

Centre for European and Latin American Studies
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European Studies Programme
presents

La Lengua de las Mariposas
a film based on Spanish Civil War



La Lengua de las Mariposas/Jose Luis Cuerda/ Spain/ Spanish/1999/94min

Veteran director Jose Luis Cuerda delivered this sensitive portrait of a child coming of age during a tense political situation just before the Spanish Civil War. On his first day of school, frail eight-year-old Moncho (Manuel Lozano) is so terrified by the imposing figure of his teacher Don Gregorio (Fernando Fernan Gomez) that he flees into the nearby woods. In spite of his authoritarian appearance, the schoolmaster proves to be a kind, free-thinking Republican who teaches Moncho the virtues of being good. The boy is soon spending much of his time with the elderly Gregorio in the Galician countryside, admiring such wonders of nature as the tongue of a butterfly. Other people in young Moncho's world include his down-to-earth mother (Uxia Blanco), his Republican father, and his older brother, who plays the saxophone with a group of local musicians. However, when the Fascists roll into town, the boy's life changes forever. La Lengua de las Mariposas was screened at the 1999 San Sebastian Film Festival. ~ Jonathan Crow, Rovi

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/la-lengua-de-las-mariposas-butterfly-butterfly-tongues/>

AV Hall, Nelson Mandela House, at 11 am on Tuesday, April 24, 2012

La Lengua de las Mariposas

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Many authors compare it with such classics of the coming of age genre as the Italian **Cinema Paradiso** (the central youngster/father-figure relationship, as well as some of its bittersweet nostalgia) or the Czech film **Kolya**. It can also be compared with the Swedish **My Life As a Dog** or François Truffaut's **The 400 Blows**, as the story is told from a child's point of view and depicts the more contemptible aspects of human nature. I also noted similarities between **La Lengua de las Mariposas** and another Spanish masterpiece, **Secretos de Corazon**, considering that most of the film is carried on by a young and quite sympathetic protagonist. In fact, Michael Thomson wrote a very good description of the young actor's talent in his review for BBC published on 26 July 2000. In it he said: "**Manuel Lozano, as the seven-year-old, is particularly powerful** when he has to do more than just look anxious and cute (his cuteness loads the dice too much)" The relationship with his older brother is another reference to the scenes of **Secretos de Corazon**.

The film's drama is developed from a series of short stories by Manuel Rivas. Its main protagonist is the seven year old Moncho (Manuel Lozano) - a young boy growing up in Spain during the mid-1930s. He has asthma and has to carry with him an odd device which makes his first day at school even harder. He has heard rumors that the teacher may punish the pupils by hitting them, which results in a sleepless night before the first day of school. On the morning of his first school day he is nervous, but soon finds out that there is nothing to worry about. Don Gregorio (Fernando Fernán Gómez), the teacher he is assigned, respects the pupils in his class and is able to gain their attention without corporal or verbal punishment. Moncho's little world suddenly opens up, and he becomes very close to his new teacher. From that moment on, the movie concentrates on Don Gregorio's nurturing relationship with Moncho, and on Moncho's first hints of coming of age.

Soon after his first experiences at school, Moncho gets to learn about life from another source – when he and an older schoolmate spy on a couple while they are making love. Up until this moment, the film projects itself as an account of childhood. As with **Secretos de Corazon**, the viewer is thinking that there won't be much more development of the film and one can sit back and enjoy the coming of age experience of Moncho. This might have been it, if the Spanish director did not have an intention to show that one's childhood is never quite the candy-coated state of bliss one may be familiar with from a variety of American Disney-type flicks.

An unexpected, but powerful, shift in the political situation of Spain changes Moncho's world. In light of the new circumstances, he becomes scared and confused – and his state

of mind is reflected in his eyes. The eyes of the boy reflected the spirit of the time and the things he could not yet understand. The eyes of many of the characters, in the Spanish films I have seen, tell as much of the story as the plot itself and **La Lengua de las Mariposas** is one of them. In order to select Manuel Lozano for the role of Moncho, the director had to audition more than 1500 kids and, once Manuel was discovered , the director called him “a genius of interpretation”.

La Lengua de las Mariposas is a pleasure for the senses while, at the same time, giving the viewer a glimpse of Spanish history and a lot of ideas to think on.

This review is included in the book **Coming Of Age Movies: Growing Up On Screen**

<http://www.theskykid.com/movies/la-lengua-de-las-mariposas/>