

El secreto de sus ojos (The Secret in Their Eyes) (18)

10th January 2011

Director: **Juan José Campanella**
Spain/Argentina 2009

Running time : 129 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Ricardo Darín** (Benjamín Espósito), **Soledad Villamil** (Irene), **Pablo Rago** (Ricardo Morales), **Javier Godino** (Isidoro Gómez), **Mariano Argento** (Romano).

SCRIPT: **Eduardo Sacheri, Juan José Campanella** based on the former's novel *La pregunta* (question) *de sus ojos*. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Félix Monti**. EDITING: **Juan José Campanella**. MUSIC: **Federico Jusid**.

The Secret in Their Eyes beat the favourites *The White Ribbon* and *The Prophet* (also shown this season) to the Foreign Language Film Oscar last year. It was a surprise choice, but on reflection perhaps not such a surprise: the Argentine movie is, on the face of it at least, a genre piece (legal thriller) more likely to appeal to Academy voters. However, generic pleasures and an affecting romance between the principals conceal both an examination of Argentine society's traumatic past and a probing meditation on memory.

An appreciation of *El secreto* is considerably enriched by some awareness of Argentina's political history. The plot, in which a legal clerk/investigator is for many years tormented by doubt over the rape and murder of a schoolteacher in 1974, relates to the period just preceding the military dictatorship that oversaw the torture, imprisonment – and worse – of dissidents, all with the connivance of judges and the police. (These *desaparecidos* (literally 'disappeared') formed the subject of sole previous Argentinian Oscar-winner *La historia oficial* in 1985.) 1974 was a turning point since it saw the death of Perón and premature end of his second term of office. His vice-president and wife (not Eva – another one) was beholden to his most fascist advisers and conflict between extreme left and right-wing factions led to financial chaos and a military *coup* (in 1976). There followed a clampdown against far left vigilantism, which spread to encompass all opposition elements, the so-called (CIA aided) *Dirty War*. The period up to the next free elections in 1983 saw wage freezes, deindustrialisation, a drop in living standards, deregulation, the collapse of the peso, unprecedented corruption, and of course the Falklands War.

It would require a TV series to do justice to the complexities of the period, and so it remains very much in the background of Campanella's

picture. Nevertheless, in Benjamín's picking over of the manufactured evidence and unjust imprisonment pertaining to one case in particular we can read a nation's collective enquiry into state injustice.

Campanella has said that what appealed to him about Sacheri's novel was that it contained *noir* elements – concealed guilt, a lowly employee out of his depth, a trail of intrigue leading to establishment corruption – but with characters who lacked the ironic, even cynical, detachment of *noir* characters. 'I related to them, especially their sense of humour, and the way they are afraid of things and are impacted by the events of the story. In film terms, it was like a *film noir* mixed with an Italian comedy.'¹ It is these comedic aspects, mentioned in other sources, that, not having seen the film, I can only guess at, but knowing Ricardo Darín's work a little helps do so.

Darín had worked in TV soaps but his appearance in the hustler/caper movie *Nine Queens* ten years ago, a big commercial success, proved to be a turning point for him. He has a way of underplaying even the most dramatic of scenes and bringing out the humour. Over the decade he has turned out to be his country's most accomplished screen actor.

Campanella too has a background in television, though in his case it his work on US series, such as *Law & Order* and *House*, that has provided his bread and butter. On the strength of this film he is yet another talent in the New Latin American cinema to watch out for.

David Clare

¹ In conversation with Demetrios Matheou for *Sight and Sound* (September 2010)