



PROJECT MUSE®

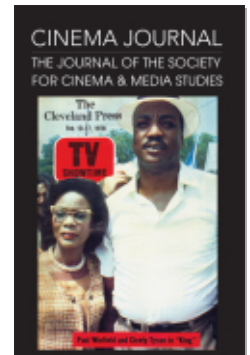
"Les Enfants et les Cinéphiles": The Moment of Epiphany in
The Spirit of the Beehive

Chris Darke

Cinema Journal, 49, Number 2, Winter 2010, pp. 152-158 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0182>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/373237>

"Les Enfants et les Cinéphiles": The Moment of Epiphany in *The Spirit of the Beehive*

by CHRIS DARKE

It is said that the spectators who choose to sit as close to the screen as possible are children and movie buffs.

Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater"¹

Barthes's famously backhanded eulogy to cinemagoing has a touchstone status in discussions of cinephilia despite its author's self-identification as a noncinephile, best expressed in his admission that "whenever I hear the word *cinema*, I can't help thinking *hall*, rather than *film*."² Along with Christian Metz's *Imaginary Signifier*, it marks the moment of a powerful disavowal of cinephilia upon which the influential strand of film theory, dubbed "psychosemiotics" by Thomas Elsaesser, established itself.³ One of the ways in which this disavowal was couched was in the association of cinephilia with infantile enthusiasm, with childhood. In this essay I will examine the pairing in order to explore the historical self-consciousness that underpins the current rejuvenation of interest in cinephilia. Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973) is an ideal film to facilitate my examination for a number of reasons. It is a film that can be seen to be concerned with the "childhood" of cinephilia. As a film that looks back to the childhood experience of cinema in 1940s Spain from the historical perspective of the mid-1970s—that is, at the moment of film theory's disavowal of cinephilia—it speaks *of* and *to* successive generations of cinephilia. And, in the thirty-plus years since its release, the film now resonates anew in its fascination with—and remarkable representation of—a recurrent motif in my reconsideration of cinephilia: the "epiphanic moment" of spectatorship.

1 Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 348. In the original, Barthes refers to "les enfants et les cinéphiles"; see *Communications* 23 (1975): 106.

2 Ibid., 346.

3 Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment," in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 33–35.

Erice has described the moment I will examine in *The Spirit of the Beehive* as “the best . . . most important . . . most essential” moment he has captured on film in his long but intermittently productive career.⁴ In terms of duration it is indeed only a moment, lasting just a few seconds in a scene a little over two minutes long. The scene shows a six-year-old girl, Ana (Anna Torrent), watching her first film, an experience so overwhelming that she subsequently interprets the world around her through this encounter with cinema. The world into which she carries this experience is that of Spain in 1940, with the country in the midst of civil war. Ana lives in an isolated Castilian village with her parents and her older sister Isabel (Isabel Telleria), and *The Spirit of the Beehive* opens on the day a mobile cinema arrives to project a film for the villagers, James Whale’s 1931 *Frankenstein*. It is at this screening that we are first introduced to Ana and Isabel.

At the heart of this scene is the moment in question. Ana’s small, grave face concentrates on the scenes from *Frankenstein* being projected in which a little girl, Maria (Marilyn Harris), plays by a river. The creature emerges from the riverside bushes and Maria responds guilelessly to his appearance, handing him some flowers, which together they toss onto the river to see them float. As Frankenstein holds a flower in his coarse hands and, imitating Maria, raises it to his nose to smell it, we see Ana’s reaction. Suddenly, she sits up in her seat and leans forward, enraptured at the spectacle she is witnessing. Opening her mouth slightly, she seems to shape a word to herself and then leans back. The light of the screen shines in her eyes. Put neutrally, we see what *Frankenstein* shows and Ana’s reaction to it. Put more expressively—and with greater fidelity to the moment of Ana’s reaction as captured by Erice—we don’t see what *she* sees, but her *seeing* it. We watch Ana’s face itself becoming a screen upon which the external signs of an internal epiphany are being played out, a revelation the child will carry into the world beyond the cinema.

The film integrates both the moment in *Frankenstein* that elicits Ana’s reaction and Erice’s recording of the moment of her reaction. At one level, there is the film being responded to (a classic horror movie from early 1930s Hollywood) and the spectator responding (a seven-year-old actress in the early 1970s who had never seen the film before, playing a girl of the same age in the 1940s who has never seen any film). At another level, there is the detail that triggers Ana’s astonishment, Maria offering Frankenstein a flower, and the moment of An(n)a’s reaction captured by Erice as *real*, where the boundaries between Anna the actress and Ana the character dissolve. In *The Spirit of the Beehive*, then, the dimension of the “cinophilic moment” is here doubled.

What does the idea of the “cinophilic moment” designate? Why choose this term over others such as shot, scene, or sequence? Precisely because it points to a dimension of the spectator’s reaction that is seen as escaping these recognizable, regulated units of cinematic grammar. The moment may ultimately reside within some combination of them but is irreducible to them. As Paul Willemen says, “what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown.”⁵ He goes on to describe the cinophilic moment as “not

4 *The Footprints of a Spirit (Les huellas de un espíritu)*, Carlos F. Heredero, 2006), television documentary feature included on Criterion Collection DVD edition of *The Spirit of the Beehive*.

5 Paul Willemen, “Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered,” in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London and Bloomington: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1994), 237.

choreographed for you to see. . . . It is produced *en plus*, in excess or in addition, almost involuntarily.”⁶ Willemen’s definition appears to disqualify this moment in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, inasmuch as it is “choreographed.” Yet, when one considers how this scene was shot, another dimension emerges. Erice has described the scene as follows:

Paradoxically, it was filmed in a completely documentary style. It’s the only shot filmed with a handheld camera. Luis Cuadrado shot it sitting on the floor in front of Anna as I supported his back. He captured Anna in the act of discovering—it was an actual screening. She was really seeing the movie. He 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.” 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 a moment that goes beyond all that formal planning.⁷

The split between a premeditated and quasi-documentary style of shooting is visible in the scene, which was shot with two cameras from four different angles. An establishing shot of the interior of the makeshift cinema initially presents a side view of the audience, the lights dimmed and the projector’s beam visible. There follows a series of shots in which the film on-screen is shown from the audience’s point of view. The “moment” itself is bracketed by a pair of nonhandheld shots, the framing static and at the audience’s eye level, in which Ana and Isabel look up and off to the right of the frame. However, Ana’s astonished reaction is recorded from a setup in which she is shown raptly gazing up and off to the *left* of the frame (the camera has an evident handheld tremor). We barely notice that the 180 degree axis has been jumped. The heart of the scene is the child’s moment of spontaneous amazement around which everything else coalesces. But while we may not be aware of the breach of classical continuity editing, this transgression is itself in keeping with the eruptive quality of Ana’s reaction, as though a rigid shot/counter-shot correspondence between spectator and screen cannot contain or adequately express what passes from one to the other.

Erice describes this moment as “the crack through which the aspect of film that records reality bursts through into every kind of fictional narrative.”⁸ In this respect, *The Spirit of the Beehive* corresponds to a further definition of the “moment.” As Christian Keathley puts it, “The cinephiliac moment is the site where this prior presence, this fleeting experience of the real, is felt most intensely or magically.”⁹ Mary Ann Doane also notes that “rarely does cinephilia fasten onto a cinematic technique such as a pan or a dissolve. . . . [W]hat is visible but not shown must be a function of the indexicality of the medium.”¹⁰ Erice succeeded here in capturing something rarely shown on

6 Ibid.

7 *The Footprints of a Spirit*.

8 Ibid.

9 Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 37.

10 Mary Ann Doane, “The Object of Theory,” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 84.

film—the natural, unforced moment of a spectator's response to cinema's revelation of the "real" beneath the "fictional." It is worth restating how the moment is doubled in this scene. For it is not so much in *Frankenstein* that this aspect of cinema emerges but in Ana's reaction to it—the revelation of cinema's potential to disclose something real is conveyed, transmuted via the screen of Ana's face. This is an image of spectatorship of a particular kind, which underlies a certain vision of cinephilia and is expressed here in its most raw, fundamental, and childlike form. Spanish critic Marcos Uzal sums this up when he remarks on how Ana's "reactions touch us as if she was the first spectator and cinema was being reborn through her."¹¹

Ana's reactions express an aspect of the cinephilic moment that Willemen discusses in terms of "excess," examined in terms of the theologically informed discourse of "epiphany" and "revelation" that derives from the highly prevalent Catholic influence in postwar French film criticism:

What is important is that they [cinephiles] dig up moments which can only be seen as designating, for those people, something in excess of the representation. . . . And these moments show you where the cinematic institution itself vacillates, where it might tip over or allow you a glimpse of the edge of its representation.¹²

Once identified, this excess is related to a mysterious dimension of spectatorship designated as the "elsewhere" or "beyond" of cinematic representation: "[T]he film allows you to think or to fantasise a 'beyond' of cinema, a world beyond representation which only shimmers through in certain moments of the film. Where you see it shimmering is largely, but not exclusively, up to you. The cinephiliac claim is that cinema can do this."¹³ Keathley notes more recently how film studies has traditionally tended to subordinate such moments of textual excess to cinema's narrative imperative, citing David Bordwell's definition of moments of excess as "whatever cannot be assigned meaning or relevance in relation to the broadest sense of a film's narrative. This excess includes 'colors, expressions and textures' that 'become "fellow travelers" of the story.'"¹⁴

However, this general dichotomy between narrative and that enigmatic substance "excess"—which is disciplined by narrative and yet supplementary to it—has a particular place in cinephilic spectatorship, according to Willemen:

[I]n order for notions of revelation and excess to happen, to be noticeable at all, they have to be demarcated or demarcatable, in some sense, from what else is happening in the film. So it is no accident, indeed it is highly necessary, that cinephilia should operate particularly strongly in relation to a form of cinema that is perceived as being highly coded, highly commercial, formalised and ritualised. For it is only there that the moment of revelation or excess, a dimension other than what is being programmed, becomes noticeable.¹⁵

11 Marcos Uzal, "Le regard fixe de l'enfance: à propos de *L'Ésprit de la ruche*," in Victor Erice, Abbas Kiarostami: *Correspondances*, ed. Sylvie Pras (Paris: éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2007), 60; author's translation.

12 Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 240.

13 Ibid., 241.

14 Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*, 32.

15 Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 238.

The “highly coded” narration referred to here is that of classical Hollywood cinema, and in this regard Willemsen isolates the examples of Fritz Lang and Jacques Tourneur. However, if we recall Erice’s observation about the “highly premeditated” way *The Spirit of the Beehive* was shot, then a similar degree of codification can be said to apply to Erice’s film, albeit within the different aesthetic procedures of modern European cinema. To further examine the relationship between narrative and excess enshrined in the cinephilic moment, and in order to delineate the utopic dimension of the “beyond” it gives onto, it is worth reconsidering Ana’s epiphany.

Vicky Lebeau describes Ana as “the very symbol of how a child’s passion for film is caught up into the work of making sense of the world, its terrible violence.”¹⁶ Discussing the figure of the child in early cinema, particularly in the genre of “Child Pictures” in Victorian cinema, she asks: “[W]hat did the spectators of early cinema look at, what did they look for, in the busy pictures displayed before them? *Contingency, detail, visual ‘noise’ are part of what the camera, the photograph, whether still or moving, brings with it. . .*”¹⁷ In the evolution from cinématographe to cinema, the question was “how to turn that excess of the visual to the purposes of narrative,” says Lebeau:

Cue the child. On the initial evidence of the child pictures, Victorian cinema began to bind that excess of the visual through the image of the child, investing the child as spectacle at the same time as it drew on the stories, and values, attached to children and childhood. . . . Cinema will use the image of the child to secure its appeals to verisimilitude, to the uncontrived, even haphazard, recording of life as it passes before the camera.¹⁸

In certain respects, Ana too fulfills the function Lebeau identifies in early cinema, whereby the child serves both to incarnate the unruly polysemy of the image and to bind it to narrative. But this is not all Ana does. She also foregrounds cinema’s residual capacity, associated with its own infancy, to produce an excess which escapes the strictures of narrative in undisciplined sparks of signification. And at the moment she senses, then sees that capacity in *Frankenstein*, Ana embodies it for Erice, for the film, perhaps even for Spain. What escapes from the narrative of *Frankenstein*, via Ana, into *The Spirit of the Beehive* forms the major coordinates of its narrative. One film begets the other through the ramifications of Ana’s cinephilic epiphany.

In this transmutation from the detail that provokes Ana’s reaction to the moment of the reaction itself, Erice displaces attention away from the fugitive particular to what comes after the encounter with it. The film thus becomes an allegory of the aftereffects of cinephilic spectatorship. Miriam Hansen observes that what is at stake in such moments is the possibility of a “split-second meaninglessness” which acts as “the placeholder of an otherness” beyond understanding, wherein the particular and the detail “precipitate processes in the viewer that may not be entirely controlled by the film.”¹⁹

16 Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 52.

17 Ibid., 25; emphasis added.

18 Ibid., 25–26, 39.

19 Miriam Hansen, “Introduction” to Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), xxxi.

This is a striking description of what happens to Ana. The figure of Frankenstein becomes Ana's "placeholder of an otherness," and the film presents her with numerous other beings whose "monstrousness" hinges on their equivocal relationship to life and death: her father, first seen as a strange figure attired in his beekeeping outfit, who lectures his daughters on the perils of poisonous mushrooms; "Don José," the anatomy-lesson mannequin to which Ana symbolically adds eyes; the doomed fugitive freedom fighter whom Ana attends to; and, ultimately, Frankenstein himself, whose appearance to Ana (in a dream or hallucination) is the answer in the world to her earlier epiphany in the cinema. Ana's narrative trajectory describes the interpenetration of film and world and gestures toward that dimension Willemen refers to as a "beyond" of cinema. One may therefore regard *The Spirit of the Beehive* as a chronicle of the child's newly sparked imaginative engagement with the world through cinema. Indeed, Marcos Uzal likens Ana to the children of Italian neorealist cinema who "see more than they know what to do with" and for whom 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."²⁰

It would be wrong to dismiss this statement in terms of mere escapism, with cinema being seen simply as a refuge from the world. Whatever else it was, first-phase postwar cinephilia must be regarded as a generation's response to the shock in childhood of the simultaneous experiences of war *and* cinema—a response which subsequently comes to be culturally formalized first through a set of viewing practices, then through writing and filmmaking. This particular historical conflation of cinema and childhood informs a major strand of postwar European cinephilia, which one finds frequently in writing on this period. French art critic Jean-Louis Schefer captures it well when he recalls not the films seen in childhood but "the films that saw our childhood," a forceful inversion Serge Daney was also fond of invoking.²¹ Born in 1940, Erice is also of this generation and has written about the abiding association of cinema with a wartime childhood:

It is, in some way, inevitable. Since that single history, that of cinema and the twentieth century, is confused, irremediably, with our own biography. I am referring to the people of my generation, born in the time of silence and ruin that followed our civil war. Orphans, real or symbolic, were adopted by cinema. It offered us an extraordinary consolation, a sense of belonging to a world: precisely that which, paradoxically, Communication, in its present state of maximum development, does not offer.²²

Apart from the explicitly utopian register of Erice's description of cinema providing "a sense of belonging to a world"—a world defined neither by war nor by Spain's own protracted experience of fascism—there is a further dimension to this generation's formative encounter with cinema. For Erice, as for Daney, Schefer, and many others,

20 Marcos Uzal, "Victor Erice—à la recherche du premier éblouissement," *Trafic* 51 (2004): 21; author's translation.

21 Jean-Louis Schefer, *L'homme ordinaire du cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1997).

22 Victor Erice, "Writing Cinema, Thinking Cinema . . .," trans. Carlos Morrero, *Rouge* 4 (2004), <http://www.rouge.com.au/4/cinema.html> (accessed June 22, 2009); originally published as "Escribir el cine, pensar el cine" in *Banda Aparte* 9/10 (January 1998).

cinema *alone* offered such “extraordinary consolation,” inasmuch as it was not yet just another node in an undifferentiated image world. The historically specific nature of this encounter with cinema underwrites *The Spirit of the Beehive*, and Ana remains its incarnation. If the cinephile can be considered a “child of cinema”—Dancy, for example, christened himself a “ciné-fils,” or “son of cinema”—then Ana further embodies this filiation as, like Erice himself, one of the symbolic orphans that cinema “adopted.”²³

The Spirit of the Beehive has continued resonance for current discussions of “post-filmic” cinephilia thanks also to a relatively little-known recent work by Erice. In 2006, he made *La morte rouge*, a thirty-two-minute digital video essay that clearly reveals the autobiographical dimensions of his first film.²⁴ In this work, Erice recollects his first experience of cinema when, as a five-year-old, he accompanied his older sister to a San Sebastian cinema named the Kursaal to watch a Sherlock Holmes spin-off thriller, *The Scarlet Claw* (Roy William Neill, 1944). He describes himself as having been of an age when “fiction and reality were the same thing,” just as they are for Ana.²⁵ For both, the early experience of cinema represents an “episode of initiation” provoked by a film whose “scariness spread forth beyond the screen, prolonging its echo in the atmosphere of a devastated society.”²⁶ *La morte rouge*, then, reveals Ana in *The Spirit of the Beehive* to be the filmmaker’s own gender-shifted infant surrogate. What both films have in common in bringing their cinephilic concerns up to date is an emphasis on the changing spaces of cinema and, therefore, of cinephilia.

The cinema in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, the site of Ana’s epiphany, was modeled on the mobile projections of the 1940s, makeshift affairs to which villagers brought their own seats, and a similar detail is also present in *La morte rouge*. The Kursaal Cinema, where Erice had his formative encounter with *The Scarlet Claw*, was housed in a building that had formerly been a casino; when gambling was outlawed, it was “converted into a refuge of shadows . . . giving it a life of dreams.”²⁷ In his commentary and in the numerous shots of the Kursaal’s grand, ghostly interior draped with dustsheets, Erice intimates a provisional and mutable cinema, one that has now come to occupy another space for which it was not originally intended. The film, after all, was commissioned for and shown as part of a major art installation, *Correspondances: Erice-Kiarostami*, in which the Spanish director was brought together with a kindred spirit, the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami.²⁸ A more culturally elevated site than the casino or village hall, no doubt, the museum’s integration of cinema has significant repercussions for “post-filmic” cinephilia. And the spatial shift alluded to in *La morte rouge* points to the potential for new epiphanies, future forms of cinephilia, other Anas yet to come. *

23 See Régis Debray and Christian Delage, eds., *Serge Daney, itinéraire d'un ciné-fils* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999).

24 Uzal, “Le regard fixe de l'enfance,” 59.

25 Victor Erice, “*La morte rouge*: Soliloquy,” in *The Cinema of Victor Erice: An Open Window*, ed. Linda C. Ehrlich, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 298.

26 Ibid., 296–297.

27 Ibid., 296.

28 *Correspondances: Erice-Kiarostami* was staged between February 2006 and November 2008 at the following institutions: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, Barcelona; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne.