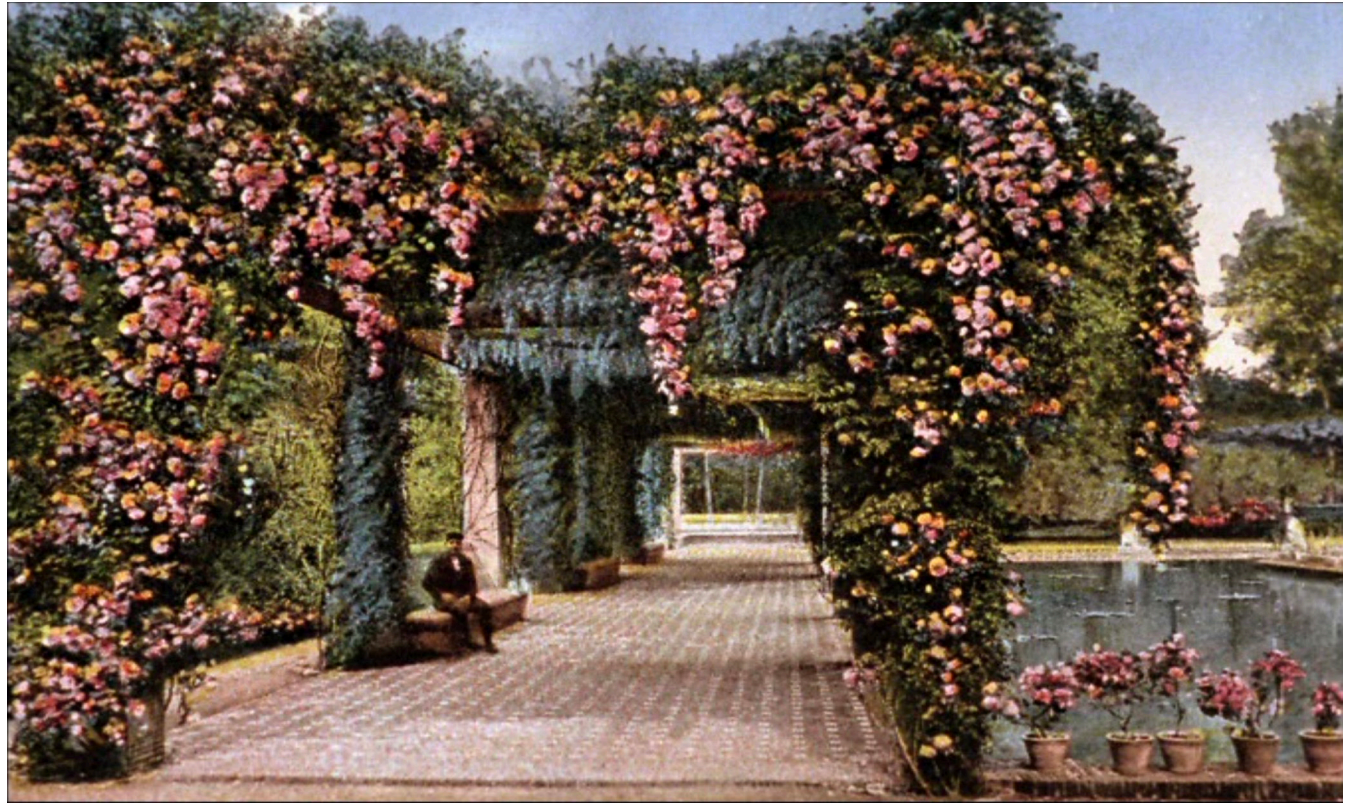


## *El Sur (The South)*, or the Memory of Cinema

### I

'My experience as a spectator is of a constant nature,' the acclaimed Spanish director Víctor Erice once wrote. 'It is the hub of my relationship with cinema' (2007: 54). He acknowledges that there is nothing unusual about a director situating himself in the role of the spectator. The distinguishing element in his case is that this experience is motivated by the possibility of a renewed encounter with people, places and histories whose fate is to remain never fully realised: 'An intimate necessity pushes us, undoubtedly to recuperate them – a necessity that is in many instances the symptom of a loss, the testimony of a social failure, and simultaneously, in its most vigorous expression, the rejection of a time when something we consider essential is denied us' (2007: 55). Erice's remarks bring together the two threads that encompass his films, one bound to the silences that characterised his childhood in the aftermath of the devastation caused by the Spanish Civil War and, the other, to an understanding of cinema's capacity to stand in for those aspects of historical experience that elude understanding. The question that I will pursue is: how do these silences and unrealised experiences leave their mark on Erice's films and the memory of cinema that they construct? In pursuing this question, I will focus on the director's 1983



film *El Sur (The South)*, while also touching on the films that bookend this production, *El espíritu de la colmena (The Spirit of the Beehive)* (1973) and *El sol del membrillo (The Quince Tree Sun)* (1992). By doing so, I hope to shed light on the forms of reflexivity found in Erice's films – as well as the larger issue that cuts across his films, writings on cinema and interviews and that encapsulates the philosophical implications of this body of work: cinema's ability to elicit an encounter with what remains still to be realised in our relationship to the past.

### II

*El Sur* begins with a shot of a darkened room that is gradually illuminated by the first rays of wintery morning light. From somewhere outside the room comes the sound of a dog

barking and a woman calling out a man's name – softly, at first, and, then, with each iteration, with an increasing sense of urgency: 'Agustín!' Awoken by the commotion, Estrella (played as a fifteen-year old by Iciar Bollain) discovers a small cylindrical box underneath her pillow. Inside the box is a pendulum that belongs to her father. 'That day at sunrise,' her adult voice-over recalls, 'when I found his pendulum under my pillow, I felt I knew that everything had changed, that he would never come home.' These events provide the starting point for Estrella's recollections of her family's arrival, seven years prior, in an unnamed town in the northern regions of Spain, their life in the two-story house located on its outskirts and the lead up to her First Communion when her family played host to two emissaries from the south: her father's mother (Germaine Montero) and Milagros (Rafaela Aparicio),

the woman who had primary responsibility for his upbringing. Their visit helps Estrella (played as an eight-year-old by Sonsoles Aranguren) to piece together a little of her father's past and his difficult relationship with his Francoist father in the years following the end of the Civil War. But it's clear from the equivocal nature of Milagros' responses to Estrella's questions about her father that the film's primary interest is not to uncover the reasons behind his decision to leave his home in the south and never return. Rather, it is to render the impact that this mystery had on her upbringing – its haunting by a place that demands something of her.

In 'Notes on the Phantom', Nicolas Abraham claims that while all the departed may return to ensnare the living, it is those individuals who took secrets to the grave that are destined to haunt. The role of the phantom is to objectify the gap created in the subject's psyche by this concealment. 'It works like a ventriloquist,' Abraham explains, 'like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography' (1987: 287). In *El Sur*, Estrella's efforts to piece together an understanding of her father's past centre around her encounters with a series of phantoms. There are the phantoms that look back at her from the postcards that she keeps in a cigar box and which she relies on to construct her own sense of the south. 'Not knowing the distances involved,' her voice-over recalls, 'I located it all on the other side of the globe, always with palm trees in the background.' Even more significant is the phantom whose name she first encounters on an envelope in her father's study: 'Irene Ríos'. Shortly after this discovery, Estrella recognises her father's motorbike parked in front of the town's cinema. Scanning one of the posters outside the building, she learns that the name written over and over again on her father's envelope belongs to the film's co-star.

Erice then does something that occurs elsewhere in the film. With a pronounced upward tilt of the camera, he leaves behind the viewpoint of his central character. In the scene that follows we witness Estrella's father (Omero Antonutti) seated in the darkened auditorium looking up at the screen on which Irene Ríos (Aurore Clément) is performing in a black and white melodrama, *Flor en la sombra* (*Flower in the Shadow*). For a few moments as Irene sits in front of a dressing room mirror brushing her hair, these two phantoms appear to look

back at each other. Their reunion inside the darkened auditorium lasts only for a few moments. But this is long enough to clarify a key aspect of the film's rendition of Estrella's recollections: their occupation of a space that is neither wholly inside nor wholly outside the consciousness of the central character, a space in which remembrance is taken over by the power of images to not only speak for our history, but also to spirit it away.

### III

'The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them,' writes Giorgio Agamben (2011: 113). In the same essay he proposes that giving expression to nonknowledge does not necessarily involve the admission of a 'lack or defect'. Rather, it is a matter of 'allowing an absence of knowledge to guide and accompany our gestures, letting a stubborn silence clearly respond for our words' (114). In Erice's films, giving expression to what remains still to be realised or understood is tied to an experience of cinematic figures that both determine and unsettle our place in the world. His first film *El espíritu de la colmena* begins with a van approaching a small village on the Castilian plain. The date, we are told in a subtitle, is around 1940. The excitement generated by the van's arrival is because it carries the reels of film and projection equipment that will transform the rundown building that functions as the village's town hall into a cinema. The film to be screened later that evening is James Whale's 1931 version of *Frankenstein*. A woman who serves as the village crier announces the cost of admission: one peseta for adults and two reales for children. In Erice's films, details that, in another context, might be considered incidental, play an important role in establishing a precise sense of the material conditions of a place. In the scene that follows, we watch the village children arranging their chairs in front of the screen. At the door, the rotund impresario responsible for bringing the film to the village is collecting the pesetas and reales. 'I hope it's good this time,' a woman tells him. 'It's magnificent,' he replies. 'Don't start a fire, now,' he warns another woman, who has brought along a brazier to keep herself warm. Quite

quickly, the barn-like room is filled with villagers excitedly chatting among themselves.

When the lights dim and the projector starts rolling, a man dressed in a tuxedo appears on screen. Cloaked in the guise of a content warning, his remarks are designed to prime the audience for the story to come, a story about 'the mysteries of creation, life and death'. After he walks off stage, the screen fades to black. When it fades back up, it takes a few seconds for us to realise that what we are watching is not the start of *Frankenstein*, but an unnamed figure tending an apiary. That the man's protective attire and awkward movements conjure images of the monster in Whale's film is one way in which Erice encourages us to view the emotions and affects conjured inside the cinema as contiguous with the life outside – a life that is marked by an acute sense of loss and grief. 'Though nothing can bring back the happy moments we spent together, I pray that God grant me the joy of seeing you again. That's been my constant prayer since we parted ways during the war.' Conveyed as a voice-over, these words link the scene of the man, who we will come to know as Fernando (Fernando Fernán Gómez), tending the bees to the scene that follows of an as yet unnamed woman (Teresa Gimpera) sitting at her desk writing to an absent lover.

The manner in which the woman's words play over the top of a close-up of Fernando's half-hidden face prompts us to question their provenance as well as intended receiver. Voices bleeding across scenes; footsteps announcing the presence of creatures that are as much imagined as real; train whistles reaching out to us through the night air: these are some of the ways in which Erice uses the acousmatic properties of sound to evoke a domain of experience that cuts across boundaries. Thus when Fernando finishes his labour with the bees and makes his way home, past the hall where the villagers are watching the screening of Whale's film, Erice floods the street with the whirring sound of the projector's mechanisms and the tinny snatches of the movie's dialogue. More surprising than this is the manner in which, a few moments later, these sounds penetrate the thick walls and windows of Fernando's study causing him to put down the magazine he had started reading. When he opens the large honeycomb windows leading onto a small balcony, the slow forward track of the camera

that follows behind seems to be driven by a need to trace the source of a sound whose volume and acoustic range expand and contract in a manner that enables it to connect otherwise discrete zones of activity.

Even at this early point, then, it is possible to glean at least two aspects of cinematic experience that are being memorialised in Erice's film: on the one hand, cinema as an actual place – noisy, squeezed together, intrusive – and, on the other, cinema as a way of relating to images and sounds that are defined by their capacity to escape their moorings. In *El espíritu de la colmena* these dimensions are realised in an image that brings together the two sides of the film's operations: as a record of a one-time only event recorded by the camera and as the telling of a fictional story. It occurs when the camera, enticed by the sounds penetrating Fernando's study, returns to the hall where the villagers are watching the film. From the mass of faces gathered in front of the screen, it picks out the two young girls who serve as the film's central characters, Isabel (Isabel Tellería) and Ana (Ana Torrent). After a few moments, it becomes clear that it is Ana, the younger of the two, whose responses hold a special interest. Cutting between the scene from Whale's film that shows the first meeting of the monster and the little village girl who befriends him and a hand-held shot of Ana gazing intently up at the screen, the film captures that 'unrepeatable moment' when the stunned responses of the young actress watching the movie for the first time become indistinguishable from the reactions of the character that she plays.

'I sincerely believe that it's the best moment I've ever captured on film,' the director confesses to an interviewer. 'It was an actual screening. She was really seeing the movie. He [Luis Cuadrado, the film's cinematographer] captured her reaction to the encounter between the monster and the little girl. So it was an unrepeatable moment, one that could never be "directed"' (2006). In the same interview, he observes that, in a film made in 'a very premeditated style,' the key moment is one that escapes this premeditation: 'I think that's the crack through which the aspect of film that records reality bursts through into every kind of fictional narrative [. . .]. But without the substratum of fiction, it too would fail to acquire its fullest sense as an image recording reality.'

For Erice, the affective force of the shot of Ana's reaction is drawn from a dual action whereby the fiction created by the director is taken over by a response that both serves and supersedes its guiding structures. Echoes of this moment can be found in the work of a range of other filmmakers whose films evidence the same productive tension between fictional and documentary elements: for example, Roberto Rossellini, John Cassavetes, Maurice Pialat and Abbas Kiarostami. In the work of these filmmakers, as well, this tension has at its source the body of the actor – its capacity to not only serve the needs of the fiction, but also enable its disruption.

In *El espíritu de la colmena* two factors give this moment its particular force. First, its grounding in a child's view of the world. In a tribute to Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), Erice claims that, at its most memorable, the experience of cinema 'gives the impression of passing over a threshold, as if images revealed life's multiple truths. Moments difficult to describe, belonging to those primordial stories we hold in our memories, in which often the silhouette of the child and of the adolescent we once were are present' (2007: 55). This claim has a close connection to Jean Louis Schefer's proposition in *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* that cinema's power lies in its ability to connect with an 'unfinished' childhood that inheres within the subject. 'It seems as if a part of ourselves is permeable to effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into meaning through our language,' Schefer proposes at the start of his book (2016: 12). The cinema aligns these unexpressed meanings to the operation of visible figures – bodies, gestures and actions – whose purpose is to reacquaint us with what remains still to be understood in our relationship to the past. 'Something of our own knowledge is in them,' Schefer writes of our attachment to these figures, a knowledge that speaks of 'our unfinished and now nearly invisible childhood' (2016: 61).

The second factor concerns Erice's insistence on embedding this 'unrepeatable moment' in the distinctive features and particularities that characterise the mass of bodies pressed together in the crowded hall. Indeed, our response to Ana's reaction has a lot to do with the way it shares the screen with the reaction of the young girl seated immediately to her right who covers her eyes when the monster appears from behind



the bushes. Seen for just these brief moments, the unidentified young girl reminds us of those forces, personalities and histories that make up the life of the village, a life that both precedes the film and continues after its cessation.

This leads to a related point about the nature of the story told in the film. In *El espíritu de la colmena* everything that happens to Ana – her attempts to clarify the nature of the monster (real or fake? spirit or phantom?), her relationship with the wounded rebel soldier, her flight from her father and encounter with the monster on the river bank – is designed to shed light on the capacity of this moment to subsist within the social realities of Spain in the dark years immediately after the end of the Civil War. The return to a child's view of the world is not an escape from the pressures and restrictions of the social world. Rather, it is the means by which the film tests

their limits and solicit forms of engagement that they actively repress. The unrepeatable moment of disruption embodied in Ana's response is, thus, also a moment of renewal – for both the cinema and the social world in which it occurs.<sup>1</sup>

#### IV

This detour to a film made ten years prior to *El Sur* helps to clarify the implications generated by the film's decision to leave the eight-year-old Estrella's perspective outside the cinema and make its own way into the auditorium. On one level, this decision lends weight to the point made by a number of critics that the film's representation of Estrella's memories includes events and incidents that she observed directly as well as events and incidents that she has only imagined. But as suggested earlier, it also undercuts this conclusion by affirming that these memories are just as much the product of another force, one that is so memorably depicted in *El espíritu de la colmena*, the cinema, itself. The tendency of the camera to operate independently from the characters as well as the slow fades that create the impression of watching scenes drawn from and receding into the darkness of the past: in *El Sur* these are two of the ways in which Erice draws our attention to the fact that it is the cinema – as much as the character – that is remembering.<sup>2</sup>

The formal implications of this coincidence come to the fore when the film pauses to contemplate the postcards that Estrella uses to construct her understanding of the south. In the lead up to this moment, Estrella's mother relays what she knows of the south and her father's decision never to return to his family home. These details capture Estrella's imagination and drive her to scrutinise the postcards, as if they might fill in the gaps in her mother's account. The montage of still images interrupts the film's forward movement and enfolds Estrella's contemplation of the strangely coloured postcards within a larger space of contemplation that takes in the spectator's own presence in the auditorium.<sup>3</sup> Drawn from who-knows-where and jumbled together in the cigar box, the image of the south rendered in these postcards is one that, in the application of colour to what would have been black and white photographs and in the staging of exoticised scenes of women dressed



in mantillas and lush overgrown gardens, has been heavily worked over. The role of these *objets trouvés* is less about visualising what the south might look like and more to do with giving dramatic shape to the challenge that lies at the heart of the film's rendition of Estrella's memories: how to render the legacy of something that exceeds one's conscious knowledge, something that by its nature must remain unrealised in our relationship to the past.

'Practically, we perceive only the past,' writes Henri Bergson, 'the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future' (1988: 150, original italics). In Bergson's view, we experience the past in two ways, simultaneously: as that which enters into engagement with the present so as to determine a course of action and as an ever-expanding repository of memories that exceed the possibility of conscious

realisation. Paola Marrati describes these unrealised memories as belonging to a past that 'does not pass: it is conserved in itself, endowed with its own virtual reality distinct from any psychological existence' (2008: 74). Similarly, in *El Sur*, the south is a set of events that had a determining effect on Estrella's upbringing and the shadow cast by what remains unfinished in her engagement with the past. How do we encounter this unfinishedness? Primarily as a type of indetermination that operates at the level of image and sound and is embodied in the responses of the central character: What is it that I'm seeing or hearing? What might this image or sound tell me about the enigmas that determine my experience of the past? In *El Sur* this indetermination marks the weight of a past that continues to press its claims on the present.



## V

If the first part of the story told in *El Sur* concerns Estrella's attempts to understand the mystery of her father's past, the second part concerns the disillusionment that supersedes these attempts. 'I started wishing with all my heart that I would grow up and get away from there,' her voice-over recalls about the crises that came to dominate her childhood. As if responding to this wish, a shot of Estrella riding away from the house on her bicycle dissolves into a shot taken from exactly the same position that reveals a now adolescent version of the character riding back toward the house. 'I grew up more or less like everyone else,' her voice-over summarises, 'getting used to being alone and to not think about happiness.' The change in her relationship to her father is summed up in a scene that echoes their previous encounter outside the town's cinema. This time it occurs outside a bar, and, unlike the earlier encounter outside the cinema, the person that Estrella observes from a distance is not someone shrouded in mystery, but merely someone who appears disoriented, who must call on the steady hand of a passerby to light his cigarette. The scene is about the changed relationship between father and daughter. But it is also about the manner in which, even in adolescence, Estrella continues to mirror aspects of her father's own behavior. This is evident when Agustín pauses to contemplate a portrait of his daughter in the window display of a photography studio. The fact that a few minutes earlier Estrella was shown doing the same thing confirms her



inheritance of her father's feelings of estrangement as well as his obsession with phantoms. 'I never forgot Irene Ríos,' her voice-over tells us at the start of this scene. 'I kept looking for her on film posters. But I never saw her name again. It was as if the earth had swallowed her up.'

The denouement of the film's story occurs one afternoon when Agustín picks up Estrella from school and takes her to lunch at the Grand Hotel. Apart from a wedding reception in an adjacent room, the restaurant is empty of other patrons. Their conversation hints at familiar sources of contention – her relationship with the boy referred to as *El Carioco*, Agustín's disapproval of her social life, his drinking – as well as the silences carried over from the years of Estrella's childhood. In the course of their conversation, she asks her father a question that she has long wanted to ask: 'Who is Irene Ríos?'

She then tells him about the night that she saw his motorbike parked outside the cinema and followed him to the café where she watched him write a letter. Rather than answering directly, Agustín is content to dissemble. When he returns to the table after taking a few moments to splash water on his face, Estrella tells him that she has to return to class. It's at this point that Agustín's attention is grabbed by the sound of the Paso Doble that seeps into the restaurant from the adjoining room. This is the same Paso Doble that father and daughter danced to on the day of her First Communion. Although Estrella is able to remember the events of this day, it is clear from her expression that this memory does not have the same impact as it does for her father. When she rises from the table, the camera follows her movements across the room. This connection is interrupted when Estrella pauses to peek through

the curtains draped across the doors at the bride and groom dancing to the Paso Doble in the adjacent room. Rather than remaining with Estrella, the camera cranes up to a position above the doors, gazing down at the wedding party through the transom window.

What is it that we are being asked to remember at this moment? Most directly, it is the once deep affection between father and daughter. But the manner in which the camera cranes up from where Estrella stands looking through the curtains to a position above the doors prompts us to remember something else that was registered during the communion dinner, namely, the way in which the tracking shot that records father and daughter dancing together begins and ends on a close-up of Estrella's communion veil draped over the back of an empty chair. We remember this detail because it marks



another moment when the camera's tendency to assert its independence from the characters distances us from the fiction. The intention here is not to suspend the story. Rather, it is to enact at the level of the mise-en-scène an oscillation between two competing points of attention: one of which is the spectacle of the dance, the other an insistent image of absence conveyed in the shot of the empty chair. One speaks of the present. The other of its inevitable passing away. One binds us to the story of Estrella's childhood. The other to the camera's role in the telling of this story.

The conclusion to be drawn is that in *El Sur* the camera's movements are always for us: their purpose is to prompt us to reflect on the experience of cinema. 'The camera may speak in the present,' Gilberto Perez reminds us, 'but it is a present now past when we watch it on the screen.' Its poignancy, he adds, is 'the poignancy of what reaches us from the past with the urgency of the present' (1998: 35). Perez's remarks help to clarify what we are being asked to remember when the sound of the Paso Doble seeping into the restaurant prompts us to recall the dance between Estrella and her father during the communion dinner. Once again, it is the cinema. This time, not as a particular place that is visualised in the story. Nor as an engagement with an 'unfinished childhood.' But as a way of experiencing the present as always already passed. This is the sad note that is carried into the restaurant during the afternoon when Estrella spoke to her father for the last time. We absorb this note as a memory of and about the cinema and its capacity to render a past that undoes our place in the present.

## VI

After Estrella leaves the restaurant, we observe Agustín sitting alone in the far corner of the room, listening to the Paso Doble. The film then returns to the morning when Estrella discovered her father's pendulum underneath her pillow. Craning down from a long shot of the city's walls, the camera reveals Agustín's body face down on the riverbank, his coat and rifle beside him. 'Before leaving the house,' Estrella's voice-over confides, 'he emptied his pockets. Among the things he left in his drawer was a small telephone receipt. That's how I found out that on the last night of his life my father had called the

south. A number I didn't recognise.' In the closing moments, we see her slip this receipt – as well as the cigar box of postcards – into the suitcase that she will take with her on her journey to the south. 'The night before I left I could hardly sleep,' her adult self recalls. 'Although I didn't show it, I was very nervous.' In the final shot, Estrella is standing directly in front of the camera – her gaze fixed on a point just to its right: 'At last I was going to see the south.'

That this is the film's final shot is only because Erice was not able to film the last third of the script, the part that deals with Estrella's trip to the south. From various accounts of the details included in the unfilmed portion of the script, it is easy enough to piece together how this material would have developed some of the threads left hanging in the story. For Mar Diestro-Dópido, this material promised to 'guarantee an emotional and geographical symmetry essential for Erice's moral schema in the film' (2017: 6).<sup>4</sup> For others, the problem with this hypothesising is that it discounts the significance of an unfinishedness that is already there in the film's rendering of the south. Unfinishedness is not something that befalls the film, we might say. Rather, it is something that it enables at the level of both the events that define its story and the formal structures that it employs to displace us from its unfolding. In their most powerful guise, this is what Erice's films do: they facilitate an engagement with experiences that, by their nature, must remain unrealised or incomplete. Moreover, they locate these experiences at the heart of a larger reflection about the nature of cinema itself.

This line of thought finds its confirmation in *El sol del membrillo*, the film Erice completed after *El Sur*. Stripped of the architecture of a script or fictional story (but still invested in the techniques of cinematic storytelling), *El sol del membrillo* documents the labour of the renowned Spanish painter Antonio López, as he tries to capture the ripening of quinces on a tree in the yard of the house that serves as his studio. The use of title cards allows us to track the progression of this endeavor – from its commencement on the 29th September 1990, when the artist began by constructing his canvas, establishing a plumb line in front of the tree and hammering survey nails into the ground to mark the exact spot from where, each day, he would stand in front of the canvas, to its end on

the 10th December 1990. In between, he covers the tree in a transparent plastic canopy to protect it from the rain, abandons the oil painting in favor of a pencil sketch and recruits his friends to prop up the sagging branches of the tree with a long stick, while he continues to work on the drawing. All this comes to naught, when, one morning, he discovers, among the discarded cigarette butts at the base of the tree, a fallen quince. A week later, after contemplating the fruit scattered on the ground, he breaks the plumb line and dismantles the remaining structures.

The opportunity to capture the light known as ‘quince tree sun’ is over. The implications that this failure has for Erice’s own practice is alluded to in the concluding sequence that begins with Lopez modelling for a painting being undertaken by his wife, the artist María Moreno. The painting requires him to lie fully clothed on a bed holding a small crystal and a black and white photograph of two men standing in front of the Parthenon. We watch as the crystal drops from his hand and he falls into a deep sleep. This allusion to the opening of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) as well as the introduction of a non-diegetic score distance this sequence from the rest of the film. The reasons for this excursus become clearer when we are presented with a shot of the camera peering down at the fallen quinces in the darkened yard. Where once the artist had stood with his feet touching the top of the nail heads hammered into the ground, we now see the feet of the tripod on which the camera rests. To the right of the tree an arc light attached to a timer switches itself on and off.

The culmination of the sequence occurs when, over a close-up of the artist’s face propped on the pillow, his voice-over begins to recount the details of a dream in which he is standing with his parents in front of the house where he was born, looking at the fruit on a group of quince trees across the square: ‘Dark spots slowly cover their skin. In the still air, I feel their flesh rotting. From where I stand, I can’t tell if the others can see it too. Nobody seems to notice that the quinces are rotting under a light I can’t really describe. Clear, yet dark, that changes all into metal and dust. It isn’t the night light. Neither is it that of twilight. Nor of dawn.’ The artist’s account of this mysterious light that animates and mortifies triggers a series of close-ups of the decaying fruit gathered at the base

of the quince tree. Like the news items about events in the Middle East broadcast on the radio that Lopez listens to as he is working or the stories told by his friend and fellow painter Enrique Gran about their time together as students, the purpose of these images is to furnish the film’s rendition of his labour with markers of what cannot be made to serve its purpose: duration, its constant transformation of the world that the artist seeks to capture.

‘It is we who are internal to time, not the other way round,’ Gilles Deleuze writes in his summation of Bergson’s theses on time (1989: 82). ‘Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change’ (82). This inversion lies at the heart of Lopez’s dream in *El sol del membrillo* as well as the broader operations of Erice’s filmmaking, a filmmaking that draws its power from an encounter with images and sounds that speak of a past that has not been usurped by the needs of the present, a past that continues to flow and lend each moment an always unfinished dimension. The face of a child confronted by a creature that both fascinates and horrifies; the sound of a Paso Doble that calls us back to a former time; the accretion of decay on the skin of a ripened quince: the role of these images and sounds is to render an experience of time that leads not to action but to a form of thinking that takes as its instigator the gaps and lacuna that subtend our relationship to the past. They affirm the cinema’s capacity to form a connection with those experiences that must remain unrealised or incomplete.

Tracing Erice’s investment in these images and sounds leads us back to our point of commencement: the director’s own experiences as a cinemagoer. In *La Morte Rouge: Soliloquy* (2006), the short film that was commissioned for the exhibition *Correspondences: Víctor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami*, first exhibited at the Center de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Erice’s voice-over recalls the dread evoked during a screening of Roy William Neill’s murder-mystery *The Scarlet Claw* (1944). He remembers how this dread was echoed in the ‘atmosphere of a devastated society’ and being struck by the silence of the adults seated around him in the cinema, all of whom seemed to be complicit in ‘a secret that explained everything’. For Erice and his generation of cinema-goers, the attraction of cinema-going lay in its ability to wound and act

as a balm upon the wound: ‘This double game of pain and consolation, of suffering and joy, that reached him from the screen, was the basis for his contradictory relationship with moving images.’ In Erice’s memory of cinema we are undone by images and sounds and able to draw from this undoing a renewed encounter with what remains still to be realised about the past.

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direct dialogue with the civil war, through Laura's [Irene Ríos' real name] brother' (2017: 6).

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**1** In the same manner, the film does not engage in an 'erasure' of historicity, as Paul Julian Smith claims (2000: 30). Rather, it locates its terms in the realm of the pro-filmic: the faces and expressions of the actual villagers as they are rendered by the camera and microphone. Historicity emerges in the interactions between the film's fictional and documentary elements as well as the capacity of these interactions to generate something new. Marcos Uzal provides a reading close to the one that I'm proposing when he argues, in relation to Erice's depiction of Ana's response to the screening, that the cinema 'is a means not to forget the world around them (ruined by war and fascism) but to reinvent it, to raise it to the level of films and dreams' (quoted in Darke 2010: 157).

**2** To this list of reflexive devices we can add the use of allusions to the history of painting. For an illuminating account of Erice's use of this device, see Linda C. Ehrlich (2007).

**3** The most influential account of the implications of this type of realignment of spectatorial space is Raymond Bellour's 'The Pensive Spectator' in *Between-the-Images* (2011: 86-98).

**4** Diestro-Dópido outlines how the change from an 81 day shooting schedule to just 48 days of shooting was triggered by the withdrawal of production funds by the Spanish state broadcaster RTVE. She also summarises some of the events that comprise the unfilmed elements of the script: 'Estrella would meet in the south a young man she would intuit was her younger half-brother (a fact never made implicit in the script), to whom she would pass on Agustín's pendulum before leaving Andalucía, having uncovered its mysteries and making peace with her father [. . .]. It was in the unfilmed scenes in the south that Erice planned to establish a