

THE CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD IN VÍCTOR ERICE'S
EL ESPÍRITU DE LA COLMENA

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Víctor Erice's first feature-length film *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973) was «one of the products of a defiant movement of young filmmakers who... set out to reshape the artistic and intellectual direction of Spanish film»¹. This work has been described by critics as one of the best Spanish films ever made and one of the two or three most haunting ones about children. *Espíritu* is a complex, ambiguous work which invites interpretation on several levels: as a political and social allegory of Franco Spain, symbolized by the beehive, which explores the weight of oppression on the human spirit; and as a metafilm in which Erice uses the self-referential device of the film-within-the film to explore the nature and impact of the intrusion of fiction into the world of reality². However, the theme which unites all levels is that of childhood.

Erice's works presents a dualistic, contradictory concept of childhood as an age of imagination, creativity, and innocence as well as imitated or spontaneous cruelty. Childhood is also viewed as a period of initiation and rebirth; and as an age closely associated to major themes like solitude, death, time, and others.

¹ Marvin D'Lugo, «The Spirit of the Beehive», *Magill's Survey of Cinema* 6 (1985): 2858.

² Vicente Molina Foix, «La guerra detrás de la ventana», *Revista de Occidente* 53 (octubre 1985): 116.

The film focuses on a middle-class family living in a small Castilian town in the 40's. The effects of the Civil War and the mood of the post-war period are suggested in the landscape, the town, and its people. The parents reflect the spiritual devastation of the war and lead a routine, monotonous life: the father tends bees during the day and writes about the life and behavior of the bees at night. The mother rides her bike to the station to mail unanswered letters.

The dual concept of childhood is illustrated by their two daughters, six-year old Ana and nine-year old Isabel, whose trajectory reproduces the dialectical «truth-lies»: «¿jugamos de verdad o jugamos de mentira?»³ Ana represents the innocent, inexperienced, creative child for whom fiction becomes reality. She is set apart from others; and distinguished by «wide-open, camera-like eyes» which symbolize not only her innocence and imaginative capacities, but also her symbolical significance as artist and spectator⁴. Like «open windows into her mind», Ana's eyes «invite the viewer to explore from the child's perspective»⁵ and characterize her as the «active and imaginative observer and recorder of the hive's misdeeds... who will become the image-making monster... and... show the true nature of the hive» (Ashworth 68). Ana's eyes also underscore her role as an «imaginative, creative film spectator who interrogates the images on the motion-picture screen», a role that Erice would induce the audience to parallel (D'Lugo 2860).

The action of the film is initiated by the two sisters who see the James Whale Classic version of *Frankenstein*, and Ana's reactions to the film illustrate the child's propensity to play in earnest as well as the power of the will to transform fiction into reality. Impressed by the *Frankenstein* film, especially the scenes dealing with the death of the small girl and the monster, Ana asks her sister why they were killed. Isabel, for whom the film is only illusion, initiates a game telling Ana that the monster is a disguised spirit who can never be destroyed; and who can be conjured up

³ Miguel Rubio, Jos Oliver and Manuel Matji, «Entrevista con Víctor Erice», published with the screenplay: Víctor Erice and Ángel Fernández Santos, *El espíritu de la colmena* (Madrid: Elías Querejeta Ediciones, 1976): 148.

⁴ Peter P. Ashworth, «Silence and Self-Portraits: The Artist as Young Girl, Old Man and Scapegoat in *El espíritu de la colmena* and *El sueño de la razón*», *Estreno* 12, no. 2 (otoño, 1986): 68.

⁵ Luis O. Arata, «'I Am Ana': The Play of the Imagination in *The Spirit of the Beehive*», *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 2 (Spring, 1983): 27-28.

by those who are recognized and would befriend him. The younger girl accepts her sister's explanation without question, and they go to an abandoned house and well — transformed by Ana into a temple — where she devotes herself to rituals, calling to the spirit who may dwell in the well. Scenes which focus on her face as she tries to summon the spirit reveal the intensity of her belief, will, and imagination. Fernando Savater notes that the two worlds of reality and fiction are united by the well, for the eventual discovery of footprints provides Ana with unquestionable physical proof of the spirit's existence: «La enorme huella a la entrada del templo es la primera y todavía como perezosa manifestación de la presencia del espíritu; comienza a corporeizarse una respuesta a la piedad de la niña»⁶.

After several trips alone to the well, Ana gets up at night; goes outside, and with eyes closed and a look of determination on her face, wills the spirit to appear. That scene is immediately followed by the arrival of a fugitive who jumps from a train and goes to an abandoned house beside the temple-well. Ana believes that the fugitive is the spirit, her monster, «for she has conjured him up and he comes at her call, a product of her imagination» (Ashworth 68). As Molina Foix explains: «En ese sentido, la potenciación de lo querido, de lo deseado fervientemente, en la niña se convierte en una forma de realidad, y un sueño de ficción se convierte en una presencia definida...» (117). This act of transformation was suggested earlier in the classroom scene of don José, an analogue of the monster-spirit, when Ana symbolically provided the eyes which gave him not only identity, but also a means of communication. Thus, in spite of the narrator's admonishment at the beginning of the Frankenstein film of «no la tomen muy en serio», for Ana, the film is real; fiction becomes reality, and her subsequent trajectory parallels the events of the film.

Isabel is unable to enter the realm of illusion or engage in the real play of imagination, and she reflects the qualities of adults whom she seems to imitate: cruelty and playacting. Molina Foix points out that all characters are defined in reference to fiction. The parents are shadowy figures who strive to realize themselves through fiction related to absence. The mother writes letters to

⁶ Fernando Savater, «Riesgos de la iniciación al espíritu», prologue to the screenplay: *El espíritu de la colmena* 19.

someone who is real or imaginary, alive or dead, but who never materializes. The father directs his nocturnal comments about life in the beehive to another person, a possible interlocutor, who never appears. Their inventions or fantasies seem to reflect the need to absent themselves from the reality created by the Civil War and its political effects (112-13). Thus, fiction for adults is primarily a means of evading reality or controlling it, for the parents are also described in terms of acting out conscious or unconscious «comedias»: the father is proud of his pretending in the mushroom scene, the mother's letter writing is like «una representación cotidiana»; and one of the musical themes in the film is a children's song «Vamos a contar mentiras»⁷. Thus, Ana's fervent desire which becomes reality contrasts with the sterile fantasy world of adults in which fiction and reality coexist but never merge (Molina Foix 117). These differences are underscored, in part, by the contrasting functions of the train which brings Ana's fulfilled wish in the figure of the refugee; but carries away her mother's letters which evoke no response and leave her wishes unfulfilled. Thus, Ana's fiction provides entrance into a world that adults and Isabel have lost⁸.

Isabel is only capable of pretending, playacting, or scaring (Rubio, Oliver and Matji 148). Her smiles and obvious disbelief, reflected by facial expressions during the Frankenstein film and as she watches her sister call to the spirit at the well, contrast sharply with Ana's intense concentration and belief. Isabel seems to reflect both the spontaneous, unmotivated and sometimes deliberate cruelty of children. Her fiction, self-conscious playacting underscored by her self-contemplation in the mirror, is cruel. For example, in one scene, she feigns death producing a sense of confusion and fright in Ana, who thinks this parallels the movie scene; only to be followed by another scene in which Ana returns to find her sister's body gone. She is then grabbed from behind by a scary figure, Isabel dressed in her father's clothes. The most trenchant example of spontaneous cruelty, of curiosity which turns to cruelty, is the scene in which Isabel is seen petting her cat.

⁷ Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens. Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy* (Denver: Arden Press, 1985) 30.

⁸ José A. Mahieu, «Victor Erice», *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 411 (September, 1984): 89.

The petting leads to violent choking as she seems to become fascinated with the cat's discomfort.

Such episodes suggest the eternal dualism of Cain-Abel and illustrate how childhood may be victimized by those who imitate adults as well as by a repressive environment (Mahieu 88). Indeed, in an atmosphere like that of the hive, the possibilities for a normal childhood are destroyed; and children become victims and victimizers. The curiosity of a child like Isabel may be deformed into the potential for destruction as suggested by the multifaceted symbol of the mushroom in the film whose attractive, innocent appearance is deceptive: with age it becomes extremely poisonous. «Qué bien huele», remarks Ana; to which her father replies: «Sí, cuando es joven, engaña. Cuando es vieja, es otra cosa».

Ana's trajectory and reactions to the Frankenstein film illustrate the creative aspects of childhood, the power of imagination, the potential of the will to transform fantasy into reality, and the child's view of the world in which reality and fantasy intermingle.⁹ However, Ana's obsession with the spirit also illustrates that fantasy and imagination may become a destructive force, for pursuit of her illusion leads both to destruction of the fugitive and of herself.

As the game between the girl and the monster in the Frankenstein film involved danger, so Ana's relationship with the fugitive implies danger. He is killed soon after he meets Ana; and like the child in the film, Ana will be killed by the spirit. Ana's obsession with the fugitive-spirit and her desire to be initiated into its mysteries provide an option to the closed world of the hive (Mahieu 89). However, her initiation is also, in a sense, self-destructive, for dangers surround that knowledge as danger and death are associated with the attractive and different poisonous mushroom. Ana's friendship with the fugitive-spirit implies distancing herself from the hive — visually underscored, in part, by the scenes in which she is «repeatedly framed by open windows, doorways, and the barren Castilian landscape» — and embracing the spirit of the mysterious, the unknown, and the different (D'Lugo 2862). The fugitive-spirit like the monster, represents that which is different, a creation of the existing order gone awry: «el

⁹ Margaret W. Jones, *The Literary World of Ana María Matute* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970): 47-49.

espíritu desgraciado no es más que la desdicha misma de la colmena, pero vuelta contra ella; del mismo modo que el monstruo no es más que la desventura de la normalidad, vivida como protesta incansable contra ésta» (Savater 18). The parallel between the Frankenstein monster and the fugitive is visually drawn by the scene in which the latter's cadaver is seen lying on a table in front of the screen where the film had been projected.

The dangers implied in Ana's initiation and gravitation away from the hive are suggested in several ways: in one scene she stands on the track until the train — a symbol of the outside and the fugitive — comes dangerously close to her. Ana's situation is also underscored by the Frankenstein film when the assistant is heard warning the doctor that his creation, the monster, must be destroyed because it is dangerous; that such efforts to go beyond, to seek knowledge are dangerous; and by the verse read aloud by a schoolmate: «I thirst for that which will destroy me»¹⁰. As Savater observes: «Ana tendrá que descubrir por sí misma lo destructiva, lo amorosamente destructiva que es la vecindad del espíritu para las niñas. Está dispuesta... a jugarse el todo por el todo, a no ahorrarse ningún riesgo para llegar al espíritu» (16).

Ana's trajectory illustrates that childhood is a time of initiation, mystery, discovery, and rebirth. Her initiation — symbolized by the mushroom, fire, and death — progresses from absolute dependency on her family to a personal adventure (Rubio, Oliver and Matji 148). D'Lugo points out that the scene with the mushrooms represents Ana's initiation into the spirit that orders the lives of the characters in the hive — «distrust and self-generating isolation» — and the negative power of that spirit. The father reduces the mushrooms into two categories: good and bad, symbolically reducing experiences to simplistic moral categories; and then crushes a poisonous mushroom with the heel of his boot, thus eliminating everything branded bad. In this manner, he expresses the negative sense of the spirit: «a distrust of the merely visible in life and a categorical condemnation of everything that does not adhere to the norm», a reference to the way in which the hive will eliminate the fugitive (2861). Thus, Ana begins to understand the destiny of the monster in the film: what is useful

¹⁰ Translation of a verse by Rosalía de Castro as it appears in the subtitles of the film.

is good; what is not useful is dangerous and must be eliminated (Savater 21).

The fugitive's death and Isabel's cruel games expose Ana to death without explanation or justification just as the death of the girl in the film was unexplained. Ana's inability to comprehend the death of the fugitive, her desire to escape from her father, whom she sees as guilty; and her determination to pursue the spirit lead to Ana's destruction expressed in part by her symbolic death. The latter is suggested by the scene in which she is united with the Frankenstein monster, the spirit in its most revealing form (Savater 22-25). Ana's symbolic death seems to suggest several things: 1) complete identification with the spirit and initiation into its mysteries, 2) death as the means of attaining illusion, 3) rejection of a cruel world which she does not understand, 4) the fragile nature and loss of childhood, and 5) rebirth¹¹. As a result of her experiences with the pretend death of Isabel, with the real death of the refugee, and with the cruelty and violence of the hive, Ana dies symbolically and is reborn, no longer the innocent child that she was. As Savater explains: «A orillas de otras aguas nocturnas, el espíritu la matará a ella también, para permitirle renacer y acabar plenamente su iniciación... De las aguas de la muerte, Ana resurgirá pura y silenciosa. Capaz de invocar definitivamente al espíritu, que ya está en ella, cuyo disfraz es ahora ella misma» (15-17; 25). Ana's identification with the monster-spirit is further underscored by reenactment of the search scene from the Frankenstein film when the village unites with lights and weapons to search for her, and by the parallel between her lack of recognition of the family and the spirit's lack of recognition of those who do not befriend him.

The concept of childhood in the film is closely associated to the theme of time. For example, childhood is associated with timelessness and an awareness of time with disillusion, consciousness of cruelty, and the loss of childhood. Awareness of time is generally associated with adults who relate it to death, destruction, and the futility of action (Jones 36-37). For example, the father's preoccupation with time is evident in the frequency with which he consults his watch, and his descriptions of the glass apiary — which

¹¹ Janet Díaz, *Ana María Matute* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971): 73-85; Jones 53-55.

he constantly observes and which he likens to the main hairspring of a clock — underscore the hive's emphasis on usefulness and conformity like the meshing of a clock's parts as well as the futile, frenzied activity of the bees that ends in death:

El movimiento de esta rueda tan visible como la rueda principal de un reloj; alguien que veía a las claras la agitación innumerable de los panales, el zarandeo perpetuo enigmático y loco de las nodrizas sobre las cunas de la nidada... la actividad diversa e incesante de la multitud, el esfuerzo despiadado e inútil... el sueño ignorado fuera de las cunas que ya acecha el trabajo de mañana... el reposo mismo de la muerte, alejado de una residencia que no admite enfermos ni tumbas... alguien que miraba esas cosas, una vez pasado el asombro, no tardó en apartar la vista en la que se leía no sé qué triste espanto ¹².

The association of time with death and destruction is further suggested by the scene in which a member of the Civil Guard is shown winding the father's watch that was taken from the murdered refugee's body, and set descriptions emphasize the ravages of passing time on the family's house and its surroundings (Erice and Fernández Santos 46).

Ana's awareness of time marks the loss of illusion and of innocence, for the recovered watch is her first indication that something has happened to the refugee and subsequently leads to her awareness of cruelty. This is illustrated by the scene in which the family sits silently at the breakfast table, a silence broken only by the tolling of the town hall clock in the background. Ana's father reaches into his pocket and takes out the watch that Ana had given the refugee, slowly swinging it before her eyes filled with lack of comprehension and dismay. Alarmed, Ana runs to the abandoned house, looks for the refugee, and discovers only a path of blood and her father standing in the doorway. Thus, time, symbolized by the watch, underscores her initiation into the violence, cruelty, hypocrisy, and destructive power of adults and thus destruction of her innocence. The father's recovery of the watch also suggests loss of independence. According to E. C. Riley, Ana's unconscious act of giving her father's watch to the refugee

¹² Víctor Ericce and Ángel Fernández Santos, screenplay: *El espíritu de la colmena* 58-60.

symbolizes the transference of allegiance from father to friend in a process of trying to assert herself and gain independence, especially from her father¹³. The sentiment of loss — of innocence, illusions, and friends — is prominent in the film; for Ana loses a friend and illusion, the fugitive-spirit, and thus her link to the outside and the possibility for answers¹⁴. This episode also suggests a variation of another theme, that of friendship betrayed. Savater notes that Ana feels betrayed by her father whom she sees as guilty of the death of the fugitive: «En el templo, por la noche, corre la sangre de la víctima inmolada en aras de la unanimidad forzosa del panal. Es su mismo padre, el resignado vigilante de las abejas, quien ocupa ante Ana el puesto sin nombre del ejecutor de la sentencia contra la libre diferencia del espíritu tal como aplastó... la seta en el bosque» (23-24).

Solitude forms an integral part of the film's concept of childhood, as suggested by the Thomas de Quincey quotation which precedes the filmscript: «En los niños la pena tiene horror de la luz y huye de las miradas humanas». Ana is isolated by the limits of her understanding, the strangeness of her world, her imagination, and the impossibility of communicating; and her world appears as something distinct, separate, and incomprehensible for the adult mind (Díaz 20). She is isolated from town and from parents who are preoccupied and estranged, immersed in their own efforts to survive; teased by an older sister; and without friends. Ana's solitude is visually reinforced by the many scenes in which she is shown alone against the sparse, silent landscape. Surrounded by empty spaces, mysteries, and enigmas, she desperately seeks answers and tries to fill in and to reconstruct, to give shape and meaning to her surroundings as the children reconstruct the figure of don José or as the father classifies and defines the mushrooms (Del Amo 158). However, neither Ana's parents nor her sister can provide adequate answers or comprehend her world of illusion. This is especially evident in the scene in which Ana seeks assurance and information about the monster from her mother:

¹³ E. C. Riley, «The Story of Ana in *El espíritu de la colmena*», *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61, no. 4 (October, 1984): 494.

¹⁴ Alvaro del Amo, «Una gradación de venenos», published with the screenplay: *El espíritu de la colmena* 159.

- ANA. Mamá, ¿tú sabes lo que es un espíritu?
Teresa no contesta.
- ANA. Tú no lo sabes. Yo sí...
Teresa, por fin, contesta:
Un espíritu es un espíritu.
- ANA. Pero ¿son buenos o malos?
- TERESA. Con las niñas buenas son buenos. Pero con las niñas malas son muy, muy malos (Erice and Fernández Santos 86).

D'Lugo points out that the polarity of the adult and child's worlds is one of the essential conflicts of the film and is suggested in several ways. The child's point of view and its association to fairy tale or myth, suggested at the beginning of the film by a child's drawings and the phrase «Érase una vez», is juxtaposed with the more literal history evoked by adults. Thus, Ana's identification with the monster and reality of the film, which she comes to interpret as the «parable of a gentle monster» destroyed because he is different, and her interpretation of the fugitive as that gentle monster and the mushroom as sweetsmelling, contrast with the identification that her father makes of his family with the beehive and his condemnation of that which is different (2859-60). This polarity is also suggested in the film's enigmatic narrative structure which both reflects the fragmented, alienated world created by adults and parallels the subjective nature of the child's experience and curiosity with its incompleteness of information (Riley 496). Arata points out that «the focus of a child's mind is dominated by curiosity but not in a cognitive sense, and so is the general focus of *The Spirit of the Beehive*» (31).

The solitude of childhood is associated to a desire to escape. The Frankenstein movie, brought in from the outside, provides escape through illusion for children trapped in boredom, a closed environment, and silence. Physical escape is suggested in terms of nature and death. The desolate and empty landscape beside the well, the forest, and the river provide Ana with temporary refuge from the agitation of the hive; and her symbolic death suggests a desire to escape a world she does not understand. However, efforts to escape reality seem futile, for disillusion is seen as the other side of illusion. In the film, the adventure of the spirit is abruptly cut off with the brutal death of the fugitive leaving

Ana trapped in the hive and no longer able to contemplate the mysteries of the outside from within. This is illustrated by the circular structure of her experience which coincides with the trajectory of regaining the watch: from father, to refugee, to Civil Guard, and back to her father (Del Amo 159).

El espíritu de la colmena focuses on the efforts of children to grow up in a harsh, uncompromising environment marked by death, conformity, violence, melancholy, and a sense of fatalism. Ana and Isabel's world is defined by the hive. As D'Lugo observes, the «massive house with stained-glass amber windows... resembles a beehive, embodying a sense of physical confinement of individuals within a fragmented world» (2860). The house offers security, but it is also a trap, for the windows are barriers that unite two identical closed spaces (Savater 18). Erice creates the impression of a dangerous and deceptive yet enigmatic and attractive environment through symbols, colors, and the constant presence of death. The monster is attractive and frightening; the mushroom is poisonous yet has a good smell; and the landscape is empty yet suggestive (Del Amo 157). Colors are used to create mood and suggest a hostile environment. Red, the blood on Isabel's lips and in the abandoned house, is associated with violence; black, associated with animals, suggests the presence of evil and death as illustrated by the cat and the painting — seen behind Ana as she types — of a martyr or saint seated between a black animal and a skull. Such images create an aura of melancholy, pessimism, and fatalism as do the father's descriptions of the inevitable passage of time, the futility of activity, and the unborn bees who are already ensnared in tomorrow's work juxtaposed with scenes of the sleeping girls. These symbols and images are complemented by contrasts between light and dark: the bright outside light; the filtered, yellowish light inside the house, which adds to the metaphor of house as hive; and dark, shadowy scenes which underscore solitude, melancholy, and the oppressive, vicarious existence of characters (Molina Foix 114-15).

El espíritu de la colmena presents a multifaceted image of childhood derived from the child's view of the world and responses. Ana and Isabel illustrate dual faces of the child: creativity, imagination, innocence, development, and curiosity; and the kind of imitation, indifference and stunting that can occur in a repressive, violent environment. Childhood is also characterized as a time of

awe and wonder accompanied by solitude, shocking insights, cruelty, and heartbreak. Such a portrait evokes not only a sense of sadness but also one of hope as suggested in the final scene in which Ana, traumatized but not defeated, reaffirms her determination to pursue the spirit. Some critics have interpreted her final invocation: «Soy Ana», followed by the faint sound of a train, as the culmination of a journey of self-discovery and affirmation of her identity. However, the final image of Ana also underscores the importance of fantasy and illusions for the child in the face of resignation and mere survival suggested by the parents and doctor who remarks that Ana «irá olvidando. Lo importante es que... vive» (Erice and Fernández Santos 128). The portrait of childhood also serves to unite the film's various levels of meaning, for Ana's adventure underscores the necessity of the spirit; the power of creativity, will, and imagination to transform fiction into reality; and the power of fiction to transform and effect change. Thus, through the child, Erice underscores the relationship between creativity and regeneration of the human spirit.