

## ***The Night of the Sunflowers* (15)**

**15<sup>th</sup> September 2008**

Director: **Jorge Sánchez-Cabezudo**  
Spain/Portugal/France 2006

Running time : 123 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Carmelo Gómez** (Esteban), **Judith Diakhate** (Gabi), **Celso Bugallo** (Amadeo), **Vicente Romero** (Tomás), **Mariano Alameda** (Pedro).

SCRIPT: **Jorge Sánchez-Cabezudo**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Ángel Iguácel**. EDITING: **Pedro Ribeiro**. MUSIC: **Krishna Lévy**.

A rare example of straight genre film-making to reach our shores from the Iberian peninsula, Sánchez-Cabezudo's first film deserves more widespread attention than it received on its release here.

After an allusive opening scene in which a man stumbles back to his car from a field of sunflowers, presumably having disposed of a body there, we are presented with the film's central location, a quiet rural village, as one of its inhabitants, Beni, departs on a walk into the mountains. The discontinuity is marked, though not yet disconcerting.

However, what follows are five discrete episodes covering the action of the film from different viewpoints. The chronology adhered to is only loose, but neither is this a *Rashomon* where the ironies spring from the differing ways in which the action is perceived or reported. Here the episodes overlap or partially precede one another, allowing us to appreciate the cruel twists of fate without sacrificing objectivity in rooting for any single character.

The village of which we are afforded the briefest glimpse at the beginning of *La Noche de los Girasoles* is the site of a putative tourist attraction in the form of a cave discovered by a local enthusiast, Beni. The villagers, led by the mayor, hope to reinvigorate the moribund hamlet's economy and population by attracting potholers.

Next we are introduced to a travelling salesman, who is maliciously misdirected off his route by a man in a roadside café to wind up, yes, that's right, in the vicinity of our village. Having cursed his ill fortune he espies a young woman near a vehicle and seizes his chance, for, if we have not guessed already, he is the serial rapist/killer seen at the start.

At which point we leave the story hanging in the air, for the moment, and go back to the arrival of experts from the city to investigate the viability

of the set of caves. This sequence then goes up to the discovery of the girl, who turns out to be the girlfriend of Esteban, the potholer, and her identity of a white-shirted man by the side of the road as her assailant.

As the plot thickens and the characters' errors have even graver consequences for the villagers, we are introduced further to the local inhabitants: uneasy neighbours Cecilio and Amós, old men with their petty grievances, Tomás, a junior *guardia civil* officer who is having an affair but is married to the daughter of his boss, Amadeo. This last is by far the most interesting character – certainly the most sympathetic – increasingly suspicious and yet saddened by what he suspects; it is a beautiful performance by Celso Bugallo.

The film ends in a very minor key and one has the impression of having viewed a dreadfully prosaic tragedy for all concerned, for the potholers from the city, who were only trying to help, as well as for the villagers, who had hoped for a boon and instead found death and deceit.

It may be that the director was inspired to make the film by the very real fate of villages in rural Spain which, far from the picture painted in films like Almodóvar's *Volver*, have been largely left behind by the growing sophistication of the cities, and by the youth who see more attractive prospects there. You may remember the village in *The Spirit of the Beehive*; well, there are parts of Spain where, colour television aside, things haven't changed a good deal since. The prospect of eco-tourism or something similar is one hope for those lucky enough to be situated in scenery as attractive as the Ávila mountains seen here (standing in for Cantabria).

**David Clare**