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Other cinema



Victor Erice's *'The Spirit of the Beehive'* (1973) is screening at BFI Southbank

Censors and sensibilities

A new BFI Southbank season explores how filmmakers in Francoist Spain managed to beat the censors, reports **Nick Funnell**

Sam Peckinpah said seeing *'The Hunt'* changed the way he made films. Carlos Saura's 1965 movie is ostensibly about three old army buddies arguing during a weekend's hunting outside of Madrid. Beyond that, though, it burrowed to the diseased core of Francoist society with its reworking of the expressive possibilities of on-screen violence. Taking place on an old civil war battleground, it created an atmosphere steeped in brooding violence, natural cruelty and internecine feuds, which would later find echo in Peckinpah's *'The Wild Bunch'* (1969).

What's remarkable is that a film so damning of Spanish society and so internationally influential could be made under the fascist, ultra-Catholic regime of 1960s Spain. Censors made divorce, realistic violence and anti-government agit-prop taboo and demanded all scripts be submitted for 'correction'.

Perhaps even more remarkable is that *'The Hunt'* wasn't alone. As a season of 20 movies at BFI Southbank shows, oppositional cinema shone under Franco, with filmmakers inventing devious ways to get round the censors.

One method was humour, as illustrated by Luis García Berlanga's 1952 *'Welcome Mr Marshall!'*. Its revelling in a sleepy Castilian pueblo transforming itself into a touristy Andalusian village of flamenco dancers and bullfighters to impress some American aid distributors disguised its questions about Francoist ideas of economics and a homogeneous Spanish identity. Meanwhile, Juan Antonio Bardem initially smoothed his *'Main Street'* (1956) past censors by basing it on a classic Spanish play, then by inserting a disclaimer saying its events could take place in 'any city... in any country'. Not that it was particularly effective—a few minutes' viewing is enough to confirm the film's unquestionable Spanishness.

Both these movies, as well as Bardem's *'Death of a Cyclist'* (1955) and Buñuel's

'Viridiana' (1961), won prizes at festivals, something the authorities liked as it showed off their tolerance, helping attract investment. It led them in the early '60s to institute a series of reforms encouraging cinema, though this didn't extend to censorship. But it at least gave a new generation of talent room to wriggle. And no one wriggled more than Saura and his producer Elías Querejeta, *'The Hunt'* being their first of 13 collaborations.

On-screen, Saura developed oblique strategies of representation that encouraged subversive readings but also allowed them to be explained away as coincidences. The opening shot of *'The Hunt'*, for instance, tightening in on two ferrets scrapping in a cage, points ahead to the senseless blasting of a ferret that triggers the film's bloody final act, not to mention the violence of the constantly evoked civil war. Unable to make overt criticisms and with little money, Saura created a claustrophobic ambience and left us to deduce its cause—it's a lesson for any aspiring filmmaker in how to conjure something out of almost nothing.

Off-screen, Querejeta conducted his battles with the censors. The wider success of *'The Hunt'* (it won Berlin's Silver Bear) earned him unprecedented bargaining power and he developed the tactic of sending his scripts to the censors, then shooting the uncensored version, threatening to stir up an uproar if they tried to butcher the final film. The method helped him nurture not only Saura's career, but also Victor Erice's, whose superlative *'The Spirit of the Beehive'* (1973) is also screening, alongside the astonishing 1971 transgender drama *'My Dearest Señorita'*, and José Luis Borau's excellent *'Poachers'* (1975).

With their imaginative leaps, experimental storytelling and thick atmospheres, all have a distinctly Spanish edge, the product of their half-fostered, half-repressed genesis, which remains influential to this day. If you want to know what makes the likes of *'Pan's Labyrinth'* and Almodóvar so exceptional, look no further.

The Spain (Un)censored season plays at BFI Southbank January 15-31.

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