DAVID GEORGE
AND GIZELLA MENESES

ARGENTINE CINEMA

FROM NOIR TO NEO-NOIR

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For Bia and Alex

—David George

For Doug, Camila, Sofia, Eliana, and Julian

—Gizella Meneses

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Chapter One

The Noir Phenomenon

Thesis, Methodology, and Approach

Our study presents multiple perspectives on Argentine film noir.[1] This first essay is introductory, consisting of general considerations concerning noir and neo-noir phenomena, focusing on Hollywood and international noir, concluding with an overview of classic Argentine film noir and contemporary neo-noir, from the 1940s to the 2000s. Subsequent essays present close readings of six Argentine films: the 1946 *El ángel desnudo* (*The Naked Angel*), the 1984 *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (a U.S.-Brazilian adaptation of the Argentine novel *El beso de la mujer araña*), the 2005 *El aura* (*The Aura*), the 2007 neo-retro noir *La señal* (*The Signal),* the 2009 *El secreto de sus ojos* (*The Secret in Their Eyes*), and the 2013 *Wakolda* (*The German Doctor*). The final essay provides a conclusion. Though our focus is primarily on exemplary neo-noirs from the 2000s, arguably the most fertile and cutting-edge period in Argentine film production, we include an extensive analysis of Argentina's first full-fledged noir, *The Naked Angel,* and continue with *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (a 1970s noir novel, adapted to the cinema in the 1980s, and to the Broadway stage in the form of a musical in the 1990s). We then scrutinize four neo-noirs from the 2000s, which constitute the main focus of our book.

Paul Schrader (see below) has been a pioneering figure in film noir studies. In his 1972 "Notes on Film Noir," he codified a menu of noir attributes that remained the industry standard for several decades. Though his taxonomy has been modified—and sometimes questioned—by other critics, it remains a useful starting point. According to Schrader, film noir is unique to Hollywood and reflective of a specific historical period, to wit, post-WWII America, from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s. Most students of this period

refer to it as "classic noir."[2] Our thesis, methodology, and approach are threefold:

1. While we endorse Schrader's taxonomy of noir tropes with reservations, we contextualize his "notes" by presenting the views of more recent studies, such as James Naremore's *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (1998 and 2008). We also deviate from Schrader's taxonomy by asserting that film noir is an international phenomenon reflecting a wide variety of historical circumstances and periods. Furthermore, we posit that classic Argentine noir films owe as much a debt to Europe as to Hollywood.
2. We examine both inscription and adaptation. We approach films as exemplars of cultural cross-fertilization, styles, and genres crossing borders. To give credit where credit is due, international noir—including Argentine noir—owes a considerable debt to the classic noir films produced in Hollywood. In more specific terms, it is our contention that the directors of the neo-noir films scrutinized in this study consciously inscribe elements of classic film noir and transform them into original forms of a uniquely Argentine neo-noir. An example is the film *El aura*'s inscription of *The Third Man*, scrutinized in essay four. This process can also be defined in terms of post-modernist recycling, homage, and intertextuality. In regard to the latter process, this study examines Argentine neo-noir from an intertextual perspective, for example, by comparing film adaptations with their sources and/or spinoffs in the cases of *The Naked Angel*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Signal, The Secret in Their Eyes,* and *The German Doctor*. A further point, in the case of foreign sources, is that in the past this cultural "borrowing" might have been viewed by some as subservient, in a process of cultural colonization, but Latin American artists are now in full command of their craft and no longer fear the stigma of subservience. As a corollary to the latter point, Latin American artists have seen their works exported, "borrowed," spun off by foreign sources, with ofttimes surprising results. Two cases of spinoffs in our study are *The Secret in Their Eyes* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.
3. We posit that some of the literature on film noir lacks focus on craft. We demonstrate that several Argentine films are full-fledged noirs—or neo-noirs—by means of a close reading of the filmic texts. Through nearly scene-by-scene analyses of noir techniques, the perspectives on craft offered in *Argentine Cinema: From Noir to Neo-Noir* include *mise-en-scène* (e.g., chiaroscuro lighting, tilted camera shots, distorted framing), elliptical plot design, tone, and theme. Our project addresses general questions on noir as well: We examine multiple points of view regarding categorization of noir and neo-noir, as well as theoretical perspectives and sociohistorical context.

CLASSIC NOIR

Film noir currently receives broad and current interest among film buffs. To illustrate, we begin with a quote from the popular press that describes classic noir:

> Between the Great Depression and the start of the Cold War, Hollywood went noir, reflecting the worldly, weary, wised-up undercurrent of midcentury America. In classics such as *Laura* [,] *Double Indemnity*, and *Out of the Past*, where the shadows of L.A. and New York pulse with killers, corpses, and perilous romance, failure is not only a logical option but a smart-talking seduction. (*Vanity Fair*)

Scholars, reviewers, and film buffs argue endlessly over definitions of film noir and neo-noir. Most would agree that films noirs are crime thrillers but not all crime thrillers are noirs. Yet there is wide disagreement regarding classification; to wit, is noir a style, a mood, a movement, a genre, a discourse?

The most oft-quoted—deservedly so—student of film noir, Paul Schrader, argues vehemently in his essay "Notes on Film Noir" that it belongs to a specific place and time period (urban America, 1940s and 1950s). Schrader also provides the most complete compilation of noir attributes (see below). Because, according to Schrader, film noir is restricted to a specific time frame, it cannot be considered a genre. It is, rather, a style, a mood, determined by historical events (e.g., post-WWII, the post-Depression hangover and anxiety, the onset of McCarthyism).

Naremore (*More Than Night)* posits the idea of noir as a discourse:

> If we want to understand it, or to make sense of genres or art-historical categories in general, we need to recognize that film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of *cinéma*; in other words, it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies. (10)

Naremore links noir "discourse" to French sources, especially postwar surrealism and existentialism: "what needs to be emphasized is that existentialism was intertwined with a residual surrealism, and surrealism was crucial for the reception of any art described as 'noir'" (17). He further explains that "critical discussion of American films noirs in the 1950s was conducted chiefly in surrealist journals. Indeed, Nino Frank's seminal essay, which emphasizes 'criminal adventure' and the 'dynamism of violent dead,' is replete with surrealist values" (17).

Those who define "noir" as a genre reply that if, according to Schrader, it were a style limited to a circumscribed time and place, how could noir

continue into the present time? Yet another school of thought argues that the term neo-noir should be defined as a subset of postmodernism (pastiche, recycling, homage). It is not the purpose of this study to resolve these arguments but to acknowledge them.[3]

What are film noir's common denominators in Schrader's taxonomy? In terms of *mise-en-scène*, plot structure, theme, and character, they are low-key lighting, chiaroscuro effects, distorted camera angles, asymmetrical composition, shadows, and night-for-night shots. In short, oblique camera angles distort and destabilize: These include low-angle and high-angle shots, as well as tilts; the camera is canted or tilted to produce tension and disorientation. Noir directors borrowed many of these techniques from German Expressionist films (e.g., Fritz Lang's Mabuse cycle). Other noir sources are hard-boiled fiction (e.g., the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain) and 1930s gangster films (e.g., *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*). Naremore more closely scrutinizes French sources:

> The French were [. . .] disposed to invent American noir because it evoked a golden age of their own *cinéma*. They were quick to observe that the new Hollywood thrillers resembled such Popular Front films as *Pépé le Moko* (1936), *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), and *Le jour se lève* (1939)—a group of shadowy melodramas, set in an urban criminal milieu and featuring a doomed protagonist who behaved with sang-froid under pressure. The term *film noir* had in fact been employed by French writers of the late 1930s in discussions of these films. (*More Than Night* 13)

Plots in films noirs tend to be intricate, and flashbacks are common. As Paul Schrader pointedly notes, "A complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and [a] convoluted time sequence to immerse the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly stylized world" (221). Films noirs, according to Schrader, project a mood of cynicism/pessimism/fatalism—a harsh view of American life—related to the historical moment and social ills. Morally ambiguous protagonists abound, often manipulated by a *femme fatale*. Settings are dystopic (usually urban but occasionally rural).

Departing now from Schrader's taxonomy, a commonly held view of noir is that the urban landscape that so excited the Modernists—one thinks here especially of the Italian Futurists—in noir became society's underbelly, a foreboding, tenebrous backdrop for crime and corruption, where nothing was as it seemed and no one—with few exceptions—could be trusted. If the "classic" noirs were filmed in black and white, more recent examples—the neo-noirs—are in color (one could mention such notable exceptions as the Cohen Brothers' 2001 *The Man Who Wasn't There*). The amoral main characters in noir may be hard-boiled PIs, police or government agents, gangsters, or amateurs

attempting to pull off a heist or commit murder. Two examples of the latter are *Double Indemnity* and the Argentine *El aura*.

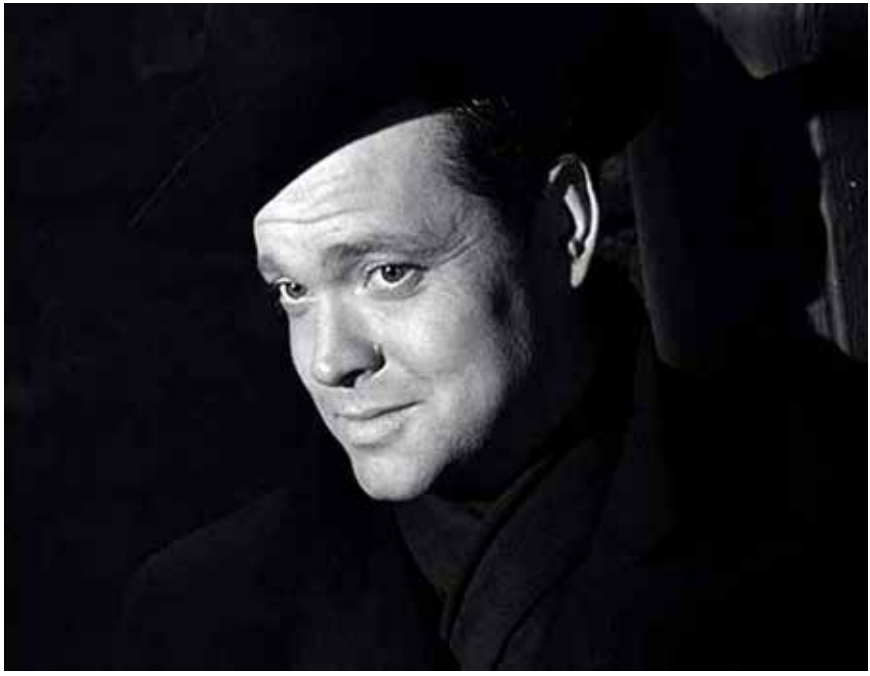
A question frequently posed by students of noir in response to Schrader's view is this: What is one to say about international noir?[4] Is the authentic film noir canon confined to the United States (i.e., Hollywood)—as Schrader and others would have it—or is it an international phenomenon? We stand beside those who argue the latter case. Richard Gilmore hints at this when he writes, "[. . .] when films began to be recognized as noir, that recognition included a detour through Europe [,] a detour that did not occur when one recognized a film as a western [. . .] or even as a simple detective story" (119). Two films many critics include in their "classic" noir lists are not set in the United States at all. The 1950 *Night and the City* is set in London. The main character, Harry Fabian, played by Richard Widmark, is a small-time hustler whose endless failed schemes lead to his doom. Though this was essentially a Hollywood production, produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, its London setting undercuts to some degree the insistence that noir is a uniquely American form reflecting American historical circumstances and social milieu.[5]

An even more glaring example is the 1949 *The Third Man*. The film is set in postwar Vienna. The scriptwriter was Graham Green, the director was the British Carol Reed, and most of the minor characters are played by British or Viennese actors (whose dialogue in German is purposely not translated in the form of subtitles). The Italian-born Alida Valli plays the female lead, Anna Schmidt. The main character is Holly Martins, played by the American Joseph Cottons, and Orson Welles plays the mysterious Harry Lime. We will discuss *The Third Man* in more detail in the essay devoted to the Argentine neo-noir *El aura*.

The international character of film noir includes numerous French examples: *Quai des orfèvres* (1948) deals with crime in Paris, featuring such seedy locations as a dance hall. The camera work—low-key lighting, asymmetrical composition—is characteristically noir. Other examples are the 1955 *Rififi* and the 1958 *Bob le Flambeur*. The term "cinema polar" is often used to describe French films with noir attributes.

In November of 2016, the Gene Siskel Film Center of Chicago presented a series on so-called Brit noir. The announcement makes a credible case for the existence of an autochthonous British Noir:

> This month the Gene Siskel Film Center presents Brit Noir, a series of eight films representing the long-overlooked British branch of the moody film movement that flourished most famously in the U.S.
>
> In their landmark study "Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style" (1979), Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward assert that the film noir, like the western, is "an indigenous American form." That claim has been



The Third Man (1949): Harry Lime, the master criminal

> challenged by later noir scholars, with perhaps the strongest counter-claim being made for a British film noir movement—or Brit Noir, as it is often called [. . .] Like its American counterpart, Brit Noir blossomed after World War II, similarly nurtured by sub-surface currents of disillusionment and anxiety in the postwar era. However, Brit Noir tended to have a grayer, more stoical, less flamboyant inflection—attributable in part to Britain's sustained wartime exposure to aerial attack, with rubble still visible long afterward, and to the years of privation and rationing that persisted while America basked in gaudy postwar prosperity. Other qualities that have been identified as distinguishing Brit Noir from Yank Noir include: a stronger influence of French poetic realism than of German expressionism, more emphasis (of course) on class issues, less reliance on private eye and femme fatale characters, and a greater direction of emphasis away from the individual and toward the community. (http://www.siskelfilmcenter.org/britnoir)

In the case of Argentina, critics have identified films from the 1940s and the 1950s. Currie K. Thompson, for example, in his essay "Two Takes on Gender in Argentine Film Noir," examines two cases from the 1950s: Carlos Hugo Christensen's1952 *Si muero antes de despertar (If I Should Die Before I Wake*) and Mario Soffici's 1958 *Rosaura a las diez* (*Rosaura at Ten*

o'Clock). Thompson expands his scrutiny of Argentine classic film noir in his book *Picturing Argentina: Myths, Movies, and the Peronist Vision*, which we discuss below in the last section of this introduction where we present general considerations on film noir and neo-noir in Argentina. We also discuss below New York MoMa's 2015 program of classic Argentine noirs. It is further worth noting another MoMa 2015 program titled "Mexico at Midnight: Film Noir from Mexico's Golden Age."

NEO-NOIR

The term "neo-noir" begs the question: If films noirs came to an end in the late 1950s, why have studios, both in the U.S. and abroad, continued to produce them? The answer is that the films adhering strictly to Schrader's codification are circumscribed by the very nature of his taxonomy. Noir tropes, however, have never died or faded away. To get around the limitations imposed by Schrader's system, critics have come up with several terms: neo-noir (the most common), postmodern noir, and neo-retro noir. The important point is that the tropes that characterize films noirs in the 1940s and 1950s are still alive and well and provide a source of ideas and techniques for filmmakers. Further, neo-noir films frequently inscribe—and occasionally remake—classic noirs. As did the films noirs of the classic period, neo-noir reflects the social change and historical circumstances of the post-classic decades, wherever the films are made. As we will see below, the Argentine films scrutinized in this study reflect that nation's history. Still, many critics side with Schrader and reject the proposition that noir constitutes a genre and assert that neo-noir is nothing more than nostalgia. For example, Richard Brody writes in the *New Yorker* (July 23, 2014):

> That's why it's strange to think of film noir as a genre—at least, as an open-ended one. A Western is a Western is a Western, whether it's filmed by Thomas H. Ince in 1916, by John Ford in 1939, or by Clint Eastwood in 1992. The same is true of war films, comedies, and, yes, crime movies. But the film noir is historically determined by particular circumstances; that's why latter-day attempts at film noir, or so-called neo-noirs, almost all feel like exercises in nostalgia.

It is our contention that neo-noirs go well beyond mere nostalgia. For example, Andrew Spicer, in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, sheds light on important features of the phenomenon:

> One of the most arresting traits of film noir is its depiction of male protagonists who lack the qualities (courage, incorruptibility, tenacity, and dynamism) that

Point Blank (1967): The first post-noir noir

> characterize the archetypal American hero and therefore function as antiheroes. Typical male noir protagonists are weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual, damaged men who suffer from a range of psychological neuroses and who are unable to resolve the problems they face. (47)

It should be noted that Spicer's characterizations could also apply to many classic noir characters. That is, the tenets of classic noir have persisted long beyond the 1950s. Spicer gives an existentialist rationale: a world lacking a moral framework. His thesis is that neo-noir intensifies these characteristics. He focuses on two films: *Point Blank* (1967) and *Memento* (2000). He maintains that they present "extreme examples of [. . .] an anti-hero whose memory is, or may be, faulty, whose experience of time is confused, and who is deeply uncertain about his past and unsure about the meaning of the present [. . .] and the very fabric of his identity" (47). In existentialist terms, he mentions several factors, such as alienation, view of life as fragile and solitary, futility of reason, lack of moral absolutes, attempt to forge an identity "from the confusing assault of experience" (47). Spicer defines John Boorman's *Point Blank* as the first post-noir noir. He asserts that the film is "highly conscious" of such classic noirs as *Double Indemnity*. One could add that conscious inscription, or "recycling"—to use a favorite post-modernist term—of classic noir frequently occurs in neo-noir films. For example, in our book we discuss the Argentine *El aura*, which clearly inscribes classic American noirs, particularly *The Third Man*.[6] *Point Blank*'s plot is deliberately unclear:

Did the events happen or were they a dream? Spicer characterizes the plot in this way: "dream logic of desire, not of reality" (51). The film *El aura*, as we posit below, plays with this uncertainty, but then a close-up in the final scene may undo the dream logic.

Color is another important neo-noir attribute, since the classic films noirs were in black and white. Spicer mentions that Boorman used unsaturated color and night scenes, which he calls "monochromatic intensity." He adds: "Cold grays and silvers through blue and green to warmer yellows and reds . . ." (52). *El aura* includes a similar color scheme, although it rarely makes use of warmer colors. Naremore has this to say on the subject: "A great many retro or 'neo-noir' films use colored light not only to heighten the atmosphere of sex and violence, but also to evoke the monochromatic tradition of high-contrast, black-and-white thrillers [. . .] but because color has become normalized, the conventional effects of black-and-white lighting can also be integrated smoothly into recent films that have no retrospective or nostalgic intent" (192).

Music is another vital element of noir and neo-noir. Many classic noirs featured elaborate scores, often heightening melodramatic effect. An exception was *The Third Man*, with Anton Karas's famous zither score. According to Spicer, Boorman's score was "more tonal than melodic [creating] a distancing effect" (52). *El aura* does something comparable: a score comprised of a repeated melancholy piano theme and an electronic drone.

Spicer returns to the question of character: "Boorman replaced conventional character psychology with a blank mask, using [the actor Lee Marvin's] expressionless face [. . .] to suggest a walking corpse, profoundly alienated from everything and everyone" (52). Espinosa, the protagonist of *El aura*, suggests something similar. However, as we explain in regard to *El aura*, there are also many differences; for example, while Marvin's character is menacing, rage-filled, and vengeful, the protagonist Espinosa is passive.

Spicer states that Boorman's film ends as a circular story, revealed as an empty spectacle or a recurring nightmare, the delusion of a man already dead. Thus a story of revenge becomes an existentialist narrative about the nature of desire, the fallibility of memory, and the fragility of identity in the face of a contingent and meaningless world, expressing the blank pointlessness of modern existence (52).

This description applies in many ways to *El aura*, especially the question of fallibility of memory. Spicer concludes his discussion of *Point Blank* with another assertion that could also refer to the Argentine movie: "Postmodern noirs often display highly convoluted plots that circle back on themselves and a pervasive uncertainty about the reliability of what is being shown or told and the processes of memory, underscored by an existential fear of meaninglessness" (55).