

# A Myth in Time: Victor Erice's *El sur*

Jo EVANS

*University College London*

## Introduction

Erice's second feature-length film, *El sur* (1983), begins with the death of the protagonist's father. The opening frames recreate the night Agustín Arenas disappeared, and the film is a meditation on his suicide which leads the viewer back to the past and returns to its opening point as Estrella struggles to reconstruct a more human version of a man she has understood only through myth.<sup>1</sup> We discover that Agustín Arenas is a middle-aged hospital doctor and diviner who has been alienated from his extended family by the Civil War. Losing his job after the war, he has moved with his wife and daughter into a form of exile in the north of Spain; the endpoint of a nomadic period summed up with exquisite pathos by the brief exchange of glances between Estrella and her father on a train.<sup>2</sup> The title of the film refers then to a time and place, pre-war southern Spain, that has taken on mythical proportions in Estrella's mind and that has been irretrievably lost along with the father. This paper will discuss myth, or, more precisely, the myth of the father in this film; the role it plays in the exercise of power and its vulnerability to time, and the

<sup>1</sup> This linking of older male character with younger female is not new of course. It represents a traditional sexual imbalance parodied in Lorca's *don Perlimpín* and Valle-Inclán's *don Friolera*. Here, as elsewhere in post-Civil War film, Marsha Kinder sees it as a way of getting to the source of a more fundamental question of alterity which is beyond the scope of the present study: 'The coupling of the middle-aged exile with a rebellious young girl also occurs in the films of Erice, both in *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973) from the period of transition and *El sur* (The South, 1983) from the post-Franco era. In both texts, the brooding father is locked in an "inner exile" that roots him in the past and that becomes a site of imaginative projection for his perceptive young daughter [...]. These Spanish daughters seek inspiration in foreign territories (either within or outside Spain), particularly as represented in movies, postcards, or reconstructed memories of inner exile. By positioning this discourse of Otherness within intimate family relations, both works question whether its most resonant sources come from without or within. They bring to mind Homi Bhabha's statement that 'the "other" is never outside or beyond us, it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously "between ourselves"'. (Kinder 1993: 281-282)

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a gentle pastiche of *Brief Encounter*, it is a glance which clearly shows the 'state of instinctive symbiosis' noted by Peter Evans and Robin Fiddian (1987: 128).

introductory scene establishing the loss of the father will be seen to be indicative of all three.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transitional powers: the passing of the talisman**

The fragments which make up the opening scene are characteristically enigmatic. The initially black screen is accompanied by the sound of a dog barking and the voice of the protagonist's mother, Julia, calling out to Agustín. Both of these sounds become increasingly frantic as the darkness gives way to light coming in from a window, top right. Then the fifteen year old Estrella discovers her father's pendulum hidden under her pillow.<sup>4</sup> Her movements are slow and economical, the lighting deliberately low and focused only on her. The *mise-en-scène* is stark, giving way to a close-up of her hands slowly unfolding to reveal the circular box containing the pendulum. Incidental music gestures to Hitchcock and the suspense genre, while the trail of a single tear, visible only when Estrella finally raises her head to the camera, is melodrama.<sup>5</sup> The voice-over of an older female narrator explains that when she discovered the pendulum she knew her father was not coming back, and the film, from this point onwards, is a study in light and shadow, as Estrella literally fumbles for clues in the dark.<sup>6</sup>

The discovery of the pendulum in the opening minutes signifies the passing on of a metonymical talisman.<sup>7</sup> The pendulum is a symbol of the father. In particular it represents the myth of the father as all-powerful. It is the tool he used to divine water and is therefore an index of his supernatural skills. But the pendulum is also an icon of time passing, and may symbolize the elapsed time which plays a fundamental role in the

<sup>3</sup> Caparrós Lera (1992) points out that in a list of the ten best Spanish films, *El sur* was the only one made after 1975, and it is likely that this is because Erice's exploration of symbol and myth transcends the merely practical application they may have at times of more rigorous film censorship.

<sup>4</sup> Erice comments that 'he places under her pillow the object which, in a sense, is the symbol of what bound them most closely together in the past. It is [...] a kind of magical pendant for discovering subterranean waters in the fields, an instrument which is a symbol of their unity. Placing it under her pillow is the last gesture of love, which carries within it a kind of dark mandate: Estrella must carry out what he himself has been unable to achieve in his life, she must gather together the diverse strands of his story' (Besas 1985: 250).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed examination of cinematic cross-referencings see Peter Evans and Robin Fiddian (1987).

<sup>6</sup> Light and shadow are often used to accentuate mood, but also, in Erice's work, to accentuate film texture by making transparent the artificiality of the link produced by splicing shots together: a technique Marsha Kinder sensitively encapsulates in her comment on Erice's 'black fades between resonant images' (Kinder 1993: 446).

<sup>7</sup> It was only after completing this article that I came across Carmen Arocena's detailed monograph on Erice which I recommend both for general information and for her discussion of *El sur* (1996).

breakdown of the myth of the father, and in his subsequent death. Offered as a gift to the daughter it represents the fragile balance of power, previously held by the father, and the inevitability of time passing. This point of transition is the catalyst for Estrella's reassessment of myth and for the present study of the way myth seduces by inviting capitulation, and the way that this capitulation links myth with cinema. The film is composed of memories and fantasies tracing events up to and just beyond the suicide, as Estrella attempts to understand her father's despair. Beginning at a time when she idealized him, she searches for the origins of the myth he created and in which she once colluded only to find that the result of this journey is a complex interweaving of myth, absence and loss.<sup>8</sup>

Here we examine the balance of power and time, and their effect on myth. These points will be examined through two key scenes in the film: the first when Estrella is learning how to divine in her father's study, and the second, when her father watches *Flor de una sombra*, the melodrama starring his ex-lover Laura.

Before examining these scenes, it is useful to remember Caparrós Lera's comment that *El sur* is Erice's 'sinfonía inacabada' (1992: 246).<sup>9</sup> The restrictions placed on Erice by Querejeta prevented him shooting the second part of the film which would have traced Estrella's journey back to the south of the title.<sup>10</sup> Erice himself said the film was planned in two parts as 'a dramatic continuum' and that 'separated it's like a child without legs'. He also went on to comment that 'unlike the first part of the film the second part is not sad. It was to have been the first time that the North and South of Spain were truly united' (Besas 1985: 251). The inclusion of this second half would have foregrounded Estrella. The film might have suggested that identity is constructed both by the biological and mythologized parents, and that these two factors combine with an all-important third element, which is the individual interpretation of that inheritance. However, in the film we see, the south remains a symbolic

<sup>8</sup> Absence is a central motif in Erice's work. It has been pointed out that *El sol del membrillo* acknowledges 'the structuring of absence that lies at the core of all visual representation' (Kinder 1993: 445).

<sup>9</sup> According to Monterde, 'pese a los problemas de producción que castraron el pleno desarrollo de *El sur*, este filme supo confirmar muchas de las cualidades desveladas por *El espíritu de la colmena*, tanto en la atención hacia un universo temático personal —las relaciones hija/padre, el acceso al conocimiento, la reflexión sobre el Bien y el Mal, la incidencia de mitos y rituales sobre la infancia y adolescencia, etc.— como en lo referente a la definición de una forma de puesta en escena no menos personal, donde la luz y el tiempo se convierten en las materias vivas de una expresión fílmica que se hace poco menos que auto suficiente, como demostrara su tercer largometraje' (Monterde 1993:190).

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this see Macedonio Fernández (1984), and Besas (1985: 247-251), which cites Erice's poignant comment that 'I have had to accept what is for me the painful fact that *El sur*, although distributed as a finished product, is not at all complete from a narrative point of view...' (Besas 1985: 248).

absence and the film pivots on the identity of the father rather than Estrella; or, more precisely, the myths which surround him, summed up in Estrella's comment that he has always been a mystery ('los orígenes de mi padre siempre fueron un misterio'). Estrella's role is confined, in this truncated version, to that of observer/narrator. As she narrates events surrounding his life and death, she plays an extension of the mirroring role she seems to have played during his life, a mirroring role which will ultimately provide a way of interpreting his death.<sup>11</sup>

### **'La mente vacía': a captive audience**

Myth seduces by demanding our capitulation, or rather, it seduces if we allow ourselves to capitulate. This is illustrated by Agustín's recommendation that if Estrella wants to learn how to divine, she must submit absolutely: 'La mente, la mente completamente vacía'.<sup>12</sup> Her successful induction occurs at a time when she is eight years old and thinks her father is all-powerful. However, before examining this scene in more detail, we need to look at a memory which is offered prior to this scene in the film both as a warning and frame to Estrella's willing initiation into the rituals surrounding the myth of her father.

The fusion of memory, myth and artistic creativity which is the dominant concern of this film, is made clear in the opening frames immediately following the discovery of Agustín's disappearance. Moving rapidly backwards in screen time, the narrator says she was told that her father had guessed her sex by holding the pendulum over her mother's pregnant stomach. This recollection is communicated by the older narrator's voice over a highly stylized image of the room in which Estrella had been seen sleeping only moments before. The room in her memory is, significantly enough, her own room in the north and not a room in the south that she has never seen and cannot imagine. It is Estrella's 'memory' and she controls the myth. According to this memory the almost motionless figures of her father (sitting upright) and her mother (lying stretched out on the bed) are lit in a way which has invited comparisons with Vermeer (Edwards 1995: 151). This should alert us to the importance of creative 'reconstruction', to the fact that what we are being told is memory, is actually fantasy. In case we fail to understand this, our illusion is abruptly terminated by the prosaic conclusion to this romantic interlude which reveals it to be 'una imagen muy intensa que

<sup>11</sup> Evans & Fiddian, perhaps extending the link with Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, read the film as Estrella's search 'to understand the woman she has become' (Evans & Fiddian 1987: 128). I am adjusting the focus slightly here in my assumption that Estrella is a medium for an exploration of the identity of father.

<sup>12</sup> Gwynne Edwards has noted similarities with Calderon's *La vida es sueño* involving magical paternal powers invoked in the struggle to control children (1995: 158).

en realidad yo inventé'. It is irrelevant whether her father's prediction is fact or fantasy, it has become folklore, a part of Estrella's family romance.

Her fantasy vision of her own pre-birth is based on the myth of the all-powerful father combined with a potentially rebellious desire to put herself centre stage (she has, after all, moved the location to one of her own choice, and the parental figures are absolutely rapt in their concentration on the unborn child). The fantasy tells us a great deal about the relationship between father and daughter, as well as about the selective and imaginative capacity for recreation that human memory shares with film. In other words this introductory 'memory' alerts us to the role of agency in the creation of myths, cinematic images and human memory, all of which may conjure up 'una imagen muy intensa' and all of which may also be fake. But we need to go back first of all to the point where Estrella does not direct, but plays a part in the myth: the point at which the room we see is not hers, but her father's.

The myth of her father that the film will slowly deconstruct is an extension of an image constructed by her parents, and a very brief consideration of the historical background clarifies the need for compensatory myth. Estrella's mother taught during the Second Republic, but lost her job after the war. She has now become a shadowy figure whose main task is to teach Estrella to respect her father's genius. The reverence with which the father is viewed is all the more poignant in this context. Both parents have lost their former status as a result of the war. As Milagros points out, Agustín went from being 'uno de los buenos' to being 'uno de los malos'. The repeated moves and their lack of choice over the direction of their lives is symbolized by the weather vane on the roof of their new house which blows in the wind, or points impotently southwards, frozen by ice. In the context of such loss, the status of the father becomes all the more important to maintaining or providing an identity for the family. What is important to Estrella, and to the film, is that the process of idealization, previously explored in *El espíritu de la colmena*, may produce its own monsters. Estrella and Agustín will discover this when she allocates to her father the compensatory monstrous role, rejecting him for his involvement with another woman.

The scene in Agustín's study, which marks Estrella's initiation into the ritual of the pendulum and the viewer's introduction to the myth of the father, takes place in the same near darkness as the opening frames. This time the single source of light is on the left hand side of the screen. It is subdued, golden and focused initially only on the left hand side of the faces of Estrella and Agustín. Our attention is entirely directed to the intensity of their concentration, and to the relationship between mentor

and pupil. Estrella's lesson is like a slow moving dance.<sup>13</sup> First of all Agustín controls the pendulum, then he gives way to Estrella, who is momentarily blocked from view by Agustín's shadow. Crossing around behind his back, now holding the pendulum on her own, she comes out into the light as the pendulum begins to turn and the figure of Agustín fades into the background. Estrella's concentration from beginning to end has been absolute. It is as if Agustín has woven a spell around her from which she emerges, looking back for praise, yet at the same time triumphant and alone.

If, as has been suggested, identity is assigned and subjectivity conditioned by ideology, language and/or myth, then what Erice reveals here is the power of that calling, the conditioning and fixing of identity, here, Estrella's identity as a mirror image of her father.<sup>14</sup> However, this seductive, *chiaroscuro* vision of father and daughter in harmonious and triumphant collusion is immediately juxtaposed with a vision of the couple working in daylight, in a scene which might be viewed as as a gently ironic coda. In the frames described above, we share Estrella and Agustín's pleasure in their gift. In those which follow we are distanced, viewing with more detachment a child who literally follows in her father's footsteps as he paces a field to find water, both watched in awe by two farmers. In the light of day the trick looks oddly banal. Perhaps the mood of the earlier scene was the result of a trick of lighting, because here the magic looks mundane and the adulation of Estrella and the farmers faintly comical. This juxtaposition of interior and exterior sequences shows the power of *mise-en-scène*. The manipulation of screen images and our own response to them parallel Estrella's manipulation by an all-powerful image of her father. Having seen how Estrella allows herself to be manipulated by and manipulates her own myth ('Una imagen muy intensa que en realidad yo inventé'), we move on to a later scene in which Agustín replaces Estrella's as the captive audience.<sup>15</sup>

### **'Ya me he hecho mayor': *Cine Arcadia/Paradise Lost***

Shortly after her First Communion, Estrella has come across drawings by her father of a woman: Irene Ríos. When she sees her father's motorbike parked outside the *Cine Arcadia*, she discovers that the unknown woman is a film star. As Estrella waits for her father outside

<sup>13</sup> A gesture perhaps to the stately *pasodoble* they dance together after her First Communion.

<sup>14</sup> See Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)' (1984:1-60), Kristeva, 'Le temps des femmes' tr. as 'Women's Time' (1986), Lacan (1991), and Ragland-Sullivan (1982).

<sup>15</sup> Fiddian and Evans point out an intertextual link here with the film *Laura*, which also investigates the incongruous male idealization of a presumed-dead *femme fatale*.

the cinema, we are privileged with a view of the film inside.<sup>16</sup> Father and daughter are visually linked by the way Agustín 's intense gaze, focused on Irene, echoes Estrella's own through the glass doors of the cinema moments earlier. Agustín gazes from Irene to her screen lover just as Estrella gazes at the publicity shots trying to work out whether Irene is the 'rubia' or the 'morena'. (Had she watched more films, she would know that Laura/Irene will play the fatal 'rubia' to Julia's domestic 'morena'.) Agustín watches with rapt attention as a series of reverse cuts form a triangle between Agustín, the murderous screen lover and Irene. Finally the sequence ends: Irene closes her eyes in unnatural and melodramatic death, the lover closes his in despair and Agustín momentarily closes his own in unconscious imitation of his screen *alter ego*.

Earlier, Estrella's idealization of her father was given an objective twist by juxtaposing their intimate with their public relationship (the scene in the study next to the scene on the field), at this point a similar twist is introduced by juxtaposing the darkened cinema with the light of day when Agustín reads Irene/Laura's letter to the accompaniment of painful notes plucked by a piano tuner. Laura points out coldly that in all her screen performances she has met a violent end at the hands of a lover. Then, in a bitter reference presumably to the way Agustín rejected her, she asks which weapon *he* would have chosen. Although she apologizes for this cruelty, the viewer who has just witnessed Agustín 's rapt involvement in the untimely execution of her *femme fatale*, suspects the apology is unnecessary. Laura then rejects all association with Agustín and her screen persona in a voice-over which echoes and parallels Estrella, who is burning a publicity still of Laura in her role as the 'other' woman standing in the shadows behind the more clearly defined couple in the foreground. The destruction of this image is a fitting epitaph to the rejection, by both women, of their respective roles in Agustín 's life, and, from this point in the film, Estrella and Agustín are alienated from the 'paradise' of the captive audience and from the pleasure of collusion, both have lost the mythical object of their gaze. Estrella states of her former idol that 'apenas sabia algo de el', and Agustín retreats into silence and occasional lonely nights in a hotel. The second part of the film leading up to the father's death is introduced by a cut contrasting Estrella leaving home on a white bicycle, aged eight and followed by an Alsatian puppy, with her return, aged

16 Whether this represents a sequence of events imagined by Estrella, a reconstruction based on a later viewing of the film, or a transference to Agustín 's point of view is not clear. For the present discussion, I am assuming it signifies transference to Agustín.

fifteen, on a red bicycle, greeted by a much larger dog.<sup>17</sup> (It is, in fact, a cut so prosaic it might represent Erice's own departure from the film.) Estrella now has an admirer who draws stars on walls to declare his love, but his childish graffiti are dismissed by Estrella as impatiently as Laura has dismissed Agustín. In this later, less romantic vision of the past, although events are still viewed through eyes of the older narrator, the sharp contrast of light and shadow gives way to a more uniform grey, and the *Cine Arcadia* advertises Hitchcock's more sinister, *La sombra de una duda* in place of the trivial *Flor de una sombra*.

The film is not unflawed. The vision of Estrella returning to a fully-grown dog is almost farcical as an index of time passing. And yet, ironically enough, the flaws help denote the weight of impinging reality. They accentuate the need for creative and comforting myth. Both Laura and Estrella rebel. Laura rejects the role of Irene Ríos, screen idol, and Estrella grows out of the role of idealizing daughter. Both women reject a romantic fantasy in which they have played the lead, and their rejection has fatal consequences for Agustín. Laura's half-ironic 'mucho me temo que por fin me he hecho mayor', and Estrella's scornful rejection of her father and of the graffiti stars which echo the name he chose for her remove the safe ground of myth Agustín had established for himself: in this instance, a safe ground where the erotic desire for Irene and need to control Estrella could be contained. The women have uncovered rifts in Agustín's mythologized version of himself and his life, and unable to mend them, or to bear their loss, Agustín chooses death. He has become stuck in the past at an impossible point of conjunction: loyalty to his mistress/loyalty to his child. Estrella may once have been the willing vessel of a myth of himself as ideal, even divine, but her rejection leaves him bereft, as does Laura's rejection of her cinematic role, which exposes to ridicule his childlike rapture before the patriarchal fantasy of *Flor en la sombra*.

## Conclusion

Erice's films are lyrical and enigmatic, the events portrayed raise more questions than they provide answers. The focus is always on identity and creativity: the role of myth and fantasy in our understanding and acceptance of reality, and the role of myth and creativity in our understanding of ourselves. Hollywood film played a cameo role ten

<sup>17</sup> Marsha Kinder points out that the image of the road used to link past and present has particular resonances in Spanish film, 'like many Spanish films of the 1950s that used the iterative subversively (such as *¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!*, *Muerte de un ciclista*, and *Calle mayor*), *El espíritu...* opens with the image of a desolate country road, an iconographic representation of the continuity between Spain's feudal past and current modernization' (Kinder 1993: 129).

years earlier in *El espíritu de la colmena*. James Whale's *Frankenstein* provided a sympathetic chance encounter, a talisman for Ana's epic inner journey back to herself: a journey which allows her to discover and lose her own monster, created in imitation of Whale's antihero, and after which she is able to turn towards the camera and declare 'Soy yo'. In *El sur*, myth and Hollywood play a slightly different, but no less important role. Estrella must take a similar journey. She has to reclaim a more realistic image of her father and she has to forgive him for failing to live up to her ideal. But in order to do so she has had to retrace the steps of her own rebellion to see how far the myth was about manipulation and how far it was about collusion. In this version, Hollywood, or rather a Spanish melodrama the title of which suggests imitation of Hollywood, has provided the link she needed, and, bearing in mind Erice's well-known modesty, *Flor en la sombra* might be read as an ironic and self-deprecating reference to his own film (also Spanish and also inspired by Hollywood), and its potentially therapeutic role for a Spanish audience still dazed by its collusion in the Dictatorship and by the rapid changes of the Transition.

Erice is concerned with the exploration of myth, and the fragile balance that exists between its positive and negative qualities: the positive being the capacity of myth to provide explanations for the inexplicable, to help us to bear the unbearable, and the negative being its potential for aiding mass manipulation and subjugation. (Both qualities exploited freely by the Franco Regime, although that is not the focus here.) The godlike power of creation, control over human destiny and (to a greater or lesser extent) over the consumer form a basic link between cinema and the myth of the father in this film. The paradox lies in that, although we may not live so easily without them, if myths remain unquestioned, we run the risk of becoming their victims. Myth offers coherence and consolation, but should also provide a focus for the kind of curiosity aroused in Estrella that will, sooner or later, destroy it. *El sur* is a celebration of the way film constructs its own myths, and the cinema is an ideal vehicle for the analysis of our capacity and need to construct personal versions and visions of life as we 'see' it. It is also a moving illustration of the power of cinematic myth and of the paradox that we are safest in our enjoyment when we can acknowledge with more confidence than Agustín that 'las cosas que ocurren en el cine son mentira'.

Briefly, myth, like language is necessary for the construction of meaning, but like language it should be trusted only so far. It may contain, in both senses of the word, our collective monsters and inner demons, but the search for autonomy, however fragile (and Laura's letter points out that she is still afraid of the dark), involves facing the monstrous, maybe to discover along with the eminently practical Milagros that we are both 'santos' and 'demonios', and that our attempts to comprehend are always 'en fin, palabras, nada mas que palabras'. Erice

is concerned with the fragile equilibrium between myth as a form of lie and myth as the essence of creativity. In the closing scene Estrella prepares to travel south to meet another myth created from a collection of postcards, an association with the maternal warmth of Milgros, and now with the exotic Irene Ríos. Although she has the pendulum, it is a gift that signifies both power and the way power weakens over time. Passing the pendulum on to Estrella, Agustín is admitting his own fallibility, taking his leave of her and wishing her luck, so that, concluding at this point without Erice's blessing, the film leaves us wondering how Estrella will cope.

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**ABSTRACT** En este artículo se estudia tiempo e identidad, mitos y cine en *El sur* de Victor Erice. Basándose en un análisis de dos escenas, se plantea una relación entre el éxito o fracaso personal, la capacidad para construir mitos, y el transcurso del tiempo. En la primera escena analizada, Estrella aprende a manejar el péndulo en el estudio de su padre, en la segunda, Agustín observa a su ex-amante, Laura, en el melodrama *Flor en la sombra*. Al principio, tanto Estrella como su padre se confabulan con el mito del *otro* — Estrella se deja seducir por la imaginaria omnipotencia de su padre, y Agustín por la identidad cinematográfica de su antiguo amor. Las mujeres, Estrella y Laura, terminan por rechazar su papel en el drama que es su relación con Agustín, mientras que Agustín, privado de los mitos femeninos que le han soportado e incapaz de cambiar, se suicida, dejando a Estrella el péndulo, símbolo de su perdido poder. Se ve, pues, que la identidad humana (tanto como las identidades cinematográficas) depende de un frágil equilibrio entre el construir mitos y el reconocer que un mito no ofrece más que una imaginaria estabilidad transitoria: que tendrá que cambiarse con el tiempo, y que tendrá que adaptarse a la continua reconstrucción que exige la paradójica búsqueda de identidad de unos individuos en continua transición.

**Keywords**

- 1 Spanish film—Spain—twentieth century
- 2 film—Erice, Victor, *El sur*
- 3 myth—cinema—identity—power—projection—reconstruction—loss