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Elliptical life in ~~(post)~~crisis cinema from Spain

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ABSTRACT

This essay tracks the long-term effects of the global financial crash of 2008 in two films produced during the so-called ~~post~~crisis period in Spain (2014–). Borrowing Lauren Berlant's term *elliptical life*, I examine Adán Aliaga and David Valero's *El arca de Noé* (2014) and Polo Menárguez's *El plan* (2019), which center on the disorientations facing recently fired security guards who draw up blueprints or make plans for alternative imaginaries in the context of ongoing crisis. Elliptical life, as a liminal space for nonsovereign subjects and an aesthetic form that deploys a loose filmic language, captures what Berlant calls "flailing" as characters express their desire for a surrogate reality free from the constraints of biopower. Through form and content alike, elliptical life embraces negativity as a strategy for chipping away at entrenched hegemonies, welcoming encounters with estrangement and/or incoherence. It sets its sights on transformational structures, privileging states of incompletion over endgame scenarios and revolutionary triumph. In the end, as both films work through the vicissitudes of elliptical life in contemporary Spain, they contemplate failure as a mode for interrogating aspirational notions of self-legitimation and control in a reality structured by the logic of late capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Crisis; ~~post~~crisis; Spanish cinema; genre; affect

As the aftereffects of the global financial crash of 2008 extend into a second decade, anxieties surrounding the ongoing crisis continue to permeate cinema produced in Spain. Over the last ten years an emergent group of filmmakers has traced the long-term effects of late capitalism on Spanish society, examining youth unemployment, housing foreclosures, bankruptcy, governmental corruption, public debt and a culture redefined by austerity. Protagonists face evictions from their homes (*Techo y comida* [Juan Miguel del Castillo 2015], *La Granja del Pas* [Silvia Munt 2015], *Cerca de tu casa* [Eduard Cortés 2016]). They suffer physical and psychological trauma in the context of the crisis (*La herida* [Fernando Franco 2013], *Stockholm* [Rodrigo Sorogoyen 2013], *Magical Girl* [Carlos Vermut 2014]). They resort to criminal activity to make ends meet (*Carmina o revienta* [Paco León 2012], *Somos gente honrada* [Alejandro Marzoa 2013], *Murieron por encima de sus posibilidades* [Isaki Lacuesta 2014]). Spaniards are forced to move abroad to find work (*Hermosa juventud* [Jaime Rosales 2014], *Perdiendo el norte* [Nacho

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García Velilla 2015], *Les distàncies* [Elena Trapé 2018]). Migrants struggle to integrate financially and socially in hostile conditions (*Biutiful* [Alejandro González Iñárritu 2010], *Diamantes negros* [Miguel Alcantud 2013], *Oreina* [Koldo Almandoz 2018]). Faced with increasingly dire circumstances, characters commit, attempt or fantasize about suicide or murder in response to their personal hardships (*La chispa de la vida* [Álex de la Iglesia 2011], *El mundo es nuestro* [Alfonso Sánchez 2012], *La punta del iceberg* [David Cánovas 2016]). As fictional indices of lived experience, these films not only reveal the enduring nature of crisis in the neoliberal present, they reflect (upon) the ambivalence felt by subjects whose attachments to society – whether domestic, professional or political – have unraveled over the last several years.

The loss, or potential loss, of these attachments saturates contemporary experience in the West along with the heartbreaking realization that they represent little more than "compromised conditions of possibility" (Berlant 2011, 24). Citizens and noncitizens alike find themselves bound up in, and disoriented by, the deteriorating structures of ~~post-~~Fordist economies and the boundaryless forms of "Empire" that now govern global markets (Hardt and Negri 2000, xi). Impeded by a debilitating presentism,[1] contemporary perceptions of the future are more paralyzing than promising, as is the realization that there may be no "progressive" exit plan for the crises confronting the West today. The future is, thus, "a time of disasters" (Hartog 2015, xviii), which can only be conceived in cataclysmic terms given the defeat of communist and socialist utopias in the twentieth century and the fact that we now live in a "nonrevolutionary age" (Traverso 2017, 20). One is left to wonder if it is even possible to intervene in a present in which widespread precarity has engendered "una cierta hegemonía del miedo y de la prudencia" (Álvarez-Blanco and Gómez L-Quiñones 2016, 13). Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, Spain sits atop the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's list of thirty-seven member countries that will be hardest hit by the virus. With GDP in free fall (down 11.6 percent as of December 2020) and unemployment skyrocketing, the global pandemic figures as yet another catastrophe in a series of crises that has forever altered Spain's cultural landscape (Fresneda 2020).

Thinking through the embeddedness of crisis in the present, this essay attends to what activist group Juventud Sin Futuro has described as "una socialización de las pérdidas" in contemporary Spain (2011, 86). I argue that the constant slashing of salaries, job opportunities and long-term employment contracts – along with flagging access to affordable housing, public education and pension funds – has not only ravaged economic security, it has generated a condition that Lauren Berlant, in another context, has termed "elliptical life" (2015). As a metaphor for redefining notions of national belonging during times of crisis, elliptical life captures the sense of "disintegratedness" affecting subjects as their attachments to the social order begin to unravel (Berlant 2015). With nearly 30 percent of Spain's workforce now dependent upon government support and hundreds of thousands of jobs hanging in the balance, the reduced horizon of expectations for Spaniards and migrant laborers has led to a scene of suspended agency for adults of all ages. Left to make sense of the changes taking place within society, national subjects inhabit "a shattered, formally inconsistent, yet intelligible zone" while wrestling with various forms of psychosocial dissociation in a crisis-ridden present (Berlant 2016). Living in ellipsis, thus, functions as a bracing strategy for managing the constraints of biopower and state-driven tactics bent on "achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault 1998, 140). At the same time, elliptical life operates as an expressive

tool for communicating modes of evasion from a reality in which one's attachments to "the good life" continue to deceive or disappoint.[2]

Interrogating what it means to belong to a society that is only capable of distributing forms of scarcity and loss, this essay focuses on the breakdown of social attachments in ~~post-~~ crisis films released over the last decade.[3] Located on an uneven plane of affect – somewhere between confusion, despair and detachment – *El arca de Noé* (Adán Aliaga and David Valero 2014) and *El plan* (Polo Menárguez 2019) center on the disorientations afflicting working-class subjects who find themselves "othered" by and excluded from the world of privilege in contemporary Spain. Both films explore the hardships facing recently unemployed security guards whose long-term subsistence on state benefits appears untenable in a country marked by unremitting crisis. The symbolic use of security guards, who derive their own financial well-being from the protection of others and/or their property, galvanizes a larger discussion on widespread insecurity in Spain.[4] Far from positing sites of utter despondency, however, *El arca de Noé* and *El plan* evoke Marx and Engels's call for "the imaginative expression of a new world" (1962, 460) by representing protagonists who devise creative methods for sidestepping the brutalities of neoliberal common sense (1962, 460). These films stand out as a distinct category of crisis cinema from Spain by positing aesthetic and affective responses to a historical present in which "genre flailing" becomes a necessary tool for moving within a reality whose conceptual anchors are no longer secure (Berlant 2018, 157).[5] Tracking the complex relays between affect and politics, genres such as science fiction, fantasy, melodrama and social realism metamorphose into new forms. The collapse of these genres in the present evinces an ongoing shift in filmic language, as artists examine degraded fantasies of "the good life" with an evolving set of formal conventions. While the blurring of generic parameters may produce bewilderment and a range of negative affects, their reshaping and constant transformation remain crucial for creating "an opening in a present of foreclosed possibility" (Love 2012, 324).

Transcending the perils of "pornoprecariedad" (Martín-Estudillo 2017, 196),[6] the works studied here move beyond the frontiers of what Dean Allbritton has labeled "Spanish 'crisis cinema'" (2014, 103). They confound "compassionate responses toward vulnerability" (2014, 110) by positing open-ended questions that prompt viewers "to be disturbed together" (Berlant 2018, 161). *El arca de Noé* and *El plan* – like *Magical Girl*, *Les distàncies* and *La hija de un ladrón* (Belén Funes 2019) – refuse any sense of closure, dashing hopes instead of casting optimism as a substitute "for any action that might effect a real change upon the world" (Allbritton 2014, 112). The disruptions they create – both formally and thematically – force audiences to ponder what is going on around them, not only with regard to the labor market, but also in terms of the pervasive angst circulating throughout Spanish society. These films entwine a dense tapestry of emotions that configure embodied experience in crisis culture – everything from hopelessness to elation – while contemplating what, if anything, lies beyond the limits of cruel optimism. They brood over the (im)possibility of "enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets and at work" while untethering protagonists, if only partially, from the diminished promises of late capitalism (Berlant 2011, 2). Further, they underscore the "affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity" linked to (un)employment and domestic life while exploring the contours of elliptical life in the present (Ngai 2005, 2).

While elliptical life might sound like a kind of stasis, akin to being suspended in the present, I insist on the perpetual movements at its core, drawing attention to the ways

in which these films wrestle with the ubiquity of marginalization under late capitalism. Finding potential within an amorphous and constantly shifting affective state, ellipsis not only activates "dispersed, multiple and tangled [forms of] awareness", it helps disoriented subjects resolve "the fissures in the collective sensorium" (Berlant 2016). As a site of transition and (potential) transformation, elliptical life recalls Foucauldian modes of self-(re)fashioning, focusing on "the interaction between oneself and others" and "how an individual works upon himself" in response to extant structures of domination and control (Foucault 2004, 417). As a method of micro-political resistance, the dissociative poetics expressed in both films reveal the affective potential embodied by Spaniards contending with precarity and unemployment. In terms of its formal dimensions, dissociative expression generates what might be best described as "realism for a world in crisis" (Berlant 2015). It negates traditional narrative structures, prioritizing "the seemingly casual" – such as mundane observations, episodic annotations and the composition of lists or plans – while expressing "an elegiac and passive relation to a reality that is failing" (Berlant 2015). Here dissociation may not necessarily invoke trauma or the prodromal phase of a psychotic illness, but rather a sensorial lag-time that is needed to grapple with the intensities of an event that has recently transpired. Nevertheless, the lull produced by the event and its aftereffects, as subjects anticipate and await what comes next, is not necessarily irrational or pathological, but rather a form of adapting to the collapse of societal and affective infrastructures. As a result, these films scrutinize the impasse in which these protagonists find themselves "dogpaddling" in order to query the possibility of other relational structures through which a different kind of political project might emerge (Berlant 2011, 199).

Plotting an exit strategy from the crisis in *El arca de Noé*

From its opening frames, Adán Aliaga and David Valero's *El arca de Noé* places the action within the context of crisis. The film's first sequence features a voiceover that provides a definition of the term itself as microscopic cells crash into one another on-screen. Reevaluating the confines of crisis, the extradiegetic narration envisages the possibility of a new era, one brought about by a dramatic shift in thinking or perception. Reminding viewers that "crisis" denotes a turning point, the commentary emphasizes the volatility of these historic intervals while unsettling extradiegetic sounds play in the background. Further, it alludes to the "inestabilidad" underpinning all crises as well as their ability to mark "irreversible" shifts in the way in which reality is commonly perceived (Figure 1). As defining moments, crises may instigate a "proceso de evolución" that forever alters how people live and understand the world they inhabit. They can, as the voiceover insists, generate "consecuencias transcendentales para la sociedad o el individuo" that may lead to revolutionary change if sufficiently "súbitos y violentos". What *El arca de Noé* posits from the start, therefore, is a cinematic reflection on crisis as a means by which established hierarchies may be exploded and future horizons envisaged through democratic contestations of the present.

Classified as everything from political cinema to spiritual filmmaking, *El arca de Noé* has been deemed a "disaster film" (Bitel 2015), a "sweet-natured comedy" (Naughten 2015) and "Ciencia Freakicción" (Mañeru 2017). The lone Spanish film premiered at Valladolid's 59th annual Seminci Festival in October 2014, *El arca de Noé* received largely positive

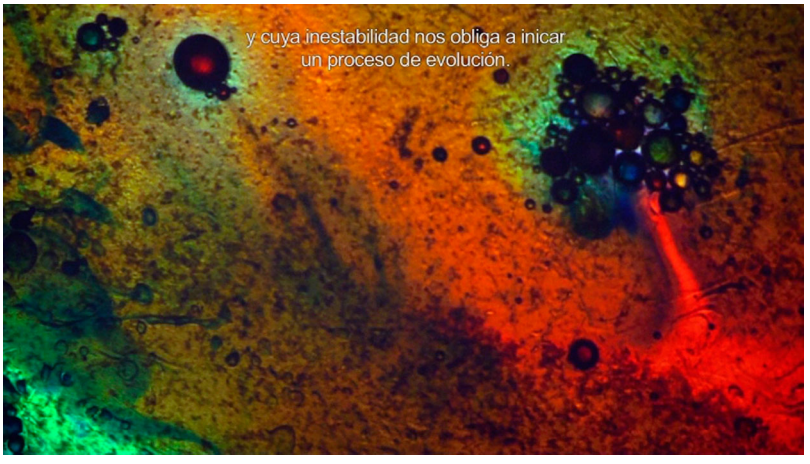

Figure 1. Microscopic cells mutate onscreen in *El arca de Noé*'s opening sequence. Courtesy of Jaibo Films: www.jaibofilms.com.

reviews from critics who expressed admiration for its "mezcla de humor y de dramatismo" (Dopazo 2017) and its "droll satire on the absurdities of the modern world" (Hart 2015). For some, however, the film's generic parameters have proven too elastic. While most critics admire its "gran poder evocador" (Anxo Fernández 2014), some express consternation at its languid pace and the lack of dialogue, which makes it difficult to understand what it is exactly that the protagonists have planned. All the same, minimal dialogue (only 10 percent of the film is scripted) and a circuitous plotline should not be mistaken for aimlessness, particularly considering the film's political point of departure. As Valero claims, the project's intention was to examine "qué pasaría si dentro de cinco años sigue gobernando el PP y Rajoy" (as quoted in "Adán Aliaga y David Valero" 2015).

Released in 2014 – though set in 2020 – the film's temporal setting mirrors its forward-looking gaze. With allusions to the biblical tale from which its title derives, the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591), H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (2011–2018), however, *El arca de Noé* signals multiple temporal dimensions. It also points to timeworn debates regarding the divide between the spiritual and material worlds, as scientific technology and sacred inspiration commingle along with references to physical illness and energy-based healing methods (Figure 2). The film's premise, despite appearances to the contrary, is relatively straightforward. Recently laid off from their job as security guards in a factory that has been sold to make way for an airport in San Vicente del Raspeig, Miguel (Miguel Chillón) and Paco (Fran Gomis) decide to craft a teleportation device to flee the crisis-ridden society they inhabit (Figure 3). Teaming up with Alicia (Alicia Santonja), they draft blueprints for the machine and later source its parts from a landfill. Paco and Miguel work in earnest to build the teleporter, which figures symbolically as the ark that will spirit the three away from the financial crisis of 2020.

Unsure that the teleporter will function properly, Miguel and Paco work with great determination, convinced that the only possibility of a better life lies elsewhere. They say goodbye to their loved ones, wives, children, lovers, family and friends, uncertain if they will survive teleportation. In the end, the machine does work, enabling all three to

Figure 2. Paco performs Quantum-Touch – a form of energy-based healing – on Miguel in *El arca de Noé*. Courtesy of Jaibo Films.

safely pass from their crisis-stricken reality to one that appears less adversely affected by financial privation. Paco quickly finds work as a mailman and meets an attractive love interest. A healthier-looking Alicia begins working in a supermarket that looks remarkably similar to the one where she was forced to shoplift to secure groceries in her previous life. Miguel finds gainful employment at a local garage and, like the others, appears content with the conditions of a seemingly ~~post~~crisis reality. In the film's closing twist, however, Miguel stumbles across the very parts – as well as the blueprint – that he and Paco used to build the teleporter. Sitting on his terrace in the final sequence (Figure 4), Miguel tries to make sense of the document while listening to a news report about a neighboring nation-state that is still suffering from the economic downturn. As the broadcaster states, the crisis lies elsewhere – somewhere outside of Spain – and while the adjacent country seems to think that the crisis will penetrate the Spanish border, financial

Figure 3. Teleportation machine in *El arca de Noé*. Courtesy of Jaibo Films.

Figure 4. Miguel sifts through the wreckage of the now defunct teleporter in *El arca de Noé*'s final sequence. Courtesy of Jaibo Films.

reports from within seem to forecast otherwise. The message, projected loud and clear in the film's conclusion, is that the crisis is always happening somewhere. The problem is not that the lateral jump made by Paco, Miguel and Alicia has been a failure as such, but the fact that they have only momentarily evaded the hardships of an economic system built on booms and busts. Escaping their own reality instead of revolutionizing it, as alluded to in the film's opening sequence, the three protagonists are left to ruminate on the "fatal flaw inscribed into the structure" of capitalism while pushing audiences to contemplate how elusive a radical break with this system remains (Žižek 2008, 279).

Staging insecurity in *El plan*

Polo Menárguez's *El plan* casts a brooding glance at life in contemporary Spain, centering on the lives of three unemployed security guards whose "plan" is to meet one weekday morning for a mysterious activity. Ambiguity surrounding their plan is central to the plot's development and the tension continues to mount over the film's seventy-six-minute running time. Pablo Martín-Caminero's off-kilter score – composed solely with manipulated sounds from a double bass – looms from the outset, foreshadowing a jarring reflection on masculinity, family values, job (in)security and the sense of unremitting loss circulating throughout contemporary Spanish society. Alternating between listlessness and feverish suspense, Menárguez's film interrogates modes of coming undone, and as the titular plan falls apart so too does the world of the three male protagonists. As Ramón (Chema del Barco), Andrade (Raúl Arévalo) and Paco (Antonio de la Torre) quarrel over the dissolution of various attachments to the social order, the conceptual anchors that once held their reality in place vanish before our eyes. The film's title, thus, intentionally misdirects the audience's attention, leading viewers to wonder what is happening, as well as what is going on with the male leads whose "plan" is repeatedly interrupted, delayed and ultimately foiled.

The opening sequence – framed by an overhead shot of Ramón, the presumptive voice of reason – further shapes spectators' expectations through a series of open-ended

questions. Via extradiegetic voiceover, Ramón queries the connection between "el centro de operaciones intelectuales" and the emotional processing of reality, alluding to the various "misterios de la mente que todavía están ocultos". Uncertainty takes center stage in the early phase of *El plan*, as Ramón states that "no siempre hay respuestas" for the problems at the core of the social order. Menárguez deploys a succession of close-up shots, from extreme to medium, as viewers watch Ramón shower and get dressed. He puts on various elements of his security guard uniform before taking a long look at himself in the mirror and directing his attention to the audience (Figure 5). "¿Vosotros os hacéis preguntas … o no?" he asks pointedly, as his gaze meets the camera's head-on in a clash that reflects the film's aim to grapple with spectatorial self-awareness. In a world where subjects lack agency on personal and professional fronts, Ramón's performative introspection prods audiences to (re)consider the relationship between work and identity, recalling landmark unemployment films from an earlier generation of European directors (Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty*, 1997; Laurent Cantet's *Ressources humaines*, 1999; and Fernando León de Aranoa's *Los lunes al sol*, 2002).

In spite of its ideological alignment with these works, reviewers have reached little consensus regarding the generic parameters of Menárguez's film. Adapted from Ignasi Vidal's 2015 play, staged in Madrid's Pensión de las Pulgas, *El plan* has been labeled with a range of conflicting descriptors. Critics have deemed it "drama social" (Pando 2020), "teatro del absurdo" (Pinilla 2020) and "amarga tragicomedia" (Díaz 2020). Critical uncertainty regarding genre, however, is perhaps most succinctly expressed in Javier Ocaña's review, which classifies *El plan* as both "una comedia negrísima" and "[una] cruenta tragedia contemporánea" (2020). While the inconsistent application of generic labels evinces a spectrum of filmic experimentation, what is crucial here is the distortion of filmic form to articulate the experience of everyday life in the context of ongoing crisis. Discordant responses merely reflect the ways in which *El plan* dismantles "good life" fantasies in contemporary Spain. As the societal landscape continues shifting beneath the feet of the three protagonists, filmic form mirrors their "flailing" as it transpires in real time. Such flailing, as Berlant has argued elsewhere with Lee Edelman, reflects the desire for "something other than what is" as well as a concern for the "lack of imagination and trust in the patience and inventiveness of others" to stimulate change in the present (2014, 110).

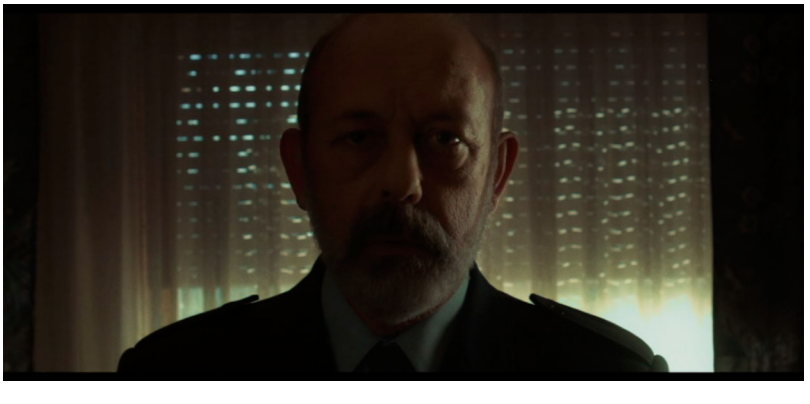

Figure 5. Ramón – dressed in his security guard uniform – stares at himself in the mirror in *El plan*. Courtesy of Capitán Araña: www.capitanarana.com.

Just as the titular "plan" dissolves time and time again, a heartrending discussion on precarious employment, societal victimization and the gutting of the middle class comes to the fore. "¿Tú te has preguntado alguna vez por qué estamos en paro?" Ramón asks Paco before querying if a subconscious rejection of work is the reason they lost their jobs as security guards (Figure 6). "El victimismo nos da una identidad", Ramón posits, claiming that all three men find comfort in "nuestro rol como maltratados por el capital". Paco – the hothead of the group – immediately rejects Ramón's explanation, however, recalling a conversation with human resources in which he is told "la única manera de evitar despidos es una progresiva bajada a los salarios". Paco, in response to Ramón's queries, attacks management's "plan", which assured continued employment despite only paying him and his colleagues "unos novecientos euros de mierda" per month "hasta que nos dispidieron a todos". As the protagonists struggle to leave Paco's home due to transportation problems, traces of Luis Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (1962) materialize, and the three protagonists remain immobilized within a setting that points to a class in ruins. In the case of *El plan*, however, the social category in question is the working class and not the ruling elite, and the dull brown and gray hues saturating the mise-en-scène reinforce the sense of decay that the film unsparingly scrutinizes.

Over the next hour, the three men disclose a number of shocking revelations while commiserating with one another about the hardships they face on public benefits. As tensions escalate, they debate, they fight, they laugh, they cry and ultimately embrace, finding solidarity in their collective dishevelment. Andrade – a resigned and long-suffering stoner – explains that he has just been approached by the mother who abandoned him when he was eight years old. Paco is forced to admit that he is destitute, impotent and that his wife, Laura, is having an extramarital affair with a mutual friend. Ramón, in the film's most stunning moment, confesses that earlier the same morning he brutally killed his wife, Manoli, (and most likely his own children) after she treated him with a mixture of pity and disdain. Ramón, who manages to psychically suppress the murder after leaving home, begins to unravel while acknowledging that he is little more than "un perdedor" who cannot find a new job after twenty-plus years of employment as a security guard. Undone by what he describes as a "fallo del sistema límbico", or a malfunction in emotional processing due to feeling overwhelmed, Ramón steals a revolver from

Figure 6. Ramón and Paco discuss unemployment and "victimismo" in *El plan*. Courtesy of Capitán Araña.

Figure 7. Ramón contemplates suicide in *El plan*. Courtesy of Capitán Araña.

Figure 8. *El plan*'s thwarted "plan". Courtesy of Capitán Araña.

Paco's safe and threatens suicide, pleading with his friends to bury him in his work uniform (Figure 7). The titular plan, as it turns out, merely involved a competitive game of soccer with former colleagues, although within the film it functions as a ruse to make audiences wonder if the three men are capable of carrying out some type of illicit activity to remedy their situation (Figure 8). In the end, as the police pound on the door to arrest Ramón, the screen fades to black, leaving spectators to ponder if he is capable of killing himself after he and the others have so thoroughly interrogated their attachments to work, domestic life and familial bonds within the suffocating confines of Paco's home.

Conclusion: discarded blueprints, thwarted plans and elliptical life

Striving to think beyond the epistemological limits of the present, both *El arca de Noé* and *El plan* find themselves colliding with the immoveable force that is global capitalism. While the constraints of late capitalism may seem debilitating, these films suggest that Western political subjects can forge ahead by implementing a shift – if ever so slight – in what Jacques Rancière has described as "the distribution of the sensible" (2009, 25).

Reconfiguring communal perceptions of what is (il)legitimate and/or (un)viable in the world today,[7] these works reorient our understanding of "spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (Rancière 2009, 25). They break open the political not through the literal representation of revolution, public protest or governmental reform, but through the articulation of a restlessness that undermines the logic underpinning the social order. This sense of disquiet not only reveals the conditions imposed by neoliberalism, it surveys the foundations of the historical present as characters and filmic projects oscillate between spheres of indeterminacy and incompletion. At first glance, it might appear as if the imaginative powers exercised by the protagonists of these films – through teleportation (*El arca de Noé*) and ludic activity (*El plan*) – were the result of wide-eyed optimism or obtuse leftist fantasy. What we find upon closer inspection, however, is that the modes of evasion they practice are meant to be read *negatively* as tools for identifying the flaws at the core of Spanish society and not, as some might imagine, as treasure maps for discovering a utopia that may not even exist.

Neither film posits fantasies of collective emancipation in literal terms, and in both cases failure proves to be more instructive than success. What emerges in this particular category of crisis cinema, therefore, is not a mollifying strategy bent on reaffirming bourgeois values, but one that exposes the structural restrictions governing our imaginings in the present. Moreover, both works illuminate bourgeois art's concern with its own obsolescence, illustrating what Theodor Adorno characterized as its "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world" (1997, 104). Here filmic subjects move back and forth – within the interstitial spaces of ellipsis – while grappling with their own (in)capacity to stimulate political action even as the cinematic texts in which they appear simultaneously contend with "bourgeois art's increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action" (Ngai 2005, 3). Both films remind viewers that the structures propping up collective perceptions of reality are never fixed and, more crucially, that the battle to explode the organizing logic of political modernity is an ongoing struggle. *El arca de Noé* and *El plan*, in many ways, operate as the cinematic equivalent of a self-destructing message. Nevertheless, the malfunctions they underscore have less to do with a "failure of imagination" than they do with "the result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (Jameson 1982, 153).

Elliptical life, as exhibited by the two films discussed here, signals experimental strategies for "giving out, not giving up" in times of crisis even as protagonists share experiences akin to propping up a world in ruins (Berlant 2015). Protagonists "flail" in amorphous filmic genres that have not yet been named, underscoring their desire to incite societal change as well as an inability to find the language or the tools to do so. The dissolution of affective and societal infrastructures in both works, while initially destabilizing, opens up scenes of activity as characters discuss collective aims, test out tentative strategies and design plans or blueprints for surviving the crisis-ridden present. For these former security guards, left to wrestle with a newfound ambivalence toward the capital they once protected, expulsion from the workplace invokes new ways of doing politics in the present. The films in which they appear disturb audiences through form and content alike, reimagining the contours of everyday life in Spain by gesturing toward the need for collective struggle. As the organizing principles that governed their understanding of the world fall away, protagonists recognize the sovereignty they believed they

once possessed to be little more than "a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state" (Berlant 2011, 97). As a result, both *El arca de Noé* and *El plan* challenge audiences to question their own attachments to a world in perpetual crisis and, in the process, to understand their own passivity in relation to the very structures that render them (in)capable of producing change.

Notes

1. Hartog evokes the image of "a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of the unending now" (2015, xv).
2. Fantasies linked to "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy" embody neoliberal subjects' perception of "the good life" (Berlant 2011, 3).
3. I reject ~~*post*~~*crisis* as a descriptor for the period of supposed economic, cultural and political recovery that took place in Spain from late 2014 onward. Despite former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's proclamation in December 2014 that "la crisis ya es historia" (as quoted in Cué 2014), statistics tracking unemployment, short-term employment contracts and national debt reveal the persistence of crisis in Spain – even before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020.
4. Unlike Stéphane Brizé's *Le loi du marché* (2015), whose jobless protagonist finds work as a supermarket security guard, the leads in *El arca de Noé* and *El plan* manage – if only momentarily – to query neoliberal logic when forced outside of the marketplace.
5. Genre, for Berlant, refers not only to artistic form, but also to the cluster of expectations that subjects have with regard to their place in the world, constituting "an emotionally patterned set of expectations about how to act and how to interpret" the events (re)shaping the world today (Duschinsky and Wilson 2015, 179).
6. Martín-Estudillo refers to a group of films that deploy an "entramado visual que explota y consume como forma de entretenimiento la exhibición de las nuevas formas de miseria en las que se sostiene y que reproduce el neoliberalismo" (2017, 196).
7. For Rancière, "politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals" (2009, 25).

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