



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 84=

The Spirit of the Beehive **(El espíritu de la colmena)**

Set in a small village in the aftermath of the Spanish civil war, Erice's bewitching portrait of innocence, the perils of adulthood and the power of cinema is a truly sensory experience. Illuminated by a spellbinding performance from Ana Torrent as a child who is profoundly affected by a screening of *Frankenstein*, it's widely regarded as one of the greatest contributions to Spanish cinema.

Jason Wood, bfi.org.uk

Victor Erice on 'The Spirit of the Beehive'

As cinema reaches its 100th anniversary, what do you think there is left to say?

Faced with the existing inflation of images – with what Wenders has called 'pollution of the image' – one of the great problems we have as filmmakers today is how to give authenticity, truth, to the mass-produced image. Television daily projects thousands of images into homes throughout the world – a flood that has brought about a hypertrophy of the image. We are forced to search constantly to regain a vision of the real image for cinema, and in this I find the relationship with painting very interesting because the painter was the first creator of images in our civilisation. For me, the painter is a primitive artist: painting is a language from the dawn and cinema a language from the twilight of our civilisation.

Of course we can't go back to what the early filmmakers – Lumière, Vigo, the early Renoir, Murnau – were because there is almost 100 years of cinema bearing down on us. The cinema of that era didn't reflect on itself, it just let itself live. Yet sometimes you need to look back to the origins – not to imitate, because it's impossible to reproduce the same thing, but because within a disoriented world in crisis, those origins can shed a certain light. Today everything is made according to formulae, formulae that have expelled reality, stereotypes. There's a tiredness, almost a sickness. Even though there is cinema made with great talent, it is calculated. So it's important for cinema to get back in contact with reality.

This fascination with early – 'silent' – cinema is clearly present in the enigmatic silence of The Spirit of the Beehive, which relies less on spoken dialogue than on a complex pattern of sound and images to demystify the 'monstrous' creatures of the cinema screen and the artificially speechless adult world of post-Civil War Spain.

The Spirit of the Beehive speaks of the generation who had lived through the Civil War. And civil war is the most terrible experience a community can live through because brother is set against brother. In a civil war everyone is defeated – there are no real victors. What characterises those people in my memory of my childhood is that they were in general very silent, introspective people. They didn't want to speak because they had lived through something so horrific. We children experienced it as a form of absence: we sensed that deep down they were far away. And perhaps that is why there was a lack of communication.

The highly metaphorical language of the film is often seen as a strategy in response to the restrictions of censorship as well as a reflection of the atmosphere within a silenced generation.

It's something you can't judge according to notions of political determinism. I didn't set out to solve the problem of censorship: I was mainly concerned to find my own voice, and since lack of freedom is something that people of my generation carry within us, I assumed my voice would reflect that lack of freedom in a natural way. I have always believed that artistic language – and particularly poetry – is a language that is not socially codified and that censors understand only what is socially codified. So the censor was unable to cut a single metre of *The Spirit of the Beehive*: they sensed it wasn't a film that was favourable to their ideas, but they couldn't find the arguments to destroy it.

But does this complexity inevitably compromise the authenticity of the image?

In cinema there is a language of prose and a language of poetry. It's a distinction Pasolini liked to make: he talked about *cinema di prosa* and *cinema di poesia* to differentiate the two types of language. Prose always recounts things in a direct way, whereas poetry expresses the ideas of the world in a totally indirect way, and more powerfully perhaps, because it speaks to the unconscious.

Is there an inevitable conflict between imposing a particular interpretation of reality – even when it's only in the selection and organisation of images – and the pursuit of truth?

Generally I don't like cinema in which the message is very obvious, so I'd prefer to call it showing or suggesting a particular interpretation rather than imposing it. The language of television is an authoritarian language that seeks a hidden means of persuading the consciousness, whereas the language of cinema – or at least of the cinema I like – communicates on an emotional level and obliges people to look within themselves, but without the idea of a rigid or direct discourse. I think all the films I have made have a common characteristic: they describe a journey of discovery, a spiritual journey. At the outset there is a consciousness that is beginning to discover things and at the end of the journey that consciousness has understood something.

*How might this spiritual journey be understood in relation to *The Spirit of the Beehive*?*

We see the child's consciousness being formed throughout the film – a consciousness that will be characterised forever as separated from the conventional vision of the world. It could be the consciousness of an artist, an excess of vision through which artists see things that others don't see, or see them in a different way. At the beginning Ana is a docile, timid person – just a child who asks questions. She can't understand how there can be something so absurd in life or so terrible that makes a monster kill a child. What the monster wants, in his misery, is to be accepted into society, yet society rejects him – perhaps because of his excess of humanity, for there is something tremendously humane in the monster. So the child's identification with him is the identification with those who suffer, because she experiences suffering too.

In the beginning Ana exists only through her sister or through the things she is told about, but by the end she exists in her own right. The first trace of her identity has been formed, and that is why she says 'I am' for the first time. But that formative process involves pain. Knowledge is like a wound; consciousness is formed through a wound.

Interview by Rikki Morgan, *Sight and Sound*, April 1993

THE SPIRIT OF THE BEEHIVE (EL ESPÍRITU DE LA COLMENA)

Director: Víctor Erice
Production Company: Elías Querejeta Producciones Cinematográficas
Producer: Elías Querejeta
Production Manager: Primitivo Álvaro
Unit Manager: Fernando Hermoso
Production Assistant: Pedro Esteban Samu
1st Assistant Director: José Luis Ruíz Marcos
2nd Assistant Director: Francisco Lucio Ramos
Script Supervisor: Francisco J. Querejeta
Screenplay/Original Story: Ángel Fernández Santos, Víctor Erice
Director of Photography: Luis Cuadrado
Camera Operator: Teo Escamilla
1st Assistant Camera: Santiago Zuazo
2nd Assistant Camera: José Manuel de Nicolas
Stills Photography: Laureano López Martínez
Editor: Pablo G. del Amo
1st Assistant Editor: José Salcedo
2nd Assistant Editor: Juan Ignacio San Mateo
Art Director: Adolfo Cofiño
Set Decorators: Ramón de Diego, Jaime Chávarri
Costume House: Peris Hermanos
Wardrobe: Angelines Castro
Make-up Artist: Ramón de Diego
Assistant Make-up Artist: Ángel Luis De Diego
Title Designer: Ana Torrent
Title Artwork: Alicia Tellería, Isabel Tellería, María Tellería
Opticals/Title Designer: Pablo Núñez
Music: Luis de Pablo
Sound Recording: Luis Rodríguez
Sound Effects: Luis Castro, SYRE
Special Collaborators: Miguel Picazo, Laly Soldevila

Cast:

Fernando Fernán Gómez (*Fernando*)
Teresa Gimpera (*Teresa*)
Ana Torrent (*Ana*)
Isabel Tellería (*Isabel*)
Laly Soldevilla (*Doña Lucia, teacher*)
Miguel Picazo (*doctor*)
José Villasante (*Frankenstein's monster*)
Juan Margallo (*the fugitive*)
Ketty de la Cámara (*Milagros*)
Estanis González (*captain, Guardia civil*)
Manuel de Agustina (*theatre owner*)
Miguel Aguado (*projectionist*)

Spain 1973
98 mins

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena) Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50
Pierrot le Fou Thu 19 Jan 20:30
The Leopard (Il gattopardo) Fri 20 Jan 14:00
Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu) Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50
Madame de... Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)
Blue Velvet Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX
Sátántangó Sat 21 Jan 13:30
Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam) Sat 21 Jan 14:15
Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau) Sat 21 Jan 17:00
The Shining Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX
My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro) Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40
A Matter of Life and Death Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi) Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX
Modern Times Sun 22 Jan 13:10
Yi Yi (A One and a Two...) Sun 22 Jan 14:00
(+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)
L'avventura (The Adventure) Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15
Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia) Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50
The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée Mon 23 Jan 18:10
The Red Shoes Tue 24 Jan 18:05
Imitation of Life Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30
Andrei Rublev Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20
Sunset Boulevard Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50
A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian) Sat 28 Jan 16:00
The General Sun 29 Jan 15:10
Metropolis Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX
Touki-Bouki Tue 31 Jan 17:40

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