

the promise of words, the promise of time

VÍCTOR ERICE'S *LA PROMESA DE SHANGHAI* AND *ALUMBRAMIENTO*

THE PROMISE OF WORDS

In December 1997, after more than a year of writing, Víctor Erice completes the screenplay for what is to be his long-awaited fourth feature film. Based on the novel *El embrujo de Shanghai*, by Juan Marsé, the script entitled *La promesa de Shanghai* will, however, remain just that: a promise. With the director already casting and scouting locations, the producer, Andrés Vicente Gómez, objects to the three-hour movie the written text is bound to become. By the end of 1998, Vicente Gómez is presented with a shorter version of the script, yet to no avail: he abandons the project altogether. Another director will bring Marsé's novel to the screen. Erice was left with an unused script, which he published in 2001.

With that written text as our sole reference, is it possible, literally, to *picture* the succession of images *La promesa de Shanghai* might have displayed? Can we, again literally, *envisage* what kind of film such a stillborn project could have become? To approach the screenplay for *La promesa de Shanghai* is, after all, to imagine, to foresee, to envision, and, ultimately and more than ever, to treat words as projected images. To approach it critically is, consequently, to situate one's analysis in an

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in-between of sorts: neither unreal nor fully existing, the images Erice's words are promising are there to be seen only in one's mind. It is only fitting that the movie itself would both have relied on and underscored the several states of *in-betweenness* that are involved in the process of representation itself. A text that never became images, *La promesa de Shanghai*



Alumbramiento

would have certainly unfolded as a constant shuttling back and forth between words and different types of pictures. However briefly, the following concerns itself, then, with the images Erice's words promise and, ultimately, with how "Erician" those images might have been.

La promesa de Shanghai tells the story of Dani, a fatherless teenager living in a populous Barcelona neighbourhood in 1947, and his attempts with the old—and apparently delusional—Captain Blay to save his community from the harmful effects of a nearby factory. A second storyline introduces Susana, a sick young girl whose father had to flee the country after the Spanish Civil War. News from her father and his presumed place of exile, Shanghai, arrives via the mysterious Forcat, a friend of the family recently returned from his own exile. The two storylines meet when Captain Blay commissions a sketch of Susana from Dani to advance their environmental cause. Dani falls under the spell of both the girl's beauty and Forcat's storytelling. The shorter version of the script, the one intended to appease the producer, ends with Dani leaving the neighbourhood. An extra chapter and an epilogue present us with Dani's return four years later.

Written to become moving pictures, the opening of the story would have been, ironically enough, an image of writing: "A piece of paper. An adult man's hand—the Narrator—starts writing. Black on white, occupying the entire screen, we see the trace of his handwriting while we hear his voice." Five more chapters and the epilogue repeat that opening, two of them stressing the black-and-white contrast of text on paper. The longer version of the film would have ended, in fact, with that image reduced to its chromatic essence: the black on white of a written page dissolving into the black and white of a dark battlefield covered with snow. This image essentially functions as a primal scene to which the narrative returns time and again. The fallen body of Dani's father as Dani imagines his death in a trench recurs throughout the narrative. That this is an image that does not exist outside Dani's mind, that he is in fact

imagining such a death, suggests how much and with what intensity the film would have focused on the power, as well as the shortcomings, of the pictures that matter the most.

The making of not one, but two pictures would have lain at the core of the film. Following Captain Blay, Dani is instructed to draw the aforementioned portrait of Susana on her deathbed

to illustrate the pernicious effects of the industrial fumes. As envisioned by Blay, the portrait must purposely distort reality. "That has nothing to do with me," Susana quickly points out at the first sight of the work in progress, so another drawing is to be made. This time Susana is to be dressed in an oriental outfit sent to her by her fugitive father. These two competing visual representations of Susana become an integral part of the story, as well as a topic of quasi-philosophical discussion. "Don't they say that an image is worth a thousand words?" asks Captain Blay, advocating the need for the first drawing. Susana's first portrait, however, will not advance Blay's environmental cause. Neither will the second one represent an ideal, orientalized Susana. But, in their representational shortcomings, these pictures of a young woman become essential within the general question of visual representation in different media or through different means. The specific images of Susana in the film itself would have likely made this subject more evident. Initially Susana is an apparition, a dreamlike creature who would certainly have been filmed as such. She would have first appeared up high in the "tower" in which she lives, "wrapped in an aura of mystery." The screenplay twice describes her room (the "galería") as "a fishbowl," the second time underlining its "unreal atmosphere."

The script's last chapter and epilogue present two more "portrayals" of Susana. We see her first entertaining a "client" in a club, and then, like her mother, working like an automaton at a movie theatre's ticket booth. Dani, once the artist, would have watched his model "elaborating" on the two roles she was assigned at the drawing table. Either *femme fatale* or "dead alive," at the end of the film Susana would have offered two seemingly contradictory images of herself, images that would have ill fulfilled the promises of her early pictures. In so doing, those images would have pointed towards the larger issue already mentioned: the fantasy-like nature of the images that matter the most *because of*—and not despite—their fabrication, their ontological unreliability. These are, of course, the kind of images the film

medium is made of; or, at any rate, these are the images Erice's films are constantly bringing to the fore. Some of the concrete cinematographic images in the movie would have made this last point evident, and would have been recognized as truly "Erician" moments as well. There is a shooting in the dark; there is a film poster on a wall while dialogue from the movie is heard outside. We would have seen the vicinity of a movie theatre, hearing the soundtrack without seeing the picture. The gaze of an adolescent would have organized the narrative. We would have seen photographs that refer imaginatively to a place where things were or could have been different. And then, there is the role of objects.

Objects on the screen are what save words in Erice's moving pictures. They are, first but not foremost, a very concrete means to link scenes and sequences. But they also play a substantial role in creating a sort of visual resonance very characteristic of his work. Recall the pocket watch that changes hands in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), or Estrella's inherited pendulum in *The South* (1983). Observe Dani's wristwatch and cleats in the *Shanghai* script. These, as with the earlier objects, belong (or once belonged) to an absent father. A paternal object that changes hands (or feet) seems to function as that piece of reality that does not fit; that, so to speak, implies an excess which cannot be dealt with, resolved, used again or in the same way as before. Guns, coins, suitcases, postcards, pictures, suits, cleats, sandals, fans, outfits...*La promesa de Shanghai* would have multiplied the Erician world of objects. It would have once more extracted from them all their diegetic, symbolic, iconic, or indexical potential. One of those objects, however, would have represented a relative novelty in the Erician *corpus*: a coin with a profile of Franco would have functioned as a very concrete political reference, an inscription of the world of politics onto the material world, passing from hand to hand, and very different in nature from Fernando's watch or Estrella's pendulum.

Some other seemingly "un-Erician" images are also promised in the script. Two deaths would have been seen on screen. The first would have occurred violently and in broad daylight, and the second would have been shown twice: first from the outside of the building where it took place, then from the inside, showing the exact chain of events and resolving, in the narrative process, the possible mysteries surrounding events inside the house. In fact, some degree of explicitness seems to be another of the surprises this movie would have held for audiences familiar with Erice. Yet it is also true that the explicitness mainly concerns the detective-story plot, and plot, as the director himself says, "does not matter much." After all, the true subject matter of the movie would have remained the image-making capability of

the imagination, of memory, of art, of film, and even of perception. That we, as humans, are subjects not only haunted by but *constituted through* certain images seems to be the essentially Erician statement that this film would have made.

As an epigraph to the finished script, Erice inserts a three-line poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "Entre el vivir y el soñar / hay una tercera cosa. / Adivínala (Between living and dreaming / there is a third state / guess what it is)." Cinema seems to be this filmmaker's answer to the poet's riddle. *La promesa de Shanghai* would have constituted his fourth attempt at making of that answer a very distinct series of moving images. —JUAN F. EGEA

THE PROMISE OF TIME

An Asturian village in the early morning. A newborn is sleeping alongside its resting mother. A man dressed in white is sleeping on a living room divan, still holding a Havana cigar between the fingers of one hand. (We later learn that the man—an indiano who has emigrated to Spain from Cuba—is the baby's father.) An elderly man (probably the child's grandfather) sits alone in the living room playing solitaire. Meanwhile, boys and girls in a fancy stationary car pretend to be drivers and grand ladies. Women sew, hang up laundry, polish shoes. A man sharpens his scythe with a hammer and begins to harvest his field. The camera pans along a photograph of a group of people posing in El Paraíso, an old business establishment in Havana.

Other images: a scarecrow with a Republican soldier's helmet on its "head"...a young man with an amputated leg braiding three strings into a thick rope...a small stain of blood that grows larger and larger...

In his contribution to Wim Wenders's omnibus film *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet* (2002), entitled *Alumbramiento* (*Lifeline*), Víctor Erice presents a gentle homage to village life, a historical turning point, and one crucial intervention. A presentation of the everyday onscreen is remarkably difficult to sustain, but Erice offers us, in just ten minutes, a landscape of the everyday: from infancy, to childhood, aborted youth, new parenthood, and on to old age. Both expansive and insular, this ten-minute sequence circles in upon itself and yields new riches with each viewing.

Erice's landscapes have always held within themselves the traces of a turbulent history. *La promesa de Shanghai* had planned to make this explicit, with actual war scenes. Even the mysterious *Spirit of the Beehive* had originally included images of guns, boots, and a grave in the scenario. In *Dream of Light* (1991), radio broadcasts about wars and terrorism break through the peaceful courtyard scene. While the majority of *Alumbramiento* consists of a loving tribute to the rhythms of village life and the immediate crisis

of the baby's bleeding, the final image—a light veil of blood spreading across newsprint from the upper-left corner of the screen—repeats an early glimpse of the paper's headline, dated June 28, 1940 (only days before Erice's own birth in the northern city of Carranza), which foretells the entry of German fascists into Spain from over the Pyrenees. In this sense, *Alumbramiento* is both historically and geographically specific and also universally resonant in its depiction of a new birth with all its promise and challenges.

"Entre la historia y el sueño" is the title Erice gave an essay he wrote in the January 1964 issue of *Nuestro cine* about Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963). In essence, all of Erice's films occupy this position between history and dream. Along with directors like Bresson, Dreyer, and Ozu, Erice has shown that films can be austere and lyrical at the same time. In the hands of a lesser director, this brief story of "alumbramiento" (giving life and giving birth) could have become a cliché, but Erice always reminds us that lyricism is possible, as is terror.

Alumbramiento is ultimately about things that tie us to life, starting from umbilical cords. Clothes are washed and hung up in the sunlight to dry in the mountain air. A well of corn flour on a table awaits the skilled hands of a woman. A young boy seated in a rustic attic (probably as a punishment from his parents) wets the tip of a pencil and draws a watch on his wrist, offering himself a powerful symbol, notch by notch—the promise of time. A young man, dismembered by the Spanish Civil War, has lost this promise. We see him first whole, but then the camera (almost reluctantly) travels down to his amputated leg. He stares back at us with the gaze of a wounded deer.

The passage of time has long been an overriding concern of Erice's, stretching back to the short films he made as a student in the IIEC (Instituto de Investigaciones Cinematográficas) in Madrid. The achingly subtle transition between childhood and adolescence in *The South*, the quiet moment of resignation when Antonio López García gives up his painting and, perhaps most tellingly, the final moments of *The Spirit of the Beehive* when the child Ana stands on the balcony and announces herself to the monster—a scene which the director describes as neither positive nor negative but rather "abierto" (open)—all attest to an investigation of how the cinema can offer us images of duration. In *Alumbramiento*, the cycles of time intersect—the newborn's span of time that stretches before him, and the grandfather's, which slowly contracts.

Along with the motion of cycles are the moments of stillness that punctuate all of Erice's films. *The Spirit of the Beehive* offers a host of such sculptural images: Ana standing, almost hypnotized, on the train tracks; the white faces of the two small girls, set against black, as they stare up at the screen in the movie "theatre";

their mother Teresa sitting in soft lamplight, lost in thought while composing a letter to someone whose identity we will never know; the father's masked, alien form as he tends the beehives. Like a *bodegón* by Meléndez or a painting by Zurbarán, *Alumbramiento* offers elemental images of bread, blood, harvest. In the bedroom where the mother and baby are sleeping, a small statuette of the Madonna and Child is captured in a soft light that accentuates the folds in the carved dress. Those creases are mirrored in the creases of the crisp white bedclothes and the whiteness of the baby's nightshirt, marred only by the ominously growing stain. Another sculptural form is the village woman, firmly centred in the frame, monumental, as she mixes corn flour and salt with her hands and later sews up the threatening wound. She is an echo of a painting or sculpture by Botero, and also of the maid Milagros (Rafaela Aparicio) in *The South*—that feisty and compassionate attendant of the strict grandmother from Seville, and the one the child Estrella turns to for comfort and advice (along with some superstitious innuendoes).

Erice always shows respect for each distinct sound in his films, and in *Alumbramiento*, those sounds hold an equal position with the visual image. The film opens on a black screen as we listen to the cry of a baby. After we see the boy entertain himself by drawing the watch on his wrist, we hear the sound of a clock ticking, later echoed by the swinging pendulum of an actual clock. Other sounds range from louder ones, like the crowing of a rooster, the meow of a cat, or children noisily pretending to drive a car, to barely audible ones, like water being poured onto corn flour for the making of a *torto*, cards being slapped onto a table, or water dripping into a basin. With this loving concerto of everyday sounds, the silent spread of blood from the baby's wound seems doubly ominous. Words enter in full volume only three-quarters of the way through the sequence, when the young mother screams for help for her bleeding baby.

And with these sounds, a series of corresponding, resonant images. The black-and-white, almost sepia-toned cinematography by Ángel Luis Fernández (who also collaborated on *Dream of Light*) is so finely nuanced that we almost feel we have seen the redness of the life-threatening blood oozing from the baby's navel. The dissolves, while gentle, pull us back into the world of the cinema, progressing in a chain of visual resonances: the cloth of the baby's nightshirt dissolves to become a young boy's skin; the head of the scarecrow dissolves to become the head of the boy (a future soldier?); numerous shots of feet—in the act of manipulating a sewing machine trestle, or dangling above the ground from a child's swing, or braiding rope by holding it on one toe—acquire new meaning near the film's close, where the village woman who

stitches the baby's wound kisses one of its tiny feet to welcome it back into the world as the young mother watches in relief.

Through the subtle interplay between sound and image, Erice marks each of his films with a distinctive rhythm. In *The Spirit of the Beehive*, there is the rhythm of the hive itself, teeming with possibilities and activity, contrasted with the echoing emptiness in the lives of the adults. In *The South*, it is the steady swing of the divining pendulum, so powerful and yet so fragile that the persons holding it almost have to slow down their heart and breath. *Dream of Light* moves to the rhythm of the seasons and their accompanying light and wind. In *Alumbramiento*, a sleeping breath mingles with the breaths of adults and children labouring, each in his or her own way.

This physical transmission between generations mirrors the transmission of knowledge that forms another connecting thread in Erice's work. In the unfilmed second part of *The South*, Estrella offers the lacquered box containing the pendulum to her newly discovered half-brother Octavio and teaches him how to hold it, just as her father had done for her. Lessons are passed down, sometimes fully (as in the memories of a favourite art professor's advice in *Dream of Light*), sometimes in an incomplete form (as in older sister Isabel's instructions about the monster to Ana in *The Spirit of the Beehive*). The act of transmitting acquired knowledge extends to the director's cinematic heritage as well. Many of the shots in *Alumbramiento* call to mind evocative moments in other films by both Erice himself and those filmmakers he admires. We can recall the laundry lines and montages of empty rooms that punctuate the films of Ozu. The men harvesting take us back to the silent cinema that Erice so loves, particularly Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909). The amputee perhaps recalls the wounded Captain John in Renoir's *The River* (1950). The black cat that shakes the newborn's cradle, no doubt attracted by the smell of blood, reappears from Erice's student film *Pages of a Lost Diary* (1962), and from *The Spirit of the Beehive*. Fallen apples on the ground evoke the ending of *Dream of Light*. Perhaps the little girl holding an elegant fan in the backseat of the car is a small nod towards what might have been in *La promesa de Shanghai*. In this way,



Víctor Erice

Alumbramiento employs images that have acquired a great resonance from a lifetime of contemplating images, and the way the cinema has influenced, and been influenced by, other artistic languages. They are images that reflect the past and speak to the future. In the words of the young boy Dani in Marsé's novel *El embrujo de Shanghai*: "Then, I still didn't know that even when growing up, and for as much as one looks towards the future, one always grows towards the past in search of perhaps one's first awakening."

While the opening montage of *Alumbramiento* shows us isolated figures, the long pan near the end reveals all of the characters in this short film gathered around the baby's bedside, a part of the drama. Then, the crisis over, the luminous ending begins: the boy wipes off his "watch" and closes the window, the men return to swinging their scythes, the bloody cloths are washed out in the basin, the dog continues to sleep in the sun. Work resumes, but with a difference. This time (with clear cuts, no dissolves) we see the villagers' labours performed to song, reminding us how fragile life is, and how resilient. Only now do we understand the implications of the popular Asturian *cancionero* that ties together the entire sequence at its close:

Sleep, child of my soul
I watch over your dreams,
white dove
who has no eave (to rest in)
Not now, my baby,
not now...

Not now. Like the monumental village woman perfectly centred within the frame, Víctor Erice refuses to be dislodged from the dominant tone of all his work—a measured, yet powerful, evocation of an inner landscape. *Ten Minutes Older*. Ten years since the last fully realized Erice film. One hopes, however, that it is a ten-minute interlude leading to renewed opportunities for new films.

In the meantime, war hovers in the background of an idyllic landscape. And all the while, the blood leaks through the pure white fabric while we sleep unaware. ☐