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Title:

A Poetic Approach to the Cinema of Erice

Abstract:

Haunted Memory evokes those themes across Erice's cinema that are of universal significance: memory, childhood, the nature of cinema itself. Mostly absent, however, is the specifically Spanish context, something which attests to this audiovisual essay's engagement with the predominantly poetic, rather than explicative, approach of Erice's work.

Keywords:

childhood, cinephilia, hauntology, history, narrative, poetry

The directors of *Haunted Memory* explain that the audiovisual essay is born of two mothers: 'the tradition of research and experimentation that comes through avant-garde film and video' and 'the essay-film (or film-essay), that historic breakaway from supposedly objective documentary which stresses the elements of the personal and the reflective' (Álvarez López and Martin 2014). In this respect, the audiovisual essay is in keeping with the creative character of the written essay which Lukacs described as 'a philosophical poem' and which, for both Lukacs and Adorno, 'did not put forward truth claims, as did documentary, but was characterised by its fragmentary, wandering concerns and stylistics' (Conomos 2016: 90). Like a poem, the (audiovisual) essay meanders towards the revelation of some knowledge,

all the while leaving space for the reader/spectator to make his/her own sense of the questions it raises.

Adrian Martin has also spoken of his and Cristina Álvarez López's consciously poetic approach in *Haunted Memory*. Their inspiration for the 'mode and mood' of their work, he explains, came from reading Víctor Erice's writings in which the director often tells the story of 'a childhood memory of a scene from a film that he loves' (Álvarez López and Martin 2016). Martin notes that from this narration of a childhood memory 'everything else follows: social history, the history of Spain, personal life and family life'. A similar observation could be made about Erice's films. For although, as Ehrlich (2006: 23) points out, 'it would be impossible to imagine [them] outside of their Spanish context', their narratives are never predicated on a direct explanation of social, national or any other history. History, to use Martin's term, 'follows', or better still, it haunts.

History's presence in Erice's cinema is ghostly. Erice incorporates the past into his account of the world not by adopting the role of witness or observer but, as Derrida and Avery Gordon recommend (Hardcastle 2005: 120), by speaking to the ghost and allowing the ghost to speak, albeit quietly, softly. There are a few moments in his cinema when history seems to speak, or to be on the verge of speaking, more loudly: the fugitive soldier in *The Spirit of the Beehive* who, we surmise, must be a member of the Spanish maquis; the newspaper headline and photograph in *Alumbramiento* depicting the arrival of the Nazis at the Hendaye-Irún crossing in June 1940; and the two instances in *La Morte Rouge* that present us with photographs of the devastation of Spain's civil war and the aftermath. Of course, even these references are in some way or other indirect. The soldier is never explicitly referred to as an anti-Franco fighter; the newspaper excerpt does not mention the welcome that Spain extended to Hitler's army; and the images of destruction in *La Morte*

Rouge speak from outside the cinema hall that is the film's focus and refuge for the child-spectator from the ruin of the external world. In all these cases, history is there and not there. In *Haunted Memory*, it is less present still.

Given its photographic references to Spanish history and notwithstanding the fact that it provides only a fraction of the audiovisual essay's shots, understanding how *La Morte Rouge* is integrated into *Haunted Memory* offers an insight into the essayists' emphases and concerns. To begin with, notable by their absence are the direct references to the civil war and the early post-war period: images of ruined buildings, lines of Republican prisoners, children suffering the bombardments of Madrid, the cadavers of children lying on the ground. Instead, the shots selected relate almost entirely to the subject of cinema and spectatorship. Together with the voiceover, they propose connections between childhood and films. Thus, a photograph of a boy (Shot 7) — 'fading out', as the voiceover observes — follows the pronouncement accompanying Shot 5 that 'The child begins like a film'. Another of a young cinema audience (Shot 23) cuts to a film poster in *El Sur* (Shot 24), the voiceover repeating its earlier pronouncement, but now adding that the child begins 'with films' also. Shots 25 and 26 of a cinema interior and then a projector beam, cutting to a similar image in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Shot 26), help to continue this line of thought, the voiceover suggesting that children are 'Born in the moment that a projector beam illuminates a white screen'. Shots 68 to 70 present us with close-ups of the faces of adult spectators and Erice's own accompanying voiceover on the pact of silence into which they enter. Here Erice's observations relay a child's desire to discover these adult's secrets. This perspective is taken up also by Álvarez López and Martín whose use of this shot sequence implies that the silence extends beyond the setting of the cinema hall. The depiction of the mother from *El Sur* shushing in Shot 71 and the talk of 'a mysterious conspiracy of silence' which is 'to be

forever associated with the adult world' (Shots 71-73) support this implication. Yet, consistent with the child's perspective, there is no attempt to explain what the adults' secret might in fact be. Thus, no reference is made to the likely link between the silence in Erice's cinema and the impact of Franco's repressive regime. Instead, the essayists collude with the primary tendency in Erice's films towards metaphor and 'elliptical narrative' (Smith 2006: 180), history in any explicit terms hardly present at all.

Interestingly, in an interview which predates his first feature film, 'Erice asserts the autonomy of the cinematic image, and confesses that he himself cannot resolve the elliptical enigmas of his own narrative' (Smith 2006: 181). While this last comment might have been disingenuous, it is nonetheless an indication of the poetic approach he would adopt in films which, characterised by a 'desire to arrest narration (Egea 2007: 168), leave space for the spectator to participate actively in the processes towards knowledge and signification over which the director has no absolute claim.

Stepping into this space, *Haunted Memory's* participation is less informed by the approach and concerns of the historian than by those of the poet and cinephile. Its opening citation 'Cinema gets glued like a second skin to things' suggests as much and, along with the subsequent citation about the 'primordial stories we hold in our memories', explains the remaining selection of shots from *La Morte Rouge*: a toy train's shadow (Shot 104) succeeding the image of a camera's shadow in *The Quince Tree Sun* (Shot 103), the voiceover remarking 'And always the memory of cinema returning'; the emphasis on light, reflection and sight ('I spy with my little eye') in the subsequent sequence of a glistening river at night with superimposed images of two children (shots 106, 107); a close-up from *The Scarlet Claw* of a hand holding a claw instrument (Shot 112), superimposed on the dissolving image of Frankenstein's hand reaching towards Ana in *The Spirit of the Beehive*

(Shot 111); the shadow of the looming figure of the postman from Roy William Neill's classic (Shot 116), succeeding an image of hand shadow puppets (Shot 115), also from *The Spirit of the Beehive*; and finally, two superimposed images of the sea (Shot 123), flanked either side by images from *El Sur* of Estrella watching (Shots 122, 124), the voiceover associating the sound of the sea and wind with the memory of music and dancing.

There are moments from other films where history makes way for poetic and accordingly universal readings, themselves consequent on Erice's subtle, even oblique approach to context. The watch Ana gives to the soldier in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Shots 37, 39) that becomes the confirmation of his death is here transformed into one of several talismanic objects 'to contain desire, memory, and imagination', like the bauble in *El Sur* (Shots 36, 40) and the glass crystal, plumb bob and art tools in *The Quince Tree Sun* (Shots 41-43). But perhaps most significant are the final shots of the newspaper photograph of the three Nazi soldiers and the date 'June 1940'. By omitting the newspaper headline referring to Hendaye, the essay removes the photograph from its precise historical context and borrows the date for its more general, final point about how we, as children, are 'born into one precise place at one precise time in history' (Shots 132-133).

Haunted Memory may end by mentioning history, but it is shaped rather more by the rapture of cinema, 'experienced as the ecstatic suspension of time before the luminous image' (Smith 2006: 181). The revelation associated with Ana opening French windows in Shots 2 and 3 ('The child awakens to the world') is akin to the 'cinophilic epiphany' (Darke 2010: 156) that she experiences at the cinema, captured in Shots 29 to 33. Erice, it has been suggested, has been haunted throughout his adult years by 'the child's delight in the cinema' (Ehrlich 2006: 6). It is this delight, it seems, which most haunts the memories constituting Álvarez López's and Martin's poetic work.

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