

The psycho who tried to get away with murder

Tesis sobre un homicidio plays thrilling game of opposites

By Julio Nakamurakare
Herald staff

FILM REVIEW

NOIR. A good film noir is supposed to rely heavily on such visual and aural elements as a menacing urban setting, German Expressionism-style chiaroscuro, a chain-smoking PI, an elusive damsel in distress with an obscure past, an unsettling music score punctuating the action, the amplified hiss of a cigarette being lit, the sound of a shot of JB being poured in a glass.

It's not that these elements alone suffice to make a piece of good hard boiled narrative, it's just that you cannot do without them, the only concession being, perhaps, that the order of the elements may be altered at will — though not at random.



The presence of a darkly impenetrable character with a pathological obsession adds another dimension to the noirish blend, imbuing the setting and the storyline with an alluring game of opposites — a psycho killer pitted against a self-styled PI in search of some form of expiation for the assassin's own capital sins and the hunter's unexpressed but evident pending accounts.

THESIS. An M.A. thesis is not just about a careful, attentive review of the existing literature about a topic that needs elucidating — it ought to pose relevant questions and provide answers with a solid grounding on field work and research methodology. As a discipline built on a body of codes and regulations aimed at having justice served, Law can purportedly be manipulated to, instead, serve an individual's or a group's vested interests, to mask their true intentions.

This is not true of Gonzalo Ruiz Cordera (Alberto Ammann, suitably inscrutable), a young law graduate who sets up a diabolical scheme to prove his conjectures about the existing gaps in the Penal Code. Ruiz Cordera is a fictitious character from Diego Paszkowski's prize-winning novel *Tesis sobre un homicidio* (1999), but his ruminations are as true and pertinent as the loopholes in criminal legislation that allow, in many cases, proven criminals and wrongdoers to escape punishment. The contradictions and maladjustments between law and justice are at the core of *Tesis para un homicidio*, the novel, and they are also the crux of the problem the internationally renowned Law Professor Roberto Bermúdez (Ricardo Darín, malleable and brilliant as expected) is confronted with in the film adaptation when Gonzalo, a student of his yearly postgraduate seminar, underscores the professor's openly cynical if true-to-life position that the Law cannot be equated with Justice and Truth. Speaking of which, the professor's and the student's position may not be as far removed, the only difference being that the former knows his hands are tied and the latter thinks he can, through the sheer power of intellect, get away with murder, literally.

MURDER. Professor Bermúdez's seminar is scheduled to last eight weeks, perfect attendance is expected, and students are to produce a dissertation on a pivotal point of the course. Although each new cohort is expected to come up with different questions from the preceding groups, Bermúdez knows all too well that the same points will be discussed repeatedly year after year.

He loves his seminar, though, and spends months preparing new material for it, even if the core studies remain the same. But this year tables will be turned on him: this new student, Ruiz Cordera, the son of a respected colleague and friend, will be in attendance, and things begin to take a strange turn the very first day of class, when the body of a young girl, the victim of a brutal rape and murder case, appears in the eerily deserted parking lot of the Law School.

BENDING THE LAW. The bait has been thrown out around Bermúdez, who begins to suspect that Gonzalo — the most brilliant student in his cohort — has neatly laid out the details of and executed a perfect crime to test the professor's wits and sanity. Bermúdez and Gonzalo establish a relationship that goes beyond that of teacher-student to become the embodiment of intellectual rivals and foes. "He's the murderer," Bermúdez tells himself, "it's a coldly calculated attempt on Gonzalo's part to prove what he's capable of, defying truth and human justice and, may be, turning in a thesis that shows his guilty and the judiciary's incapacity to catch a diabolically murderous, sick man."

THE WORD. *Tesis para un homicidio*, the novel, mostly follows the stream of consciousness-style introspective deliberations of Gonzalo, the 23-year-old lawyer with criminal intentions, a first-time narrator whose every thought is voiced by himself in writing, addressing a choral multiplicity of readers. Not unlike *Brett Easton Ellis'* groundbreaking *American Psycho* (1991), Diego Paszkowski's murderer is well educated, rich, cynical, cool, aloof, with no material concern to speak of other than the materialization of his obsession. In the movie, actress Calu Rivero is rather adequate as the carnal bait who will presumably lead to Gonzalo's downfall.

OF THEE I THINK. The novel contains a profusion, an overabundance, if you will, of references to US actress Juliette Lewis and all of her films, all of her scene-stealing moments, her characterizations and her acting range, from *Cape Fear* (1991) to *Kalifornia* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Every moment in Gonzalo's mental and physical perambulations is filled with delusional images of Lewis, as though she were the only human being he could relate to. And indeed Lewis is the perfect surrogate for a compulsively, pathologically obsessed person estranged from the "real world," if there's such a thing as the "real world." If there is indeed a real world out there, it's mean and evil, Gonzalo muses, and the way to prove his contention is through intellectual manipulation and actual development: murder, the perfect kind. Which, unlike traditional thrillers, is not about leaving no traces but exactly the opposite: massaging his own ego by purposefully constructing a puzzle and following the reassembly process.

TRANSPOSITION. Pato Vega's screen adaptation of *Tesis para un homicidio* is nothing short of stunning, a veritable tour de force. Vega's script shifts the narrative thread from killer to persecutor, foregrounding the suitably noirish personality of Professor Bermúdez, whose pulsating voice, whether aurally realized or not, resounds in audience' minds with the power of a thunderous nightmare.

"He is behind this monstrous killing," Bermúdez tells himself when the dead body of a young woman is discovered in the parking lot of BA's Law School, within sight of teachers and students. "He's challenging me," Bermúdez soliloquy goes on amid endless gulps of JB. In narrative terms, Bermúdez calls the shots, a reversal of roles that Gonzalo, were he real, would have found inadmissible. But screenwriter Pato Vega — who developed the perfectly choreographed 2009 comedy *Música en espera* with co-writer Julieta Steinberg — does a fine job turning tables on Gonzalo and focusing, so to speak, on his rival, Professor Bermúdez, whom he tries to outwit at any cost.

GRADING. *Tesis para un homicidio*, the movie, is so cleverly assembled that, even at the risk of doing away with apparently instrumental situations and introducing new occurrences, it

manages to create empathy with Bermúdez and creates the need to follow the fate of the retired judge turned professor and law writer. Kudos for actor Ricardo Darín, whose screen persona alone suffices to capture the attention of even the most inattentive audiences. Although Darín is the best actor of his generation and the subject of countless accolades in comedy, drama, thriller, dramedy and every conceivable genre crossbreed, he is the possessor of that rare quality very few performers are endowed with: the capacity to detach themselves from previous work and their own personal lives.

In spite of his larger-than-life persona, maybe it's Mr. Darín's real-life low profile that never allows critics or audiences to go, "That's him again in such and such a role..." Under the skin of the down-and-out Professor Bermúdez, whose lifetime achievements in the field of Criminal Law have made him a celebrity but turned his existence into a dreary, alcohol-fuelled fixation with the byways and crevices of human justice, all that can be said about Mr. Darín is that noir definitely becomes him, largely on account of his breakout performance as a court officer turned PI in Juan José Campanella's Oscar-winning *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009). The same speculations and meditations are present in *Tesis para un homicidio* and *El secreto...*, even if the parallels that may be drawn between the two are far and few apart, other than moral dilemmas and preoccupations. What Mr. Darín's characters have in common in both films is their sense of determination to find the truth, to solve a riddle, to have justice served — three almost unattainable goals that spur the action ahead at a relentless pace. Pitted against the intellectually gifted but emotionally incapacitated Gonzalo, Professor Bermúdez embodies, in his alcohol-drenched analgesia, the very human need to pursue the truth, however useless and ridiculous the judiciary system, the Penal Code and addenda, the impedimenta that prevent judges from proving that Justice is indeed blind.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Tesis sobre un homicidio. Argentina-Spain, 2012. Written by: Patricio Vega, based on Diego Paszkowski's novel of the same title. Directed by: Hernán Goldfrid. With: Ricardo Darin, Alberto Ammann, Arturo Puig, Calu Rivero. Produced by: BD Cine, Tornasol Films, Telefé, Haddock Films and Castafiore Films. Distributed by: Buena Vista International. Running time: 105 minutes.