



THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES

(El Secreto de Sus Ojos)

Autumn
Season
2010

Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian:

At this year's Oscar ceremony, film critics congratulated themselves generously for having praised the triumphant Iraq drama *The Hurt Locker*, thus justifying our continued existence in the face of a million bloggers. Then we compounded the conceit by grumbling that the best foreign picture prize had not gone to either of the press favourites – Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* or Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet* – but to Juan José Campanella's little-known Argentinian noir thriller *El Secreto de Sus Ojos*, or *The Secret in Their Eyes*. I am ashamed to recall that I, too, joined in with the general air of dismissive bemusement, without having yet seen the film, an omission now rectified.

The Secret in Their Eyes isn't, in fact, as good as either *The White Ribbon* or *A Prophet*, but it is a supremely watchable, well-made and well-acted movie with a dark, sinewy sense of history: a tremendously slick thriller from a director who has worked on American TV shows such as *Law and Order* and *House*. His movie may in fact be rather closer to box-set-quality television drama than cinema. But respect has to be paid right away to Campanella's most delirious big-screen flourish: an unbroken travelling shot that begins soaring over a football stadium during an evening match, swooping down into the stands where a suspected felon is being sought, tensely following him into the lavatories and then out on to the field itself, bringing play to a halt. It looks like a mix of CGI and a colossal real-world crowd scene, with the join cleverly concealed.

Ricardo Darín – best known for the 2000 grifter classic *Nine Queens* – has enormous presence as Esposito, a retired Buenos Aires prosecutor who broods over a life of disappointments and lost opportunities. As a distraction from his various sources of chagrin, Esposito sets out to write a novel, based on a horrendous unsolved crime from the bad old days of the 70s: the rape and murder of a young woman in 1974, an event for which Esposito conceived a futile obsession, and which poisoned his career and his life. Using this improbable literary project as a pretext, he calls on his old boss, the beautiful senior prosecutor Irene Menéndez Hastings, played by Soledad Villamil, a woman with whom he has been hopelessly in love for decades. She is intrigued, and we are carried in flashback to grim 1970s Argentina, and then back to the present, in which this cold case is brought back to boiling point. Campanella shrewdly places us in the ugly, paranoid arena of the junta and *los desaparecidos*, and the film coolly shows how a world where people were afraid to ask about those who had "disappeared" created rich opportunities for all criminals, both political and unpolitical, intent on killings, vanishings and rubbings-out. Argentina in the 1970s is an inspired setting for a film noir, and it's a wonder it hasn't been used more before.

Darín's careworn, faintly leonine face conveys both his professional exhaustion, only slightly diminished for his notionally younger, darker-haired self in the 1974 scenes, and the agony of swallowed, unconfessed love. The poor guy is still head over heels for Irene, and Villamil nicely carries off her first appearance in the office, wearing an



adorably goofy red beret, and insisting on the Anglicised pronunciation of her surname "Hastings" on the grounds that it is Scottish, which may incidentally explain the headgear, without excusing it. All this, and her classy background of postgraduate study at Cornell, amply shows that Irene is from Argentina's patrician class, and poor Esposito is very much other ranks. It is his awareness of the status gap, duplicated in his own subordinate position in the office, and his male pride, that prevent him from doing anything about the awful longing in his heart.

Esposito is a very lonely lawman indeed, and the nearest thing he has to an emotional life is his friendship with his colleague, the hapless Sandoval, touchingly played by Guillermo Francella. Sandoval is an alcoholic and depressive, given to drinking himself into a stupor in a nearby bar, incautiously denouncing the fascists in charge, and then having to be carried out by Esposito and permitted to sleep on his couch because Sandoval's wife refuses to have him in the house.

Campanella's script persistently nudges the audience in the direction of a very guessable final twist, but suddenly withdraws this in favour of a bizarre and grotesque disclosure just before the credits, although that initially telegraphed twist might have been rather more satisfying, in its simple realism, than the grand guignol nightmare with which Campanella finally leaves us. It's a matter of taste, but the movie's real success is the way it shows how Esposito's obsession with the hideous crime is a way of redeeming himself, not for a squalid misdemeanour of his own, as might easily be the case in another sort of cop procedural, but for the simple mischance of being in love. Manically focusing on this brutal affair is a deliberate, macho cauterisation of the agony of unrequited passion. The charismatic Darín makes a seductively melancholy and unexpectedly gallant hero.