

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

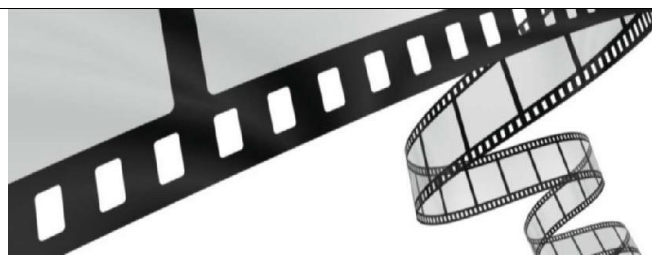
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El Sur (The South)

Writer/Director: Victor Erice

Based on the novel by Adelaida García Morales

Spain/France 1983

95 minutes

Cast: Omero Antonutti (Augustin Arenas), Sonsoles Arangren (Estrella, 8), Icíar Bollaín (Estrella, 15), Lola Cardona (Julia), Rafaela Aparicio (Milagros), Aurore Clement (Irene Ríos/Laura)

Victor Erice's 1983 gem remains a haunting tale of family secrets and postwar loss, even if problems behind the camera left much of its story unfilmed

If you're looking for a quiet place of refuge from the idiotic summer movie season, head south. Victor Erice's 1983 film *El Sur* is haunted by the ghost of its unmade other half: intended to run three hours, its producer stopped production midway through and Erice was left to spin his gold from an unfinished story. As such, its family dramas and tragedies – persecution, internal exile, disappearance – almost all occur elsewhere, in the past, or in the never-seen south of Spain. Halved or whole, however, it is almost perfect.

Like Erice's debut, *The Spirit of the Beehive*, *El Sur* is a child's-eye view of a world that the protagonist, Estrella, is not yet equipped to fully understand. The movie opens in 1957 when she is 15, on the night her father Agustín disappears, but it mostly unfolds in 1950 when she is eight. The unnamed, isolated part of northern Spain where she lives, a place between town and country, is nicknamed "no man's land" by her brooding father, a doctor who never talks about his past or his own father back home in the south, where Agustín hasn't returned since the civil war.

On the roof of their isolated house is a weather vane, first seen covered in winter icicles, compounding a looming sense that life is elsewhere, along with history, the future, other women, even explanations, as it turns out. Whole areas and characters exist off-screen: one (Aurore Clément) is only seen in a movie she appears in at the cinema; a suitor of Estrella is only heard on the phone; Generalissimo Franco, the author of this family's sorrows, is mentioned once. And the producer's decision to halt filming before the crew's move to southern locations means that we never even see *El Sur* either.

Which leaves us with a young girl trying to figure out her parents (her mother has also faced postwar "reprisals"), finding certain clues via old letters and servants' gossip about the family's poisoned past. Erice favours dark interiors in which stasis acquires dynamism (a Caravaggio effect his work is noted for), and loves deeply centred, symmetrical compositions. When he delivers a stylistic flourish, it's worth the wait: a father-daughter dance after Estrella's first communion is a track out from the main table to the dance itself (to a tune ironically called *In The World*), followed by a track back to Estrella's empty chair, a sublime camera move that mimics the bellows-like movement of the accordion leading the dance. And the dissolve that ages Estrella from eight to 15 is a 10-second triumph of clarity.

This is a simple and moving cinema language, whose serenity belies the rich complexity of its visual construction and its mastery of the themes of childhood, memory and loss. A masterpiece, haunted by itself.

John Patterson, *The Guardian* 12 September 2016

Our next film: *The Salesman*, Tuesday 12 June, which will be our last film of this, the 30th season of CFC. A new 2018/19 season is being planned and membership will be £65 for the sixteen films, guests paying £7.50 on the door.