

THE HISPANIC AND LUSO-BRAZILIAN WORLD

Contemporary Argentine Cinema during Neoliberalism*

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Abstract: In this article I analyze contemporary Argentine cinematic production assessing the impact of Law 24,377 that was implemented in 1995 and that provided much-needed funds for national productions. By looking at film production and consumption, the emergence of young filmmakers and the performance of both commercial films and those belonging to the so-called New Argentine Cinema, I make the case for the success of Law 24,377 regarding an increased national production, but not necessarily higher film consumption of national cinema by local audiences. This article is based primarily on data available from the Argentine Union of the Cinematographic Industry (SICA).

Key Words: globalization, INCAA, national cinema, New Argentine Cinema

In the early 1990s, Argentine cinema production and consumption reached historically low records with 12 films released in 1990, 17 in 1991, 10 in 1992 and 13 in 1993. A host of reasons contributed to this decline. First, Argentine President Carlos Menem (term of office 1989-1994) cancelled state funds for the Institute of Argentine Cinema (ICA) as a part of a larger plan of reducing governmental expenditures. This measure constituted a harsh blow to Argentine filmmaking, for unlike American mainstream cinema that is solely financed by private investors, national cinemas around the world require state funds as primary sources for production. The inability of the Argentine state to sponsor film production resulted in a decrease of national films released. In addition, given this elimination of state support, even Argentine studio companies reduced their investments in film production (Getino 117). For instance, in 1994, only four movies were released in Argentina, a record low for a country that had traditionally been one of the three major Latin American film industries.

Another factor that impacted film consumption around the world and also in Argentina, revolved around new access to visual products thanks to the widespread availability of VCRs in the 1980s. Anthropologist Néstor García Canclini noted that in the early 1990s, there became noticeable in Latin America, "the displacement of cinema from the public arena to the home, [a trend that] involves not only changes in pattern of consumption but also changes in the production and financing of the offering" (248). In the case of Argentina, not only did audiences choose to consume films through new technology, but also, and more importantly, an economic crisis made the price of a cinema ticket a luxury for middle-class audiences and an unaffordable expense for the working classes. It soon became evident that audience loyalty towards domestic cinema—something that was noticeable in the 1980s when some Argentine films generated good box-office returns, and one Argentine film, *The Official Story* (Luis Puenzo, 1986), won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film—was fast disappearing among Argentine cinemagoers. This, in turn, produced less demand for national movies.

What further complicated the situation of Argentine cinema was its lack of appeal to domestic audiences. According to Argentine filmmaker Octavio Getino, Argentine films accounted for only 3.5 % of the released films in 1994. Thus, as Getino judiciously asserts referring to the early 1990s, "Argentine cinema has lost the interest of the public" (121). The virtual disappearance of Argentine cinema led the state to backtrack from its initial denial of state funds. Taking into consideration that film is part of the so-called cultural industries and that culture needs to be

protected, Law 24,377¹ which sought to reinvigorate domestic film production was passed in 1994. This law, which was implemented in 1995, and is still in effect, not only regulates, but also encourages film production and exhibition in Argentina. This law dictates the creation of a national public entity to regulate cinematography, the National Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA). In addition, Law 24,377 mandates several measures to develop local filmmaking, such as opening credit lines, subsidies, and screen quotas for national films. Specifically, 10% of the box-office income generated by both national and foreign films makes up a fund that, in turn, is redistributed among local film producers and directors. These subsidies are earmarked for films that are deemed to “contribute to the development of national cinematography being by their cultural, artistic, technical or industrial qualities, except those that are based or related to sex and drugs, and that do not present a positive influence for the community” (Law 24,377 Article 26).

Since the implementation of Law 24,377 in 1995, Argentine film production has dramatically increased. However, the deregulation of the national economy as a result of neo-liberal measures implemented in the early 1990s, facilitated the entrance of foreign companies that heavily invested in the entertainment sector, particularly film exhibition.

The presence of foreign companies constituted a new challenge to domestic production as the exhibition of Hollywood productions attracts larger audiences, and thus, generates more revenue. How did Argentine cinema fare since the passing of protectionist laws designed to mitigate the impact of the growing trans-nationalization of visual products? In this article, I will assess Argentine film production in the 1996–2006 period—the years chosen correspond to the years between the implementation of Law 24,377 and the most recent year of complete statistical data compiled by the Argentine Union of Argentine Cinematography (SICA). By taking into account Argentine films’ domestic box-office performance as well as its international reception, I will look into Argentine cinematography after the passing of Law 24,377. This will allow me to evaluate whether this law successfully contributed to the development of a national cinema in times of increased global interactions (Appadurai 46). I will also compare the success of Argentine films by seasoned filmmakers to the performance, both domestic and international, of the New Argentine Cinema film directors as a way to explore the ways in which this national cinematography has appealed to different audiences.

General Considerations about the Period

Argentine film production and consumption between 1996 and 2006 has been punctuated by the impact of economic recessions triggered by Argentina’s neo-liberal economic model. For instance, in 1996 when the national unemployment index reached 18.8% (Svampa 35), the overall number of national spectators amounted to 21 millions, the lowest number in the period under study (DEISICA 6).² The financial crisis that took place in the last months of 2001 and resulted in the resignation of President Fernando De la Rúa also influenced the number of Argentine cinema-goers. In 2001 and 2002, there was a significant decrease in the number of spectators: from 33 millions in 2000 to 31 millions both in 2001 and in 2002 (DEISICA 10, 11 and 12). The secretary of the Argentine Union of Argentine Cinematographic Industry, Mario López Barreiro in his annual summary of the sector forecasted reduced budgets with the following words: “esta contracción, que se trasladará a la recaudación impositiva, sin duda tendrá una incidencia negativa sobre el fondo de fomento y producción para el año 2002” (DEISICA 1, 11). Indeed, the decrease in consumption negatively impacted the funds collected in box offices, and thus, the money that the INCAA has been able to distribute for new film productions. Consequently, in a country where film production heavily depends on box-office revenues, it is important to take into account the implications of recessive economic cycles as well as financial booms.

Another issue that has to be considered is the price of a movie ticket for local audiences, which during the 1990s was similar to that in the United States. When President Eduardo Duhalde was sworn as president in January 2002, he ended the peg of the Argentine peso to the US

dollar—a trademark feature of the Menem years (1989–1999) and the De la Rúa administration (1999–2001). This measure impacted the price of movie tickets, which was reduced to 30% of its previous value, making cinema going more accessible to domestic consumers, even in a recessive economy.

Argentine Films, Audiences and Market

After the implementation of Law 24,377, Argentine film production increased significantly when compared to the number of films from the early 1990s. In eleven years, some 489 domestic films were released, the highest ever among similar periods in Argentine film productions. This fact also attests to the positive stimulus derived from a renewed interest in this industry, particularly among young filmmakers.³

Table 1
Argentine film production and consumption, 1996–2006.

Year	National films released	National films produced	Theaters
1996	38	25	480
1997	28	36	608
1998	35	23	830
1999	38	N/A	920
2000	45	39	956
2001	45	39	852
2002	37	30	334
2003	46	67	1003
2004	54	28	290
2005	65	41	290
2006	58	58	297

Source: DEISICA

What is apparent from the data shown in Table 1 is that the crisis of 2001 negatively impacted the film industry in 2002, but since then film productions have rebounded in the 2003–2006 period, and even considerably surpassed the number of releases of the year prior to the crisis. This fact highlights the positive influence for the film industry of ending the convertibility of the peso and the dollar, since production costs visibly decreased for national films. In addition, except the year 1997 when there were only 28 films released, national production has remained strong, reaching a peak in 2005 when 65 films were made.

A number of reasons have contributed to this solid production. First, undoubtedly, the beneficial clauses of Law 24,377 which provide financial incentives for local productions have jumpstarted Argentine cinematography. Second, the emergence of new directors trained in both international and domestic film schools has contributed to the diversification of themes, styles and genres. Third, several films, with nationally recognized stars, have been very successful among cinemagoers, probably because they provide an opportunity for cultural heterogenization in the otherwise homogeneous film consumption (Appadurai 32). I will touch more on each of these reasons, but now I analyze distribution and exhibition of national films.

Film exhibition during the period under study experienced some changes as independently-owned movie theaters were replaced by foreign-managed multiplexes. Indeed, when taking into account the number of movies theaters, it is evident that the tendency of the early 1990s to reduce the number of traditional theaters in favor of multiplexes with several small rooms continued during the 1996–2006 period. For instance, the annual report of the first trimester of 1999 and 2000 noted that, “continuó por tercer año consecutivo la tendencia de inaugurar complejos cinematográficos iniciada en diciembre del [19]96 con el aterrizaje de empresas norteamericanas y australianas” (DEISICA 9, 4).⁴ These multiplexes found in shopping centers were the main outlets of exhibition in Argentina, particularly those of the international chains Hoyts General Cinema and Village Roadshow and Cinemas.⁵ Hoyts General Cinema is a transnational exhibitor and a

distribution company that owns multiplexes in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay and is based in the Cayman Islands. As a profit-making company, Hoyts not only advertises the high-quality equipment and technology of its multiplexes, but is also the main exhibitor of foreign films, which dominate the Argentine market. As the following table shows, the Argentine market was unevenly divided between Argentine and American films.

Table 2
Argentine and American Film Consumption in Argentina, 1996–2006

Year	Domestic market share	U.S. market share	Number of spectators (thousands)
1996	38 (7.96%)	78.73%	21,348
1997	28 (15%)	61 %	25,623
1998	35 (13 %)	78 %	32,400
1999	38 (15 %)	67.7 %	31,800
2000	45 (17.71 %)	73.3 %	33,500
2001	45 (12 %)	74.2 %	31,300
2002	37 (10.21%)	80.32%	31,800
2003	46 (9.2 %)	82 %	33,300
2004	54 (10.15 %)	74.53 %	44,500
2005	65 (11.82 %)	75.18 %	37,600
2006	58 (10.76%)	78.13 %	35,700

Source: DEISICA

In spite of a sustained and significant local production, Argentine films have irregular success with the local audiences. On the one hand, in 1997, three Argentine movies attracted close to 3.5 million local cinemagoers, eroding the market share of American films, which in that year accounted for its lowest point of the period under study, 61%. A similar situation occurred in 1999 when three other Argentine movies had almost three million spectators, and thus, the American share was 67%. On the other hand, the commercial success of local films was subscribed to a small number of blockbusters. For instance if we compare the domestic market share in 2000 and 2005, in 2000 fewer Argentine films were watched by more people than when the offer of national films increased in 2005.

Argentine audiences strongly favored American films over domestic movies, a trend that is also visible in the other two major Latin American film producers: Brazil and Mexico. For instance, for every four films screened in Argentina in 2004, only one was Argentine and the remaining three were American. One of the most significant conclusions that can be drawn from Table 1 is that American films prevailed despite the strong national cinematic production post-2001. For example, the market share of the 65 domestic films released in 2005 did not negatively impact the consumption of American films, which was, in fact, slightly higher for that year than in 2004. In addition, in 2006 when 58 Argentine films were released—the second highest year of local production—American movies performed better than local productions. Thus, it is evident that Argentine films faced the competition of other domestic films, without significantly affecting the consumption of foreign entertainment.⁶

The fact that Argentine films competed among themselves for a market share is noteworthy, particularly if the protectionist measures that were introduced during this period are examined. Known as screen quotas, this measure was spelled out in the Resolution 2016 and implemented for the first time July 1st 2004. Screen quotas stipulate the showing of one Argentine film per movie theater every trimester. Another measure, the median continuity—which sets different numbers of spectators per theater to allow the uninterrupted screening of a national film⁷—was also introduced in 2004 to support domestic productions (Steinmann 25). This resolution has been strongly resented by exhibitors who feel that showing Argentine films deprives them of the higher income that could be obtained by showing foreign films. This brings me to analyze the Argentine movies that resonated with local audiences.

During the 1996–2006 period, twelve top-grossing national movies surpassed the one million

spectators mark. Of particular importance was the year 1997, with three blockbuster movies: *Comodines* (Nisco 1997), *La furia* (Stagnaro 1997), and *Dibu, la película* (Olivieri & Stoessel 1997). Other films with more than a million spectators were: *Un argentino en Nueva York* (Jusid 1998), *Papá es un idolo* (Jusid 2000), *Nueve Reinas* (Bielinsky 2000), *Corazón, las alegrías de Pantriste* (García Ferré 2000), *El hijo de la novia* (Campanella 2001)—the only one to be nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Film—*Apasionados* (Jusid 2002), *Luna de Avellaneda* (Campanella 2004), *Papa se volvió loco* (Ledo 2005) and *Bañeros III, Todopoderosos* (Ledo 2006). Most of these films were produced by Argentina Sono Film S.A.C.I.—*La furia*, *Un argentino en Nueva York*, *Papá es un idolo*, *Papa se volvió loco*, *Bañeros III, Todopoderosos*—Artear (*Comodines*) and Patagonik, (*Nueve Reinas*, *El hijo de la novia* and *Apasionados*). These films mainly pertain to three genres: comedies, dramas and thrillers. Another genre that has consistently performed well at the box office during this period is animated movies: *Dibu, The Movie* (Oliveri and Stoessel 1997) was the second top-grossing film in 1997. *Manuelita* (García Ferré 1999) was the top grossing film of 1999 with a share of 42% of the national audience, an achievement replicated by *Patoruzito* (Massa 2004), which also had over two million domestic spectators, followed by *El ratón Pérez* (Buscarini 2006) which placed second in the top ten box office successes of 2006.

While top-grossing films should not necessarily be equated with meaningful cultural productions—in fact, most of them are produced for the entertainment and consumption of local audiences—some of these top-grossing films such as *Nueve Reinas*, *El hijo de la novia* and *Luna de Avellaneda* have effectively captured the *zeitgeist* of Argentine culture at the beginning of the twentieth-first century and have been rightfully recognized for this achievement, both nationally and internationally. A case in point is Bielinsky's *Nueve Reinas* which was very successful among local cinemagoers. In addition, it garnered seven Condors—the most prestigious Argentine awards—and two awards at the International Film Festival of Mar del Plata. It won twenty-one of the twenty-eight national nominations it received. It also did well among international audiences and garnered critical acclaim in film festivals worldwide.⁸ Most of these recognitions were awarded in the European film festivals of Biarritz (France), Trieste (Italy), Lleida (Spain) and Norway. *Nueve Reinas* was remade for American audiences as *Criminal* (Jacobs 2004) and even reached India, with a remake entitled *Bluffmaster* (Sippy 2005). For his part, Juan José Campanella's *El hijo de la novia*, besides its Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film, also received numerous awards both in Argentina (nine Condors) and abroad in the film festivals of Gramado (Brazil, three), Havana (two), Montreal (two), Sant Jordi (Spain, two) and one award each in Cartagena (Colombia), Lima, Oslo, São Paulo, and Valladolid (Spain).

In the 1996–2006 period, fourteen films were commercially successful but had fewer than a million spectators. Among these, in 1999, two comedies—*Esa maldita costilla*, *Alma mía*—and one action-thriller—*La venganza*—attracted more than two million spectators. By casting popular TV actors, these three films targeted local audiences, and hence, did not receive international recognition. For their part, Marcelo Piñeyro's *Plata quemada*, which is a rendition of Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia's novel of the same name, and Bielinsky's *El aura*, a noir thriller, deserve particular attention as they attracted both cinemagoers and international critical acclaim. *Plata quemada* received one of the seven Condors for which it was nominated, the prestigious Goya award given by Spain, two awards at the Havana Festival and one award in the United States. *El Aura* garnered six Silver Condors out of the ten for which it was nominated, as well as foreign awards at the festivals of Cartagena and Havana.

Other films with important box-office numbers are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
Argentine films with fewer than 500,000 spectators but more than 100,000

Film	Director	Spectators
<i>Tiempo de valientes</i> (2005)	Damián Szifron	461,734
<i>Cleopatra</i> (2003)	Eduardo Mignona	450,446
<i>El faro</i> (1998)	Eduardo Mignona	445,008
<i>La edad del sol</i> (1999)	Ariel Piluso	440,610
<i>Martin Hache</i> (1997)	Adolfo Aristarain	380,000
<i>Kamchatka</i> (2002)	Marcelo Piñeyro	372,006
<i>Patoruzito, la gran aventura</i> (2006)	José Luis Massa	356,742
<i>Erreway 4 caminos</i> (2004)	Ezequiel Crupnicoff	342,904
<i>Illuminados por el fuego</i> (2003)	Tristán Bauer	328,107
<i>Despílate amor</i> (1996)	Eliseo Subiela	321,225
<i>Sol de otoño</i> (1996)	Eduardo Mignona	312,597
<i>Rodrigo, la película</i> (2001)	Juan Pablo Laplace	299,845
<i>Valentín</i> (2003)	Alejandro Agresti	297,110
<i>Un día en el paraíso</i> (2003)	Juan Bautista Stagnaro	279,927
<i>Una noche con Sabrina Love</i> (2000)	Alejandro Agresti	240,148
<i>Dibu 3</i> (2002)	Raul Rodríguez Peila	234,121
<i>Eva Perón</i> (1996)	Juan Carlos Desanzo	222,130
<i>Las manos</i> (2006)	A. Doria, J. B. Stagnaro	219,029
<i>Lugares comunes</i> (2002)	Adolfo Aristarain	218,249
<i>El bonaerense</i> (2002)	Pablo Trapero	215,784
<i>Crónica de una fuga</i> (2006)	Adrián Caetano	194,059
<i>Whisky, Romeo, Zulu</i> (2005)	Enrique Piñeyro	184,484
<i>Derecho de familia</i> (2006)	Daniel Burman	184,281
<i>El perro</i> (2004)	Carlos Sorin	178,432
<i>No sos vos, soy yo</i> (2004)	Juan Taratuto	175,288
<i>Un oso rojo</i> (2002)	Adrián Caetano	169,356
<i>El abrazo partido</i> (2004)	Daniel Burman	159,855
<i>El dedo en la llaga</i> (1996)	Alberto Lecchi	149,421
<i>El mundo contra mí</i> (1996)	Beda Docampo Feijóo	138,546
<i>Historias mínimas</i> (2002)	Carlos Sorin	138,105
<i>Ay, Juancito</i> (2004)	Héctor Olivera	134,609
<i>Roma</i> (2004)	Adolfo Aristarain	134,416
<i>Los Pitin al rescate</i> (2000)	Franco Bittolo	133,767
<i>El mismo amor, la misma lluvia</i> (1999)	J.J. Campanella	127,317
<i>Fuerza Aérea, SA</i> (2006)	Enrique Piñeyro	113,848
<i>La cienága</i> (2001)	Lucrecia Martel	110,321
<i>Un hijo genial</i> (2003)	José Luis Massa	109,149
<i>El desvío</i> (1998)	Horacio Maldonado	108,964
<i>No debes estar aquí</i> (2003)	Jacobo Rispa	105,423
<i>En el fondo del mar</i> (2003)	Damián Szifron	103,764
<i>Cama adentro</i> (2005)	Jorge Gaggero	102,503
<i>Pizza, birra y faso</i> (1998)	B. Stagnaro, I. A. Caetano	101,709
<i>Hasta la victoria siempre</i> (1997)	Juan Carlos Desanzo	100,000

Source: DEISICA

These 36 films make up a heterogeneous group ranging from popular to more art-house productions. Among the films that were produced for domestic consumption with nationally recognized TV stars and singers are *Erreway 4 caminos*, *Rodrigo, la película*, *Un hijo genial*, *Un día en el paraíso* and *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia*. Films that addressed topics relevant to domestic audiences include the whistleblower films of Enrique Piñeyro: *Whisky, Romeo, Zulu* (2005) and *Fuerza Aérea, SA* (2006). Another group comprises films based on popular American genres such as the buddy movies (*Tiempo de valientes*), comedies with broad appeal (*No sos vos, soy yo*/*It is Not You, It's Me* and *Valentín*), a feminist road movie (*Cleopatra*) and a war film (*Illuminados por el fuego*). There are also films that have garnered considerable national and international critical acclaim and were made by veteran directors such as Eduardo Mignona, whose *El faro* (1998) received several awards including the Goya for Best Foreign Film in Spanish as well as other awards in Montreal, Oslo and Argentina. Carlos Sorin directed *Historias mínimas*

(2002), which received 22 awards including a Goya and also prizes at the Havana, Los Angeles and San Sebastian film festivals. His most recent film, *El perro* (2004) was awarded for best director in Guadalajara and won the FIPRESCI award in the San Sebastian, and was surprisingly viewed by more spectators than the much-awarded *Historias mínimas*. Another experienced filmmaker, Alejandro Doria directed *Las manos*, which received a Goya and other awards at the Cartagena (Colombia) and Huelva (Spain) film festivals. It is important to point out that besides the credit lines and subsidies stipulated by Law 24,377, many of the filmmakers mentioned above participated in co-production and/or received financial support from the Hubert Hals funding, thus transcending local audiences and state sponsorship.

The final group is composed of filmmakers who directed *operas primas*, belong to the same age group (under 40) and/or are usually grouped under the umbrella term New Argentine Cinema. Argentine film critics Horacio Bernades, Diego Lerer, Sergio Wolf, Gonzalo Aguilar, and Fernando Martín Peña have hailed the arrival of the New Argentine Cinema, particularly after the release of *Pizza, birra, faso* (Caetano and Stagnaro 1998). For Gonzalo Aguilar, in the 1990s there was a renewal in Argentine film production thanks to the New Argentine Cinema (13). However, a precise definition of what the NAC entails has eluded these critics. For her part, film scholar Tamara Falicov provides a persuasive explanation to group this generation based on the facts that film directors in this group belong to the same generation (most of them were born after 1965), were trained in film schools and received funding from the INCAA after a 1994 controversy that pitted seasoned directors against young ones as they vied for funding (115–17). The discussion led to the creation of a new category, the *operas primas*, with funding available to first-time filmmakers. This category has thus contributed to a democratization of cinema providing more access for young directors. For instance, in 1997 *Historias breves I y II*, a collection of 16 shorts made by young filmmakers was seen by 6,419 spectators. This screening has been hailed as a promising beginning for those seeking to gain exposure in the field. Nonetheless, the circulation among the public was minimal as illustrated by the number of spectators. In what follows, I analyze the reception of the NAC.

The New Argentine Cinema: National and International Reception

Table 4
Ranking of the most-watched films of the NAC, 1996–2006

Year	Film	Arg Spectators/ Ranking
1998	<i>Pizza, birra y faso</i> (B. Stagnaro, I A. Caetano)	101,709 (6)
1999	<i>Mundo Grúa</i> (Pablo Trapero)	68,544 (8)
2000	<i>Esperando al mesías</i> (Daniel Burman)	39,579 (N/A)
2001	<i>La Cienága</i> (Lucrecia Martel)	110,321 (N/A)
2002	<i>Bolivia</i> (Adrian Caetano)	52,272 (11)
	<i>El Bonaerense</i> (Pablo Trapero)	215,784 (5)
	<i>Un oso rojo</i> (Adrian Caetano)	169,356 (6)
2004	<i>El abrazo partido</i> (Daniel Burman)	159,855 (7)
	<i>La niña santa</i> (Lucrecia Martel)	104,860 (N/A)
	<i>Familia rodante</i> (Pablo Trapero)	57,000 (N/A)
2006	<i>Crónica de una fuga</i> (Adrián Cateano)	194,059 (5)
	<i>Derecho de familia</i> (Daniel Burman)	184,281 (6)
	<i>Nacido y criado</i> (Pablo Trapero)	29,882 (16)

Source DEISICA

The thirteen most-watched films listed in Table 4 and that belong to the New Argentine Cinema have collectively attracted 1.5 million spectators, a considerable number, yet one that lags behind the box-office revenues of more commercial films. This data leads me to disagree with Joanna Page's assertion that New Argentina Cinema films "are consciously produced as much for an international market as a domestic one" (*Crisis* 56). As I will discuss shortly, the domestic consumption of New Argentine Cinema is a point of contention among some film critics and directors.

Only four directors have been able to sustain production during the last eight years: Burman, Caetano, Trapero and Martel. Burman and Caetano have steadily captured more audiences, despite Burman's *Todas las azafatas van al cielo* (2002) and Caetano's *Bolivia*, which did poorly at the box-office. What is interesting about *Bolivia* is the fact that it has generated considerable scholarly interest (Gundermann and Page) for its treatment of urban violence and racism as well as its neo-realist cinematic techniques.

Of the four most-watched directors, both Burman and Martel found good reception in Germany. Burman received two Silver Bears in the festival of Berlin for *El abrazo partido*. His fourth feature film, *Derecho de familia* (2006) has performed well at the box office and was immediately released on DVD (Rocha, "Identidad"). Lucrecia Martel's feature-length *La ciénaga* was recognized with the Alfred Bauer Award in Berlin, four awards in Havana and two awards at the Toulouse film festival (Forcinito, Gómez, Martins, Martín Morán and several essays in Rangil).

In general, Argentine film reviewers of *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Página 12* and *Ambito Financiero*, the most important and widely circulated newspapers in Argentina, have strongly supported the production of these directors, particularly *Clarín*, which awards film prizes.⁷ From the data in Table 5 which provides information about awards, it is evident that the aesthetic of the NAC has generated substantial interest in international film festivals, both in Latin America—Lima, Havana, São Paulo, and Uruguay—and also in Europe—Lleida, San Sebastian (Spain), Toulouse (France), Rotterdam (Holland), and Berlin. European film festivals have celebrated particularly the stark tone of Argentine film productions from these NAC directors. This attempt to raise awareness of the socioeconomic conditions of everyday life in Argentina has been a booming strategy to obtain awards at European film festivals, and thus, to reach foreign investors.

Yet, as is shown in Table 4, local audiences have only cautiously supported the techniques and themes of the New Argentine Cinema. Indeed, the lack of a sizable national audience seems to be one of the weaknesses of the NAC. In 2003, film critic Jorge Carnevale wrote with great lucidity that "most of the films that returned to Argentina with awards and merits fall within a week into the tomb of Argentine cinema, which is the Tita Merello Complex or slowly languish at the Gaumont. With its minimalism, common-places settings and boring dialogues, people run away from these films or do not even become aware of them."¹⁰ Part of the alienation of local spectators may lie in the fact that with some exceptions such as Graciela Borges in *The Swamp*, Enrique Liporace in *Bolivia* and *La ciénaga*, most of the New Argentine Cinema directors use non-professional actors in their films. They also use cinematic techniques such as a handheld camera, unusual lighting, and real sound that lack the glossy touch of Hollywood film productions to which local audiences are accustomed. Another reason for the low public support is that most of the funding goes to cover production costs and few copies of each film are released, making its exhibition in different movie theaters difficult. Finally, when these movies are screened under the benefits of the screen quotas that I mentioned at the beginning of this article, low attendance motivates exhibitors to informally "encourage" cinemagoers to watch more mainstream films. The fact that Argentine films have smaller audiences means that exhibitors can replace a film that produces low box-office earnings by one that generates profit.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have shown that Argentine cinematic production post-Law 24,377 has been strong compared to that of the early 1990s. In addition, some films have received important national and international awards, a fact that has given visibility to this national cinema. However, the support of the local public has, at best, been irregular.

While some films have enjoyed excellent box-office performance, others have failed to attract significant numbers of spectators while still others have struggled to be shown despite protectionist measures designed to ensure circulation. The inability to interest domestic audiences and to be shown has particularly troubled the productions of young directors grouped under the term of New Argentine Cinema. While the arrival of a new generation of directors was,

at first, a reason for optimism and renewal, lately it has generated new tensions and calls for accountability since many of these films are financed to promote Argentine cinema and yet they are only watched by small audiences. The experimentation and subsequent proposal of a cinematography that departs considerably from the formulas associated with Hollywood productions, have not garnered the massive support of either Argentine or international spectators. In spite of this, many films have been recognized for their originality in both national and international film festivals. It seems that at the moment despite some well-done films such as *Nine Queens* and *Son of the Bride*, the Argentine cinematic industry is split between low-budget *operas primas* and art house productions that fail to appeal to national and international spectators alike, thus posing a yet to be resolved problem pertaining to circulation for Argentine productions.

NOTES

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¹Further information regarding Ley 24,377 can be found at <<http://www.ica.u.mec.gub.uy/pdf/Ley%20de%20Cine%20Argentina%2017741.pdf>>.

²For the first time, the data in the Deisicas tabulates information dividing it into *salas* (movie theatres) and *screens* (pantallas).

³Other periods of high national film production were 1937–1947 when 426 films were released and 1947–1957 when 453 were made (Getino 337). Part of this boom is due to the interest that filmmaking generates among young people. Fernando Martín Peña mentions that there were 10,000 film students who attended ENERC (Escuela Nacional de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica) and Manuel Antín's FUC (Fundación Universidad del Cine) (268–69).

⁴The report of the first three months of 1999 and 2000 also mentioned that the national Cinecenter opened 19 screens in the provinces (7 in Bahía Blanca, 7 in San Luis and 5 in Tucumán) while Nai/Paramount and Village Roadshow opened the most theatres in two upscale neighborhoods of Buenos Aires: 16 in Recoleta and 16 in Olivos. Finally Hoyts General Cinemas opened 16 new theatres in Córdoba. (DEISICA 9, 4) The report of 2001 acknowledged the opening of new multiplexes but at a slower pace, (DEISICA 11.6)

⁵The Australian-based Village Roadshow and Cinemas left the Argentine market in the year 2000.

⁶This data seems to contradict Horacio Bernades, Diego Lerer and Sergio Wolf's assertion that "since 1999, Argentine cinema has recovered almost 20 % of its domestic audience" (9).

⁷The median continuity classifies films according to the number of copies that are used during the initial screening: "A" films have more than 20 copies, "B" films are released with 10 to 20 copies and "C" films are premiered with fewer than 10 copies. During high season (April 1 to September 30), this classification is used to determine a minimum of spectators per movie theater: "A" films have to have a median of 25% of movie theaters with a capacity of 250 and 20% in movie theaters of 250–500 spectators and 10% in movie theaters with a capacity of more than 500 spectators, "B" films should maintain a median of 22% of spectators in movie theaters with a capacity of 250–500 spectators and 18% in movie theaters, 9% in movie theaters of more than 500 spectators. "C" films need to have a median of 20% of movie theaters with a capacity of 250 and 16% in movie theaters of 250–500 spectators and 8% in movie theaters with a capacity of more than 500 spectators. These percentages decrease during low season (October 1–March 31) (El cine).

⁸For specific numbers in foreign box-office, see Deborah Shaw's article "Playing Hollywood at its Own Game? Bielinski's *Nueve Reinas*."

⁹*Clarín* newspaper is part of the Clarín Group, one of the largest multimedia holdings in Latin America with participation in TV, radios and production companies such as Patagonik and Pol-ka.

¹⁰The original reads: "la mayoría de estas películas que arriban con estatuillas y diplomas sucumben a la semana en esa tumba del cine argentino que es el Complejo Tita Merello o languidecen en la sala del Gaumont. Con su suma de minimalismo, lugares comunes y diálogos para el bostezo, la gente huye o ni se entera." Agreeing with Carnevale, one of the key players of the Argentine cinematographic industry, the Argentine Union of the Cinematographic Industry (SICA), which represents technicians, musicians, camera operators, costume designers and directors, the Argentine Union of Musicians (SADEM), Argentine Cinematographic Directors (DAC) and the only Union of Workers of Public Spectacles (SUTEP) published a petition on December 2, 2007 in the most popular newspaper in Argentina, *Clarín*. I transcribe and translate it in its entirety because of its relevance.

Given the depth of the crisis that Argentine cinematography is undergoing, a result of the negligent management of public funds earmarked for cinematographic creation and production, we require that national authorities undertake the following:

- the immediate implementation of active policies aimed at recapturing the lost Argentine audience as a natural spectator of our national cinema.
- the urgent institutional normalization of the INCAA (National Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts) through the constitution of an Advisory Board, the only industry group that has control over the distribution of public funds and which were disbanded six years ago.
- the imperative appointment of well-qualified and respected officials to be in charge of the executive direction of the INCAA, particularly those with a recognized reputation, knowledge and background in the Argentine cinematographic industry.
- the effective enforcement of the screen quota law for movies as well as a screen quota for television.
- the updating of the Law of Cinematographic promotion, adapted to new audiovisual technologies, encouraging the development of new formats of production, distribution and exhibition.
- the creation of a Strategic Five-Year Audiovisual Plan—Statepolicy—that with efficient, rational and legal guarantees would pave the way for a new impetus for our cinematographic industry.
- the creation of a national Cinemateca that would guarantee the conservation and audiovisual memory of the Argentines.

With the hope that the national authorities understand the urgent need of a change, by which we will work on behalf of our National Cinema as we have done historically for over fifty years.

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