



Night of the sunflowers

Director: Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo
Country: Spain
Date: 2006

A review from BeyondHollywood.com:

One of the residents of a declining little village in northern Spain comes across an ancient cave in the nearby hills. Hoping to revitalize the town through the potential touristic possibilities of a prehistoric cave, the locals call upon Speleologist Esteban (Carmello Gomez), who arrives in the region to investigate the cave with his assistant Pedro (Mariano Alameda) and girlfriend Gabi (Judith Diakhate). However, while waiting for Esteban and Pedro to return from the cave, Gabi is brutally assaulted. Delirious with rage, Esteban and Pedro set out in search of Gabi's assailant, but a case of mistaken identity leads to a tragic act of violence.



The fallout from this spins the protagonists' lives out of control, particularly after they run across opportunistic cop Tomas (Vicente Romero) and his straight-arrow, world-weary boss Amadeo (Celso Bugallo, "The Sea Inside"), who also happens to be his father-in-law. Thus begins "La Noche De Los Girasoles" ("The Night of the Sunflowers"), the debut feature film by Spanish writer/director Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo.

A mystery thriller set in rural Spain, "Girasoles" utilizes a unique story telling architecture whereby the film is constructed of six overlapping chapters. Each chapter focuses on a different set of characters and their circumstances. By virtue of each chapter starting sometime before the last one and ending sometime after the next one, Sanchez-Cabezudo deftly sustains the common threads that lead them all together without resorting to off-the-wall coincidences, as is so often the case in these sorts of fragmented narratives.

The rather deliberate pacing and moody atmosphere make this a character-driven production, and the cast is up to the challenge. Employing mostly character actors rather than instantly recognizable faces, Sanchez-Cabezudo forces the film to rely on its characters to advance the story, rather than coasting on the cast's name recognition. Gomez and Bugallo, in particular, are standouts as the reluctantly amoral Esteban and the doggedly meticulous Amadeo, respectively.

Despite the rural setting, "Girasoles" is a classic film noir, touching all the usual bases: crime, melodrama, betrayal, deception, moral ambiguity and the use of fragmented structures such as flashbacks and flash-forwards. Sanchez-Cabezudo manages to keep these well-worn archetypes fresh by framing them with some prototypical literary themes of small town protectionism (sell your communal dignity for cash, outsiders always cause problems, rich city folk can buy their way out of trouble) and turning them on their ears. The beautifully lensed barren landscapes of the Spanish hills are symbolic of the economic decline of rural communities. This parallels the moral decline of the city-slicker protagonists, thus completing the larger metaphor of the societal costs of the demographic rift.



As befitting of the subject matter, the overall feel of the film is extremely bleak. This point is made all the more apparent by the construction of the characters and their deplorable, yet quite believable actions. In particular, the manner in which Gabi's assailant is handled is very disturbing due to its uncomfortable realism. The film offers the characters no answers and no opportunities for redemption. Rather, it revels in showing how man's built-in instinct for self-preservation can turn tragedy into outright evil in the blink of an eye, crystallizing the thesis with the singular statement, "Is justice really necessary if no one demands it?" delivered with Machiavellian seriousness by Tomas.

"La Noche De Los Girasoles" is an impressive debut effort for Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo. The story doesn't break any new thematic ground, but strong performances and a carefully juggled episodic structure keep it fresh and engaging.

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