed that held that “the guerrillas were more culpable than the paramilitary and the state was not culpable at all” in perpetrating violence (Rowen 2017, 632).⁸ In this sense then, *Parábola*’s calling to memory of Wilson Mario’s disappearance as part of the political genocide of the UP – perpetrated by the paramilitaries alongside members of state forces – challenges this denialist narrative by highlighting a case of state and para-state persecution under the umbrella of “dirty war” strategies. Consequently, Wilson Mario’s spectral presence in the late 2010s disrupts linear history and refutes “the oblivion that the elites and paramilitarism would seek to impose” (Bernal Benavides 2022, 179) in their calls for the country to “turn the page”.

Moreover, in its engagement with hauntology *Parábola* not only problematises the “pastness” of violence and the teleology of transition in Colombia, it also demonstrates the haunting of the present by the lost futures and historic alternatives represented by Wilson Mario’s life and the movements he formed part of. Although this is clearly symbolised in the lost future of Wilson Mario in exile, as we shall go on to see, it is articulated politically through the recording of Wilson Mario dancing at the party with other members of the UP and the images of his bedroom that formed part of the archival material sent to Soto’s grandmother by Wilson Mario’s comrades, “todos jovencitos, veinteañeros como él” [all young, twentysomethings like him], after his disappearance (Soto, personal interview). Indeed, the home video of Wilson Mario’s bedroom, which focuses in and out on the images on the walls (featuring a picture of Manuel Marulanda, the founder of the FARC, a Communist Youth poster, and a poster in solidarity with Uruguayan political prisoners, amongst others), very clearly signals the politics of the UP and why they were targeted as part of a systematic campaign against a legally constituted left-wing political party (Cepeda 2006). At the same time, in their haunting articulation of an explicitly socialist politics, and in the film’s evocation of this in the 2010s – decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism – the images point to Marxism’s spectral afterlife even beyond the “end of history”. This furthermore reinforces how *Parábola*’s spectrality does not stop at a depoliticised “melancholic entrapment” (Blanco and Pereen 2013, 16) in past trauma but connects to its roots in Derrida’s claims for Marxism’s haunting presence at a “moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible or thinkable” (1994, xix).

As Gray argues, alongside questioning dominant narratives of transition, hauntology can also draw to the present another element often erased in dominant discourses of transitional justice and memory, the idea “of the past as a sphere of hope and emancipatory possibility” (2022, 8). Echoing recent scholarship in memory studies that has questioned the field’s dominant preoccupation with the past as defined by trauma and repression and called for its reorientation towards memories of activism and “positive forms of attachment” that inspire hope (Rigney 2018, 370), Gray draws upon both the “emancipatory promise of the spectral traces” of Marxism as analysed by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (2022, 15), as well as other theorists, particularly Gordon, who “share

a belief that the haunting past can be a socially transformative presence” (2022, 16). For Gordon, then, the appearance of the ghost represents not just the “social violence done in the past” (2011, 2) but, following Herbert Marcuse, the haunting of the present by “the ‘historic alternatives’ that could have been and by the peculiar temporality of the shadowing of lost and better futures” (2011, 7). Distinguishing haunting from trauma, Gordon argues that “futuraity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself” (2011, 3) and “is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done” (2011, 2). Thus, rather than working through the ghost, it “should be engaged in dialogue, so as to reactivate hopes, or projects that have been deemed lost or obsolete” (Gray 2022, 14).

Within *Parábola* this reading of hauntology as mobilising the “memories, traces and prophecies of rebellion” (Gray 2022, 4), and “the enduring presence of emancipatory pasts that have been deemed lost or obsolete” (Gray 2022, 3), is furthermore demonstrated in a key hauntological intertext that permeates Soto’s work: the thinking of the English writer and cultural theorist Mark Fisher, whom the director has mentioned as an influence in various interviews and whose work he was reading during the making of *Parábola*.⁹ Fisher applied Derrida’s concept of hauntology, particularly to music and popular culture, to speak about what he described as a “cultural impasse” (2012, 16) in the early twenty-first century in which the future, or the “capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live” (2012, 16), has disappeared. Paraphrasing Fredric Jameson, in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* Fisher (2009) described this as the inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism. Soto himself has remarked that reading Fisher provided him with the ability to recognise how the present is defined by the cultural theorist’s definition of capitalist realism:

I had studied capitalism from a Marxist approach, from theory, from capital, but I had never fully understood how it is to live within capitalism. Listening to Fisher enabled me to understand how the effects embed themselves in your brain. He saw very clearly that the sadness, the sadness of the present, had a very clear root, and that was in a political system. (personal interview)

For Fisher, despite the limitations of the capitalist realist present as described by Soto, the failure of the future, while resulting in artworks “suffused with an overwhelming melancholy” (2014, 20), does not equate to what Wendy Brown defined as “left melancholy”, or an attachment to a failed past over the possibility of political transformation in the present (1999, 21). In contrast, and in a context in which cultural texts have become haunted, “not so much by the past” but by “all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 2012, 16), Fisher’s melancholia consists of “a refusal to give up on the desire for the future” and consequently maintains a political dimension, “because it amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism” (2014, 20). As he argues then, the spectre, “the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world” (2014, 23).

In the same way, *Parábola*’s spectrality relates to Gordon’s description of the historic alternatives evoked through the modes of haunting. This is particularly seen

in the archival footage of the party where Wilson Mario is seen celebrating with his comrades. In sharing the blurry images of Wilson Mario and his friends dancing salsa, eating food, laughing and joking around, Soto does not simply reinforce the “public and ritualistic display[s] of mourning and protest” (Taylor 1997, 186), such as the black-and-white photos of the disappeared and assassinated that have become iconic of protests against state terror in Latin America, although these do appear in the film. Instead, *Parábola* depicts a largely unseen side to the UP, a moment when political transformation was possible and where pleasure, joy, and happiness formed part of this. Significantly then, this provides an alternative representation to both the predominant image of the UP, as constructed through processes of memory and commemoration, as well as memory discourses of the Left, where revolution and activism have become inextricable from mourning, trauma, and loss (Hamilton 2010). This is not to say the film reinforces a simple nostalgia for an unreconstructed Marxism nor a left melancholic attachment to outdated political ideas. This unique archival footage and its montage within a narrative that obliges the spectator to both believe in Wilson Mario’s existence in the present and adopt his position throughout the film – as Soto argues, “yo creo que hay que experimentar la historia en el presente” [I believe we need to experience history in the present] (personal interview) – also indicates a Fisherian refusal to give up on a desire for alternative futures. Thus, the film’s articulation of the haunting of the present by Wilson Mario and his fellow members of the UP can be read as reproaching the capitalist realist world and the alternative narratives and futures that have been both violently suppressed within Colombia and often erased within transitional justice’s legalistic and liberal-capitalist biases (Zunino 2016).

Conclusion – spectres of exile

The presence of Fisher in Soto’s work furthermore highlights another significant feature of *Parábola*, the diasporic connection between the UK and Colombia that both defines Wilson Mario’s fictional journey of return in the film and Soto’s own life. Suárez’s central work mapping Soto’s generation of filmmakers importantly links the experimental aesthetic style of their films and their suspicion of the archive to the “geographical dislocations” (2019, 559) that define both their own personal trajectories, as filmmakers that predominantly live and work abroad, and their filmic production. Reading these films through Marks’s influential theorisation of intercultural cinema – understood as emerging from “the new cultural forms of Western metropolitan centres” and resulting from the “global flows of immigration, exile, and diaspora” (2000, 1) – Suárez applies Marks’ theory of “haptic visuality” whereby diasporic filmmakers recompose individual and cultural memories lost in the process of displacement through sensorial, non-visual recollections and the materiality of the film (2019, 543). As seen above, these elements are clearly on show in *Parábola*, which in the main focuses on Wilson Mario’s fictional return to Bogotá, and is dominated by images of what Hamid Naficy describes in his theory of accented cinema as “transitional and transnational places and spaces” (2001, 5), such as the tube train, the airport and the aeroplane, and represents the

disjunct orders of image and sound that characterise the diasporic experience (Marks 2000, 31) through an emphasis on the sensorial and non-visual.

For Suárez, the work of Soto and his peers – who mainly work in Europe and cannot be characterised as “exiles”, having “moved to different countries for personal reasons or even out of the privileged position” of relocating to carry out their artistic and intellectual projects (Suárez 2019, 544) – responds to diverse migratory experiences that do not reflect traditional frameworks based on postcolonial categories or displacements caused by political violence. As she argues, then, the diasporic forms of language and expression on show in their films represent a questioning of both “the idea of the nation”, as well as the “very concept of Colombian cinema” (2019, 542). However, while Soto’s own positionality echoes Suárez’s point – he similarly emphasises that his exile is not “obligatorio, es un exilio voluntario” [obligatory, it is a voluntary exile] (personal interview) – the characteristics identified in Marks’s theory, which asserts that the diasporic condition produces “a suspicion of visibility, a lack of faith in the visual archive’s ability to represent cultural memory” (2000, 21), has much in common with the modes of haunting and spectral realism’s distrust of visibility. These, as we have seen in *Parábola*, do not simply suggest a suspicion of the Colombian nation or of the archive but engage quite explicitly and critically with the transitional moment and the peacebuilding context the film forms part of.

Thus, although the film articulates a fictional story of political exile, reading its form and style through the lens of hauntology rather than theories of diasporic cinema or Soto’s own individual positionality enables us to comprehend how *Parábola* evokes an aspect of the UP’s and Colombia’s political history that has largely been silenced until the most recent peace process.¹⁰ As Martínez argues, spectral realism’s visual ambiguity is also linked to how it unmoors the stable spatial coordinates of classical realism, creating spectral sites with no specific geographical referents but which “haunt the national imaginary” as “spaces in which violence has gorged itself” (2020, 25–26). While in Martínez’s analysis spectral realism situates itself in the Colombian countryside – the largely remote areas where the war has been most acute, which she terms, following Evelio Rosero, the “lejeros” of Colombia, or faraway lands – *Parábola* introduces a further spectral site, the initially ambiguous non-spaces of the London tube train and airport, which on the surface appear both geographically unstable and unconnected to violence in Colombia. As Fisher states, haunting resists the “contraction and homogenisation of time and space” in such sites of capitalist globalisation and occurs when these places become “stained by time” or become sites for an “encounter with broken time” (2012, 19).

Consequently, alongside representing a disruption of linear time, Wilson Mario’s hypothetical past/present/future in London positions the unmoored, non-space of exile as a silenced site of violence haunting the Colombian national imaginary. In this sense, it is vital to recognise how *Parábola* has been included amongst an emerging group of cultural texts, particularly documentary films, that have begun to explore and provide more complex narratives about migration and forced migration from Colombia.¹¹ Indeed, this complexity, as Anastasia Bermúdez points out, has been the consequence of a multifaceted, long-lasting conflict involving multiple armed actors and forms of violence, which has produced a heterogeneous

population abroad that problematises easy distinctions between “economic migrants” and “refugees”, and “forced” and “voluntary” migrations (Bermúdez 2021, 9).¹² These cultural texts importantly have contributed to a transformation in the visibility of Colombian refugees, exiles, and migrants abroad – a process to a large extent coalesced by the 2012–2016 peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC, as well as the transitional justice mechanisms emerging from this – which have challenged the reluctance to recognise political exile and international displacement as a consequence of the war (CNMH 2018, 10).¹³

Arguably then, Soto’s films, in particular *Parábola*, should not solely be seen through the lens of diasporic hybridity or a critical engagement with the archive, although these are present within them. Instead, despite its fictional construct, *Parábola* can be read as exploring a silenced story of political exile that haunts dominant narratives of Colombian emigration as economic and not connected to the conflict (Bermúdez 2017, 213).¹⁴ Moreover, while Wilson Mario expresses the pain of exile in *Parábola*, within the framework of the film, exile is also configured as a liberatory space – what Soto refers to as “the poetic liberty to give him a moment of freedom” (personal interview) – that is linked to the lost futures that are a fundamental part of Fisher’s idea of hauntology and spectrality in general. Consequently, the specific futurity of *Parábola*’s scene of haunting, the decision to imagine an alternative future for Wilson Mario in which he escaped instead of being disappeared, is specifically bound up with a “something-to-be-done” that mobilises the past as a space of emancipatory possibility as well as a site of political violence, and thus engages in an act of futurity that contributes to the transformation of the current forms of transitional justice in Colombia. In this way, *Parábola*, alongside critiquing the linear temporalities of “transition” and “post-conflict” in the country forms part of an “imagining and constructing [of] more socially just and equitable futures” (Gray 2022, 4) and ideas of justice in Colombia in which exiles, migrants, and refugees can be included.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Alongside *Parábola del retorno*, Soto has made a series of films since 2009, most notably the shorts *19° Sur 65° Oeste* (*19° South 65° West*, 2010) and *Oslo* (2012), and the full-length film *Estudio de Reflejos* (*Study on Reflections*, 2013). See <https://www.juansoto.co.uk/>.
2. Like other recent Latin American documentary films exploring memories of violence, María Marcos Ramos and Pablo Calvo de Castro define Soto’s work as an example of postdocumentary, understood as combining diverse cinematographic methods, such as the use of archival images, montage, an emphasis on sound and the position of the camera, and a questioning of the role of the filmmaker, as well as the limits between documentary and fiction (2022, 4).

3. All English translations of the film come from the version with English subtitles. Any other English translations are my own.
4. Beginning with the passing of Law 975 of 2005, the so-called “Justice and Peace” Law, which created an alternative justice system for illegal armed groups. This marked the first time that the Colombian government adopted the processes and mechanisms of transitional justice. Followed by Law 1448, or the Law of Victims and Land Restitution in 2011, and then the 2016 FARC peace agreement, Colombia has implemented various “alternative approaches to conventional justice” (Laplante and Theidon 2006, 50), which seek to balance the competing demands for punishment of perpetrators of violence with the need to build peace through alternatives to retribution and other initiatives that could benefit victims, such as reparations programmes and truth-seeking mechanisms.
5. Julia Carrillo Lerma (2016, 206) argues that the UP’s memories of violence have occupied a privileged space within the counter-memories (of the Left and victims of state crimes) in the country.
6. This includes a confession by Pedro Antonio Aristizabal as part of the “Justice and Peace” process (Carreño 2020) and the progression of the family’s claim against the Colombian state before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CIDH 2021).
7. Soto contrasts his film with the most famous documentary made about the genocide of the UP, *El baile rojo* (*The Red Dance*, 2003), which he says could be called a “standard” documentary – “I would have never been able to make it and it is a document that has been very useful to me” (Tibble 2016) – and cites the influence of fake documentaries such as fellow Colombian Luis Ospina’s *Un tigre de papel* (*A Paper Tiger*, 2008) and fictional films, such as Chris Marker’s *The Embassy* (1973) (Carreño 2020), which mimic the documentary form and reflect on the “duplicious nature of the cinematic medium” (Alter 2006, 97), on his filmic practice.
8. Official rhetoric represented the “Justice and Peace” Law as a peace process that would deepen Colombian democracy (Díaz 2008, 196). However, the creation of official transitional justice and memory initiatives, including an alternative justice system for paramilitary forces – “pro-systemic actors, who never fought against the state” (Uprimny and Saffon 2008, 168) – went hand in hand with a denial of the conflict’s existence under the argument that “insurgent groups in Colombia were terrorists threatening a pluralist democracy” (Riaño Alcalá and Uribe 2016, 8–9). As Laura Rodríguez Castro remarks, this narrative continued throughout the implementation of subsequent transitional justice and memory mechanisms under successive conservative governments (2020, 4–6). However, the election of left-wing president Gustavo Petro in 2022, a former guerrilla member, and his intention to pursue a policy of “total peace” through negotiations with the remaining armed groups in Colombia clearly signals a shift away from the previous denialist politics of “transition”.
9. Fisher’s book *Capitalist Realism* also makes an appearance in Soto’s 2020 film *Revelaciones* (*Revelations*), and he states that a new piece, *Born Digital*, is inspired by Fisher’s reading of hauntology (personal interview). In his interview with Carreño (2020), Soto mentions Fisher as a key influence.
10. As Carrillo Lerma (2016, 132) points out in her study of exile and migration as a result of the Colombian armed conflict, the huge numbers of members of the UP who were assassinated and disappeared due to state and para-state persecution could be related to the fact that many did not seek refuge or go into exile abroad, “as political migration was a phenomenon denied not only by the government, but also their own movements”, as this was equated with abandoning the struggle.

11. For example, *Parábola* was included in the first Festival of Colombian Migrant Cinema (Festival de Cine Colombia Migrante, FCCM) in 2022.
12. As Bermúdez explains, unlike other cases, such as those fleeing the Southern Cone military dictatorships, the Colombian population abroad includes a variety of profiles, ranging from those who could be defined as political refugees (e.g. left-wing activists, trade unionists, human rights defenders etc.) to those she defines as “accidental refugees” who have fled the country due to generalised violence or “insecurity” (2021, 110). Echoing this, Ángela Iranzo Dosdad and Wooldy Edson Louider have emphasised that official numbers do not capture the totality of victims in the diaspora as many have not claimed asylum or been formally recognised as refugees (Iranzo and Edson 2018, 15).
13. This is despite the fact that more than a million people were forced to leave Colombia to seek international protection between 1982 and 2020, including members of the UP (CEV 2022, 44). Significantly, the Colombian Truth Commission (CEV) was one of the first in the world to include testimonies from exiled victims and has dedicated one of the volumes of its final report to exile. Entitled *La Colombia fuera de Colombia* [The Colombia outside of Colombia], this includes significant testimony from exiled victims, survivors, and family members of the UP and was accompanied by a documentary about exiled members of the movement, *Unión Patriótica desde las cenizas* (*Patriotic Union, from the Ashes*, CEV 2022, 27).
14. This builds upon Soto’s previous film, *19° Sur 65° Oeste* (*19° South 65° West*, 2010), which like *Parábola* has a fragmentary style, using family archival footage and taking the form of a kind of travelogue. Once again recording his own trip, although this time to Montevideo, Uruguay, Soto also uses the film to explore his family’s political history, although this time through another uncle, his uncle Caliche, who unlike Wilson Mario did survive in exile. Caliche, Carlos Enrique Cardona Henao, was a former FARC commander who participated in the creation of the UP. In *19° Sur 65° Oeste* Soto similarly demonstrates the difficulty of recuperating or constructing a clear narrative about the history of his uncle, who barely appears on camera and whose story and presence in exile appears to haunt both Soto’s family history as well as national political history.

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