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U.S.-Argentine Co-productions, 1982-1990: Roger Corman, Aries Productions, “Schlockbuster” Movies, and the International Market

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Introduction

A series of low budget films were made jointly by U.S. producer Roger Corman and Argentine director-producer Héctor Olivera in the 1980s. Produced primarily for the direct-to-video and cable market, these commercial entertainment films with titles such as *Deathstalker* (1983), *Barbarian Queen* (1985) and *Two to Tango* (1988) were markedly different from the typical art house co-productions made in Argentina. For one, they were not destined for the international film festival market. Second, in contrast to other Argentine co-productions, these films for the most part had no bearing on Argentine (popular) culture, history, or current events. Third, few were geared toward both the Argentine and U.S. markets.

This essay examines how co-productions as dual (or multilateral) cultural collaborations between countries may potentially be plagued by unequal power dynamics that could have negative consequences on the productions. This case of Argentine-U.S. co-productions poignantly illustrates this tension. Despite the financial gains these films brought to the Argentine film industry (such as employment, use of resources, etc.) I argue that the films ultimately worked counter to the spirit of Argentine filmmaking due to either the absence of Argentina from the cinemascapes or the distorted representations and/or stereotypes of Argentine culture in the few times it was depicted. For example, some of the “sword and sorcery” films co-produced by Corman and Olivera were shot entirely in Argentina, yet erased all cultural or geographic references to the country. Instead, the Argentine landscape served as a backdrop and double for forests in medieval Europe. In other cases, images were depicted in stereotyped ways (e.g. tango dancing, Latino ‘macho’ men, etc.) designed for the U.S. and other English language market consumption. Finally, all of the films were shot in English, with the exception of *Cocaine Wars* (*La muerte blanca*) where both English and Spanish versions were produced.

By examining the dynamics and processes of coproduction between these two countries, one can see how the relative size and wealth of film markets play a determining role in the shaping of film content and the formation of cultural products in general.

Why Co-production between the United States and Argentina?

During the 1980s, due to massive hyperinflation, the Argentine economy was in a shambles. The film market accordingly had shrunk, and within the film industry community, new strategies for encouraging international investment and film export were being considered. In 1982, around the time the transition to democratic rule occurred, Héctor Olivera and a producer named Alejandro Sessa contacted Roger Corman about producing low-budget cinema in the Pampas. Corman, who had previously experimented with co-production in countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, and Yugoslavia, decided to produce a series of films to be shot principally in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He had encountered problems in some countries where he had filmed,¹ and thus did not have one specific place he felt comfortable making movies. Argentina was ideal for him because not only were labor and other prices extremely low, but also the technical skill of the crew was excellent.

With the possibility of state subsidies in Argentina, as well as the prospect of exhibition and distribution in Latin America (two channels that were ultimately underutilized), this co-production venture seemed rife with opportunity for Corman. For Olivera and producer Sessa, it made sense to seek international partners during this difficult period in time. Héctor Olivera, co-owner of Aries Studios, one of the most successful film studios in Argentina, was aware that prices were low for foreign spending in Argentina, and thus sought ways to encourage filmmakers from other countries to shoot films in Argentina. He recalls:

At that moment, we were the owners of the Estudios Baires Films of Don Torcuato, and we needed to keep the studio in motion. This was the time of “cheap Argentina” (*Argentina barato*) when production costs were very low. The salary of an extra was equivalent to three dollars and Corman took advantage of this.²

Roger Corman might be called the “low-budget producer extraordinaire.” He began producing and directing films in the mid-fifties. His first film, the *Monster on the Ocean Floor*, was made on a budget of \$18,000. Corman then began producing a wide array of low-budget features for American International Pictures. The majority were genre films—Westerns, sci-fi, gangster and rock ‘n’ roll. In 1957 alone Corman turned out nine films—some of which were completed in two or three days. Besides his knack for producing films quickly and at a modest price, he is also known for directing films based on the works of Edgar Allen Poe.

In addition, Corman is credited with having launched the careers of very well known directors and actors, such as Francis Ford Coppola, Ron Howard, Robert De Niro, Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, and others. According to the biography on his company’s website, Corman, “[a]ppalled by the intrinsic waste of time and money, as well as executive interference, opted out of the major studio system. In 1970, he founded his own production and distribution company, New World Pictures.”³

Roger Corman to this day remains an institution in Hollywood and has been called the “King of B Movies.” Key to his success has been his timesaving techniques. For example, he would contract actors who were on the set for a higher budget film, and simply borrow their set and hire them for their off-duty time. In 1990, Corman wrote (with Jim Jerome) his autobiography *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*. As the title suggests, many of the anecdotes in this book reinforce the notion that the keys to producing low-budget or cult movies are production efficiency, resourcefulness (e.g., reusing the same sets repeatedly for various films), low cost, and quantity over quality. The ultimate goal was to successfully reap the financial rewards from his low-to-no-budget movies. When I interviewed him about his experience of producing films in Argentina, Corman recalled how cooperative crews in Argentina were, and how things ran according to schedule. The operative term during the interview was how his filmmaking was purely “market driven”—that is, profit is the goal of filmmaking.⁴ His distribution company is now called Concorde/ New Horizons Company, where the majority of his productions are solely for the direct-to-video market.

In 1956 Héctor Olivera and Fernando Ayala founded the film studio Aries Cinematográfica Argentina. The studio first pro-

duced commercial films, such as the psychedelic comedies *Psexoanálisis* (Sexoanalysis) (1968) and *Los Neuróticos* (The Neurotics) (1969). Later the studio alternated between more commercial hits such as comedies, rock concert documentaries, and thrillers, on the one hand, and more politically engaged national dramas on the other. Olivera directed and produced some of Argentina’s most well known testimonial films, such as *La Patagonia Rebelde* (Rebellion in Patagonia) (1974), *La noche de los lápices* (Night of the Pencils) (1986), and *El caso Maria Soledad* (The Case of Maria Soledad) (1993). These films are feature-length dramas that document social struggle and political repression in the history of Argentina. While he does have his share of detractors who feel these serious films were “opportunistic,”⁵ he has won numerous awards for his work, and is well respected as a national filmmaker. Olivera stated in an interview that these more politically engaged films were in a sense “subsidized” by the more popular genres that he and Ayala produced.⁶ In order for Argentine film to survive, Olivera believes, it must conform to

an industrial model as well as serving as a vehicle for cultural production. This model thus far has been successful, as Aries is one of the few remaining Argentine film studios still in production.

Aries produced nine films in conjunction with Corman’s New World and Concorde/New Horizons, and Olivera directed five of them—*Wizards of the Lost Kingdom* (La guerra de los magos) (1985), *Barbarian Queen* (Reina salvaje) (1985), *Cocaine Wars* (La muerte blanca) (1985), *Two to Tango* (Matar es morir un poco) (1988), and *Play Murder for Me* (Toca la muerte por mí) (1990).

The “Sword and Sorcery” Genre: Low Budget Movies with B-rated Cast

The Corman-Olivera film productions can be divided into two categories: First, films that were made in a subgenre of the fantasy genre, the “sword and sorcery” genre. These films set in a medieval time period could have been made in any forest locale, and thus displayed no specific markings of Argentina in terms of the script content and the cinematography, and secondly, films that were made with Argentina’s geographic and cultural locale in mind. This latter set of films, two thrillers and one action film, worked within a specific national or regional theme and for that reason were shot on location. In the first example, films such as *Deathstalker*, *The Warrior and the Sorceress*, *Barbarian Queen* and others were shot in Argentina, but were emptied or erased of anything specific to it. In the second example, films such as *Play*



Roger Corman: “the low-budget producer extraordinaire.”

Courtesy of Photo Archives.

Murder for Me, *Cocaine Wars*, and *Two to Tango* did have themes that related to Argentina and/or Latin America, albeit in ways that were tailored for U.S. audience expectations. Nonetheless, these films were specifically scripted to be shot in Argentina and used Argentine screenplays. Although the majority of these films were of the “sword and sorcery” genre, the final two films, *Two to Tango* (Matar es morir un poco) (1988), and *Play Murder for Me* (Toca la muerte por mi) (1990) were remakes or rewrites of Argentine film productions. Although none were comparable to the originals in terms of quality and coherency (both films were criticized by critic Diego Curubeto as “parodies of the originals”), they were, at the very least, paying homage to or recognizing the preexistence of a film culture in Argentina.

The first set of films, those of the sword and sorcery genre, will be cursorily described. The second set of films, or those with more Argentine content, will be analyzed in greater detail as this has potentially had some impact on the framing of national culture within the rubric of a usually more “internationalized” form of co-production.

The sword and sorcery films had such titles as *Deathstalker* (*Cazador de muerte*), *Deathstalker II*, *Barbarian Queen* (*Reina salvaje*), *The Warrior and the Sorceress* (*El guerrero y el hechicera*), and *Wizards of the Lost Kingdom* (*La guerra de los magos*), *Stormquest* and *Amazonas*. They were directed by U.S. directors such as James Sbardellatti, John Broderick, and Corman’s protégé, Jim Wynorski. From Argentina, producer/director Alejandro Sessa and Olivera were directors. All the films were made for the direct-to-video market with the exception of one film, *Cocaine Wars* (*La muerte blanca*), which was shown briefly in movie theatres in both Argentina and the United States.

The choice to make “sword and sorcery” films had nothing to do with Argentina as a specific locale, but rather as a place to shoot a series of films based on the recent success of the 1982 Hollywood hit, *Conan the Barbarian* (dir. John Milius), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Thus, the choice of film genre was not accidental. Argentine film critic Claudio Minghetti observes that “Corman was a master of ‘cloning’ other films.”⁷⁷ In other words, Corman’s objective for many of his films was to try to ride the wave of big Hollywood successes albeit on a much lower budget. (For example, in the early nineties he would rake in a modest success with *Carnosaur*, a direct rip-off of Spielberg’s blockbuster hit *Jurassic Park*.) Few films were well received by critics. These “schlockbuster” movies, as I deem them, were no more than commercial rip-offs of Hollywood blockbuster movies, and provided sheer entertainment to its viewers. Film critic Leonard Maltin gave *Deathstalker* a low rating and called it “a weak interpretation of the sword and sorcery genre, and interesting only for the involuntary laughter the film provokes and the gratuitous female nudity.”⁷⁸

Despite characterizations that Corman is “one of the forefathers of ‘independent’ cinema,”⁷⁹ his co-productions of the 1980s strove only to imitate Hollywood, rather than produce work that

aimed to break with the dominant set of film codes created historically by the Hollywood studio system. Although Corman did not produce work within the major studio system, his philosophy of filmmaking aimed to emulate big Hollywood productions while on a shoestring budget. Thus, his films were typically based on genres that were popularized by Hollywood at the time. Corman also worked within a “star system” to thus appeal to a potentially greater audience. However, due to budget constraints, these were typically less famous film stars, such as B-list actors. Accordingly, these co-produced films included the importation of these actors and actresses, many from U.S. television and magazines (such as David Carradine from *Kung Fu* fame, or Barbi Benton, a Playboy bunny “playmate of the year” and ex-wife of Playboy magnate Hugh Hefner).

Therefore, by shooting films with U.S. actors of some name recognition it necessarily followed that all production was to be shot in English. This also relegated Argentine actors to the margins. In this way, the films were not truly co-productions in the sense that they did not allow equal opportunities for actors from both countries. Rather, it worked as a vehicle for recognizable U.S. actors for the U.S. market. This contradicts the idea of co-productions as bilateral agreements. When two markets for exhibition and distribution are not envisioned, this in itself throws off the whole dynamic of working to ensure interest in both cultural contexts.

Behind the camera, one issue to arise was the power dynamics from the U.S.-Argentine interaction on the set. In the case of this particular set of co-productions, the technical crew was mainly Argentinean, but there were a few key positions, such as makeup and special effects, that were held by a U.S. technician. Corman, for a few films, brought the director from the United States as well, but then realized that there were good directors in Argentina and thus did not need to import them.¹⁰ Roger Corman himself only came to a production for one or two days at the start of every production. Production designer María Julia Bertotto observed in a personal interview that:

It was a great experience to work on multiple films here during that time. The only problems we faced were a lack of experience and professionalism by the U.S. crew. Corman would send down these young arrogant men to work in special effects. They felt uncomfortable working in collaboration with the Argentine crew, despite the fact that many of us spoke English. They essentially gave orders and refused to hear our suggestions. It was as though they had preconceived notions of Argentina and thought we were ‘Indians with feathers on our heads.’¹¹

Another problem stemmed from the plan to market a film for the Anglophone market. During the postproduction phases of

the film *Wizards of the Lost Kingdom* (a fantasy genre aimed at young people) Roger Corman and Frank Isaac, Jr. decided that the film end credits needed to be altered. The Argentine crew was made to change their names to pseudonyms so their names would sound more anglicized. For example, the assistant director was billed as Andrew Sargent, but in fact was Américo Ortiz de Zarate. Art director Mary Bertram was in actuality María Julia Bertotto. This move unequivocally demonstrated for whom this production was made, and simultaneously commanded a profound disrespect for the professionals who worked on it.¹²

Scenarios such as these have sparked debates about the presence of foreign film companies who come to Argentina to produce films whether in coproduction or not. Octavio Getino, communication scholar, Third Cinema filmmaker, and an expert in Argentine cultural industries, argues that “U.S. co-productions are a business and I think that is fine. This helps us because it makes our film crews undergo some technical gymnastics (*gimnasia técnica*) in film production. Some money stayed in the country too, but fundamentally it was in the experience.”¹³

Getino uses both gains in “technical experience” and in the economy to justify these film productions. He sees U.S. co-productions as a way to stimulate the Argentine film industry, despite the fact that most of these productions had no thematic connection to the country, nor were they shown in Argentine theatres.

An opposing view, demonstrated in a film journal editorial of *Cinecuadernos del Sur* (Southern Notebooks), a journal published by a state film school in Avellaneda, in Greater Buenos Aires, believed that filmed co-productions á la Corman were detrimental to the well-being of the country’s national identity. In a scathing commentary, the editorial committee states:

We send out a “red light” of warning to that modality of film coproduction with U.S. producers who take advantage of the unequal relationship between the peso and the dollar and with that, construct their travelling circus in Argentina. We want to clarify that we are not against co-productions per se, because we are aware that many times it permits people to produce films in countries that for economic reasons wouldn’t be able to otherwise. However, we are against those co-productions that control us, for those where we are only in charge of services and cheap raw materials where ultimately we wind up playing the role of the lackey. We are against the notion that our cinema becomes another “Taiwan” in the forms of production and consumption of B-rated products or worse.¹⁴

This perspective stems from the idea that national sovereignty and an appreciation for an Argentine identity is central to the preservation of an “authentic” Argentine cinema.¹⁵ This phenomenon of commercial co-production was directly correlated

with the general trend facing the nation: that is, how the process of multinational ownership and investment was stripping the country of its natural resources and autonomy. In reality, unfortunately, the strategies that developing nations can choose between are largely constrained by the economic situations they face. In the words of Brazilian filmmaker Leon Hirszman, “The critic, if s/he wishes to truly understand Third World Cinema, must keep in mind that the material conditions of production exert a determining influence on their form.”¹⁶ For this particular series of co-productions, the U.S. partner had more power in decision making than did the other; there was the use of English as the dominant language; and the script was formulated for a group of U.S. actors destined for one market rather than both.

María Julia Bertotto stated that her only regret working on these films was that she had been a great admirer of Corman as an auteur filmmaker in the 1960s and 1970s, but that after the U.S.-Argentine end-products were churned out, she felt a deep disillusionment. In other words, given the creativity and the resources in Argentina (however limited), these films could have been produced much better than they were. The crux of the problem, she concluded, was that “the part of cinema that is made purely for commercial purposes was what Corman valued most in all that he produced in Argentina.”¹⁷

“Argentine-Oriented” Films Made for the U.S. Market: The Contradictions of Coproduction

Although some co-productions have worked successfully, this was not so with the New Horizons-Aries productions. In this case, contradictions arose repeatedly. For the films that tried to incorporate Argentine themes and locales into the storyline, there was a larger attempt to position the films for both the U.S. and Argentine market. In the end, however, the films were not made with the good faith effort to appease two culturally distinct populations. This is because there were characters and plotlines that viewed Latin Americans from the optic of “otherness,” such as shown in the case of *Two to Tango* (*Matar es morir un poco*). *Two to Tango* was based on the script *Últimos días de la víctima*, by Argentine screenwriter and novelist José Pablo Feinmann, but was totally rewritten by a U.S. screenwriter, Yolanda Finch, for a U.S. audience. A similar fate was met in the case of *Cocaine Wars*.¹⁸

Both of these films, while depicting some degree of Argentine culture, fundamentally differed from their original versions to present stereotyped images for easy U.S. audience consumption. By comparing an Argentine film, *Últimos días de la víctima* (Last Days of the Victim) with its rewrite made as a U.S.-Argentine coproduction, *Two to Tango*, it is possible to detect how films are reshaped for an external market. The script *Últimos días de la víctima* was made into a critically acclaimed eponymous film in

1982 directed by one of Argentina's foremost directors, Adolfo Aristarain. The producer was Olivera's Aries Producciones.

The Argentine Prototype: *Últimos días de la víctima* (Last Days of the Victim)

The film opens with the anti-hero, Raúl Medizábal (Federico Luppi), a hit man, sitting in the apartment of his next victim, Mr. Rabena. There are lengthy takes of Medizábal biding his time while waiting for his victim's arrival. He is shown eating food out of the refrigerator, putting on records, going to fill up the bathtub. In short, it is a framing that conveys a lengthy and anxious wait for the hit man—an impatience that forces the viewer to sit uncomfortably in his/her seat. Medizábal turns on the television and sees his target victim, Mr. Rabena, a businessman, live on television discussing the political and economic misfortunes of his company. The television program depicts him as a man in deep financial trouble. He is interviewed saying: "I am doing my best to protect my employees." In the next scene, off camera, the viewer sees the businessman flee his company with his secretary en route to his apartment (before presumably leaving the country with a lot of money). The political subtext of the film conveys that business elites are lying to the media and the country about working in the best interests of the employees. Thus, the film presents a visual irony by framing the "double speak" of the powerful elites in Argentina, thereby conveying a deep mistrust for those in positions of authority.

Throughout the film, the *mise-en-scène* is austere, and there is no inclination toward lavish sets, mansions, or anything else that would indicate an upper class lifestyle. Most of the interiors are sterile, and the exteriors are urban and generic (such as on crowded anonymous streets, etc.). The locations are plain and unassuming, with locations such as Raúl's sparse apartment, a bowling alley where he meets an associate, and corporate offices. Overall, the look of the film is austere and the lighting muted. The somber mood created within this film is reminiscent of how the atmosphere under the military dictatorship (1976-1983) may have felt when this film was produced. The anti-hero is portrayed throughout the film as someone who works independently, and while critical of the way in which businessmen and politicians kill people to cover up their mistakes, he is willing to be a hired mercenary for those people. A rather detached and alienated character, he is usually alone in the frame, or else he is shown driving to the outskirts of Buenos Aires to spend time with his best friend Gatito (Ulises Dumont) in a rustic setting away from the city. Gatito also lives on the margins of society, although it is not clear what he does for a living. His girlfriend, Vienna (Elena Tasisto), is a prostitute. Raúl spends much time with Gatito and Vienna and seems to confide in them greatly.

One day he asks Gatito to look up some information on a

person that he has been hired to assassinate. Raúl has been given an assignment to kill a "Mr. Kulpe" (Arturo Maly) by some higher-ups. Raúl rents an apartment across the way from Kulpe's apartment. Every evening, he spies on his new victim and takes photographs of him. Raúl's apartment walls are covered with photographs of Kulpe, in various poses and focal lengths. This adds a voyeuristic dimension to the film. He spies on Kulpe amid the shadows and low Noir-ish lighting. In multiple scenes Medizábal spies on Kulpe and his girlfriend Cecilia (Soledad Silveyra) shooting heroin in Kulpe's apartment. The use of intravenous drugs is graphic, but it illustrates a grim truth—this is the underworld of drug dealing and sex in Buenos Aires. The conclusion of the film carries an unexpected twist. Ultimately, after his friend Gatito is murdered for trying to locate information for him, Raúl goes in for the kill to avenge his friend. When he bursts into Kulpe's apartment, he finds that there are photos of himself plastered all over the walls; much in the same way that Raúl has photos of his target. Thus, there is a reversal of "hunter and hunted." Raúl is killed in the end.

A Thriller "Made for Export": *Two to Tango*

In the "made for U.S. audiences" version, the protagonist Jim Conrad (Don Stroud), a blond, middle-aged man, does not speak Spanish—nor does he have any desire to. He is a hit man hired by mafiosos to kill a wealthy businessman in Buenos Aires. Jim sets out to rent a hotel room near his victim so he can spy on him. When he stumbles upon the Hotel Levin, he lies to the concierge by telling her he is a journalist and that he has a Jewish sounding last name. He bonds with the hotel owner, who also is Jewish. Later, we find that the hotel owner and her ailing husband are actually Nazi war refugees who hid their identities to avoid problems. They are depicted during the husband's funeral with a huge Nazi flag and a record playing "Die Furher" speeches on the gramophone. The concierge is dancing wildly and chanting "Seig Heil" in an erratic and sociopathic manner. This "Nazi menace" addition into the script was in obvious reference to the popular image or stereotype of Argentina as a refuge for escaped German war criminals.

Some other distortions in the plot revolve around the nationalities of the characters. The main character is hired to assassinate a shady wealthy character, but as he spies on him through binoculars, he falls in love with his victim's girlfriend. The woman, Susan (Adrienne Sachs) is a tango dancer who only dates rich and powerful men. She is not Argentine, but a New Yorker who took tango lessons from an Argentine whom she followed to Buenos Aires. Thus, she speaks with a New York accent and speaks no Spanish either. Later Jim stumbles upon the owner of the tango bar where Susan performs. It is owned by an American, who happens to be his old friend Dean (Michael Cavanaugh). Thus, the

three main characters are all coincidentally American, so that they may speak English with ease.

The other characters speak English with an accent, and they are stereotyped representations of Latinos: a suave Latino mafioso (Dulio Marzio¹⁹) with a thick Latin accent á la Ricardo Montalban, or, such as is found in the opening sequence, the first target Jim annihilates is an older Latino gentleman who dies screaming, “Oh no, I was not part of the Colombian drug deal, that wasn’t me.” Clearly, the issue of Colombian drug lords fit easily into the imaginary of the “general U.S. moviegoer” so this too made its way into the script as another means to satisfy a U.S. audience’s expectations. The only shred of likeness found in the Corman version of Feinmann’s work was that in the conclusion, Jim attempts to kill his target, and instead winds up being the victim himself. The film’s *mise-en-scène* is usually well lit, in expensive interiors such as the head Mafioso’s home, an upscale tango bar, and parties thrown in huge fancy mansions with wealthy English-speaking people. Although it is almost completely set in Buenos Aires, it is as though the country’s location is irrelevant. What matters is that people are wealthy and all speak English or heavily accented English. Finally, many scenes in the film showcase the main actress’s knowledge of tango dancing to satisfy the tourist’s cultural appetite.

Conclusion

Corman’s quest for cheaper sources of labor, adequate shooting locations, and a skilled workforce was aided by Olivera’s efforts to solicit producers in the U.S. and Europe to invest in Argentine co-productions. This scenario is analogous to what development theorists in the 1970s deemed *dependency theory* to describe the unequal relationships between the First and Third Worlds.²⁰ This perspective is useful in outlining how First World elites exploit poorer nations in their exhaustive search for ever cheaper sources of labor, raw materials, and lax governmental regulations abroad. Peripheral nations, in need of foreign currency, investment, and employment, market themselves to the exterior in the hopes that wealthy global elites will invest capital in their country.

Critical communication scholars have studied the impact of these “runaway productions,” or offshore film productions from Hollywood to other countries. Toby Miller has shown this to be a case of foreign exploitation under non-union conditions, much to the chagrin of U.S. film workers. Miller notes that runaway productions helped Hollywood studios to “avoid foreign-exchange drawback rules that prevented the expatriation of profits, simultaneously benefiting from host-state subvention of ‘local’ films.”²¹ Although I have made a distinction between typical higher-budget Hollywood studio films and Roger Corman’s lower budget production company, both types of production houses engaged in what Robles describes as “a trend that depends on peripheral na-

tions that have the right skills, language, familiarity, business links and foreign exchange rates to suit—what has been called a form of ‘peripheral Taylorism,’ such that there are highly-developed efficiencies available from a skilled working class in places that nevertheless continue to import what is made on ‘their’ territory—but never under their control.”²² In the Corman-Olivera case, Concorde/New Horizons went to Argentina to shoot films using Argentine subsidies, cheap labor, and narrative storylines that were not targeted to Argentine audiences but rather to U.S. ones. While some Argentine film critics denounced this type of “outsourcing” as a detriment to the Argentine film industry, others saw it as a source of income and technical experience.

In the 1980s, after the demise of the most brutal military dictatorship in the history of Argentina, the country confronted many of the same political-economic problems that other recent democracies in Latin America experienced. Alicia Entel accurately notes that “these were fragile democracies and ones that were negotiated. They also bared the brunt of huge external debts that were impossible to pay back.”²³ Thus, at this historical juncture, the push for foreign investment in film co-productions was tantamount to sustaining the Argentine national film industry, mainly by European partners but by the U.S. as well, as the Corman example illustrates. Therefore, the phenomenon of U.S. commercial co-productions came at a time when Argentina was willing to take whatever opportunity it could, despite the lack of cultural attributes the films possessed. This was a commercial venture that did not translate financially well at the video box office, but one could argue, as does film critic Diego Curubeto, that it paved the way for later film productions from the U.S. such as *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986) and *Highlander II* (Russell Mulcahy, 1991).

While the Corman-Olivera films were low-quality products that never were released theatrically (save one), the films still met with the objectives of Aries productions, albeit at a disadvantage. María Julia Bertotto spoke of disenchantment when she realized there would be little collaboration between U.S. and Argentine technicians. According to Vincent Porter, this kind of power imbalance does not make for a healthy coproduction. In his piece “European Co-productions-Aesthetic and Cultural Implications,” he advises:

The first of these [guidelines] is that the co-production should be a partnership of equals, not simply in terms of the financial commitments involved but in terms of the market the film aims to serve. Just as one partner will seek not to be dominated by another, so too should the needs of one market not dominate another. Many co-production treaties express pious hopes that a balance will be achieved of films produced in the participating countries, but all too often this is not achieved.²⁴

Ultimately, major problems lay with the economic inequalities present on two levels. On one level, there was a disparity of investment in the majority of the films made by the Corman-Olivera duo. On another level, there was the large size and wealth of the U.S. film market, which gave it precedence over the smaller Argentine market. When asked why Héctor Olivera was making action films essentially for the U.S. market, he observed:

This project [*Cocaine Wars*] would be impossible to film without a co-producer, due to the high costs involved. If we had proposed a film like *Rebellion in Patagonia* or the *Funny, Dirty Little War*, no U.S. producer would have been interested in the theme, nor would we have been able to break into that market. The U.S. public does not care about the political issues facing foreign countries; good films such as *Missing* or *Under Fire* did not perform well. However, action movies have not been attempted much in Argentina and they are made well in Hollywood. For me, it is important to stand up to the challenge [and produce an Argentine action movie jointly with a U.S. producer].²⁵

Thus, even though there were films with an equal share in investment, they were conceived with a U.S. target audience in mind. Consequently, the choice of script, actors, genre, language, and stereotypes remained in place. Themes such as the tango, drug running, Argentina as a haven for escaped Nazis, thick Latin accents, etc., were reinforced and reinscribed into the U.S. imaginary. In sum, the New Horizons-Aries venture was an opportunity to shoot U.S. style films in what some have called “America’s backyard” with a fine level of infrastructure, technical ability, and low costs.

Notes

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1 Diego Curubeto, author of an eyewitness account of Corman’s films made in Argentina, notes that “the crew who worked on the sets in Italy, the Philippines, and Mexico encountered the following problems: In Italy, there were worker strikes that inhibited production, in the Philippines, it was difficult to find local technicians, and the development of the film industry was limited, and in Mexico, there were union pressures to utilize their labor, and the presence

of untrustworthy people on the sets (i.e. robberies of props and costumes). Diego Curubeto, “Roger Corman: Invasión de la serie B”, *Babilonia Gaucha: Hollywood in la Argentina, La Argentina en Hollywood* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1993) 149.

2 “Opinión” de Héctor Olivera, *Página 12* (28 July 1993): 29.

3 See Roger Corman’s biography online at http://www.newconcorde.com/roger_corman.htm

4 Interestingly enough, because I teach courses in video production, Corman proposed the following business venture to me; riding on the coattails of the low budget success of *The Blair Witch Project*, a film produced digitally by youth, Corman offered his services and a possible investment of \$60,000 for a script that my students at the University of Kansas proposed, with the condition that it was shot in a digital format, and produced in a local setting.

5 From the dictionary entry “Héctor Olivera”: “Some critics believe that his films could be characterized as opportunist, while others see him as an artist who has been able to comment on the political climate that surrounds him.” From Clara Kriger, “Héctor Olivera” en el *Diccionario de realizadores* (Tomo cine latinoamericano 1) edited by Clara Kriger and Alejandra Portela (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Jilguero, 1997) 116.

6 Personal interview with Héctor Olivera, Buenos Aires, July 1995.

7 Claudio D. Minghetti, “El increíble Roger Corman: Dinosaurios clase B” *Página 12* (28 July 1993):29.

8 From Leonard Maltin’s *TV Movies Video Guide*, cited in Curubeto, *Babilonia Gaucha*, 157.

9 For example, in 1999 the American Film Institute recognized Corman’s achievements by presenting him with a Lifetime Achievement Award for independent filmmaking.

10 During the initial shoot of *Wizards of the Lost Kingdom*, Corman fired U.S. director Alan Holled over the phone, and put Héctor Olivera in his place. From then on, Olivera directed all of the remaining features, minus those of Argentine Alejandro Sessa.

11 Personal interview with María Julia Bertotto, 15 July 2000.

12 María Julia Bertotto, despite these thorny issues, still felt that it was a positive experience for her to work on these films. There had never been the opportunity to work on such fantasy genres such as these, and overall, it was challenging and exciting to be so creative with few resources.

13 Mariano Thieberger y Diego Dubcovsky, “Entrevista a Octavio Getino” *Contra luz*, October 1990: 12.

14 “Editorial: Entre dos aguas,” *Cinecuadernos del sur* 2.3 (1983): 2.

15 Alternatively, the authors of the above quote do support co-productions between Latin American countries because they instead “respect the dreams and kinds of expression fostered by our peoples.” The notion of “commercial” co-productions by Latin American countries was not considered as a possible exception to this notion of “pan-national culture.”

16 Osvaldo Capriles, Peran Evminy, Fernando Rodrigues, “Por la línea viva del Cinema Novo: Entrevista con Leon Hirszman”, *Cine al día*, 19 March 1975: 10, cited in Julianne Burton, *Film Artisans and Film Industries in Latin America, 1956-1980*. (Washington, D.C.: The Wilson Center, 1981) 13.

17 Bertotto interview, 15 July 2000.

18 Due to the length of this essay, I am not able to illustrate in detail the situation behind the making of *Cocaine Wars*. The film was shot in Salta and Jujuy, two provinces in Northern Argentina, but it was set in an “imaginary Latin American country,” known for its drug production. The protagonist, a U.S. DEA official was played by blond actor John Schneider, of television series *The Dukes of Hazzard* fame. The original script was written by David Viñas, a celebrated left-leaning novelist. However, U.S. screenwriter Steven M.

- 19 Krauer revised the script and left essentially nothing of Viñas' work.
Dulio Marzio is a well-respected actor in Argentina. Although he may have been content to have a role in a U.S.-Argentine co-production, it was certainly not the most developed character he has played during his distinguished career.
- 20 See Fernando E. Cardoso, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969) and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).
- 21 Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell. *Global Hollywood*. (London: British Film Institute, 2001) 56.
- 22 Alfredo C. Robles. *French Theories of Regulation and Conceptions of the International Division of Labor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994):137 and 151 cited in Miller, Govil et al, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001) 63.
- 23 Alicia Entel, "Cono Sur 1970-1990: De la liberación a la integración," in Hugo Achúgar (ed.), *Cultura Mercosur: políticas e industrias culturales*. Aportes del seminario "Políticas culturales en el marco de la integración regional del Mercosur organizado por FESUR, Montevideo, setiembre 1991, edición Logos, Uruguay,18.
- 24 Vincent Porter, "European Co-productions: Aesthetic and Cultural Implications," in Susan Hayward, ed. *European Cinema Conference Papers* (England: Aston University, an AMLC publication, 1985) 12.

- 25 Daniel López, "La muerte blanca, realización de Héctor Olivera: film nacional correcto aunque insuficiente en su propuesta, *La Razón*, 2 Aug. 1985.



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Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History

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"As badly as Hollywood often presents the presidents, it has had an enduring impact on how we see them, on how they behave, and even, in a few cases, on who won. It is about time, therefore, for a book like this that takes seriously the American presidency in film and history" (from the foreword by Richard Shenkman, author of *Presidential Ambition: Gaining Power at Any Cost*).