



## OF TIME AND LIGHT: THE FILMS OF VÍCTOR ERICE

# El sur

### El sur (The South)

Director: Víctor Erice

Production Company: Elías Querejeta  
Producciones Cinematográficas

In co-production with: Chloe Production

In collaboration with:

Televisión Española S.A.

Executive Producer: Jean Pierre Fougéa \*

Production Manager: Primitivo Álvaro

Unit Manager: Gregorio Hebrero

Production Secretary:

Ma. Victoria Hebrero

Production Assistant: Víctor Albarrán

2nd Production Assistant:

Ricardo Albarrán

Production Team: Nacho Soriano

1st Assistant Director:

Francisco Lucio Ramos

2nd Assistant Director: John Healey

Script Supervisor: José L. López Linares

Screenplay: Víctor Erice

Based on a Story by:

Adelaida García Morales

Director of Photography: José Luis Alcaine

Assistant Camera: Santiago Zuazo

2nd Camera Operator: Alfredo Mayo

Assistant Camera: Santiago Zuazo

Gaffer: Victoriano Romera

Key Grip: Antonio F. Santamaría

Special Effects: Antonio Bueno

Editor: Pablo G. del Amo

1st Assistant Editor: Esperanza Cobos

2nd Assistant Editor: Josefa Ferré

Art Director: Antonio Belizon

Costume Designer: Maiki Marín

Wardrobe: Ana Ma. Infante

Make-up Artist: Ramón de Diego

Hair Stylist: Consuelo Zaonero

Titles: Story Film/Pablo Núñez

Colour Grader: Antonio Pastor

Sound: Bernardo Menz

Boom Operator: Miguel Polo

Re-recording Mixer: Eduardo Fernández

Sound Effects: Antonio Illan

Laboratory: S.A. Madrid Film

Cast:

Omero Antonutti (*Agustín*)

Sonsoles Aranguren (*Estrella, age 8*)

Iciar Bollain (*Estrella, age 15*)

Lola Cardona (*Julia*)

Rafaela Aparicio (*Milagros*)

Aurora Clément (*Laura, 'Irene Ríos'*)

María Caro (*Casilda*)

Francisco Merino (*admirer*)

José Vivó (*waiter*)

Germaine Montero (*Doña Rosario*)

José García Murilla (*chauffeur*)\*

María Massip

(*voice of Estrella as an adult*) \*

Spain/France 1983

95 mins

\* Uncredited

It is virtually impossible to write about *El sur*, the second feature in Spanish director Víctor Erice's highly acclaimed if small body of work – *The Spirit of the Beehive* was made ten years earlier and *The Quince Tree Sun* nine years later – without revealing its plot as it stands, for about a third of this virtuoso, lyrical coming-of-age story was never actually filmed: a fact which also accounts for much of its cult status. Regardless, it is still arguably Erice's most accessible film, seen like *The Spirit of the Beehive* through the eyes of a young girl. Here we follow Estrella between the ages of seven to 15, a period in which she reflects in voiceover on her infatuation with both her emotionally withdrawn father Agustín and the mythical south of Spain where he hails from and is never able to return to, and the events that led to his eventual fall from grace.

Co-written with Erice's late partner Adelaida García Morales and based on her eponymous 1981 short novel, *El sur* had a scheduled shoot of 81 days based on a 400-page script. During the second week of filming, prolific Spanish producer Elías Querejeta (*The Hunt*, *Cría cuervos*) announced that the funds from Spanish state broadcaster RTVE might be withdrawn owing to a change in its general director. Querejeta brought the project to a halt after only 48 days of shooting, and just before the crew was due to film in Carmona, a small municipality in Seville province where location scouting had already begun.

The footage apparently moved the then director of the Cannes Film Festival, Gilles Jacobs, so much when he saw it in Madrid that he invited the film into Competition on the spot, for which Erice edited what is known today as *El sur*. The remote, and for some observers naive notion that the rest of the film might be shot at some later date became, paradoxically, even more unlikely in light of the overwhelmingly positive reactions of the national and international press, which hailed the unfinished film as a masterpiece from the off, albeit one shrouded in mystery.

Mystery also surrounds Estrella's father Agustín (played by the enigmatic and charismatic Omero Antonutti), a doctor who works in the municipal hospital of a northern city and divines water for the locals with a pendulum. He spends the rest of his time locked in the attic where he cannot be disturbed, for, as Estrella's mother Julia explains to her, 'That is where all his energy is kept.' Whereas in the novel Estrella's narration was presented as a direct address to her father, in *El sur* the voice we hear is the adult Estrella's, speaking from the future.

As the object of Estrella's adoring gaze, Agustín is constructed in the film as a figure of mythical proportions, a man whose past in the sun-drenched south leads his daughter to imagine a utopian Andalusian paradise, completely at odds with their isolated life in the harsh greyness in the north of Spain. In fact Agustín was forced to leave the south because of his political beliefs, but it's his very apartness and obvious difference to the locals that casts a spell on an infatuated Estrella. That blinding childhood love soon shades into disenchantment when Estrella discovers that her father is in turn infatuated with someone other than her mother, his magical aura slowly but irremediably beginning to evanesce.

It is 1957, almost 20 years since the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco imposed a totalitarian regime founded on shadows, secrecy and lies. Forced to leave the south as a result of his opposition to the regime and look elsewhere for work, Agustín's inner exile finds its corporeal equivalent in the rented house the family settles in, an isolated enclave located in a virtual no-man's land reachable only by a long tree-lined path, on the outskirts of a city surrounded by walls and geographically enclosed by a river.

It is within this physical and emotional prison, desolate and forlorn, that Estrella's mother, Julia, endures Agustín's detachment, a state of non-communication not dissimilar to that of Ana's parents in *The Spirit of the Beehive*. At first glance Julia's character seems underwritten – she didn't even have a name in the novel – but in fact her role is pivotal. Where the father is absent, emotionally locked in an idealised past, Julia is completely present and emotionally available, the facilitator of a possible future for Estrella.

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**El sur** The South

Tue 26 Mar 18:10; Sun 14 Apr 20:45; Sat 20 Apr 18:30; Tue 30 Apr 20:40

**The Quince Tree Sun** El sol de membrillo

Thu 28 Mar 18:00; Wed 17 Apr 20:25

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In order to evoke Estrella's complex inner world, to illuminate what is after all made up of memories and gaps filled with fantasies, Erice, like an alchemist, gives each sequence emotional depth and shading by means of a very precise use of light, breathtakingly executed by legendary cinematographer José Luis Alcaine – Almodóvar's regular DP – and camera operator Alfredo Mayo, and hugely influential ever since. To achieve this, Erice's avowed cinematic reference points – Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Ozu Yasujiro and Mizoguchi Kenji – are to some degree supplanted by painterly ones, most obviously Vermeer and Rembrandt, with Alcaine's extreme contrast of light and darkness also calling to mind Caravaggio's chiaroscuro and the tenebrism of the baroque Spanish school.

Such methods help bestow on the father that otherworldly quality so strongly projected by Estrella, as he emerges like a ghost from the darkness whenever he appears on screen. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is in the darkness of a cinema that Agustín's past is also resurrected.

Estrella's newfound knowledge and insight, born in the cinema, will reshape her experience of life, and as a consequence her father's gestures, routines and mysterious tools will no longer work their magic. Her new perspective (suggested by a literal tilt of the camera) on her everyday world only serves to emphasise how heavily burdened she and her mother have been by Agustín's demons and frustrations, as much as by dire political circumstances. Events start to mirror each other, like the swing of a pendulum, and what was once mysterious and enticing is now bathed in the harsh light of reality; the paso doble danced by father and daughter, which marked the highest point of togetherness in their relationship – masterfully depicted in one of the most magical travelling shots in film history – is echoed in a scene eight years later, sealing their irrevocable separation.

Crucial to envisaging what would have been Erice's final version of *El sur* is the knowledge that the transition from north to south, from the Basque Country to Andalucía, was one that Erice actually made with his family when he was growing up. Estrella too was supposed to make the physical and emotional journey her father never made and discover, not the mythical south seen in the postcards she repeatedly stares at during her childhood, but its realities as Erice himself experienced them. What's more, the ending – broadly corresponding to the last 12 pages of the novel – would guarantee an emotional and geographical symmetry essential for Erice's moral schema in the film.

In fact everything in the original story led to an act of reconciliation, of maturation on the part of Estrella's character, rendering *El sur* both a human portrait but also a metaphor for a divided Spain. It was in the unfilmed scenes in the south that Erice planned to establish a direct dialogue with the Civil War, through Laura's brother, a role given to Fernando Fernán-Gómez (*Ana's father in The Spirit of the Beehive*). Sadly, the complete version of *El sur* will always remain a mystery, lurking in the shadows like the figure of the father, bereft of its ending, only visible as, in Estrella's own words, 'a very intense image that in reality [we have to] make up', based on fragments, interviews and endless online discussions.

In a sparse, superbly directed scene between father and daughter in an empty restaurant near the end of the film, what is in effect Agustín's last confession to Estrella identifies his own longed-for Arcadia with the possibility of being able 'to tell everyone what you think', of being emotionally free. This was echoed in the final sentences in Erice's completed script, which consisted of a description of the southern seas as a utopian state of mind, a paradise, lifted from Robert Louis Stevenson's travel memoir *In the South Seas*, a gift to Estrella from her brother and read aloud by her. And yet, as it stands, I would argue it is the quote which opens Morales's novel, by lyric romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin, that best conjures the magic of *El sur's* masterful, if forever incomplete current version: 'What can we love that might not be a shadow?'

Mar Diestro-Dópido, *Sight and Sound*, October 2016