

WRITING CINEMA. CINEPHILIC PASSION IN THE WORK OF VÍCTOR ERICE*

*“Writing cinema... That’s the way it is—by writing, one day I began to think cinema—discovering a way to prolong its vision, of realizing it too. It was in the summer of 1959, after seeing *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) in the San Sebastián Film Festival. I left the theatre, moved. And that same night I felt the need to put down in writing the ideas and feelings that François Truffaut’s images had awakened in me. It was the first time that anything like that had happened to me.”*

These words of Víctor Erice’s (quoted in EHRlich, 2007: 267) draw a clear line of continuity between two practices that are usually presented as conflicting: critical writing and filmmaking. As in the case of Jean-Luc Godard, who has insisted repeatedly that there is no Great Wall of China between his original career as a critic and his subsequent career as a filmmaker¹, all of Víctor Erice’s work is connected by a general line that exhibits an essential continuity, in such a way that his work as a filmmaker can to a large extent be considered a transposition of his critical and cinephilic preferences.

In view of the above, I believe it would be of interest to offer an analysis along these lines. Is this to be another of those operations aimed reconstructing a kind of secret genealogy by identifying clues in a filmmaker’s remote past in order to interpret his later works? Not at all. It is simply an opportunity for an unprejudiced exploration of an artist’s entire body of work as a single text, marked by certain formal isotopies, so that the same content can be given shape in very different expressive materials. It is thus not about finding the traces of previous critical texts in his films, but replacing the traditional genetic hypothesis with a morphological one, renouncing evolutionary positions in favour of exposing the formal connections linking the facts. All of this is with the purpose of producing what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1997: 133) called a “perspicuous representation” (*Übersichtlichen Darstellung*), which can reorganise the data into a general picture that doesn’t take the form of a hypothesis of chronological development.

The concept of perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for

us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things. (A kind of 'World-view' as it is apparently typical of our time. Spengler). The perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections". Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*. But a hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal conclusion. But I can also see the evolutionary hypothesis as nothing more, as the clothing of a formal connection (WITTGENSTEIN, 1997, 133).

In other words, if his critical texts signal a future, his subsequent cinematic work sheds light on them retrospectively, building and activating implicit connections, apparently secondary aspects, which only when they are focused on in this way reveal their true dimension. Following this line of thought I believe that the Erice's career as a critic is marked by his successive encounters with Luchino Visconti, Kenji Mizoguchi and Josef von Sternberg. In the texts devoted to studying certain works of these filmmakers, Erice starts to lay the foundations of an aesthetic which will find its definitive artistic expression years later, in his film work.

On the occasion of the Spanish premiere of the Visconti film *The Leopard* (Il gattopardo, 1963), Erice published two long articles in the journal *Nuestro Cine* (1964a and 1964b) dedicated to unravelling the lessons that can be gleaned from the work of this Milanese artist. Taking a stance in opposition against a certain sector of Italian critics who argued that in this film Visconti's *sentimental identification* with the world he presented verged on *decadent art*, Erice not only

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stressed that, in his opinion, Visconti was the film director who had best assimilated the virtues of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, but also that underlying the criticism against him was a simpleminded understanding of the complex notion of *realism*. As Erice puts it: "realism is not single and indivisible, but is defined according to its relationship with a certain historical era, to the emotional and cultural experience of a director, to the social problems of a country and an industry" (1964a: 20). The *realism* in the works of Visconti (its validity in terms of category, both critical and aesthetic) derives from a complex synthesis between the evocation of a world of ideas and feelings doomed to disappear and the elements that will create a future in which the filmmaker sees himself unable to participate. This central duality, present in all Visconti's films, finds its clearest formulation in the meaningful title of the article, "Entre la historia y el sueño" (Between History and Dream), which expresses the ambivalence that pervades a

cinematic work in which the historical and ideological motifs appear inseparably woven with psychological and existentialist motifs. Thus, Erice highlights how, at the end of the film, its protagonist, Prince Salina, accepts "the protagonist's resigned farewell to a past youth and happiness. History and dream, nostalgia and letting go of the past, the presence of death and the memory of lost happiness, [which] are woven in this dance abounding in compelling examples of the decadence of the present and of the false hopes of success in the future" (1964a: 23-24).

Similarly, in the second article devoted to the film, Erice details even more clearly the positions that take him in the direction (in Bertolt Brecht's wake) of an unrestricted notion of *realism*:

If we intend to develop an aesthetic and, especially if it is a realistic aesthetic, we confuse the individual with society, or suddenly erase the contradictions that exist between these two nuclei. In the context of a bourgeois society these contradictions truly exist and affect, one way or another, many realist filmmakers (1964b: 25).

Thus, advocating a high-flown *realism* that is not short-circuited by *a priori* restrictions, Erice begins to construct the conceptual framework that will find its precise formulation in a film like *The Spirit of the Beehive* (El espíritu de la colmena, 1973), in which a very precise attempt is made to align the levels of *history* and *dream*, in an extraordinarily innovative synthesis that fuses a meticulous record of a Spain immersed in the paralysis of the Franco years with the mythic density conferred on the film by its manipulation of what could be called *primordial images*². It could be said that the greatest lesson that Erice would take away from his analysis of the work of Visconti is related to the idea that *critical realism* not only does not preclude the perspective of a different and new society, but also entails the need to incorporate the

aesthetic work of the filmmaker into a dual artistic and political tradition.

In 1965 Erice went to what was then the National Film Library to the exhibition of a short cycle of the last films of Kenji Mizoguchi. His reflections on these works are collected in a long and well documented article (1965: 15-28) called "Itinerario de Kenji Mizoguchi" (The Journey of Kenji Mizoguchi). If we ponder this article for a moment, it won't be hard to identify, together with the information on the social and historical context that frames the works of the filmmaker studied, the key points that the young critic detects in his films. The attention of his analysis focuses on the idea of the liberating impact experienced by Mizoguchi's heroes, in which, as in the unnameable experience of a Zen revelation, "a bolt of lightning will light up

the night of the soul", causing a "spiritual collision, an emotion that frees the soul from worldly conventions" (1965: 23). No less significant is his selection for privileged examination of three exemplary films: *The Life of Oharu* (Saikaku ichidai onna, 1952), *Tales of Ugetsu* (Ugetsu monogatari, 1953) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (Sansho Dayu, 1954). Of the first he takes note of the fact that the protagonist is a *chosen one*, a rebel woman who transgresses the moral customs of her era, "a kind of *visionary* who seems to have found, through suffering and humility, the primary and natural order of things" (1965: 23)³, whereas of the second he highlights its famous scene of the reunion of the potter Genjuro and his wife Miyagi, who had been murdered earlier by pirates. While the first of these references and its relationship with the theme of *The Spirit of the Beehive*⁴ should hardly need mentioning, no less obvious are

the connections between the aforementioned scene from *Tales of Ugetsu* and that privileged moment of Erice's first feature film, where Ana meets Frankenstein's monster on the banks of the river. In both scenes, imagination and reality are fused, revealing the illusory nature of the boundaries between truth and falsehood, fantasy and reality.

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Furthermore, when turning to *Sansho the Bailiff*, Erice underlines the essential role played, within the extremely bleak story that the film tells, by the young Anju, who pays with her life for her wish, enflamed by an *inextinguishable fire*, to be reunited with her mother. Having noted this point it would be a mistake to overlook – particularly in light of their ethical nature – the ideas that Erice puts forward when evaluating the treatment that French critical literature (to a great extent responsible for the critical success of the Japanese filmmaker in Europe) has given Mizoguchi. Erice criticises French critics for an evaluation of the filmmaker that all too often separates his style from the "religious, social and aesthetic roots that gave him life". Opposing an interpretation that tends towards the creation of an "aristocracy of cinematic thought composed of a series of *differentiated* filmmakers"

(1965: 27), Erice defends a reading of Mizoguchi's films that focuses on the "precise historical context" in which they were made, as "the ideological meaning of his films – even their religious implications – is not dictated by the immanent, but through a poetic dissection of the everyday, of a constant immersion in reality" (1965: 28).

Only two years later, his discovery of the work of Josef von Sternberg gave rise to the last important critical text published by Erice (1967: 16-28) before he turned to filmmaking. In the films of this great Viennese filmmaker, Erice would detect the constant presence of characters who, lacking a past, conceal within themselves what distinguishes them from other mortals, and would stress that the mechanism of reality transformation employed by these unique heroes is

none other than pure romantic passion. But, above all, Sternberg offers Erice the twofold lesson of a *mise en scène* devoted to the "sacralisation of the imaginary" and the discovery, through Sternberg's films starring Marlene Dietrich, of a "path towards abstraction", as opposed to the customary "mythification of everyday life" characteristic of cinema produced for mass consumption.

This twofold lesson would not be easily forgotten, as we will see. One need only consider the images of that *film within a film* that is *Flower in the Shadow* (included in *The South* [El sur, 1983]) to recognise that Sternberg is an important part of Erice's cinematic heritage. It is not unlikely that Erice learnt from the images of the Viennese filmmaker what would become one of his greatest signatures both in his feature films and in his work as a documentary maker in *Dream of Light* (El sol del membrillo, 1992):

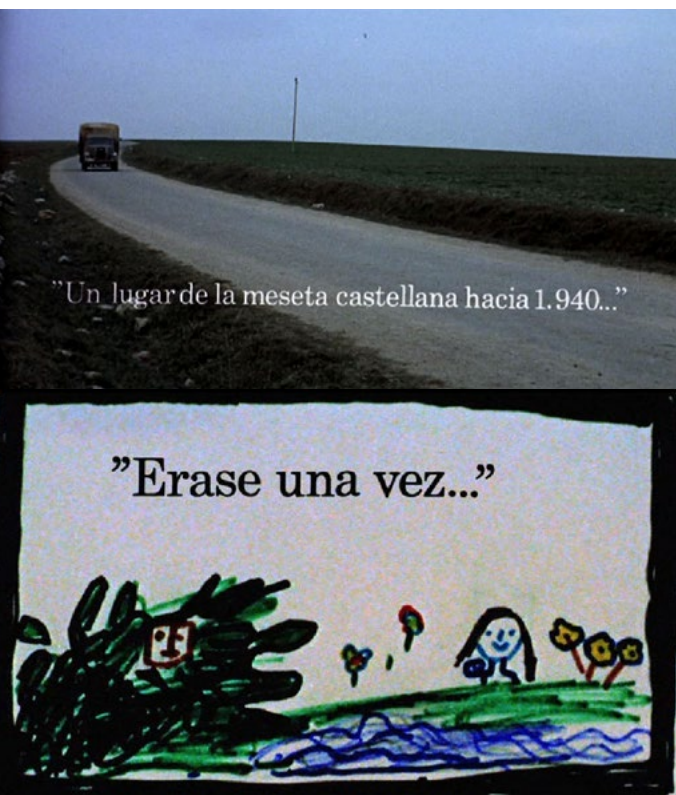


Figure 1 (top). The future of cinema
Figure 2 (bottom). The power of the story

the ability to combine fiction on one hand and, on the other, the historicity of certain images branded with his desire to document the Spain in which his characters live; a testimony of this is the caption, evocative of Cervantes himself, appearing on the poster showing what is, in fact, the first realistic image of *The Spirit of the Beehive*: “Somewhere on the Castilian plateau, around 1940”; an image that is preceded by another showing a child’s drawing of a film screen on which will appear a phrase that is both a promise and a programme: “Once upon a time...”¹.

We find one of the key stylistic traits of the filmmaker, as reflected in the fusion of history and fiction that is one of the core elements of the piece of cinematic craftsmanship titled *Lifeline* (Alumbraimiento), Erice’s contribution to the collective film *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet* (2002), which is presented as a reflection on time that links the individual and the collective and sets the unfolding of daily life against a disturbing historical background.

Erice would recognise the same tension in the images of *The Saga of Anatahan* (1953) a film mark the end of Sternberg’s career, in which myth (the lost woman on a desert island who will become “the only woman on Earth”)

and history (the group of Japanese soldiers who refuse to accept the end of the war and the capitulation of their country) go hand in hand. Years later, in the mid-1990s, Sternberg’s films would once again haunt Erice’s dreams when he began working on the (ultimately unsuccessful) adaptation of the Juan Marsé novel *El embrujo de Shanghai* [The Shanghai Spell], which, as the filmmaker himself would point out (1994: 22-23), placed Sternberg’s film *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) “at the heart of the story”. Fortunately, traces of this work remain in an admirable script that was published in

2001 under the title *La promesa de Shanghai* [The Shanghai promise] (Areté, 2001), which constitutes, despite the absence of images, the most beautiful Spanish film of that decade.

Although it is true that from the time of his always precarious inclusion in the Spanish film industry, Erice’s writing would become more selective, it would never disappear completely. It would be precisely the singular nature of his works that would signal that, in all cases, we are being offered some privileged reflections through which the filmmaker “thinks” cinema: his own and that of his favourite artists. From this point of view it is not surprising that Erice, together with Jos Oliver, would take charge of the publication of the volume that the Filmoteca Española [Spanish Film Library] devoted to Nicholas Ray in 1986 (ERICE, OLIVER, 1986). In the work “at a crossroads, with an essentially lyrical inspiration,” and marked by the experience of the exile and self-destruction of this filmmaker (1986: 13), Erice would recognise an artist who, like him, portrayed “outsiders”, “children wounded by life, adolescents who have barely survived the breakdown of their homes” (1986: 35) –from *They Live by Night* (1948) to *Bigger than Life* (1956), and including *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)– through the awareness of the misfortune that dominated their lives, as reflected in the admirable article devoted to Ray’s first feature film, titled “Como en un espejo” [As in a Mirror] (ERICE, 1986: 17-21)⁵.

Figure 3 (left). The individual wound. Figure 4 (right). The collective wound





Figure 5 (left). Spectators of the Pedagogical Missions. Figure 6 (right). Ana, spectator

A few years later, Erice (1995b: 106-117) would be obliged to pay his debt to one of the most important filmmakers in the history of Spanish cinema: José Val del Omar. Erice recognises in his works an antinomy to which the filmmaker is especially sensitive:

It is not surprising that given his character as a poet and a visionary –that which best defines him–Val del Omar was would be destined to clash head-on with reality. Nor it is surprising that, sometimes, bewitched by the splendour of his own vision, the terms –not always free of a certain confusion–on which he expressed some of his ideas would arouse, even among those best prepared to understand him, a few reservations. [...] Because it is precisely on this point where, in my view, a gap opens up in his work between pure poetic expression and theoretical formulation, through which we can perceive the echoes of *the modern, socially established contradiction between history and poetry* (ERICE, 1995b: 108; italics added).

It is impossible not to recognise the recurrence of the concerns that would not change when moving from writing to films, or from films back to writing. Likewise, the *missionary* Val del Omar, committed to the Pedagogical

Missions of the Second Spanish Republic, taught the young filmmaker, through his images, which captured the impact of the cinema on an innocent public, to value the fact that:

Cinema will become the *supreme art of experience*. For him, there would never be better proof of this certainty than the images of those rural *virgin creatures* so far removed from the culture of letters and intellectual knowledge, who are capable of reflecting a transcendent emotion without any inhibitions.

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This would constitute the paradigm of the ideal viewer captivated by a vision, in whom it is possible to perceive the pulse of *culture of the blood*, the primal gaze of man’s infancy (“to me, the whole audience is a big child in love for the extraordinary”), which he must have projected into the dawn of his sensitive perception of the world (ERICE, 1995b: 109).

Could there be a better critical description of one of the central moments of *The Spirit of the Beehive*, when Ana discovers in the world of shadows that flicker on screen the existence of a reality different to that of her monotonous daily life?

Erice would refer to this same primordial experience when, in a conference on Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931), he explains his presentation by recalling that:

in any case, the fact that I have reacted by placing myself in the role of the viewer is not unusual. In fact, going to the cinema is what I’ve been doing, almost without interruption, since the day I went to see what I recall as the first film of my life. [...] My experience as a viewer has a constant character; it is the core of my relationship with cinema. It is a fundamental experience, common to many people, whereby it is possible to separate a series of sequences, of privileged moments that can synthesise the best of

the films that comprise it, and that we once discovered with the impression of crossing a threshold, feeling that its images were revealing to us the multiple truth of life (ERICE, 1989: 6-7).

Closing the circle of references with an implacable logic, in 2006 as part of the exhibition *Correspondences*, which would bring him together with Abbas Kiarostami in an expe-

rience that would form part of what is known as expanded cinema, Erice would make a thirty-four minute video titled *La Morte Rouge*, in which he tackles the story of the primordial scene, the narration of the first encounter of the individual with film images. It is a journey, in his own words, "to an encounter with ghosts", conceived with the "inevitable character of a sketch", "basically doomed by its own nature to fail in its effort to recover the facts." But knowing, at the same time, that this soliloquy (as this is the genre to which this work belongs) would allow him fuse, into a single image, the most intimate and personal memory with the density and weight of History.

The voice over in the film (spoken by Erice himself) clarifies its title: "La Morte Rouge... Yes, that was the name of the place: a village located in French-speaking Canada on the outskirts of Quebec, surrounded by swamps. I've never managed to find it on a map, probably because it only existed in the imagination of the scriptwriters of *The Scarlet Claw*, the first film I remember ever seeing." *The Scarlet Claw* (1944) was a film by Roy William Neil and starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, playing Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, respectively, a film that forms part of a series of pictures produced by Universal in which Hollywood brought Conan Doyle's famous characters to the big screen in the most diverse range of situations and settings over the course of the 1940s.

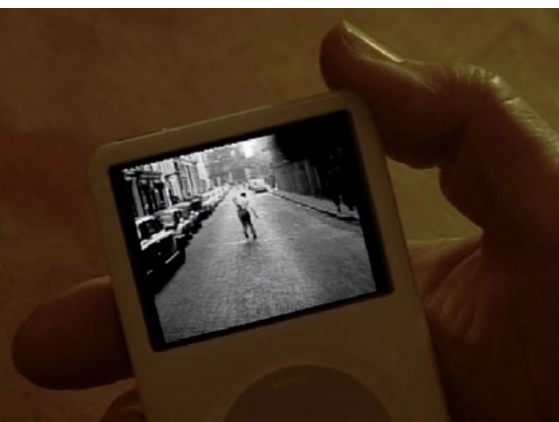
Old ghosts conjured up, History exorcised, *terra incognita* where the chimera of fiction is mixed with the passionate burden of the past, both individual and collective. This is why in this work the memories of a San Sebastian inhabited by the spectres of the cinema are seamlessly combined with brutally real images of a civil war and devastated post-war that coloured the atmosphere with pain and sadness. Thus, "the first film I remember ever seeing" (in Erice's own

words), serves the filmmaker as a veritable crucible of dreams to give cinematic shape to a unique and unrepeatable experience. This film presents a point of no return that marks the definitive entry of the subject into a magical world from which he will never be able to escape. While this spectral dimension of the filmic experience may have been outlined in some masterpiece of classic cinema, well represented by the famous intertitle in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) ("And the ghosts came to meet him") indicating the protagonist's crossing of a line of no return that marked the boundary of an alternate reality, something similar could be suggested about the role played in Erice's film by the huge mass beached on the shore of a sea that pounds relentlessly against the coast, that structure, a mixture of casino and movie theatre (the Kursaal auditorium of San Sebastian), where everything is possible and where we can transform the loose change of a sad reality into the fascinating gold of all phantasmagorias. It is a dialogue with the primal scene, that moment which brands us for all time to come. But it is also the establishment of a territory where history and the imagination constantly settle their debts in an ongoing dialogue.

Should we be surprised that the work in progress to which Erice has devoted himself for most of his last years would adopt the form of a series with the clear character of essays in which the filmmaker revisits the places where the films that shaped him were created? Or that this series, which presents the story of someone with the profile matching what Serge Daney (1994) called *ciné-fils*, should have a title as explicit as *Memory and Dream*? The filmmaker's return to roads once travelled by auteurs like Godard, Truffaut, Bresson, Rossellini or



From top to bottom:
 Figure 7. The cinema and its power
 Figure 8. *The Scarlet Claw*
 Figure 9. The personal memory
 Figure 10. The burden of history



Malraux should not be viewed as cinephilic autism, but as a specific way of revealing a history of allegiance, of choosing a general line within which to inscribe a work.

This is what it is revealed in the images of the documentary that Alain Bergala (2009) dedicated to the Spanish master: the fact that cinema, its history, is, above all, a problem of continuities and elective affinities. From one image to the next, what it is made visible is the difficult alignment of history and memory, of poetry and dream. It is this that is ultimately the favourite theme of the critical and cinematic writing of Víctor Erice. He points in this direction when he suggests that, beyond the mere recording of events to which the audiovisual medium seems to be doomed “through the use and abuse of modern technologies”, the task of the filmmaker above all has to do with the act of “revealing what may lie behind those gaps opened up by the action of time both in the personal memory and the records of History⁶.” ■

Notes

* The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)

1 “At *Cahiers* we all considered ourselves to be future directors. [...] To write already meant to make cinema, because the difference between writing and filming is one of quantity and not of quality. [...] As a critic I already considered myself to be a filmmaker. [...] I believe that a great continuity exists between the different mediums of expression. It all forms a single block. The question lies in knowing how to take on that block from the angle that best suits you” (FRODON, 2014, 11).

2 On this question see Zunzunegui (1998, 42-70).

3 In a brief allusion to Mizoguchi’s film *My Love Burns* (*Waga koi wa moenu*, 1949), Erice underlines the fact that the film tells the story of a “well-intentioned young woman who leaves the order and tranquillity of her family and moves to the city to participate in political activity, [and] encounters nothing but failure and disappointment.”

4 I would like to recall here the words that Fernando Savater (1976: 25), in a memorable article, used to describe the new Ana who emerged “purely and silently” after her symbolic death at the hands of the “monster”: “Capable of definitively invoking the spirit, which is already in her, and she herself is now its disguise. Ready for any future, who knows, for the worst: prison, a madhouse or love.”

5 There is an expanded version in French titled “Un film de la nuit. Quelques notes sur *They Live by Night*” by Nicholas Rayin *Traffic*, 15, 1995, pp. 57-65.

6 Victor Erice as quoted in the brochure that accompanied the DVD edition of *La Morte Rouge* (Rosebud / FNAC, 2009).

From top to bottom:
 Figure 11. *A bout de souffle*
 Figure 12. *Breathless*
 Figure 13. *Nothing would have taken place...*
 Figure 14. *...but the place*

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