The European Dream: crisis narratives through film and photography

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It took just over ten years for the notion of Europe as an ideal land of progress and integration to start falling apart or, at the very least, sink into a deep crisis. The birth of Europe as an institution dates back to the 1950s when it was first made possible thanks to the bold initiative of its "founding fathers". General consensus among historians sees the event as the onset of a long time of peace, cooperation between countries as well as unprecedented social and economic growth across the Old Continent. The free movement of people, goods and capital, a common currency, the promotion of symbols, and the introduction of social, cultural and economic policies driven by the institutions of the European Union nourished a consciousness of belonging to a "common home" – albeit without excessive fervour. Or, to borrow a definition coined by Georg Sørensen, a "community of feeling" spread amongst the inhabitants of the new supranational Europe: "a relationship between groups of citizens built around a common history and culture, shared myths, symbols and art" (Liz 2016, p. 17).

In her study of the images of Europe found in contemporary cinema, Marian Liz shows a direct relationship between the degree of acceptance of Europeanism and economic trends (2016, pp. 12-13). In the early 2000s a

time of "Euro-euphoria" translated into widespread enthusiasm about the European integration project. Around the same time, more precisely in 2004, American economist and sociologist Jeremy Rifkin coined the notion of "European dream" as opposed to the traditional "American dream", which he described in eminently lucrative terms. As with Sánchez-Escalonilla (2018; pp. 277-278), the European Dream outlined by Rifkin is perceived as a "better alternative" to its American counterpart in its economic, political and social aspirations:

> …based on the ideas of economic growth, personal wealth and private enterprise, the American dream had ceased to constitute the reference paradigm for both collective and individual progress and was being replaced by a new dream that promised a kind of prosperity based on integration, interdependence and multiculturality: the European dream (2018, p. 278).

For Rifkin, the European Dream embodied a range of values that were more appropriate in an age of globalization. The emphasis on material progress and individual affluence was being replaced by new priorities such as common prosperity, cultural diversity, human rights, global cooperation and sustainable development. However, so much optimism now seems to have waned and to have given way to widespread disillusionment among Europeans. Mistrust in the present state of affairs, the loss of faith in progress and fear of the future define a general sense of melancholy, if not nostalgia (Hermsen, 2019, p. 15), that begs the key question: what has happened to the European Dream?

As known, the economic recession caused by the financial crisis exploded in 2007 inflicted a first substantial blow to the stability of a pro-European conscience. At an institutional level, the crisis laid bare the fragility of cooperation between different European peoples, thus widening the gap between North and South, between creditors and debtors. The same tensions resurfaced again most recently due to disagreements over the financial aids needed to face the terrible economic crisis caused by COVID-19.

Clearly, these are not ideal circumstances to dispel the mounting pessimism that more and more shrouds the current socio-economic scenario. We have witnessed the explosion of precarity and precariousness denounced by Guy Standing (2011), whereby millions of Europeans struggling to simply make ends meet. In countries like Spain there is a growing awareness of a middle class getting weaker and more vulnerable; and the crisis of the welfare state is seen by most as a sign that future generations will face even worse consequences.

The combination of factors outlined above helps to understand the success enjoyed by nationalist and populist movements in the political arena in the last decade. To make things worse, the European Union project has been put in serious question by the agonizing departure of the United Kingdom, which has become effective in 2020. Furthermore, a growing Euroscepticism has been spreading across the continent, due to discredited Union's institutions and to political and bureaucratic elites generally perceived as out of touch with the reality experienced by their citizens who, in turn, lament the lack of a strong leadership, able to lead Europe through such tumultuous times.

However, more than anything else, it was the response by the European countries to the humanitarian crisis of migrants and refugees to have been the most responsible for the obliteration of the European Dream. Although certainly not a new phenomenon, never before the last decade had Europe become the promised land for millions of people displaced by wars or simply in search of a better future. As observed by Peris Cancio (2018, pp. 21-25), this is a crucial time for Europe's identity to the extent that "what is at stake is the credibility of its own democratic political project". At the same time, the coherence of those values it claims to stand by is tested: that is, solidarity, hospitality, advocating human rights and the dignity of the individual.

Many intellectuals have drawn attention to the battered image of Europe (and of its inhabitants). In his insightful essay *Strangers at Our Door*, Zygmunt Bauman points the finger at the immoral "passing the buck"

treatment that Europeans reserved to refugees, and at the ease with which we have ignored the tragedy that was unfolding before our eyes (2016, pp. 9-10). The Polish-British philosopher cautions against the growing adiaphorization that would exempt us from any consideration of morality in human relations (pp. 72-73). Beyond the "carnival explosions of solidarity", Bauman adds, we seem less and less willing to admit moral obligations in a world split between "us" and "them". Europe seems more concerned with protecting its own borders than to safeguard the rights of migrants who, deprived of their dignity, are turned into a problematic "other": troublesome, undesired and, in the end, unacceptable. Hermsen reminds us that melancholia turns into concern, insecurity and fear; ultimately, it acts out aggressively against the *homo sacer* as described by Agamben, the outcast we blame for all our ills and try to expel from the *polis* (2019, p. 14).

In a recent article, Claudio Magris see the management of the migrant crisis as another symptom of the decline of western civilization foreseen by Spengler almost a century ago and now coming to completion as Europe's organic unity dies out. Magris traces the cause of this in the neglect of the two principles that were its *raison d'être* and its greatness at the same time: humanism and universalism. Europe is failing to recognize the "other" as a person and the encounter with other civilization as enriching.

Two years ago, Violeta Kovacsics wrote an article on the New Wave of European cinema:

> If European cinema serves as a reflection of the tribulations of our continent (...) one can only think of a certain hopelessness, regret, discomfort that gets projected on the screen without alibis or filters. It seems to tell us that there is hardly any room for smiling, that there is no truce in this Europe scourged by a crisis which is economic just as well as political and humanitarian (2018, p. 6).

Keeping cinema as the main focus but opening up to other media as well, this monographic issue of *Fotocinema* aims to contribute to the ongoing debate around how visual and audiovisual arts are giving account of the

crisis of the European Dream. Javier Ortiz-Echagüe and Araceli Rodríguez's article opens Part 1 of this monographic issue by examining the evolution of the idea of Europe through almost half a century as it emerges from five notable photobooks, all of which reflect on the topic and, taken together, end up tracing the history (and story) of a disenchantment. The first of the series, and the most optimistic, is *Europeans* (*Les Européens*, 1955) by Henri Cartier-Bresson: it shows daily lives of ordinary European people as "a flow of faces and situations (that) favour the interpretation of Europe as a common home". Four decades later, in the *New Europe* (1993) sanctioned by the Maastricht Treaty, Paul Graham revisits the notion through "forty-five photos that expose the blinders of the prevailing utopistic vision of the New Europe". Similarly, Carlos Spottorno's *The PIGS* (2013) captures the stereotypes adopted by the financial press to describe the debtor countries of Southern Europe. In *Atenea* (2017), Roger Grass takes the reader/viewer on a trip "across a Europe pockmarked by depression and disillusionment", a journey that, not by chance, departs from Germany and ends in Athens. Through this photographic journey, Grass questions the value a "monetary" Europe that dispenses with its own ethical and cultural legacy. Finally, Federico Clavarino's *The Castle* (2018) finds in Kafka a contemporary myth *par excellence* (Balló y Pérez, 1997, pp. 262-275) that elaborates on the suffocating power of Europe that embroils its own citizen in labyrinthine procedures and norms.

Both Marta Frago on one hand, and Marcos Jiménez and Jorge Latorre on the other, rely on the value of myth as a key to understand Europe. Frago investigates the cinematic representation of a polyhedral figure, both revered and cause of recent controversy, such as Winston Churchill. This indisputable protagonist of World War II was one of the pioneers that set the process for European integration in motion and a champion of the necessity to put an end to centuries of enmity between France and Germany. Frago's comparative study of *The Young Winston* (R. Attenborough, 1972) and *The Darkest Hour* (J. Wright, 2017) is all the

more relevant to the extent that, besides offering a portrait of the British Prime Minister in two distinct moments of his life (as a young man and as an experienced leader, respectively), sheds light on the spirit of the times when the two films were made. Frago traces the "social values" embodied by Churchill in each one: in Attenborough's film, the character "aligns himself with the youth spirit of a time driven by the desire for social and political reforms" and becomes "the symbol of a promise". In Wright's film, Churchill is portrayed as an experienced and committed leader thus becoming symptomatic of "the longing for a leading figure in times of difficulty, one who know how to rise to the occasion".

Jiménez and Latorre too employ a comparative approach by focusing on Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927) and on the iconographic project of the Rockefeller Center in New York. The authors trace the aesthetic affinity between the two to then extrapolate and focus on their different use of the two classical myths – Prometheus and Atlas – in order to propose a provocative hypothesis: "While *Metropolis* constitutes a certain dystopian (and cautionary) premonition of the crisis of the European Dream, the Rockefeller Center symbolizes the more utopian project of the capitalistic American Dream". The aim is "to understand why and how common aesthetic choices can be driven by such different, if not opposed ideological uses of the same myths".

Myths give way to facts and statistics in the article by Roberto Gelado and Javier Figuero. Tapping into the annual report published by UNIC (Unión Internacional de Cines), they conduct a quantitative study to demonstrate how little, if at all, the ideas of Europe and of the European Dream are present in European cinema. Even when depicting well-known historical events, European films do so almost exclusively from a national perspective. The data collected also show that the most watched films in Europe are neither national or European productions and that what little "European cinema is watched by Europeans is limited to productions from their own countries". In other words, in each and every European countries

the most watched titles are either American films or productions from one's own country.

In spite of such unappealing evidence at a "macro" level, Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla finds value and champions the importance of individual films that build on the specific topic of this monographic issue. In particular, he focuses on a genre that is traditionally absent from European productions: the space-adventure movie. Sánchez-Escalonilla's article pulls the focus on *Proxima* (A. Winokour, 2019), a French-German co-production realised by a multinational creative team, as milestone of its genre so much so that "it reinvents the archetype of the astronaut", thanks to a character, Sarah, who is "protagonist, woman, mother and European". Furthermore, the film evades the nationalist agenda so often found in both American and Soviet/Russian counterparts. Instead, it claims back the value of inter-country cooperation as one that "works better both in outer space and at geopolitical level". The European identity of the protagonist represents "a third way that transcends rivalries between superpowers and stands by the new values of the space dream, characterized by globalism and cooperation between nations as opposed to the exaltation of national achievements".

Sánchez-Escalonilla's article thus close Part 1 of this issue with the promise of an alternative construction of the European Dream as work in progress. In doing so, it anticipates some of the thematic elements that characterise the works analysed Part 2: in the following articles the focus gravitates continuously from the identity of the European institutions to the fissures of a societal texture compounded by a growing sense of precariousness, to the reactions to the migrant crisis of the last decade or so.

Ricardo Jimeno Aranda and José Antonio Jiménez de las Heras open Part 2 of this special issue with a substantive analysis of latest four films to date in the monumental career of Greek-French filmaker Costa-Gavras – notably, all but one written with his long-standing screenwiter Jean-Claude Grumberg. Taken as a whole, and comparing the four titles with one another, this corpus of works reveal the manifold structural fractures of the European home by tracing an ideal path that takes the viewer "from the ravages of unployment"

(*The Axe*, 2005) to the stark "reality of illegal immigration" (*Eden is West*, 2009); to then expose the cynical orthodoxy and technocracy of the "speculative funtioning of the economy" (*Capital*, 2012) and break open the intricately and "institutional gear" of the EU (*Adults in the Room*, 2019). The idea(s) of Europe is the common thread in four films that, otherwise, employ a varied range of generic conventions (e.g. black comedy, satire, slapstick, political drama) and storytelling techniques (e.g. mise en scene, points of view, symbolism, allegory/parody), all accounted for in the analysis offered by Jimeno Aranda and Jiménez de las Heras. Gavras' films also seem to trace a metaphorical inverse trajectory: from localism to universalism, from effects to causes, from openness (e.g. the idea of Europe as a promised land) to closeness (Fortress Europe), from the fears, hopes and disenchantment of the citizens to the failings of European institutions that are hypocritically entrenched in their paternalism and out of touch with everyday circumstances.

A close readings of these films offers an overall narrative that questions and dissects the very idea of Europe along with its defining notions/ideals of progress, equality and freedom. Conversely, Europe has redefined itself as a postmodern society whose consumeristic attitude ends up imbricating any sense of stability with a widespread sense of both precariousness (i.e. uncertainty) and precarity (i.e. lack of security and predictability) (Lorey, 2015). An obvious consequence of this is an altered perception of values and circumstances, one that seriously undermines trust and a shared sense of community as it emerges in Gavras's films as well as in Robin Campillo's.

Lucas Sebastián Martinelli adopts a framework informed by political philosophy and theories of affect to explore the theme of precariousness/precarity in connection to the notion of "end of dream" in Campillo's cinema, particularly by looking at the subjectivity of migrants through the analysis of the construction of temporality. In doing so, Martinelli retrives the notions of impasse (Berlant, 2015), amnesia and gap to drive his reading of two main tropes in Campillo's titles: work and death. Campillo's contribution to director Laurent Cantet's *Human Resources*

(1999) and *Time Out* (2001) –as editor and screenwriter, respecively– is singled out, among others, for staging the clash between the dream of an affluent life by a dominant neoliberalist tenets and the actuality of the precarity these have engendered; by the resulting grey areas that trigger a permanent state of drifting away. The article also investigates other titles in Campillo's filmography as screenwriter/editor –i.e. *The Class* (2008), *The Workshop* (2017), *They Came Back* (2004), *Planetarium* (2016), *Eastern Boys* (2013), *Heading South* (2005)– to strenthen the argument that they "lay bare a problematic European state of affairs and the need to foster a new philosophy of encounter in the world off screen".

Similar themes characterise the cinema of Ruben Östlund. In their article, Mónica Fernández Jiménez, Sofía Martinicorena Zaratiegui and Inés Paris Arranz analyze the spacial politics of "hostipitality" (in Derrida's terminology) in Europe as portrayed in three films by the Swedish filmmaker: *Play* (2011), *Force majeure* (2014), and *The Square* (2017). The authors return to a postmodern view of Europe that is depicted in Östlund's films as an agglomeration of non-places that, while systemically functional to capitalist logics of consumerism on one hand –i.e. the perpetuation/reproduction of itself through fetished commodities– reveal "the impossibility of an ethics of hospitality" and "jeopardise the vulnerable European identities of the characters", and, as a direct consequence, the idealized European dream. Most surely, Östlund's Europe is a far cry from the communitarian exceptionalism championed by Rifkin and seems to replace it with a constant, and voluble clash between implied hospitality and an inseparable hostility that comes to the fore at times of crisis, such as the recent waves of migrants.

The representations of the imaginary informed by and about the migrant crisis is also the focus of Raúl Álvarez Gómez's semiotic examination of the iconography, literary expression and narrative techniques in comic books published in Spain in recent years. This article follows in the wake of recently renewed attention to this medium in the field of semiotic studies and complements this approach with a quantitative analysis in order to assess the

impact of these comic books in terms of visibility, reach and market on one hand; and by pointed references to the controversial EU's legislative initiatives enforced to tackle the migrant crisis on the other. The thirteen titles identified (produced mostly in Spain, but also in France, Belgium, Poland, Italy and Irak) show some common traits: the recurrent trope of the journey as the main narrative device and, concurrently, as a metaphor for the change and transformation the characters aspire to; mostly linear plotlines; characterization tends to be condensed into archetypes and stereotypes (e.g. villains and victims); and the iconography tends to swing between expressionistic figuration, caricature, and a more realist style of representation. What emerges as a non-negotiable trait though is the sense of tragedy at the root of all migrant waves, and the lack of happy endings, which reminds the reader of the bureuacratic odissey to which Europe has subjected migrants in recent years.

Georgina Oller Bosch wraps the monographic issue with an unusual, and yet insightful use of the notion of counter-monument that she applies to Mercedes Álvarez's award-winning documentary *The Sky Turns* (2004). As defined by historian James E. Young, counter-monuments are "self-conscious memorial spaces" (1992, p. 267). Oller Bosch argues that *The Sky Turns* can be seen as a counter-monument that challenges the stereotypes of progress by offering "an alternative counter-discourse", one that does not impose any absolute truth on the subject matter at hand: this being the ongoing process of modernisation imposed on the tiny Spanish village of Aldealseñor in order to stop (and possibly reverse) its advanced stage of depopulation. In order to achieve this, rather than employing and expository paradigm to raise a given problem and possible solution (Nichols, 1997), Álvarez's documentary is a performative space for the inhabitants of the village and their subjective, unfiltered memories, without the addition of any further information regarding their identity and/or personal histories. It does not ask questions; it simply "frames the situations lived" by these people and enables the spectators to listen to their conversations. The innovative value of *El cielo gira* is therefore to be found in the ability and right enjoyed

by the spectators to watch, engage critically with and freely interpret the images on the screen. In its local and demographically limited dimension, a tiny Spanish village shows Europe the way to find shared concern and engagement on matters of general interest. Most importantly, it highlights a simple and yet crucial caveat: that is, it is not possible, or at the very least debatable, to undertake any process of material and cultural modernization (just like the European project) if the will of the people is marginalized.

Ultimately, this special issue of *Fotocinema* revolves around the idea of a myth-construction process. As Lakoff and Johnson exemplify, myths derive their power from their alliance with ideas of "truth, rationality, accuracy, fairness" as reflected in the manifold discourses that inform social and cultural practices (1980, pp. 188-189). When effective, myths lose the need to be deciphered and accepted as they become the natural, common sense way of a given ideology – understood as a set of values, beliefs and attitudes. The articles presented in this issue reflect a critical tension betweem two polar extremities. At the positive end of the spectrum lie attempts at scouting and representing the European Dream as a set of ideals and values, the constituent parts of an optimistic myth-construction process. At the negative end awaits a stark reality check whose outcome clashes dramatically with the promise of the European Dream. Somewhere in the middle, intensifying the line of tension, is the awareness that, even in the best scenario, that process generally feels like it got stuck in the making: both in terms of the actual message it carries (i.e. the values, beliefs, attitudes of the European Dream), and of the way it is passed.

A common trait of all the articles – as well as all the case studies – proposed here is a focused attention to the subjects trapped in this tension: the people. Their investigations through cinema, photography, and comics, past or contemporary, unveil how, whatever middle ground can be found to accommodate a realistic construction of a shared European identity that realizes the European Dream, the most pressing cause of the crisis under way seems to be the loss of trust and belief by the citizens in the common values. In other words, the European Dream is still very much in search of an

audience. And for the positive myth-construction process to be rescued, that audience must be engaged as active players rather than being reduced to either the consumer or victim paradigms.

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