

Jason Weiss

An Interview with EDGARDO COZARINSKY

Literary and film critic, writer of fiction and film scripts, director of features and documentaries, Edgardo Cozarinsky (Buenos Aires, 1939) keeps genres and discourses in constant flux, permeating each other in an ongoing dialogue of forms. Through the 1960s he frequented literary and film circles in Buenos Aires, especially the group around Victoria Ocampo's illustrious journal and publishing house Sur, which included Borges, Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo. He published an early book on Henry James, and eventually made a first film in 1971, but his work as a filmmaker and as a writer mostly developed only after he left Argentina and settled in Paris in the mid-1970s.

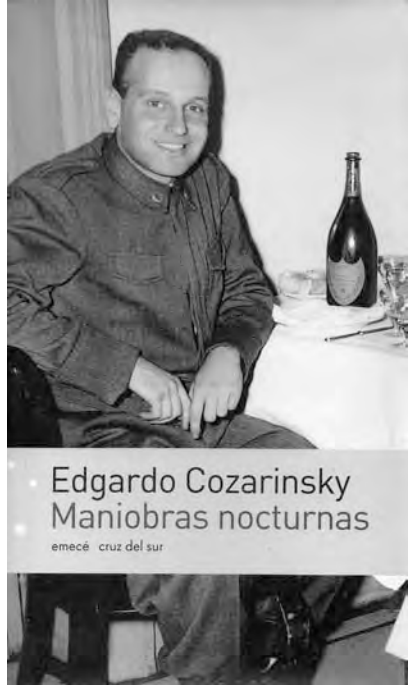
His departure coincided with what was quickly becoming a wave of exiles from the Southern Cone, due to military dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay that lasted well into the next decade. Though many exiles headed for Mexico or Spain, a substantial number of intellectuals went elsewhere in Europe, especially Paris. Ever since the nineteenth century, writers and artists from Latin America (from Spanish America, above all) looked to Paris as a place of pilgrimage, an almost obligatory rite of passage in their cultural formation. Rubén Darío, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, César Vallejo, and Alfonso Reyes were but a few who spent significant years in Paris through the first half of the twentieth century; later, most of the writers in the so-called Boom spent time there, either early in their career (Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez), or intermittently, or even for most of their adult life (Julio Cortázar, Severo Sarduy). Moreover, the French reception of such literature was well in advance of its interest among Anglo-Americans. Paris was the place where writers from throughout the continent were most likely to cross paths, and during much of the twentieth century it was somewhat considered the capital of Latin American literature. For more recent generations of writers, coming of age amid the growth of vibrant democracies at home, the glow of Paris

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has dimmed, and yet even today the city is still teeming with Latin Americans.

Though he has long maintained a small apartment in the Montparnasse neighborhood of Paris, Cozarinsky only began returning for regular visits to Buenos Aires in the late 1980s, to the point where he gradually alternated about equally between the two cities and now probably stays more in his native land—amid various travels inevitably, whether for film projects or by invitation or simple curiosity. At the time of this interview—in New York, in April 1995—he was more actively engaged in his work making films. But following a serious illness and time in the hospital in 1999, he returned to writing with a vengeance, publishing over ten books (novels, stories, essays, chronicles) in the past decade alone.



Among his many films are: *La Guerre d'un seul homme* (1981; One Man's War), *Guerreros y cautivas* (1989; Warriors and Captive Women), *BoulevardS du crépuscule* (1992; Sunset BoulevardS), *Le Violon de Rothschild* (1995; Rothschild's Violin), *Tango-Désir* (2002; Tango Desire), *Ronda nocturna* (2005; Night Watch). His books include: *Vudú urbano* (1985; *Urban Voodoo*, 1990), *La novia de Odessa* (2001; *The Bride from Odessa*, 2004), *El rufián moldavo* (2004; *The Moldavian Pimp*, 2006), *Palacios plebeyos* (2006; *Plebeian Palaces*), *Man-iobras nocturnas* (2007; *Night Manoe-uvsres*), *Milongas* (2007), *Lejos de dónde* (2009; *Far from Where*), *Blues* (2010).

Jason Weiss: *When you came to live in Paris in 1974, how well did you know the city? How did it meet your expectations?*

Edgardo Cozarinsky: I had been there four or five times before. The longest I had stayed was for a month, in '67 I think. When I first went as a tourist, I had lots of prejudices about the city because I was aware of the long

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infatuation---Latin American and Argentine particularly---with Paris. Also, I had a certain idea in my imagination of Europe that came mostly through films. If you could speak in those terms, I was rather a London person than a Paris person. Because Paris seemed to be the city that was preferred by many Argentinians I didn't like too much, and at the same time I was always really attracted by English literature. Having followed Borges, I always had a sudden distaste for Paris literary life---for schools, groups, movements, everything that Paris seems to embody. London is supposed to be a city of individuals somehow, and not of groups. So, all this was in my head and I didn't expect to be very impressed by the city. But then I was impressed---slowly, by stages. It was not the French character or the literary life of Paris, which I continued to ignore completely; rather, it was the fact that it was a multi-cultural city, in a way I had never experienced before. I had not been aware of all the layers of Eastern Europeans, North Africans, Americans, South Americans, even the enormous Chinese and Vietnamese communities.

I mean, there is this question that every country inherits its colonies. It caught my imagination very much. When I went in '74, I went thinking that I wanted to put some distance between me and Argentina, because it was very asphyxiating there, and I had an inkling that worse things were coming.

And worse things did come . . . I had a film project for which I tried to get money in Germany, therefore I stayed in Paris because I had friends there. Slowly one decision led to another, I never decided I was going to stay in Paris. It was a series of minor decisions. I was very well advised by friends who told me, "In order to eventually get some money for your project here, it has to qualify as a French film. You not being a resident is a problem. Why don't you take a residence card for six months?" At that time, the problem of immigration was not so terrible as it is now. So, I just had to queue for half a day at the central police station to get my *carte de séjour* for six months, that's all. Then I renewed it. Slowly things got worse in Argentina, and a little money appeared, so I went postponing and postponing the return. But the major decision I only understood in retrospect, not at the moment it was made, because I think that somehow it was in the back of my mind and I didn't want to admit it.

In Paris, at the beginning, did you mostly seek out Latin Americans and Argentines?

It was a mixture. When I arrived, I stayed at the house of Argentine friends for a month, and for the first six months I didn't rent a place of my own. That also goes to show that I was not sure. I had Argentine friends, people I had known for years, but at the same time I acquired some of my best French

friends in the first months.

When did you first return for a visit to Buenos Aires? Did that shed a different light on your being in Paris?

In 1974, when I left, I went back for fifteen days before the end of the year. Because I had made up my mind to stay for a few months. So, I went back just to leave some papers signed for my mother, and to pick up some books and clothes. Then, I didn't go back until '85. I returned for three weeks, and I didn't go back again until '87. And then I started going regularly. Now it's a pattern more or less, I go there for Christmas and New Year, three weeks if I can.

Had you remained in contact all through that time with people in Argentina?

All the time. I corresponded, and also there were Argentine friends who visited Paris, they always brought me news. When video became more common . . . there was particularly one friend of mine, perhaps my best friend in Argentina, who made a yearly visit to Paris, he started bringing cassettes labeled "Chronicles of Everyday Horror" 1983, 1984, 1985, etcetera. They were mostly composed of television advertisements, fragments of talk shows or telenovelas, a kind of miscellany of things he found. And, of course, they were particularly terrible. But I remember the labels. The idea was, he said, "You know how much I enjoy seeing you in Paris, but there is something I cannot stand: very late in the evening sometimes, after having had too many drinks, you get into a fit of nostalgia. Now, each time you feel that nostalgia is coming, you just give this a look."

Do you think nostalgia plays a role for you culturally as an Argentine abroad?

I don't think I would be able to live in Argentina, first of all because I cannot earn my living doing what I like to do and I can earn my living doing things I like to do in Paris. That's basic. But on the other hand, if I knew I couldn't go back to Argentina even on a visit, I think I would be very, very desperate. Because my visits there now, through the years, have become a kind of vampyric nourishment. I go there to suck the blood of my past. It's a kind of nostalgia trip: I go there and I recover the person I was many years ago. It's double, because on the one hand, when I say I recover the person I was years ago, it's just that the city's another city, so it's not a question of visiting