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*Editor*

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## ÍNDICE

### **METODOLOGÍA DE LAS MIGRACIONES INTERNACIONALES**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| ESCUELAS Y MÉTODO EN LOS PROCESOS MIGRATORIOS INTERNACIONALES ..... | 6 |
| José Manuel Azcona  |   |

### **COMUNICACIÓN CULTURAL EN ESPAÑOL**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| LA COMUNICACIÓN Y LA CULTURA EN EL ESCENARIO DE IBEROAMÉRICA ..... | 17 |
| Juan Francisco Torregrosa Carmona                                  |    |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| LOS TÓPICOS SOCIALES DE LOS EXTRANJEROS QUE VISITAN ESPAÑA ..... | 30 |
| Eugenio García Pérez   |    |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| THE PRESENCE OF IBERIAN AMERICAN CINEMA IN SPAIN ..... | 51 |
| Eugenio García Pérez                                   |    |

### **LITERATURA HISPANOAMERICANA**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| LA DINÁMICA DEL COSMOS FEMENINO EN LA OBRA DE GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ ..... | 64 |
| Majlinda Abdiu   |    |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ALGUNOS RASGOS DE LA DIVERSIDAD ESTILÍSTICA EN LA PROSA MARQUESINA..... | 79 |
| Majlinda Abdiu  |    |

### **LITERATURA EN ESPAÑOL EN ALBANIA**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| RECEPCIÓN DE LA LITERATURA EN ESPAÑOL EN ALBANIA: CUÁNDO, CÓMO, POR QUÉ ..... | 96 |
| Mario García Moreno   |    |

### **LITERATURA Y MÉTODO DOCENTE**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| THE USE OF DIFFERENT GENRES OF LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSES ..... | 107 |
| Elvana Shtepani  |     |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| LA COMPOSANTE CULTURELLE DANS LE DÉVELOPPEMENT DE LA LITTÉRATIE EN<br>LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE ..... | 120 |
| Eldina Nasufi  |     |

### **MITOS IDENTITARIOS DE LA SOCIEDAD ALBANESE**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| IL MITO ANTICO E NUOVO DELL'ITALIA NEL TERRENO SOCIO-CULTURALE ALBANESE ..... | 129 |
| Diana Kastrati  |     |

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| MITI MODERN I IDENTITETIT ..... | 142 |
| Diana Kastrati                  |     |

## INTERCULTURALISMO IDIOMÁTICO

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| ORIENTALIZMAT NË RRJEDHËN E ITALIANIZMAVE NË GJUHËN SHQIPE ..... | 167 |
| Dr. Adriatik Derjaj<br>Flavia Kaba                               |     |

## DIDÁCTICA DE LA ENSEÑANZA EN LENGUAS MODERNAS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| L'USO DELLE TIC APPLICATE ALL'INSEGNAMENTO DELL'ITALIANO COME LS. UN<br>ESEMPIO PRATICO: IL CAMPUS VIRTUAL..... | 178 |
| Matteo Re   |     |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| BREVE INTRODUCCIÓN A LA COMPETENCIA SOCIOCULTURAL EN EL AULA DE E/LE EN<br>ALBANIA ..... | 189 |
| Aida Myrto   |     |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| EXPERIENCIAS DE AULA: WEB 2.0 EN LA CLASE DE COMUNICACIÓN TURÍSTICA..... | 199 |
| Isabel Leal Valladares   |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| LA VALUTAZIONE E L'AUTOVALUTAZIONE DELLA PERFORMANCE NELLA LINGUA<br>C(QCE): MODALITÀ EFFICIENTI PER UN FEEDBACK CONTINUO ..... | 214 |
| Ela Vasi  |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| TRADURRE LE VARIETÀ LINGUISTICHE DI UN'OPERA LETTERARIA ..... | 227 |
| Mirela Papa<br>Anastasi Prodani                               |     |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| ACTION RESEARCH AS A MEANS OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ..... | 245 |
| Vjollca Hoxha  |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| CULTURE AS A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ..... | 253 |
| Miranda Veliaj-Ostrosi                                    |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| THEATRICAL TRANSLATION PROBLEMS FROM SPANISH INTO ALBANIAN AND VICE-<br>VERSA ..... | 262 |
| Iris Klosi<br>Esmeralda Subashi   |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| THE CHALLENGE YOUNG TEACHERS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LANGUAGE TEACHING ..... | 275 |
| Shpresa Delija<br>Ymer Leksi  |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| DIATESI PASSIVA NELLA LINGUA GRECA..... | 282 |
| Eneida Mataj                            |     |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| EDUCATION AU PLURILINGUISME EN CONTEXTE ALBANAIS: ENJEUX ET PERSPECTIVES.. | 291 |
| Silvana Vishkurti  |     |

# **COMUNICACIÓN CULTURAL EN ESPAÑOL**

# **THE PRESENCE OF IBERIAN AMERICAN CINEMA IN SPAIN**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the fact that Spain shares a lot of aspects with many countries from Iberian America, such as the language, the common history, and an identity common to all the Hispanic way of living, which put these nations in a really close position, in a way that they called themselves brother countries. In this brotherhood, it is logical to think that the exchange of products, from a cultural perspective, is a two way road, which leads the contents across the Atlantic Ocean sideways. That is the reason why the intention of this presentation is to give a deep analyzes of the motion pictures done in South and Central America which are most successful and most popular in Spain. For this evaluation we will classify the films according to their nationality, as well as the topics which are relevant in their destinationn. Finally the criteria as to affirm that a movie has been successful in that country will be the amount of viewers and the money obtained in the box office takings. Through this brief general overview of the cinema done in this part of the world, we would be able to understand how successful is this cinema in Spain, despite the closeness of both geographical areas both in cultural and linguistic terms.

## **Latin versus Iberian America**

First of all it is crucial to settle down the differences and similarities in meaning among the terms Latin America, versus Iberian America, and the reason why in this chapter the latest is used to the detriment of the first. Although the difference is simple it is vital to understand the concept of this chapter. Whilst in the former the cinema from all the countries speaking both the languages of the Iberian Peninsula

are included, that is to say, that Portuguese speaking countries, such as Brazil are included, in the term Latin American, this country is excluded, as it is considered to be Spanish speaking countries. And nowadays there is no possibility to keep out Brazil from the features and the common identity of the South American continent, moreover in the times, where the whole geographical area is joint together in a economic and political body, such as the MERCOSUR, but also when in Brazil the learning of the Spanish language is obligatory in the secondary education, and where there is a lack of more that 11,000 teachers of Spanish. Although the term Iberian America includes both Spain and Portugal, in order to achieve the aim of this presentation, these countries will both be rejected, as the cinematographic relationship between Spain and Portugal would fill by itself a whole chapter.

### **Argentine cinema in Spain**

#### a. A global positioning

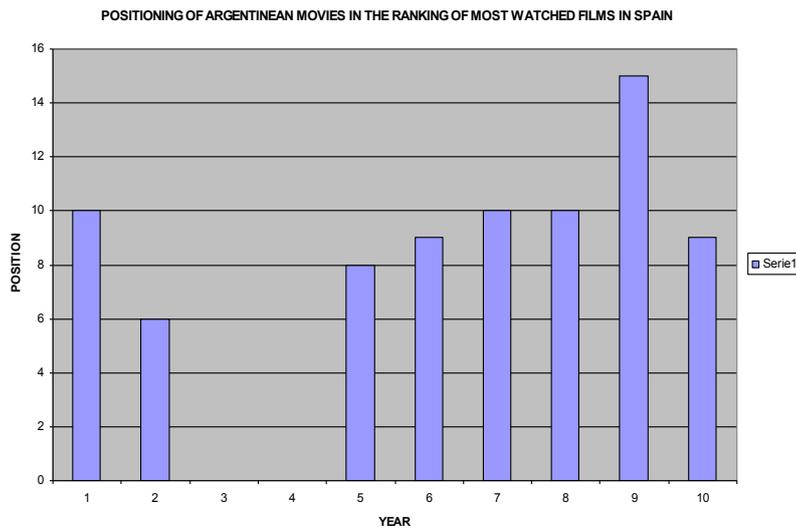
Without a doubt, Argentina is the South American country which has the second biggest number of films produced and released in theatres from all the continent, with a total of 601 films, and it is just behind the United States of America (1284) with a huge gap from the following countries in the list, such as France, in the third position with 220 films, Spain with 116 and Italy with 70 movies<sup>1</sup>. Regarding the rest of the countries in the area being analysed, as it will be seen later the difference is huge.

Compared to this exceptional figure of movies done in Argentina, the number of films which arrive to Spain is relatively poor, as in the period comprised between the years 2001 and 2010, only a 25% of the movies done in the land of Peron arrived to the Iberian country, which means only 160 Argentine movies were released. Furthermore, when the analysis is done in terms of the movies which managed to occupy a position in the top films ranking in theatres both by viewers or by box office sells, the list diminishes to a mere 10% of the total, that is to say, only 69 movies were in the most watched movies list of Spain.

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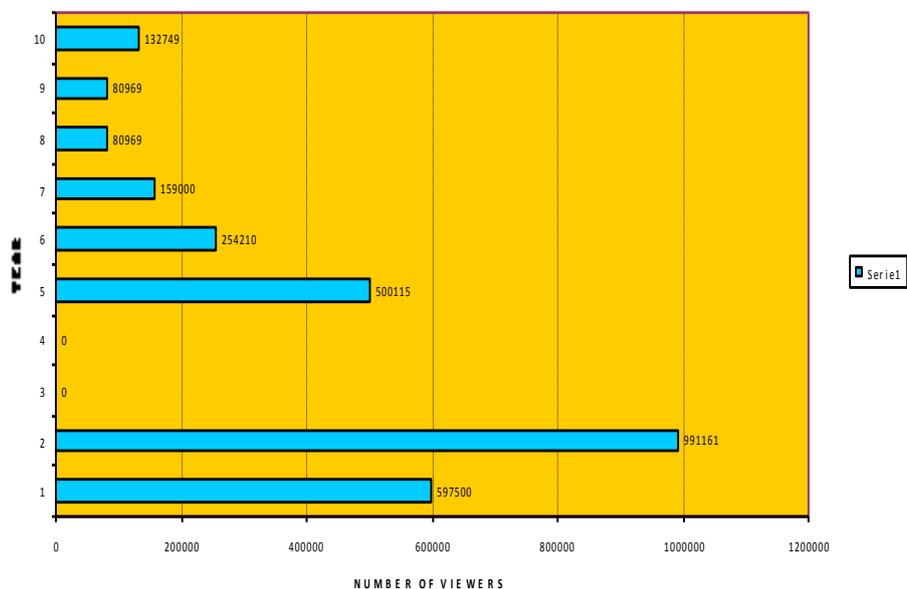
<sup>1</sup> De Izcue, Nora, Buquet Gustavo, Schiwy, Freda, Miller, Toby *Producción, coproducción, distribución y exhibición del cine latinoamericano en América Latina*, La Habana, Cuadernos Nuevo Estudio, 2009.

Figure 1. Number of Argentine movies in the Spanish theatres 2001-2010



The relevant figure which should be taken into account is the added audience or public which the movies of Argentina have had in this last decade, which is slightly over the 3 million spectators. Making an average figure of this statistic, the number of viewers per film is of 86,000, but as it will be stated in a few lines, this is not real and does not show the reality of the presence of the Argentine films in Spain.

Figure 2. Number of viewers of Argentine movies in Spain between 2001-2010



As shown in the chart above it would be unrealistic to make an average figure, as the one done before of spectators per year, as there are some years in which the number of the public going to see Argentine movies is around the million, such as it was in 2002, only 9,000 viewers away from this figure, or the years 2001 and 2005 when more than half million Spaniards went to the cinema to watch movies from

this country. On the other hand, as clearly stated in the graphic, there are two years in which the Argentine cinema was not present in the top ranking of movies in Spain, which were in the years 2003 and 2004, even though, in those years, more than 150 movies in total were produced and released in the country. So one might easily wonder what is the reason for this incredibly huge gap of viewers and relevance of the Argentine movies in Spain

#### b. Argentine themes in movies attractive to the Spaniards

Argentina has had a very interesting and deep history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, which goes from being the home to millions of Europeans – Germans, but especially Italians and Spaniards after the Civil War and World War II - to being ruled by one of the most charismatic couples of the contemporary history, Eva and Andrés Perón, evolving towards a military coup d'état, which many historians affirm to have had its weakest moments in the war against the British for the control of the Maldives Islands as to finally being one of the nations on the Earth with the biggest amounts of natural resources, but with a very controversial political class, which makes the population of this country to live in a state of poverty, not linked to the wealth and riches of the country.

As one might think, this very rich intrinsic background has been reflected in the Argentinean cinema, with a very special relevance of the period comprising the lives of the Peron matrimony, to the military coup d'état that this country suffered in the seventies, and to the most poetical characters of this historic event, the mothers of the second of May Square, who has been constantly denouncing the disappearance of more than thirty thousand Argentines during the 7 years that this stage of the history lasted. Another very attractive episode for the Argentinean cinema is the Maldives war, and especially the tragic effect that the nation suffered, especially from a psychological point of view. Finally the third episode very present in the cinema of this country is the so-called "Corralito", or the huge monetary crisis that the country suffered in the year 2001, where the population was not allowed to withdraw their savings from the banks, due to their lack of funds, which meant, basically, that the lifetime's savings of a country were lost.

Although these have been the most important themes of this land's cinema in the last decade, few of them have been relevant for the Spaniards. What is more, the historical themes for the public of the European nation have been something attached to the movie but it is not what they have looked for when watching a film

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<sup>2</sup> See Azcona Pastor, José Manuel *Violencia política y terrorismo de estado en Argentina del totalitarismo de José Uriburu a la dictadura militar (1976-1983) una visión bilateral*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2010.

from Argentina, but the search of the imaginary that from the South American country the Spanish public has. The average Argentinean citizenship, according to the Spanish vision, is somehow proud, always speaking a lot, with that special accent with which they speak the language, very close to being a psychologist, or psychiatric doctor, and always wondering the fate of their nation. *The Porteño* (or a person born in Buenos Aires), has to struggle to survive, and fight against a unfair society, which according to them is a legacy of the Spanish empire, but according to Spain, is a historical problem by which the Argentinean people haven't known how to deal with. That is why films such as *Nueve Reinas* (The nine Queens), reflecting the picaresque and the struggle to survive, has been one of the most successful movies in Spain done in Argentina.

Another aspect of the cinematography of this country is the possibility to see a very wild landscape, untouched by the human hand, which is the idea that Spaniards have of all the south of Argentina, and that is why, movies such as *Caballos Salvajes* (Wild Horses) had some relevance in Spain. A third kind of movies which have had some relevance in the Spanish theatres have been the ones dealing with very deep and special feelings, the human touch, that all the societies need in order to survive, and to remind us the humanity of the population. That is the reason for the success of two movies in Spain, both *El hijo de la novia* (The bride's son) and *Kamchatka*. And in a fourth place, very close with the former one, are the movies telling us the normal life of the country, where little stories within the daily life of the cities and villages, but which in an general overview would not be highlighted or published by any newspaper. In this last category we could include movies such as *Familia Rodante* (Rolling Family) and *Bombón*.

#### c. Ricardo Darín

With very few exceptions, the biggest blockbusters of the Argentinian cinema outside its borders is due to the magnificent performance of the actor Ricardo Darín. And it is necessary to point out that the high performance of the movies featured by him, happens not only in Spain, but also in countries such as France, Italy and the United States. And far from being a coincidence, all the years that the Argentinian cinema did not appear in the most watched movies in Spain was due to the fact that this actor did not feature anything at all. Very briefly in this chapter we will talk about his most popular movies in Spain.

His first big blockbuster was the movie *Nueve Reinas* (The nine queens) shot in 2000, but released in Spain in 2002. According to the International Movie

Database<sup>3</sup> this movie managed to collect more than 2,2 million of euro in the box office with more than 473,000 admissions in the cinemas (more than 135,000 in France, 50,000 in the United Kingdom and more than 25,000 in Italy, The Netherlands and the United States). The movie deals with two professional con men, very different among them, who decide to team up in order to give the "Bank Job" of their lives, when they try to sell the replica of a stamp to a Spanish collector by a huge sum of money. Everything gets more and more complicated as towards the end of the movie, the characters find themselves immersed in the Bank crunch of the "corralito" not being able to cash in the cheque of the transaction. The plot of the movie is based on real facts obtained by the director of the movie, Fabian Bielinski, who used the confidences done by journalist and real con men. As to finish with this movie, it should be mentioned that a remake of *the nine queens* was done in Hollywood, but it was not half as successful as the original.

His second successful motion picture in the Spanish movie theatres was the movie *El hijo de la novia* (The Bride's son), which was shot the following year, that is 2001. The plot behind this movie is a very tender and endearing story, mixing moving narratives of the characters together with their own personal problems, which do not affect only to themselves, but also to those around them. This has been the most popular feature film from Argentina ever in Spain, with a total figure of 1,5 million spectators and with a total box office receipts of 7,2 million euro. Needless to say that besides the quality and the sentimentalism behind the stories of the plot of the film, the tremendous success of the movie was also a consequence of the feature movie mentioned above, *The nine queens*, put the actor Ricardo Darín in a privileged position in the cinema sphere in Spain.

The subject matters of *The bride's son* were the main reason for the popularity of the movie. The first one is the mental disease that the main female character suffers during the story. It is one of the first times that the Alzheimer illness was dealt with visually, including all the consequences that this sickness had on the whole family life. The disruption of the mental disease leads back the life of her husband, giving all his attention and importance he couldn't give to her before. The second issue this movie is about is the difficulty and the tensions of life. The problems that the modern man have to face, such as having to merge the business together with the family and the personal life of the character. As life goes through, the balance of the mixture becomes more and more complicated.

The third popular movie in which Darín took part was *Kamchatka*, produced and released in 2002. This movie has been the one and only incursion that the actor has

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<sup>3</sup> [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

done in the subject matter of the Argentinean dictatorship of the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties. But the reason of the social acceptance of this movie in Spain, compared to the big number of films done in this topic, further than the appearance of the actor being discussed here, is the projection of a very human story in contrast to a completely dehumanized society, in which there is no place for the feelings of children. The plot is centred in the story of a ten year old boy, who is in danger of being kidnapped due to the social position of his parents, both with very liberal professions, and therefore not supporting the coup d'état. This situation was a very common one during these years, and more specifically in the big cities, such as Buenos Aires, Córdoba or Rosario. For this reason the family of the boy has to hide away in the countryside, having to leave behind all their lives – friends, school, belongings, etc. Again the third movie in a row by Darín which went beyond the half million spectators in Spain and more than 2 million euros in the box office receipts.

As stated before, the dependence of the success that the Argentinean cinema might have in Spain is highly linked to the appearance of the actor being discuss here. The evidence for this, resides in the fact that during the years 2003 and 2004 Darín did not take part in any film at all. Coincidentally during these two years the figures of spectators and the box office receipts regarding movies from this South American country dropped drastically, disappearing from the top 50 position ranking of the most featured movies watched in our country. Such is the case, that all the organisations which work recollecting these figures, do not mention any movie in their listings. Being this not enough evidence as to support the idea of the subjection of the Argentinean cinema to Ricardo Darín, one should take into account that the following year, that is 2004, when another movie is back to the top lists, and once again, the famous actor is featuring in it. This film was *Luna de Avellaneda* (Avellaneda's Moon), which scored a total of 346,000 spectators and more than 1,5 million euro in the box office.

The last two most watched films by Darín have been *El secreto de sus ojos* (The secret in her eyes) and *Un cuento chino* (A Chinese Tale), both of them having had more that half million spectators in the movie theatres and takings over three million euro. The international recognition of the first one is unquestionable, as it received, amongst many other awards, the best foreign film Oscar by the Hollywood Academy. The movie has a perfect plot from a narrative point of view, mixing flashbacks, and crossed realities, both between different characters, but also, within the own characters. It is a metaphorical voyage to the discovery of what the human being is able to do for revenge, putting into images what the Greek philosopher Plauto said "man is wolf to man". On the other hand, the former

one *Un cuento chino*, is a story of survival and mutual understanding between two people each of them from the furthest corner of the planet, who happen by chance to live together.

#### d. Argentine cinema besides Ricardo Darín

Against to the recurring thought of "the cinema of a country cannot be just one actor or director", this is the case of the situation of this industry in Spain. The popularity of the movies in which Darín do not feature, is really poor, and its performance in terms of number of spectators and the takings obtained still more irrelevant. However, there are some titles and directors which might be mentioned, as they have had some significance in the Spanish cinematographic sphere, but as highlighted before, these names are far away from the productions featured by Darín. The only Argentinean movie in which Darin has not appeared collecting more than a million euro in the Spanish box offices has been *No sos vos, soy yo* (It is not you, but me) which is a comedy involving affairs and flirting. The most popular director from the South American country in Spain is Carlos Sorín, whose movies have had some social acceptance, although not having received the approval in the movie theatres. His latest four movies *Historias mínimas* (*Minimal Stories*), *Bombón el perro* (*Bombón the dog*), *Maldeamores*, *La ventana* (*The window*) and *El gato desaparece* (*The cat vanishes*)

### **Mexican cinema in Spain**

As it was stated at the beginning of this presentation the country which has managed to export the biggest number of productions across the ocean and which also produces the most in South and Central America is Argentina, and the second country, but to a very long distance from the Patagonian one is Mexico. Compared to the 601 movies of the former, the latter's industry releases only eighty feature films. So even though the gap between these two countries in number is large, surprisingly enough, the relevance of the movies of this Central American country could be stated as superior as from the productions coming from the South. This fact is explained thanks to the ability of the sector of this country as to work in joint productions, both with the United States of America as with Spain. Being able to have popular worldwide celebrities or very well known local faces has managed to give the products coming from Mexico a very good commercial image, pushing their titles to the first places of the rankings in all the markets. Such is the case of the most well known production coming from this nation, *Babel*, produced and released in 2004, featured by one of the most popular actors in the planet, Brad Pitt. *Babel* deals with four intermingled stories, whose main protagonist in belong to a different

race in each part. Needless to say its tremendous success from the number of spectators point of view as well as takings from the box office.

Regarding this joint production method together with the Spanish film industry, the system used has been quite intelligent, from our point of view. Although the capital invested had its origins from Mexican hands, the main roles of the movies were developed by local actors, making this mixture a complete achieving of the goals aiming at. The 2010 production *Biutiful* led by Javier Bardem, is a clear example of what has been remarked before. This motion picture was very well received among the public in the Hispanic cinemas. Another two illustrations of our theory are *El laberinto del Faunio* (Pan's Labyrinth) (2006) and *Y tu mamá también* (And your mother too) (2001) two Hispano Mexican productions with a very acclaimed Spanish actress, Maribel Verdú, who made that these movies were very well received in her country, as she was already beloved by her public. A final example of this methodology of production is the film *Las vidas de Celia* (Celia's lives) (2006), with Luis Tosar and Nanjwa Nimri leading the main roles of the plot.

As to finish with the analyses of the film industry of this country, we shall stop and speak in detail of the only one hundred per cent Mexican movie which has made its way through the top positions of the listings. This movie called *Amores Perros* (Love's a bitch), managed to have over three hundred thousand spectators in our country, with total takings of more than 2,5 million euro. The outline of the story is divided up into smaller narratives, all of them related somehow to dogs. But all of the parts of the movie show the miseries and the worse part of the society, notwithstanding the social status or level of the characters, going from the opulent to the homeless. When released, back in 2000, *Amores Perros*, was scrutinised as very cruel movie, showing hurting images of damaged animals, in spite of the fact that at the starting credits it is vouched for ensure that during the shooting no animal suffered any harm, although this warning seemed to have little effect on the criticism, heading to its banning in some western countries.

### **Brazilian cinema in Spain**

Albeit being one of the countries of the world, and for sure the one in South and Central America, with the biggest number of movie theatres, the number of feature productions done in this giant nation is quite scarce, either in the number of releases not to mention the quality of the films. So the number of motion pictures that from this country has arrived to ours is quite minimal, and our concern about their filmography is enclosed to the movies showing the misery, the poverty and the misfortunes of their society. It is quite normal to associate the image given in

the pictures, with the "favelas" or the very poor neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Río de Janeiro.

The first of the three movies being examined here is *Estacao central do Brasil* (Central Station), produced in 1998. It is a heart-breaking road movie which shows for the first time at an international level the bottomless misery, indigence and penury of the Brazilian society, retreating from all the existing stereotypes of the country, such as the constant carnival in which they lived, the tropical sandy beaches and stopped from throwing off the scent of the happiness of its population that the foreigners had from this nation. Also it gave a very profound analyze of the religiousness of the peasants and the indifference and the struggle of survival against the mafias.

The second motion pictured being disseminated is *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), made in the year 2002, which gained more than 175,000 spectators in Spain, and takings over a million euro. Astonishing and hyper-realistic story of the quotidian life of one of the most perilous favelas in Río de Janeiro, and the inner fights within the shack settlement in order to control the drug market of the city. A complex vision from the eyes of one of the boys who manages to stay clean of the mafias, and struggles to escape from the life of the commune.

Finally, and so as to close the dissection of the Brazilian productions we will remark the movie *Tropa de elite* (Elite squad), which deals with the same subject matter as *Cidade de Deus* but just from the opposite point of view, namely the perspective of the life in the shack areas as seen by a member of the elite police of Río de Janeiro. Specially trained soldiers who have to raid in the shacks in order to stop the drug trafficking. However when being inside the raids they find themselves with worse combat equipment than the local population. This movie also shows the level of corruption within the local police, and how that image is extrapolated to all the security forces of the country, so all the member of this elite squad has to face this, and confront it socially.

### **The cinema of other countries**

As to conclude this presentation, we will mention some other important movies in Spain not belonging to the three countries which have already been referred to, that is Argentina, Mexico and Brazil. The first country that will be quoted is Colombia, whose most important presence in our cinemas was with the movie *María, llena eres de gracia* (Mary full of grace), produced and released in 2004, an extremely moving film depicting the story of a young girl whose economic situation

pushes her to take drugs in her stomach (71 balls of cocaine) into the United States, what in Spanish is called "mulero". An interesting and new perspective of the Colombian drug mafia, and how they threaten her to kill all her family if "something goes wrong". The situation gets worse, when she finds out that she is pregnant

Secondly we will briefly speak of the Peruvian cinema, from which we will highlight the title *La teta asustada* (The milk of sorrow), from 2009, which is a reflection in the present of the period before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, as the characters of the movie speak in Quechua, the local language of the Indians and there is a constant mentioning of the ancestors traditions, one of them being la teta asustada, which describes the illness or the believe that the women who were raped during the terrorist war in Peru pass onto their babies through the milk of their breasts.

## **Conclusions**

Summing up what has been exposed in this presentation, the link between the idea of common language and interest in the culture of the Spanish speaking countries on either side of the Atlantic Ocean is not as valid as it might be thought. That is the reason why number of the movies produced in Central or South America which arrive to the Spanish screens is relatively small.

The first case analysed in the lecture has been the Argentinean one, a country who has produced over 600 motion pictures in the last decade, from which a mere 25% arrived to the cinemas of our country. And that from that percentage only 69 were in the listing of the most watched movies or the highest takings in the box office. It has been set very clearly that the fact that the actor Ricardo Darín features a movie, is a guarantee for the movie to be successful in our nation, giving as a proof of this the statistics of the takings of all the years, which diminish deeply in the ones when this actor did not appear in any movie. It has also been mentioned some other movies and directors which contributed a little towards the interest of the Spanish public to the films of that country.

Following Argentina, it has been depicted the situation of the Mexican cinema in Spain, which is slightly better than the previous country, due to the fact that most of the productions done by them are joint together with other nations, providing them with an international fame, from which their movies have benefitted. Such is the case of the collaboration with the United States in the movie *Babel*, being the movie from the country who has the biggest takings in the history. Also this

coproduction system has worked very well in our country, as using familiar faces, such as Javier Bardem, Maribel Verdú, or Luis Tosar, has pushed the films from this Central American land to the top positions of our theatres. And as to end up with them, a short note on the most popular Mexican films, not in a joint production, which was *Love's a bitch*.

Thirdly a short stop in the Brazilian cinema has been performed, as it is the second country with the biggest number of screens of the American Continent, only beaten by the United States, but whose production of motion pictures is quite poor both in number and in quality. It has been highlighted that the subject matters most attractive for the Spaniards that the cinema of this country can provide is the social situation of most of the population, which live in the poverty and the misery. The first movie to give the real image and to override the international imaginary that the overseas community had on Brazil was *Estacao central do Brasil*, soon followed by other two very succesfull titles, such as *Cidade de Deus* and *Tropa de Elite*.

Finally, a very brief word was given to movies shot in other countries different from the former ones, and very telegraphically explained about Colombia and Peru, countries which only provided a relevant movie each. The Colombian one is *María llena de eres de gracia*, telling the story of a young female who is force to use her body as to take drugs in the United States. And the Peruvian one was *La teta asustada* very intrinsic and intimate movie, showing the existing civilization and customs prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquerors.