

GHOST RETURNS AND HISTORICAL MEMORIES IN ZHANG YIMOU'S *GUI LAI* AND PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S *VOLVER*

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“Gui lai” in Chinese carries the same meaning as “volver” in Spanish: both mean “to return.” *Volver*, released in 2006, is a hard-hitting drama by Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar; *Gui lai*, released in 2015, is a historical romance by Chinese director Zhang Yimou. Viewing *Volver* as a modern update of Odysseus’s homecoming from the perspective of gender, Corinne Pache claims that “to raise the phenomenon of return is inevitably to start a conversation with Homer’s *Odyssey*, which is, the home to which all narratives of homecoming must themselves return” (55). Indeed, Odysseus’s homecoming, as a mythical ritual, goes beyond individual experiences and embodies human fate across nation and culture. As Gregory Nagy notes, return—in Greek, *nostos*—in Homer’s *Odyssey* refers to “homecoming,” a “song about homecoming” and a “return to light” (283). Differences between *Gui lai* and *Volver* aside, the two films show parallels with relation to these three connotations of *nostos*. More specifically, both recount homecoming stories and use those stories to allude to historical memories; both use art, including songs and photographs, as means for the main characters to recover their memories; and lighting shapes the way the audience perceives the (non-)boundary between the dead and the living. Whereas a comparison of these two works shows different approaches to the concept of returning, the allegorical interpretations of both works in their respective sociopolitical contexts, in turn, shed light on these differences.

Gui lai is set during and after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Like Odysseus, the protagonist Lu has also been absent from home for twenty years. Where Odysseus spends ten years fighting in the Trojan War and ten more years on his homeward journey, Lu spends twenty years of his life in a political labour camp in a desert in Northwest China. Throughout these two decades, he attempts to return home twice, only to find that he will never be able to return. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana

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Boym observes, “After all, Odysseus’s homecoming is about non-recognition. Ithaca is plunged into mist and the royal wanderer arrives in disguise [...] Even his faithful and long-suffering wife does not see him for who he is [...] Odysseus has to prove his identity in action” (8). Boym’s description of this scene from the *Odyssey* has its equivalent in *Gui lai* with Lu’s attempted returns home amidst and after the Cultural Revolution. His first attempt is characterized by the dark in both its literal and figurative senses. Escaping from the camp, he covers himself up from head to toe to escape the notice of the Communist Party cadres. When he reveals himself to his daughter, whom he has not seen since she was three years old, she refuses to recognize him for political reasons. Years later, Lu is lucky enough to survive the Cultural Revolution and waits until the day of his release to go home again. To his surprise, his wife, who suffers PTSD, is no longer able to recognize who he is. In spite of numerous endeavors to prove his identity, he does not succeed in returning to his family and resuming his roles as father and husband.

112 Whereas Lu’s homecoming in *Gui lai* fails for political reasons, Irene, the protagonist of *Volver*, hides herself from others and lives in the dark for personal reasons. On learning that her husband had raped their daughter and had an affair with their neighbour, Irene sets fire to their home on a windy afternoon, thus burning her husband and his adulterous lover to ashes. Having committed arson, Irene escapes prosecution by not showing up in public. She stays underground with her elder sister, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease and has lost memory and thinking abilities. There are rumors among the neighbours that Irene’s ghost appears from time to time, but these rumours do not surprise anybody because, traditionally, the dead are an integral part of living in the village.

The beginning of Almodóvar’s film suggests the spectral nature of Irene’s existence. *Volver* opens with village women cleaning the graves in a cemetery on a bright and windy morning. The camera pans over the tombs, moving from right to left, the reverse of what is considered natural and progressive in cultures that read from left to right, seemingly hinting at a return. Furthermore, at the extreme left of the shot, the title, “*Volver*,” slides into the audience’s view, showing impressively bright red letters inscribed on a gravestone. This gravestone parallels the stone of the tomb in which the supposedly dead Irene and her husband are buried and hints at her possible return. The conversation between the two sisters, Raimunda and Sole, reveals that in their village, women usually live longer than men, but their mother Irene died in their father’s arms in a fire. Both the filmic techniques and the dialogue in this scene point to Irene’s coming back from death.

The expected return of Irene from death evokes Odysseus’s return from Hades. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Circe informs Odysseus that his homeward route will lead him through Hades, the House of Death, where he can speak with the spirit of Tiresias, a blind prophet who will help him return home. In the underworld, Odysseus manages to convince his hosts to bring him back to life; likewise, in *Volver*, Irene, who is believed to be dead, also needs someone to remove her from the village after the

death of her sister, so she can return to the light of day. Her daughter Sole assumes the role of the hostess, who unwittingly brings Irene out from the dark and harbours what she believes to be Irene's ghost. Like Lu, who runs home in camouflage, Irene arrives at Sole's home, disguised as a Russian homeless woman whom Sole adopts, and who helps Sole with her hairdressing business. Until she gathers the courage to confront her traumatized daughter Raimunda, Irene hides herself when Raimunda visits her sister Sole.

Just as the opening scene of *Volver* summarizes the film as a whole and leads the audience to expect a ghost return, *Gui lai* opens with an intense shot depicting an eerie creature. The film begins with a repressive high-speed train in the foreground, and the ghostly presence of a vagabond huddled in a corner of the aperture of the bridge on the back. The camera slightly tilts up from the ground by the railway and faces into the bridge opening, between the wheels of the moving train. The human figure, with his back to the audience, seems to uncoil agonizingly up to a standing position, as the fast motion of the train sharply contrasts his slow movement. The low-angle shot makes the character in black look bigger and thus more threatening and unsettling. This suggestive shot appears immediately after the title screen, in which the two words *Gui lai*, in bright blue letters, are superimposed on a completely black background. Like the opening scene of *Volver*, in which the camera pans in a direction opposite the audience's expectations, the initial scene of *Gui lai* also goes against convention. The train that is supposed to bring wanderers home is galloping ahead in order to cast off the ragged traveler.

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Throughout the first shot, the character keeps his back to the audience. The lack of distinct identity thus allegorically implies a common experience that is shared collectively. According to Ismail Xavier, a common strategy in constructing national allegories is the use of one individual to represent a larger political group or social class, and this individual will usually display particular characteristics associated with that national imaginary (342). Lu, who represents the numerous intellectual victims of the Cultural Revolution, is such a character, and *Gui lai* thus turns a family romance into an allegorical narrative of China's national past. Therefore, the film's representation of Lu and his life story is also a representation of the filmmaker's attitude toward the Cultural Revolution and the historical memories resulting from the political upheaval. Drawing on an auteurist approach, I explore Zhang Yimou's treatment of the Chinese national past in the context of the collective obsession of fifth-generation Chinese directors with the "ten-year calamity" (*shi nian hao jie*).

An examination of *Gui lai* in its sociopolitical context provides an insight into the interplay between its handling of the Cultural Revolution and the official attitude toward China's traumatic past. On its release in 2015, Zhang Yimou's film was a success at the Chinese box office and gained many favourable responses from critics and filmmakers such as Ang Lee, Mo Yan, Steven Spielberg, and others. A prominent feature of the film is its large number of references to the Cultural Revolution, a series of events from the national past that is still a sensitive issue in contemporary China. The

ban on Zhang Yihe's book, *The Past is Not Like Smoke*, in 2007 due to its "uncomfortable recollections of political campaigns" (Zhang) demonstrates the sensitive nature of this topic, as the government and official media discourage discussion of the events of the Cultural Revolution. While there are no nationwide public reflections on the past in China, since the 1990s several films have directly or indirectly referred to this historical period and have used various means of escaping censorship. These include Chen Kaige's *Ba wang bie ji* (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993), Zhang Yimou's *Huo zhe* (*To Live*, 1994), Jiang Wen's *Yang guang can lan de ri zi* (*In the Heat of the Sun*, 1994), Jia Zhangke's *Zhan tai* (*Station*, 2000), and Zhang Yimou's *Shan za shu zhi lian* (*Under the Hawthorn Tree*, 2010). The most audacious attempt at addressing the Cultural Revolution is Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*, in which Mao and the Cultural Revolution are parodied and ridiculed.

114 In comparison to *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Gui lai* seems to take a more nostalgic view of the past. Maoist slogans printed in large letters on walls and public spaces, grey and military-green clothing, and revolutionary songs broadcast on the radio are all reproduced in their original forms in order to remind the audience of the film's historical context. Although its seemingly non-political emphasis on individual homecoming helped *Gui lai* pass the censor, its obvious references to the controversies of the past piqued the public's interest and thus led to the biggest opening weekend of 2015 in the Chinese film industry, with a domestic gross of RMB 23.7 million (US \$3.80 million) on its first day. In *The Past Revisited: Popular Memory of the Cultural Revolution in Contemporary China*, Li Zeng points out the dominant presence of "a light consumer culture" surrounding the Cultural Revolution, which "turn(s) the past into an abstract picture and a pleasure land for easy consumption" (253); he further observes that "the nostalgia culture extends from the television screen to physical consumer space" (253). This non-reflective "consumer culture" fueled the popularity of *Gui lai*, contributing to the creation of the myth at the box office.

The uncritical reproduction of the typical scenes of the Cultural Revolution actually masks the reflections of the past that are rendered allegorically in *Gui lai*. As the leading director of the fifth generation, Zhang Yimou is said by critics such as Jie Li to "treat history as a series of dramatic moments and glossy snapshots" (Li) without reflection; however, by examining the opening scene of *Gui lai*, one can notice that *Gui lai* is more self-conscious about its treatment of historical memories than Zhang's previous films have been. The sharp contrast between the modern high-speed train and the lagging lumpen shape conveys the filmmaker's reflection on the relationship between history and politics in contemporary China. Examining the relationship between Spanish historical memories and modern culture, Jo Labanyi argues that "the capitalist market economy is predicated on the production of the ever-new and the compulsory obsolescence of the old" (108). With this in mind, the train seen at the beginning of *Gui lai* symbolizes modernity and the market-driven economy of present-day China, while the subject, whom we later know as the protagonist Lu, represents the past and a constant retrospective look at that past. Whereas the open-

ing scene embodies Labanyi's observation on the nature of the market economy, the film's focus on Lu's attempts to return home attests to fifth-generation filmmakers' collective attitude toward the Cultural Revolution: the past will keep haunting the present if it cannot find a proper position in the present.

Unlike Zhang Yimou, who directly uses the past as the backdrop of the story of *Gui lai*, Almodóvar handles the historical past in *Volver* indirectly. Ismail Xavier points out the frequent motive that lies behind the use of allegory: "Throughout history, the powers that be, religious or secular, have protected their interests by censoring texts and images, and allegory has been a frequent weapon against authoritarian rules" (344). If this description can be applied to *Gui lai*, then I would like to add one more motive to the use of the same literary device by historicizing *Volver* in 2006, the year of its release, which was a year before the passing and implementation of the Law of Historical Memory. The law formally condemns Franco's regime of 1936-75, recognizes the victims on both sides of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, and gives rights to the victims and their descendants. The approval of the Law of Historical Memory marks the culmination of ideological debates about the war and its subsequent dictatorship. The perception of oversaturation of the market with books and films about Spain's traumatic past is manifested in the title of a 2007 novel, *Otra maldita novela sobre la guerra civil* (*One More Damned Novel about the Civil War*). In other words, in contrast to the mysterious aura of the forbidden past in China, direct references to historical trauma in Spain in the new millennium have not attracted public attention in the same way.

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The Spanish Civil War (1936-39), followed by the forty-year dictatorship of Franco (1939-75), continues to haunt contemporary Spain. The relevance of the past to the present remains significant in thought and practice, because the recovery of historical memory is still ongoing and the suffering of victims in this period has not been fully recognized in the public space. Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* uses allegory to address the past in light of perceived reader/audience apathy toward this subject. In contrast to Zhang Yimou's use of allegory to evade censorship, Almodóvar uses this technique to address the theme of the Spanish Civil War from an indirect and original perspective in order to reach a popular audience.

The main protagonists' homecomings in both movies assume ghostly forms, with the ghosts created by their countries' respective historical pasts. Drawing on Derrida's discussion of specters, Jo Labanyi argues that "ghosts are the return of the repressed of history—that is, the mark of an-all-too-real historical trauma which has been erased from conscious memory but which makes its presence felt through its ghostly traces" (1). A common idea repeated throughout *Volver* is that ghosts return because of unfinished reckoning with the past, and they will not leave until they have completed their unfinished tasks. Sole firmly believes that her mother Irene died on that windy afternoon, and that the mother figure who arrives at her home is an apparition instead of a real person. Therefore, she constantly asks Irene for a reason why she has returned, and whether she has anything that she wanted to do

that was left undone. Irene's answer is always "yes," and her unfinished business is twofold. On the one hand, she comes back to articulate her otherwise unspeakable and repressive life story and tries to come to terms with her own past; on the other, she seeks redemption and reparation. She needs to ask her daughter Raimunda for forgiveness for her negligence, which had allowed Raimunda to be raped by her own father, causing her to leave home for Madrid full of grief and resentment and to stay away for fourteen years. Irene also needs to take care of her sick neighbour Agustina due to her responsibility for the death of Agustina's mother, who committed adultery with Irene's husband.

An allegorical examination of Irene's spectrality links the personal to the national and helps to unfold the multi-faceted politics of memory in contemporary Spain, though Jo Labanyi warns us of "the risk of constructing history as something done to people, negating individual agency" (120). In *Volver*, Irene kills her husband after learning of his rape of their daughter and his affair with their neighbour. In other words, she does not seek the intervention of others to correct the injustice that happened to her, but rather takes revenge with her own hands. In this process, she plays the double roles of victim and perpetrator. Later, she returns not only to communicate her life story, but also to acknowledge and make reparations for the pain that she has inflicted, either directly or indirectly, on others such as Raimunda and Agustina. In so doing, Irene complicates and problematizes the oversimplified binary between victim and perpetrator in memory politics of the Spanish Civil War. Zhang Yimou's film explores a similar dynamic in the character of Lao Fang, a cadre during the Cultural Revolution, who also combines perpetrator and victim in one. In *Gui lai*, Lao Fang's sexual harassment triggers PTSD in Lu's wife, who lives in the shadow of her husband; however, when Lu seeks revenge on Lao Fang for his wife's suffering, he finds that the perpetrator has disappeared amidst political turmoil, leaving his wife and children helpless.

Where Zhang Yimou blurs the boundaries between victor and perpetrator among ordinary people during the Cultural Revolution, the visual imagery of *Gui lai* embodies his condemnation of the Mao regime. Without any transition from the bleakness of the opening scene, the second scene of the film employs bright light to show a group of spirited young girls dancing a revolutionary ballet, "The Red Detachment of Women." Hanging on a wall nearby is a poster bearing the Maoist slogan "Carry the great proletarian cultural revolution through to the end." One of the two leading dancers seen against the backdrop of the revolutionary slogan is Lu's daughter Dan Dan. The scene that follows foreshadows the trouble that will accompany Lu's first attempt at returning home: Dan Dan faces a crucial moment in her professional career when her instructor will be selecting the lead dancer, while at the same time Lu escapes from the labour camp in which he was imprisoned. Knowing that Lu's escape will negatively affect her chance of being selected as lead dancer, Dan Dan chooses between politics and family without any hesitation. In front of the Workers' Mao Zedong Thoughts Propaganda Team, Dan Dan firmly rejects her father. A medium

shot shows the determined expression on her face, in contrast with her mother's deep concern over her father's safety, further testifying to the success of the Mao government's indoctrination of the younger generation. A shot-reverse shot first focuses on the cadre's intimidation, and then the camera pans over to give a close-up of Dan Dan's face, emphasizing her fear of the consequences of her father's escape. These subjective shots depict Zhang Yimou's critique of Maoism by showing how the propagandists cowed young people like Dan Dan into submission.

The Maoists' use of intimidation and deception is further illustrated as the party cadre cajoles Dan Dan into revealing her father's whereabouts in exchange for naming her the principal dancer. Lu's fugitive homecoming and Dan Dan's stealthy denunciation of him both occur in repressive darkness and heavy rain that seems to wash the dirt from both father and daughter. If the father needs to get rid of his political stain, then the daughter needs to cleanse herself of her shameful betrayal. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns to his kingdom in disguise, only to discover the betrayal of Melanthe, one of Penelope's favourite maids, who sleeps with the suitors, and that of the goatherd Melanthius, who caters to the suitors. In a parallel scene in *Gui lai*, Lu returns home in disguise to learn of his betrayal by his daughter, who was fooled by the cadre's deceitful promise to her. The strongest image of thwarted return occurs as both Lu's wife and daughter rush to the train station, with the mother eager to meet her husband, and the daughter trying to prevent them from meeting. The rejection of Lu by his daughter and wife show that there is no place for him to return, and his persistent attempts at homecoming testify that he will not be reconciled to homelessness. If we interpret the wife's and the husband's perseverance allegorically by relating the personal to the national, then the filmmaker's attitude toward the relationship between the past and the present becomes clear. When the past is not properly accommodated, it will keep haunting the present until it achieves a complete return.

The so-called return of the past can only be attained with the recovery of historical memories. Art, including photographs and songs, plays its role in this process in both Zhang's and Almodóvar's films. Memories, according to Rob Kroes, are "stores of sensory perceptions, of sounds, of sights, of smell and touches" (1), and pictures are among the most powerful tools in the recovery process. In *Gui lai*, Lu collects old photographs from friends and shows them to his wife, aiming to trigger her memories of their past. As long as she recognizes his sound, touch, and smell, she is expected to accept him as who he is. Disappointingly for him, when she sees the old photograph, the wife reconstructs the good old days by suppressing the bad memories. Her romanticization of the past represents current attitudes toward memories of the Cultural Revolution: many people use its emblems and rituals nostalgically, to reconstruct imagined bygone times and reminisce over their lost youth. The photographs seen in *Volver* function more effectively with regard to memory than those in *Gui lai*; Patricia Holland claims that "looking at the pictures we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a 'real' one"

(14). The camera pans over the gravestone of Irene and her husband and shows their pictures, which inspire Raimunda and Sole to discuss their memories of the death of their parents. This conversation evokes the process of constant constructions and reconstructions of historical memories: Sole considers their parents' death in a fire to be painful, but Raimunda believes their mother was happy because she died in their father's arms and she loves him more than anyone else in the world. However, the story Irene tells of her disappearance, mistaken as death, and her relationship with her husband is completely different from both her daughters' versions. The constructionist nature of historical memories enables a space in which different voices can engage in dialogues, discussions and reflections, allowing for the possibility of reconciliation.

In addition to photographs, music also contributes to historical consciousness by opening a door to the past. In Homer's *Odyssey*, when hearing Phemios singing about the disastrous *nostos* of the Athaens, Penelope breaks down and asks the singer to stop the sad song, because "an unforgettable grief comes over me, more than ever. [...] this is the kind of person I long for, recalling his memory again and again, the memory of a man whose glory extends far and wide throughout Hellas and mid-most Argos" (Nagy 285). The song brings the memory of Odysseus back to Penelope's mind, since the singer directly refers to the hero's experience, and the music contributes to the sadness of the words. The power of music is as strong in *Gui lai* and *Volver* as in the *Odyssey*, but in different ways. In *Volver*, the recognition and reunion of mother and daughter is marked by a critical moment when Raimunda sings a childhood song, titled "Volver." Pache analyzes this moment by juxtaposing the lyrics of the song and the life experiences of Raimunda as both mother and daughter, and argues that this movie is a "radical feminization of the *nostos* narrative" (65). Viewing this scene through the lens of historical memories, I see the song more as a nexus that connects the past and the present. Irene taught Raimunda the song for a children's singing contest. The connection of time that has been established by singing and hearing it in the past is brought back by singing and hearing it again in the present. In other words, the old song serves as a pathway that transports people back to the past, and also brings the memory of the past back to the present.

In *Gui lai*, the only moment when recognition nearly occurs is marked by a piano piece titled "Fishermen's Song," which was popular when Lu and his wife were young. After coming back from the labour camp, Lu strives to restore his wife's memory of him by using familiar objects, including music. The score accentuates Lu's initial hope and immediate disappointment with each frustrating endeavour to jog his wife's memory, just like the rise and fall of musical movements. The physical and psychological trauma that his wife suffered during the Cultural Revolution was so overwhelming that her bodily response is to automatically shut down her memory of the past as a kind of self-protection. She is not capable of properly dealing with the past, which her husband seems to embody.

While the musical movements set the atmosphere of the moment, the light shapes

the scene and suggests the relationship between husband and wife. At the beginning of the scene, when the wife hears the seemingly familiar music, she accelerates toward the sound. The camera turns to focus on Lu, who is playing the piano, and this is the first time that a natural light shines directly on Lu. The direct morning sunlight feels warm and gives people hope, in this case the hope that Lu will leave his ghostly existence and come back into the light. The use of light in this scene thus reminds us of Nagy's interpretation of *nostos* as a "return to light" (283). The sunbeams coming from the windows create a contrast of light with shadow, as the characters move into and out of the light as they approach each other. The alternation of light and shade grips the audience, alluding to the possibility of Lu's return and the reunion of the couple, until Lu's wife suddenly pushes him away, and he falls into the gloomy darkness again. In contrast to Odysseus, who gains Penelope's recognition by shooting the bow that originally belonged to him, Lu has no way to prove his identity in front of his wife.

During the encounter between Lu and his daughter, Lu is also in the shadows, while the light shines on his daughter. Only when Lu leaves the darkness and enters the light does he have the opportunity to reunite with his family, but when the light finally shines on him the next day, he meets with his wife but is not able to come near her: they wrestle with the cadres, intending to break loose and rush in vain toward each other. In the end, the fugitive is not supposed to expose himself to the light. If homecoming means a return to the light, Lu's attempt is doomed to fail.

Unlike Lu, who is forced to stay in the dark, Irene gains the freedom of travelling between light and shade by completing her unfinished business. Revealing the story of her life, Irene comes to terms with the past; reaching a mutual understanding with Raimunda, she can once again appear in public as a mother; and intending to compensate for the loss of Agustina's mother, Irene reassumes the ghost identity to take care of her sick neighbour. Only after she properly buries Agustina can Irene leave behind her spectral form and move forward to a new life. Likewise, only by articulating grievances, confessing guilt, acknowledging losses, and assuming historical responsibility can contemporary Spain finish what is unfinished and allow the ghosts of the past to stop haunting the present.

The recovery of historical memories aims not at "comparative victimhood," to use Tony Judt's terms (826-30); instead, it intends to facilitate a public space in which all traumatic experiences can be recognized and all injustices can be rectified. People who suffered trauma need to make their voices heard, and people who created trauma should confess and make amends for their guilt. As the end of *Volver* demonstrates, only when the ghost completes his/her unfinished business can the spectral apparition disappear.

Whereas in Spain we discuss the exorcism of the ghost, in China we deal with how to live with the ghost. As shown in *Gui lai*, the past cannot come fully into light because of the "collective incapability of dealing with it properly" (Colmeiro 31). This incapability is best illustrated by the final scene of *Gui lai*, as the camera is positioned

inside the iron bars of the door in the train station, where Lu's wife goes to receive her husband on the fifth day of each month, ironically and sadly with the companion of her husband by her side. The couple in their twilight years, surrounded by the snowflakes dancing in the air, gazes at the direction of the stream out of the railway station. The wife seems to be waiting for someone, and the husband looks at her with love from time to time. There is no grief in his expression, only deep resignation and profound love. The film ends with them frozen in the cold winter and locked up behind iron bars. The most telling element in the frame is the sign bearing the husband's name, which he himself holds high. It reminds the audience of one of the most frequent occurrences during the Cultural Revolution: people who were branded as rightist intellectuals and were humiliated and tortured in public would be forced to hold up signs with their names written on them. In other words, the husband and wife have lived, and will live the rest of their lives, in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. Love sustains the couple, and the Chinese in general, against the bitter cold and dark, enabling them to endure the national turmoil and the subsequent oblivion of the past.

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