

*Modern Ghost Melodramas: What Lies Beneath*

Michael Walker

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At almost 500 pages and discussing many dozens of films and television programs, Michael Walker's *Modern Ghost Melodramas* does not want for ambition. Its scope is impressive: it discusses films from Britain, America, Spain, Korea, Japan and more, along with a smattering of television programs. Some are famous, obvious examples, while others are relatively obscure (like *Below* (2002), *The Marsh* (2006) and *Genova* (2008)). Its sprawling quality is both a strength and a weakness.

The structure of *Modern Ghost Melodramas* is eccentric, with some sections focusing on themes (communication with the dead, male melodrama, machines, etc.), some around settings (Hospitals, Schools, Prisons, etc.), some national (Hollywood, Spain, Japan, France, Italy, South Korea, British), and occasionally topics that merge several of these. To my mind, the book is the strongest when it is the most focused, as when focused on two Spanish films about the legacy of Franco; sometimes the treatments of individual films become meandering and disconnected, as if the author could not bear to cut insights even when they do not quite contribute to the overall reading.

As the title implies, its focus is on films of the twenty-first century, though it spends its first 150 pages or so analyzing important earlier ghost films from *The Changeling* (1979) to the 1990s, with *Ringu* (1998) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) positioned as breakthrough hits that motivated a millennial cycle of production. Nonetheless, this is not really an industrial study. Walker does not dwell on box office figures, or production companies, or the sort of commercial pressures that might motivate the continued production of ghost films of a certain kind; one will not learn here, for instance, about Roy Lee, the Korean-American producer who brokered most of the deals for Hollywood remakes of Asian ghost films. His focus is largely textual.

Its title suggests a kind of spiritual follow-up to Katherine A. Fowkes's *Giving up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films* (1998), yet Fowkes's book is cited only a few times. While Fowkes's Lacanian/Deleuzian framework is certainly overdetermined and very much a product of the theoretical climate of the 1990s, Walker's intellectual framework is deliberately much looser. The theme of "melodrama" putatively holds it together and it is reasonably well defined in the introduction, though it is odd that Linda Williams' seminal work on the relationship of horror and melodrama is not cited at all. Neither is much of the writing on ghosts and spectrality in recent decades, within and outside of Film Studies.

On the book's first page, Walker asserts that films like *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* (2001) and *El Orfanato* (2006), "are not really horror films at all. They are more productively viewed as ghost melodramas" (11). I do not understand the need to draw such Manichean distinctions between genres; would it not be more productive still to see them as a point of contact between horror and melodrama, and indeed a space to interrogate those genres' likenesses? Furthermore, what does it matter? The fact of analyzing a film through one critical

paradigm does not necessarily entail denying that it could be handled differently. Somewhat later, Walker positions films like *The Fog* (1980) and *Candyman* (1992) outside of his frame of inquiry since their ghosts are “essentially just monstrous killing machines” (15). This seems to me a dismissive reading of *Candyman*, in part because *Candyman* (Tony Todd) has characterization and motivation that goes beyond murderousness and in part because a melodramatic interracial love story drives much of the narrative. One again gets the impression that the distinction Walker draws is primarily about cultural taste, using melodrama to elevate the films he has chosen to write about above being “just” horror. But many, probably most, of the films he takes on are clearly horror films. The fact that he frequently uses the word “scary” to define his canon makes placing distance between melodrama and the horror film particularly strange. Ghost comedies with melodramatic modalities are similarly excluded (only a smattering of references to the likes of *Just Like Heaven* (2005) or *Ghost Town* (2008)) as, in the main, is art cinema (and what filmmaker more regularly combines ghosts and melodrama than Guy Maddin, completely unmentioned here?).

Playing an interesting role in this book is Jan de Bont’s version of *The Haunting* (1999), which receives a smattering of references but concerted analysis only in a chapter on “Childhood Abuse.” That section begins with: “This film is included primarily for thematic reasons” (164); it is so relevant to the chapter that Walker feels obligated to discuss it despite the fact that it is a CGI-slathered denigration of a classic novel. But ought its quality as a film to be the measure for inclusion in a study of this sort?

What results is a thorough and certainly handsome book (plenty of gorgeous, full-colour pictures) that is certainly full of engaging prose and often insightful readings of individual films. One might venture to call it more “essayistic” than academic, which is surprising only because it

is published by a university press. As such, it makes less of a contribution to the body of literature on the supernatural and cinema (the so-called “spectral turn”) than if it had done more to integrate itself into broader intellectual currents. Walker’s making his individual mark on the area is commendable (and often the benefit of free-thinking that the “independent scholar” brings to scholarly writing), but doing more to forge links with existing scholarship would have been helpful as well.