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In Between Two Deaths: Hauntological Negative Time-Images in Global South Cinema

Entre duas mortes: Imagens-tempo negativas espectrais no cinema do Sul Global

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Abstract

This essay introduces the concept of the "negative time-image" to explore how certain contemporary films from the Global South operate as cinematic ledgers of temporal debt. Building on Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image, Jacques Derrida's hauntology, Jacques Lacan's idea of the "space between two deaths," and Mark Fisher's writings on lost futures, the negative time-image refers to a cinematic articulation of time shaped by absence, spectrality, and disjointed chronology, a ghostly temporality out of sync with the present. These films frame history not as resolved narrative, but as a lingering debt: past traumas and foreclosed futures continue to haunt the now, demanding recognition. Focusing on three films, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021), Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006), and Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019), the essay traces how each work embodies a distinct aspect of the negative time-image. Through detailed analysis of cinematic form, long takes, fractured timelines, sound design, and the visual motif of ruins and ghosts, it examines how these films enact a nonlinear mode of mourning. Rather than resolving grief, they remain suspended in a liminal temporality "between two deaths," where the victims of historical violence persist in spectral form. The essay develops the idea of temporal debt as the unresolved, unpaid dues of history, wounds that remain unhealed, losses unmourned, and argues that cinema, in these cases, becomes a medium for registering that debt. Ultimately, it weaves together the theoretical and cinematic threads to propose cinema as a haunted ledger of time, extending the metaphor toward speculative terrains such as ecological collapse and digital afterlives. The result is a sustained argument for film's capacity to visualize the ghost-time of unfinished histories.

Keywords

time-image | hauntology | Global South cinema | temporal debt | ruins

Resumo

Este ensaio introduz o conceito de imagem-tempo negativa para explorar como certos filmes contemporâneos do Sul Global funcionam como registos cinematográficos de uma dívida temporal. Com base na teoria da imagem-tempo de Gilles Deleuze, na hauntologia de Jacques Derrida, na noção lacaniana de "entre duas mortes" e nas reflexões de Mark Fisher sobre futuros perdidos, a imagem-tempo negativa refere-se a uma articulação cinematográfica do tempo marcada pela ausência, pela espectralidade e por uma cronologia desalinhada, uma temporalidade fantasmagórica fora de compasso com o presente. Esses filmes tratam a história, não como uma narrativa resolvida, mas como uma dívida persistente: traumas passados e futuros forcluídos continuam a assombrar o agora, exigindo reconhecimento. O ensaio concentra-se em três filmes, *Memoria* (2021), de Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Still Life - Natureza Morta* (2006), de Jia Zhangke, *e La Llorona* (2019), de Jayro Bustamante, e analisa como cada obra encarna um aspecto distinto da imagem-tempo negativa. Por meio de uma análise detalhada da forma cinematográfica, planos longos, linhas do tempo fragmentadas, *design* sonoro e o uso visual de ruínas e fantasmas, examina como esses filmes realizam um luto não linear. Em vez de resolver o luto de maneira progressiva, eles permanecem suspensos numa temporalidade liminar "entre duas mortes", onde as vítimas da violência histórica persistem em forma espectral. O ensaio desenvolve a ideia de dívida temporal como os débitos não quitados da história, feridas que permanecem abertas, perdas ainda não choradas, e argumenta que o cinema, nesses casos, se torna num meio de registrar essa dívida. Por fim, o ensaio entrelaça os fios teóricos e cinematográficos para propor o cinema como um registo assombrado do tempo, estendendo a metáfora para terrenos especulativos como o colapso ecológico e as pós-vidas digitais. O resultado é um argumento coeso sobre a capacidade do cinema de visualizar o tempo-fantasma de histórias inacabadas.

Palavras-chave

imagem-tempo | hauntologia | cinema do Sul Global | dívida temporal | ruínas

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Introduction

In the modern film landscape of the Global South, a notable theme can be seen: the remnants of history that are ghostly disrupt linear conceptions of time and force a kind of accounting to happen. These films do more than just tell stories; they act as witnesses to breakdowns in time. They pull viewers into situations where past events, the present moment, and future possibilities that were not realized mix together. In this realm, mourning ceases to follow a straightforward path. Instead, it takes on the form of a pause, a state of being that does not lead to a clear endpoint. This essay presents a concept referred to as the "negative time-image," aiming to depict a specific filmic interpretation of time influenced by notions of absence, ghostly presence, and obligations that linger. The term "negative" holds a dual meaning. It suggests a likeness to a negative photograph, which uncovers that which tends to stay hidden: the forgotten

elements, those things that are pushed aside, or even the things completely erased from memory. Simultaneously, like a negative account balance, it signals something unpaid or unresolved in time—a kind of temporal debt[1]. This notion refers not just to trauma or injustice, but to something owed across time: events or lives left unmourned, futures that never materialized, and histories that resist closure. The cinematic image becomes a ledger[2], not of completed histories, but of unfinished reckonings.

Hauntology, Between Two Deaths, and the Negative Time-Image

This concept builds upon a constellation of theoretical frameworks. Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image offers a foundation, emerging from the modern cinema's breakdown of the sensory-motor link (Deleuze 1989, 1-5). Once the image is untethered from the demands of linear action and causal narrative, time itself, in its virtual, non-chronological, and purely optical and auditory states, can be presented directly, unfolding through contemplative audiovisual rhythms. Jacques Lacan's notion of being "between two deaths," derived from his analysis of Antigone, helps conceptualize a liminal state (Lacan 1992, 270-80). In this state, characters or communities are symbolically dead, yet still alive in the physical world. Such figures (or even entire societies) live in a suspended zone where normal time and social order are broken.

Derrida's notion of hauntology brings into sharper focus the lingering presence of past experiences and unrealized futures within contemporary contexts (Derrida 1994, xvii–xviii). As he puts it, spectral phenomena occupy an ambiguous space—not fully present nor entirely absent, existing somewhere between life and death—which disturbs our conventional understanding of fixed states. This theoretical framework complicates linear timelines through temporal overlaps, meaning the weight of historical events and potential futures that never arrived continues to shape current realities, creating what might be called a temporal dislocation. Building upon these ideas, cultural analyst Mark Fisher expands the discussion by framing modern culture as being haunted by what he terms vanished possibilities for progress (Fisher 2014, 8). This condition manifests through repetitive cultural patterns recycled from previous decades, suggesting a stagnation in envisioning alternative futures. In other words, Fisher characterizes this phenomenon as a gradual erosion of forward momentum, where society remains trapped reusing outdated templates rather than generating novel trajectories .

This essay's conceptualization of the "negative time-image" enters into dialogue with a significant body of scholarship extending Deleuze's work into contexts of world

1 Temporal debt refers to the notion that time itself carries unresolved obligations—unacknowledged traumas or silenced futures—that persist as a kind of ethical residue in historical consciousness.

2 The metaphor of the ledger reconfigures cinema as a form of recordkeeping, where the image tallies what has been lost, denied, or remains unsettled across time.

cinema and historical trauma (e.g., Deamer 2014; Pisters 2012). It is crucial, for instance, to differentiate this framework from proximate concepts, most notably David Martin-Jones's (2018) *Cinema Against Doublethink*. Martin-Jones compellingly uses a Deleuzo-Derridean lens to analyze how films depicting 'lost pasts' create an ethical 'hesitation' or doublethink in the spectator. While sharing a concern for unrepresentable histories (and indeed, Weerasethakul's cinema), the 'negative time-image' proposed here shifts the analytical focus from the spectator's cognitive-ethical encounter to the formal-ontological status of the image itself. This article argues that the image functions as a haunted ledger, a specific visual and auditory form that registers temporal debt as an unresolved account of injustice. The 'negative' is thus about the image's function as an active, spectral invoice.

With this theoretical groundwork laid, the essay now turns to close analyses of three films that exemplify negative time-images in distinct ways. Each film—*Memoria*, *Still Life*, and *La Llorona*—comes from a different cultural context (Thailand/Colombia, China, and Guatemala, respectively) and confronts a different kind of historical trauma (political violence, disruptive modernization, genocide and injustice). Yet all three deploy cinematic techniques that estrange the viewer from linear time and immerse us in a haunted, reflective temporality. By examining how specific formal elements (sound design, long takes, depictions of ruins, fragmented narrative, use of supernatural figures, etc.) convey the sensation of "being between two deaths," we can see concretely how theory and film form inform each other. For example, sound in *Memoria* becomes a vehicle for hauntology; the depiction of ruined landscapes in *Still Life* viscerally evokes time "out of joint"; and the ghost-story framework in *La Llorona* is repurposed to visualize historical accountability.

Throughout the analyses, the emphasis is on absence and irresolution rather than on tidy narrative closure. Instead of simply labeling these films with abstract concepts, we will describe how, for instance, a film shows past and present coexisting in the frame or soundtrack and why that matters for the idea of mourning. By the conclusion, all the theoretical threads and filmic examples will be tied together under the thesis of cinema as a ledger of temporal debt. We will also suggest how this concept might extend to other contexts—such as ecological crises (which can be seen as humanity's growing debt to the future) or the digital archive (which increasingly haunts our sense of the present).

The choice to concentrate on *Memoria*, *Still Life*, and *La Llorona* is guided by method rather than by claims to representativeness. Among many Global South films that address historical violence, these three works bring into focus different formal ways in which cinema can register temporal debt. For the purposes of this article, they mark out three provisional modalities of the negative time-image—auditory haunting (*Memoria*), spatial ruin (*Still Life*), and spectral justice (*La Llorona*), that together help to test and refine the conceptual framework developed above.

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Figure 1
Jessica (Tilda Swinton) stands alone before a glass wall in *Memoria* (2021). The frame's stark geometry, diffused light, and stillness embody the film's themes of suspended perception and hauntological time. (*Memoria*, dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2021 | © Kick the Machine Films, Burning, Anna Sanders Films, Match Factory Productions, ZDF-Arte, and Piano).

Memoria: Echoes of the Cosmic Past and Shared Memory

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021) revolves around a woman struggling with an unexplained auditory phenomenon that exists solely within her perception. Jessica (Tilda Swinton), a foreigner living in Colombia, is awakened one night by a deep, low-frequency sound. The noise is powerful, inexplicable, and has no clear source. This peculiar acoustic occurrence manifests intermittently without pattern, effectively serving as the film's central sensory motif. As Jessica pursues answers regarding its source, the narrative gradually unfolds into broader reflections on memory retention, historical legacies, and temporal interconnectedness. The work demonstrates unconventional temporal representation through auditory strategies and storytelling methods, fostering an environment where individual recollections merge with societal histories. As Jessica searches for an explanation, Memoria unfolds as a meditation on memory, history, and interconnectedness across time. Through extended sequences featuring environmental sounds and delayed narrative resolutions, the director constructs a cinematic experience where temporal layers coexist and interact. That is to say, inviting viewers to perceive time not as linear progression but as overlapping vibrations echoing across personal and collective consciousness.

Scholars of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's work, such as May Adadol Ingawanij (2013), have shown how his films mobilize animist cosmologies and long-take, realist techniques to unsettle modernist national chronologies, opening cinema to registers of memory and spirit rooted in Thai lifeworlds. *Memoria* transposes this preoccupation into a new context, using its sound design to probe the layered, disavowed histories of Colombia.

The film employs a particularly distinctive approach through its sound design. The mysterious noise Jessica keeps hearing functions not merely as plot device but as a kind of invisible presence–we experience it exactly as she does, never seeing what exactly causes it. This separation between sound and visible source creates a situation where effects exist independently from their causes, making the sound operate like a shadow of some event that never fully materializes (Chion 1994, 72–73). Put differently, it becomes a vibration in time without clear origin point. As the story unfolds, various narrative elements gradually hint at possible meanings behind this phenomenon: for instance, Jessica's friend Agnes, who studies ancient civilizations, talks about discovering an old skeleton showing head trauma (evidence of ancient conflict); local residents mention plagues from generations back that made whole communities forget their past; and later Jessica encounters an elderly villager named Hernán whose memories strangely extend beyond normal human lifespan. Though these clues remain partially unexplained, they collectively suggest the noise might represent echoes from past tragedies–lingering reverberations of historical conflicts. Somehow, Jessica has become attuned to these residual waves of bygone eras through unclear mechanisms.

The idea of shared memory becomes explicit in a pivotal scene where Jessica and the elderly Hernán sit silently holding hands. In this extended moment—notable for its stillness and duration—Jessica closes her eyes and suddenly the soundscape fills with layered noises. We (and she) hear a cascade of sounds from different eras. It is as if Hernán's mind, which carries centuries of memories (recalling Borges's story of "Funes the Memorious"), is transmitting to Jessica an auditory archive of history. In this moment, Memoria powerfully sonifies the notion of temporal debt: the land itself holds memories of violence and loss (buried bones, forgotten stories) that demand to be heard. Jessica, who began as a solitary individual with a peculiar ailment (what a doctor calls "exploding head syndrome"), becomes a vessel for collective memory. The past invades her present — essentially, a haunting through sound.

Cinematically, Apichatpong conveys this haunting by employing extremely long takes and quiet, patient pacing. The camera often lingers on ostensibly empty or static scenes—a tunnel, a courtyard, a forest—attuning us to subtle ambient sounds. The lack of conventional dramatic editing allows time to stretch and sag. This aligns with a Deleuzian time-image: the viewer is not propelled forward by plot, but invited to drift in a contemplative temporal space. The "negative" here lies in what we do not see: the film never flashes back to colonial times or shows the original violence that might have caused the spectral boom. Instead, it presents present-day tableaux infused with absence. We see Jessica's face registering something invisible, or we watch her listening

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intently to silence. Memoria is filled with shots of listening: characters (and even inanimate objects, like a car whose alarm is mysteriously triggered by the boom) reacting to an unseen force. The effect is eerie—viewers become hyper-aware of the off-screen and the invisible. This is precisely how a hauntological time is conveyed: through an acute sense of what is absent yet implied.

Weerasethakul's film collapses personal, political, and cosmic scales of time into a poetic whole. Jessica's private dislocation and grief (subtle hints suggest she feels unmoored as a Scottish woman in Colombia, and she is also coping with an ill family member) expand to encompass national history (the film quietly alludes to Colombia's decades of civil conflict) and even planetary time. In a startling late sequence, an otherworldly spacecraft is revealed glimmering behind the trees—a brief encounter with radical otherness that suggests a perspective beyond human history. This leap to the cosmic reaffirms that forces or memories far bigger than the individual are at play. The sudden appearance of the spaceship—never explicitly explained—can be read as an embodiment of the ghost of a future: time not as linear progression but as a co-existence of timelines that occasionally intersect.

In Lacanian terms, one could argue that Jessica herself becomes a liminal figure "between two deaths." She is alive, moving through daily life, yet her routine existence is interrupted by an encounter with something beyond life—the collective memory of the dead speaking through Hernán and through the land itself. One character, a young sound engineer (also named Hernán) who initially helps Jessica recreate the boom, even seems to vanish from reality: later, when she inquires about him, she is told no such person ever worked at the studio. This inexplicable disappearance (was he a figment of her psyche, or a double of the older Hernán?) remains unresolved. But thematically it reinforces that Jessica is navigating a space where normal distinctions between real and unreal are blurred. *Memoria* deploys no conventional "ghosts," yet it makes reality itself eerie—a subtle estrangement of the everyday. The booming sound is a presence where there should be absence; conversely, the final sequences imbue natural landscapes with an uncanny calm, hinting at unseen presences.

The hauntological aspect of *Memoria* also carries political resonance. Colombia's troubled history of violence and loss, and the presence of a European outsider trying to interpret a Latin American past, raise the idea of layered traumas that transcend any one culture. Jessica's outsider status means she has no direct personal connection to Colombia's historical atrocities, yet she becomes a receptacle for them—suggesting a kind of transpersonal or cosmopolitan mourning. In this sense, the film posits a shared human debt to remember and mourn, crossing boundaries of nationality and time. Derrida wrote that one must "learn to live with ghosts" as a form of justice to those past. *Memoria* dramatizes this learning process: over the course of the film, Jessica moves from being unsettled and frightened by the sound to eventually accepting and even embracing it. By the end—after the overwhelming memory-transfer scene with Hernán—she hears the boom once more but is no longer afraid. In confronting the spectral weight

of history, she has found a measure of peace or understanding. The negative time-image here thus serves a purpose: by making the temporal debt audible and visceral, the film guides its protagonist (and the audience) toward a contemplative reconciliation with the ghosts of history. *Memoria* does not "solve" Colombia's historical traumas, of course, but it ritualizes an acknowledgment of them.

In *Memoria*, Apichatpong has effectively "recorded" a temporal debt onto cinema—the film itself becomes the ledger where a haunting sound is inscribed over and over. Jessica's personal memory now includes memories that are not originally hers. This is perhaps the most literal example among our case studies of cinema carrying others' memories. By using the audiovisual medium—especially sound—*Memoria* makes the audience co-experience a fragment of collective memory or historical trauma. The film never explicitly tells us whose trauma the boom represents; it remains evocative rather than didactic. Yet as viewers, we fill in the blanks with our awareness that Latin America's landscape contains many "unhealed wounds." In sum, *Memoria* exemplifies the negative time-image through an auditory hauntology and a near-cosmic perspective on memory. Time is portrayed as layered, resonant, and shared, rather than linear or private. What is absent or unknown takes center stage and, paradoxically, unites characters across vast temporal and cultural distances.

Having explored how *Memoria* turns sound into a vehicle for spectral temporality, we move to a very different milieu in *Still Life*, where the emphasis shifts to visible ruins and the tempo of everyday life amid historical upheaval. If *Memoria* was about an omnipresent past intruding on an individual's present, *Still Life* is about a rapidly changing present haunted by the recent past—the submergence of homes and the erasure of communities under the waters of "progress."

Still Life: Ruinscape and the Disjunctive Time of Development

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, 2006) unfolds in Fengjie, a riverside town undergoing transformation during the Three Gorges Dam construction. As water levels gradually rose, entire neighborhoods faced demolition or submersion. The film tracks two individuals returning during this turbulent period, each seeking a spouse who had disappeared. The environment itself exists in a state of continuous decay—buildings partially collapsed, families having to relocate, the landscape altering daily. In *Still Life*, Jia constructs a temporal landscape where different historical layers collide. The past, embodied by the old town and personal memories, gets erased in pursuit of progress and energy generation, leaving the present fractured and disorienting for those caught in it. This fragmented experience of time aligns with Ackbar Abbas's observations regarding how rapid urban changes in places like Hong Kong foster a "culture of disappearance," where locations vanish before their stories solidify, creating an aesthetic of impending loss (Abbas 1997, 7). The film serves as a prime example of depicting

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Figure 2
Han Sanming stands amid the rubble of Fengjie's demolished homes in *Still Life* (2006), visually encapsulating the film's motif of living in ruins
© Shanghai Film Studio, 2006.

temporal fragmentation through grounded narratives—employing observational, quasi-documentary visuals while evoking an underlying unease about time's instability. *Still Life* demonstrates how realistic portrayals of social change can reveal deeper ruptures in how communities perceive their relationship to both past and future.

Jia's work has been central to what scholars describe as a "cinema of ruins" (Braester 2010; Schultz 2016), in which the meticulous documentation of demolition sites and half-collapsed domestic architecture becomes a critical method for interrogating the erasures and dispossessions built into China's official narratives of modernization.

Jia's cinematic form emphasizes patience and observation. He often employs a static camera or very slow pans that allow us to absorb the environment and the subtle actions (or inactions) of characters within it. One storyline follows Han Sanming, a miner who returns after 16 years to find his wife and daughter. As he wanders the crumbling streets asking after people, we experience with him the erosion of time: he carries an old photograph of his family, but the address on it is now underwater. The other storyline follows Shen Hong, a nurse searching for her husband who hasn't contacted her in two years while working on the dam project. Both protagonists move through Fengjie like ghosts in search of other ghosts—their loved ones are absent presences driving their quests.

The ruins themselves function almost as characters, or at least as spectral evidence of what has been lost. Jia includes sequences in which workers methodically hammer

down walls, revealing the empty interiors of homes; people boat through flooded streets that were once neighborhoods; and the camera lingers on piles of rubble where personal belongings (a single shoe, a teacup) peek out—intimate traces of life amid the wreckage. These visual details serve as mnemonic triggers: they evoke memories of the people who once inhabited these spaces. In this way, *Still Life* actively mourns the community in real time, even as it vanishes.

These visual details also serve as mnemonic triggers, evoking memories of the people who once inhabited these spaces. Film scholar Chan Du notes that Jia combines observational realism with subtle moments of surreal disruption. This blend generates "uncanny temporal disjunctures," opening a shared space of memory rather than relying on postmodern stylistic tricks (Du 2022). One famous surreal moment occurs when a large modern building suddenly launches off the ground like a rocket and flies into the sky, witnessed in stunned silence by Han Sanming. This startling image arrives without explanation, breaking the diegetic reality. The film offers no explanation. But the image reads like a quiet metaphor for absurdity. It's the fantasy of progress escaping reality. Or it's the soul of the town, slipping free. It is a moment of explicit negative imaging: a solid structure of the present is negated as it turns into an apparition and vanishes. Such moments remind us that beneath the film's placid, neorealist surface, there is a persistent sense of the unreal. *Still Life* visualizes, in oneiric fashion, the feeling among locals that the stable world they knew has gone absurdly out of control.

Notably, Jia portrays nonlinear time not through flashbacks or overt time-travel but through pacing and juxtaposition. He presents long stretches of waiting—Han Sanming takes demolition jobs to bide time while searching—interrupted by abrupt transitions or ellipses. For example, Shen Hong finally finds her husband, only for the reunion to be distilled into a wordless "break-up" dance on a rooftop set to a pop ballad. The scene feels like an emotional time capsule from their past, surfacing into the present. The film eschews a tightly causal plot; instead, it accumulates encounters and vignettes. The structure is paratactic, placing scenes side by side with minimal explanation. The effect is that we as viewers assemble a temporal understanding of Fengjie's transformation that is impressionistic rather than chronological. Rey Chow's insights into sentimental fabulation in Chinese cinema suggest that such dislocated attachments reflect a wider cultural unease with national visibility and the cost of modernization (Chow 2007). We see children playing amid ruins, and later see them departing on a ferry; we hear old men reminiscing about decades past; we observe neon-lit bars for dam workers springing up alongside traditional noodle stalls. By not arranging these moments in a clear cause-and-effect sequence, Jia allows past, present, and impending future to cohabit in the film's temporal field.

One scene poignantly encapsulates the notion of "between two deaths" in a social sense. Shen Hong eventually learns that her husband has emotionally moved on; by the time they reunite, their marriage is effectively dead. When they meet at a café, they share a polite but distant conversation, as if speaking through a veil of time. After their

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rooftop dance—a ghostly reenactment of their younger selves—her husband remains behind as Shen Hong leaves. He is last seen standing at the edge of the dam, a tiny figure against a vast wall of water, and then he literally vanishes from the film. Though physically alive, he has ceased to exist in her life; in a sense he becomes a ghost in the narrative, never to be seen again.

Conversely, Han Sanming's wife (whom he does eventually locate) is alive, but their 16-year separation means their relationship exists only as a debt. Han offers to work to pay off the money her family demanded (the reason she was taken away), planning a reunion in the future. But within the film's timeframe, they do not reunite. Both story threads thus involve connections that persist in a liminal state—neither fully alive nor fully severed by the story's end. This is the human face of nonlinear mourning in *Still Life*: relationships and communities that cannot be neatly resolved or mourned because the people are still there, yet everything around them has irreversibly changed. The inhabitants of Fengjie could be seen as a population "between two deaths"—between the death of their former way of life and the eventual physical disappearance of their town—living through an in-between period of prolonged loss and anticipation.

Though subtle in its presentation, *Still Life* carries an implicit critique of the costs of progress. The temporal debt in this context can be read as the cultural and emotional debt incurred by China's rapid development. The dam's construction promises a new future (electricity, flood control, economic growth) but pays for it by drowning the past—not just historical artifacts, but the lived history of communities. There is a sense that something has not been accounted for: the grief of those uprooted and the value of what was destroyed. One character mentions he is from a town upstream that is already gone; another describes finding old coins and keepsakes in demolished homes—fragments of heritage turned to debris. Such details suggest that the official ledger of "progress" has ignored many entries on the loss side. *Still Life* quietly fills in those entries by devoting time to them. It cannot stop the flood, but it creates a cinematic record—a ledger—of the transitory moment in which a landscape and its people are caught in transition.

In sum, *Still Life* integrally links theory and practice by showing how cinematic form (long takes, slow observation, punctuated by surreal ruptures) enacts the concept of temporal debt and nonlinear mourning. The film is a ledger of what modernization "owes" to those it displaces—each ruin documented and each person's story acknowledged, however briefly. The negative time-image is palpable in the film's pervasive sense that the present is never just itself: it is inhabited by the traces of what was (ruins, memories) and by what is yet to come (the rising water, the new city planned to replace the old). By focusing on an in-between moment—just as Lacan's Antigone inhabits an in-between state—Jia depicts the mourning process, normally relegated to the aftermath, as ongoing and unresolved.

La Llorona: Haunting Justice and the Ledger of Historical Memory

Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019) reimagines a popular Latin American ghost legend—"the Weeping Woman"—in the context of Guatemala's late-20th-century genocide. The film centers on Enrique Monteverde, a retired general (clearly modeled on real-life dictator Efraín Ríos Montt) who is on trial for the massacre of indigenous Maya people. When a guilty verdict is dramatically overturned by the courts, Monteverde returns home, where his family becomes besieged by angry protesters outside and increasingly uncanny events inside. A young indigenous maid, Alma, is hired in the household, and it soon becomes apparent that she is an incarnation of the avenging ghost La Llorona, seeking retribution for the atrocities. *La Llorona* deftly intertwines the political drama of the failed trial with the supernatural horror of the haunting, offering a clear portrayal of temporal debt: the general owes a debt of justice to his victims that has been deferred, and now their spirits return to collect it. The film's narrative makes literal the metaphor of history's ghosts—here, the dead appear because they have not been properly laid to rest by acknowledgment or justice.

From the very beginning, *La Llorona* cultivates an atmosphere of lingering trauma. In the courtroom scenes, Indigenous women speak of rape and mass murder in the Ixil language. Bustamante deliberately omits subtitles, aligning the viewer's experience with that of the Monteverde family—who also cannot understand Ixil. The emotional impact of the testimonies is conveyed through tone, expression, and silence. This lack

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Figure 3
An indigenous Ixil witness testifies with her face covered by a veil in *La Llorona* (2019), reflecting how the film amplifies silenced voices of genocide survivors
© La Casa de Producción, 2019.

of translation forces non-Ixil-speaking audiences to move beyond literal comprehension, to listen and feel the pain even without understanding every word. In doing so, it reflects how Guatemalan society, for a long time, failed to truly hear these voices. This directorial decision reinforces the theme of silent spirits. The powerful have long ignored—or refused to translate—the experiences of the victims. Now, those voices

return in a form that demands attention. Bustamante incorporates real survivor testimony, resonating with what Diana Taylor (2003) describes as "the repertoire of embodied memory." Acts of storytelling and ritual become vehicles for transmitting truth and pursuing justice (Taylor 2003).

Bustamante's strategy resonates with what Struan Gray (2022) identifies, in relation to post-dictatorship Chilean film, as a "spectral turn," in which ghosts and haunted landscapes function less as generic horror devices than as modes of political address that keep questions of responsibility and justice insistently open.

After Monteverde is released (free by law but clearly guilty in truth), the film largely confines itself to the domestic sphere of his opulent home, where hauntology comes alive. The once-secure mansion becomes a haunted space. At night, Monteverde hears the faint sound of a woman weeping—the signature cry of La Llorona—which stirs his guilt and fear. His family initially attributes his anxiety to age or stress, while the indigenous housekeepers immediately recognize the sound for what it is. This dynamic is telling: the oppressed understand the haunting as real, while the elites attempt to rationalize or deny it. As the nights progress, the haunting escalates: locked doors swing open on their own; Alma is found in trancelike states (at one point standing silently in the house's pool, submerged to her waist as if communing with spirits). Monteverde's wife, Carmen, begins to suffer nightmares of the crimes—she envisions indigenous women invading her dreams, making her relive what was done to them. Carmen, who had dismissively called the victims liars during the trial, gradually loses her certainty as these visions chip away at her denial.

The film employs classic horror techniques—dim lighting, long corridors, sudden apparitions—but it remains grounded in human drama and moral context. There are no cheap scares; instead, a suffocating sense of guilt and dread envelops the household. Monteverde himself increasingly resembles a man in a state of living death: he sits rigidly, rarely speaks, and is haunted by sights and sounds that others do not perceive. In Lacanian terms, Monteverde becomes a subject between two deaths. Socially and morally, he has "died" (he's a pariah with crowds outside chanting "*genocida*", and the annulment of his verdict is effectively the death of justice), yet physically he remains alive, lingering in a kind of spiritual twilight. He is tormented by the return of the repressed, a concept originally formulated by Freud and central to Lacan's ethics, where all the crimes he refused to acknowledge come back as hallucinations. Alma's presence—as a seemingly gentle, silent maid by day and a supernatural entity by night—perfectly symbolizes this threshold state; she straddles the mundane and the ghostly, life and death.

Hauntology in *La Llorona* is explicitly tied to the idea of justice. Derrida (1994) famously argued that we owe something to those who are no longer alive, that "the dead shall not be dead to us" until their dues are paid. Recent scholarship echoes this principle: West describes an "infinite responsibility" to the past (West 2023, 65). Sociologist Avery Gordon (1997) similarly suggests that haunting is a constituent element of unresolved social violence, where ghosts signal persisting injustices (Gordon 1997, 5).

Guatemala's victims were literally buried in mass graves and their stories suppressed for years. *La Llorona* ensures that the dead do not rest silently. Alma (her name tellingly means "soul") embodies the nation's unfinished business. It is even stated in the film that the past remains an "*asunto pendiente*"—an unfinished matter—haunting the country's present. The haunting does more than punish Monteverde; it catalyzes a moral reckoning within his family. Monteverde's daughter Natalia, initially defensive of her father, finds her certainty wavering as she hears the testimony and witnesses Alma's unsettling behavior. By the end, the women of the family turn against him: Carmen, once his staunch defender, is moved to attempt to smother him with a pillow when she finally confronts the magnitude of his crimes—taking justice (or vengeance) into her own hands.

The climax of the haunting arrives as Alma reveals her true form. Monteverde's guards either flee in terror or fall mysteriously asleep at their posts, allowing Alma to confront the general alone. In a tense, surreal sequence, Alma appears to Monteverde as an avenging mother and forces him (and us) to witness visions of his atrocities. The walls of the house seem to dissolve into a nighttime jungle, and Monteverde sees indigenous children being drowned—an inversion of the La Llorona legend (in which a mother drowns her own children) that underscores that it was the general who drowned others' children. Past and present bleed together as the ghost brings the massacre into Monteverde's drawing room. This collapse of time—essentially a ghost-induced flashback manifesting in the present—is a quintessential negative time-image: the past made viscerally present through spectral means. Bustamante pointedly stages it not as a discrete cutaway but as a continuous nightmare that invades the film's "now," keeping us firmly in the horror of the moment. In effect, the film forces Monteverde to reckon with what he did by literally showing him (and the audience) the missing pieces of history that had been denied.

Sound serves a significant role in merging timelines and helps strengthen collective memory. The chanting of protesters outside the mansion continues day and night, a constant auditory reminder that societal memory will not be silenced. Occasionally, these protest sounds transform into ghostly wails only perceptible to Monteverde or his family members, implying that public demands and supernatural disturbances share similar roots in seeking justice. As one reviewer noted, *La Llorona*'s sound environment suggests Guatemala's history remains "unfinished". This approach not only connects temporal dimensions but also emphasizes how unresolved issues linger in national consciousness, manifesting through both human voices and otherworldly phenomena that resist being forgotten (D'Argenio 2021).

In *La Llorona*, the idea of being between two deaths applies on multiple levels. Monteverde, as discussed, is a "dead man walking" in moral terms. Alma (La Llorona) is literally undead—a mother murdered along with her children, who now exists in the limbo between their death (which killed her spirit) and her own eventual rest (which she will find only when her vengeance is complete). And Guatemala as a nation is depicted

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as stuck between a violent past and a just future, symbolized by a trial verdict that is left hanging. By the film's end, Monteverde suffers what appears to be a stroke (or perhaps is supernaturally drowned by La Llorona's embrace) during Alma's final confrontation, leaving him paralyzed and catatonic.

This is effectively his second death: he's rendered a living corpse, incapable of speech or harm—a fate the ghost is content with. Carmen, who once fiercely defended him, now looks upon him with a mix of loathing and pity. Alma quietly departs the house, her task fulfilled, and steps outside to join the crowd of protesters. In a moving symbolic shot, the sea of indigenous protesters parts to let her through, acknowledging her; she then disappears among them. It is as if the spirit returns to the collective—uniting the dead and the living in a common cause. The closing images show women digging in the earth for the bones of the missing and finally uncovering them (echoing real post-war exhumations in Guatemala), with Natalia standing alongside as a witness. The ledger of temporal debt is thus, in part, balanced: the truth has been acknowledged within the perpetrator's own household (at least by its women—Monteverde himself never repents, but he is neutralized), and the process of properly mourning and honoring the dead has begun.

At first glance, *La Llorona* might appear more straightforward compared to works such as *Memoria* or *Still Life*, particularly when considering its conventional narrative methods and genre frameworks. The film's real achievement lies in how it links spectral figures to questions of ethical accountability. It demonstrates how supernatural entities can operate as tools for both recounting history and addressing societal fairness. By blending a traditional folk story with real historical events related to large-scale conflicts, such as legal disputes surrounding collective tragedies, the director repurposes mythology into a channel for communal memory.

The weeping figure transitions from being merely a horror convention to serving as an embodiment of collective mourning and moral indignation. This approach reflects the notion that historical injustices left unresolved will inevitably reemerge, aligning with philosophical perspectives emphasizing the necessity of confronting past traumas through either judicial processes or shared remembrance. Such interpretations mirror broader cultural tendencies observed across Latin America, where fantastical elements frequently symbolize lingering consequences of institutionalized oppression. (One could mention, for example, narratives from periods of political unrest by prominent writers or influential cinematic works that combine imaginative elements with depictions of real suffering—or even oral traditions preserving memories of displacement.)

La Llorona shows that the negative time-image can operate at a populist, narrative level as effectively as in art cinema. The image of Alma standing among the protesters —a silent ghost within the living crowd—is a powerful negative time-image: she is visibly there (to us) yet, within the story, she is a spirit visible only to those attuned to her. The film's final moments underscore a collective resolve not to let her story (and what she represents) fade away again.

Conclusion: Cinema as a Ledger of Temporal Debt

Taken together, these films confirm that cinema can arrest linear time to confront traumas left out of official history. Each film serves as a kind of account book for a specific unresolved history: *Memoria* records personal and national memory in the aftermath of violence; *Still Life* chronicles communal loss amid the upheavals of modernization; *La Llorona* registers political atrocity and a reckoning with justice deferred.

The negative time-image is seen as a convergence point for discussions, acting like cinema's way of showing things that are not really present in a tangible way. These things could be past traumas or potential futures that are not fulfilled. For those working in film creation and analysis, focusing on negative time-images requires paying attention to gaps in narrative, moments without dialogue, and uneven pacing within visual storytelling. In this context of our case studies, examples such as silent moments shared between characters, deserted urban areas, or low-key emotional reactions, they carry importance, almost equal to the significant plot developments that happen. These quiet elements push viewers to think about the context beyond what is immediately visible—like historical backgrounds or shared experiences that are not verbally expressed but linger beneath the surface images. Watching these kinds of films turns into a joint effort of remembering and thinking deeply in partnership with the characters shown on-screen. It reflects, in several aspects, an accountable way of viewing that requires a sensitive understanding of the subtle meanings and the gaps that exist within the realities that have been constructed.

Looking beyond the three case studies discussed here, the idea of cinema functioning as a ledger of time debts can be applied more broadly. When it comes to the environment, where the situation has become serious, some argue that we are dealing with a form of debt—often called carbon debt, or a debt owed to future generations. Certain contemporary films and visual artworks present premonitory pictures, scenes that visualize the future before it occurs, acting as early shadows of events not yet here, such as melting glaciers or landscapes void of animal life. These works effectively mourn future losses in advance, offering a kind of anticipatory grief for the planet.

Likewise, the digital age has created a constant presence of the past in daily life—old photos resurface on social media, profiles of the deceased linger online, and vast online archives ensure that nothing is ever truly forgotten. Filmmakers are grappling with this digital hauntology: stories about AI recreations of lost loved ones, or documentaries about how traumatic events live on in online media, show how the data of the past can incessantly intrude upon the present. These speculative extensions suggest that negative time-images are not confined to ghost stories or historical dramas; they can emerge wherever time feels out of joint and a debt—whether to the dead, the environment, or even information—hangs over the present.

Ultimately, looking at cinema through this perspective focused on lingering echoes shows how impactful the medium can be in dealing with things that go beyond simple

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representation. By learning to read beyond what is visible, we begin to notice the hidden layers in film. We see the ghosts, hear the silences, and recognize the debts waiting to be acknowledged. This awareness makes us more attuned to how cinema engages with unresolved history. In a world still filled with unaddressed traumas and incomplete justice, this approach to filmmaking and viewing stays crucial. That is to say, these shadows of history might, in a contradictory way, direct us toward a more hopeful future. In other words, a future where facing and mourning what the past owes could lead to better understanding, and possibly even reconciliation between divided groups.

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