

The Secret in Their Eyes: Does “fear” help explain anything?

By Joanne Laurier
19 June 2010

Written and directed by Juan José Campanella, based on the novel by Eduardo Sacheri

This past March *The Secret in Their Eyes* (*El secreto de sus ojos*) from Argentina won the Academy Award for best foreign language film. A further indication, if one needs it, that the Hollywood community, or at least its vote-casting portion, is very confused and easily impressed by sham seriousness and shallow psychologizing.

Juan José Campanella’s movie won the prize over the far worthier *Ajami*, about an impoverished and conflicted Arab neighborhood in Tel Aviv. The joint Arab-Israeli effort was one of the year’s more important pieces of cinema. And one would have to say that, with all their wrongheadedness and murkiness, both Michael Haneke’s *The White Ribbon* (from Germany) and Jacques Audiard’s *A Prophet* (from France) were more serious efforts than the pedestrian and essentially empty *The Secret in Their Eyes*.

Campanella, it would seem, wants to make a few points about the period that led up to the military’s seizing power in a coup in March 1976 and establishing a ruthless, CIA-backed dictatorship, which killed tens of thousands of leftists, trade unionists and students. But the filmmaker’s insights, vague and scattered and shedding relatively little light on the dynamics of the period, are buried, in any case, under the details of a thriller that tediously unfolds as an “obsessive” love story. It doesn’t add up to much, despite the loud claims of the critics, who are also all-too-easily impressed.

After emigrating from Argentina to the US, Campanella has spent most of his career directing episodes of US television series, such as “House” and “Law & Order: SVU.” *The Secret in Their Eyes* bears the mark of that experience, albeit with souped-up

production values and a feature-length format. The story might have been more effectively (and less pretentiously) told as a 60-minute television drama.

The plot of *The Secret in Their Eyes* revolves around the rape and murder of a young Buenos Aires woman in 1974 and its far-reaching consequences.

Now it’s 1999. For a quarter-century the brutal killing has consumed criminal court investigator Benjamin Espósito (Ricardo Darín), who, after he retires, decides to write a book about the case in the hope of resolving issues in his own life.

Jumping between the past and present (the historical to and fro is made clear primarily by appropriate changes in the color of the protagonist’s hair), the movie reveals how Benjamin is deeply affected by the love that the murder victim’s husband has for his wife, even long after her death.

Such single-minded adoration forces the investigator to assess the state of his own feelings for a judge, Irene (Soledad Villamil), whom he has known for years. Afflicted by a sense of his own unworthiness, Benjamin has nonetheless loved no one but her since their first encounter at the time of the murder, when Irene was fresh out of Cornell Law School. (Actor Darín is one of Argentina’s most popular actors, and it is hard to accept, especially as the camera continuously caresses the features of his rugged visage, that his Benjamin is out of Irene’s league, Ivy or otherwise.)

Benjamin and his partner, the drunken savant Sandoval (renowned comic Guillermo Francella), solve the case and secure a confession. The perpetrator is jailed, but a corrupt government official with a vendetta against Benjamin has the individual released so that he can become a hit man for the secret police. Afraid for his life, Benjamin leaves Buenos Aires never having declared his love for Irene. As he begins to write his

book years later, he attempts to discover the fate of the victim's husband and killer, through which he deciphers the mysteries of his own life. Thus he elevates himself from a debased state of fear to one of love.

A wider connection is being made here, according to Campanella. He claims in several interviews that a frightened population was in part responsible for the dictatorship's ability to come to power.

For example: "I was so particular in making it understood that during a democratic government, when you have the threat of terrorism, people out of fear will sign off on anything." Elsewhere: "I chose to set the movie in the pre-dictatorship days rather than during the dictatorship, because everyone in those pre-dictatorship days was already succumbing to fear by refusing to talk about it. I wanted to show that moment where they make the choice of shutting up, looking away, and running away."

These are somewhat grandiose assertions, and there is no reason to doubt Campanella's motives. Unfortunately, the film shows no such process. The secret police make a very brief appearance, and if Benjamin's fear of retaliation is intended to stand for the supposed political spinelessness of the Argentine populace, then this is bad drama and bad history too.

Presumably, the director has in mind not only Argentina before the military coup, but the US after September 11, 2001. But the conceptions are amorphous, weakly dramatized, and the filmmaker is trying to make a few individual psychological responses bear far too much weight.

The military butchers didn't come to power because of "fearfulness" in the population. That doesn't explain anything. Latin America, as a whole, and Argentina in particular, was in a state of mass political and social unrest in the late 1960s and 1970s, a semi-insurrectionary state in some cases.

There were definite political forces in Argentina that blocked the population's path toward social revolution: Peronism, Castroism, Stalinism. Tragically, many students and young people were misguidedly drawn into suicidal guerilla activities. The forces of repression no doubt used the "terrorist threat" to intimidate sections of the middle class, but even here, it would be false to suggest that "fear" alone played a major part in the social process.

A general strike erupted in Argentina in June-July 1975, demonstrating the determination of wide layers of the population to pursue their social interests in the face of an increasingly threatening political situation. As in Chile in 1973, the social aspirations of millions in Argentina were betrayed by movements claiming to be "socialist" and even "revolutionary," but who paralyzed the population and rendered it vulnerable to the sinister plots of the armed forces, backed to the hilt by Washington.

A filmmaker is not obliged to follow the historical narrative in detail, explaining the motives and interests of all the social parties—although some artists have certainly done that. He or she, however, is obliged to take history and the historical process seriously and not simply proceed on the basis of surface impressions.

The Secret in Their Eyes does not illuminate this complex and traumatic period in Argentina in a substantive or convincing fashion. In fact, it is more or less rendered deaf and dumb in the face of it. Rather than considering the real crisis and contradictions out of which the dictatorship emerged, the filmmaker chooses to view the event as the product of an abnormal mental state or repressed national memory. This is not helpful.

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