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## **REVIEW: THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES**

Dir: Juan Jose Campanella, 2009

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Empty lives and unrequited love is what makes Juan Jose Campanella's 2009 Oscar winner *El Secreto De Sus Ojos* (*The Secret in Their Eyes*). It tells the story of Benjamin Esposito (Ricardo Darin), Irene Hastings (Soledad Villamil) and Pablo Sandoval (Guillermo Fracella) - three justice officials who attempt to solve the rape and murder of Liliana Coloto. The crime has unjustly been attributed to two workers who are tortured

into signing a confession and it is up to Esposito and Sandoval to hunt down Isidoro Gomez (Javier Godino), the man they suspect of being guilty.

Told in flashback—Esposito, now retired, is in the process of writing a novel on this case—the film is about memory; more accurately, about how memory is constructed. It begins with a few flashes of Esposito's memory, the last and most violent one being that of Liliana's rape. We see those images as Esposito sees them, and he sees them as he writes them down. There is a narrative being constructed; fiction that is based in reality, except that the reality remains impossible to grasp. It is this inability, the nagging feeling that justice had not been done to the memory of a young woman that haunts Esposito and until he witnesses justice at its most ephemeral and awe-ful, he can't put the memory down in a satisfactory enough manner.

It may be worth noting that Esposito comes closest to the truth after leaving the justice system behind him. In the legal system, a man who admittedly committed a brutal rape and murder walked out of prison with the help of court officials. In the story that develops after, the man is seen serving the most severe and unending sentence – captivity in total isolation. Truth and justice ultimately lie outside legality and the rational outlook it promotes. Facts mean nothing, even the highest indictment this system can pronounce – death – doesn't do justice to the intensity of the crime, in fact, it can't even understand it. The clue lies in something so much more difficult to prove, the look, buried in seemingly innocent photographs. The story is set in Argentina in the 1970s, arguably its most tenuous political phase, and it can hardly be a coincidence that Campanella tells two love stories that are overwhelmed and subtly dictated by the political atmosphere.



There are two parallel narratives that run through the film – the story of Benjamin and Irene who love each other but are incapable of expressing their love, and the jilted affair of Gomez and Liliana which ended in Liliana's brutal death at the hands of her former lover. In other words, there are two love stories that can be strikingly similar, except that they are not, and it goes to Campanella's credit that he leaves it to the audience to crack this code, never once forcing his structure in any demonstrative way. The only give-away is the ending, where one story ends most tragically, the other manages to pick up the pieces.

Aside from the strict control that Campanella exercised over his film, it is his masterful technique that makes this film as potent as it is. To begin with, Campanella armed himself and gave the film an edge by selecting a team of outstanding actors who have evidently responded to the characters they play and the relationships they enter into. The spaces these characters occupy are constructed and lit in such a way that they serve as footnotes to their characteristics and their relationships. The trajectory of their lives, their preoccupations and failures become quite apparent in the detailing done by Campanella. Esposito's house is either drowning in darkness or marked by the singular existence of its owner. Sandoval feels most at home in a neighborhood bar. And Irene, despite a long married life which has resulted in two children, is only seen in professional spaces. Both she and Esposito are unable to confess their love because they cannot transcend the

professional ambit of their relationship. They are constantly surrounded by a legal mess, they occupy a physical and emotional wasteland and they can't even get themselves to close the door and have a private conversation. The excellent camerawork by Felix Monti highlights the escaping truth in the eyes of each of the characters, presumably giving the film its title. The six-minute chase sequence that is captured in one take is easily one of the most incredible pieces of camerawork cinema has seen. It starts with a long shot of the football stadium, closes in on Esposito and Sandoval who are among the thousands of audience, it follows them as they identify Gomez and follow him down a passage, up the stairs, into a bathroom, down the stairs, down a wall and finally back into the stadium where he is captured. There is a heady mix of restless camera movement and relatively slow, deliberative shots that work emphatically to underscore character traits and the significance of each moment in the film. To complement the camerawork is the editing done by Campanella himself. The film doesn't slack for moment and there are moments when the collaboration between sound and editing is pitch perfect.

There is empirical data that recommends this film most highly—it has won the coveted Academy Award, two Goya Awards, innumerable awards for the lead actress and a rough average of three and a half stars on most popular film review sites. Alongside, however, there is also a more potent promise—of despair, of satisfaction, foreboding and a sliver of hope.

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**About Author:** A Master's in English Literature from Delhi University, Kuhu Tanvir is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. She was previously an editor with NDTVMOVIES.com, the web vertical of the Indian news channel, NDTV. She has also worked as a contributor to the Daily Bulletin of the Osian's Cinefan Festival 2007. Her paper on urban terror in *Aamir* and *Delhi-6* was published in the *Sarai Reader 08: Fear*. She has also written a chapter titled 'Cyber Stars: Stardom and the New Media' for *Media, Culture and Identity* a volume edited by Dr. Md. Firoz by Dr. Meena T. Pillai which will be published in October 2010. Kuhu is one of the contributors to the *Directory of World Cinema – Spain*, her entry is on *Pan's Labyrinth*. The volume is being edited by Lorenzo Torres and will be published by Intellect in 2010.

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