
Miscellaneous

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Childhood, memory and cinephilia in the work of Víctor Erice: the case of *Cerrar los ojos*

Abstract

This exploratory and descriptive study analyses Víctor Erice's film *Cerrar los ojos* with regard to three key concepts of the author's work: childhood, memory and cinephilia. The method chosen is audiovisual text analysis framed within qualitative research, and interpretative content analysis. The results confirm *Cerrar los ojos* as an autofiction that creates a dialogue between the life and work of its author through lost identity, nostalgia for childhood and cinema as redemption.

Keywords

Víctor Erice, childhood, memory, cinephilia, *Cerrar los ojos*, Spanish cinema.

1. Introduction and method

In 1973, the philosopher Eugenio Trías published an article in the magazine *Triunfo* on the film *El espíritu de la colmena*, titled “Cerrar los ojos”. As a result, 51 years later, the film's director, Víctor Erice, would go on to title his last feature film *Cerrar los ojos* (2023). In his article, Trías (1973, p. 69) reflected on the lack of authentic artists in Spain, specifically in the field of cinema, through meditations on Erice's film.

Trías asserted that Erice's gaze captured a “sensorial corporeality” that moved beyond borders, nations and cultures to reach a point of universality, whereas Spanish cinema (and culture in general) was too demanding with the notions of “correctism” and “documentarism”, to the extent that nothing truly interesting was ever explored (Trías, 1973, p. 69). Thus, Erice could already be said to be a Spaniard as a filmmaker and a foreigner in his own country.

Along similar lines, Gubern (2021, p. 493) described the 1970s in Spanish cinema as a time of “struggle for artistic survival”, in which a large part of the national production consisted of films shot in the desert-like landscapes of Almería, horror films and bawdy comedy, with *El espíritu de la colmena* being an exception to the “mediocrity” that pervaded the early years of that decade, defining the film as “a sharp political reflection and one of the poetic peaks of the history of Spanish cinema”.

However, Erice belonged to the generation of the New Spanish Cinema movement (1962–1967) and what became known as opposition cinema; a cinematographic period characterised by a sense of rupture with Franco's censorship in Spain, such that directors intentionally set out to reveal and denounce the political reality of that time. Erice's work is imbued with an “oblique and elliptical” language, one shared by his contemporaries, with the aim of seeking a more active audience, and along these lines film producers began to emerge with a political sensibility that

was in keeping with that period, such as Pere Portabella, producer of *Los golfos* (Carlos Saura, 1962), and Elías Querejeta, who produced films by Antxon Eceiza, José Luis Egea and Erice himself, forming a body of individuals within the sector of film production and filmmaking who sought to develop a more artistic and intellectual approach to Spanish cinema in the face of the proliferation of spaghetti Westerns and the production of comedies for which there was no market abroad (Sánchez Noriega, 2024, pp. 464-465, 475).

Thus, in *El espíritu de la colmena*, through the imagination of a girl in 1940s post-war Spain, Erice depicts the monster from James Whale's classic 1931 film *Frankenstein* as a symbol of "everything the regime condemned" (Cousins, 2024, p. 140). Years later, this ideological spectrum was not abandoned by the new wave of filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s, such as Almodóvar and Amenábar, but it tended to remain in the background (Fernández Heredero, 1999).

However, despite the aesthetic impoverishment of the dominant and generalised cinematographic activity of the 1990s, there were filmmakers of various nationalities operating on the periphery of the industry, such as Abbas Kiarostami, Nanni Moretti, Manoel de Oliveira and Erice himself (Gubern, 2021, p. 544). As Aljaro (2024, p. 20) states, there exists in contemporary culture "a series of filmmakers who, by moving away from the mainstream, created a narrative that responded to the acceleration of social and consumer rhythms". The filmmaker José Luis Guerin (2023, p. 32) states that Erice is a director who makes extemporaneous cinema and who, like so many older filmmakers, refuses to jump on the bandwagon of fashions: "They are filmmakers who, far from dressing themselves in the garb of fashions, are beholden only to themselves", and compares Erice to Chaplin, Hawks, Dreyer and Oliveira.

In 2010, when Erice was a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival, he was still a filmmaker on the side-lines of the industry and it was at this point in his career that he took the opportunity to insist on common themes in his work such as "the discovery of cinema, memory, affiliation within a certain realist tradition, cinema as revelation, the importance of the filmmaker's honesty in the face of what is filmed, but also the displacement and melancholy of the cinephile in the face of 'the audiovisual'" (Ramos Arenas, 2021, p. 142). While continuing to make short films and exhibition pieces, Erice made a return to feature films in 2023 with the premiere of *Cerrar los ojos* at the Cannes Film Festival.

The filmmaker was welcomed back by the critics, but felt side-lined by the festival itself, and through the newspaper *El País* (2023) reproached the organisers for not informing him of the section in which *Cerrar los ojos* would be entered with enough time to weigh up other options, which he considered unfair treatment both as an individual and as an artist. In his review of the film for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mitzer (2023) writes: "One day Frémaux¹ should explain why he has programmed such a powerful and elegant tribute to the cinema in a side section like Cannes Première rather than in competition", concluding that "*Cerrar los ojos* is a consummate piece of cinema by a great artist". Such gestures of disdain from the industry only add to the legend of Erice as a marginal filmmaker that has built up around him over the course of his career. In the US, however, the reaction was quite different. For *The New Yorker*, *Cerrar los ojos* was the best film of the year. The prestigious film critic Justin Chang justified this decision with these words: "After years of absence from the cinema, an octogenarian legend re-

¹ Thierry Frémaux has served as director of the Cannes Film Festival since 2001.

emerges with a work of art that sums up his career. Passionate, dazzling and inevitably polarising”².

This article aims to investigate the vision of childhood, cinephilia and memory that is encapsulated in the film *Cerrar los ojos* by Víctor Erice, through the use of audiovisual text analysis, which, unlike a critique, consists of “clarifying how and why the work says what it says” while attempting to investigate “the significance of the characters and settings, verbalising and specifying the underlying themes of the text, and evaluating the hermeneutics and reception of the work” (Sánchez Noriega, 2024, pp. 636–637). From this investigation, the following questions emerge:

- What is the relationship between Erice’s previous work and his most recent film?
- What does *Cerrar los ojos* bring in terms of its approach to cinephilia and memory in relation to the contemporary era and to the director’s oeuvre?

This study, which is both exploratory and explanatory in scope, also uses interpretative content analysis as a technique, which consists, according to Abela (2002, p. 22), of “a set of systematic techniques for interpreting the hidden meaning of texts”, or in this case of images that contain references to Erice’s film.

This research is thus framed within a qualitative perspective, focusing on the “study of complex processes, subjectivity, and their significance”, using a form of observation that implies the existence of an observer and of subjectivity and reciprocity (Hernández Sampieri et al. 2014, p. 586). In short, it is a form of content analysis that opens up more complex interpretations of the objects of study, while recognising the particular perspective adopted (Ahuvia, 2001, p. 162). The greatest risk for film analysts is that of “including value judgments of any kind, ideological approaches, etc.”, and as such “the descriptive basis must always be taken into account so as not to fall into meaning drift or aberrant interpretations” (Gómez, 2006, p. 48).

The aim of film analysis can be as a demonstration of a theory, within the work of a filmmaker, to explore its directions of meaning (in the case of a recognised work) and as a space within which to discuss the pleasure of interpreting or theorising about a particular film (Noguez, 1980, pp. 191–192). This study focuses on the case of *Cerrar los ojos* within Erice’s oeuvre, in terms of how it condenses the themes and universes of his other films, specifically his vision of cinephilia and of memory, as two of the main themes in the director’s work. According to Aumont & Marie (1988, p. 8), “We will consider the film as an autonomous artistic work capable of generating a text (textual analysis) that anchors its meanings in narrative structures”.

Ultimately, the work of the film interpreter lies in “ascribing implicit and symptomatic meanings to the films”, thereby articulating an argument that demonstrates “the innovation and validity of the interpretation” (Bordwell, 1995, pp. 59–60). In this way, the analyst examines the films under investigation as an active observer in search of a larger meaning, looking for what they say or suggest, trying to see the most important moments as part of a larger whole, comparing them with each other (Bordwell & Thompson, 1995, pp. 49–50).

According to Gómez (2006, p. 7), from whichever perspective the analysis is approached, the researcher will be faced with the same task: to break the film down into its constituent elements and “establish relationships between these elements in order to understand and explain the mechanisms that allow them to construct a ‘meaningful whole’”.

² Article titled “The Best Film of 2024”, published on 18 December 2024 in *The New Yorker*.

2. Memory and cinephilia in the films of Víctor Erice

Light and darkness combine in Erice's work, not only as a duality that confronts life and death, illumination and ignorance, but also as the act of remembering and forgetting. This duplicity is omnipresent in the filmmaker's work. For example, in *El sol del membrillo* (1992), Mowchun (2020, p. 215) states that the camera films and the lighting illuminates "a staging of the painter's deeply rooted dream memory" revealing poignant "intimations of time passing inexorably through light and darkness".

In *El espíritu de la colmena*, Erice combines his own film memories with the memory of the Spanish Civil War, drawing together a childhood tale set in the golden fields of Castile, the film *Frankenstein* and the children's melody *Vamos a contar mentiras*, creating in the audience a sense of the lack of understanding experienced by the child, Ana (Ana Torrent), and immersing viewers in a complex plot about memory, childhood and the love of cinema (González de Dios 2024, p. 33).

According to Pedraza (2024, p. 59), since the 1950s Spanish cinema as a whole has been a medium "with children" in its narratives, following the neorealist trail of *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), in which children "watch and learn from the world of adults and are seen by them" in stories in which they "suffer and judge". However, despite the usual presence of children in Spanish cinema, it would be simplistic to classify Erice as a neorealist, as he is a director who works within the framework of self-fiction. According to López-Gay (2022, p. 238), self-fictional cinema "opens up an interstitial space that includes auteur and fiction documentary cinema, without being exclusively reduced to, or even supplanting, either of them", as an expressive medium of particular value for reviving the attitude of suspicion in times of post-truth.

Along these lines, Erice's cinephilia is accustomed to wandering between reality and fantasy through the filmic experience of childhood. Erice puts it this way about *El espíritu de la colmena* (Carazo Rubio, 2017, p. 91): "Ana confuses fantasy and reality because she is still in the period before the use of reason". Although *El espíritu de la colmena* is fiction, the film relates to Erice's life in terms of the important role that cinema played in his childhood. Erice was born in 1940 (the year in which *El espíritu de la colmena* is set), and his first cinematic experience, recounted in his film *La morte rouge* (2006), was with the film *The Scarlet Claw* (Roy William Neill, 1944). As an infant, Erice expected a potential murderer every time the postman knocked on the door. Like Ana with the images of *Frankenstein* in *El espíritu de la colmena*, Erice narrates his upbringing through two traumas: one experienced through cinema and the other as a consequence of war and dictatorship (Henzler, 2023, p. 456). Erice himself admits that "I do not establish a substantive difference between documentary and fiction" (Fernández Heredero, 2023, p. 8).

In *La morte rouge*, Erice narrates how in his childhood he felt panic at the sight of the immobile faces of adults who did not react to the violence on the screen. He contrasts the controlled appearance of adult viewers with that of children in front of the cinema screen (Henzler, 2023, pp. 458-459). The film included "Erice's own personal photographs, a fictional recreation of childhood, and images (still and moving) of *The Scarlet Claw*" (Ramos Arenas, 2021, p. 153).

In this regard, Erice (2003) admits to being particularly interested in the vision of childhood depicted in the Soviet film *Ivan's Childhood* (1962, Andrei Tarkovsky): "This to-and-fro between reason and delirium, between waking and dreaming, is the experience of most of the protagonists of Tarkovsky's fictions". In a study that relates Erice's work to that of Tarkovsky, it is concluded that the visual images that Tarkovsky and Erice use are bridges to spiritual

perceptions, bridges that draw the viewer into an engagement that seems to oscillate between madness and childhood (Partridge & Diaz Caneja, 2011, p. 31). According to Erice (2003), viewers become implicated in the ordeal of the soul of Tarkovsky's characters. Similarly, Morin (2019, p. 179) states that "cinema offers us the reflection not only of the world but of the human spirit", with two psyches in every film: the one embodied in the film and the one provided by the audience. In short, the participation created by a film is also created by the viewer.

This unique history—of the cinema and of the century—merges seamlessly with our own life story. I am talking about the people of my generation, those born in the time of silence and destruction that followed our last civil war. Cinema adopted us, real or symbolic orphans, and offered us an extraordinary consolation: the feeling of belonging to the world (Victor Erice, quoted in Bergala, 2005, p. 86).

It was quite common in post-war cinephilia for film theorists and filmmakers to reflect on the impact of films seen in their childhood in relation to their adult lives. "Cinephiles began to see themselves as people 'marked' by cinema in their childhood and as people who reactivate their own inner child when they go to the cinema" (Henzler, 2023, p. 452). This love felt by film fans was defined by Sontag (2011) as the affirmation of an absolute art that contained everything, with cinephiles being apostles of the religion of cinema and cinema itself being the definitive book of art and life. In this regard, it was the French critics who devised a theory that "directors were to films what poets were to poems" (Biskind, 2021, p. 15).

Pujo Ozonas (2011, p. 112) explains that cinephilia is defined as fanaticism for film intellectuals, whose habits opt for ritualistic obsessions such as physically going to the cinema, reading specialist magazines and building knowledge shared exclusively with peers. On the other hand, Erice responds to a type of cinephilia which, although still classic, has become more residual: "Films are made and consumed in a very different way", with a notion closer to consumption, such that "it is not strange to speak of both users and viewers" (Erice interviewed by Reviriego, 2019). It was at the time of *Star Wars* when many film buffs and film intellectuals saw how "the work of an artistic and cultural legitimisation of cinema as ushered in by the film buffs of the 1950s and 1960s was blown apart by the success of directors and films completely removed from the canon of auteur cinema" (Pujol Ozonas, 2011, p. 42).

Erice himself states that "it is clear that cinema no longer has the space in society that it held in the past. Of its original experience, only the cinema itself remains" (Fernández Heredero, 2023, p. 22). Similarly, following the premiere of *Cerrar los ojos*, Vega (2023, p. 106) laments that in 21st-century cinema, there is no longer any refuge for filmmakers or their monsters, concluding that, at present, despite the fact that more scripts are written than ever before, "few contain projects with original images ready to be materialised".

In his feature film *El sur* (Víctor Erice, 1983), just as in *El espíritu de la colmena*, Erice uses the character of the girl, named Estrella (played by Sonsoles Aranguren and Iciar Bollain) to portray the trauma "inflicted by the past on a generation that was left inwardly exiled, self-absorbed and converted into absence" (Martínez Sariago, 2024, p. 132). In an interview, Erice himself argued that *El espíritu de la colmena* was a personal vision of a childhood in which he was unable to connect with his parents after the Spanish Civil War, stating that, when the nightmare of the war ended, "many returned home and had children, but there was in them, forever, something profoundly mutilated, which is what their absence reveals" (Fernández Santos & Erice, 1976, p. 23).

In *El Sur*, cinema is also a symbol of trauma, childhood and time. According to Martínez Sariago (2024, p. 138), as in other works by Erice, *El Sur* features three distinct ages: "that of history or the collective past; that of adults immobilised in the present, and that of childhood".

Childhood in Erice's work is usually portrayed by a character who "reconstructs" their past from scattered memories and information. In *El Sur*, it is the character of Agustín (Omero Antonutti), Estrella's father, who has broken the bridges of intergenerational communication due to the stormy past of the war.

Agustín goes to the cinema to see the fictional film *Flor en la sombra*, starring an actress, named Irene Ríos (played by Aurore Clément), whose real name was Laura, with whom it is suggested that Agustín had had an affair in the past. "Irene Ríos is a ghost because she is nothing more than Laura's shadow projected by the cinematograph; a shadow, however, that is powerful enough to summon all of Agustín's inner demons" (Martínez Sariego, 2024, p. 138). Thus, memory, identity, cinema and trauma come together once again in Erice's work. *El espíritu de la colmena*, *El sur* and *Cerrar los ojos* are united by the filial search, both literally and poetically, through cinema as a common thread in the three films (Fernández Heredero, 2023, p. 26). In reference to Erice's films, Guerin (2023, p. 35) states that "There are these echoes or rhymes between his different works that allow us to see his filmography as a composition, as a work in itself".

In *El sol del membrillo* (Víctor Erice, 1992), behind Antonio López's mysterious need to "accompany the tree", Erice finds a vivid dream from his childhood (Monterrubio Ibañez, 2018, p. 171). In the final scene of the film, the camera turns on by itself to film a re-enactment of López's childhood memory of the quince tree. This is a dreamlike staging by the painter, in which the illuminated rotting quinces awaken the imagination and expand the child's small world with "poignant intimations of time passing inexorably" (Mowchun, 2020, p. 215).

In *Cerrar los ojos*, Erice makes use of the disappearance of a famous actor in the middle of a film shoot and, it is speculated, due to a mid-life crisis twenty years after the shoot. The missing actor is Julio Arenas (José Coronado) and the film director who is looking for him is Miguel Garay (Manolo Solo). The unfinished film is titled *La mirada del adiós*. *Cerrar los ojos* begins by revealing a theme linked to the passage of time with a statue of Janus who, in the words of Erice (Fernández Heredero, 2023, p. 10), "is a god associated with thresholds and doors. He opened and closed them. He is also associated with beginnings and endings". Janus is a god usually represented with a face on each side of his head, so Erice could be said to be revealing that the director and the actor "are two faces of the same identity" (Fernández-Heredero, 2023, p. 10). With this suggestive and mythical image, Erice begins and ends a film that embraces identity, memory, time and cinema as its common axes.

3. Results

In his essay on Nicholas Ray, Erice focuses on *Lightning Over Water* (1990) by Ray and Wim Wenders, a film about the last days of the American filmmaker, as follows:

This face, marked by the signs of mortal illness and the passing of days, in which it is barely possible to make out a single trace of the lost identity, becomes that of a primordial figure, a mediator between the darkness from which man comes and the world, in a longing for recognition. Expressing an intense nostalgia for the origins, his words are both the symptom and the consequence of a failure. But of a failure which, by the nature of the commitment behind it—the quest for an impossible solidarity—affects us all. From the ashes of this passion, Nicholas Ray's work is reborn as an example of universal character, a mirror in which we can all recognise ourselves, a poem where cinema and life appear fraternally united (Erice, 2011, p. 134).

Erice's essay on Ray is titled "Como en un espejo" (As in a Mirror). In the fictional film *La Mirada del adiós* contained within *Cerrar los ojos*, the Jewish character Ferrán Soler/Monsieur Levy (played by Josep María Pou) reflects on the figure of the king on a chessboard next to his

table, stating that “Chess is a mirror of the world”. In Erice’s quote above about Ray, the Spanish filmmaker is clear in his affirmation that illness, lost identity and nostalgia for origins make the American director’s work an “example of universal character, a mirror in which we can all recognise ourselves, a poem where cinema and life appear fraternally united” (Erice, 2011, p. 134).

Erice’s words and his work thus conjugate a simile between cinema and chess, the king in the game reflecting both Soler’s anxieties (and thus those of Erice himself) and, at the same time, the space they inhabit. The house is called *Triste le Roy*: a house that exists both in the 1940s (in *La mirada del adiós*) and the 1990s (when that film was shot in the universe of *Cerrar los ojos*). Thus, Erice combines people who are fictional (Soler) and real (Garay) with the space in front of and behind the frame (the two periods that inhabit a space when a film is shot). Similarly, in the film’s present moment, the space inhabited by Arenas and Garay is next to a beach and, although Arenas does not remember Garay, they both paint.³ They eat in the same way when they meet again, and they even tie the knots they learned to tie together in the marina in their youth in the same way. Arenas does not remember why he knows how to tie a knot, but it is clear that he remembers the knot. The filmmaker shows the audience how the two friends are strangers who know each other very well.

Erice’s comments about Nicholas Ray also reveal a tension between his past life and his illness, reflected in the sick part of Julio Arenas, a character suffering from amnesia, and the painful, nostalgic part of his past, Garay. It is clear that reality and art are constantly intermingling, sending signals to Garay, who is unable to forget no matter how much he hides in his peaceful life by the sea. For example, Garay sees King Emeritus Juan Carlos I apologising on television for a scandal; he is clearly a sad king.

Erice reveals these nods to Garay’s character throughout the film. Later, towards the end of the film, when Garay finds a chess piece of a king among Arenas’ belongings, he tells Ana that it is “a sign” but that he does not know what it is. He concludes that “Your father has no memory, but I’m not sure he has a conscience either”.

It is no coincidence that Erice shows Garay, shortly after meeting Arenas again in the residence, talking to Doctor Benavides (Juan Margallo) about the question of Julio Arenas’ soul after making a more technical and cold diagnosis: “He was suffering from neurological deterioration, caused in part by alcohol. He was probably suffering from trauma, what we used to call retroactive amnesia. Something that can wipe out a life in one go”. However, the doctor treating Arenas tells Garay that his friend is not just a name or a dossier (like the one they create for the TV programme *Casos sin resolver*). On the contrary, he tells him that “we have to help him recover something he’s lost”, something that, in the doctor’s words, no medical professional can do.

It is worth noting that Erice (2011, p. 134) states that only films can somehow reflect *who* and *what* the artist Nicholas Ray has been when all is “lost”. This division between person and filmmaker, or between reality and cinema, or person and mask, is present in *Cerrar los ojos* on several levels (just as it is in *El sol del membrillo*). Like the statue of Janus that opens and closes the film, Miguel Garay and Julio Arenas are two sides of the same piece of stone, just as all people are Nicholas Ray when they are in front of his camera, and just as the child Ana in *El espíritu de la colmena* is the same adult Ana as the character in *Cerrar los ojos* (both portrayed by Ana Torrent) when she is seen repeating the phrase “I am Ana”.

³The scene in which Miguel and Julio paint is adorned with white sheets stretched out in the wind, an image reminiscent of Erice’s short film *Alumbramiento*, released in 2002.

The duality of Arenas and Garay, and their deep friendship, does not seem to be based solely on something as superficial as a name: “What is a name?” Garay asks Dr Benavides when they discuss Arenas’ amnesia. Similarly, when Miguel is relaxing with his neighbours, a pregnant couple and a friend, he discusses what to name the couple’s future daughter. The father prefers the names Esmeralda or Estrella, and the mother wishes to call her Juana. In this scene, Miguel explains that if he is known as Mike, it is because it was the nickname he was given by a foreign neighbour he had in the past. A friend at the table (played by Alejandro Caballero Remis) says that he is now called Patón, but that his original name was Rufino, confessing that nobody calls him that and that nobody knows his real name.

Faced with this friendly debate, Miguel or Mike, Juana or Estrella and Patón or Rufino, Erice seems to ask: what is the real difference between a person and a name? In *Cerrar los ojos*, this kind of superficial dilemma seems to be sought only in the television programme *Casos sin resolver*. In the fictional *La mirada del adiós*, Monsieur Levy tells the investigator he hires (played by Julio Arenas) that he wants to find his daughter (Venecia Franco) for one reason: “She is the only person in the world who can look at me in a different, unique way”. Thus, in *Cerrar los ojos*, true identity can be found in a look, and not just in a name.

However, this goes much deeper: Monsieur Levy talks about “the Shanghai gesture”, which he inherited from his mother, which consists of hiding one’s face behind a fan. He tells the investigator played by Arenas in *La mirada del adiós* that he used to sing songs from his childhood to his daughter while her mother taught him this gesture. He named his daughter Judith, but her mother changed the girl’s name to Qiao Shu. This is another fundamental pillar in the theme of identity in *Cerrar los ojos*. The quest that Garay is on in real life (to find his lost friend) is the same quest that Monsieur Levy has in *La mirada del adiós* (to find his lost daughter). The film thus reveals yet another change of names within the same person: Judith and Qiao Shu; Julio Arenas and Gardel; Mike and Miguel.

Once again with Erice, art and reality intermingle through the artist’s life and work. It is important to note that, like Garay, Erice is a filmmaker who has had to suspend filming. Erice was unable to film his screenplay *La promesa de Shanghái*, based on the novel by Juan Marsé, and was similarly unable to finish the second part of *El Sur*, the filming of which was suspended after shooting only half of the film. As with *La mirada del adiós*, *El Sur* is an unfinished film. And in the same way, Garay is a mirror of Erice.

Cerrar los ojos also reflects on the mysteries of identity in a more spiritual way, affirming that these do not fit into rational, cold, technical or vulgar explanations. This is a poetic form of cinema which, according to González de Canales Carcereny (2019, p. 274), is a type of narrative that employs “intra-filmic formal elements” that are “enablers of the sensory-transcendental dimension that is perceived by the viewer”. Along similar lines, the author finds the basis of poetic cinema in the form of the film’s composition (such as shot lengths and the use of montage) beyond the subject matter or the sensations it provokes in the audience. However, another important factor of poetic cinema lies in making the audience active participants while viewing the film (González de Canales Carcereny, 2019, p. 274). This search for an active audience is present throughout Erice’s work.

In search of answers about the disappearance (both metaphorical and literal) of Julio Arenas, the self-sacrificing and defeatist Miguel Garay collaborates with the TV programme *Casos sin resolver* with the intention of locating his friend; he even collaborates with the show’s presenter, Marta Soriano (Helena Miquel), to locate Ana, Arenas’ daughter. Erice makes Ana a worker at the Prado Museum. Like Garay, Ana feels abandoned by art: “To spend hours and hours surrounded by so much beauty and for it to become routine”, Ana laments. The common

link between the two characters is their abandonment by Arenas, making them both orphans: one of a father and the other of a friend. Arenas becomes not only a memory but a symbol of nostalgia for a time when art had a certain value.

In this sense, according to Erice's metaphors, the loss of loved ones entails a spiritual loss that the director himself combines with the loss of cinema's value. The art that the characters were once so passionate about seems obsolete and lifeless today: this is especially represented in the character of Max Roca (Mario Pardo), a film buff who lives in the past surrounded by cans of film and who constantly regrets that cinema is no longer as respected as it used to be. Max draws a comparison between himself and Garay, and the film cans: "They're archaeology. Archaeology, like you and me!".

Another common link shared by the characters is their lost childhood. Monsieur Levy wants to be seen through his daughter's eyes. Ana claims that the only thing she keeps from her father is a doll he gave her as a child. Sister Consuelo (Petra Martínez) confesses that she gave Julio Arenas the name Gardel because it reminded her of the tangos she danced in her village when she was younger. Soledad (Lola San Román) states that recovering the neighbourhood of her childhood was the best thing about having returned to her country of origin, and Julio Arenas (according to Garay) often fantasised about destroying his identity and being reborn again. When Garay confesses this to Soledad, he tells her how he imagined the moment when Arenas decided to rid himself of his identity. At that moment, Erice shows an imaginary flashback in which Julio, barefoot in the rain, takes position in a football goalmouth, readying himself to save an imaginary shot on goal.

Finally, music plays an important role in the awakening of Qiao Shu's memory to remember her father, Monsieur Levy, in *La mirada del adiós*. The Sephardic song *Hija mía, mi querida* forms the backbone of the whole story, and appears throughout the film in different ways, depending on the needs of the screenplay. The first time it is heard is as a diegetic instrumental piece, played on the piano with a high, lyrical tone. It is reminiscent of the piano played by Teresa (Teresa Giampera), Ana's mother, in *El espíritu de la colmena*, one that is out of tune, in accordance with her emotional state (Ehrlich, 2007. p. 250), and of *El Sur*, where a piano also appears, with a sequence that has relevant because a tuner appears who generates musical dissonances while working with the piano.

The next time the tune is heard in *La mirada del adiós*, at the end of the film, it also comes from a piano, in an elided diegetic form, because the source is not explicitly seen. In the universe of *Cerrar los ojos*, Julio Arenas is seen with his daughter Ana while the projection of the final sequence of *La mirada del adiós* begins. It is understood that the piano is played by Levy because he later appears seated with his arms on top of the instrument. His obsession with this musical theme, as a link to him reuniting with his daughter, is patently clear. It is important to note that, at the beginning of the film, Monsieur Levy explains to Arenas that he sings the songs he learned as a child to his daughter. In any case, it can be assumed that, in this work of encounters and recognition, the relationship of Julio Arenas, in the real world, who has to recognise his daughter, whom he has forgotten, is also at stake. And for this reason, the theme interpellates the two narrative levels: that of meta-cinema (fiction in fiction) and the 'real' fiction.

The last sequence of the film begins when Judith appears before her father, dignified and heavily made-up. As she greets him, she makes the "Shanghai gesture" with her fan, coldly, her features hard. This gesture distances her from him because it is something her mother taught her. Monsieur Levy then turns to the piano and plays the Sephardic song *Hija mía, mi querida*. At that moment, the girl recognises this song of her father's and becomes emotional, her initial

hardness breaking down. The father approaches her and, with some force, removes her make-up, using water he has taken from a vase.

It is a significant act, because it returns her to her original state of simplicity, to her past, to the realm of childhood. And then the miracle happens. The father falls, and as he dies, he begins to sing the song *a capella*. He sings the first verse and his daughter starts to weep before continuing with the second verse. The lyrics are in keeping with the narrative between them. The father tells her not to go to sea, that they are going to take her away. And she answers him: "To take me and bring me. And may a black fish swallow me, to save me from love". In this sequence, not only what is said in the songs is relevant, but also what is not made explicit: the third verse, which speaks of the mother, is not sung by either of them. The final part of the song says: "Tell him for me, child, that I love you for me". It is as if Erice does not want to show the obvious, because it seems redundant.

"In Víctor Erice's films, the songs that appear are very carefully selected", states Lázaro López (2016, p. 342), concluding that "the songs with sung lyrics that Erice takes from different pre-existing repertoires to incorporate into his films speak explicitly about issues that are current and of relevance in the dramatic situations of the films in question". Thus, the miracle that happens on screen is also sought in the real world: The screening could restore Julio Arenas to who he was. "Miracles in cinema don't exist since Dreyer died," Max states, clearly appealing to the film *Ordet: The Word* (1955). Finally, at the climax of the film, Julio Arenas closes his eyes.

4. Conclusions

As in Víctor Erice's previous works, the themes that unite the characters are childhood, memory and cinephilia. The characters in *Cerrar los ojos* open up to memories through film, a medium that is, in turn, a journey back in time to childhood. For Erice, as happened to him, life is built on the films and songs that the individual felt as a child.

This can be seen in many of the characters in *Cerrar los ojos*, such as Miguel Garay, Soledad, Sister Consuelo and Monsieur Levy: a younger and more hopeful vision confronted with one that is mature and disconsolate. However, Erice does not establish such marked differences, which would veer into cliché). On the contrary, the filmmaker believes that there is something authentic and immutable, in terms of identity, that his characters forget and bury as time goes by. *Cerrar los ojos* asks about the miracle of art as an awakening of childhood, which is, ultimately, the origin and destiny of Erice's films.

Cerrar los ojos is still a residual film in contemporary times. Few filmographies remain as faithful to a style and to obsessions as that of Víctor Erice. However, for this auteur, poetic and self-fictionalised cinema serves the director as a vehicle between memory and forgetting, childhood and maturity, light and darkness, clarity and confusion. *Cerrar los ojos* can be enjoyed without having seen any of Erice's previous work, but the experience would be all the poorer for it, as the film draws a conclusion, in a more personal and lucid way, to many of the themes of his work.

Erice's reflections on love, cinema and childhood in *Cerrar los ojos* bring even more doubts. As experienced by the character of Ana in *El espíritu de la colmena*, being a child does not free her from confusion. Nor has adulthood brought more clarity to Ana in *Cerrar los ojos*. All the characters in Erice's films are mirrors (of both the filmmaker and his audience) and *Cerrar los ojos* ends with a mirror of the audience seeing themselves reflected in the cinema. Waiting for a miracle.

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