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## Cinema at the edges of the European Union

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## 14

CINEMA AT THE EDGES OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION

## New dynamics in the South and the East

*Lydia Papadimitriou***Introduction**

The late 2000s saw the European Union face a significant financial crisis, unprecedented in its history. Almost a decade after the introduction of the single currency in January 2002, a debt crisis hit the Eurozone, leading to financial recession, fiscal austerity, social upheaval and political tensions, especially in the most indebted countries. Often referred to by Anglophone media in the early 2010s with the derogatory acronym PIGS, these countries—with the ambivalent exception of the “I” that could equally stand for Ireland—all belonged to European South: Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain. An implicit internal border between the ostensibly diligent and thrifty North and the lazy and profligate South surfaced, reproducing deeply entrenched stereotypes.

Despite the official emphasis on unification, cultural proximity, free movement of people and the gradual dissolution of boundaries, real and symbolic hierarchies have persisted within the EU. Aside from a North–South divide, distinctions between Western and Eastern Europe also remain. While the EU’s enlargement has increasingly brought into the fold a number of countries from the ex-communist bloc, economic and other discrepancies among citizens and states have endured. The UK’s referendum vote in June 2016 to exit the EU was largely motivated by such discrepancies, translated into the fear of an intensified influx of economic migrants. The uneven and, until such developments concealed, dynamic between centre and periphery within the EU, is still present (Imre 2012: 6–7).

Tensions have also been evident around the EU’s Eastern external edges too. In 2013, geopolitical considerations led to clashes in the Ukraine, an ex-Soviet republic internally divided between pro-Europeans and pro-Russians. In a series of localised conflicts reminiscent of Cold War tensions, the southeastern region of the Crimea fell into war, thus raising fears of a further escalation of violence in close proximity to the EU. More recently, since 2015, over a million refugees from Syria and other warring regions of the Middle East have been crossing the Mediterranean to reach European lands. This refugee crisis has drawn attention to the permeability of Europe’s external borders, rekindling a number of questions about European values and reinforcing divisions and distinctions within Europe that led—among other things—to the UK’s Brexit vote. The countries of the European South and East have become passageways for the more prosperous, desirable and increasingly out-of-bounds Central and Western Europe.

The above indication of points of tension within—and beyond—the EU suggests some of the different ways in which the edges of the Union can be conceptualised (Cooper 2015). This chapter aims to throw light on recent developments in the cinemas of geographical regions that could be considered as the (internal) edges of the EU. It will focus on the financially troubled South of Europe (mainly Greece), and it will also introduce the cinemas of the most recent entries in the EU, all of which used to belong to the Eastern Bloc: Bulgaria (joined in 2007), Romania (2007) and Croatia (2013). As all these countries, including Greece, are known to belong to the Balkans, this chapter will also explore the concept of Balkan cinema and argue for its potential in empowering these peripheral cinemas. The chapter takes its cue from an intellectual drive that emerged in the 2000s to discover and validate the marginal, the small, and the peripheral in world cinema (Hjort 2005; Iordanova *et al.* 2010; Giukin *et al.* 2014). Drawing attention to films and cinematic traditions that are often overlooked challenges entrenched hierarchies in Film Studies—and beyond. In exploring recent cinematic developments in the chosen national and transnational contexts, the chapter will also engage with the, sometimes contested, role of European institutions in fostering and promoting its small cinemas. It will focus both on aspects of production and financing, as well as distribution and exhibition that enable the circulation of such films—including film festivals.

### **Cinema in Greece and the European South since the crisis**

In an article on the cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain, Kourelou, Liz and Vidal (2014) compare developments in the respective countries of their focus and highlight structural similarities among them. They stress that, while financial unsustainability and extensive reliance on state funding has placed these cinemas in a chronic condition of crisis, the significant reduction of national public subsidies for cinema since 2010 led to a creative resurgence among filmmakers and to the adoption of more collaborative, independent, and non-profit based modes of production. While celebrating this creativity-under-duress, the authors also highlight that it has encouraged filmmakers to turn outwards and seek more “opportunities for internationalization” (2014: 147). These, crucially, include the role of film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, San Sebastian, Karlovy-Vary) in opening paths for circulation and recognition, but also in enabling networking and facilitating co-productions.

As the authors indicate, all three of these national cinemas have enjoyed increased international visibility in the years since the crisis. This has been fostered by a combination of media-triggered interest in the countries, together with a refreshed and distinctive cinematic output, in addition to the supportive role of the international film festival system. However, despite such structural similarities the three national cinemas have rarely been considered in comparative terms. This is partly because, in practice, there has been relatively little overlap between their cinemas in terms of actual filmmaking collaborations or stylistic similarities. While noting the presence of certain parallels in the recent cinematic development of countries of the European South, I will now focus on Greek cinema, as a particular instance of a “small cinema” that has indirectly benefited from the crisis in terms of both output and visibility, and grown to occupy a more prominent position within discourses of European and world cinema. Focusing mainly on the work of the director Yorgos Lanthimos, which has reached significant international prominence and critical acclaim during these years, I will explore the dynamic between the national and the transnational, as well as that between centre and periphery—or, to put it otherwise, the European core and its edges.

As I have argued elsewhere (Papadimitriou 2014a), 2009 represents a nodal point for contemporary Greek cinema, mainly because of the release of Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Kynodontas*

(Dogtooth, 2011, Greece). The film premiered at Cannes, was shown in, and received awards from, many more festivals, and, most significantly, for the first time since 1977, it represented Greece at the Oscars with a nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. While *Dogtooth* brought Greek cinema to the attention of the festival circuit, the deepening of the crisis and the increased international media coverage instigated further interest in the film and, to a certain extent, in Greek cinema more broadly. An influential article in *The Guardian* explored the “weird wave of Greek cinema”, and asked whether the “brilliantly strange” films of Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari are “a product of Greece’s economic turmoil” (Rose 2011). Despite quoting the two filmmakers’ scepticism regarding the existence of such a wave, the article suggested causality between the “troubled country” and the “inexplicably strange” films that had recently emerged from Greece—while also acknowledging the existence of a number of Greek films that do not quite fit that label.

The term “weird wave” has since often been challenged for being inappropriate and intrinsically negative; however, its suggestiveness has led it to dominate academic and critical discussions of recent Greek cinema and helped create value from a cinema that historically has had limited international presence. Indeed, the main two internationally known directors of Greek cinema in the past were Mihalis Cacoyannis (1921–2011) and Theo Angelopoulos (1935–2012). Cacoyannis helped define a particular exotic image of Greekness, associated with uninhibited emotional and libidinal expression (*Stella*, 1955, Greece; *Zorba the Greek*, 1965, USA/Greece), while also tapping into established Greek cultural capital through his adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies (*Electra*, 1962, Greece; *Iphigenia*, 1977, Greece). It is worth noting that the film that established his international reputation was *Zorba the Greek*, an American, rather than a Greek, production (20th Century Fox) with a transnational cast (Anthony Quinn, Alan Bates), and spoken in English. A few years later, Angelopoulos challenged the tourist image of the country by focusing on the “other Greece” of grey skies, abandoned mountain villages, and political post-war divisions, while also making extensive, albeit more indirect, use of Greek myths (*Anaparastasi*, Reconstruction, 1970, Greece; *O Thiasos*, The Travelling Players, 1975, Greece; *To Vlemma tou Odyssea*, Ulysses’ Gaze, 1995 Greece/France/Italy/Germany/UK/Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Bosnia and Herzegovina/Albania/Romania). Like Cacoyannis, he developed transnational collaborations, evident mainly in the international cast of his later films (Harvey Keitel in *Ulysses’ Gaze*, 1995; Bruno Ganz in *Mia aioniotita kai mia mera*, Eternity and a Day, 1998, Greece/France/Germany/Italy), and the extensive use of European funding and co-production opportunities.

The international breakthrough of *Dogtooth* in 2009 introduced a new Greek director as well as a new brand for Greek cinema—the “weird wave”—while, as noted above, the release of the film at the outset of the crisis made it easier to render it emblematic of a broader cinematic turning point for the nation. However, aside from the fact that *Dogtooth* was not a product of the *financial* crisis in Greece—although its subject matter and form can and have been plausibly connected to the country’s political, social and even moral crises—it is highly questionable whether Lanthimos will continue to represent *Greek* cinema. This is both because he has distanced himself from the crisis-ridden Greek context and relocated to London, pursuing an international career; but also because even his Greek-language films (including *Dogtooth*) intentionally repress signs of Greekness and utilise instead an allegorical and oblique storytelling style with widely recognised, rather than culturally specific, references and archetypal conflicts. We have, in other words, the case of a transnational filmmaker who moved from the edges to the centre in search of financial opportunities, better working conditions, and a broader audience; but who, also, in the process of this move has detached himself from the association with a (peripheral) national cinema.

It is interesting to note how, unlike other directors whose formative years took place outside Greece (for example, Cacoyannis and Angelopoulos studied in London and in Paris respectively), Lanthimos was originally a “home-grown” filmmaker. His film education took place at the Stavrakos School in Athens (the only film school in Greece at the time) while during most of the 1990s and 2000s he worked extensively for the then flourishing audio-visual sector in Greece, shooting commercials, music videos and shorts, as well as his first independently produced feature, *Kinetta* (2005, Greece). With a strong reputation as a gifted director in the Greek media industry, and with the modest but significant festival success of his first feature, Lanthimos was able to secure enough public and private funding from within Greece to make *Dogtooth* (Papadimitriou, 2014b). This was just before the financial crisis. By the time of his third feature, *Alps* (2011, Greece), state funding (from the Greek Film Centre and the Greek State Television) was limited, and private financing even more restricted, so despite the success of his previous film, financially he struggled to complete it.

At this point, faced with the option to remain in a country in crisis or relocate, Lanthimos chose the latter and moved to London, from where he sought financing for his fourth feature film (and the third co-scripted with Efthymis Filippou). Shot in Ireland, with a budget that was twenty times larger than before, *The Lobster* (2015) is an English language, internationally cast, Irish, British, Greek, French, and Dutch co-production that received the Jury Prize at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival and has since then been widely distributed as an arthouse film. Firmly established by this stage as a director with international credentials, for his next project he has been able to secure “one of the most sought-after projects in the marketplace” (Jaafar 2015), a project developed by Film4 and the British Film Institute, *The Favourite*. A more mainstream project, the film is a costume drama set in eighteenth-century Britain, with no Greek involvement aside from Lanthimos’ own. At the same time, Lanthimos has been developing another international co-production scripted by Efthymis Filippou, *The Killing of a Sacred Cow*, suggesting a desire to maintain the semi-absurdist and distinctively stylised brand identity of the films that emerged from this collaboration. Lanthimos’ Greekness, however, is becoming increasingly less prominent.

The above discussion shows, first, that for cinema from the edges to circulate more widely, it needs to be validated through institutions and pathways that involve the centre: major film festivals, international stars, and powerful distributors. However, while this process takes place, the centre attracts and assimilates selected aspects of the edge: key talent relocates to the international and European metropolises to access more opportunities, while particular brands of national cinema—such as the Greek Weird Wave—matter mainly in the context of international art cinema promotion and circulation. In many ways this reflects the process of globalisation which, while open to fluidity, mobility, and the disruption of certain hierarchies, ultimately reinforces the centre and its interests—even if the centre is, arguably, partly transformed in the process.

Before concluding my discussion of Greek cinema as a peripheral European cinema, I would like to return briefly to a national frame of reference and throw some light on the production and reception of Greek films in Greece. I will demonstrate that, while overall film production has increased since the crisis, the pattern of reception of national films is strongly underscored by a popular/art dichotomy. I will then highlight the role of European institutions in supporting small and/or peripheral national cinemas in Europe.

Paradoxically, the total number of films made in Greece in the years since the crisis has increased: while 27 films were produced in 2010, data from the Greek Film Centre indicate a notable increase to 40 in 2013 and 46 in 2014. Of these films, however, only a small number has been released theatrically, and only a handful of these had a significant box office presence.

The most commercially successful Greek films in this period have been the two films by writer, director and star Christophoros Papakaliatis' *An . . .* (What If . . . , 2012, Greece) and *Enas Allos Kosmos* (Another World, 2015, Greece). Employing multi-stranded narratives that refer to the crisis but also elements of genre, Papakaliatis' films attract audiences with their combination of high-production values, star appeal, and an honest, if at times didactic, address. Another notable box office success has been *Mikra Anglia* (Little England, 2013, Greece), veteran director Pandelis Voulgaris' tale of a doomed romantic triangle set on the island of Andros in the early parts of the twentieth century. Apart from a few exceptions, the vast majority of commercially successful Greek films in this period (just like before) have been quickly produced comedies, often capitalising on television stars and reproducing well-worn popular scenarios.

As the above examples suggest, international acclaim and festival awards for Greek films do not necessarily translate into domestic box office success, even though they certainly contribute towards the films' visibility. Indeed, the films that make it to the larger festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice) tend to reach the top ten of Greek films released domestically. For example, Yannis Economides' physically and verbally violent *noir* set in crisis Athens, *Stratos* (2014, Greece/Germany/Cyprus) and camp melodramatic road movie about two half-Greek brothers, Panos H. Koutras' *Xenia* (2014, Greece/France/Belgium) were ranked fifth and sixth respectively in the Greek box office for Greek films. This nonetheless translated to roughly 16,000 and 15,000 admissions for each, and therefore not numbers that can guarantee financial sustainability in commercial terms. Such non-correspondence of critical and commercial success is not unique to Greek cinema, and is due to the limited audience appeal of films with challenging or "feel bad" topics, little—if any—use of genre, and self-conscious aesthetics, as opposed to more generically mainstream, melodramatic or comedic entertainment-orientated films. Despite its national and international notoriety, *Dogtooth*, for example, had around 40,000 admissions on its initial theatrical release in 2009—while Papakaliatis' popular *What If . . .* attracted over 450,000 people three years later.

Small countries with a language not widely spoken outside their national boundaries, and therefore with a disadvantage for exportability, face particular challenges in sustaining their cinematic production: their national market is limited and they often encounter fierce competition from better capitalised (mostly American) films. Partly in response to this problem, after the Second World War a number of Western European countries set up national funding bodies to support national production (and often its promotion to international festivals too), especially for films deemed culturally significant. By the late 1980s European institutions followed suit: Eurimages, the Council of Europe's support fund for European cinema, was established in 1988. Its aims are both cultural and industrial: to support (mainly through co-productions) films that promote European values while also fostering cross-European co-operation among professionals and aiming to broaden the audience basis of European films (Jackel 2003: 76–80). Eurimages is open to all 47 members of the Council of Europe, and it also accepts associate members (Eurimages 2016). Participation is optional and requires annual contributions—the UK, for example, joined in 1993 and withdrew in 1996 (Ibid.: 76–77). While offering benefits to larger members, the fund has been especially supportive of smaller and peripheral participating countries. According to Melis Behlil, Eurimages has significantly helped Turkey boost the international visibility of New Turkish Cinema, while also strengthening creative collaborations and co-productions, not least among its geographical neighbours—in this case Greece (Behlil 2012: 512–513).

In contrast to Eurimages, the MEDIA programme, established in 1987, is open to members of the EU and the European Economic Area (Creative Europe 2016). In its current incarnation (2014–2020) as a sub-programme of Creative Europe its primary orientation is economic



rather than cultural, aiming to enhance the “EU’s competitive position in international trade” (Schlesinger 2015: 10). The limited resources (especially of Eurimages) and the separation of support for production and distribution, are among the criticisms expressed about these programmes (Iordanova 2002; Jackel 2003: 79–80). Overall, however, it is widely accepted that they have played a significant role in supporting cinemas from the European periphery and particularly, in “reinvigorate[ing] media production in the former Socialist states” (Imre 2012: 5).

### **European enlargement and the Balkans: Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia**

The radical geopolitical transformations brought about by the end of the Cold War resulted in the EU’s enlargement. The reunification of Germany in 1990 led to the immediate integration in the European Community of what had been East Germany, while 2004 saw a significant enlargement of the—by then renamed—EU to include ten new countries, eight of which had been part of the Soviet Bloc. Three years later, in 2007, Romania and Bulgaria joined, marking an eastward expansion of the Union. Croatia followed in 2013, becoming the second ex-Yugoslav country to become a full EU member.

Aside from their post-socialist past, the three most recent entries also share a different common identity: they all belong to the Balkans. A term laden with negative connotations of fragmentation, poverty and violence, its literal meaning refers to the geographical space that covers the territories of Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, the former Yugoslavia, but also Greece and (the Westernmost part of) Turkey. As Iordanova (2006: 1) has argued, despite appearing to be a project of “connecting a disconnected space”, a regional approach to the cinema of the Balkans is very rewarding, as it brings to the surface an “astonishing thematic and stylistic consistency” among films produced in different national contexts. The 1990s wars of secession in the former Yugoslavia brought the attention of the international media to the area, and reinforced entrenched prejudices; but it also triggered a wave of creative work and scholarship on the topic, including foundational writings on Balkan cinema (Iordanova 2001). The restoration of peace and the entry of Balkan countries into the EU has changed the internal dynamics of the region and opened up opportunities for regional cultural redefinitions. Although the new challenges brought about by the recent waves of migration from further East risk further marginalising the Balkans in the context of Europe, a regional approach can both help revise perceptions and strengthen actual collaborative practices.

The disconnectedness of the Balkans has been evident in the past in the various political, religious and linguistic barriers that have hindered the circulation of the cinemas from this region across neighbouring countries. Save from the films that broke through to the West (or that circulated within the socialist bloc), cinemas in these countries developed and circulated predominantly within a national framework. During the 1990s the films from this region that gained prominence in the West generally concerned the crisis in Yugoslavia. At the height of the Bosnian war, in 1995, the two top winners of the Cannes Film Festival were Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/France/Germany/Bulgaria/Czech Republic/Hungary), a carnivalesque recounting of the history of Yugoslavia, and Theo Angelopoulos’ *Ulysses’ Gaze*, a Homeric Balkan road-movie concluding in Sarajevo. Other notable films from this period include Micho Manevski’s *Before the Rain* (1994, Republic of Macedonia/France/UK), Srdjan Dragojevic’s *Lepa sela lepo gore* (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame, 1996, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Goran Paskaljevic’s *Bure baruta* (Cabaret Balkan, 1999, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Republic of Macedonia/France/Greece/Turkey)—all dealing with the consequences of ethnic tensions in the former Yugoslavia.

With the conclusion of the wars, attention to the region as a whole waned while the emphasis shifted towards the process of integrating these countries within the EU. This also had an impact on cinema, as funding from Europe became increasingly available to filmmakers, while the festival circuit opened paths for some directors and offered visibility to their national cinema. In the rest of this chapter I will briefly discuss recent developments in the cinemas of Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, while also highlighting the extent of their trans-nationalisation both within the region and across Europe. I will place emphasis on the most prominent expressions of their cinemas, and situate them in the context of their national and international reception.

Of the three, Romanian cinema stood out in the 2000s, mainly through the emergence and wide acclaim of what became known as the Romanian New Wave (Nasta 2013: 139–200). The term refers to a group of films made by a generation of filmmakers who started working in the post-communist period and made films that conveyed in a suggestive and original way the experiences of the transition period, while also throwing new light to the Ceaușescu era. The films are characterised by a minimalist realist aesthetic: they focus on the everyday, they use understated acting, few if any narrative ellipses, long takes, tableau-like compositions, near-static shots, no extra-diegetic music score and—at times—dry humour (157). The three directors that best represent this aesthetic are Cristi Puiu (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, The Death of Mr Lazarescu, 2005, Romania), Corneliu Porumboiu (*A fost sau n-a fost?*, 12:08 East of Bucharest, 2006, Romania) and Cristian Mungiu (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days, 2007, Romania/Belgium). All three won awards at the Cannes Film Festival, with Mungiu becoming the first Romanian Palme d'Or winner. A dark tragi-comedy about a dying man caught in a highly dysfunctional hospital system (*Lazarescu*); a dry satire about whether the revolution of 1989 started in a small provincial town or not (*East of Bucharest*); and an exploration of sexual exploitation and body commodification through the problem of illegal abortions during the Ceaușescu era (*4 months*)—all three films portrayed aspects of the recent past or of contemporary life in Romania in a fresh and subtle manner that attracted the interest of Western cinephile audiences, and launched critical writings about the Romanian New Wave (Nasta 2013).

Despite representing a break from previous cinematic approaches, such as Lucian Pintilie's more symbolic and obliquely expressive films (e.g. *Balanta*, The Oak, 1992, France/Romania), these films did not develop in a vacuum. Mircea Daneliuc, for example, had already employed a semi-documentary style in his work, often weaved with a degree of self-reflexivity (*Proba de microfon*, Microphone Test, 1980, Romania). That the new directors developed a pared-down cinematic language to convey their experience of a country in post-socialist transition (that also stylistically matched the limited financial resources available) helped identify them as a critical mass and facilitated the international circulation of their films. The films benefitted from a revamped system of state funding in 2003, and a number of them also managed to attract European funds (for example, *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* received support from the Hubert Bals Fund of the Rotterdam Film Festival). Despite critical acclaim, the films, however, were not box office successes in their native Romania, as audiences tend to prefer escapist (and mostly American) fare. It is worth noting, though, that the international success of *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* triggered inventive initiatives for parallel showings outside the commercial exhibition circuit, such as, for example, travelling screenings around the country (Nasta 2013: 198).

Like most Eastern European countries, during communism Romania had a significant studio infrastructure, as all film production was state funded. Referred to as the Balkan *Cinecittà*, during the 1960s the Buftea Studios hosted many European co-productions, mainly with France and Italy (Ibid.: 233). As the regime became more isolationist the studios were closed to Western productions, but, just like elsewhere in post-socialist Eastern Europe, they were later bought



and renovated by Western private multinational companies. Acquired by Romanian-American Castel Films, the old Buftea studios were revamped and are now among the largest sound studios in Europe, attracting Western productions once more (Imre 2012: 2–3; Nasta 2013: 233). This offers economic benefits to the country, as it keeps the local workforce employed and skilled, but it does not necessarily lead to a strengthening of national film production or to opportunities for above-the-line personnel (such as screenwriters, directors, actors).

Aside from the similar acquisition of the Boyana studios in Bulgaria by an American company specialising in action films (Iordanova 2008: 11), other parallels also emerge between the two countries, such as the privatisation of the state-owned cinemas and the rise of the multiplexes. In Bulgaria, the attempt to attract audiences in refurbished single screen cinemas failed, and by the mid-2000s most of these closed, often leaving small cities without a cinema (Bulgarian Cinema 2014: 31–34). In contrast, the new multiplexes located in shopping malls thrived, boosting overall cinema attendance in the country, which, in 2013, reached record-breaking numbers (Ibid.: 23–25). Here, as elsewhere, the tendency has been for few big-budget, mostly American, titles to attract the largest audiences; however, interestingly, in the early 2010s a few Bulgarian commercial titles became runaway hits, reaching the top of the box office in the country.

On top of this list is *Mission London* (2010, Bulgaria/UK/Hungary/Republic of Macedonia/Sweden, Dimitar Mitovski), the third highest grossing film in Bulgaria since 1998 with 375,000 admissions—preceded only by James Cameron’s global hits *Avatar* (2009, USA) and *Titanic* (1998, USA) (Ibid.: 28). A farcical comedy set in London, the film focuses on the semi-absurd series of events triggered by the decision of the Bulgarian president’s wife to host an important reception in the British capital on the occasion of the country’s entry into the EU. The film relies on national stereotypes, self-critically portraying the Bulgarians as brutish, but also the British as naïve and the Russians as mafiosi. Underlining the new European and cosmopolitan orientation of the country, it also suggests that “if everyone is flawed, then Bulgaria can easily become part of the dysfunctional European family” (Nedyalkova 2015: 118). Through its use of satire, parody and slapstick, and genre elements of romance and crime, *Mission London* released anxieties and fantasies experienced by the country’s desired Europeanisation.

Since the early 2000s, the prospect of Bulgaria’s entry in the EU led to the requirement that state supported films display a European orientation. The 2003 Film Industry Act introduced as its top criterion for subsidising a film its “artistic potential within the context of European cultural diversity”, demonstrating a desire to “overcome the small national inferiority complex, cultural and business isolationism” that characterised aspects of national culture in the past (Ibid.: 99). This largely explains why, despite its commercial emphasis, *Mission London* received 35 per cent of its budget from a state subsidy. Despite being a European co-production with stakes from the UK, Hungary, Macedonia and Sweden, the film’s commercial appeal was almost exclusively among Bulgarians. Its domestic box office returns are estimated at 1.3 million euros, a figure that matches its estimated total budget. It is notable that the second largest domestic box office hit, *Love.net* (2011, Bulgaria, Ilian Djevelevkov), a Bulgarian version of *Love Actually* (2003, UK/USA/France, Richard Curtis), was also supported by the state; it received 66 per cent of its one million euro budget from state funds (Ibid.: 235).

Despite being controversial, the state’s policy to support films with commercial potential in the domestic market has brought some positive returns for the domestic industry (Ibid.: 104). At a different end of the market, the last decade saw a number of distinctive documentaries produced in Bulgaria—mostly by Agitprop. Often utilising humour to highlight eccentricities triggered by the post-socialist transition, the films have challenged previously established documentary practices in Bulgaria and appeal to a European sensibility, thus successfully attracting co-production funding and festival awards (Tuțui 2015: 218–221). Examples include Andrey Paounov’s *Georgi*

*i peperudite* (Georgi and the Butterflies, 2004, Bulgaria/Canada/Finland/Netherlands/Norway/UK/USA), an optimistic and playful portrait of a psychiatrist who dreams of having an eccentric farm for his patients; Boris Despodov's *Corridor#8* (2008, Bulgaria), a highly engaging absurdist series of vignettes around the development of a major road that would connect Bulgaria to some of its Balkan neighbours; and, more recently, *The Last Black Sea Pirates* (2013, Bulgaria, Svetoslav Stoyanov), that focuses on a group of ex-convicts and petty thieves on a tiny island off the Bulgarian coast and their attempts to fight the government while seeking a hidden treasure. The eccentric topics and exotic locations have helped attract attention to these films, but it is arguably the inventiveness and consistency of their cinematic approach that has placed Bulgaria in a leading position in the field of creative documentaries in the Balkans.

Bulgaria has recently seen a surge of first features directed by women, all gaining international attention. Maya Vitkova's *Viktorina* (2014, Bulgaria/Romania) is an exploration of the love-hate relationship of Bulgarians with their country, told through the symbolic tale of a girl born without a belly button in 1979. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2014 and triggered significant controversy when it was not selected to represent its country for the Oscars (Holdsworth 2014). Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov's *Urok* (The Lesson, 2014, Bulgaria/Greece) was awarded the Best New Directors' Award at its world premiere in San Sebastian later that year. A micro-budgeted co-production with Greece, the film suspensefully explores the moral dilemmas of a provincial schoolteacher who tries to teach a lesson to a thieving pupil. Svetla Tsotsorkova's *Jajda* (Thirst, 2015, Bulgaria), a sensuous and symbolic tale of an isolated family in rural Bulgaria disturbed by the arrival of two well diggers, also opened at San Sebastian and travelled the festival circuit to critical acclaim.

The challenges faced by other Eastern European countries in terms of their transition to a market economy were even more intense in the case of Croatia (and most of the other ex-Yugoslav countries), because of the war and the fragmentation of the socialist federal country. Structural change was particularly slow and until the introduction of a new law in 2007, funding processes depended on centralised state mechanisms (Kurelec 2012: 44–48). With a population of 4.5 million, Croatia is a very small national market, and relies extensively on co-productions with the other countries of the former Yugoslavia—a practice established during communism. Indicatively, of the 15 feature-length feature films produced in Croatia in 2015, ten were co-productions, of which seven involved other ex-Yugoslav countries (Croatian Audiovisual Centre 2016).

One of the few films produced exclusively with state funds from Croatian television and that managed to combine popularity at home with acclaim at international festivals is Vinko Brešan's 1996 comedy *Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku* (How the War Started on My Island, 1996, Croatia). The film presents the events that triggered the war on a Dalmatian island as a conflict between a fun loving Mediterranean culture and an oppressive central authority. It became a huge domestic box office hit, attracting an audience of 350,000 (about 8 per cent of the population), a number only surpassed by *Titanic*, and established Brešan as Croatia's most prominent director. Despite relying on comic stereotypes, the film humanises the main Serb antagonist, thus avoiding nationalistic simplifications and appealing to a political consensus (Pavičić 2012: 53). Brešan's more recent *Svecenikova Djeca* (The Priest's Children, 2013), a co-production between Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, takes on the sensitive topic of the Catholic Church, a very powerful institution in independent Croatia, and comically exposes its hypocritical stance on birth control.

The 1990s wars in Yugoslavia brought to the surface nationalism and religious intolerance, but the increasingly European orientation of the region reinforces cosmopolitanism, as well as a new Balkan regionalism. In films from the ex-Yugoslav countries, the traumas of the war are still

a recurrent topic, but there is an emphasis on finding ways forward. Dalibor Matanić's highly acclaimed *Zvizdan* (The High Sun, 2015) is a Croatian–Serbian–Slovenian co-production that portrays the absurdities, tragedies and dead-ends of inter-ethnic hatred through three interconnected love stories in which the same two actors play different couples across three decades somewhere near the Croatian/Serbian border. The weaving of the three stories and characters in a way that transcends personal and national identities stresses the interchangeability of victims and perpetrators, and sets foundations for new beginnings.

## Conclusion

The ongoing challenges facing Europe, most recently illustrated by the UK's vote to exit the EU, will inevitably lead to further redefinitions of the dynamic between centre and periphery, and shift both geographical and axiological boundaries. While European funding mechanisms (Eurimages, MEDIA) have already provided support for countries of the periphery, opportunities for a truly international career remain limited for those based far from the centre (as suggested by the case of Lanthimos). A new Balkan regionalism that would reinforce co-operation across the countries of South-Eastern Europe could help strengthen their marginal position, redefining the European project in more inclusive and polycentric ways, and enabling the region to project internationally. While national specificities may gradually erode in the context of globalisation, cinema can function as a means for further collaborations, across the local, the regional, the European—and beyond.

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