



The Devils Backbone

El Espinazo del Diablo

Thursday 27th March, 1.30pm, Cinemobile

Study Guide **Sean Molony**

The Devil's Backbone El Espinazo del Diablo (2001)

Cast

Eduardo Noriega	Jacinto
Marisa Paredes	Carmen
Federico Luppi	Casares
Íñigo Garcés	Jaime
Fernando Tielve	Carlos
Irene Visedo	Conchita
Berta Ojea	Alma
Francisco Maestre	El Puerco (as Paco Maestre)
José Manuel Lorenzo	Marcelo
Junio Valverde	Santi
Victor Barroso	Luis
Daniel Esparza	Marcos
Javier González	Owl
Adrian Lamana	Galvez

Crew

Director	Guillermo del Toro
Screenplay	Guillermo del Toro Antonio Trashorras David Muñoz
Executive producer	Agustín Almodóvar
Producer	Pedro Almodóvar
Associate producer	Rosa Bosch
Executive producer	Bertha Navarro
Associate producer	Michel Ruben
Producer	Guillermo del Toro
Original Music	Javier Navarrete
Cinematographer	Guillermo Navarro
Editor	Luis De La Madrid
Art Director	César Macarrón
Special effects	Reyes Abades

The Director Guillermo del Toro

Born in 1964 in Guadalajara, Mexico, Guillermo del Toro studied scriptwriting with Jamie Humberto Hermsillo and was a founding member of the film studies centre and the Muestra del Cine Mexicano (Mexican Film Festival)

Of his numerous shorts (shot on Super 8 and 35mm), 'Dona Lupa' and 'Geometry' were selected in a dozen international film festivals. He studied special effects and makeup with the legendary make-up artist Dick Smith ('The Godfather', 'The Exorcist', 'Altered States', 'Amadeus'). For ten years he was dedicated to this work through his company 'Necropia' where he supervised special effects for several films including 'Bandidos Coita', 'Cabeza de Vaca', 'Mentiras Piosas', 'Dollar Mambo' and more than twenty episodes of 'La Horda' 3 of which he wrote and directed.

He has taught and headed film workshops since the age of 15 and has served as a juror on selection committee of the Mexican Film Institute, Sundance Institute and the Spirit Awards. His commitment to film also extends into production, a commitment which has culminated in the creation of 'Tequila Gang', with Bertha Navarro, Laura Equival and Rosa Bosch.

As a promoter of Latin American cinema he was selected as one of the fifty young leaders for the millennium by both Time magazine and CNN. As a scriptwriter del Toro has been very active in the last eight years. Projects include 'Cronos', 'Down There', 'The Devils Backbone', 'Hellboy', 'Mephisto's Bridge', 'Mimic', 'Montecristo', and 'Riding Shotgun'. 'Cronos' won the critics week award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993, Nine Arieles from the Mexican Academy awards and many other international awards. Recently it was nominated by the British magazine 'Shivers' as one of the best 100 horror movies in the history of film.

Selected Filmography

Cronos (1993)
Mimic (1997)
The Devils Backbone (2001)
Blade II (2002)



Introduction

“What is a ghost? An emotion, a terrible moment condemned to repeat itself over and over? An instant of pain perhaps? Something dead which appears at times alive. A sentiment suspended in time, like a blurry photograph, like an insect trapped in amber.”

These words spoken by Casares (Frederico Luppi) the aged professor, begin the haunting tale of the Santa Lucia school during the last days of the Spanish Civil War. The most recent arrival to this isolated orphanage is Carlos, who, abandoned along with the other boys, comes in contact with the ghost of a murdered boy. Del Toro has produced a picture that is both chilling and poignant, with his portrayal of innocence lost and

childhood interrupted. His adult characters are complex, Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega) is a very atypical antagonist. Carmen, the strict headmistress, widow of a leftist poet; Casares, who keeps jars of malformed fetuses and has unsung love for Carmen.

Carlos uncovers the dark ties that bind the inhabitants of the school, including the secret of the accidental murder of Santi on the night that an unexploded bomb landed in the courtyard from war planes flying overhead.

A supernatural melodrama, a strange and unpredictable ghost story. ‘The Devil’s Backbone’ is a telling allegory for the brutal war that was raging just outside the school walls.

The Story

The story takes place in an isolated orphanage, the Santa Lucia school, in Spain of the 1930's. Ten year old Carlos arrives from across a spaghetti-western type desert. It is the last days of the Spanish Civil War. Carlos is met by Jaime who is older and the leader of the boys. Carlos' tutor who brought him, has his wounds tended to by Casares, the professor, and promptly leaves. Carmen, the headmistress harbours children left by the Republican Militia. Carlos is brought to the dormitory and given a bed – number 12, the cot of a missing boy. Jacinto, the Caretaker, Alma, another teacher and Conchita the cook, make up the remainder of the adults in this isolated outpost. Jacinto has a deep resentment of the orphanage and all those in it. He tells two hired hands; Marcelo and el Puerto (The Pig) of his plan to liberate the freedom fighters' gold he believes Carmen is hoarding.

His first night in the dorm, Carlos is made to sneak into the kitchen with Jaime to replace water that was spilled by a shadowy figure. Jaime shows Carlos the unexploded bomb in the courtyard. Jacinto investigates their noisy errand, forcing Carlos to hide in the off-limits basement. There he encounters an apparition who warns of many deaths.

Casares puts Carlos and the other boys to work after their midnight excursion putting up crucifixes around the compound (a common practice during the war to appear loyal to the emerging power). He is set upon by the other boys. Carlos knocks Jaime into the pool. Carlos saves Jaime but also comes upon the floating corpse of Santi, the missing schoolboy. Jacinto discovers them and injures Carlos. Casares tends to Carlos' wounds in his laboratory. He shows Carlos jars that contain aborted fetuses with a deformity known as 'The Devils Backbone' (spina bifida). They are suspended in a mixture of rum, cloves and herbs. Casares sells it to fund the school. He disproves Carlos' encounter with the ghost.

Carlos stays up late with the other boys. They speak of 'the one who sighs'. They say that a ghost came the night the bomb fell. Casares and Conchita journey to get supplies and sell his rum. That night Casares witnesses the execution of Carlos' tutor. Fearing for the children's and Carmen's safety he begins an evacuation of the school. Jacinto takes this opportunity to confront Carmen for the gold. He is forced from the compound

but returns and ignites all the fuel tanks in the kitchen and flees. The explosion engulfs Alma, Carmen, several children and injures and deafens Casares.

Carlos and Jaime help Casares tend to the smaller children. Jaime reveals his part in the events that led to Santi's murder. Jacinto is shown to be the killer. Carlos has one final encounter with the ghost of Santi. He vows to help it. Jacinto returns with Marcelo and the pig. Casares, who has been guarding the school, has succumbed to his wounds. The boys are locked in a room while the men seek out the gold. The boys are freed by the ghost of Casares. Jacinto has now been abandoned by the other men. He has got his hands on the gold and goes after the boys who lure him to the pool in the basement. There they impale him on spears they have fashioned and push him into the pool. The weight of the gold in his pockets causes him to sink and he drowns, embraced by the corpse of Santi. The boys leave the school, watched on by the ghost of Casares.

First Impressions

It is always a good exercise to give your response to a film straight after a viewing as you are still emotionally involved in the story. Use some of these points to help you.

Questions

Do you like or dislike the film? Why?

What, do you believe, is the main theme of the film?

Were you frightened during the story? For whom?

Which characters were more frightening? Santi? Jacinto? The Pig?

What did you think of the characters of the children?

The adults? What do you think of the directors choice of actors?

What do you think of the actions of Jacinto? Would you empathise with him? Why?

Do any of the scenes in the film stand out for you? Why?

The cast was predominantly young boys. Did you relate to any of them? Why?

Was the ending what you would have expected? Would you consider it a 'conventional' ghost story?

What do you think of the boys' decision to face Jacinto and their actions afterwards?

Put yourself in their position. Do you think in the end you would act in the same way?

Context

The Spanish Civil War

In 1936 Spain had entered a bloody chapter in its history as Fascist leader Franco Bahamonde led a revolt against the Republican government. He was backed by Hitler's Germany and Italy. Little did people know at the time how devastating this war would be for the rest of Europe. The Republican government had been strongly opposed by the middle classes and Catholic Church of Spain who saw them as anti-Catholic Communists in the grip of Russia. Franco's group, known as the Nationalist, had their strong hold in the Spanish Colonies of Africa from where they launched their offensive in the Spanish mainland. The conflict became truly international when Hitler unleashed the German air force on Left-wing supporters. Nazi planes transported Franco's men to battle. Italy sent tanks, war planes and over 47,000 men.

The German Luftwaffe carried out its first blitzkrieg – using Stuka dive bombers to bomb civilians and obliterate the town Guernica. Russia replied in kind supporting the Republican government with arms and financial aid to conduct the war. It became a battle between two ideologies, Fascism on one side and Communism on the other.

In the end the Nationalists won and Spain entered a period of dictatorship under General Franco

Questions

Do you think a war can be a just war? why?

Look to the recent past for examples of countries involvement/lack of involvement in the wars of others.

The director on the war, its' reflection in the characters in the film

"The Spanish Civil War, I believe, is one of those wars that never ended. It just kind of wound down very slowly and to this day still haunts the Spanish people. I don't think it was ever fully resolved. It was a war waged at home where fathers fought and killed sons and brothers killed brothers. And like any civil war it becomes a much more cruel war in the sense that it reaches and destroys the boundaries of home and family. It was very common before the war for a family table to be shared by a Republican father a fascist son, republican son, and a fascist mother for example. It was very common. It took less than a year after end of the civil war that Hitler took Poland. At yet even when the Spanish Civil war was essentially a testing ground for most Fascist practices and tactics and weaponries, Europe remained largely uninvolved.

So all the characters in the movie have something that they have lost and all of them, by the end of the movie, except for one, reach closure, in one way or



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another. You have Jacinto who has lost a childhood that he thoroughly hates and it haunts him. You have Casares who is haunted by a love that was never able to declare. You have the war, which is the biggest ghost generator in humanity because it destroys the past, annuls future, and destroys life. All those children are essentially left without a childhood. And on top of everything, you have the literal ghost floating in the hallways. A terrible event doomed to repeat itself over and over again.”

The director's image of war

“I wanted to have a symbol in the movie that represented war because the orphanage is so far away. I needed something that was almost like a totem that reminded you that you may be far away geographically, but here I am, I'm war. And on the other hand I wanted very much to have a symbol that didn't 'pay off' like in a Hollywood movie that is, that exploded at the end. I actually very purposely decided that there was a huge explosion but the bomb remained unexploded. And the reason for this is found in the inaction of the objects, because the only way I can deal with the war in this is to say: “And the bomb is still is unexploded in the middle of the patio”. And that's one of the last images in the epilogue – the bomb still there standing proud in the middle of the courtyard.”

Questions

Are you satisfied with the direction the director has taken with this imagery? How?

There are other images of war in the film. Can you find them?

The notion of Waiting

The idea of 'waiting' pervades the film heavily. The children of the Santa Maria School are waiting for their parents to return. At the beginning of the film, Carlos believes his father is still alive and accepts that he must wait for him. Casares has remained by Carmen's side for twenty years waiting for her to return his love but never able to consummate it. The adults wait out the war, reflecting the civil unrest with the conflicts they have with each other.

Jacinto has waited his whole life for his reward for being in the orphanage. He sleeps with Carmen and then uses her keys one at a time to try and unlock her safe where she has been stockpiling gold for the militia.

Jacinto's partner Conchita, waits patiently for Jacinto to leave the school with her and settle on a farm in Granada. The unexploded bomb in the courtyard is a reminder of the war outside. The ticking that Jaime hears from it gives it an air of expectancy.

The most important wait, however, is Santi's wait for revenge. He waits for the right child to communicate with so that his murderer, Jacinto can be lured to his watery grave.

Characterisation

Del Toro maintains that good and bad characters rarely get to be seen beyond the surface. Jacinto, has some revealing moments about how he feels about his past. When he and Marcelo and the pig blow up Carmen's safe in search of the gold, all they find are bundles of old letters and photographs. One is of Jacinto as an infant. Jacinto points out that he was out of focus when it was taken. The back of another photograph reads 'the prince without a kingdom' this gives a brief glimpse of humanity to contrast with his otherwise malicious and selfish behaviour; the murder of Santi and Conchita and the blowing up of the school.

Del Toro maintains that all his characters are flawed. All except Carlos. When he first arrives he stands up to Jaime's bullying. He seeks out the ghost of Santi. He offers to combine his writing with Jaime's ability to draw to make comic book stories. He forges an alliance with Jaime to destroy Jacinto

The Director on 'Symmetry and 'Layering'

The entire movie if you watch it closely more than once, you will realise it is constructed as a rhyme. The opening is very similar to the closing. We see the entrance to the basement as the ghost of Casares recites the different meanings of a ghost. There are moments of Casares reciting poetry, the first is very normal, he is getting dressed. Carmen can hear him in her room. The second is far more poignant. He recites to her as she dies in her arms. There are two children that fall into water into in the movie. The first, where Jaime is knocked in by Carlos is more matter of fact. The second one, remembered in flashback where it is revealed that Jacinto murdered Santi, bound him whilst bleeding to death and sank

him to the bottom of the pool. There are two moments in which characters observe someone dying and his blood bubbles to the surface in the exact same manner. Del Toro wanted to have two unrequited love stories in the movie, Jaime who loves Conchita, but is incapable of telling her. And Casares, who loves Carmen, but is incapable of telling her.

The reason for this symmetry, the director feels: "it was interesting to make the movie symmetric and the characters asymmetric including Carmen with one leg and Casares, who is an idealist, a revolutionary and the most romantic lover ever created and yet is old, impotent and cowardly. And Jacinto, who is the most beautiful lover you could ever wish for, is sadly rotten to the core."

Questions

Why do you feel the director does this?

Does it better your understanding/appreciation of the film?

Can you think of other films that contain layers of meaning? (Historical or otherwise)

Style

Cinematic style comes from the combination of different elements in the filmmaking process.

- Lighting, Costume
- The setting of each scene
- The use of colour and special effects
- The position and movement of the camera
- The use of music and sound

The look of the film is apocalyptic and encapsulating. The opening shot before the title sequence sees destruction from above. The title sequence sees the camera passes closely over the jar that contains the fetuses, immersed in an amber fluid. The rounded arches throughout the school and the rounded doorway of the basement is reminiscent of amber encapsulating an insect. This image of something being trapped is echoed throughout the film; Casares' jars with their amber 'Limbo water', Carlos locking himself in the laundry cupboard all night, the school trapped in the desert with its inhabitants waiting out the war, and the boys being locked in by Jacinto. The director chose three main colours on his palette; amber, dirty white and moss green. The metaphor

of the insect in amber could reflect the literal image of Santi's body floating in the grimy water of the basement pool. The almost monotone appearance of the film could at times reflect the worn photographs Jacinto discovers .

The dreamy atmosphere and lighting helps to portray the boys' view of their surroundings, things that might or might not be the result of their boy hood imaginations. Their propensity in this regard to tell stories is shown in Jaime who dreams of making comic stories with limitless possibilities. And all as they are bathed in amber and sepia tones, a childlike enclave where they are safe in their imagination. That is until Carlos ventures alone again to find Santi. The dark green and sepia corridors almost envelope him. The directors use of colour, at times works hand in hand, albeit subtly, with Carlos' uncovering of Santi's wrongful death and the feelings that engenders. When Carlos asks the bomb to help him find Santi, a small red ribbon, one of several with different colours that are snagged on the tail of the bomb, gently floats across the courtyard in to where Santi waits, and blends with the upward flowing blood from his head.

Del Toro's long standing interest in the horror genre equips him with a sensitivity towards portraying his ghost. At first, through Carlos' point of view, we are shown only glimpses of the ghost. Then as Carlos' encounters become longer we become less afraid of the apparition as his story unfolds. He uses the image of the ghost as a means to resolve the issues of the other characters as opposed to the attention being put on it in some supernatural denouement. (e.g. the end of 'Poltergeist').

Can you pick out any other significant scenes from the film that were strengthened/heightened by colour?

The director's use of the camera almost always favours the point of view of the children, down at their height. The camera's movements remain fluid as they follow Carlos to the floor of the dormitory when he looks under the bed for the apparition that disturbs him in his first night at the school. Our view is kept on Jaime during the flashback sequence when the bomb drops directly in front of him on the night he witnesses Santi's murder, concentrating our attention on Jaime and the weight that these events will have on his conscience.

Look for instances where you feel the placement of the camera gives further meaning/weight to the scene.

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The director on his use of sound

"I made it with as much soundscape as possible. In the same way that I've planned the images to exist in a world of amber, I also planned the movie to have this low frequency and this echo, kinds of sounds that really make an emptiness and a vastness, almost a childlike view of the building. But that also gave the building some form of life. I tried to create a 3-D feeling in the theatre by having the sound exist in the four walls. So if a child runs away the child runs around the theatre, for example. And I did some of the foley work myself. For example, the sound of the ghost materialising, I came up with the idea of using Coca-cola and grains of rock salt which makes the cola fizz. So we recorded that and tweaked the sound digitally to make it sound even more ethereal. And for the sound of ghost's voice, we added a drop of water with all the consonants, so that his voice has a liquid sound. I personally did the sound of the ghost's asthmatic breathing."

Special Effects

Special effects are as old as cinema itself for they are implicit in the very nature of film. Action can be slowed down or speeded up, people can be made to appear or disappear, scale can be altered, so that people become giants or mannequins, double exposure allows one actor to play roles simultaneously. The possibilities are endless and they were realised very early in showing moving pictures in the early 1890's. It was no coincidence that professional stage magicians were among the earliest filmmakers.

Special effects are often regarded as the last minute component of an otherwise realistic work. It could make more sense to regard special effects as completely fundamental to film. After all the language and grammar of film is nearly all 'special effects', but most of the tricks are now so familiar that we pay no more attention to them than people do in a conversation to nouns verbs and adjectives. Montage (juxtaposing different images in quick succession to create a wider meaning) cross cutting (two or more timelines being shown together), close ups, panning and tracking shots, zooms and all the rest of the filmmakers vocabulary, were all in their day special effects. Now we take them for granted.

'The Devils Backbone' is a ghost story, but not an effects-driven ghost story. The appearance of Del Toros' ghost is certainly not a typical apparition found in

a mainstream fantasy film. The director remarks that: "It was very important for the ghost to be actually beautiful in a way by having him float in water even when he is walking in air. So we created a digital medium that moves with him and has little particles floating. It has blood escaping from his forehead, like underwater, and that gives it a very dreamy quality. And I kept saying; this has to look almost like a religious statue of a little Saint." As beautiful an image as this is, it also serve to heighten an emotional response to the ghost other than the conditioned feared reaction. The visual reminder of the moment of his drowning lends a heavy sadness and much more depth to Santis' ghost.

Last Word

Del Toro's film, whilst exhibiting all the hallmarks of a horror film, also offers a sensitive portrayal of children who have been orphaned or left behind in a time of great change. Using the skills of well respected European actors in tandem with relative newcomers, gives a freshness to his approach. More than anything, the ghost in the film serves as a metaphor of lives kept in limbo while history takes it's course far outside the orphanage walls.

