

# VULTURE

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## A Great Director Returns After 31 Years With a Grudge Against Cannes

By Bilge Ebiri, a film critic for New York and Vulture



Victor Erice skipped the Cannes premiere of his first film in 31 years — a stirring tale about memory, identity, and friendship — and for good reason. Photo: Manolo Pavón

Before this year's Cannes, the Spanish director Victor Erice had made only three features in a 50-plus-year career. These happen to be three of the greatest films ever made. *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) is one of Spanish cinema's most beloved treasures. *El Sur* (1983) had its

production cut short and thus is considered something of a *film maudit*, but to my eyes, it's even better than *Spirit of the Beehive*. And his 1992 documentary, *Dream of Light*, which won the Jury Prize at Cannes that year, is one of the most mesmerizing meditations on the elusive nature of art that anyone has ever made, anywhere.

That was 31 years ago, and the premiere of a new feature by the now-82-year-old Erice, a three-hour drama called *Cerrar los Ojos* (Close Your Eyes), was one of the most notable news items in this year's Cannes lineup. The director was not present, however, for the Tuesday premiere of his film at the festival. Some suggested it was because he was too ill to make the trip, while others speculated that after so many years out of the limelight, he had taken on a Terrence Malick-style reticence. (It's worth noting, however, that Erice has continued to make shorts and produce other work over the years; he also served on the Cannes jury in 2010.)

Two days ago, Erice published an op-ed in the Spanish paper *El País* explaining his absence. Turns out, he was just pissed. The director's first feature in 31 years was playing out of competition, a fact Erice apparently learned only at the press conference announcing this year's lineup. At Cannes, it's generally understood that the main competition is where the best films are screened, though in truth the negotiations over who does and doesn't get to compete are often filled with petty politics and starfuckery. (For example, you're clearly guaranteed a competition slot if your film either stars or was directed by Sean Penn.)

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To be clear, Erice wasn't annoyed because he wasn't in competition. He felt disrespected by the way the festival had communicated with him, keeping him in the dark about its intentions. This matters because other festivals — including Venice and Cannes's own parallel fest, Directors' Fortnight, which has in the past premiered many major movies from major directors — had offered Erice choice slots. These other venues all effectively got screwed over by Cannes's inability to communicate properly with the filmmaker.

The good news is that one day all this nonsense will be forgotten but *Close Your Eyes* will remain. Erice's fourth feature is a stirring tale

about memory, identity, and friendship, and it feels deeply, almost alarmingly personal. It opens with tantalizing images from what turns out to be an abandoned project called *The Farewell Gaze*. That picture, we learn, was left unfinished when its star, Julio Arenas (Jose Coronado), disappeared under mysterious circumstances, seemingly walking away from the movie and from his whole life, never to be heard from again. The director, Miguel Garay (Manolo Solo), never shot another roll of film. Indeed, he now lives off the grid, in a trailer by a beach, growing his own tomatoes and catching fish. A TV investigation into Julio's disappearance lures Miguel (who sometimes likes to be called "Mike") back into the world, and he begins to make inquiries into what might have happened back then.

There's enough of a mystery in *Close Your Eyes* that it makes sense to keep the rest of the story secret for now. The film proceeds in stylistically distinct movements. That opening scene, with its lush images of footage allegedly shot long ago, even looks like it could have been a part of a real movie called *The Shanghai Spell* that Erice spent three years preparing back in the late 1990s, only to have it fall apart. Some have speculated that this actually *is* footage Erice shot for that project, but that production appears to have stopped well before cameras started rolling.

Erice, however, remains heartbroken over the experience, and it's clear that he sees a lot of himself in Miguel, an artist who's withdrawn from the world. At one point, Miguel visits his old projectionist friend Max (Mario Pardo), who has a large, dusty archive full of film reels. Max talks about the fact that 90 percent of cinema history still exists only in celluloid form, even though almost nobody screens 35-mm. anymore. There is a sense throughout *Close Your Eyes* that everything Miguel knows is being taken away from him. The almost idyllically austere seaside abode where he lives is on the verge of being sold, meaning he'll have to leave. Julio might have withdrawn from the world years ago — either by dying or walking away — but now, with his own world slipping away, Miguel understands something about vanishing.

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*Close Your Eyes* soon settles into a very deliberate, matter-of-fact cadence, at first built around two-person dialogue scenes. The director even seems to be toying with the viewer's patience here, with each scene ending on an almost excruciatingly long fade to black. (I definitely heard some gripes.) But the almost bland textures of this section feel relevant to the whole project, as Erice sets up a stark contrast between the magic world of cinematic make-believe and the humdrum nature of base reality.

*Close Your Eyes* is about cinema, too, though not in the way that we've become used to in recent years; it's not a love letter or a poison-pen missive, but rather an exploration of cinema as memory and of the relative value of that memory. This is a film made by a man who has been unable to direct the films he's wanted to for decades. You feel his frustration and regret in every frame, but you also sense a sort of acceptance. At one point, Miguel types out on a keyboard a statement about an artist who had decided that his masterpiece would not be his work, but his life. Is that an aspirational thought or a desperate one?

The final section of the picture asks, in mesmerizing and unbearably touching fashion, what really makes a life. Is it memory and identity, the cumulative power of all our experiences, the knowledge of our friends and family? Or is it simply the ability to be happy and present? Those opening scenes of that film abandoned long ago feature a man who talks about how often his name has changed over the years, and he laments the fact that his estranged daughter, who is half-Chinese, has been given a different name by her mother. Everybody's name seems to undergo multiple changes in this movie. What's in a name? Why does who we are even matter in the grand scheme of things?

As Miguel's search goes on, we might begin to wonder if he's really looking for Julio or for himself. The man in the unfinished movie longs for one last glance from his daughter — that "farewell gaze" of the title — before he dies. Miguel needs Julio's memory more than Julio needs his own. It's in others' gazes that we know ourselves. That's something a filmmaker understands. And it's something that a filmmaker who hasn't been able to make a film *really* understands.

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