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Víctor Erice's "Close Your Eyes" begins with seeking answers to a mysterious disappearance, but the real mystery solved is that of regaining lost faith.



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Halfway through Víctor Erice's "[Close Your Eyes](#)," Miguel Garay (Manolo Solo) finds himself at the door of his former girlfriend Lola San Román (Soledad Villamil). She welcomes him with a warm smile and the two revert to the rapport of their youth. Miguel has come to express the turmoil he feels over the strange case of his friend Julio Arenas (José Coronado), who vanished mysteriously more than 20 years before.

Lola and Miguel sit facing one another as Miguel tells her what he believes might have happened on Julio's last night. Miguel's elegant narration shifts subtly to a scene change of Julio sitting calmly on a cliff, watching the horizon. The voiceover accompanies a scene we can only assume ended in death, but is portrayed instead as a peaceful transition into another world.

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"Close Your Eyes," I would argue, is a spiritual experience as much as it is a cinematic one. A nuanced director, Erice uses a soccer goal post to suggest traveling through a portal and, with screenplay co-writer Michel Gaztambide, crafts a script that at times feels like more than memorized lines from an actor. Miguel's loving theorizing resembles the practice of Ignatian prayer, through which we are invited to imagine a place and time to open a portal of the soul where we can speak to Jesus.

Immersive prayer invites us to use our senses to marvel in the wonders of God, and Erice's film emulates this practice. "Close Your Eyes" is punctuated with recurring reaches for human touch — a ravenous scene in which a character proudly devours a hard earned meal, the smell of salt we swear we detect as we listen to the rhythm of the waves on the screen, and a soulful rendition of "[My Rifle, My Pony and Me](#)." (Those who remember the song from "[Rio Bravo](#)" will find it impossible not to see Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson in vibrant technicolor in their mind's eye. If we're able to recall scenes from films we love in the projector of our memory, doesn't the grace experienced during immersive prayer seem less implausible?)

I once bemoaned my struggle to enter into immersive prayer to my spiritual director, Sister Sheila. The idea of doing so plagued me with reminders of the rejection I'd experienced from men in my life. Sister Sheila wisely invited me to reformat how and what I thought of Jesus. "Imagine yourself sitting on the subway," she said, "and now tell me who you would want sitting next to you in order to feel safe and protected."

"Judy Garland," I said without hesitation. "Then that's how Jesus wants you to speak to him," she affirmed softly.



Soledad Villamil as Lola San Román in Víctor Erice's "Close Your Eyes."

Cinema can serve as a connection to the divine; films can be prayers we summon and are transported into. During one of the film's most extraordinary scenes, the expressive faces of devoted spectators bear witness to a tragic conclusion. Viewers will find themselves involuntarily in prayer.

"Miracles in movies haven't existed since Carl Dreyer," says one character, who calls himself a "practicer but not believer." But "Close Your Eyes" makes his theory invalid.

In his first film in almost three decades, Erice ushers us into what feels like a cathedral that's been in construction for centuries. The imposing nearly 3-hour run time is justified by the care with which the filmmaker has built structures upon structures, the story flowing with ease as Miguel's rekindled interest in finding Julio

becomes a reckoning with losing faith.

Erice infuses Julio with a subtle Christlike story arc that leads to an unexpected sort of resurrection. But rather than reducing the film to this much-debated mystery, Erice chooses instead to address the mystery of regaining one's own faith.

Images captured on film hold a devotional quality for Erice, whose characters learn how to cry when they watch someone else cry in a movie or rediscover a forgotten part of their soul by losing themselves in an ancient photograph. Erice's direction-as-prayer leaves us wondering if the sound of heaven's gates might resemble the trickling sound of a film projector preparing to shine a light on our world.

Editor's note: "Close Your Eyes" is now playing in select U.S. theaters.