



From the desk of Pierre Beaudry



THE DISAPPEARING FOOTPRINTS OF A POETIC SPIRIT

(An example of discovery of principle in cinema)

By Pierre Beaudry, September 24, 2012



FOREWORD

Today, the overwhelming ocean of cinematographic fantasy has stormed the shores of reality shattering the boundary conditions that, up until only yesterday, had permitted the creative process to pierce through the poisonous fog of popular opinion by means of moral classical poetry and music.

Today, there is everywhere despair, because this power has been deliberately destroyed and lost for people who don't even know it exists. However, the Spanish movie, *THE SPIRIT OF THE BEEHIVE* (1973) is a beautiful pedagogical example of what cinema should be, not only because its scenes are peppered by beautiful "units of poetry," but because these poetic moments succeed in redeeming the generational lost of the principle of creativity. It is simply the most beautiful film ever made.

THE FOOTPRINTS OF A SPIRIT

[The Spirit of the Beehive](#) (1973) realized by Spanish director, Victor Erice, is a beautiful example of the art of shadow making for the purpose of discovering the principle of creativity. From the first to the last images of that movie, the spirit of "*Frankenstein*" (1931) by James Whale (**Figure 1**) is present, but not in the manner that one might expect. The 1973 audience was both shocked and bewildered by the effect this movie had on the young children of a small village of Catalan, in 1940

Spain, where it was filmed. The movie poses, directly and performatively, the paradoxical question of a monstrous result in the misuse of creativity.

At the onset, the audience is immediately confronted with the irony that cinema might be a monster representing the real world before an innocent spectator like Ana, who, because she is a child, is unable to make the difference between fiction and reality. The film deliberately creates ambiguous moments when the two domains become confused, because this is the only way for an adult to understand that what a child discovers can only be accessible through the footprints of the poetic spirit. As the producer, Victor Erice, said about the Frankenstein scene of **Figure 1**: “I think it captures and represents in one’s mind the first experience of a viewer of cinema. So much so that one day, pondering that image, I have sensed that everything you could say was contained in that image.” (Victor Erice, Documentary video [The Footprints of a Spirit](#) Disc Two, The supplements, The Criterion Collection.)



Figure 1. Scene from “*Frankenstein*” (1931) by James Whale.

There seem to be two different but corroborating intentions for introducing the Frankenstein movie into [The Spirit of the Beehive](#): one is historical and the other epistemological. At the first historical level, the movie within the movie is a reminder of how the people of Spain were held hostage by the monstrosity of the Franco Regime, during and after the Spanish Civil War. The movie helps to reclaim the lost historical memory of the Spanish people during the Franco Years. At the more profound level of epistemology, the movie aims to revive the creative process of adults by helping them reclaim the poetical process of their forgotten childhood discoveries. This is a recall to the epistemological resiliency of the youthful mind. Erice’s primary intention was to answer a single question: “What is eternity?”

In substance, the movie is about the creative mind of a child, viewed through a poetically-minded adult, who is concerned with the fundamental principle underlying human life itself. This principle is the principle of immortality conceived through the lens of the simultaneity of eternity and experimented through a child’s first discovery of the real world. The beauty of that immortal metaphor is represented by the fact that this extraordinary movie will always have the power to awaken in adults, their own childhood memory of the creative process by restoring the footprints of their dormant poetic spirit.

The most important moment of the movie comes when the little girl Mary, in the Frankenstein movie, gives her monster-friend flowers to throw onto the water as if to have their friendship sealed by drifting together like ships on the sea of the unknown. That very moment was captured in a most unique shot by the camera man showing Ana taken in by both fear and wonder at the same time. She is repulsed by the idea that the monster might become destructive, yet she is attracted by the idea of goodness that the little girl is expressing by giving him flowers. That is the actual poetic ambiguity of the creative process: being drawn in and recoiling at the same time. Erice described this emotional moment not as a scene, but as a “unit of poetry.” He said:

“It is a moment that is impossible to repeat, one that could never be ‘directed.’ That’s both the paradox and the wonder of cinema. If we think a bit about this film, it was made with a very premeditated style. Nevertheless, what I consider the most essential moment of the film is the moment that goes beyond all that formal planning.

“I think that’s the crack through which the aspect of the film that records reality breaks with the fiction and with all manners of fiction. This dimension of documenting reality has been lost today to a great extent. To me, it’s a loss of enormous importance, because that aspect of movie making has nourished the best fictions. And contrary to fictions, this movie had the power to record reality as it happened. But, without the substratum of fiction, it too would fail to acquire its fullest sense as an image recording reality. But, that’s truly the moment I find the most moving, even today. I sincerely believe it’s the best moment I’ve ever captured on film.” (Victor Erice, Documentary video [*The Footprints of a Spirit*](#), Disc Two, The supplements, The Criterion Collection.)



Figure 2. Discovering the state of mind of Ana looking at the scene of Frankenstein is discovering the poetic principle of the creative process.

The story is, in reality, about a journey that the spectator has to make in himself, by himself, and for himself, which is precisely the ideal search of the republican spectator of the 1972 period who was a child during the early 1940’s. In that sense, it is not a movie for children. It is a scientific experiment involving the power of discovery of adults living during that period of time. It is a movie about children made for adults who once were such children, but had forgotten. It is about recollecting the creative process they had lost during their childhood, or right after. It is a sort of crucial experiment aimed at forcing the spectator into making a discovery of principle, in his own mind, by piercing through the secrets of how to read its shadows, that is to say, by attempting to define the pulse of the timeless spiritual

experience of mankind through the mediation of the shadowy universe of perplexity and awe. As Erice said:

“This process – if it is one, which I am not sure it is, arose from how we had to handle the grown-ups. We always see them through the children’s eyes, children who have yet to acquire the use of reason. The repercussions of this are obvious: we tried to avoid ‘psychologizing,’ because that is alien to how children observe and evaluate the world.” (Victor Erice, Documentary video [The Footprints of a Spirit](#), Disc Two, The supplements, The Criterion Collection.)

[The Spirit of the Beehive](#) is also a story about film making in the same manner that Velasquez expressed the process of painting with *Las Meninas*. It resembles Velasquez in that it displays the means by which the artist has to compose in order to make the movie, by first establishing the central metaphor and by constructing supporting metaphors that all contribute to help the spectator decipher the unity of effect of the film: What does this shadow mean? What about this reflection, this echo? What is this movie asking me to do? In other words, the actual subject of the movie is creativity, and this is why there are so many different layers of the same function, like in a palimpsest. For example, how do you know when a train is coming? In the same manner that you know when a person is dead. You put your ear on the metaphorical indicator.

The shadows on the wall, the Vermeer-like honey-colored stain-windows, the small foot into the large footprint, the sound of a pebble hitting the bottom of the well, all these metaphors represent ways in which the human mind has to kneel down to hear the echo of what is to come, or of that which is no longer there. These are the many choices of means that are intended to awaken the creative curiosity of the dormant post World War II generations and explore with them how creativity works.

As the documentary concluded, this beautiful poem of the mental awakening to the creative process is the sort of classical work of art capable of healing all of the sores of war and hatred of contemporary society. Definitely to be watched, and studied again, and again. Finally, it was Erice who best summarized the significance of the gaze of Ana:

“If something in the film lives on today, it’s the universal element within it. That is what belongs to the realm of poetic experience. Forgive me if I speak of the film as poetry. It’s not a statement about its quality, just a description of its nature. Taking historical time as its starting point, it seeks to take us back to our source in time. And what is that? It’s when a child’s gaze takes in the world for the first time.” (Victor Erice, Documentary video [The Footprints of a Spirit](#) Disc Two, The supplements, The Criterion Collection.)

The final irony of the movie is that when [The Spirit of the Beehive](#) was shown in the same theater where the Frankenstein movie had been originally shown to Ana in Catalan, there were no children present in the room. The spectators were all older people, some of whom remembered having played a role in the 1940 movie, but reflected no memory of what it had been all about. Maybe that was the reason why the censors originally rejected the film as “unwatchable.”

