



Guillermo del Toro

The Devil's Backbone

The Devil's Backbone El espinazo del diablo
Director: Guillermo del Toro
Production Companies: El Deseo, Tequila Gang, Sogepaq, Canal+ España
With the participation of: Producciones Anhelo
Producers: Agustín Almodóvar, Bertha Navarro
Co-producer: Rosa Bosch
Associate Producer: Michel Ruben
Production Manager: Toni Novella
Production Supervisor: Esther García
Location Manager: Chus San Pascual
Assistant Director: Pedro Lazaga
2nd Assistant Director: Covadonga R. Gamboa
3rd Assistant Directors: Luisfer Machi, Jorge C. Dorado
Script Supervisor: Yuyi Beringola
Casting Director: Sara Bilbatúa
Screenplay: Guillermo del Toro, Antonio Trashorras, David Muñoz
Director of Photography: Guillermo Navarro
Camera Operator: Joaquín Manchado
Steadicam Operator: Joaquín Manchado
Digital Effects: Telson
Mechanical Effects: Reyes Abades, Ángel Alonso, Juan Carlos Corroto
Maquettes: Emilio Ruiz
Graphics Design: Art&Maña
Editor: Luis de la Madrid
Art Director: César Macarrón
Set Decorator: María Del Pilar Revuelta
Storyboards: Carlos Giménez
Wardrobe: José Vico, Mercedes Sanz
Make-up: Jorge Hernández
Make-up Effects: DDT
Hairdresser: Fermín Galán
Titles: Telson Internacional S.A.
Technical Direction: Yolanda Cáceres, Alfonso Aguirre
Music: Javier Navarrete, Alberto Iglesias *
Music Performed by:
The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra,
Martin Hubsch, Martina Ciglerová,
Radovan Sandera, Jaroslava Eliášová
Orchestra Director: Mario Klemens
Music Mixer: José Luis Crespo
Sound Mixer: Ray Gillon
Mixing Technician: Diego Garrido, Salvador Mayolas
Sound: Miguel Rejas
Sound Editor: Oriol Tarragó
Sound Effects: Kiku Vidal
Sound Effects Recordist/Editor: Ian Sasplugas
Stunt Co-ordinator: Sergio Atanes
Stunts: Salvador Martos, Silvia Carballo
Cast:
Marisa Paredes (*Carmen*)
Eduardo Noriega (*Jacinto*)
Federico Luppi (*Casares*)
Fernando Tielve (*Carlos*)
Iñigo Garcés (*Jaime*)
Irene Visedo (*Conchita*)
José Manuel Lorenzo (*Marcelo*)
Paco Maestre
Junio Valverde (*Santi*)
Berta Ojea (*Alma*)
Adrian Lemana
Daniel Esparza
Miguel Ortiz
Juan Carlos Vellido
Javier González Madrigal
Victor Eliás
José Luis Torrijo
Alvaro Vega

The Devil's Backbone, director Guillermo del Toro's masterly supernatural thriller set in an orphanage haunted by the ghost of a young boy, is the latest in a distinguished line of features exploring the legacy of the Spanish Civil War from a child's point of view. It's a tradition that has long combined the domestic and the horrific. Victor Erice's 1972 *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*), for instance, had its youthful protagonist Ana – a cinematic ancestor of the orphan Carlos at the centre of this film – come face to face with Frankenstein's monster, an all-too appropriate allegory for Spanish dictator Franco. But two aspects distinguish *The Devil's Backbone* from such recent UK releases as José Luis Cuerda's saccharine *Butterfly's Tongue* (*La lengua de las mariposas*) and Montxo Barrios Armendáriz's *Secrets of the Heart* (*Los secretos del corazón*). The first is its status as a Spanish-Latin American co-production, made jointly by Almodóvar's El Deseo and Mexico's Tequila Gang. Until now El Deseo has limited itself to Spanish or Basque directors who, given unprecedented artistic freedom, realised such varied fare as Alex de la Iglesia's coarse science-fiction comedy *Acción mutante* (1993) and Daniel Calparsoro's taut political thriller *Pasajes* (1996).

Increasingly projects are addressed to both Spain and Latin America, territories whose cultural tastes remain diverse. In this context the expert casting of *The Devil's Backbone* is significant. The two leads (both schoolteachers in the orphanage) are Argentine Federico Luppi, who has frequently worked in Spain, and Spaniard Marisa Paredes. The second intriguing feature is the record of del Toro himself. Exploiting his professional background in special effects and make-up, his first feature *Cronos* (1993) was a brilliant essay in body horror in which a mechanical vampire transforms a mild-mannered antique dealer (Luppi once more) into a rabid zombie. More importantly perhaps, *Cronos* is set in an eerily deracinated Mexico City where Argentine tangos (associated with Luppi's character) collide with Russian street signs and dialogue alternates between Spanish and English. The vampire machine, brought to the New World by a Spanish colonist, is an uncanny allegory for the mixed and warring roots of Mexican culture. Widely praised, *Cronos* was followed by the much cruder *Mimic* (1997) in which Mira Sorvino fights off giant cockroaches in the New York subway. Rescued from Hollywood by the brothers Almodóvar, how does del Toro cope with his first film made in Europe and in a period setting?

The Devil's Backbone features all the visual brilliance that once made del Toro seem destined to be the founder of Mexico's own 'cinéma du look'. The opening montage of a falling bomb, wounded child and body parts drifting in amber liquid is dazzlingly realised. Expert cinematographer Guillermo Navarro alternates the stark day-lit exteriors of the central Spanish plain with nocturnal interiors that either glow warm and brown in Velázquez-hued domestic scenes or shimmer blue and grey in the child's supernatural encounters. The digital swirl of dust and flies around ghost child Santi is executed with panache. And the accomplished visual effects are matched by a subtle sound design, in which the conflict between brutal Spaniard Jacinto (played by matinee idol Eduardo Noriega, now hardened into a convincingly repellent macho) and kindly Casares (Luppi) is played out through their choice of music the traditional Spanish songs of Imperio Argentina (Spanish collaborator with the Nazis) or the tangos of Argentine national hero Carlos Gardel.

Jonás Batuecas
Daniel Cuño
Ruben Escamilla
Andreas Muñoz
Adrian Serna
Javier González Sánchez
Alvaro Román
Mikel Selles
Leandro Tejada
Izan Checa
Victor Barroso
Mario Barroso
Francisco Fernández
Spain-Mexico 2001©
108 mins
Digital 4K

With thanks to

Cai Mason, Lisa Taback, Imogen Munsey and the Netflix team, Gary Ungar

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While del Toro reconciles European and Latin American elements in the film, he has more trouble adapting his distinctive sensibility to a historical setting. Casares' opening voiceover suggests a psychological explanation for the uncanny: 'What is a ghost? A terrible moment condemned to repeat itself over and over ... a sentiment suspended in time.' And del Toro's narrative (he is one of three credited screenwriters) echoes the conflict between the two Spains played out in the Civil War itself: the scientific rationalism of the leftist schoolmaster versus the supernatural irrationalism implicitly embodied by fascism. This sophisticated approach chimes with Freud's analysis of the uncanny, in which the supernatural is defined as a displaced or repressed version of the real, but it tends to undercut the frisson of the horror genre. While del Toro can faithfully execute a suspense sequence worthy of his master Hitchcock in the scene where the boys fetch water in the dead of night, the appearances of the ghost are too prosaic to satisfy genre aficionados. This is largely because of the interference of the historical setting in the supernatural drama. At the height of the Civil War it hardly requires supernatural intuition to predict, as ghostly Santi does, that 'many of you will die.' Likewise Casares remarks to his beloved Carmen that it is they, the outnumbered and vulnerable Republicans, who are the real ghosts. If the uncanny is diagnosed too well, then surely its potency is lost?

But del Toro's dazzling way with the image pulls him and the picture through: a massive unexploded bomb stands in the centre of the children's playground (one child claims you can hear its heart beat); a mysterious clockwork frog takes the place of *Cronos*' vampire machine. Perhaps the eerie basement where child and torturer meet their end in a womb-like water cistern also has a particular resonance: Mexican culture is also built over ancient and violent foundations, and it's not too far-fetched to compare the film's doomed Spanish orphanage to the great baroque buildings of Mexico City. In spite of an overextended final act, then, *The Devil's Backbone* remains the work of a great stylist with a uniquely disturbing attraction to, and vision of, the frontier between life and death.

Paul Julian Smith, *Sight and Sound*, December 2001