

Sydney Film Festival—Part 4

Courageous and thoughtful cinema**Titicut Follies directed by Frederick Wiseman and The Spirit of the Beehive directed by Victor Erice**

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This is the fourth and final article on the Sydney Film Festival.

In varying ways American documentarian Frederick Wiseman and Spanish director Victor Erice have had a distinct impact on filmmaking over the last thirty years.

Since his groundbreaking *Titicut Follies* in 1967, Wiseman has directed over 35 films, fearlessly documenting different aspects of American social life and establishing the standard for what is variously known as “observational” or “objective” documentary filmmaking.

Spanish director Victor Erice, by contrast, has completed only two features and a couple of shorts since his first feature *The Spirit of the Beehive* in 1973. Notwithstanding this limited output, Erice’s mesmerising first film about two young sisters has inspired many contemporary directors. An American critic described it in 1976 as “one of the two or three most haunting films about children ever made”.

This year’s Sydney Film Festival provided a rare opportunity to view both these films and to understand some of the reasons for their ongoing influence.

Titicut Follies is a detailed examination of life inside a Massachusetts asylum for the mentally ill. The film is probably one of the most harrowing documentaries ever made and became the first of a series made by Wiseman examining public housing, hospitals, the police, high schools and social welfare in the US.

During the Middle Ages the mentally ill were believed to be possessed by evil spirits. According to an edict issued by the Roman Catholic Church in 1487, anyone who saw visions was a witch and a fair target for persecution. While significant developments in medical and social science over the last few hundred years have overcome this ignorance and superstition, *Titicut Follies* demonstrates that the treatment and care of the mentally ill at Massachusetts’s Bridgewater State Hospital in the mid-1960s was far from enlightened.

Taking advantage of new lightweight cameras and tape recorders and armed with a determination to reveal the truth, Wiseman takes viewers on a frightening journey into the Massachusetts facility.

Titicut Follies begins and ends with a song and dance routine by prison officers and inmates, part of an annual vaudeville performance at the institution. Hence the name of the film. The

show is supposed to help and encourage the patients. Tight close-ups and high-contrast black and white images give the event an eerie tone with little discernible difference between the performing prison officers and inmates.

These opening scenes, however, are followed by increasingly nightmarish events where cruelty dominates and the most likely avenue of escape for the patients is death. Bridgewater is a place where seriously ill men, defined by authorities as “criminally insane” or “sexually dangerous”, are treated like wild animals and where boorish and sadistic guards physically and mentally abuse the inmates. Doctors treat their so-called problem patients with heavy doses of tranquilisers.

At times *Titicut Follies* is so real and distressing that it is difficult to watch. As the film develops, distinctions between sanity and mental illness blur, the rehearsals and final performance of the song and dance routine underlining this effect.

One patient, Jim, a former teacher, is roughly washed and shaved each day and then returned naked to his cell where he spends most of his time screaming and stamping his feet. Another inmate, an old man, has decided that life in Bridgewater is so horrible he has resolved to starve himself to death. The authorities respond by taking him from his cell, stripping him naked and force-feeding him. The doctor in charge casually smokes as he pushes a greased rubber hose down the inmate’s nose. This “treatment” is ineffective and the man eventually dies. Wiseman films an embalmer preparing the old man for burial, the tragic funeral procession and the service which inmates are allowed to attend.

Numerous patients speak directly to the camera, explaining their hopes and fears. One man urges authorities to send him to a prison facility so he can serve out a jail term and be released. A panel of doctors rejects this request and ignores his complaint that the tranquilisers are making him ill. Their response is to prescribe a higher dosage.

While Wiseman was given official permission to film inside the institution for 29 days, state authorities launched legal action against the movie after it was screened to great acclaim at the New York Film Festival in 1967. The Massachusetts Attorney General barred public screenings and the state’s Supreme Court ruled that the movie constituted an invasion of privacy of the Bridgewater

guards and patients. This ban remained in place until 1991, almost a quarter of a century after the movie was made.

Wiseman, who is now 73 years old, eschews a precise characterisation of his work but has, on occasion, described his documentaries as “reality fictions”. However they are defined, his films are characterised by their objective, almost scientific, approach to their subject matter and a deep sense of humanity.

Titicut Follies is perhaps a documentary filmmakers’ equivalent of Francisco Goya’s *The Madhouse* (1815-20) and has a similar disturbing impact. Wiseman’s movie not only demonstrates the power of courageous documentary filmmaking but is a valuable resource for those fighting for a more enlightened approach to the treatment of the mentally ill.

Victor Erice’s *The Spirit of the Beehive* is a visually striking and poetic work and an extraordinary example of what can be achieved when young children become the vehicle for examining complex social issues.

Set in the Castilian countryside in 1940, the film examines a few weeks in the life of two girls—eight-year-old Ana (Ana Torrent) and her ten-year-old sister Isabel (Isabel Tellería)—following the victory of General Franco’s fascist forces over the Spanish working class. While references to the fascist regime and the political situation are mainly allegorical—Franco was still in power when the film was made in 1973—*The Spirit of the Beehive* captures the frustration, fears, confusions and uncertainty within the family in the aftermath of this historic defeat. In fact, Erice’s movie was the first Spanish film to give a realistic depiction of life in the first years of the dictatorship.

It is not clear whether the family has just arrived at the village or are long-term residents. Whatever the exact circumstances, the girls’ parents are passing through a deep personal and political crisis. Fernando (Fernando Fernán Gómez), the father, is entirely preoccupied with beekeeping and spends most of his time studying their life cycle and writing copious notes. He conducts various experiments on the bees and unsuccessfully attempts to force them to build a beehive in a crystal-like structure he has created.

His lonely wife Teresa (Teresa Gimpera) maintains a secret correspondence with someone in France—either a lover or close relative and supporter of the revolution—and spends her day attending to this. Husband and wife rarely converse, inhabiting their own private worlds and paying little attention to the girls who are left to their own devices for most of the day.

A travelling cinema visits the village one day and screens James Whale’s 1931 classic, *Frankenstein*. Ana is fascinated by the movie and the monster but cannot understand why the villagers kill him. Isabel tells her sister that Frankenstein is a spiritual being and will appear if she closes her eyes and calls out her own name.

While Isabel thinks little of this fantasy, Ana becomes convinced that the spirit of Frankenstein is at a distant but deserted farmhouse near a railway line and decides to visit. Coincidentally, the barn has become a hiding spot for a wounded republican soldier. She befriends the man, believing him to be the spirit and decides to bring him some food and her father’s jacket, which contains her father’s watch. But the young republican, who barely utters a word in the film, is discovered and gunned down by the fascist forces in the dead of night.

The authorities discover the watch and trace it back to Ana’s father. This mystifies Fernando, who confronts his daughter one morning. Ana denies any connection and leaves the house, determined to locate the young man’s spirit but becomes lost in the countryside. A search party is organised to locate her and she is eventually found and brought home. She still hopes to find the young man’s spirit some time in the future and quietly calls into the night from her bedroom window: “I am Ana. I am Ana.”

The Spirit of the Beehive, which is beautifully shot by Luis Cuadrado, is slow-paced and has little dialogue. The film has a melancholic tone combined with an undercurrent of impending disaster. Performances by the cast of mainly non-professional actors, particularly Ana Torrent and Isabel Tellería, are astonishing.

Life, as seen mainly through Ana’s eyes, is episodic and almost dreamlike and yet the film charts the young girl’s awakening imagination and her growing understanding that something is missing or wrong about the world in which she lives.

Erice, who was born in 1940 and studied political science and economics at the University of Madrid also attended the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía. He wrote film criticism and reviews for *Nuestro Cine*, a leading Spanish film journal he helped establish in 1969, and made a series of short films before beginning work on *The Spirit of the Beehive*.

When the film first screened in Spain it sharply polarised audiences. Supporters of Franco greeted it with undisguised hostility, while those opposed to the regime hailed the movie, clearly responding to its symbolism. The film’s depiction of the claustrophobic and lonely atmosphere in the isolated rural community were powerful metaphors, not just for the psychological state of Spain in the early 1940s, but on life during the three decades of Franco’s rule.

Erice followed this film with *The South* (1982) and *The Quince Tree Sun* (1992), which was made in collaboration with painter Antonio López. He is reportedly working on an adaptation of Juan Marse’s novel *The Shanghai Gesture* set in Barcelona in the aftermath of the civil war and dealing with an unusual relationship between a former forger and two children.

The Spirit of the Beehive has been a major influence on Iranian filmmakers—its aesthetic style and its use of children and non-professional actors were an inspiration for figures such as Abbas Kiarostami, who considers it as a seminal influence in his cinematic work.

While Erice’s first film is a popular amongst festival patrons and serious students of cinema, it is not yet available on DVD. Hopefully this will be rectified soon and the evocative movie made available to wider audiences.



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