

SPECIAL **REPORT**

Chile's

Praised and prized abroad, Chilean movies often fail to make an **impact back home where cinemagoers choose Hollywood blockbusters over local offerings.** **bUSINESS CHILE** looks at the reasons and at what **the industry offers.**

By **Gideon Long**



Courtesy of La Casa Films



Courtesy of Matias Bize

Film Industry

When, in the first few weeks of this year, two Chilean feature films won prestigious international awards, cinema critics in Santiago reacted with patriotic pride, but also a degree of surprise.

No-one had expected *La Nana* (The Maid), directed by young filmmaker Sebastián Silva, to win a World Cinema prize at the Sundance Festival in Utah. And despite his previous success with the 2004 film *Machuca*, few had predicted that Andrés Wood would win a Goya - regarded as the Spanish equivalent of an Oscar - for *La Buena Vida* (The Good Life).

But this is typical of Chilean films. Often sober and thoughtful - some might say ponderous - they may be praised and prized abroad, but they struggle to find an audience at home.

There is no denying that Chile's film industry has grown impressively in recent years. It now produces around 12 feature films a year compared to just one or two back in the 1990s.

But in a sense, the industry has fallen victim to its own success. The number of new cinemas in Chile has not kept pace with the number of films, and that means it is increasingly difficult to get a movie aired.

That is partly because the average Chilean goes to the cinema less than once a year as compared to nearly five times a year for the average U.S. citizen. Faced with relatively high box office prices, many Chileans tend to stay home and watch movies on (sometimes pirated) DVDs.

"Films are sometimes only shown for a week or two and by the time people get round to going to the cinema they've missed them," says Matías Bize, one of Chile's innovative young filmmakers. "It's a shame because I think there's a lot of exciting things happening in Chilean cinema at the moment."

But competing with the tide of well-financed, well-made films that sweeps down the Pacific coastline from Los Angeles each year is difficult. Of the 182 feature films

shown in Chilean cinemas in 2007, just 12 were Chilean and the vast majority - nearly 90% - were made in the United States.

Chile is not, of course, alone in this: every film industry in the world works in the shadow of Hollywood. But some countries in Latin America have risen to the challenge while Chile has yet to do so.

In Argentina, an estimated 32% of films shown in the cinemas are locally made while in Brazil the figure is around 23%. In Chile, in sad contrast, local films make up just 6.6% of the total.

"The Argentine film industry is very well established," acknowledges Bize, whose fourth feature film *La Vida de los Peces* (The Lives of Fish) is due out early next year. "Here in Chile we've only just started to grow."

Financing

The state is working hard to promote the industry's development. The government's Economic Development Agency (CORFO) provides funding for pre-production, the stage at which a film is little more than a figment of a director's imagination.

Then, once filming is underway, the National Arts Council takes over, helping to finance production and post-production, while the job of promoting the film abroad falls to the Foreign Ministry's Dirección de Asuntos Culturales (DIRAC), which touts Chilean films at world festivals.

State financing for the Chilean film industry is relatively generous. Last year, the Arts Council handed out over a billion pesos (some US\$1.7 million) in grants to local filmmakers, with an upper limit of around US\$250,000 per film.

"For some films that represents a substantial amount but for others it's obviously not enough and they have to raise finance from elsewhere," says the Arts Council's executive secretary Claudia Gutiérrez, who estimates the average cost of making a Chilean feature film at US\$670,000.



Courtesy of Dirac



One major source of funding from outside Chile is Ibermedia, the Madrid-based state-financed regional film fund for Spain, Portugal and Latin America. Over the past decade, it has helped finance over 250 Latin American films, including several successful Chilean movies.

Significantly, Ibermedia's funding is conditional on co-production. That has forced Chilean producers to venture across the Andes in search of partnerships, leading to a healthy internationalization of the Chilean film industry.

Audience appeal

A handful of private Chilean production companies

are also establishing themselves as significant players on the domestic stage. They include Fabula, which last year produced the unexpected hit *Tony Manero*, a film about a John Travolta fanatic set against the unlikely backdrop of the Pinochet dictatorship.

But critics of Chilean cinema complain that the country's films are not broad enough in their scope and constantly return to the same themes - notably, life under Pinochet. Certainly, a glance at the back catalogue of Chilean films - particularly documentaries - shows that the events of September 1973 hold an extraordinary grip on the nation's collective cinematic memory.

Themes of exile, opposition, separation, tragedy and

Chilean Films: Ten of the Best

- *Tres Tristes Tigres*, Raúl Ruiz (1968). A milestone in Chilean cinema, Ruiz's early feature film delves into the small-time underworld of 1960s Santiago, with its cramped apartments and sleazy bars.
- *Valparaíso Mi Amor*, Aldo Francia (1969). The film that immortalized the port city for a generation of Chileans. A father is imprisoned for theft, prompting the disintegration of his family.
- *El Chacal de Nahueltoro*, Miguel Littín (1970). Based on a true story, an illiterate peasant from southern Chile murders a mother and five children but finds God before facing the firing squad.
- *Julio Comienza en Julio*, Silvio Caiozzi (1979). A wealthy landowner orders the sexual initiation of his son and heir with a local prostitute, but the plan backfires when the two fall in love. An indictment of the early 20th century Chilean aristocracy.
- *La Frontera*, Ricardo Larraín (1991). Hailed as the first great Chilean film of the post-dictatorship era, this is a story of a school teacher banished to the south; uprooted from his urban existence, he falls in love and learns from the locals.
- *El Chacotero Sentimental*, Cristián Galaz (1999). The film that lifted the lid on the sex lives of ordinary Chileans in the 1990s. Based on a radio chat show hosted by Roberto Artiogoitia, alias Rumpy, the film spawned a successful 2007 sequel *Radio Corazón*.
- *Taxi Para Tres*, Orlando Lubbert (2001). A black comedy about a taxi driver, Ulises, who joins forces with a criminal duo to pay off his debts. Only when the gang is holed up in his house with his beloved daughter Javiera does Ulises decide it's time to take drastic action.
- *Mi Mejor Enemigo*, Alex Bowen (2004). It is 1978 and Chile and Argentina are on the verge of conflict in the south when a Chilean platoon gets lost in the pampa and digs in close to an Argentine platoon. During the tense countdown to war, the two groups strike up a friendship.
- *Machuca*, Andrés Wood (2004). The most acclaimed Chilean film of the current decade. A lonely boy from a middle-class family is thrown together with a streetwise kid from the slums of Santiago. An unlikely friendship blossoms during the final doomed days of the Allende government in 1973.
- *La Sagrada Familia*, Sebastián Lelio (2006). Marco's family are at their beach house over the Easter weekend when his girlfriend Sofia arrives and turns his respectable, wealthy middle-class family on its head.



protest abound, even in films made recently. That's not to say the films aren't good, but they can sometimes feel a bit relentless.

Alejandra Cillero, who heads the film and video department at DIRAC, says this is changing. "These days when we go to a festival we find ourselves promoting horror films, animation films and comedies," she says. "Chilean cinema is much more diversified than it was even a decade ago."

Many older Chilean film directors - men like Miguel Littin and Raúl Ruiz - are still active but a new generation has also appeared, with only a scant recollection of the Pinochet years. They are showing themselves ever more willing to

address a range of themes that capture the essence of Chile in the 21st century.

The Bond factor

But, while Chile's filmmakers are busy seeking funding and recognition abroad, Patricio Parraguez is trying to entice foreign directors to Chile. Parraguez works at the government's export promotion agency, ProChile, and is charged with promoting the country as a destination for would-be filmmakers.

He estimates that foreign companies currently spend US\$10-15 million a year filming in Chile. That's



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mostly for advertisements.

"Shooting an ad takes an average of five days and costs around US\$400,000 in Chile," Parraguez says. Coca-Cola, Texaco, Mercedes-Benz and Volvo are among the many companies that have shot commercials in Chile and, at any given time, there may be two or three crews at work around the country.

But ProChile's biggest success to date was bringing James Bond to Chile. Last year, part of the latest Bond movie *Quantum of Solace* was filmed in the Atacama Desert.

Feature films are a potentially lucrative business: just one big movie can do wonders for a country's image. New Zealand's tourist industry received a welcome shot in the arm when the country was used as a backdrop to *The Lord of the Rings* and visitors headed to the Greek islands in droves after seeing them enchantingly captured on film in the musical *Mamma Mia!*

But *Quantum of Solace* didn't do quite the same for Chile. It was only one of many countries used for filming and, in any case, viewers were - rather controversially - led to believe that the spectacular

Atacama Desert locations were actually in Bolivia.

But it still provided a welcome boost for the economy in the north. ProChile estimates that the film's crew spent around US\$8 million on hotels, transport, food and tourism during their brief visit.

Parraguez hopes that other film producers will follow suit. "Chile's great advantage is that, from the deserts in the north through the central valley to Patagonia, we can recreate almost any landscape in the world."

Chile also has wonderful sunlight, he adds. And, because of the counter-seasonal factor, companies can use it, for example, to film autumn shots when it's spring in the northern hemisphere.

"We have so much to offer," insists Parraguez. Indeed, what Chile is offering international cinemagoers is a double bill - the increasing appeal of its home-grown films and, in the background of other countries' films, the appeal of its scenery. **bUSINESS CHILE**

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