

# *It Could Happen to You*

Empathy and Empowerment in Iberian Austerity Cinema

Iván Villarnea Álvarez

‘We have lived beyond our means’. This expression – *viver acima das nossas possibilidades* in Portuguese, *vivir por encima de nuestras posibilidades* in Spanish – was endlessly repeated between 2011 and 2012 in the Iberian Peninsula. Aníbal Cavaco Silva, former President of the Portuguese Republic, used it in May 2011, after the signature of a €78 billion bailout programme between the Portuguese Government and the troika formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Later on, Fátima Báñez, former Spanish Minister of Employment and Social Security, did the same in the parliamentary debate on state budget held in May 2012, five months after the overwhelming victory of the People’s Party in the 2011 Spanish general election. The sentence soon became a mantra for conservative governments, since it allowed them to justify the adoption of austerity measures without having to assume any political responsibility after years of systematic indebtedness, institutional corruption and public overspending, as Rafael Rodríguez Tranche criticised at the time (2013). The idea, however, was not new: a few years before, the same narrative had already been used in the United States to moralise a problem – the aftermath of the financial crisis – that actually had institutional roots.

The unexpected outbreak of the Great Recession, and especially its long duration, challenged the self-image of Iberian societies: the set of wishes, fictions and self-representations associated with an inclusive middle-class fell apart overnight (Observatorio Metropolitano 2011: 73). At first, filmmakers did not react to this conjuncture: the financial crisis and its consequences were barely represented in Portuguese or Spanish films until 2011, with the exception of a few titles that drew attention to the malfunctions of these countries prior to the recession.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, while the sentence ‘we have lived beyond our means’ was being turned into an ideologically loaded cliché, some filmmakers decided to depict the plight of a wide range of social collectives, such as precarious workers, unemployed people, sick people, evicted owners and tenants, Iberian emigrants in Northern Europe, Latin American and African immigrants in the Iberian Peninsula and a disoriented youth with few aspirations and less opportunities. The choice of these characters allowed filmmakers to address a series of social problems – from unemployment to evictions – that have worsened as a consequence of both recession and austerity. Thus, faced with the voices that stated the need to make cutbacks in public services, these filmmakers took sides with the victims of the crisis in a new film cycle that reflected and responded to the effects of the Great Recession at a thematic, formal or allegorical level.<sup>2</sup>

This Iberian Austerity Cinema, as I suggest to call it, is characterised by a ‘politics of pain and suffering’ in which ‘political and physical vulnerability’ go hand in hand, as Dean Allbritton has stated (2014: 102).<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the self-blaming discourse implicit in the expression ‘we have lived beyond our means’, which advocated the atonement for a supposed shared guilt through personal sacrifice and passive resignation, this new film cycle sought to overcome the victims’ loneliness and isolation by turning ‘the individual experience of precarity and vulnerability into a communal one’ (Allbritton 2014: 103).

In fact, at that time, the circulation of life stories through media and social networks was being interpreted as a technology of political imagination that allowed thinking and seeing things that were neither thinkable nor visible before, as explained by Germán Labrador Méndez (2012: 562-563). According to this author, certain life stories had begun to be regarded as part of major structural problems, raising to the category of collective political issue what was previously perceived as individual risk and private life. Consequently, many events that apparently only affected specific individuals were being inscribed within a collective paradigm, introducing a human scale in processes that used to be told in quantifiable magnitudes (Labrador Méndez 2012: 563-564).

This dynamic is based on the creation of ‘an empathic bridge’ between those who tell their stories and their audience (Labrador Méndez 2012: 563), as well as between the characters and the viewers in the specific case of cinema. These stories foster identification between the former and the latter, although their ultimate meaning varies from case to case. Allbritton already warned that these films usually cast ‘optimism, hope and sympathy as stand-ins for any action that might effect a real change upon the world’ (2014: 112); and Labrador Méndez (2018) has gone even further by discussing recent Spanish disaster films as examples of disciplinary narratives that promote individual survival as the only viable option, disregarding other possibilities based on group interdependence or collective solidarity.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the way in which stories and characters are presented before the audience, this empathic bridge can help reinforce or dismantle the social bonds destabilised by recession. The aim of this work is therefore to identify and discuss the formal and narrative strategies through which life stories pervade Iberian Austerity Cinema, paying particular attention to those films, whether fictions or documentaries, in which the characters work as sites of enunciation,

that is, as the starting point and social position from which filmmakers take part, directly or indirectly, in the contemporary debates on austerity policies.

### Afflicted Voices

The traumatic impact of the Economic Adjustment Program in Portugal left the country knocked out for a few years. The ubiquitous gloomy *zeitgeist* was recorded in a series of non-fiction films characterised by the enveloping presence of afflicted voices, such as *The M of Portuguese Cinema (Ó Marquês Anda Cá Abaixo Outra Vez*, João Viana, 2013) – a reflexive work on the growing difficulties of making films in Portugal – or *Field Notes (Notas de Campo*, Catarina Botelho, 2017) – an abstract travelogue in which two female voices tell their experience during the worst years of the crisis over images of increasingly dry and wild landscapes. There was even a film that echoed President Cavaco Silva's ominous words in its title: *Beyond Our Means (Acima das Nossas Possibilidades*, Pedro Neves, 2014), a collective portrait of several citizens living below the poverty threshold in Porto.

Two documentaries stand out within this cycle by addressing the recession as part of long-term processes of late capitalism: *Broken Glasses (Vidros Partidos*, Victor Erice, 2012) and *Active Life (Vida Activa*, Susana Nobre, 2014). The first is a set of screen tests with former workers of a now-closed textile factory in the River Ave Valley Region, north of Portugal.<sup>5</sup> These workers – six men and five women between fifty and eighty years old – summarise their working life before the camera with an old picture behind: an image taken during a lunch break in the factory canteen at the beginning of the twentieth century. They recall their harsh living and working conditions while maintaining a strong emotional bond with the factory, since it is closely related to key

moments in their lives. These memories, which date back to a previous stage of capitalism, bring the past to the present, the same as the old picture: all interviewees look at that image and can hardly identify themselves with the people appearing in it, mainly because current working conditions have improved compared to those a century ago, but also because people in the picture represent a type of industrial worker that no longer exists in Southern Europe: a worker with a stable job and confidence in the future. Through this contrast between workers of different times, filmmaker Víctor Erice echoes the current disorientation of the working class, which has lost its agency as a consequence of its inability to cope with the closure and relocation of factories. What is most remarkable in *Broken Glasses* is the apparent ease with which Erice gives a universal scope to this particular case: the story of this factory – and the story of its workers – symbolises and summarises the recent evolution of industrial capitalism from the workers’ perspective.

*Active Life*, in turn, reflects on the way work shapes identity while unemployment undermines self-esteem. This film mostly consists of talking heads interviews with unemployed middle-aged workers: fifteen men and ten women who are ‘too old to work’ but ‘too young for retirement’, as one of them says. All interviews were recorded at a vocational training centre in Alverca do Ribatejo, east of Lisbon, in which filmmaker Susana Nobre worked while making the film: there, she helped unemployed people to improve their academic and professional profile by certifying the expertise they had acquired throughout their working life. Most interviewees were people with low school education and without computer skills, who had become unemployed after having worked for two or three decades in sectors that were then in decline. Among them, some men in their fifties and sixties look quite uneasy in front of the camera, inasmuch as they are aware that their profile is no longer required in the labour market.

This is the reason why they felt nostalgia for their previous jobs, even for the hardest ones, especially those who had worked for large companies in the metal industry: once again, those jobs were linked to happy memories of friendship and youth, an idea emphasised by showing work memorabilia in the transitions between interviews.

*Active Life*, as well as *Broken Glasses*, uses the methodology of oral history to let ordinary people express their own standpoints regarding macroeconomic processes of which they are part. Nostalgia emerges in both films as a reaction to the social involution accelerated by recession in an attempt to recover ‘the self-confidence of the present’ that, according to Zygmunt Bauman, is at the basis of the concept of historical progress (2000: 132). This attitude, however, has not been the only response to the crisis among Portuguese workers and filmmakers. Some documentary fictions, such as *Arabian Nights (As Mil e Uma Noites*, Miguel Gomes, 2015) and *The Nothing Factory (A Fábrica de Nada*, Pedro Pinho, 2017), also include interviews with unemployed and aged workers with a slightly different purpose: offering people – both the characters and the audience – the possibility of developing alternative accounts of the recession, beyond resignation and victimhood, that help them empower themselves as individual and collective subjects. In order to do so, both films combine different systems of representation with a playful and self-conscious spirit that ultimately praise the very pleasure of storytelling: from objective records of strikes and demonstrations to fictional re-enactments of real events, as well as metafictional reflections on the different ways of filming the crisis and even sequences planned according to the conventions of film genres such as the fairy tale fantasy, the western or the musical.

*The Nothing Factory*, for example, criticises a key aspect of late capitalism – the transnational mobility of capital, here represented by factory relocation – while simultaneously making a self-criticism of the commonplaces of social cinema. The film

explores the different stages of a labour dispute in an elevator factory: the company's attempt to take the equipment away, the workers' resistance, the failed negotiations between both sides and the beginning of an indefinite sit-down strike that will lead the workers to occupy the factory and assume its self-management. This story, which is set in the midst of recession, actually comes from two previous sources: the real story of a factory abandoned by its owners after the Carnation Revolution that was later bought and self-managed by its workers (see Halpern 2017: 16), and Judith Herzberg's drama play *De Nietsfabriek*, originally staged in 1997 and later adapted to Portuguese in 2005. From these materials, filmmaker Pedro Pinho shapes a film that revisits, refutes and reworks many clichés of social cinema: what begins as a documentary fiction played by real workers soon becomes a self-reflexive militant film pervaded by a dry and bitter humour that even dares to include a choreographed musical number on the verge of self-parody. The development of the plot, in which every new situation causes doubts among the characters, entails a gradual transformation in the film's style that echoes the filmmaker's own doubts about how to represent this conflict and its effects on the characters. Thus, by embracing Brechtian aesthetics, *The Nothing Factory* establishes a link between the past and present challenges of the workers' struggle while testing different strategies to update the tradition of social cinema.

Two years before, *Arabian Nights* had already managed to extend the scope of austerity cinema with its ambitious blend of documentary footage and whimsical re-enactments. This six-hour epic project consists of three feature film composed of eleven independent episodes inspired by real events gathered by a team of journalists. Such structure was intended to depict the impact of recession in the everyday life of the Portuguese people in the early 2010s.<sup>6</sup> The claims and complaints of real unemployed workers can be heard from the opening sequence, a twenty-five minutes prologue in

which a series of disembodied voices talk about their working and personal relationship with a large shipyard that was about to close in Viana do Castelo, north of Portugal. At a given moment, filmmaker Miguel Gomes joins these voices to make a reflexive and self-parodic speech – probably, the most quoted passage in Iberian Austerity Cinema – that must be interpreted as a statement of intent regarding the aim, meaning and politics of the film:

I feel I am in the eye of the storm and at a dead end at the same time. Our current situation stems from what I consider today the dumbest idea of my life. I thought I could make a fine film, filled with wonderful and seductive stories. At the same time, I thought the film could follow, for one year, Portugal's current miserable situation. Any mutton-head understands that, more or less skilfully, one of these two films can be made. But it is impossible to make both at once. It is a matter of common sense. You cannot make a militant film which soon forgets its militancy and starts escaping reality. That is betrayal, disengagement, dandyism. Likewise, it is stupid beyond words to want to tell marvellous stories, timeless fables, fettered by the transient, the foam of days, the present's closed horizon.

In this sequence, Gomes self-portrays himself as a filmmaker who does not know how to make 'a fine film' on recession. His creative crisis mirrors the country's situation, but simultaneously uses the aesthetic of failure to parody the inability of some filmmakers to find original and meaningful ways to depict crises – in this regard, he will probably agree with Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano that 'representations of crisis need not be crises of representation' (2011: 39). Gomes introduces himself as a filmmaker

who is first and foremost a worker who claims for his rights.<sup>7</sup> He thus identifies himself with the demonstrators in Viana do Castelo, but also with Scheherazade, the main character in *One Thousand and One Nights*, because both work as storytellers: a job understood by Gomes as an act of empowerment and resistance.

Susana Nobre also self-portrays herself as a worker in *Active Life*; a worker who loses her job, given that the film ends with the closure of the vocational training centre where she worked: the final shot shows the destruction of large amounts of paper, meaning the destruction of office work and jobs. Her onscreen presence, just as Gomes' appearance at the beginning of *Arabian Nights*, has to do with another tendency in austerity cinema: the rise of diary films, both in Portugal and Spain, in which the filmmakers' life stories – Elías León Siminiani's trip to India in *Map* (*Mapa*, 2012), Joaquim Pinto's treatment against Hepatitis C and HIV in *What Now? Remind Me* (*E Agora? Lembra-me*, 2013) or Eloy Dominguez Seren's experience as a migrant worker in Sweden in *Ingen ko på isen* (*No Cow on the Ice*, 2015) – must be understood as allegories of recession. In all these films, the filmmakers become characters that expose the position from which they speak, thereby establishing the aforementioned empathic bridge with the audience.

### **Suffering Bodies**

Just as happens in Portuguese cinema, first-person accounts are also central to Spanish non-fiction film, especially to those works supporting anti-austerity movements and organisations – from the 15M Movement to the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages – in which filmmakers directly recorded public assemblies where ordinary people took the floor to share personal issues with their fellow citizens. The strength of

the voices heard in titles such as *In a Strange Land* (*En tierra extraña*, Icíar Bollain, 2014) or *La Granja del Pas* (Silvia Munt, 2015)<sup>8</sup> contrasts with the weariness of the bodies depicted in family portraits, a genre with few examples in the documentary field – *The Disinherited* (*Los desheredados*, Laura Ferrés, 2017), *Niñato* (Adrian Orr, 2017) – and much more presence in fiction – *Beautiful Youth* (*Hermosa juventud*, Jaime Rosales, 2014), *Magical Girl* (Carlos Vermut, 2014), *Food and Shelter* (*Techo y comida*, Juan Miguel del Castillo, 2015) and *The Olive Tree* (*El Olivo*, Icíar Bollain, 2016) in Spain; *Saint George* (*São Jorge*, Marco Martins, 2016) and *Colo* (Teresa Villaverde, 2017) in Portugal, among other titles.

Characters in these films do not look at ease in their family homes, which are usually represented as spaces of isolation and confinement. Their bodies seem trapped there, as happen to Natalia and Carlos, the protagonist couple in *Beautiful Youth*: Natalia, who is pregnant, still lives with her divorced mother and two younger siblings in a small flat south of Madrid, while Carlos takes care of her sick mother in another narrow apartment of the same city. They embody a particular social type: the NEETs, the young people who are not in education, employment or training, and consequently have no choice but to stay in their family homes. Lacking privacy, Natalia and Carlos meet in public spaces such as parks, walkways, vacant lots, parking lots or bus stations, non-places filmed by cinematographer Pau Esteve Birba with a dull white light that significantly contributed to set the tone of the film: an everyday naturalism completely devoid of emotion.

The narrative in *Beautiful Youth* is composed of banal conversations and domestic scenes in which nothing apparently happens, not even in the two stunning ellipses that summarise the events of several months – including the birth of Natalia and Carlos' daughter – through WhatsApp conversations and pictures taken with smartphones. The coldness of most sequences emphasises the characters' deadlock despite their efforts to

improve their situation. Natalia, for instance, looks for a job as a shop assistant after giving birth, but the impossibility to find it convinces her to migrate to Hamburg, where she works as a cleaner, babysitter and sexual worker. Carlos, meanwhile, works as a bricklayer for €10 and plans to buy a moving van with a friend, even though they do not have money to do it. An unexpected possibility to get it arises after being attacked by a petty criminal, since Carlos denounces the aggression and expects to legally receive a compensation for his wounds. As he finally does not get it, he decides to hire two thugs to beat up and extort his aggressor in a pathetic attempt to get money and revenge. The characters' bodies thus become the battlefields of their daily struggle: damaged and battered bodies subjected to physical and sexual abuse in their search for income. *Beautiful Youth* must therefore be interpreted as a nihilist film, inasmuch as it hints that this type of life stories – those of NEETs without prospects – may lead the people to prostitution and crime.

*Magical Girl* goes even further with its reversal of film noir conventions. One of its characters, Luis, is an unemployed high school teacher who has a teenage daughter ill with leukaemia. One of her last wishes is to wear the dress of her favourite manga character, which costs 900,000 yen – plus 2,500,000 yen more for its magic wand. Luis tries everything to get that money: he sells his books, asks a friend for a loan, requests a credit by phone and is about to rob a jeweller's shop when he accidentally meets Barbara, a beautiful woman who is going through a personal crisis that threatens her marriage with a wealthy psychiatrist. They spend the night together, and then Luis blackmails Barbara to get the money for the dress. She might tell everything to her husband or even ask him for the money, but instead decides to get involved in a sordid plot of prostitution and sadomasochism. In this unlikely noir, the femme fatale becomes

the victim of blackmail, but the blackmailer has already been introduced as a victim too: with whom should the audience then empathise?

Luis' obsession with the dress – and with the money it costs – is actually an allegory of the confusion of priorities in times of crisis, considering that what his daughter really wants is simply to spend more time with him. Likewise, Barbara's decision to put her physical integrity at risk to pay her debt is an allegory of austerity that stands for the excessive and unnecessary sacrifices that Iberian societies have had to make in order to cope with recession. In this regard, *Magical Girl* takes to the extreme the ruthless logic summarised in the expression 'more pain, more gain'. The first time Barbara prostitutes herself, a man warns her that there is a safe word: 'everything will stop only when you pronounce that word', he says, 'the longer you take to say it, the more money you will make'. The second time, however, there is no safe word, as she has asked for more money: the blank paper she receives before entering the room where she will be brutally mistreated represents the helplessness and hopelessness of every society subjected to the 'shock doctrine', the term used by Naomi Klein to describe the neoliberal strategy to implement free market policies after armed conflicts or economic shocks, taking advantage of the fact that the people is then too overwhelmed to dissent or resist (2007).

The situation does not seem less desperate in Portuguese family portraits, beginning with *Saint George*. Its main character, Jorge, is a boxer who has been hired as a debt collector for a company that buys private debts and coerces people to pay them back. This job places him in an insider position halfway between creditors and debtors – as well as between employers and employees – that allows filmmaker Marco Martins to address a wide variety of life stories: on the one hand, those of small businessmen on the verge of bankruptcy; on the other hand, those of workers distressed by the threat of unemployment. Recession is thus depicted as a problem common to all social classes in

a country in which nobody seems to be solvent. Wherever Jorge goes, his colleagues always use the same sentence to convince people to pay their debts: ‘help us to help you’, a catchy phrase that actually conceals a fallacy, inasmuch as debt collectors help creditors, not debtors. Its systematic repetition throughout the film echoes the rhetoric of the troika years, in which people had ‘the illusion of being helped’, as Mariana Liz has pointed out, while their lives were made worse (2018: 246).

Marco Martins uses Jorge as a witness narrator to peek into different social strata. Through internal focalisation, the camera follows the character’s gaze and shows what he sees: a depressed, decapitalised country where people strive to continue working despite the fact that their income is never enough to pay their debts. His job is supposed to be to intimidate debtors and, if necessary, to give them a beating, but Jorge’s passive and hesitant nature prevents him from taking action for most of the film. In fact, as a boxer, his main ability is to withstand the blows, a feature that may be regarded as another allegory of the country in recession. After all, Jorge is also a victim; a former industrial worker with a complicated family situation: he still lives with his father – an insensitive man who thinks his son is good for nothing – and is temporarily separated from his partner – Susana, an Afro-Brazilian immigrant who is thinking of returning to her country with their child, Nelson. Under such circumstances, Jorge takes the job as a debt collector in order to get the money needed to rent an apartment in which to live with Susana and Nelson, away from his father’s scorn. His plan is simple, but the crisis is not the right time to carry it out, an idea expressed through the camerawork itself: ‘the constant tight framing’, Liz explains, ‘highlights the sense of entrapment that defines Jorge’s character – in the boxing ring, in his professional, and in his personal life. From the start, Jorge is reduced to insignificance by framing choices that see people and buildings constrain him’ (2018: 244).

Jorge's family house, for example, is depicted as a hostile environment in which is impossible to feel at home. The place is a claustrophobic apartment located in a working-class neighbourhood – Bela Vista, south of Lisbon – that appears to be permanently crowded with relatives, neighbours and former workmates. There, Jorge acts like a caged animal: he barely leaves his room, and when he does so, he has to cross several barred metal gates to reach the street. In these sequences, the mise-en-scene conveys the feeling that he is always alone, isolated, fleeing from something or hiding from someone. This impression remains when the character goes to Jamaica, the neighbourhood to which Susana has moved after leaving his house: a vertical slum inhabited by African immigrants that is located in Seixal, again south of Lisbon, in the periphery of the periphery. This area is a doubly marginalised space, a racially segregated ghetto disconnected from the city's main economic flows, beginning with the closest street – an attentive observer will notice that its multi-storey blocks have been built within a large plot surrounded by other buildings. The choice of these communities as settings for the film shows the places where the victims of the crisis are confined, but also mirrors the semi-peripheral condition of the Iberian Peninsula within Europe in a historical time that has been described as a moment of rejection disguised as a moment of acceptance by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014: 51).

Recession has also hit middle-class neighbourhoods like Olivais, east of Lisbon, where *Colo* is set. This film chronicles the gradual disintegration of a family: the father, who is unemployed, stays at home all day, entering a downward spiral of depression and neglect; the mother, in turn, has two different jobs, one by day and one by night, so she is absent and exhausted most of the time; and their daughter, finally, faces her own teenage anxieties without any parental support. Their sense of entrapment is also expressed through framing strategies: this time, instead of a handheld camera on the

move, like in *Saint George*, filmmaker Teresa Villaverde uses static shots that enclose the characters in rigid compositions with the help of architectural elements, especially windows – an opening that let them look outside while remaining inside. These architectural metaphors allow Villaverde to delve into the psychological effects of the crisis, such as the father's loss of self-esteem or the mother's growing alienation.

The father's inability to maintain his role as breadwinner led him to develop an erratic and paranoid behaviour until assuming the paternity of a child that is not his, just to recover a power position within the hegemonic masculinity framework. The mother, meanwhile, gradually disengages from her family situation while normalising self-exploitation as an inherent condition to make a living. There is no wonder that their daughter decides to escape from this family life towards the end of the film, and not precisely through imagination, as the main character in *John From* (João Nicolau, 2015) – another teenage girl who lives in the more affluent district of Telheiras, north of Lisbon, where she can still dream of seducing a neighbour in a parallel universe. On the contrary, in *Colo*, the girl ends the film alone in a fisherman's shed, far from everything and from everyone, like Jorge in *Saint George*. The use of estrangement and defamiliarisation effects, as already happened in Villaverde's previous films, contributes to obscure the reasons of the characters and, what is more important, to denounce the arbitrariness of the crisis, from which nobody was safe at the time. The disintegration of this family, in which every character decides to cope with recession on their own, is the outcome of the tendency to isolation that *Arabian Nights* and *The Nothing Factory* try to counteract with their collective accounts. Arguably, then, one of the purposes of the agonistic narratives of these family portraits would be to warn the audience about the limits and risks of individual responses to the crisis.

## Ambiguous Identifications

Prioritising the representation of victims has also indirectly helped to keep the sectors that have caused the crisis away from the spotlight. If we all are victims, is there no one responsible for the economic and political decisions that led us to recession and austerity? The empathic bridge has also served to reflect on social and individual responsibilities, especially in multi-protagonist films, such as the Spanish comedies *Dying Beyond their Means* (*Murieron por encima de sus posibilidades*, Isaki Lacuesta, 2014) or *Some Time Later* (*Tiempo después*, José Luis Cuerda, 2018), as well as in titles portraying different professional collectives, from bricklayers in *Os Fenómenos* (Alfonso Zarauza, 2014) to politicians in *The Realm* (*El reino*, Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2018). In these works, the characters' life stories are used to describe the social dynamics before and after the crisis, but also to judge them retrospectively from a moral point of view, giving rise to ambiguous discourses that may blame the victims and excuse those in power.

*Dying Beyond their Means* – another film with this awful expression in the title – is an inter-class satire that avoids entering into dichotomies between good and bad characters since none is a paragon of virtues. Its five main characters are victims of recession that meet in a mental hospital and devise a plan to overcome the crisis and take revenge on those who they consider responsible for their misfortunes. Each one stands for a different social stratum: Miguel, an investor, belongs to the upper class; Albert, the owner of a pet store, to the middle class; Iván, a debt collector, and Julio, a conservative homeless who insists in taking his son to a private school, to the working class; and finally Jordi, a drug dealer, to the underclass. Their respective life stories are introduced through flash-backs in order to explain the reasons that have led them to the

mental hospital, but also to parody the excesses of the socioeconomic system and the complacency of the population prior to the crisis.

As the narrative progresses, the film also mocks the shortcomings of anti-austerity movements, represented here by this inter-class alliance formed by the characters, whose methods and purposes turn out to be brutal and lacking in ambition: in the long set piece that closes the film, the characters break into a secret party full of wealthy, beautiful people with the aim of kidnapping the president of the central bank and torturing several corrupt ministers responsible for cutbacks in public services.<sup>9</sup> Their political claims, however, make it clear that they do not intend to change or improve the situation, but just to restore their previous privileged position – in the case of the upper class, embodied by Miguel – or, at least, the illusion of prosperity in which they lived – in the case of the popular classes, headed by Julio in this final set piece. By presenting the characters as a gang of naive fools doomed to failure, filmmaker Isaki Lacuesta hints that these people might be fighting for the wrong reason: it should not be a matter of returning to the status quo prior to austerity but of attempting to develop a fairer and more equitable system.

Corruption has finally come to the fore in *The Realm*, a political thriller inspired by real events taken from several case summaries (see Zas Marcos & Pinheiro 2018). Its main character, Manuel López Vidal, is an ambitious party man who has benefited for years from influence peddling and misappropriation of public funds while waiting to move up within the hierarchy of his party – an unnamed party that presents many similarities with the conservative People’s Party, especially with its regional branches in Madrid and Valencia. The appearance of an incriminating recording in which he is talking about illegal activities with a city councillor causes his expulsion from the metaphorical realm referred in the title: his career must be sacrificed in order to save the

party. Manuel, however, refuses to step aside – why him and not any other? – and decides to gather evidences to incriminate his colleagues, in an attempt to prove that he was just a pawn in a larger system.

Throughout its first half, *The Realm* meticulously describes the power relations within the party, as well as the inner workings of its corrupt networks. So far, except for Luis Bárcenas in *B* (David Ilundain, 2015),<sup>10</sup> corrupt politicians had usually been depicted as stereotyped supporting characters in austerity cinema.<sup>11</sup> Manuel, in turn, is an antihero with whom the audience can empathise, inasmuch as his illegal activities are explicitly compared with ordinary people's petty thefts: in the most questionable sequence in the film, Manuel sees how a young client keeps the extra money he has wrongly received as change after having paid his bill in a bar. This wicked comparison seems to state that corruption is, to a greater or lesser extent, an inherent attribute to the Spanish society, as if Manuel's life story might be compared with anyone else's, obviating the fact that he held a privileged position that was completely out of reach for most of the population. The issue, according to filmmaker Rodrigo Sorogoyen, would not then be who is corrupt, but who is not; an ambiguous and indulgent approach that is not so far from the statement 'we have lived beyond our means'.

Manuel rebels against the system, but his reasons have nothing to do with a desire for justice or an attempt at atonement. On the contrary, he is moved by revenge. The final sequence, in which he tries to expose the party's fraudulent accounting in a TV show, conveys a misleading message: instead of showing the party's account books, the anchorwoman corners Manuel with her questions, blaming him and missing the big picture, just as the party wanted from the beginning. This ending reproduces a usual narrative convention in conspiracy thrillers, according to which the truth remains hidden because society is never prepared to face it – and, consequently, why should anyone

bother to try to change things? The anchorwoman's question that closes the film is supposed to be an invitation to self-criticism, but it actually induces self-blame: 'have you ever stopped to think', she asks to both Manuel and the audience while staring at the camera, 'about what you were doing?' The way the question is asked and filmed leaves no room for empowerment: there may be some viewers who have somehow benefited from corruption and others who did not... but even so *The Realm* seems to suggest that the latter are also guilty of not having been able to prevent the former from doing it.

### **Conclusion: Exemplary Lives**

Allegory has become the main rhetorical figure in austerity cinema at a time when collective certainties are constructed from individual feelings and perceptions: anything, and especially anyone, may stand for a country in recession. For this reason, many characters have been used as social signifiers to embody different attitudes and situations related to the crisis, both in documentary and fiction films. Their life stories have been adapted to cinema through several systems of representation, among which first-person monologues and internal focalisation stand out. These narratives have allowed filmmakers to establish an empathic bridge between the characters and the audience in order to promote an inter-class identification with the victims of austerity, who usually play the role of civil, secular martyrs in these films. Accordingly, this technology of political imagination, as Germán Labrador Méndez has called it (2012), must be regarded as a counter-hegemonic strategy against self-blaming discourses that have ultimately helped reinforce social bonds.

Some of the titles adopting this dynamic, however, may lead to victimhood or, what is worse, to confuse self-criticism with self-blame. A few films take advantage of this empathic bridge to spread the line of argument of those in power, according to which all citizens have been more or less responsible for the crisis, regardless of the scale and impact of their actions and choices. Nevertheless, the systematic effort of Iberian filmmakers to show the plight of the victims has been mainly intended to turn compassion into solidarity and empowerment, despite the fact that this strategy has sometimes bordered on sensationalism or led viewers to identify with the wrong people. After all, empathy in film does not depend on taste or ideology, but on the approach and skill with which filmmakers address any kind of situation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Works such as *Slightly Smaller Than Indiana (Um Pouco Mais Pequeno que o Indiana)*, Daniel Blaufuks, 2006), *Go Away from Me (Vete de mí)*, Víctor García León, 2006), *The Contestant (Concursante)*, Rodrigo Cortés, 2007), *Ruins (Ruínas)*, Manuel Mozos, 2009), *The Sword and the Rose (A Espada e a Rosa)*, João Nicolau, 2010) or *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010) can be interpreted retrospectively as a premonition of the economic shift, as I have argued elsewhere (Villarmea Álvarez 2018: 9-10).

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<sup>2</sup> Many writers have taken a similar position in their books on the topic, at least among Spanish novelists, as argued by Jochen Mecke (2017: 212).

<sup>3</sup> Albritton specifically writes on Spanish cinema, but his ideas can also be applied to Portuguese film.

<sup>4</sup> Some of these films would be *The End (Fin)*, Jorge Torregrosa, 2012), *The Last Days (Los últimos días)*, Àlex & David Pastor, 2013) or *The Bar (El bar)*, Alex de la Iglesia, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> These screen tests are not spontaneous interviews but re-enacted speeches, a *mise-en-scène* technique that had previously been used in the documentary fiction *24 City* (二十四城记, Jia Zhang-ke, 2008), another film made from the testimonies of former industrial workers.

<sup>6</sup>*Arabian Nights* was filmed between August 2013 and August 2014, when Portuguese macroeconomic data was at its worst: at the time, the country's GDP had been decreasing for more than two consecutive years and the unemployment rate had just reached its peak – 17.5% – in the first quarter of 2013.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Gomes played an active role in the 2012 debate on the public funding for film in Portugal (see Ribas & Cunha 2015).

<sup>8</sup> These documentaries, according to Araceli Rodríguez Mateos, have contributed to turn the circulation of life stories into an empowerment strategy within the Spanish context (see 2018: 198-218).

<sup>9</sup> The desire for revenge against bankers and politicians was a widespread fantasy in the early 2010s that appears in other Spanish films such as *El mundo es nuestro* (Alfonso Sánchez, 2012), *Justi&Cia* (Ignacio Estaregui, 2014) or *Retribution (El desconocido)*, Dani de la Torre, 2015), as explained by Marta Álvarez (see 2018: 81-102).

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<sup>10</sup> Luis Bárcenas worked in the accounts department of the People's Party from 1990 to 2009. His involvement in several corruption scandals led to his detention and imprisonment in 2013. The film *B* is a legal drama based on a previous play – *Ruz-Bárcenas* (Jordi Casanovas, 2014) – which transcribed Bárcenas' testimony in the Audiencia Nacional.

<sup>11</sup>A few examples would be the villains in *Five Square Meters* (*Cinco metros cuadrados*, Max Lemcke, 2011), *Justi&Cia* or *Dying Beyond their Means*.