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WisFilmFest2007: Sean on The Spirit of the Beehive

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To what extent is *The Spirit of the Beehive* a precursor to *Pan's Labyrinth*? A girl in 1940s Spain gets caught up in escapist fantasies which only intensify as she is subjected to cruelty, and, galvanized by the death of an anti-fascist rebel, she flees from her father figure (and ineffectual mother) in pursuit of fantasies that she is sure are real. They're different in that *Pan's Labyrinth* is more interested in exploring fantasy as a response to fascism, where *The Spirit of the Beehive* is more interested in the experience of childhood, and it studies this marvelously.

The child in question is 6-year-old Ana (Ana Torrent, an actress who would grow up to work with Alejandro Amenabar and Peter Greenaway), who, with her slightly older sister Isabel, lives with their well-to-do parents in a Castilian village. The father, a scientist/beekeeper, is a solitary figure, the kind to write philosophy before falling asleep at his desk. The mother, significantly younger than the father, is ever pining for an absent correspondent -- a lover, presumably -- to save her from the monotony of her life; she's barely present and rarely, if ever, in the same shot as her daughters.

One day, the girls are moved by a roadshow screening of the Boris Karloff *Frankenstein*, in particular by the scene in which the monster misapprehends the nature of the little girl's game and drowns her to see if she will float like the flowers. The tragedy of it perplexes Ana, but she identifies with the monster, and Isabel tells her that the monster's spirit lives in a nearby abandoned farmhouse. Ana treks there but finds nothing except a footprint, which is enough to keep hope alive, and on a return visit she finds a wounded fugitive, presumably an antifascist rebel. She tends to him with food and her father's clothes; this compassion is counterpointed by Isabel, whose treatment of the family cat -- coddling, then strangling -- foreshadows a future cruelty she will perpetrate against Ana. This, combined with the unpleasant fate of the rebel (which Ana can only infer from her father's reacquisition of those things she had given away), spurs Ana to flight, and lost in the wilderness she has another visitation with the Frankenstein spirit -- the model for the person she is becoming. (The nighttime search party pursuing her clearly references the torch-bearing villagers from that movie.) When she returns home, her innocence has been replaced with sad, quiet fortitude.

The movie is deeply beautiful, shot with thoughtfulness and precision by director and co-writer Victor Erice and cinematographer Luis Cuadrado. The Spain depicted is barren and impoverished, but the story doesn't reference Franco and the war except obliquely; this only enhances the movie's universality as a tale of a child learning what the world can be like. The film fest screening was packed and absolutely quiet -- everyone was transfixed, and the 35mm print was quite nice.

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