

DIRECTORY OF WORLD CINEMA SPAIN

EDITED BY LORENZO J. TORRES HORTELANO

Spanish cinema, well-loved by moviegoers worldwide, has thus far suffered from a relative lack of critical attention. Focusing on the vast corpus of works that have left their marks on generations of spectators, *Directory of World Cinema: Spain* returns the national cinema of Spain rightfully to the forefront with numerous full-colour stills and essays establishing the key themes and genres in their sociopolitical context, including civil war films, documentaries, comedies, and the cinema of the transition. From the award-winning big-budget productions of Pedro Almodóvar in Madrid to Pere Portabella's experimental documentaries and the influential Barcelona School, the volume covers individual titles in considerable depth. Essential reading for students and scholars of Spanish cinema at all levels, this volume provides an accessible overview of the main trends and issues in Spanish film.

The *Directory of World Cinema* aims to play a part in moving intelligent, rigorous criticism beyond the academy by building a forum for the study of cinema that relies on a disciplined theoretical base. Each volume of the *Directory* takes the form of a collection of reviews, longer essays and research notes, accompanied by film stills highlighting significant films and players.

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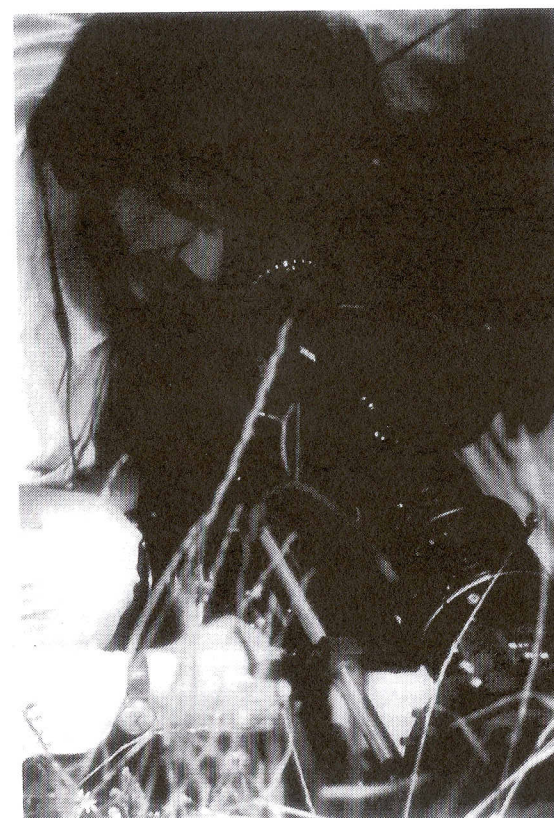
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But musicals form the majority of his work from the Transition to Democracy, and ten movies are dedicated to the world of dance and music. The most emblematic, as the first and one of the best, is *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*) (1980), from the ballet created by Antonio Gades, freely inspired by the work of Federico García Lorca. At first it is almost a documentary in which Saura films the ballet rehearsals before its filming of the performance. This makes *Bodas de sangre* not a simple transposition but really a reinvention for the camera of the most intense work of Gades, as with the duel between the two protagonists, during which the empathic camera follows each step of the mortal fight. Collaboration with Antonio Gades produced two films, *Carmen* (1983) and *El Amor brujo*/Carlos Saura Dance Trilogy, Part 3: *El Amor Brujo* (1986). In the first, the director is mixing the two levels of representation, the characters of the plot and the dancers of the French opera, thus returning to games already present in his work. This trilogy is his first step into the world of music and is inspired by existing works but, with the diptych *Sevillanas* (1991) and *Flamenco* (1995), Saura removed, in a sense, the musical story, and dedicates himself to capture different flamenco dances, with an almost absolute sobriety in the first film, and with virtuoso lighting by Italian Vittorio Storaro in the second. The director's last musical works tend to be diverse from a musical and geographical standpoint: *Tango* (*Tango*, 1998), *Fado* (*Fado*, 2007) and, again, the flamenco in his latest film, *Flamenco, Flamenco* (2010). These films range from a form of absolute respect for the represented art to more personal implications, such as the question of Dictatorship, with *Tango*'s questioning of the military assassinations in Argentina. Finally three works of classical inspiration, *Salome* (2002), *Iberia* (2005) and *Io, Don Giovanni* (2009) complete the artist's palette.

Not everything can be reduced to a few genres in the work of Saura: from 1975 he made a few very different films that show not only his immense technical qualities but also a taste for diversification that has not always been valued properly because it lies outside commonplace creative lines. Perhaps the most significant, and one of his biggest hits, *Ay, Carmela!* (1990), is a brilliant adaptation of the work of Sanchis Sinisterra, which describes the route, during the Civil War, of the 'cómicos de la legua' ('travelling actors') who end up facing fascism – the titular character Carmela paying with his own life. In addition to the impeccable direction of actors – Carmen Maura was breaking with Almodóvar, and Andrés Pajares fleeing from more popular products – Saura's *Ay, Carmela!* is a return to the subject of the Civil War which had never been represented head on and which he had just spoken of in his book *Esa luz* (*That Light*) (2000). A few films can be considered as biopics: *Antonieta* (1982), about the figure of the great feminist Antonieta Rivas Mercado; *El Dorado* (1987), describing the epic of Lope de Aguirre; *La noche oscura/La nuit obscure* (1989), on the life of San Juan de la Cruz; or, in some ways debatable, *Buñuel y la mesa del Rey Salomón/Bunuel and King Solomon's Table* (2001). The best film in this category is surely *Goya en Burdeos/Goya in Bordeaux* (1999) with the imposing presence of a Paco Rabal absolutely steeped in a tailor-made role. Saura's passion for the Aragonese genius is transparent throughout the film, with Storaro's splendid lighting and with continuous games on memory, time and neglect, where the mobile sets, already used in other movies, show extraordinary flexibility, and facilitate the transition from one era to another.

Saura is a film-maker who has always managed to adapt to situations, not only political but also economic, and so are born films as diverse as *Los zancos/The Stilts* (1984); an uninspired adaptation of Jorge Luis Borges *El sur* (1991); the official film of the Olympic Games in Barcelona, *Maratón/Marathon* (1992), conceived as a musical; or *El Séptimo día/The Seventh Day* (2004) recreating the settling of a tragic score. Over more than half a century, Saura has built a diverse but always demanding oeuvre, always with political compromises which had to be defined ideologically. His filmography is one of the most exciting in Spanish cinema and he is without doubt one of the most important figures of Spanish culture.

Jean-Claude Seguin



Victor Erice in *Dream of Light*, Rosebud.

DIRECTORS VÍCTOR ERICE

Despite his scant output, Víctor Erice (b.1940) is one of the most widely-recognized Spanish directors on the international stage. A cult author, slow and obsessive in his themes, jealously guarding his artistic sovereignty, he makes cinema which seems to challenge the laws of the market. Even so, his three feature films, *El Espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), *El Sur/The South* (1982) and *El sol del membrillo/The Quince Tree Sun* (1992) received important European awards and he also has a large group of devoted followers in Spain and abroad. He has been invited as a member of the Jury in Cannes 2010, and selected (along with Luis Buñuel, the only Spanish filmmakers) for the project *Paris-Madrid, allers-retours*, directed by Alain Bergala. There is a DVD forthcoming, edited by Rosebud, which includes two of Erice's last works, the short *Alumbramiento/Lifeline* (2002) and the medium-length film *La Morte Rouge* (2006), which were not premiered on the Spanish commercial circuit but were shown as part of the exhibition *Erice-Kiarostami, Correspondences*. This event took place at MACBA (Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art), La Casa Escondida of Madrid and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, from 2006 to 2008, and received hundreds of thousands of visitors. It would seem that Erice's films are more appropriate for screening in a museum than for distribution through the current industry channels as a show with mass appeal.

With the exception of *The Quince Tree Sun*, which is considered in the documentary mode and determined by the life and work of the painter Antonio López, Erice's films reflect his generation's experience of childhood in post-war Spain. And this is emphasized not only in his great films *The Spirit of the Beehive* or *The South*, but also in all of his other works, from the first of his surviving shorts, *Páginas de un diario perdido* (1962) up to the most recent of them, *Lifeline* (2002) or *La Morte Rouge* (2006), where he also deals with this childhood, autobiographical material, but, in the last one, it is no longer disguised as 'other' fiction.

Erice manages to delve deep into the poetical springs of his childhood memory, working with the very subject of the filmed reality, and integrates the accidents of filming into the tale. This memory frequently has to do with the cinema itself, such as it was experienced by his generation of children as 'symbolically adopted children by the cinema'. That explains why one of the great themes of Erice's films is cinema itself as a window to the world, as a teacher of life, which contains as much of dreams as it does of reality. This is fundamental in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, in *La Morte Rouge* and also in *El Sur*, where the cinema represents the link between Agustín and his hidden past, which his daughter Estrella will have to discover by travelling to the south. Another of the great themes that Erice tackles in most of his films is the mystery of the origin and sense of human destiny, which is also the main subject of *El Sur*. The short, *Lifeline*, for instance, performs, under an historical disguise, a real story, which the protagonists still hold at the forefront of their minds. For this reason, Erice decided to adopt a reportage style when working, with the amateur characters not acting but playing quotidian attitudes typical of the country. At the end we are shown, in black and white, a post-natal scene in a traditional house belonging to 'Indianos' (Spanish emigrants to America) back in Asturias in the immediate Spanish post-war context: the same month and year in which Erice was born. This resource of mixing past and present allows Erice to deal not only with the ghost of recent Spanish history, but also to pose symbolically the great questions of universal existence, such as the past and the meaning of life, which were also implied in the same cinematographic subject that was the leitmotif of the collective work *Ten Minutes Older* (2002), to which this short belongs.

This method is no different from what occurred in his masterpiece, *The Spirit of the Beehive*, unanimously considered one of Spanish cinema's best films. The film is historical-biographical and mythical at the same time: a domestic version of the myth of Frankenstein adapted to the Spain of the immediate post-war that the director wishes to recover cinematographically. However, the narrative dimension in a poetic tone of magical child-

hood memory, so revolutionary in its time, did not obey any previous intentions on the part of the director, or of the co-scriptwriter Ángel Fernández-Santos, but was brought about by the girls, who did not distinguish between reality and fiction, work and play. In fact, the characters kept their first names because that is how Ana Torrent addressed them. And also the structure of the film changed completely because of Ana, despite the fact that this change, which eliminated the flashback, could have made the film incomprehensible for the rest of the film crew, including the producer Elías Querejeta. Erice did so because, in his words, he felt he had to; not for magical reasons but for strong realism, due to a true respect for the reality, which was so open that it surprised even the film-maker. Thus, the initial pretext of Frankenstein (the horror genre was enjoying great success in Spain at the time) was gradually transformed by the documentary imperative into a window on the great existential questions about the lack of communication in human herds; the problem of evil and death; and the mystery of creation and re-creation.

Cinema, in Erice's own words, is at the same time the cause of the wound and its cauterization. With *The Spirit of the Beehive* Erice tried to cauterize the wound Ana had received from the complete visualization of Whale's film *Frankenstein* (1931), which aroused in her the big questions about death and evil in reality. And the director does that through the apparition of the monster by the river during the night scene in the forest. This was something that provoked great controversy from the premiere of the film and still remains polemical since it breaks the tale's supposed verisimilitude. Erice himself said that he introduced this poetic element because he felt that Ana needed it; because he recalled the faith which she had in the monster's appearance – as a reward for that. This testimony calls to mind the miracle of *Ordet* (1955) by Danish director Dreyer, whose influence Erice acknowledges. But it also shows that the final solution depends on the director, on his role as a Doctor Frankenstein that plays with his fictional creatures.

Ana Torrent, who did not really act since she was only six years old, followed her own initiative, but behind her was Erice both guiding her and letting her lead at the same time. He did this respectfully, but in the direction which suited him, according to his own memories of childhood and experience as an artist. The documentary dimension is used not for realistic purposes but for poetical ones, in order to recover in the present the personal experience of the past. It explains why Víctor Erice usually defines his films as historical poems, which talk about an encrypted time: that of his childhood memories; although this memory occurs live, more like the present than the past.

To sum up, in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, the connection between Frankenstein and his creature is not so much that which occurs between Fernando and Ana, but more like that between Erice and Ana Torrent. Let us not forget that Fernando's watch, like Agustín's pendulum in *The South*, is a symbol of authority, and appears in the title credits of *The Spirit of the Beehive* next to the director's name. This watch, which passes from hand to hand and indirectly causes the death of the fugitive – in Ana's imagination, the incarnation of the immortal spirit – does not belong to Fernando, who is so chaotic in his schedules. He who really controls the time of the narration, the rhythm of the story, the true Doctor Frankenstein of the film, is Víctor Erice, as it falls to him to give life to the new creatures with his work as 'sculptor of time', using Tarkovsky's famous title and ideas that Erice admires.

Furthermore, the child in the attic in the short film *Lifeline* could symbolize the universal 'great watchmaker' who governs the fates of men; but above all it has to do with Erice's childhood memory of playing with a chronometer drawn on his wrist, and dreaming of being able to control the time – the lives – of other people. This duplicity between the child in the attic and the protagonist born in the same month and year as Erice is none other than the duplicity that exists in all artists between creator and creature, of Doctor Frankenstein and of a monster without a name. The experience evoked by Erice himself with a family that had recently undergone that same narrated incident, splits

into different characters because one cannot have memory of one's own birth; but Erice, thanks to historical fiction, can recover the memory of this child who plays in the attic at being Chronos, the god-watchmaker.

The former interpretation could help in also understanding the deep meaning of *The Spirit of the Beehive*, a film which, as well as talking about a concrete time in Spanish history, deals with the ambition for unlimited knowledge (let us not forget that it is inspired by Mary Shelley's *Modern Prometheus*, the origin of the Frankenstein saga), and on the consequences this knowledge by experience has for the human person. Fernando the beekeeper is, like Doctor Frankenstein, father of a creature to whom he cannot give answers about the meaning of her existence; to the great questions about evil and death that Ana raises precociously after having watched Whale's *Frankenstein*. This mythical content refers above all to the book of Genesis, which is quoted indirectly in the film, especially in the bucolic scene in the mushroom forest. The scene ends in a dramatic manner with Fernando's threat of death to anyone who dares to try the forbidden mushroom, which evokes God's advice to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, pointing at the Science's tree: 'if you eat it, you will die'.

Also in *Lifeline*, the idea of the fugacity of the life of the 'mortal' (*Lifeline* could refer to the thin line which separates life and death) is emphasized with some symbols taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition (the apple, the serpent, etc.) which refer to the same existential meanings on time, freedom, the generational ills and inexorable death. These great themes are a primary preoccupation of Erice himself, since they appear in his writings of the 1960s, when he worked as a critic on *Nuestro Cine*, and also in the more recent writings, such as the book which he published about Nicholas Ray in 1985, where he wrote that evil is not only a social factor but, at the same time, arises as a reflection of a mythical fall and guilt: as a sort of primordial misfortune engendered by ambition, cowardice, the loss of innocence or mere ageing.

The passage of time is a subject present in the Spanish tradition of the still-life paintings called *Vanitas*; something which Erice raises once more in *The Quince Tree Sun*, where in painting his quince tree, Antonio López attempts to challenge time and the fleeting light of the autumnal dusk, the time of this late fruit, the twilight, which provides the film's title. Particularly illustrative of the Spanish Baroque's thematic influence on Erice's work is the sequence from *The Spirit of the Beehive* in which a coquettish Isabel is putting on her lips a bit of blood from her finger, just a few seconds before the camera shows us in detail the skull in the painting of Saint Jerome. This Baroque *memento mori* alludes to the ephemeral nature of this rose of youth which will wither in time. In addition, like the baby's cord bleeding onto a white cloth in *Lifeline*, blood spilt from Isabel's finger symbolizes the sexual-procreative dimension of the human being. Both life and death, future and past are merged paradoxically in scenes such as these.

Symbols can be paradoxical, especially in the Spanish Baroque tradition in which Erice finds inspiration: a realistic tradition which, despite its obsession with the death and the passage of time, usually concludes in reflections of existential hope, or at least with an open ending. In *Lifeline*, despite the inexorable passage of time, of the advance of the scythe and the growing expanse of the blood stain, the child is saved by 'chance'. The cat, which on entering the room seems to foretell death itself, is the saviour chosen by fate to rock the cradle and provoke the crying which makes it possible to heal him in time. 'Agora no' ('Not now' in old Spanish) says the Asturian folk song at the end; all in its own time. The endings of *The South* and *The Promise of Shanghai* (a film meant to be based on Juan Marse's famous novel *El Embrujo de Shanghai*, whose script was published in 2002) would have also been open, had the first been finished and second actually made. And the ending of *The Spirit of the Beehive* can also be described as open, since Ana is an independent creature who determines the outcome of the story and, at

the same time, a creature guided by his creator, the real Victor Frankenstein of the story, Victor Erice.

Five or six years, the same as Ana's, was the age at which Erice experienced discovery of the world and its problems through the cinema, as he himself tells us, and now without disguising it in his last work, *La Morte Rouge*. The deeper meanings of the recent autobiographical film and *The Spirit of the Beehive* or *Lifeline* are not very different; everyone deals with the same concerns on the identity of the creator in dialogue with his work. The voice is Erice's, but it is constantly switching between the first and third person. It is extremely difficult in this type of poetic-realistic cinema, that follows the method of Pasolini's *Cinema di poesia*, to establish what comes first, reality or poetics, life or story. Erice recognizes that he does not know, as he feels that cinema is something real and unreal at the same time. He only knows that cinema allows him to recreate, as if it were the first time, his own experiences of the past, and to extract universal symbols from these personal experiences, as the best poets do in their writing. The difference is that cinema, as Pier Paolo Pasolini used to say (and to which Erice refers frequently), is like writing on a burning page.

Jorge Latorre