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INNOCENCE, FANTASY, AND DANGER: THE HISTORICAL MEMORY OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR THROUGH THE LENS OF CHILDHOOD CURIOSITY

Abstract: This article examines how Spanish cinema engages with the contested historical memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the subsequent dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975) through the lens of childhood, fantasy, and curiosity. Focusing on Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*), Del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*), and *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*), the paper argues that child protagonists, detached from any political ideology, offer a powerful narrative framework for exploring trauma, repression, and moral resistance. Their encounters with supernatural or imagined worlds contrast sharply with the violent realities of war and dictatorship, highlighting both the persistence of innocence and its vulnerability.

The analysis situates these films within broader debates over Spain's historical memory, including the legacy of silence following Franco's regime and the delayed institutional recognition of its victims through Spain's 2007 law of Historical Memory (Ley de Memoria Histórica). It demonstrates how filmmakers employ fantasy, allegory, and symbolism to circumvent censorship (in the case of Erice) or to reach global audiences through visually rich storytelling (in the case of del Toro), while consistently humanizing victims of repression, particularly Republican resistance fighters.

Ultimately, the article contends that childhood curiosity operates as both a narrative device and a moral compass, allowing these films to reframe historical violence through empathy, wonder, and confrontation with danger. By juxtaposing innocence with brutality, these works challenge the culture of forgetting and assert the necessity of remembrance, suggesting that the imaginative resilience of children symbolizes an enduring resistance to authoritarian erasure and a commitment to preserving historical truth.

Keywords: Historical Memory; Collective Memory; National Identity; Spanish Civil War; Spain Under Franco Regime; Spanish Cinema; Political Art; Childhood; Magical Realism in Film; Guillermo Del Toro; *El Espinazo Del Diablo*; *El Laberinto Del Fauno*; Víctor Erice; *El Espíritu de la colmena*; *The Spirit of the Beehive*; *The Devil's Backbone*; *Pan's Labyrinth*; war; trauma; fascism in film

A country's historical memory reflects the values it is meant to defend, those ideas and principles that its citizens should aim to uphold, yet it is precisely for this reason that it is often subject to fierce debate. The government has a powerful role to play in the way that a country portrays its history and what narratives it prioritizes and politics is indissociable from the ways in which a nation defines itself.

Over the past decades, Spain has struggled with issues around its Historical Memory especially as concerns its Civil War (1936 – 1939) and the forty-year fascist regime that followed it. One of the arenas in which this battle over how to remember the nation's past is of course that of culture, and Spain's renowned filmmakers have frequently grappled with this question. Yet, there has always been tension in that country regarding two very different approaches to the trauma of civil war and the massive, decades-long retaliation campaign that Franco's government waged against its perceived enemies. This campaign was so pervasive that Spain is currently one of the countries that has the most mass graves with over 2000 of them and well over 100,000 victims of government terror. Many of the victims were buried in unmarked mass graves and the question of whether to dig up the bodies of the victims (known as "retaliados" or "victims of retaliation") is a central point of contention between those who wish to forget and those who feel it is crucial to remember. Many thousands, the vast majority of survivors (now elderly children or grandchildren of victims) still have not identified the bodies of their family members. Those who do not want the bodies disinterred seek to continue with a culture of silence around what happened.

In fact, after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, and the subsequent fall of his dictatorial regime, the Spanish government did not formally recognize victims of the Civil War or condemn the regime formally until 2007, when it passed the Historical Memory Law (Ley de Memoria Histórica) due to the Amnesty Pact by which it was agreed that the members of the Franco Government who were guilty of crimes wouldn't be prosecuted so as to avoid a new civil war.

However, long before the 2007 law was passed, the tragedy and despair that came with the Civil War (1936 – 1939) and the repressive Franco Regime (1939 – 1975) were already major themes reflected in Spanish cinema which subsequently has consistently produced movies reflecting on the Civil War or the Franco Regime, ranging from comedies such as *La Vaquilla* (Berlanga, 1985) or *¡Ay Carmela!* (Saura, 1990), *La reina de España* (2016) or last year's *La cena* (2025).

In contrast to the approach taken in these films, some Spanish films look back on the Civil War and the early years of the Franco regime through the lens of fantasy or magical realism, in which their child protagonists make contact with supernatural entities or enter into magical realms while the adults of the story deal with the country's political turmoil. This is the case in particular in *El espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973) directed by Victor Erice as well as *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001) and *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth* 2006) both directed by Guillermo Del Toro – a Mexican director whose close family ties and personal interests connect him with Spain. It should be noted that Del Toro was operating in a very different economic, political and cultural atmosphere. His films come at a time when Spanish-language cinema had already triumphed both due to filmmakers such as Almodóvar and the Mexican triumvirate of Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu who were making big films in the US and would all go on to win Oscars.

The three films which I am interested in here depict the violence and repression that the Franco regime imposed on political opponents, and sympathize with the Republicans (that is, those who defended the democratically elected Republican government) who are targeted by the new fascist government. Unlike the adults, the children in these movies are not politically motivated and function in a different sphere from the hopeless and politically charged environment their parents and the adults around them find themselves in. The children are mainly preoccupied by their curiosity about and fascination with supernatural forces. The very real depictions of adults in despair alongside the magical adventures of the children is meant to contrast with the bleak reality Spain was faced with. The children's access to fantastical worlds reflects their heightened wonder which goes beyond the logic of adults. This child-like sense of wonder and naïveté represents human nature untainted by ideology and wholly trusting of the world. Although broadly speaking these films share similar goals and thematic elements, the way in which each director portrays both fantastical and real historical elements differs.

Even during the Franco regime, amidst a repressive atmosphere of censorship and persecution, films such as *El espíritu de la colmena*, which attempt to tackle the nation's past and are critical of the Franco regime slipped by censors by veiling their messaging with symbolism and allegory. While Del Toro's more visionary approach makes heavy use of CGI, costumes and production design and is targeted at more wide reaching audiences, Erice's vision, due to economic and politically imposed constraints, was more tonally subdued and made use of symbols while eschewing conventional narrative structures. In short, Del Toro's audience is the world, while Erice was speaking mainly to Spaniards at a time when Spanish films were not widely distributed outside Spain (with the exception of film festivals).



The ghost of the dead boy in El espinazo del diablo (Del Toro, 2001).

Del Toro, a Mexican filmmaker with strong ties to Spain, humanizes the monsters in his films, often depicting them as misunderstood outsiders who are subject to the monstrous humans lead by fear or greed, very much like in his 2025 adaptation of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, in which Jacob Elordi gives a very sympathetic portrayal of the "monster," unlike in the novel and in the 1931 version by James Whale, in which the monster drowns a little girl. This scene as depicted in the 1931 film appears both literally and metaphorically as the impetus for the protagonist Ana's fascination with spirits in Erice's film. The *maquis*, or Republican resistance fighter, who appears

near the end of the film right after little Ana, played by 5 year-old Ana Torrent, is filmed looking up at the sky as if yearning for some kind of magic amidst the uneventful rural environment she lives in. Erice's neutral portrayal of the injured republican who is holed up, hiding in a cabin does not explicitly suggest support for the democratic regime though the little girl's curiosity and sympathy for him evokes that of the audience. This compassion contrasts with the brutality of the killing of the republican once he is discovered.

In both films, the children are guided by a curiosity which ignores signs that adult logic would perceive as dangerous and are driven by a vague instinct to do good. In Del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo*, set during the Spanish Civil War, the main character Carlos, played by 14 year-old Fernando Tielve, is sent to live in an orphanage after his father's death and ends up seeking justice for the killing of another little boy who appears to him as a ghost. Carlos' drive for justice leads him to investigate the presence of the ghost who was killed by a young man who had also been interned in the same orphanage and now works there. The presence of a bomb in the courtyard of the orphanage is an everpresent reminder of the random inhumanity of war, which is part of the cruel adult world. The bomb cannot be removed and since it is suggested that it could go off at any moment, it represents a continual threat.

The fact that the rusted bomb itself (which fell sometime before the story begins) has become a sort of artifact makes it something from the past which remains, just as the history of the country continues to shape political discourse and identity.

In *El espíritu de la colmena*, despite others' fear of such men, Ana, a little girl in a middle class family who live in an isolated area of the countryside, instinctually helps an injured republican whom she sees as a "spirit", giving him her father's clothing and wristwatch. Some time after Ana leaves the cabin he is hiding in, the republican is caught and ruthlessly gunned down by police who later call in her father and return his possessions. When Ana returns to the cabin which is now blood splattered, she is scared by her father who suddenly enters, and spontaneously flees. A police-led search is conducted for her which only finds her the next day. While she is alone in the woods, there is a sequence in which the line between reality and dream is blurred. Here, Ana imagines that she is herself the little girl she saw in the 1931 *Frankenstein* film. She is facing a lake, and is confronted by the monster, who approaches her ominously and before we see what happens, the scene ends.



Ana offers the Republican an apple in *El espíritu de la colmena* (Erice, 1973).

Cornelia Ruhe identifies the image of the monster with the repressed Maquis, which would make the scene a recontextualization of the original scene in the film in which the monster is vindicated, mirroring the director's attempts to present the humanity of the Maquis who were persecuted and negatively portrayed under Franco's rule: "la figura del monstruo de Frankenstein le sirve a Erice para representar a los republicanos españoles oprimidos bajo Franco, pero especialmente a los maquis, en su relación con la España oficial." ("The figure of Frankenstein's monster serves Erice as a way to represent the Spanish Republicans oppressed under Franco, but especially the maquis, in their relationship with official Spain." Ruhe, 43)

Ana is later found sleeping behind something, and when she is taken in and cared for by a doctor, the doctor consoles the mother by solemnly telling her that "Ana will forget." This forgetting is portrayed as the healthy desire of the Spanish people at the time to forget the horrors of the war (not the Franco regime), while the filmmaker suggests that Ana herself, who is symbolic of the nation's hopes for the future, will *not* forget. Historical memory here entails not only a remembrance of the atrocities committed during the civil war and the Franco regime, but also the recognition of the effort made by those who died or risked their lives opposing it.

Each film explores how innocence, fantasy and danger or death can intertwine for children living during moments of war or political uncertainty. Ultimately, that sense of wonder is never without risk be it psychological or physical. While both *El espinazo del diablo* and *El espíritu de la colmena*'s endings revisit Spain's history on symbolically hopeful notes, framed by the child protagonists looking outwards, *El laberinto del fauno* ends on a much more somber note, with the protagonist dying from the violence of the regime. In addition, it is implied that the world of Pan (el fauno) which seemed so real was all in her imagination, subverting the "happy ending" one expects from the kinds of fairy tales and fables from which the film borrows its fantastical imagery.

Despite the somewhat hopeful endings of *El Espinazo del diablo* and *El espíritu de la colmena*, the journey the protagonists embark on is a tumultuous and dangerous one, in which both either crossed paths with death or risked dying. It is their determination, whether it be due to a naive ignorance of life's dangers (in the case of Ana) or a selfless sense of justice, to look death or danger unflinchingly in the face (in *El espinazo del diablo* Carlos literally does this when bravely communicates with the ghost) which is the necessary step to survive while maintaining one's humanity against all odds.



Pan and Ofelia in *El laberinto del fauno* (Del Toro, 2006).

While the ending of *El laberinto del fauno* may be more tragic, each film's fantasy world is contested by a cold reminder of the brutality the Spanish faced from Franco's regime, and serves as a force of resistance to it. Youthful curiosity therefore functions as a symbol for the eternal battle of good versus evil, or more directly the persistence of the people who opposed the regime, who are venerated in each film for their bravery and their unwillingness to forget.

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