

The Secret in Their Eyes (*El secreto de sus ojos*, 2009)

Sophie Dufays

dir. Juan José Campanella; prod. Mariela Besuievsky, Juan José Campanella; screenplay Juan José Campanella, Eduardo Sacheri; photography Félix Monti; music Federico Jusid, Emilio Kauderer. 35mm, colors, 127 mins. Haddock Films, Tornason Films, 100 Bares, distrib. Distribution Company.

»A guy can change anything. His face, his home, his family, his girlfriend, his religion, his God. But there's one thing he can't change. He can't change his passion ...«
(Pablo Sandoval to Benjamín Espósito)

El secreto de sus ojos is a film about passions. More specifically, it delves into two passions that are both at the core of melodrama and appear closely, yet ambivalently, linked: inter-class love and social justice. With its consequent generic blending of thriller and romance, Campanella's film has successfully captivated audiences and critics alike. It has received more than forty awards across the world, including two Goyas in Spain and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It was the second Argentine film to win this prestigious prize, twenty-four years after → *The Official Story*. The extent of the film's impacts on the Argentinian public sphere is comparable, as both have triggered intense debates about memory, national identity, and social justice. Like Puenzo's melodrama, *El secreto de sus ojos* returns to the collective trauma of the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976-83), or, more precisely, to the earlier years (1974-76) in which the Triple A (the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) was experimenting with the repressive terrorist methods later implemented by the military. This violent past is revisited from the memory of the film's protagonist: Benjamín Espósito (played by emblematic Argentine star Ricardo Darín), a retired judiciary employee who, at the end of the 1990s, tries to write a novel about his own trauma. But unlike *The Official Story*, which unlocks historical secrets through a female perspective, and against the melodramatic canon, here the characters who discover judicial and emotional truths are men. Therefore, *El secreto de sus ojos* can be conceived as a »male melodrama« (Rocha), which is structured



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around »fallen men« who are dominated by their passions, are led to bypass a balanced definition of justice, and eschew an ethical commitment within the public sphere.

This excess of a sense of social justice is highly melodramatic, and simultaneously derives from a deviation from traditional melodramatic conventions. Thus, the film adheres to the melodramatic *mode of excess*, rather than to the rules of the genre. To understand this subtle play with melodrama, we need to look at how the film constantly interweaves its two plot lines: the search for justice and the love story. This interweaving is introduced from the very beginning. The first two sequences evoking Espósito's separation from his superior and secret love interest, Irene (played by Soledad Villamil)—in a melodramatically coded train departure—and the violent rape and murder of Liliana Colotto, respectively, are indeed interdependent. Both of them are displayed as memory flashes that the protagonist tries to put on paper in the diegetic present of the film, set in 1999. These initial flashbacks refer to two experiences that are equally traumatic for him, and which will later be reintegrated into a more structured plot. When re-watching them, we understand that in the first sequence, Espósito, looking from inside the train at Irene running after him, was realizing *too late* that his love for her was reciprocal and that his decision to leave Buenos Aires without her condemned both of them to live »an empty life,« »a life full of nothing,« just like the one left to widower Ricardo Morales (played by Pablo Rago) after his wife's murder. The audience is also led to understand that the horrific vision of Colotto's bloody corpse in the second sequence crystallizes a state of shock and moral outrage that stirs Espósito's deep desire for justice. He felt this desire just shortly after having met Irene Menéndez-Hastings, a rich woman engaged to be married, when she started working in the judiciary system as his new supervisor.

Until the very last sequences, both the »Morales case« and the love story are left unresolved: The murderer, Isidoro Gómez (played by Javier Godino), arrested by Espósito and his colleague Pablo Sandoval (played by Guillermo Francella), had been released from prison and hired as a hit man—and Espósito is still unable to express his love for Irene. The final sequences display the extent to which these narrative lines are intrinsically linked, as the love affair between the protagonists can only culminate after the search for justice—and, with it, traumatic memory of 1970s Argentine violence—has been resolved. The prolonged and hopeful realization of the melodramatic »foundational romance« (Sommer) indeed happens after the »sensation scene,« in which Espósito and with him the audience discover the secret jail where Morales had for decades locked up the murderer, taking the law into his own hands. Following Linda Williams, the melodramatic confrontation typically reaches its climax in such a »sensation scene« where »the unspeakable truth« is revealed through a paroxysm of pathos and/or spectacular action, in both cases »bypassing language altogether« (52). The sequence in which Espósito witnesses Morales' peculiar appropriation of justice could be interpreted along these lines, as the pathos-laden revelation leaves the former speechless. But if the sensation scene is supposed to make the viewers and diegetic characters recognize the moral virtue of the victim (Morales), here the uncovered »truth« of the case is a morally questionable one, and Espósito's silence conveys a tacit agreement, or even complicity, with Morales' vigilantism. The attitude of the ex-judiciary employee and his consequent action—going to court to express his love to Irene, instead of making public the secret truth of the Morales case—alludes to a collective failure of justice and to the corrosion of the legal system in the post-dictatorship era (Rocha 13).

This ambivalent ending is especially striking regarding the film's relationship with melodrama. Some commentators have argued that *El secreto de sus ojos* »deploys the melodramatic mode masterfully, demobilizing audiences by redirecting our investment away from collective, politicized demands for accountability,« and is, consequently, »ideally functional for neoliberal democracy and the global marketplace« (Tandeciarz 68). But such a reading supposes a reductive understanding of melodrama's operations and multiple levels of signification.

In its activation of the melodramatic mode, the film is indeed much more complex. *El secreto de sus ojos'* romantic resolution »masks the disturbing message that in a society in which justice for decades has been linked to political power, the legal system is no longer effective nor reliable to act fairly« (Rocha 13). From this perspective, the sensation scene, far beyond its apparent revelation of a secret truth, destabilizes all certainties about the past and questions the very existence of justice. This operation of destabilization is grounded on two narrative and visual strategies throughout the film. The first consists in the use and reversal of certain conventions of the melodramatic genre regarding the narrative structure and the characters' roles. The second lies in the implementation of modes of visual excess and the investment in forms of symbolic value particular to the melodramatic mode, which mobilize the spectators' memories and collective imaginations of history (of 1970s Argentina).

First, the seeking of justice as enacted by the »good« characters appears, from the beginning, to be impure—that is, contaminated by personal feelings. This impurity recalls Brooks' analysis that, in melodrama, »morality is ultimately in the nature of affect, and strong emotion is in the realm of morality: for good and evil are moral feelings« (54). In its intertwining of justice and love, Campanella's movie blurs the borders between the traditional roles of melodrama. If the roles of the traitor, the champion of justice, the victim and the fool (as defined in Martín-Barbero) are clearly distributed at the beginning, all of them progressively become interchangeable, up until their final inversion: In the sensation scene, Gómez is transformed into a victim and Morales into a monstrous executioner. Before this culminating moment, Espósito moves from his role of champion of justice, and alternately mirrors both Morales—as a frustrated lover and the victim of an »empty life«—and Gómez. In the photos of Irene's engagement, he looks at her just as Gómez was observing his future victim, with the same *secret* passion *in his eyes*. The fool himself, Sandoval, becomes a victim when he is killed in place of Espósito.

Secondly, the melodramatic truth does not have to be found in the causal order of the signifiers but rather in the construction and dissemination of significant figures and images as well as in the *mise-en-scène*, the semantic value of which is open to diverse metaphorical interpretation (Dufays and Piedras). Some images of the traumatic events reconstructed in Espósito's novel symbolically allude to a visual collective memory of the Argentine military dictatorship. Liliana Colotto's naked and tortured body, Sandoval's murder in Espósito's house, Espósito's internal exile to Jujuy, Gómez and Morales behind the jail bars, the secret prison itself, all offer images that exceed the plot and its morally unsatisfying resolutions. This excess accounts for the perturbed processes of Espósito's memory but also for a narration that pretends to organize and resignify images loaded with collective trauma.

The final scene of interclass reconciliation between the lovers and the door that is literally closed on them is typical for the intrinsic contradictions of melodrama. Despite the obvious allegorical value of the foundational romance and its setting in an

office at the courthouse, this happy ending gives us the appearance of a retreat to the private sphere that comes to compensate for the film's disruption of the idea of justice. The discomfort generated by *El secreto de sus ojos* is based on the construction of a plot that seems to offer closure but that is exceeded by the symbolic and emotional density of its own images and *mise-en-scène*.

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