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DOI:

[10.1386/ncin.12.1-2.133_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.12.1-2.133_1)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Kourelou, O., Liz, M., & Vidal, B. (2014). Crisis and Creativity: The New Cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain. *New Cinemas Journal of Contemporary Film*, 12(1-2), 133-151. https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.12.1-2.133_1

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Crisis and creativity: The new cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain

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Abstract

This article examines the new cinemas, film cultures and discourses emerging from three of the film-producing nations most adversely affected by the Eurozone crisis. Through case studies arising from Portugal, Greece and Spain, the article explores the enhanced visibility of independent film-making at a time in which the role and the very survival of the state-subsidized film industries in recession Europe has been crucially thrown into question. This comparative analysis suggests, conversely, the cyclical nature of the discourse of crisis and explores the creative responses mobilized by European cinema.

Keywords

crisis

European cinema

Portugal

Greece

Spain

small nations

This article attempts to map the new cinemas and attendant discourses emerging from three of the European film nations most adversely affected by the 2008 global financial crisis: Portugal, Greece and Spain.¹ Greece received the first bailout in the

spring of 2010, followed by Portugal in April 2011 and then by the rescue of Spanish banks with Eurozone funds at the end of 2012. In all three countries, the effects of the crisis have begun to ripple out to their respective cultural industries. However, these effects transcend the purely economic. Our goal in the pages that follow is to investigate creative manifestations emerging from these film nations that have been brought into sharp relief – or even enabled – by the crisis. Since we focus on recent developments and on (regulatory, economic, cultural) processes that are still ongoing, we do not aspire to offer a comprehensive or definitive analysis of the relationship between the financial crisis and the film sector in the three countries under investigation. Rather, this article is prompted by questions that resonate within and across national borders; questions that, we argue, reveal a broader European dimension to the debates and sit, like the crisis itself, at the intersection of the national and the transnational.

Our intervention in these debates particularly underscores the highly paradoxical nature of the discourse of crisis when examined in relation to what we could call Western Europe's 'other' cinemas. By this we mean cinemas marked as other not only by their nations' shared predicament – their current association with an economically troubled South in the insidious picture of a two-tier crisis-ridden Europe – but also by the particularity that comes from both scale and cultural recognition. Discussing the status of cinemas from small nations, Mette Hjort points out that

[w]hat the concept of small nation acknowledges is that the game of culture, be it film culture or some other form of cultural articulation, is more accessible to some groups than others, more hospitable to some aspirations than others, and, in the long run a process involving winners and losers. (2005: 31)

In this respect, we propose the notion of ‘small’ and of ‘other’ cinemas as coterminous on the basis of the dynamics of recognition that constrain the work of the film-makers under study, of their perceived disadvantageous position in the ‘game’ of film culture. All three countries are relatively young democracies (Portugal and Greece became constitutional democracies in 1974; Spain, in 1978) and experienced a belated entry into European institutions – Greece joined the European Union (then the European Economic Community) in 1981; Portugal and Spain followed in 1986. Parallel to these political timelines is the three countries’ marginal position in the international canon of European art cinemas, which in the global market still largely stands for the idea of European cinema *tout court*.

The three-part structure of this article proposes a comparative outlook on the discourse of the crisis and its apparent contradictions. Thus we explore new forms of art-house film-making at a time in which the role and the very survival of the state-subsidized cultural sector in recession-hit Europe has been crucially thrown into question. Our analysis points at the cyclical nature of such discourse and explores the creative responses mobilized by these new cinemas.

Portugal: From decline to internationalization

Austerity in Portugal has not only had quantifiable consequences, it has also generated an overwhelming volume of public discourse, particularly about the arts and cinema. As a heavily subsidized sector, film has traditionally come under attack in eras of economic contraction. Since 2011, Portuguese cinema has therefore been scrutinized by a wide range of commentators. Writing in the daily *Público* in October 2012, for instance, Alexandra Lucas Coelho claims: ‘2012 is the year zero of

Portuguese cinema' (Coelho 2012). Coelho is here referring to 2012 as the year that follows Portugal's bailout by the *troika* (formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). After the implementation of a so-called rescue package, severe cuts across a number of sectors ensued; culture, including film, were no exception. The new government, elected in June 2011, just two months after the bailout was agreed, dismantled the ministry of culture and suspended all public funding for the audio-visual sector. Previous governments in Portugal had dismissed the ministry of culture. However, the blanket suspension of funding was an unprecedented measure in a sector that had received large sums of state support since 1971. This was the 'year zero' since, for the very first time, no funding was made available. 2012 thus became a new watershed in the history of Portuguese film.

Coelho's article is also revealing because, while alluding to the impact of the contemporary crisis, it simultaneously refers to such history. The idea of the 'year zero' is a familiar trope in scholarly publications, although in historical accounts of Portugal's cinema it is 1955 (and not 2012) that is generally described as the 'year zero', as no films were produced in the country that year (cf. Costa 1991: 109). By establishing a connection with the 1950s, the article highlights the fact that, even though this is a contemporary and transnational crisis, there is, at least in Portugal, a (national) history to this – a crucial issue for the understanding of the crisis, discussed in more detail below.

Film output is also one of the best indicators to examine the consequences of the contemporary crisis in cinema. Circa ten fiction feature-films are produced in Portugal every year. The graph in Figure 1 represents the evolution of film production in the country between 2004 and 2013. In absolute terms, the graph shows a slight increase

in relation to the Portuguese average. But although not unexpected, the graph also shows a sharp decrease in film production after 2011. While no evidence has been found to suggest the upsurge of 2010 would have been the beginning of a new growing trend, the impact of the cuts imposed on the film sector after 2011 is remarkably clear: by 2013, the numbers had lowered to less than a third of the films normally produced.

Figure 1: Number of films produced in Portugal 2004–2013.²

Taking these figures into account, even if not quite a 'year zero', 2012 certainly emerges as a bleak year for Portuguese cinema. Yet, Figure 1 does not tell the whole story. The numbers presented here refer only to films produced with the support of Instituto do Cinema e Audiovisual (ICA), the public body attributing funding to the film sector in Portugal. Other data, for instance related to film distribution, points to a different conclusion. The number of Portuguese films released in the country increased from 23 in 2010 and 2011 to 26 in 2012. These are first releases, and not just Portuguese films from any year, which would be a lot more (over 100 according to numbers released by ICA).

Both the indication of 26 and 100 are spectacular figures for a film sector of this size. Hence, the crisis has not signified the death of Portuguese cinema *tout court*. In fact, 2012 is a very successful year in many other ways. First, a series of films and film-makers were awarded key prizes at some of the most important film festivals in Europe and beyond. Miguel Gomes, who won the Alfred Bauer and the FIPRESCI awards at the Berlin Film Festival for his film *Tabu* (2012) and João Salaviza, winner

of the Golden Bear for the best short film with *Rafa* (2012), also in Berlin, are the best-known cases. Gonçalo Tocha and João Pedro Rodrigues were also amongst a wider group of Portuguese film-makers receiving awards in Locarno, Buenos Aires and San Francisco. The examples mentioned here are not altogether new; these film-makers follow in the footsteps of directors such as Manoel de Oliveira, Pedro Costa and José Álvaro Morais. However, Gomes and Salaviza, Tocha and Rodrigues launched an encouraging perspective on cinema in a country dealing with a profound economic crisis.

The success of Portuguese cinema is not exclusively measured in international terms. There has been an overall decrease in the number of spectators in film theatres in Portugal since 2011, with a 13 per cent fall in 2012 in relation to the previous year. But despite this, and although as a direct consequence of austerity measures cinema tickets became more expensive in Portugal after the rise of VAT (from 6 to 13 per cent already in 2010), Portuguese cinema had, in 2012, exceptional numbers of spectators at home. For the first time in the history of Portuguese cinema two national productions appear, if only for one weekend, at the top of the box office in September 2012: the comedy *Balas e Bolinhos 3 – O Último Capítulo* (Ismael, 2012), which was seen by 256,158 spectators, and the youth-oriented *Morangos com Açúcar – o filme* (de Sousa, 2012), watched by 238,200 spectators. It should be said that these films, like the vast majority of successful Portuguese films, despite popular with audiences, never recoup their production costs. But while this might justify the inapplicability of words such as ‘industry’ and ‘market’ in the Portuguese context, it nevertheless highlights an important sign of vitality in an otherwise badly damaged sector. Even though state support drops, cinema seems to survive. More than a ‘year zero’, 2012 emerges as the continuation of a deeply unbalanced and unstructured system

(producing at the same time art cinema for external consumption and unprofitable popular cinema for national audiences only) that has struggled with the idea of crisis for decades.

The tension between seeing the crisis as a period of exception or assuming it to be 'business as usual' is also present in the discourse on contemporary Portuguese cinema. Here, three main concepts emerge. The first keyword, and perhaps the most obvious, is decline. This is illustrated in material terms, as many cinemas across the country have closed since 2011 – especially historical theatres, and art-house cinemas in their majority, which are unable to compete with ever ubiquitous multiplexes. Portuguese cinema too is presented as having a compromised future. In May 2012 film professionals organized a series of protests outside the Portuguese parliament (which were paired with public screenings, discussed below) to demand that the government rethink their position in relation to the funding available for the arts. In the same month, Gomes, Salaviza and Tocha were invited to parliament to celebrate their international achievements. Instead, the film-makers took advantage of the opportunity to criticize the government and demand more support for national film in front of the media.

The second keyword emerging is the past – more specifically a familiar past, that is, the repetition of history. The screenings outside the parliament in May 2012 showcased the history of Portuguese film; while this might be a cinema with no future, it is certainly one with a past. Likewise, there is a sense that the crisis has been around for some time, and that it has been experienced before. A series of comparisons between the current situation and the nineteenth century have been made, particularly in relation to the work of realist writer Eça de Queirós. In 2013 João Botelho shot an adaptation of Queirós's most celebrated novel, *Os Maias* – a

work from 1888 that, as the film-maker put it in an interview, nonetheless tells the exact same story of contemporary Portugal; one of national debt, bank bailouts and mass emigration (Botelho cited in Cardoso 2013). Evidence of the history of the crisis in Portuguese cinema is also found in a much less distant past. In an article published in 1994 and tellingly entitled 'Portuguese cinema: In the doldrums of neglect', Nelson Traquina describes Portuguese cinema as experiencing 'yet another life or death situation' (1994: 291).

To a certain extent, the crisis does not have a strong impact on the film sector because Portuguese cinema was already, or has always been, in crisis. However, this does not undercut the seriousness of the situation. While Portuguese cinema might survive, several structural problems remain and these are as important in post-bailout Portugal as they were before 2011. At the same time, the crisis is a period of exception because it underlines some of the extreme aspects of Portuguese cinema, good and bad; it frames old issues in a new perspective.

The final keyword emerging in the discourse about cinema and the crisis in Portugal is internationalization, which has significantly gained currency since 2011. For better or worse, the crisis and the austerity measures that ensued have meant Portugal has been increasingly placed in a European sphere. One only needs to think of anti-troika demonstrations, where Portuguese flags appear side by side with Spanish, Greek and Irish flags. The awards Portuguese films have received in recent years are also good examples, which further testify to the international potential of art cinema. While in the 1990s Traquina discussed Portuguese cinema as being in the doldrums of neglect, after 2011 films from Portugal are in the spotlight – and, significantly, this is an international spotlight.

The importance of Europe, 28 years after Portugal joined the EU in 1986, is undeniable. At the same time, another, more global sphere, emerges in the international projection of Portugal. Despite being highly contested in political and cultural terms, the idea of a Lusophone (or Portuguese-speaking) world has, especially since 2011, become an important and increasingly sought commercial strategy for the promotion of Portuguese film. Coelho's article in *Público*, for instance, was written after a press conference in Brazil, in a year when the Rio de Janeiro International Festival held a season on Portuguese cinema (as have many other festivals since). A growing number of Portuguese film-makers are looking for development opportunities in Brazil, especially after the announcement of new co-production schemes between the two countries (Ancine 2014).

Internationalization is not just a survival strategy but a trend that has characterized contemporary Portuguese cinema since the mid-1980s – coinciding precisely with the start of the country's Europeanization process and, related to this, the end of colonialism. Similarly, the shift from an inwards, nationally obsessed cinema to one defined by a transnational outlook is part of an argument made by scholars of Portuguese cinema in the past decades (see for instance Baptista 2010). Internationalization is, however, reinforced by the crisis. Opening in November 2013 the 'Harvard at the Gulbenkian'³ season illustrated the strength of this perspective by staging a series of screenings and debates that enacted important dialogues between Portuguese films and world cinema.

Portuguese cinema is a paradigmatic example of the cinema of a small nation (Hjort 2005). Portugal is both: a small country that produces films and a country that produces a small number of films. But Portuguese cinema also challenges this notion. For instance, what is the 'greater' state that makes Portugal 'small' by comparison?

Not a former colony, but a former colonial power, this is perhaps an example of a nation that uses not a state but two diverse transnational geopolitical spheres (Europe and a supposed Lusophone world) as its 'others'. Yet, these are others in which Portugal simultaneously seems to include itself – a trend only reinforced after 2011. As a period of exception in terms of reflection (perhaps more than financially or industrially), the crisis has allowed for a maturation of the turn to the transnational. The year 2012 marks Portuguese cinema's dismissal of the national question and instead potentiates its international affirmation.

Both the numbers and the discourse representing Portuguese cinema are highly paradoxical: although the crisis is contemporary, undeniable signs of vitality emerge; there are historical glories to be celebrated (including those screened outside the parliament) even though the crisis has been ongoing, and is therefore also a feature of the past. On the one hand, the crisis is 'business as usual', which raises questions about how to measure the impact of austerity in a sector that, ultimately, has always been in crisis. On the other, this is a moment of exception insofar as it highlights important trends in Portuguese cinema. It remains to be seen the extent to which decline and history, as themes and contextual pointers for analysis, appear in the films produced after 2011. Worthy of further consideration is also the value of internationalization, namely in terms of the consequences it has for the definition and understanding of national Portuguese cinema.

Between crisis and renewal: The paradoxes of the Greek 'Weird' wave

The debt crisis has not only become a major trope within contemporary Greek cultural production; it also constitutes the key perspective through which almost all Greek artistic activity is currently viewed both at home and abroad – something that is

understandable considering that Greece is the most severely affected nation of the Eurozone. Specifically, mirroring the Portuguese case, discourses around the Greek crisis revolve around its paradoxical nature: on the one hand, the devastation that has been brought about as a result of the fiscal debt and ensuing austerity measures, and on the other, the renewal and creativity that the financial and sociopolitical instability has inadvertently helped to foster. Cinema is central in this context because of its role in spearheading the interest in Greek culture and, arguably, in redirecting the negative media coverage arising from the country's financial mismanagement towards a more positive interest in its new, creative side.

The type of cinema that has come to be associated with the crisis is generally known as 'The Greek New Wave'. Other terms commonly used include 'Young Greek Cinema' (Kerkinos 2011), 'New Greek Current' (Demopoulos 2011) and 'Greek Weird Wave' (Rose 2011) – the latter being a problematic appellation that is discussed later. All labels refer to low-budget art films made by first- or second-time film-makers, which have premiered at international film festivals, subsequently winning awards and critical acclaim, and which have found distribution in Europe and the United States. While the films of the Greek New Wave are not characterized by homogeneity there are marked similarities among them that allow for the applicability of the collective term. What primarily links them together is a concern with the present (as opposed to the focus on history in the films of the previous generation, the most representative of which is Theo Angelopoulos). Focusing on challenging subject matter, which invariably revolves around domesticity and youth, the films adopt a critical stance towards contemporary Greece, which is articulated through a formally stringent visual language. The major film-makers associated with this new current are Athina Rachel Tsangari, Panos Koutras, Yannis Economides, Filippos Tsitos, Syllas

Tzoumerkas, Argyris Papadimitropoulos, Babis Makridis, Elina Psykou and Alexandros Avranas. However, the central figure behind the development and discovery of the Greek New Wave is Giorgos Lanthimos, with his 2009 film *Kynodontas/Dogtooth*. The film opened at Cannes where it won the Un Certain Regard award that year. Several awards and nominations followed, including an Oscar nomination in the Best Foreign Language Film category (2010).

Dogtooth constitutes a landmark in Greek cinema both culturally, ushering in an unprecedented international interest in Greek film, and industrially. Its phenomenal success, along with the attention two other 2009 Greek festival films attracted (Koutras's *Strella/A Woman's Way* in Berlin, and Tsitos's *Akadimia Platonos/Plato's Academy* in Locarno) gave a new impetus to the Greek film community to emancipate itself from 'deep-rooted practices, institutions and ideologies' (Chalkou 2012: 245). Two events that took place in 2009 are crucial here: the formation of the 'Filmmakers of Greece' (FOG) group and the establishment of the Hellenic Film Academy.

FOG is an independent organization, made up of film-makers (most of whom belong to the Greek New Wave), scriptwriters and producers, that was founded with the aim of having the then current legislation on Greek cinema reviewed. Since the 1970s, Greek cinema had relied almost exclusively on public funding – a strategy that proved highly ineffective. This was attributable to two main issues. On the one hand, state underfunding created unfavourable conditions for the development of domestic film production. On the other hand, the state's systematic violation of the existing film law 'deprived the industry of valuable alternative resources' (such as tax rebates for independent producers and the investment of 15 per cent of TV channels' gross income in film production) (Chalkou 2012: 250). It should be noted that the Greek film sector (even when it was organized around industrial lines in the post-war period)

has been in a chronic state of crisis, with the state typically showing little support for its sustenance. Hence, the FOG movement's call for the reform of the film law constituted a significant intervention towards the renewal of the national film production coming from within.

Concomitant with FOG's formation was the establishment of the Hellenic Film Academy. Following international models like the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) and the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), the Hellenic Film Academy was set up as another independent organization, consisting of solely film professionals, and giving out annual awards on the basis of what they decide is worthy without any political party or union interference (as had been the case before). While through these two initiatives Greek film-makers managed to have their demands factored into a new law on cinema, unfortunately they coincided with the implementation of the first round of austerity measures, making state funding again largely unavailable.

Despite this, however, a number of different financing options have been adopted post-2009. These options align Greek cinema with what Hjort (2005) defines as 'small nation cinema' in her work on Scandinavian directors who also had to work creatively through financial constraints by adopting alternative models of producing low-budget art films, so as to gain access to the networks of cultural circulation both within and beyond their nation. Some of the ways through which contemporary Greek film-makers have reconfigured traditional patterns for financing their projects include 'the adoption of a system of labour exchanges' (Papadimitriou 2014: 6), whereby film-makers work for free in each other's films, or actors and crew members work without pay, at least until the film secures distribution – a strategy that film-maker Babis Makridis has described as the 'guerrilla way' (Routsi 2012); the forging of co-

production deals, mainly with European companies; the deployment of the possibilities offered 'by the international festival network (concerning development, funding, screening, and film distribution)' (Kerkinos 2011); and the teaming up with 'new, internationally orientated producers' (Papadimitriou 2014: 7), such as Christos Konstandakopoulos's Faliro House Productions, which supports both the film-makers of the Greek New Wave and foreign indie auteurs like Jim Jarmusch. What emerges, then, is that paradoxically the crisis has brought about a long-awaited restructuring of the industrial and institutional frameworks of Greek cinema. Despite the general austerity, Greek film has benefitted from both the changes in state funding and the more 'creative' financing routes that have opened up.

But what about the films themselves? How and to what extent has the crisis affected film-makers' thematic and formal choices? In an article that appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2011, journalist Steve Rose muses: 'is it just a coincidence that the world's most messed-up country is making the world's most messed-up cinema?' (Rose 2011). He then goes on to establish a direct line of causality between the Greek financial crisis and the first festival successes of the Greek New Wave, Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* and Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010), coining a phrase that has become a trendy catchphrase in subsequent discussions on Greek cinema: the 'Greek Weird Wave'. Before looking at the ideological implications of 'weird', we first need to respond to Rose's question by answering positively, that it is indeed a coincidence, as a cinema of 'crisis' had been brewing for quite some time prior to 2009.

A closer look at the films of the slightly older members of the Greek New Wave makes this instantly apparent. Yannis Economides is a good case in point, as it is his first feature, *Spirotokouto/Matchbox*, made in 2002 that established some of the key traits that the Greek cinema of the crisis has been preoccupied with. What is meant by

'crisis' here, however, is not to do with economics, since financial concerns are not really a thematic feature, especially in the early films of the Greek New Wave. Rather, 'crisis' refers to social decay, typically expressed through narratives about dysfunctional families and through an austere visual language. These two trends are clearly evident in Economides's *Matchbox*, in which the family home functions as the site of a wider moral societal crisis, while the film's austerity lies not so much in its resources but in its formal choices. The film is a chamber piece, set exclusively in a petit-bourgeois Athenian household, showing several events that take place over the course of a hot summer day that reveal the tension among the family members. The oppressive nature of their relationship is articulated through tight framing and the use of claustrophobic close-ups. Throughout, Economides shuns camera movement, opting instead for lengthy, static, skilfully controlled shots. Any sense of action is created through the use of jump cuts at moments of intense verbal abuse and through the constant repetition of profanities. Like subsequent Greek 'crisis' films, *Matchbox* is a film with and about violence; a violence, nonetheless, that is not so much physical (as in the films of the 'New Extremism' mode in European cinema), but rather verbal. Verbal abuse is strongly felt in Economides's work, functioning to question contemporary Greece through its most treasured unit, the family, and at the same time exposing the misogyny, racism, homophobia and oppressive patriarchy that existed even before the economic meltdown and the concomitant rise of the fascist party Golden Dawn.

Because of their preoccupation with the bourgeois family, their predilection for violence and their highly stylized form, the film-makers of the Greek New Wave have frequently invited comparisons with such European auteurs as Michael Haneke and with film movements like Dogme 95. Yet, when the comparison with their illustrious

peers is accompanied by such descriptors as ‘weird’, this becomes a rather backhanded compliment. Apart from its ubiquity in the foreign press, especially in Britain, the ‘weird’ label has also been adopted by domestic critics. For instance, in a recent article featured in *Cinema* (the longest-running cinephile magazine in Greece) assessing Greek cinema’s output during 2013, the writer argues,

Maybe the term [‘Greek weird cinema’] is not totally applicable to all Greek films that have been travelling to international film festivals. [...] However, in itself the need for the creation of a label indicative of the quality and of the outward outlook and appeal of the recent national film production can only be positive. (Theodosopoulos 2013)

The value of using a negatively loaded term to describe the revival of Greek cinema is highly debatable, while the uncritical embracing and recycling in both the foreign and domestic press of a label that exoticizes Greek cinema as an-Other national cinema is problematic. The ‘weird’ discourse becomes even more complicated when it trickles down to films, affecting both their style and the perception of their aesthetics.

This appears to be the case with Alexandros Avranas’s *Miss Violence* (2013). The film centres on its patriarch, a seemingly benevolent provider to a large family only to be later unmasked as a brutal incestuous paedophile. *Miss Violence* had a successful festival run, commencing in Venice where it won a total of four awards, including a Silver Lion for its director. Despite this, however, the film received mostly lukewarm reviews that, while praising its accomplished visual style, commented negatively on how ‘predictable’ it is (Lodge 2013). Peter Bradshaw’s review is telling in this respect: ‘[*Miss Violence*] is a film with real technique, but it

reinforces my worry that Greek film-makers are cultivating a self-conscious mannerism of the bizarre' (note the critic's substitution of 'weird' with 'bizarre') (Bradshaw 2014).

Certainly international exposure, especially through festivals, is important for the sustainability of new cinemas. Yet, when local film-makers begin to internalize foreign critics' and international markets' expectations about what their films ought to look like, this may lead to a national cinema's 'genrification' (Farahmand 2010). As Azadeh Farahmand argues in relation to the ways in which international film festivals have influenced the development of Iranian cinema,

Festival exposure [...] influences the very processes of production and affects the visual look and narrative tendencies of films – hence reinforcing the generic qualities of national cinema. The very discovery of 'the new' becomes trendsetting. The cycle evolves into a replicable style, and the line between discovery and invention becomes blurred. (Farahmand 2010: 267)

In the Greek case, there emerges an interesting historical parallel: the first time that Greek auteur films became international was in the 1960s with the successes of *Pote tin Kyriaki/Never on Sunday* (Dassin, 1960) and *Alexis Zorbas/Zorba the Greek* (Cacoyannis, 1964). Critics have accused the films (both at the time of their release and subsequently) of exoticizing what was backwards about Greece by pandering to foreigners' ideas about Greekness as raw and underdeveloped. Similarly to the films of the 1960s that aestheticized a pre-industrial primitivism, as incarnated by the uncultured, lusty character of Zorba, the young directors of the 2010s run the danger of fetishizing a post-industrial primitivism, embodied by the corrupt and abusive

patriarchs that populate their films. This danger, of course, cannot negate the fact that Greek cinema has entered a period of unprecedented renewal. It is uncertain how the Greek New Wave will evolve. Regardless, it will hopefully avoid confirming international stereotypes about Greekness.

Cinephilia in times of crisis: Spain's 'Other' cinema

Figure 2: Daniel Castro in *Ilusión*.

Like in Portugal and Greece, film-makers in Spain are creatively reacting to the crisis – sometimes with a high sense of irony. Here is one example: Daniel Castro, a would-be film-maker, prepares to sleep rough on a park bench in downtown Madrid. He covers himself up with a poster of Woody Allen's 1977 classic *Annie Hall* in a rather inadequate attempt to ward off the bitter cold of the winter night (see Figure 2). This frame belongs to Castro's debut feature *Ilusión* (2013) in which he plays a version of himself, a television scriptwriter doggedly pursuing finance for his whimsically ambitious first film; a musical about the 1978 Moncloa Pact, a key political episode of the Spanish transition to democracy. 'Ilusión' is a deliberately ambiguous title: it means 'joy' or 'hope' but it also alludes to cinema as illusion – a disavowal of reality comically embraced by the aspiring film auteur whose girlfriend, exasperated by his refusal to settle for a safe if uninspiring job, has kicked him out of their apartment. On the one hand, Daniel's fictional predicament hints at the real pressures faced by Castro (and other first-time film-makers) in the process of financing his debut film. Daniel lies opposite to the statue of Don Quixote that graces España Square, a less than subtle simile for his deluded aspirations. On the other, the comically incongruous image also has a shade of subversion: for a moment it dares to suspend the crushing

reality with a candid faith in cinema. This suspension, however, comes under a question mark: can the love of cinema protect us from the cold? Can cinephilia provide an imaginary solution to a real crisis?

With its mixture of cruel satire and irrepressible optimism *Ilusión* seems to be replying simultaneously yes and no, and it is not alone in expressing such mixed feelings. Castro's is just one among many post-2008 films made in Spain outside the structures of the Spanish film industry, structures eroded by the global financial crisis that led to the European bailout of the Spanish banks in 2012, to the ensuing recession and soaring rates of unemployment. Like in the previous case studies, against this dismal backdrop the discourse of post-crisis cinema in Spain runs on parallel tracks of failure and renewal. At the centre of this paradox stands the so-called Spain's 'other' cinema. Rather than a school or a movement, this critical phrase has been used to refer to an extremely diverse set of digital films, many of them first and second works, made through a do-it-yourself ethos. With little chance to reach commercial screens, this other Spanish cinema has however rapidly gained visibility through the festival circuit and online platforms of exhibition.

The critical traction garnered by this growing body of cinema (more on this later) needs to be put in the context of a shrinking and increasingly polarized film industry. As state aid and private investment simultaneously dry up, resources (especially from television) cluster around fewer, bigger titles each year. The 2009 change to the subsidy system in order to raise the threshold of private investment in film production, the shrinking of ring-fenced state funds (from 88.3 million euros in 2010 to 33.7 million euros in 2014), and the steep raise of the VAT on the cultural industries implemented in September 2012 (from 8 to 21 per cent, the highest in the Eurozone) have prompted increasingly politicized clashes between the government

and the industry professionals (Prieto 2013; Triana-Toribio 2014). Add to this the costs of cinema digitalization and rampant online piracy in Spain (Evans 2009), both of which have hit the exhibition sector particularly hard.⁴

This generalized crisis of the sector highlights the precarious position of the indigenous film production, worsened by the long-term imbalance between the high volume of films made and the negligible percentage able to recoup their costs through commercial exploitation (cf. Jordan 2011: 19–23). Writing in 2003, Luis Alonso García already suggests that the crisis discourse has become intrinsic to the very idea of a Spanish national cinema, acting as a smokescreen covering up structural problems (2003: 8–9), such as the sector's overdependence on subsidies lavished by the first democratic government, the proliferation of non-viable production companies and the shrinking of television investment into film production since 2002 – all key factors in an ailing industry that suffers from endemic de-capitalization and atomization (Ansola González 2003: 50–51). In short, the current discourse of the crisis simply exposes more sharply the historical ghettoization of Spanish cinema within its domestic market, condemned to occupy the position of cultural 'other' with regard to its primary target audience (Castro de Paz and Cerdán 2003: 38).

Against this dismal backdrop, there has been a concerted critical effort to shift the terms of the discussion towards a quasi-celebration of marginality – in itself, a necessity – as an identity position. Since 2013 the idea of a 'free' and 'alternative' cinema has been actively promoted in blogs and sections of the national press (cf. Vázquez 2013; Belinchón 2013). In particular, *Caimán. Cuadernos de Cine*, a specialist magazine in the line of *Cahiers du cinéma* in France and *Sight and Sound* in the United Kingdom, has taken the baton of cinephilia in Spain, vigorously promoting the idea of the 'other' Spanish cinema as a shift in film culture. The September 2013

issue devoted its cover to this phenomenon and featured a key position piece by Carlos Losilla entitled 'Un impulso colectivo'/'A collective effort'. Notwithstanding this notion, the list of 52 film-makers simultaneously published on *Caimán*'s website can hardly be characterized as a group or as a generation (for a start, their birth dates span the 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s (Anon. 2013)). Moreover, this list suggests continuity with previous incarnations of independent cinema (in particular the rebirth of experimental documentary in Catalonia at the turn of 2000s). The films are broadly diverse in format, style and sensibility: experimental documentaries, some of which connect with the 15M protest movement (*VidaExtra*, Ledo, 2013); essay films (*Mapa*, Siminiani, 2012), experimental fictions (*Los Ilusos/The Wishful Thinkers*, Trueba, 2013; *El Futuro*, López Carrasco, 2013), and nascent cult pieces that subvert genre codes (*Stockholm*, Sorogoyen, 2013; *Diamond Flash*, Vermut, 2012; *Uranes*, García Ibarra, 2013). At the high end, Spain's 'other' cinema comprises festival films partially supported by national and regional subsidies as well as television, such as Fernando Franco's *La Herida/Wounded* (special Jury Prize and Best Actress in San Sebastian 2013), or Albert Serra's *Història de la meva mort/The Story of my Death* (Golden Leopard at Locarno 2013). At the low end, we find films made in almost underground conditions – personal projects shot with minimal crews, nearly or entirely self-financed (e.g. *Stockholm* resorted to crowdfunding), which target their audiences through social networks and are made accessible via VOD platforms such as #littlesecretfilm, márgenes and PLAT.⁵

Faithful to its auteurist agenda, *Caimán* highlights aesthetic adventurousness as the defining trait of Spain's 'other' cinema (Losilla 2013: 6), and points at what we could call the re-activation of a cinephilic culture of viewing, writing and sharing enabled – and transformed – by the digital context (cf. Fernández Labayen et al.

2013). This symbolic economy brings to the fore three paradoxes: a discourse of minimum visibility and maximum (self-)exposure, the nurturing of a group identity based on the cultivation of fiercely individualist styles, and a commitment to the present which, however, can be ambiguously devoid of overt political criticism.

Films about film-making such as the opening example, *Ilusión*, make the first paradox visible better than most. Written, directed, performed and entirely self-financed by Castro, the film was shot in the houses of friends and in Madrid's public spaces with the assistance of a minimal (unpaid) crew and other film-maker friends (David Trueba, Félix Viscarret and Victor García León) who were cast in small parts. With a meagre 61-minute running time, *Ilusión* did not aim for commercial release. Instead, it was shown in small festivals with a strong focus on Spanish cinema (including Málaga, Barcelona, Nantes and Toulouse) before being released on the pay-per-view streaming platform Filmin. In the style of the performative comedies of Nanni Moretti and Woody Allen, Castro plays a hapless film-maker naively convinced of his project's worth, but who only manages to persuade an eccentric elderly producer who turns out to be senile and has to be incapacitated by his son. Exposure is financial, but also personal: the film's satire largely stems from increasingly humiliating situations and deliberately blurs the line between the actor/director and his character, and between fictional plot and plausible conditions of production. *Ilusión* both extols and parodies the figure of the creative auteur, out of touch with the hard realities of diminishing resources and vanishing audiences. Personal films are a quixotic enterprise – something which the very existence of *Ilusión* both reinforces and contradicts.

The second paradox resides in the idiosyncratic character of many of these films which, nevertheless, seek the spectator's complicity through a first-person mode of

address. This complicity extends to the relationship between film-makers. Directors appear together in the media endorsing each other's work, they share work in progress and lend support on each other's shoots. A sense of commonality arises from public networks of friendship, which gets channelled through a shared language of cinephilia. But there is also a sense of building a shared space with the audience. For example, León Siminiani's debut feature film *Mapa* has been discussed as a model case for new strategies of distribution that promote a higher degree of contact with 'consumers' through the idea of community, enhanced through the use of digital media. Before receiving limited commercial release, the director engaged with audiences at screenings in non-commercial venues (mostly cinémathèques and cultural centers) in thirteen cities in Spain (Fernández Labayen et al. 2013: 8). Jonás Trueba gave up on commercially releasing his second film, *The Wishful Thinkers*, choosing instead to go on tour with his film, and to show it on alternative screens across the Spanish state, an experience that he has described as akin to doing gigs like a musician (Martín 2013). Despite the complexity of producer-user relations in the digital era, the other Spanish cinema thus works towards building a community in ways not dissimilar to first-wave cinephilia. François Truffaut's enthusiastic call in 1957 for the 'film of tomorrow' still applies: 'the film of tomorrow will resemble the person who made it and the number of spectators will be proportional to the number of friends the director has' (Truffaut 2000: 338, my translation).

Not only is this manifesto transferable to the film's mode of circulation, in which each screening is promoted as an event among supporters and sympathizers; the reference to first-wave cinephilia is doubly appropriate in the case of *The Wishful Thinkers*, a Madrid film strongly reminiscent of the improvisational style and focus on youth in the city characteristic of the French New Wave. *The Wishful Thinkers* defines

itself (via an opening intertitle) as a ‘film in-between seasons’ (*película de entretiempo*). Mirroring the small crew of friends making the film in their spare time, the characters are shown in periods of inactivity, biding their time in the periphery of the economy. They are stuck in the present, but the film problematically voids the present of political urgency. Shot in crisp black and white on expired 16mm Kodak stock, the film’s Madrid looks stylish and bohemian, and the film renders the film-making process visible with Godardian relish. Trueba’s film is undoubtedly a throwback to the past, but we could equally claim that it is resolutely concerned with the future.

Thus we arrive at the third paradox: Spain’s other cinema’s preoccupation with what we could call the future of the past. *The Wishful Thinkers* melancholically exposes the dead end of the cinephilia associated with the generation of state-funded, middle-class film-makers coming out of the Spanish Transition (Triana-Toribio 2014: 73–75) but it also carries this tradition forward (literally so, if we consider that Trueba is the youngest of a family of film-makers who are a crucial part of that generation) even when such model is no longer viable. In *Ilusión*, the recycling of the signifiers of the Transition through incongruous elements of consumer culture alludes to the changing relationship of the present generation with recent history: in a kitsch joke, Daniel’s mobile phone’s ringtone turns out to be a recording of the famous line ‘Spaniards, Franco has died’ that announced the passing of the dictator on national television. These films signal that the imposed consensus on which the culture of the Spanish democracy was built is gradually wearing thin.

At the time of writing, Spain’s ‘other’ cinema is an ongoing phenomenon reluctantly linked to the language of the crisis. Films are often showcased as ‘low-cost’ or ‘zero-cost cinema’,⁶ a label that many reject as a neo-liberal attack at the

foundations of a professionalized industry, but also as a sop to young film-makers' ambition of moving from the periphery to the centre (cf. Vázquez 2013). Gonzalo de Pedro Amatria perceptively warns of the perils of a filmic bubble economy: there is a wealth of first films, but no assurance of sustained careers (2014: 11). However, these weaknesses – the paradoxes of Spain's 'other' cinema – may also be at the basis of its strength. The films may not generate substantial returns, yet the cinephilic dialogue entertained by critics, cultural institutions, film-makers and their audiences injects a non-quantifiable dose of cultural capital into the ailing body of Spanish cinema.

Spain's 'other' cinema may represent a new lease of life rendered to a national cinema in perpetual crisis, albeit a temporary one. A piece in *Variety* concludes: 'It's not a sustainable business model. But, energized by creative freedoms, these films remain compelling calling cards for the day when Spain's economy finally mends' (Hopewell and De Pablos 2013). In conclusion, cinephilia offers one possible response to the discourse of crisis. With its precarious means and risky choices, Spain's 'other' cinema speaks of different forms of crisis (personal, generational) but resists the burden of expectations to *represent* a state-of-the-nation cinema. It does not want to become *the* cinema of the crisis. Instead these films are generating a rich reflection on the role of cinema face to the recession's lasting social and cultural effects. It is the renewed faith in the cinema, the ethos of cinephilia behind this 'collective effort', which may offer the most fruitful testing ground for the paradoxes facing the future of the Spanish film industry.

Conclusion: Re-thinking the crisis

The comparative approach to the impact the Eurozone crisis has had on the cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain highlights three key points. First, we argue against a

contingent approach to the discourse of the crisis in favour of a more considered exploration of its *structural* nature. Faced with negative landmarks (e.g. 2012 as the ‘year zero’ of Portuguese cinema and of Spain’s record VAT raise on cultural products), our analysis points at the recurrence of such crisis points in debates about the relationship of these national cinemas to their domestic audiences. Conversely, positive landmarks – such as the international success of Lanthimos’s *Dogtooth* in 2009, which was made to function as poster child for the Greek cinema of the crisis – need to be contextualized in pre-crisis trends.

Second, the reverse aspect of the discourse of the crisis is the re-activation of what Hjort calls ‘a gift culture’, that is promoting artistic leadership and solidarity amidst partners for the purposes of making films and building capacity in various film-related areas (2005: 18–23) within a context of national reconstruction as well as transnational collaboration. This phenomenon can be observed in the emergence of communities in all three countries, whether as a common front to oppose destructive policy in Portugal, in the shape of new organizations to rebuild film culture (such as the newly minted Hellenic Film Academy), or as public networks of friendship, as is the case in Spain.

Third, as a counterpoint to the constraints faced by film-makers, new opportunities for internationalization arise. Festival circulation is an important factor, as the success of *Tabu*, *Dogtooth* or *The Story of my Death* at Berlin, Cannes and Locarno, respectively, shows. Co-production arrangements is another crucial aspect of internationalization: the Portuguese and Greek industries are seeking expansion along cultural/linguistic axes (e.g. the idea of a Lusophone world through alliances between Portugal and Brazil) and in collaboration with European partners, as is the case of Yannis Economides’s *Stratos/To Mikro Psari* made through Greek, German and

Cypriot participation and presented as a case study at the 11th Berlinale Co-production Market in 2014.

Although beyond the scope of this article, the continuous production of popular cinema in these countries also provides further reasons for optimism. This said, the opportunities opening up for Europe's other cinemas should not mask the very serious issues that they face. Rosalind Galt rightly warns against the co-opting, under the rubric of world cinema, of modes of political representation into the cultural institutions of neo-liberal globalization (2013: 81). This warning especially resonates with the drift towards self-exoticism in the Greek New Wave (despite its parallel adoption of 'guerrilla' film-making practices), and with the possibility that grassroots production modes might be appropriated as a top-down business 'model' in Spain. The contemporary cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain are creatively reacting to the negative visibility of recession Europe (Harrod et al. 2014), via diverse strategies that seek to restore agency to institutions, critics and film-makers. This transformation of their structural weaknesses into strengths against the grain of the crisis makes them uniquely fruitful case studies to examine contemporary film practices in Europe within the context of globalization.

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Notes

¹ A note on authorship: the first section on Portugal is by Mariana Liz, the second section on Greece is by Olga Kourelou and the third section on Spain is by Belén Vidal. The three authors have jointly written the introduction and conclusion, and edited this article.

² Data source: Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual (ICA), <http://www.ica-ip.pt/pagina.aspx?pagina=198>, accessed 3 June 2014.

³ For more information about the season and a full list of films screened see <http://harvardnagulbenkian.pt/>, accessed 3 November 2014.

⁴ The closing down of most of its 200 screens by Alta Films, one of the most established art house distributors in Spain, in April 2013, is a case in point.

⁵ For further critical appraisals of the ‘other’ Spanish cinema see Rebecca Naughten’s report on the Bradford International Film Festival, as well as the contributions by Josetxo Cerdán, and Miguel Fernández Labayen and Elena Oroz to the collective volume *Trazos de realidad: Nuevas manifestaciones del documental en la producción audiovisual española y latinoamericana*, forthcoming from Iberoamericana/ Vervuert in 2015.

⁶ See for instance the series ‘Cine Low Cost’ screened in 2013 in Barcelona. <http://cine-low-cost.tumblr.com/>, accessed 15 August 2014.