Directed by Víctor Erice
Written by Víctor Erice, Ángel Fernández Santos, and Francisco J. Querejeta
Produced by Elías Querejeta
Music by Luis de Pablo
Cinematography by Luis Cuadrado
Film Editing by Pablo G. del Amo
Art Direction by Jaime Chávarri
Set Decoration by Adolfo Cofiño
Costume Design by Peris

Fernando Fernán Gómez ... Fernando
Teresa Gimpera ... Teresa
Ana Torrent ... Ana
Isabel Tellería ... Isabel
Ketty de la Cámara ... Milagros, la criada
Estanis González ... Guardia civil
José Villasante ... Frankenstein
Juan Margallo ... Fugitivo
Laly Soldevila ... Doña Lucía
Miguel Picazo ... Doctor


**Isabel Tellería ... Isabel** appeared in only 1 film—1973 *The Spirit of the Beehive*—for which she also designed the titles.


Everyone has the capacity to create and recreate within them. And a film doesn’t exist unless it is seen—if there are no eyes to look at the images, the images don’t exist. When I’ve finished a film, it’s no longer mine—it belongs to the people. I’m nothing more than an intermediary in the process.

—Victor Erice

Victor Erice has directed just three features and two shorts in a little over thirty years (the shorts, included in portmanteau films, bookended the features he has made roughly ten years apart). In its studied and contemplative approach to cinema, as well as its meagre productivity, Erice’s career can be compared to that of Carl Dreyer and Terrence Malick. The connections to the work of these great, visionary filmmakers do not end there. Like Malick & Dreyer, Erice is a filmmaker who explores his environments through precise, lyrical, light-filled or filtered compositions. He also presents characters that are inseparable from or mired in particular times, spaces and historical moments. Erice’s first two films (like Malick’s) also feature strong, structurally central female characters forging their identity within masculine environments (a striving which often stages itself as act of speaking, of finding voice). Although his films are artfully composed, Erice also shoots in a manner that, like Malick, is responsive to the sound-image possibilities and accidents that emerge on location. But whereas one can imagine, or even fantasise about, the philosophical questioning of Malick and the spiritual contemplation of Dreyer occupying them between films, Erice throws up another ‘picture’ all together. Although he actually has made his living writing film criticism, screenplays and directing for television (including a surprisingly large number of commercials) one would rather imagine, or at least easily conceive, that his films are the product of a deep, extended process of reflection, of repose, the outcome of an accretion of details and minute, precise observations captured over a sustained period of time (a process/practice suggested by the knowledge that he insisted on filming every day during the two-month shooting schedule of his third feature, *The Quince Tree Sun* [1992]—resorting to video when film stock, and the money for it, intermittently ran out).

It is unsurprising that Erice turned directly to the subject of painting (and the painter) in *The Quince Tree Sun*, making explicit—making it, in fact, the ostensible subject of the film—a preoccupation with light, observational detail and the shifting but subtle patterns and differences wrought by the passing of time. Formally the film contains some of the most languid and ‘sedentary’ dissolves in film history. In *The Quince Tree Sun* Erice’s cinema also moves closer to that of Abbas Kiarostami, mixing together specific fictionalised frameworks with the documentary materiality of everyday life, real-life characters and situations. *The Quince Tree Sun* also brings to the ‘surface’ many of the preoccupations which define Erice’s two previous films, including a fascination with the painterly qualities of light and studied, almost still-life observation. The most painterly or
artisanal of filmmakers, his films often take on the impression of a collection of interlocking still lives set in motion.

In *The Quince Tree Sun* we are asked, gently, to contemplate the intense, but here somewhat dissipated, connection and difference between painting and cinema. We watch the painter (Antonio López García, himself a profoundly quotidian painter) attempt to capture the play of light upon the leaves and fruit of a constantly evolving quince tree, while the filmmaker (Erice, one assumes, though he is never directly present in the film) attempts to document the dynamic processes of creating and ‘imagining,’ while simultaneously showing us the painstakingly serene activity of still-life painting. Inevitably, the film can’t capture enough detail and can’t crystallize the painter’s activity into a suitable closing or defining image; while the painting loses the dynamic of light (and life) in the process of committing the tree to the canvas (but it also captures something of it as well). Nevertheless, each, painting and cinema, goes some way toward capturing the essence of its subject. This tension between a medium of movement (and thus time) and stillness or permanence (and thus a different concept of time) preoccupies Erice’s cinema. Time and its registration can be seen as the key leitmotif of Erice’s cinema. A ‘time’ which Erice sees as endemic of artistic creation itself: “Time is present in every work of artistic creation because mankind seeks permanence.” But like the painter’s work, his cinema is also one of process, what it captures moment-by-moment is as important as its ambiguous conclusions.

The quotation from Erice that opens this essay points us towards the experiential quality of his work, as well as the processes of creation and imagination encouraged by his films. In Erice’s cinema this idea is taken beyond the more obvious and commonly represented forms of artistic expression—even in *The Quince Tree Sun* the painter’s daily work is compared to that of a group of builders and the broader actions of the immediate world (which it also largely registers in changes and pulsations of light) which surrounds his walled garden. Both *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and *The South* (1983) follow characters who create an understanding of the world from the often fragmented and incoherent materials that come into the realm of their experience.

*The Spirit of the Beehive* is a film that is set—“Once upon a time… somewhere on the Castilla plain in about 1940”—in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. It is less a film about the broad historical reality of this period and its events (it was made in the final, more open years of Franco’s rule) than its experiential, material impact on isolated individuals and communities. Its characters rarely converse, are introverted, isolated, and find occupation in various forms of what could be called metaphorical abstraction—the father’s metaphysical obsession with bees, the mother’s unexplained letters to a ‘lover,’ the young girl’s appropriation of the image and tale of Frankenstein’s monster to test her own dawning sense of identity, difference and mortality. This interiority, and the pain it expresses, as well as the secrets it never quite reveals and indistinct reverberations it creates, can also be seen as the political point of the film.

Similarly, in *The South* we watch a group of mostly disconnected individuals try to deal with the legacy of a receding past; the Civil War and the divisions it has forged within families and between generations. Although this film is a somewhat truncated version of Erice’s original vision—he conceived of a final section actually set and filmed in the ‘south’—its refusal to move outside the isolated northern community which the family inhabits, in a kind of exile, leaves open the potentiality for the processes of imagination and creative subjectivity that define Erice’s work (as well as his characters). In a scene reminiscent of the Stereoscope sequence in Malick’s *Badlands* (1973), Estrella, the young girl who is the ‘focus’ of the story, uses the material things that surround her to create an understanding and sense of the somewhat inconceivable world beyond her immediate experience. Because her parents rarely discuss the past, she has to extrapolate from the old-fashioned hand-coloured photographs she finds in a family album, or imagine her father’s past lover from a lobby card she picks up at the local cinema (as in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, cinema is used as a means to spark imagination and to create identity). The worlds of Erice’s films emerge as a collection of disconnected but connected signs—aural and visual—that enable the characters to come into being.

It is the look and sound of Erice’s films that is often their most remarkable and telling characteristic. His work is full of ambient, often isolated, perhaps not even adequately sourced, sounds. It is often these sounds which most clearly haunt and disturb the characters. These sounds are also an indication of a world outside of the explicitly framed—this is a cinema full of frames-within-frames, doorways, windows, metaphors of entrapment—and often boxed-in environments we are shown (gunshots, barking dogs, train whistles, vehicles shifting gear). Sound is often figured as a site of the imagination and the unknown, a trigger for processes of creativity, memory and identity formation. For example, early in *The South* the narrator tells of her first memory (assumedly ‘re’-constructed at a later time from a story told by her parents), in which her father mysteriously ‘designates’ her gender while she is still in the womb—the first of a series of uncanny connections that bind father and daughter together in this family romance. Thus, it is not just sounds but words that are central to the make up of the characters.

All three films contain sequences in which characters attempt to explain their feelings, actions and position in the world. This is hardly remarkable but these moments have a curious, particular quality in Erice’s cinema. In *The Quince Tree Sun*, these scenes operate as often quite delightful explanations for the everyday creative activities that we see, while both *The South* and *The Spirit of the Beehive* show how characters use words—written or spoken—to bring themselves into being or express a world from which they are excluded. These two films feature sequences in which characters are shown writing to long absent (and perhaps even non-existent) lovers, while it is Ana’s incantation in *The Spirit of the Beehive*—“I am Ana”—that helps...
crystallise the journey of identity, and being, that she undertakes. Sound also binds these characters in a way that counters or slightly breaks down their physical isolation. At the beginning of The Spirit of the Beehive the major characters are shown in their own worlds—the children Ana and Isabel watching James Whale’s Frankenstein (1931), the mother writing a letter, the father enclosed in his bee-keeping attire. It is the soundtrack of Frankenstein, drifting out of the makeshift community cinema, that starts to bind together the experiences of the various characters (its simultaneous foreignness and familiarity, as well as its ability to float between spaces, a sign of its uncanniness).

The opening of The Spirit of the Beehive also tells us much about the isolation of the characters and their community, as well as the multiple effects that isolated images, sounds and cultural artefacts can have on people (the kind of process that Erice addresses in the quotation at the start of this essay). In Erice’s cinema this can be expanded outwards to an understanding of Spanish society on a more general level. The use of Frankenstein in The Spirit of the Beehive tells us much about how Erice views the cinema and its power (and, subsequently, about how he might view a broader modernity). Although his films are explicitly ‘sound-based’ they also hark back to the expressive sound–image relations possible in silent cinema (and some examples of early sound cinema as well). In many respects, it is the radically different cinema of Murnau that casts the greatest shadow over Erice’s work (as it also does for Malick). This is most explicit in the mix of documentary and fiction found in both Murnau’s Tabu (1931, with Robert Flaherty) and The Quince Tree Sun. But it is also found in the preoccupation with the qualities of light and the expressive possibilities of sound (as sound) found in both directors’ work. The imaginative and suggestive quality of this sound throughout Erice’s cinema links it further to the evocative suggestiveness and pictorialisation of sound created in Murnau’s late silent/early sound hybrid, Sunrise (1927).

The most remarked upon quality of Erice’s cinema is its visual dimension. His films are dominated by the juxtaposition of often stark long shots and beautifully composed and lit vignette—or tableau—like compositions. His camera moves intermittently, but usually only to reframe or follow the characters. Thus, his films do have a studied, contemplative quality on a compositional level (they are full of repeated set-ups and move between a sense of closeness and distance). The most remarkable element of his films’ visual dimension is the qualities of light that they capture—not unlike a painting by Vermeer or Valázquez (though modern, this also hints at the timeless, partly anachronistic quality of Erice’s cinema). This light is often sculptural, its physical dimensions affecting both the perception of the spectator and the actions of the characters. (For example, the browns, burnt yellows and oranges that dominate the bleak interior and exterior landscapes of The South express the muted anguish of the characters, but also seem to shape their literal movement in space.)

It is often reported that the cinematographer of The Spirit of the Beehive, the great Luis Cuadrado, had become virtually blind by the time he shot the film (relying upon his assistants to carry out his instructions). This detail tells us much about the physical qualities of light in Erice’s films. Though often beautiful on a purely aesthetic level—the chiaroscuro flickering candlelight in the pillowed exchanges of the children Ana and Isabel—the light (and colour) of the films generally is also something that you feel physically, the burnished quality of the images emanating a temperature, a season—predominantly autumnal—a sensibility. Like Cuadrado, I assume, we can actually feel this light. Erice’s films also document and favour small changes in composition, a technique that can often look like time-lapse photography. Like many of the great silent filmmakers, Erice is a master of the dissolve. But whereas such dissolves often have a complex meaning and purpose in the work of Sternberg, Murnau and Sjöström—forcing certain readings which don’t appear immediately on the ‘surface’—they are predominantly used by Erice to register minute changes in light and compositional detail. They communicate a sense of time passing—which is conventional—but predominantly through the small (detailed) shifts in pose, colour and light; of characters mired or rested in a particular environment.

Both The South and The Spirit of the Beehive are films about the experiential realities of characters, communities—and a country—in isolation. They each primarily focus on female characters attempting to forge their own identities within somewhat barren, chilly and mute environments. Erice’s films are also remarkable for the space they give to all of their characters—even the woman (played by Aurore Clément) only seen in the film within-a-film in The South is able to express herself through the long letter she sends to Estrella’s father. This virtual dialectic, between specific, knowable entities/characters and the world that surrounds them, is carried over to a general understanding of the connections between images and sounds in Erice’s cinema. Thus, although many of the images and sounds of his films seem to partly exist for themselves—highlighted by the common use of the fade to black, which tends to isolate shots—they are also part of a rich fabric of associations. In regard to this, Erice’s films constantly play upon the tension between movement and stillness, ambulation and repose, the isolated observation and its macroscopic implications.

Erice’s films are also uncommonly preoccupied by death. It is death in both The Spirit of the Beehive and The South that allows the female protagonists to finally venture out into the world. Erice’s final feature film to date, The Quince Tree Sun—he began work on the stalled adaptation of Juan Marse’s The
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Shanghai Gesture in 1999—is a film of a more benign and relaxed character. Although the painter confronts a kind of death every day in the seasonal changes of the quince tree he tries to ‘capture,’ this is a film that is much more concerned with the gentle flurries of change and cyclical processes of renewal (which are also a kind of death). Towards the end of the film López poses for a painting by his wife. Laid out on a bed, his repose—and its representation—suggests a kind of death, a framing and stilling of a moment. Nevertheless, such intimations of mortality tell us little of the way in which life ebbs and flows through the film; a collection of moments, observations, contemplations and manipulations that make up the film and the painting. Rather than exploring the distinction between these two states, Erice’s films occupy a space in which, as Linda C. Ehrlich suggests, there is an “intermingling of life and death.” In regard to this quality, as well as others, Erice’s cinema can be seen as profoundly interstitial. The film’s final gestures towards the materiality of filmmaking (we see a camera filming the artificially lit quince tree) and the seasonal rhythms of life (the tree is shown renewing itself in spring) could be regarded as representational clichés. And yet, both gestures seem right, totally in keeping with the patent simplicity and complexity of Erice’s work.

Erice reminds us of how much we have lost in a time when the rapture of cinema has fallen out of fashion.

Released in 1973, in the dying days of General Franco’s forty-year dictatorship, The Spirit of the Beehive soon established itself as the consummate masterpiece of Spanish cinema. Yet, strangely, many of the gifted artists who collaborated on Victor Erice’s first feature, an atmospheric exploration of a child’s experience in a bleak village just after the civil war, have had troubled afterlives. Erice himself, acclaimed by critics as Spain’s greatest auteur, has completed only two features since (The South, another period drama, in 1982, and Quince Tree of the Sun/Dream of Light, a documentary on a painter, in 1983). The career of Luis Cuadrado, the creator of the luminous cinematography, was tragically cut short by blindness. Ana Torrent, the six-year-old star, remains haunted by the role that made her a Spanish icon. In 2003, on the thirtieth anniversary of The Spirit of the Beehive’s release, she posed for the poster for the San Sebastián Film Festival. Re-creating a scene she had shot so many years before, she stood solemn faced on the railway tracks. Erice has said, "When I’ve finished a film, it’s no longer mine—it belongs to the people." Surely few films have had such an enduring effect on both their makers and their audience.

The Spirit of the Beehive was controversial from the start. Although it won the main prize at San Sebastián on its release, the jury’s enthusiasm was not shared by all the public. Some of the audience, restless at the film’s slow pace, even booed. Yet The Spirit of the Beehive is a classic example of one strand of Spanish filmmaking at that time. Like many repressive regimes, Francoism attempted to use cinema to change its negative image abroad and to create the impression that freedom of expression was permitted. By producing some internationally successful "quality" films, the regime also hoped to raise the status of Spanish cinema generally, which was at that time dominated by crude, mainstream comedies. By the early seventies, these policies had led to the production and export of many experimental and even discreetly oppositional films, although, of course, no overtly leftist movies could be made. The gaping holes in the plot of The Spirit of the Beehive and the mysterious motivations of its characters are typical of this "Francoist aesthetic," a term used to describe artistically ambitious movies of the time that made use of fantasy and allegory. These characteristics, which remain so magical to modern audiences, were used in the period as a form of indirect critique.

What is unique about The Spirit of the Beehive is its reference to the horror genre. The enigmatic plot begins with two children, Ana and her sister Isabel (Isabel Telleria), watching James Whale’s Frankenstein in an improvised cinema in the village of Hoyuelos (like the actors, the location keeps its real name in the film). Obsessed with a spirit who her sister claims lives nearby, Ana will set out one night to meet him, with near tragic consequences. Erice recently recounted that when the child actress confronted his re-creation of Frankenstein’s monster on set, she was as deeply disturbed as her character is in the film.

Ana Torrent’s dark-eyed infant, mesmerized by the monster, was thought to be especially Spanish in her looks and was compared by critics to a Goya portrait. Her innocence is counter-balanced by the hard-won experience of her father, played by veteran Fernando Fernán Gómez. The latter’s fond familiarity to Spanish audiences (he had already played in more than one hundred films and would appear in one hundred more) helped to humanize the somewhat chilly austerity of the film’s form.

He is first glimpsed in the beekeeping mask that gives him the air of an astronaut (the bare Castilian landscape is also lent a lunar quality), and this existential isolation seems similar to that of Erice, who has often spoken of the intensely personal nature of his cinema and the purity of his self-expression. Indeed, Erice and coscreenwriter Ángel Fernández Santos (later a distinguished film critic) based the script on their own memories, re-creating school anatomy lessons, the discovery of poisonous mushrooms, and the ghoulish games of childhood. It is no accident that the film is set in 1940, the year of Erice’s own birth.

Early versions of the script are both more explicit and more political than the final film. Originally, the story had a frame narrative in which the adult Ana explained in voice-over the mysteries that she could not fathom as a child (The South would retain such a voice-over). Likewise, the opening sequence, which is now limited to the arrival of the traveling cinema in the
leads a child by the hand (Ana will become carefully chosen for their themes: in the girls' bedroom, an angel battlements on the roof where Ana’s mother calls out to her lost most important character in the film. The weathered stone indistinct offscreen noise and mu her watchful, fearful face, while her husband is reduced to joins his wife in bed, she feigns sleep. Erice trains his camera on as his child protagonist.

That trauma is signaled in coded references. The village may be a playground for heedless children, but its unpaved streets and ruined buildings are scarred by conflict and deprivation. The father, Fernando, listens in secret to a shortwave radio (surely it is to the BBC, forbidden by the regime), while his wife, Teresa (Teresa Gimpera), writes letters to an absent loved one (an envelope is addressed to a Red Cross camp in France, where Spanish refugees were interned). The character known only as “the fugitive,” whom Ana visits in an abandoned barn, is presumably a member of the maquis, or anti-Francoist resistance. More generally, the insistent melancholia, approaching catatonia, of the household marks it out as one inhabited by members of the losing side in the war. As the innocent Ana leafs through the family photo album, we glimpse her father in a snapshot with Miguel de Unamuno, the famous intellectual who was a brave critic of Franco’s rebellion.

Erice conveys all this with great economy and reticence. The script is laconic (many of the best sequences are entirely silent), and the shooting style says it all. Each member of the family is introduced separately, in a different location: the spartan cinema, the teeming beehive, the hushed room, reminiscent of Vermeer, where Teresa writes her letter to an unknown man. Not once in the film’s ninety-nine minutes do they share the same frame. Typically, in the one sequence when all four are together, a family breakfast, Erice films each of them on their own. Because Erice rarely gives us an establishing shot to set up the action in such scenes, we feel as lost and disoriented as his child protagonist. Framing, too, is used to suggest existential isolation. In one moving sequence, when Fernando joins his wife in bed, she feigns sleep. Erice trains his camera on her watchful, fearful face, while her husband is reduced to indistinct offscreen noise and murky shadows cast on the bedroom wall.

The house itself, an authentic location, is perhaps the most important character in the film. The weathered stone facade, its large entrance crowned by a timeworn coat of arms, suggests an ancestral residence gone to seed (there are even battlements on the roof where Ana’s mother calls out to her lost daughter). Dark furniture is matched by gloomy oil paintings, carefully chosen for their themes: in the girls’ bedroom, an angel leads a child by the hand (Ana will become obsessed with death); in Fernando’s study, where he reads and types, Saint Jerome is depicted as a writer, with a skull placed prominently on his desk. Even the honey-colored light that streams through the windows, glazed with hexagonal panes, is more ominous than it first seems. It evokes the beehive of the title, which Fernando tells us is a society of feverish, senseless activity, one that has no tolerance for disease or death. Cuadrado’s cinematography thus cites a tradition of Spanish old masters that sees intimations of mortality not just in shadows but also in the vanity of everyday life. Ambitiously aiming his first feature at the heart of Spanish cultural tradition, Erice even has his opening title (“A village on the Castilian plain”) echo the first words of Spain’s national novel, Don Quixote (“In a place in La Mancha”).

Less evident, but no less exciting and innovative, is The Spirit of the Beehive’s sound design. Spanish films of the period generally used postdubbing for dialogue. The many child heroes of popular pictures were voiced by adult women shrilly impersonating infants. It is difficult to imagine now the shock felt by audiences on hearing real children’s voices, recorded live on location. Indeed, some complained that the atmospheric scenes where the children talk in whispers were inaudible. Elsewhere, Erice uses sound to cite the horror genre. As the children whisper about spirits (a candle flickers perilously between them), ominous clumping noises are heard offscreen (we later realize that it is just the father pacing the bare boards in an adjoining room). The original soundtrack, by acclaimed classical composer Luis de Pablo, combines uncanny melodies (including a haunting flute motif) with more familiar tunes taken from traditional children’s songs (one is called “Let’s Tell Lies”). In the final sequence, Ana looks straight into the camera as we hear her defiant invocation of the mysterious spirit: “Soy Ana” (better translated as “It’s me, Ana” than as “I am Ana”). Sound and image are perfectly fused.

Erice, who wrote a book on Nicholas Ray, has spoken of his love for Ray’s “beautiful” film We Can’t Go Home Again. Ironically, Erice’s own work can be seen as a repeated attempt to return home. After The Shanghai Gesture, a long-awaited feature project, fell through in the late 1990s, Erice shot a short in luscious black and white for the portmanteau movie Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet (2002). In his segment, called “Timeline,” a baby is born in a village, once more in 1940, only to die unheeded as the villagers go about their everyday life. In Erice’s own words, “Blood blooms across the baby’s clothes like an endless rose.” The intimate connection between life and death in childhood, the great theme of The Spirit of the Beehive, could not be expressed more lyrically and tragically than here.

It seems unlikely that Erice, the perfectionist auteur, could have guessed that his filmmaking career would be so troubled for the thirty years that followed his miraculous debut. But while his oeuvre may be slight, it more than makes up in quality for what it lacks in quantity. Erice has said that he makes films “against time, to escape time.” It is an aim he has brilliantly
fulfilled in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, a film that has left an indelible mark on cinema in Spain and beyond.

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**Roger Ebert: Spirit of the Beehive**

On a vast Spanish plain, harvested of its crops, a farm home rests. Some distance away there is a squat building like a barn, apparently not used, its doors and windows missing. In the home lives a family of four: two little girls named Ana and Isabel, and their parents, Fernando and Teresa. He is a beekeeper, scholar and poet who spends much time in his book-lined study. She is a solitary woman who writes letters of longing and loss to men not identified. The parents have no conversations of any consequence.

It’s an exciting day in the village. A ramshackle truck rattles into town announced by scampering children, who shout, “The movies! The movies!” A screen and projector are set up in the public hall, and an audience of kids and old women gather to see “Frankenstein” (1931).

For the children, the movie had might as well only be about the monster, so tellingly performed by Boris Karloff. The creature comes upon a farmer’s young daughter tossing flowers into a pond to watch them float. Perhaps because of censorship, the film cuts directly from this to the monster mournfully carrying the child’s drowned body through the village. Perhaps because of censorship, we don’t see that he did not drown her, but threw her in with delight, thinking she would float as well. For the two girls, especially Ana (Ana Torrent), this makes a dramatic impression.

Her misunderstanding of the scene will shape the events to follow in *Victor Erice’s* “The Spirit of the Beehive” (1973), believed by many to be the greatest of all Spanish films. Although the time is not specified, it would have been clear to Spanish audiences that the film is set soon after the end of the Spanish Civil War, which began Franco’s long dictatorship — so soon after that the same day, a wounded opponent of the regime takes refuge in the barn-like outbuilding.

Only a few years separate Ana and Isabel (Isabel Telleria), but they form that important divide where Ana depends on her big sister to explain mysteries. The little girl runs carefree all over the farmlands, and in the barn she discovers the wounded soldier. That night, her eyes wide open in the dark, she asks Isabel to explain why the creature drowned the little girl.

“Everything in the movies is fake,” she’s told. “It’s all a trick. Besides, I’ve seen him alive. He’s a spirit.” That of course serves for Ana as a possible explanation for the wounded man, and the next day, she sneaks him some food and water, and her father’s coat.

What follows is considered a coded message about Franco’s fascist regime, but it’s not for me to connect the dots. I relate it more strongly as a poetic work about the imagination of children, and how it can lead them into mischief and sometimes rescue them from its consequences.

“The Spirit of the Beehive” is one of only three features and a short subject directed by Erice (born 1940). Like such films as Charles Laughton’s “The Night of the Hunter” (1955), it is a masterpiece that can only cause us to wonder what we lost because he didn’t work more. It is simple, solemn, and in the casting of young Ana Torrent, takes advantage of her open, innocent features. We can well believe her when she accepts her sister’s explanation, which goes far to account for her behavior later in the film.

This is one of the most beautiful films I’ve seen. Its cinematographer, Luis Cuadrado, bathes his frame in sun and earth tones, and in the interiors of the family home, he creates vistas of empty rooms where footsteps echo. The house doesn’t seem much occupied by the family. The girls are often alone. The parents also, in separate rooms. Many of the father’s poems involve the mindless churning activity of his beehives, and the house’s yellow-tinted honeycomb windows make an unmistakable reference to beehives. Presumably this reflects on the Franco regime, but when critics grow specific in spelling out the parallels they see, I feel like I’m reading term papers.

More rewarding is to read the surface of the film. When Ana’s good intentions to the “spirit” are misinterpreted, and when she is linked to the wounded man by her father’s pocket watch, this sets up a situation that could be dangerous for both father and daughter. When she runs away and inspires a search — the lanterns of volunteers bobbing through the night — we feel how the behavior of innocent children can lead them into trouble. In a later scene when Ana plays a trick on Isabel, the older child also discovers how her myth-making has repercussions.

Ana Torrent starred in another notable Spanish film, Carlos Saura’s “Cria Cuervos” (1976). She has gone on to a successful career, making 45 films and TV series, including Saura’s “Elisa, My Life” (1977), his first film after Franco’s fall. But child actors are often bathed in a glow of enchantment that no later role will quite capture.

**Geoff Andre: The Quiet Genius of Victor Erice (Vertigo)**

“The music that I like best is the sound produced by the editing of all the images. The rhythm of the images has a music of its own and that’s much more difficult than just placing music on top of a film.”

Victor Erice makes (or has been able to make) films so rarely, he is in danger of becoming one of contemporary cinema’s forgotten masters — shamefully, he wasn’t even given an entry in the most recent edition of David Thomson’s *Biographical Dictionary of Film*. But with the recent *Lifeline*, his at once typically modest but magisterial contribution to the portmanteau film *Ten Minutes Older – The Trumpet*, Erice gently but very effectively reminded the world that while his output may be far from prolific — two shorts and three features in 35 years — he remains one of the very finest film-makers around today. He’s proof that you needn’t shout to be heard; there is something magnificently human not only about the concerns of his work but also about its tone and scale. Like Kiarostami,
Malick, Angelopoulos, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jarmusch and our own Terence Davies, he is one of the contemporary cinema’s most eloquent poets; his films are simple in terms of story but enormously rich and subtle in meaning and resonance. Ravishing in their painterly precision, illuminating in their exact evocation of time and place, philosophically contemplative yet profoundly compassionate, they are cinematic gems to treasure: multi-faceted, exquisitely beautiful reflections of the world as seen by a truly distinctive artist.

What follows is an edited version of an on-stage interview that took place at the National Film Theatre on 2 September, 2003.

**Geoff Andrew:** You don’t make many films. Why did you make your latest, *Lifeline?*

**Victor Erice:** The producers of *Ten Minutes Older* approached me, their only stipulations being that the film must not last longer than ten minutes, and that its main theme should be ‘time and the expression of time’. That’s what inspired me to make the film.

**VE:** Can you talk about this theme? It’s something dealt with in all your films to date.

**GA:** Films are inherently full of time, especially if you compare their language to that of other art forms. The concept of time and its duration: film is obviously best equipped to express that. Naturally all art forms have expressed time in one way or another, but none has managed to contain it – as a bowl can contain water – as film has managed to do.

**VE:** Another theme clearly relates closely to your own life: the film’s set in the part of Northern Spain you were born in, and in June 1940 when you were born. How autobiographical is the film?

**VE:** I try not to indulge too much in autobiographical aspects. I shouldn’t like my work to be looked at only from that point of view; if it were, I’d consider it a failure. I aim for more universal points of reference than just my own story, because I consider myself an ordinary person. Nevertheless, there are inevitably some autobiographical aspects because the theme of time – at least as it was proposed to me by the producers of this compilation – is a very abstract, philosophical thing. We don’t know – I especially think that I don’t know – what time really is. So I have tried to make it concrete, to fill it out with something more solid, by trying to give the images a sort of documentary feel. For instance, there are no professional actors in it; each one of those people I cast was from the village where we made the film. Also, of course, it was nourished by the memories that came down to me, via my parents, of my own birth.

**GA:** Why did you make it in black and white? All your other films have been in colour.

**VE:** Good question. I actually shot it in colour. The colour was very beautiful. But I realised that the image of blood in modern cinema, with all its special effects... that image is somehow so strong, or totalitarian, in contemporary cinema, that in colour the blood became completely banal and just lost whatever quality of expression I was trying to achieve. The cameraman kept saying the film looked very beautiful, but I was never trying to achieve a beauty of the image: I was aiming for the beauty of truth. I always take as my motto what Robert Bresson said: you don’t have to make images that are beautiful, you have to make images that are necessary. And Bresson is a filmmaker who was, first of all, a painter.

**GA:** Actually, you were a film critic yourself and have always been a cinephile. What attracted you to cinema in the first place? When did you become interested in films?

**VE:** It’s difficult to say. I don’t feel that I chose films; they chose me. I don’t mean to sound pretentious. During my childhood, films had a fundamental importance. In a country which, in the 1940s especially, was still very isolated from the rest of the world and marked by the Civil War, films offered me an extraordinary possibility to be a citizen of the world.

**GA:** And did you always want to make films? You became a critic quite young…

**VE:** It was an evolution; I became conscious of that desire when I was about 19. You don’t choose to be a film director when you’re little; you’d be a little monster! Also, do remember that nobody chooses the object of their love.

**GA:** You wrote with great sensitivity and love about the work of Nicholas Ray, von Sternberg, Dreyer and others. With the possible exception of Dreyer, your own films don’t seem to exist in quite the same universe as those of some of the people you admired. But do you yourself feel there’s a continuity between the films you advocated and the films you make?

**VE:** Whenever I hear somebody talk in these terms, I can’t recognise myself; I find it hard to place myself in the history of cinema. In fact, I probably consider myself a better spectator than director. But I realise my view of what a spectator is differs from that held by most producers. For me, every spectator’s a potential filmmaker; also, of course, without the spectator, the films have no meaning, no reason to exist. So I continue to go to see films wherever I can. I suppose I could say that cinema has helped me to live.

**GA:** Let’s move on to *The Spirit of the Beehive*, in which you actually include shots from a Hollywood film, James Whale’s *Frankenstein* [1931], but do so for metaphorical purposes. You seem to like using metaphor in your work.

**VE:** As a child, I watched a lot of Hollywood movies; that was what we could see. So I was able to enjoy an extraordinary period for American films. I now realise that as a child I watched films which I considered masterpieces then and which I still consider masterpieces today. So even before I knew *Frankenstein* was the product of the imagination of Mary Shelley, even before I read the book, I saw the film: for me, Boris Karloff is Frankenstein. In other words, the myths we absorb in childhood remain with us forever.
But inevitably we grow up, and one day as an adolescent I went into a cinema and saw a film made about five years earlier but only projected in Spain belatedly: de Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (1948). I was deeply moved by it and, at 12 or 13, realised there was a whole side to cinema I’d had no idea about. For the first time I saw realism in cinema: faces like those I saw in the street, situations I could recognise. So that’s probably the point where I left innocence behind for a more conscious approach to cinema. I became a desperate cinephile, went to all the cine clubs. And I came to understand that films were not just for fun, they could also be an act of resistance. Then when I went to university in Madrid, I had another important experience with another Italian film. Someone had managed to get hold of a film from the airport for just a few hours; it was one of the films banned in the Franco era – Rossellini’s Rome, Open City (1945). It was screened secretly in a projection booth for 20 people. And it was a radical experience for me, not only because of the quality of the film itself, but because of what we were living through under Franco. It confirmed my feeling that a film could be an act of resistance, and I’m deeply indebted to that experience. In my own way I try to continue to resist and use film in that way.

GA: Why did you show the pain of a family scarred by the Civil War through the eyes of a small child?
VE: How do you arrive at a story? Chance intervenes. I believe a great deal in chance. I’d received a proposal to make a film about Frankenstein, but actually in that genre. It was to be a completely commercial project. I was desperate to make my first film and I’m very obedient, so I started writing a conventional Frankenstein movie. But then chance intervened in my favour because that kind of film needs a lot of sets, and well-known actors, and the producer had to admit he didn’t have enough funds. So I then proposed a Spanish version of Frankenstein – not so extravagant, without big sets, only four weeks filming. He liked that idea. But now I found myself with a major problem. I wasn’t sure what to do. On my work desk I had a picture I saw every day, which I’d cut out, from Whale’s Frankenstein: the moment when the monster and the child are together. Then I realised that everything I needed was there in that image. So I called upon my own personal experiences. But I felt that the identification with the child – and with the film – would be far greater if the child was a girl. And so gradually the story began to unfold.

GA: Another thing immediately obvious about this film is the visual style, meticulously beautiful and very like the paintings of Vermeer or Velazquez. How do you approach imagery? Do you storyboard or plan a lot in advance?
VE: I believe very much in the experience of the present. I don’t consider myself an intellectual. What I’ve done has always come from experience. 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 about having ideas, but about how to express them, give them body and life. Obviously, in Spirit… my love of painting comes out. I went to Madrid to study and take advantage of things only available in that city: in 1957 there were more than 200 cinemas there, and the Prado Museum. I probably spent more time in cinemas and the Prado than in my classes.

GA: I’d like to move on to The South, which is quite wonderful, and seems totally coherent, yet was actually never finished. You weren’t allowed to shoot everything you wanted to, and part of the story isn’t there. Was that a very painful experience for you?
VE: Yes, it was very painful for the film itself, but of course for filmmakers this is quite common. Shooting was interrupted for financial reasons. That apart, the production went well, and even in the state it’s in, the film had a lot of commercial and critical success, especially in Spain. It should have been one hour longer, though many critics applauded the fact that the south – of Spain – was never actually seen. My taste’s a little more commonplace: I wanted to show it, especially as I was born in the north but have lived for many years further south. This was a wonderful opportunity to have north and south coming together in the film: it was a metaphor for the divisions that became apparent in the Civil War and also for the divisions in an individual who can’t reconcile two aspects of his own being.

The father in The South is divided between two loves: his romantic passion and his mundane life with his wife. He wants to go to the south but never manages to go. He never manages to get on the train, he returns home, and he dies. But in a sense he leaves a mandate because, when he’s about to die, he leaves under his daughter’s pillow a symbol of communion. So it’s as if his last impulse is to provoke the daughter to make the trip he was never able to make – and so she does what he could never do.

In the part that was never filmed, the girl does reach Andalusia, where her father was born and spent his childhood, so it completed the story of her father’s death. In this way she was able to reconcile herself with the image of her father. This was the original dynamic of the film. As it is now, the girl is still under the weight of the pain, whereas the visit to the south was to bring redemption and she would become an adult. I can’t say it would have been a happy film, but there would have been energy and vitality.

GA: In this film they watch an amusing melodrama, Flor en la Sombre. Unlike Frankenstein you made it yourself: was an attempt to make a little von Sternberg film?
VE: It’s a fragment, but I had a lot of fun doing it. There are influences of von Sternberg in the lighting. I was a great admirer, especially in my twenties; he is the master of cinematic flamboyance.

GA: You also had fun making The Quince Tree Sun [1991], which has some very funny moments but is very different. It’s
sort of a documentary about the artist Antonio López, who spends so long painting a quince tree in his garden – he’s a perfectionist – that he’s unable to finish it, because time has its way with the tree, and it changes. It’s a fine portrait of López – but also, perhaps, a self-portrait of a meticulous person?

VE: I have this reputation, but I’m far less of a perfectionist than Antonio. Perhaps there’s an autobiographical aspect in that we experience life in a similar way and have similar obsessions. But in any case, these are the great themes of Spanish Baroque art: the passing of time, dreams, decadence, childhood.

GA: It’s a special film because it is a documentary, but he is very aware of the fact that you are there all the time. It’s not like a fly-on-the-wall documentary. Did you sometimes say to him, ‘What are we going to do today?’

VE: We didn’t actually talk very much at all. Remember that the task of a painter is a solitary process, totally in contrast to a filmmaker. Time, too, is different for a painter; he has his own time and so can use it with impunity. But for the filmmaker, it’s closer to an industrial process. He’s surrounded by people and doesn’t have the privilege of individual time. It’s collective time and counted out in pennies. I was aware that our presence – the cameras, sound people and so forth – was modifying both the way Antonio could work and his private experience with the tree he was painting. Though I tried to respect as much as possible this relationship between painter and tree – obviously very mysterious, and something which I tried to express at the end of the film – I felt that the crew, while we were only six, could not but interfere in some way. This is why I showed a film camera at the end, to show my work-tool, as it were. I even insinuate that it is our artificial lighting rotting the fruit on the tree.

I feel that the language of painting belongs to the dawn of our time and civilisation, and, in a similar way, cinema belongs to its sunset. The whole, cinema has a youthful image, but in fact I think it’s exactly the opposite. Once I was speaking with Antonio. ‘Have you seen,’ I said to him, ‘how quickly the cinema has become old? Like a child that has become prematurely old, in only one hundred years it has covered a huge amount of ground, which it’s taken other arts centuries and centuries to achieve.’ Then Antonio replied, and it’s something I’ll never forget: ‘Ah, but you see, cinema was born when man was already very old.’

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

Nov 4 Roman Polanski, TESS, 1979
Nov 11 Sydney Pollack, TOOTSIE, 1982
Nov 18 Joel and Ethan Coen, FARGO, 1996
Nov 25 Erik Skjoldbjaerg, INSOMNIA, 1997
Dec 2 Mike Nichols, CHARLIE WILSON’S WAR, 2007

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
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...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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