



When Silence is Loud

Omission, Affect, and Memory in *Cría cuervos*

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Abstract

This paper explores how *Cría cuervos* (1976) portrays authoritarianism not only as a political regime but as something lived and felt within the intimate space of the family. Through the perspective of Ana, a child navigating grief and confusion in late-Franco Spain, the film reveals how power operates quietly through everyday communication: through silence, emotional restraint, and the authority to decide what is true. Drawing on discourse theory and affect theory, I argue that authoritarian control seeps into the household, shaping not only what can be said, but what can be remembered and understood. Silence in the film is not empty; it is structured and atmospheric, producing fear and uncertainty. At the same time, the film's nonlinear structure resists the regime's desire for narrative closure. By blending memory, imagination, and present experience, Ana creates a space where the past refuses to stay contained. Ultimately, *Cría cuervos* suggests that while authoritarianism disciplines everyday life, it can also be quietly unsettled through alternative ways of speaking, remembering, and imagining.

Keywords

Discourse Theory, Affect Theory, Latin America, Visual Media, Memory

INTRODUCTION

While the common adage, the personal is political, may be an appropriate rebuke to those who like to smugly claim that they just aren't into politics, it inadequately addresses the full scope and nuance of this relationship. In fact, it is perhaps most accurate in its inverse: the political is personal. The natural consequences, power dynamics, and affective discourses of the political realm are often most acutely felt in the intimate sphere. This paper argues that the 1976 film *Cría cuervos* presents authoritarianism through a child's perspective, which functions as a uniquely revealing lens.

Since Ana has not yet fully absorbed the social norms and political assumptions that shape adult interpretations, her perspective strips away many learned filters, thereby exposing underlying structures of power, fear, and control more candidly. The film presents the family household as a microcosm of Francisco Franco's regime through its communicative control in which silence, emotional restraint, and authority dictate what can be expressed and how. This demonstrates how authoritarian power persists interpersonally through communicative norms rather than solely through formal political mechanisms.

Furthermore, the film's nonlinear structure, as shaped by Ana's memories, imagination, and the fusion of past and present, challenges authoritarian narrative logic. Such logic traditionally relies upon linear timelines, historical closure, and the establishment of one 'official truth'. Drawing from communications' discourse theory, affect transmission, narrative epistemology, and political theories of authoritarian social control, I contend that the film reveals how power governs both how people speak and how they remember. Ana's imagined ongoing dialogue with her mother functions simultaneously as a counter-discourse and a counter-timeline, restoring open communication and alternate and playful timelines. Through this deliberate disruption of discourse and time, *Cría cuervos* demonstrates that while authoritarianism may trickle down into the personal sphere of everyday communication and historical narration, it can be similarly undermined through counter-practices that keep ethical and political knowledge from being sealed into the past. Smith (2007) condenses this idea neatly, noting that "the past is not past."

THEORY

Film as a Political Knowledge Medium

Film can produce political knowledge by subliminally structuring audience perception in the place of overt claims; as such, this investigation treats film as a means of knowledge-production rather than a simple illustration of existing scholarship. One of the most effective and illuminating means of grasping the consequences of political actors and decisions is by investigating the personal realm; it establishes the foundation upon which the construction of meaning can take place. When films investigate the intimate, we engage in a meaning-making practice that sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the true scope of authoritarian regimes. Bordwell (1989) discusses this, noting that “Meanings are not found but made” (p. 3), thereby supporting the analysis of silence, relationship dynamics, and structure in *Cría cuervos*. Since the film is centred upon the perspective of a child, viewer inference and interpretation become crucial. The viewer is asked to decode the hegemonies at play, since they are beyond Ana’s understanding; we see the dregs of authoritarian rule in family life rather than through overt displays of power. As a result, the communicative control and temporal structure must be read formally.

Interpretive Restraint

A disciplined reading of political film must resist reducing images to fixed symbolic meanings and instead analyze how form produces experience. Sontag (2015) discusses how content “is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art” (p. 3). In context, this text warns against over-interpretation; we are simply analyzing structures of experience rather than decoding any supposed underlying symbols. For example, film allows us to experience living in Ana’s house without having to code the structure as a stand-in for Spain itself. This said, an anti-allegorical approach should not be conflated with an anti-political one—it is simply a different filter by which we can analyze. Thus, this investigation follows an experiential reading over symbolic mapping; this is one of the many doors that films open in the place of strict political theory and interpretation.

Authoritarianism as Social Control

Authoritarian rule operates not only through state institutions but through struggles over social control that regulate everyday life. Márquez (2017) notes that, “Totalitarian regimes attempted to thoroughly control and transform society in pursuit of ideologically defined goals; the state was meant to be[...] total” (p. 40). This distinction is made for the purpose of

identifying the scope of this control model, rather than any concrete classifications on regime type. This form of control, exhibited in Franco's Spain, translates to the micro-scale; households may, consciously or not, come to reproduce these top-down discourses. This often presents itself by means of limits on communicative norms and emotional regulation—placing unspoken restrictions on both dialogue and behaviour. Brennan (2004) defines the transmission of affect as “a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect... They come via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact” (p. 2); in essence, one's surroundings shape their affect, which can spread further in turn. This suggests that top-down governmental control operates not only discursively, but also affectively. Affect is not metaphorical here; it is embodied. This phenomenon is easily understood through the medium of film, as you are effectively in the shoes of someone facing these unspoken constraints; the resulting emotion, fear, and uneasiness is better understood within this framework.

Temporal Authority & Refusal of Closure

Authoritarian regimes often rely on a fixed account of the past without room for question or interpretation; any previous repression is to be understood as having passed without any crossover into today. In Franco's Spain, this practice was common enough as to be understood as an unspoken and unwritten policy. This is substantiated by Encarnación's (2010) discussion of *la desmemoria*, which describes “liberation from past traumas as well as a refusal to face them” (pp. 78–79). Within this framework, forgetting is conflated with healing. The problem lies in the fact that what you do not examine, you cannot question; it is thus an effective tool of control within authoritarian regimes. *Cría cuervos* resists this structure through Ana's counter-timeline, thereby playing with chronology and accuracy of events. When told through the perspective of a child, especially one who finds so much comfort in her memories, the viewer can never be wholly certain which events are real, imagined, a memory, or some combination of the three. No element of the story is rooted entirely in the past or present, thereby acting as a counter-narrative to the discourse promoted by the authoritarian regime. This framework plays alongside a similar counter-structure: communicative restriction and liberation inside the household.

From Regime Control to Household Control

Authoritarian control is most studied at the state or international level, but it may be argued that the resulting effects of these regimes are most strongly felt on the personal level;

Cría cuervos focuses on making the invisible disciplinary strings visible at the level of the household. The film displays control through patterns of speech and emotional expression or repression. Márquez (2017) discusses how the scope of these was all-encompassing; they displayed “an unheard-of capacity for large-scale repression and terroristic control over their populations” (pp. 39–40). Within the context of the film, we can observe how these mechanisms of social control can operate at the interpersonal level; they establish a social environment in which unspoken, but widely felt discourse rules shape what can be said and treated as true. Moving forward, this concept will be referred to as a communicative micro-regime. Ana’s household follows this structure through silence rules, interpretive authority, and emotional restriction—the most consistent of which is silence.

Silence as Structured Control

Silence in the film operates as a communicative constraint on its inhabitants: the result of “trickle-down control.” It acts as a recurring pattern of interactions that signal which topics, emotions, and actions are off-limits for those living in Franco’s Spain. The absence of dialogue serves not as a lack of information, but instead follows Bordwell’s (1989) account of meaning-making, in which “understanding is mediated by transformative acts...” (p. 3). That which goes unsaid can say just as much, if not more, than the spoken word; nuance hides in silence. Omission becomes evidence of repression. For Ana, this produces emotional instability in addition to informational gaps, since events cannot be named, and as a result, processed within these social constraints. In the early post-death household scenes, Ana is surrounded by controlled adult speech and withheld explanation, demonstrating how silence functions as a communicative boundary rather than a neutral pause. Even in saying her final goodbye to her father, military members surrounding the casket give an air of control and restraint to what should be an emotional moment for Ana; this atmosphere likely scares her, explaining why she instead chose to hide. Silence, therefore, operates affectively as well as discursively. As Brennan (2004) writes, the “‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual” (p. 1), and here the silence establishes an atmosphere characterized by barely suppressed tension. In this way, silence regulates feeling as much as speech.

Discursive Dismissal & Interpretive Authority

Adult discursive dismissal can be understood as the convention of adult characters overriding, minimizing, or replacing a child’s perspective. This practice within Ana’s house

establishes an arbitrary hierarchy of authority on which experiences are considered the most legitimate. Only those with such authority, the adults, are allowed to dictate what is real or meaningful. Sontag (2015) warns that such restrictions on interpretation of experience can be a harmful practice, noting that “the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys...” (p. 4). From this, we can conclude that such a practice runs the risk of superposing a sterile experience over the more open-minded perspective of a child. When Ana asks direct questions and receives dismissive or partial responses, adult authority replaces her interpretation rather than expanding it, illustrating discursive dismissal in practice. This is highlighted in her aunt Paulina’s determination that Ana and her sisters be seen, but not heard. It is further enforced when Ana mentions having seen another woman in her father’s bed when he died and was promptly shut down and told not to lie about such things; her experience is considered unworthy of consideration. Within an authoritarian context, such a narrow interpretation of whose experience is considered valid is expected; any alternative understanding of events is to be immediately disqualified. This aligns with Márquez’s (2017) observation that ideology shapes “what can and cannot be said in almost every social setting” (p. 40). It then follows that discursive dismissal and interpretive authority become forms of control within the communicative realm of the family.

Internalization of Communicative Control

Together, these communicative constraints work together to shape how Ana interprets authority and truth. Over time, external discourse rules become internalized, subconsciously influencing how perceptions are evaluated and understood, even when the external authority is no longer present. Kinder (1979) notes that Carlos Saura’s films tend to place a strong emphasis on one’s inner psychological state and their corresponding memory structures, thereby centering consciousness as a focal point (pp. 17–18). It then follows that the limits placed on her speech, behaviour, and explanation shape what Ana knows and how she evaluates what she knows. Nussbaum (2001) describes how “emotions... have a history” (p. 175), meaning that emotional responses are not produced in isolation, but are instead the result of experience and knowledge. Furthermore, when Ana (as an adult) turns to her own imagined or remembered explanations from childhood, communicative control can be seen moving from external rule to internal interpretive habit; she is seen rationalizing from the same framework of control and restraint as exhibited by the adults in her life when she was a child. These conclusions work together to

suggest that communicative restriction helps structure emotional judgment, linking discourse limits to moral interpretation. Yet this internalization is not only discursive, but also atmospheric.

Atmosphere as Governance

Cría cuervos effectively demonstrates how authoritarian governance structures may persist at the household level not only through rules and discourse, but also through an affective atmosphere that governs behaviour even in the absence of explicit instruction. Building on Brennan's (2004) description of affective transmission as a social process with tangible outcomes on one's physiology, it is also worth noting that "the origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without" (p. 2). This highlights how an emotional state can move between people and environments without any direct means of communication. It then follows that authority can be felt before it is articulated. Within the household, mood can regulate behaviour before a single word is spoken, shaping what is safe to ask or express. In shared household spaces such as meal or sitting-room scenes, tension is communicated primarily through posture, pacing, and silence, showing atmosphere regulating behavior before any rule is spoken. Even before Paulina corrects the girls' table manners, there exists an unspoken tension: one that seems to be the result of their ignorance of what unspoken rules are expected of them. This concept reinforces previously-discussed communicative controls; silence and dismissal of experience are rarely neutral omissions, but instead emotionally charged states. Brennan (2004) adds to this, noting that "'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual" (p. 1), which helps explain how household tension becomes an embodied experience for Ana. The viewer never receives a direct explanation of the powers at play, but is able to deduce them through atmosphere and patterns of interaction. In this way, the atmosphere itself becomes an unspoken, but equally effective means of governance.

Emotional Transmission & Fear as Judgment

This affective governance operates through a kind of emotional contagion, in which adult tension transfers into children's bodily and emotional responses without explicit explanation. Brennan's (2004) account of the social transmission of fear and tension via atmosphere works well in the exploration of Saura's work, which often discusses such topics as childhood consciousness, trauma, and memory, highlighting the interplay between "inner life and outer events" (Kinder, 1979, p. 17). Ana's cautious movement and observational stillness in tense household moments illustrate how children may calibrate behaviour to affective atmosphere

rather than explicit instruction. This supports reading Ana's emotional responses as structured by her environment. Nussbaum (2001) discusses how an adult's emotions derive from their childhood experiences (p. 178); it can therefore be claimed that emotions are evaluative responses, shaped by experience. It then follows that Ana's fear is not random or irrational, but a telling response to a deeply constrained communicative world. Read this way, fear becomes interpretive. It shapes affective discipline via unspoken authority and an atmosphere of repression.

Affect and Emotion as Political Evidence

Emotional experience in the film, therefore, functions as political evidence of a much larger system of control and governance. Encarnación (2010) describes the Spanish post-authoritarian culture as one that encouraged forgetting, producing what he describes as "the years of great silence and of no memory" (pp. 78–79). When discourse is restricted and memory is repressed, affect and atmosphere often convey what speech cannot. The film demonstrates what the affective aftermath can look like by keeping emotional knowledge open rather than closed off. This aligns with Smith's (2007) framing claim about *Cría cuervos*: "The Past Is Not Past." The persistence of fear, grief, and unease demonstrates how political history remains present and embodied, even when official narratives push toward closure. Affect thus operates as both an enforcer of the authoritarian afterlife and a record of it. The film's temporal structure will extend this resistance further, formally preventing the past from being sealed off through linear narrative closure.

SYNTHESIS

Film as Political Knowledge

Taken together, the *Suara*'s effective employment of communicative silences, affective atmosphere, and nonlinear memory structure in *Cría cuervos* highlights the ways in which cinema can reveal how authoritarian afterlives persist in lived experience, not only in institutions or laws. Political theory often describes systems of power at state or international level, but film humanizes those systems, thereby making them easier to understand and empathize with; as a viewer, in a sense you live the protagonist's life; you see through their eyes, better understand how they may feel, and navigate their world. This discussion is grounded in meaning construction; "meanings are not found but made" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 3), and *Cría cuervos*

requires viewers to actively infer power relations from silence, atmosphere, repetition, and fractured chronology. These household dynamics work together to produce a lived model of authoritarian persistence rather than a pedagogical one. This experiential political knowledge is anchored most clearly in its subjective perspective: Ana. This is especially accentuated through Ana's continuing relational memory of her mother.

Ana–Mother Spectrum as Counter-Discourse

The relationship between Ana and her mother solidifies how the film constructs both a counter-discourse and a counter-timeline within a communicatively restricted environment. Ana's identity is largely established in relation to those around her. When communication fails, she often turns to internal dialogue structured around her mother's remembered, and imagined, presence. Within this framework, the mother functions as a kind of communicative anchor, enabling interpretive and emotional processing where household discourse, or lack thereof, blocks it. Nussbaum's (2001) discussion of how one's history informs the shape of their emotions (p. 175) further supports this reading, since Ana's remembered relationship carries a great deal of weight on her (re)actions and expressed emotions. Since Ana's mother lives in both Ana's memory and her imagination, her existence disrupts the expected linear chronology. This stands in direct opposition to the post-authoritarian culture Encarnación (2010) describes as *la desmemoria*, thereby serving as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic norm of the time. The film seems to deliberately reject such closure by playing with memory, time, and expectations.

Final Synthesis Claim

Cría cuervos both demonstrates and challenges the many ways in which that authoritarian power endures at the interpersonal level, through discourse patterns, affective transmission, and nonlinear memory anchored in Ana's maternal counter-structure. Throughout the film, authority operates through strict, yet unspoken, regulation of speech, affect, and even time—resistance of which foments through internal dialogue, incorporation of a child's imagination, and nonlinear memory. Brennan's (2004) discussion of affect also helps clarify how both control and resistance operate atmospherically as well as discursively. As a result, the film does more than represent authoritarian aftermath; it models how it is both lived and how it is interrupted. This analysis shows that communicative theory, affect theory, and narrative form together reveal dimensions of political life that no abstract description or theory could hope to capture. Authoritarian afterlives are lived before they are theorized; movies make those lives personal.

CONCLUSION

Cría cuervos demonstrates that authoritarianism persists not only through institutions or official narratives but through communicative control and lived experience. This paper has argued that authoritarian power continues at the interpersonal level through three interconnected mechanisms: communicative restriction, affective transmission, and pressure toward temporal closure. These mechanisms govern how people speak, what they are permitted to feel, and how they are encouraged to remember. Viewers experience power in the film not through explicit political orders, but through inference built from silence, omission, repetition, and nonlinear structure. This framework is clearest in Ana's ongoing memory—imagination relationship with her mother, which underlines how nonlinear memory resists enforced forgetting, or desmemoria. The spectrum between Ana and her mother functions simultaneously as counter-discourse and counter-timeline: where household authority restricts dialogue and expression, memory enables internal conversation, and resultingly, a kind of freedom for Ana. As a result, the film directly challenges the post-authoritarian culture Encarnación (2010) describes as “the years of great silence and of no memory” (pp. 78–79). By actively maintaining and playing with memory, the film rebuffs this silence.

By highlighting the ways in which authority shapes how people speak, feel, and remember, the film reveals dimensions of political power that theoretical description alone cannot capture. Atmosphere, hesitation, silence, and recurrence become evidence of this. Brennan's discussion of affect describes how politics becomes an embodied experience. Taken together, communicative theory, affect theory, and film form support the paper's central contribution: a paired model of communicative control and the politics of memory and time. Authoritarian regimes may end, but they live on both communicatively and temporally: enduring phenomena which cinema can make visible in ways abstract theoretical description alone often cannot. Films can connect souls across space, time, and reality; we need only watch.

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