

They drive by night

El décimo infierno references film noir, gets nowhere

By Julio Nakamurakare / Herald staff

Every literary or film genre has certain rules and conventions difficult to eschew, but it is not necessary to stick so strictly to them to the point of turning them into clichés. It's difficult to imagine a hard-boiled novel or a film noir, especially when set in the US, where it's not hot, where a PI strapped for cash accepts an investigation commissioned by a damsel in distress. Think Dashiell Hammett, picture Bogart and you get the idea.



The new Argentine movie *El décimo infierno* — which marks the directorial début of writer Mempo Giardinelli — follows these premises to the dot, the only difference being, perhaps, that the action is transported to Resistencia, the capital city of the northeastern province of Chaco. Resistencia, the first person narrator in *El décimo infierno* explains, can be compared, to a certain extent, with the early 1960s TV series *Peyton Place*. The reasons for the analogy between *Peyton Place* and Resistencia are obvious: both cities are calm to the point of dullness, but there's an undercurrent of suppressed emotions and passions that burst out at the least expected moment. Until.

The modular structure of film noir may seem repetitious to the point of triteness, but the formula does work when the narrative serves the purpose of highlighting the amoral nature of humankind, the decadence of the upper middle classes, the boredom that becomes a deadly trap. Giardinelli's *El décimo infierno* is a presumptuous descent into this kind of urban inferno.

Giardinelli and co-writer/co-director Juan Pablo Méndez Restrepo play it safe from the beginning, trying to recreate the suffocating atmosphere of film noir setting. Narrated in offscreen voiceover by Antonio, *El décimo infierno* abides by the rules of the game: well-off, late middle-aged businessman Antonio Romero, a respectable citizen in every regard, goes about business routinely, like an automaton, but silently keeps thinking of *Peyton Place*.

There's a love triangle in the film: Antonio, a successful real estate entrepreneur (Patricio Contreras), Alfredo, his business partner and best friend (Guillermo Somogi), and Griselda, Alfredo's sexually starved wife (Aymara Rovera). Alfredo knows that his wife has been cheating on him with Antonio, and that the affair has been going on for some time. And yet, he plays

the pretense game as though secrets could be kept from others in Resistencia, a Hell-on-Earth, stifling small town.

Triggering the action in *El décimo infierno*, Antonio and Griselda ask themselves the question they have avoided for years: why not kill Alfredo and run away together? You can't be overzealous to ask yourself the question: why should they? Why not keep things as they are, dull and repetitive yet reasonably comfortable?

The voiceover narrative gives us a clue: Antonio is fed up not only with his apathetic life, but also with the impunity that lords over Resistencia. In other words, he needs a getaway not out of passion, not to live out a forbidden love. Here's another dictum Giardinelli and Méndez Restrepo try to remain faithful to: we live in a universe that's basically amoral. This is the essence of film noir, the unavoidable amorality of hypocritical urbania.

But the premise does not match the result, not in the case of *El décimo infierno*. The underlying message may be there but it takes an improbable suspension of disbelief to take in the shooting rampage Antonio and Griselda engage in before, during and after their getaway odyssey.

While all the elements of film noir are present in *El décimo infierno* — from the asphyxiating atmosphere to the neon-lit cityscape and even a husky voice humming *My Funny Valentine* — the film never really takes off, and the rhetorical questions Antonio asks himself about moral dilemmas sink him and his partner in crime into an abyss from which there is no escape.

PRODUCTION NOTES

El décimo infierno. Argentina, 2012. Written and directed by: Mempo Giardinelli and Juan Pablo Méndez Restrepo. Cinematography by: Lucas Nieto. Edited by: Ximena Franco. Music by: Raúl Barboza, Rodrigo Soko. With: Patricio Contreras, Aymar Rovera, Guillermo Somogi. Distributed by: Aura Films. NC16 PG. Running time: 83 minutes.