

## **Of monsters, spirits, soldiers and the power of imagination.**

### **A psychoanalytic lens on Victor Erice's "The spirit of the beehive" (El espíritu de la colmena)**

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#### **Abstract**

My article on Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) looks at the ambivalent fantasies of two Spanish young girls, excited by the screening of the film *Frankenstein* in their village town-hall. I offer an interpretation of their fantasies in the context of those children's psychological development, of their relationship with emotionally distant parents, and of the post-Civil War historical period when the story takes place.

**Key words:** childhood, frankenstein, spanish civil war, monsters, ghosts

Throughout the history of cinema, feature films about children, which are not always films for children, abound. To this genre, My own idiosyncratic list of favourite European movies in this genre (therefore leaving out Hollywood's important contribution) includes: Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (1947) about a boy's desperate attempt to survive in a city destroyed by the war; Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951) on a mother's obsession with her little girl getting a part in a film; Truffaut's autobiographical *Les quatre cent coups* (1959); Loach's *Kes* (1969) on a lonely boy's love for a bird of prey; Saura's *Cría Cuervos* (1976) about a child wrongly convinced of having poisoned her father; Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (1988) on a boy's lifelong passion for cinema; Sverák's *Kolya* (1996) on a cellist saddled with someone else's kid, and getting to love him; and Doillon's *Ponette* (1996) on a four-year old girl coming to terms with the death of her mother. Last but not least, my list would also include *El espíritu de la colmena* [*The Spirit of the Beehive*], a film aptly described by a critic as "a visually poetic, haunting, allegorical film on innocence, illusion, and isolation".

Written and directed by Victor Erice in 1973, *The Spirit of the Beehive* was acclaimed internationally as a masterpiece and won several major awards. The indirect influence of a psychoanalytic approach to filmmaking is made explicit by Erice himself, who in relation to this work has stated:

"I believe in the less conscious (in other words, the subconscious or unconscious) experiences and feelings that gradually build up in our minds without our being too

aware of them. The problem in art isn't just to have ideas, but how to express them and give them body and life".

Erice was born in 1940 in a village in the Spanish region of Biscay. He studied law, political science and economics at the University of Madrid, and film direction at the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía. He wrote film criticism for the journal *Nuestro Cine*, and directed some short films before his first feature, *The Spirit of the Beehive*. After a gap of nine years Erice wrote and directed his second feature, *The South* (1982), based on a story by Adelaida García Morales; even if left unfinished for financial reasons, it was still a critical and commercial success. After another long gap came his third movie, *The Quince Tree Sun* (1992), a documentary about painter Antonio López García, which won two important prizes at the Cannes Film Festival. Finally, in 2002 Erice directed *Lifeline*, a wonderfully evocative black-and-white short on the problem of time, for the collection *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*.<sup>1</sup>

Human beings have always attempted to cope with the anxieties stemming from their limitations - physical, emotional, mental and otherwise - by imagining worlds where such shortcomings are magically denied or overcome. Their impotence is thus transformed into omnipotence, their ignorance into omniscience, their mortality into eternal life, their unhappiness on earth into bliss in heaven ...

We learn from psychoanalytic developmental theories that the origins of such grandiose phantasies may be traced back to the infants' primary narcissism and to their belief that the mother's breast (concretely and metaphorically speaking) will always be available to them on demand – a certainty to be challenged early enough, of course, by the disturbing intrusion into the child's life of the 'Reality Principle'. Mythologies, including those that take the form of religions, are but variations on the themes of such primitive wishes and are to be found in all cultures.

In the *Zeitgeist* of the 19th century, characterized as it was by its emphasis on scientific progress, one of these myths found special fortunes: it consists in the wish to artificially recreate human life by removing various organs from corpses, assembling them into one body, and then infusing a sparkle of life into it, perhaps with the help of magnetic energy or of the then newly-discovered electricity.

Not unlike those arrogant, if also brave, biblical builders of the Tower of Babel who hoped to get close to God with their construction, any woodcarver à la Mastro Geppetto

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<sup>1</sup> Those interested in this film director's life and work can read the anthology edited by Linda Ehrlich: *An Open Window. The Cinema of Victor Erice*. Lanham (Maryland): Scarecrow Press, 2000.

(Pinocchio's 'father' in Carlo Collodi's 1883 masterpiece) or any scientist à la doctor Henry Frankenstein could learn to imitate, and thus to challenge, God's (or, rather, Mother Nature's) powers to form new lives. An enterprise, this one, doomed to a tragic outcome in Mary Shelley's 1818 genial literary creation, and in James Whale's film that gave it a scary visual representation in 1931, but less outlandishly fantastic in our own electronically-dominated third millennium, when the creation of artificial intelligence, of anthropomorphic robots, and of cloned sheep is fast moving from the realm of science fiction to that of ordinary reality.

"I had received a proposal to make a film on the theme of Frankenstein, but actually in that horror genre", explained Victor Erice about the genesis of *The Spirit of the Beehive*, "but when I started to do the budget, chance happily intervened in my favour because that kind of film needs a lot of sets and famous actors, and the producer had to admit he didn't have quite enough funds. So when I proposed a Spanish version of Frankenstein - not quite so extravagant, without big sets and with only four weeks of filming, he liked the idea... On my work desk I had cut out a picture, a frame from James Whale's Frankenstein, that moment when the monster and the child are together... I understood that in that image everything was contained. I called on my personal experiences and decided that the identification with the child and the film would be far greater if the child was a girl and not a boy. And so gradually the story started unfolding".  
(from Jeff Andrew's BFI interview to Victor Erice, September 2003)

In the imagination of young children growing up in the Spanish countryside in 1940 we can well believe that the sight of Boris Karloff in the role of doctor Frankenstein's monster, projected on an improvised screen in their village town-hall, must have been truly scary. The 'word of friendly warning' of the presenter of the film, claiming that its story 'is not to be taken too seriously', must have done little to assuage these children's fears.

We encounter the two protagonists of our film - seven-year old Ana and her elder sister Isabel (played by Ana Torrent and Isabel Tellería respectively) - unable to fall asleep after the screening of Frankenstein, their minds still full of the disturbing images they have been watching. How could children like them respond emotionally to such distressing material? How would they conceptualize and integrate it within their mental space? Would their reactions, as girls of 'latency period' age, be substantially different from those of boys, or of older children, or even of adults, when being presented with a monstrous creature walking about a scientist's laboratory who then throws a young girl like themselves into the lake as if she were just another marigold?

Ana and Isabel know that what they had seen was just a film ("In the movies it's all fake, it's a trick", says the older girl), much as we know that Victor Erice's is also just a

film; and yet, beyond all rationalizations, they must have found it impossible to keep its fictional reality entirely separate from their daily experiences, and understand it as nothing more than the product of someone else's imagination. Such, by the way, is the power, and indeed also the fascination, of cinema for us all...

In the poignant scene of their *sottovoce* dialogue in bed, we hear sleepy Isabel trying to answer her wide-eyed younger sister's questions by making her believe that she knows more than she actually does about such things as monsters, ghosts and spirits. "I saw him alive," she claims. "Where?" Ana inquires. "In a place I know near the village. People can't see him. He only goes out at night". "Is he a ghost?". "No, he's a spirit..."

In another scene, Isabel pretends to be dead and then creeps in from behind on Ana in the dressed-up guise of a monster, almost enjoying scaring her - a way, we presume, to deal with her own fears through the well-known defensive mechanism of 'Identification with the Aggressor'. Ana, on her part, who earlier on was not much convinced by Isabel's parapsychological explanations, is now not too frightened either by her dramatic performances. However, she will still pursue her wish to meet the monster, who she believes can make itself visible at the bottom of the well near the abandoned farm, albeit only as a ghostly apparition.

But, we may ask, what are Ana and Isabel really looking for? We must assume that in their solitary search for the monster's spirit, alongside experiencing some sense of adventure and excitement, they secretly hope to come across someone who could offer them the understanding and affection which neither of their rather absent parents could be trusted to give them; to find someone sufficiently in touch with their inner world and sympathetic to their insoluble existential dilemmas about good and evil, life and death, bodies and sexuality - questions that all children have to struggle with - to help them dispel or at least reduce their anxieties.

Indeed, these girls' parents (played by Teresa Gimpera and Fernando Fernán Gómez), seem not just to ignore each other, but also to be quite indifferent to their daughters who, as a result, are often left by themselves playing dangerous games on the railway lines and wandering in the open countryside, as if they didn't need any parental supervision. Teresa is busy writing letters to a former lover whose destiny she now ignores and worries about, while 'misanthropic' Fernando (Teresa's definition of her husband) is obsessed with the meticulous observation of bees. The imagery of the beehive, by the way, repeated in the hexagonal pattern on the house window panes, creates in the film what a critic described as "a pervasive sense of claustrophobia and geographic disconnection"; it can also be seen as a reminder of the buzzing mental activities taking place in the minds of the two girls, as they try to make sense of the mysteries of life.

On a couple of occasions, it is true, we witness Fernando and Teresa behaving like 'good enough' parents. The girls' father takes them out to pick mushrooms and explains the difference between the edible and the poisonous ones - perhaps an indirect lesson in

moral values. In another scene, Teresa affectionately combs Ana's hair and tries to answer her questions about spirits ("a spirit is a spirit", she says – a hardly enlightening explanation!), followed, moreover, by the instruction to be 'a good girl', but also by a genuinely tender embrace. Later, when the girl runs away and cannot be found anywhere for a few hours, both Teresa and Fernando are clearly upset, though maybe also out of guilt for not having taken proper care of her. All in all, one is left with the impression that these parents are not engaged with their daughters in an emotionally profound and consistent way, and that therefore these still very young and needy children cannot quite rely on them. It is significant that when Ana is worried about what could have happened to her sister, she goes to the more present and caring servant Milagros for help, and not to her mother.

A delightful scene in *The Spirit of the Beehive* is the one that takes place in the classroom, where a well-meaning teacher gives a rudimentary anatomy lesson to her pupils by making them reassemble, Frankenstein-like, the different organs (heart, lungs, stomach, eyes – no genitals, of course) on a wooden mannequin named Don José... as if whole objects such as human beings were just the sum total of the part objects they contain - a theme incidentally also touched on by another Spanish filmmaker, Pedro Almodóvar, in his latest movie *The Skin I Live In* (2011), again inspired by the Frankenstein story.

In *The Spirit of the Beehive*, as well as throughout the rest of director Erice's scanty filmic production, we can perceive the noisy presence of time ticking by: a theme visually illustrated here by the father's musical watch, an album of old family photographs, the cycle of the bees' lives, the children's daily ritual walk to and from school.

"Films are obviously full of time", Erice remarked, "all forms of art have expressed time in one way or another. But none has managed to contain it, as a bowl would contain water, as film has managed to do".

A repeated image in *The Spirit of the Beehive* is that of fire; matches, candles, cigarettes, bonfires and oil lamps are here symbols not only of cathartic purification, but also perhaps of the destructive powers of conflict. At one level the film could be interpreted as an allegory of Spain at the tail-end of its bloody Civil War - a country first traumatized, and then for the following four decades anaesthetized, by the presence of a monstrous dictatorship. The literary and filmic Frankenstein and the historical Franco can be seen as two men affected by a similar delusion of omnipotence: the former to imitate God by creating life through a perverted use of science, the latter to oppress his country through his violent and authoritarian regime (Erice's film was released two years before the end of Franco's long dictatorship). Guillermo del Toro's recent *Pan's*

Labyrinth (2006) is another film set in the same period of Spanish turbulent history and, like *The Spirit of the Beehive*, with as protagonist a young girl lost between her vivid imagination and the horrors of war.

Yet, *The Spirit of the Beehive* may as well be set in any place and at any time. Unfolding at a slow tempo, Erice's film allows us to immerse ourselves in the two children's fantasy world and magical thinking, skillfully explored by the filmmaker's camera as it flawlessly moves in and out of the family's comfortable country house. I was intrigued to learn that the film is made up of exactly 500 indoor and 500 outdoor shots, almost to assert the presence in the children's lives of a perfect balance between subjective experiences and external reality.

Alongside more joyful, light-hearted and playful moments in the girls' existence, we will not find it surprising that their imagination should also be populated by primitive fears of dying - the mind of children being, not unlike cinema itself, such a contradictory juxtaposition of lights and shadows. Stimulated both by the fictions of horror cinema and by the realities of horror history, we hear much talking of spirits and ghosts, we see religious icons of skulls and crucifixions, we watch Isabel attempting to strangle the cat or pretending to lie dead herself, and we come across a corpse - real rather than imagined this time, if still within the fictional world of the film itself - of a Republican soldier shot by Franco's army in the abandoned barn. Ana had offered him an apple with a similar innocent generosity to the one of little girl Maria towards Frankenstein's monster, we assume in identification with her and with the unconscious hope to rewrite that frightening story and survive where Maria had succumbed. Covered by a blanket, and facing us from the same daring perspective as the *Cristo morto* in Mantegna's painting at the Pinacoteca di Brera, the Partisan's body will be displayed in the town hall makeshift mortuary, in the very same room where, earlier in the film, the villagers had been watching Frankenstein...

A critic described *The Spirit of the Beehive* as "a haunting mood piece that dispenses with plot, and works its spells through intricate patterns of sound and image". I am aware that it may feel difficult for some viewers to relate to films such as this, which (like the works of such great directors as Jean Vigo and Yasujiro Ozu) lack a conventional, straightforward narrative. However, I believe that the deliberate absence of a recognizable plot is here abundantly made up for by the filmmakers' lyrical emphasis on atmosphere, by the powerful visual impact of Luis Cuadrado's simple yet always beautiful photography, and, most of all, by the accuracy with which the two little girls' inner world - whether excited by curiosity, delighted with their discoveries, or

tormented by anxiety - is represented in the film, allowing us to identify with the characters and reminding us of what it was like, also for us, to be a child.

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