



El Sur

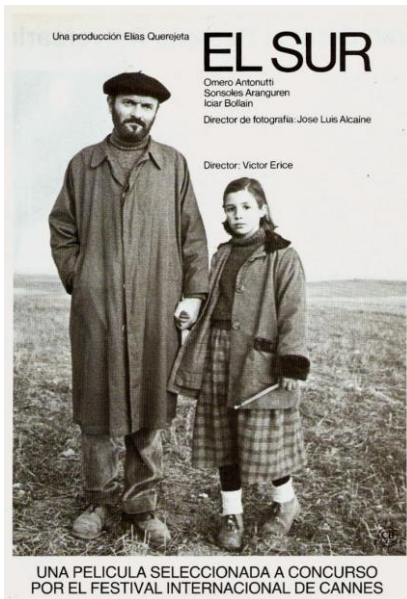
Director: Victor Erice

Country: Spain

Date: 1983

A review by John Patterson for The Guardian:

If you're looking for a quiet place of refuge from the idiotic summer movie season, head south. Victor Erice's 1983 film *El Sur* is haunted by the ghost of its unmade other half: intended to run three hours, its producer stopped production midway through and Erice was left to spin his gold from an unfinished story.



As such, its family dramas and tragedies – persecution, internal exile, disappearance – almost all occur elsewhere, in the past, or in the never-seen south of Spain. Halved or whole, however, it is almost perfect.

Like Erice's debut, *The Spirit Of The Beehive*, *El Sur* is a child's-eye view of a world that the protagonist, Estrella, is not yet equipped to fully understand. The movie opens in 1957 when she is 15, on the night her father Agustín disappears, but it mostly unfolds in 1950 when she is eight. The unnamed, isolated part of northern Spain where she lives, a place between town and country, is nicknamed “no man's land” by her brooding father, a doctor who never talks about his past or his own father back home in the south, where Agustín hasn't returned since the civil war.

On the roof of their isolated house is a weather vane, first seen covered in winter icicles, compounding a looming sense that life is elsewhere, along with history, the future, other women, even explanations, as it turns out. Whole areas and characters exist off-screen: one (Aurore Clément) is only seen in a movie she appears in at the cinema; a suitor of Estrella is only heard on the phone; Generalissimo Franco, the author of this family's sorrows, is mentioned once. And the producer's decision to halt filming before the crew's move to southern locations means that we never even see *El Sur* either.

Which leaves us with a young girl trying to figure out her parents (her mother has also faced postwar “reprisals”), finding certain clues via old letters and servants' gossip about the family's poisoned past. Erice favours dark interiors in which stasis acquires dynamism (a Caravaggio effect his work is noted for), and loves deeply centred, symmetrical compositions. When he delivers a stylistic flourish, it's worth the wait: a father-daughter dance after Estrella's first communion is a track out from the main table to the dance itself (to a tune ironically called *In The World*), followed by a track back to Estrella's empty chair, a sublime camera move that mimics the bellows-like movement of the accordion leading the dance. And the dissolve that ages Estrella from eight to 15 is a 10-second triumph of clarity.



This is a simple and moving cinema language, whose serenity belies the rich complexity of its visual construction and its mastery of the themes of childhood, memory and loss. A masterpiece, haunted by itself.

From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/12/victor-erice-el-sur>

Cigarettes and Coffee (Romania, 2004, 15 mins)

Cigarettes and Coffee is one of the first Romanian films to have received international recognition, as the 2004 winner of the Golden Bear for Best Short Film in Berlin. Along with *Stuff and Dough* (2001) and the widely acclaimed *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), these films established Cristi Puiu as a leading director of an emerging national cinema. What critics have called the Romanian New Wave are a series of films by young directors who grew up during communism and dramatize a preoccupation with the former regime's relational, emotional, and institutional legacies. They use a minimalist observational style – long shots, natural lighting, absence of non-diegetic sound – to circumvent idealizations reminiscent of socialist realism and to explore with uncompromising sobriety the details that make up relations and institutions.



Puiu's short condenses this new sensibility in only fifteen minutes that stage a meeting between a father and son. From the very beginning, their gestures establish the two as very different inhabitants of the post-communist world. The elderly working class father, Mr. Tomescu (played by Victor Rebengiuc), walks hesitantly and talks continuously to cover his unease in the middle-class restaurant where his son, Vlad (played by Mimi Brănescu), has chosen to meet. Vlad is curt and aloof, sure in his demand for services from the waiter and for succinctness from his father. The apparent reason for their meeting is revealed by one of Vlad's interruptions: Mr. Tomescu needs to find a workplace for two more years, after being laid off from his thirty-plus-years communist job, so that he can retire with full benefits. The son may be able to help him by asking the right people. [...]

Puiu's film points to the complex continuity between past and present, subtly illuminating how neoliberalism is turning the younger generation into more skilled students of power networks than their parents had to be under dictatorship. But this grim chronicle of generational changes finds respite in the robust bonds of care that run in this family. Mr. Tomescu appears as an affectionate husband who has been caring for his ill wife patiently. Puiu also packs a lot of kindness in the seemingly cold interaction between father and son. While Vlad is blunt and too controlling interpersonally, he is nevertheless very caring. He is surprisingly non-judgmental when it transpires that his father wants a job not only for the pension benefits, but because he needs to feel useful in ways the communist economy made him feel, and to take a break from caring for his bedridden wife. Vlad understands Mr. Tomescu's emotional needs as well as the efforts they entail from other family members (in particular, hiring a caretaker for his mother). But he does not try to change his father's mind realizing Mr. Tomescu may usually not ask for much in his otherwise very modest life.

Love is an important subject for Puiu. The director had set out to explore it in a series of features he titled "Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest," and so far has chronicled only its absence in the face of indifference and alienation. *Cigarettes and Coffee*, thus, comes off as Puiu's most trustful film. The post-communist world he paints is one where kindness and care can survive in strained family relations and during austere times that have relegated the younger generation to demanding exercises in resourcefulness.

Abridged from: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/cigarettes-and-coffee/>