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## Who counts? The presence of women directors in Spanish independent cinema through a data analysis of film circulation (2013-2018)

**Abstract**

This article examines the presence of women filmmakers in Spanish independent cinema by assessing the national circulation of their works in the alternative distribution and exhibition circuit where gender studies are almost inexistent. Along with other neighboring countries, independent filmmaking enjoys a growing cultural weight within a national cinema conditioned by digitalization and the domination of multinational corporations in the aftershock of the economic crisis. The study, based on a representative sample to quantify female directors, carries out a cross-sectional examination in three areas within independent film circulation that, in turn, endow them with such status: festivals, specialized VOD platforms and independent film distribution companies with catalogs for release in traditional movie theaters or the cultural sector. The chosen timeframe is 2013-2018, from the moment independent cinema, branded as *other cinema*, achieves increased visibility, and establishes itself as an alternative to the commercial cinema in Spain up to the most recent year with available data. The research shows that, although there is a more significant proportion of female filmmakers than in commercial production, it continues to be a minority in the 20% range. Such underrepresentation does not only affect the cultural value of women's work but also raises questions on the nature of a type of independent film practices that lay claim to cultural diversity.

**Keywords**

**Gender gap, Spanish independent cinema, film circulation, alternative circuits, female filmmakers.**

### 1. Introduction

Who counts in Spanish independent cinema is not a trivial question, but rather a relevant issue allowing to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's place in contemporary filmmaking and to shed light on the opportunities and challenges, old and new, that they have to face in a national industry polarized and disrupted by digitalization and the effects of the economic crisis.

Feminist film research focused on institutional and economic conditions –a key area of inquiry addressing production, distribution, exhibition, and political frameworks (Kuhn, 1982)– keeps showing the marginal role played by female filmmakers. According to the European Women’s Audiovisual Network (EWA, 2016), which gathered data from seven countries throughout 2012-2013, the presence of female filmmakers varied between an outstanding 36.4% in Sweden<sup>1</sup> and more modest, and standard, figures like the 18% found in Austria. Spain was not included in this study, but the situation is significantly more dramatic than in other neighboring national industries. Between 2000 and 2006, only 10% of the feature films were directed by women (Arranz, 2010), while in the following decade (2007-2015), the figures follow a similar pattern: from the total amount of feature films produced, 11.62% of fiction works, 22.27% of documentaries, and 7.32% of animation films carried female authorship (Sholz, 2018). The latest reports available, prepared by the Asociación de Mujeres Cineastas y de Medios Audiovisuales (CIMA, Association of Women Filmmakers and from Audiovisual Media), show that in 2016 the percentage of female filmmakers reached 16%, while in 2017 it fell to 12% (Cuenca, 2017). In 2018, it was 14.3%, a percentage that increases to 16.9% when considering co-directed works (MCUD, 2019). So far this century, the number of films directed by women in Spain has only increased by 5%, which shows a distinct and ongoing gender gap in the film industry, particularly in directing roles.

These studies, however, only show a partial picture of the film sector, as they are based on data provided by the Instituto de Cinematografía y Artes Audiovisuales (ICAA, Film and Audio-visual Arts Institute), the cinema body of the Spanish Ministry of Culture, that cover the bulk of the annual production or, as in the case of CIMA, only focus on productions submitted for nomination to the Goya Awards, the honors given to the national output by the Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográfica (Spanish Film Academy). Thus, such research does not include and/or allow to single out the contemporary independent or non-commercial production that, following a global paradigm shift in film culture, has thrived over the last decade thanks to digitalization and finds its audience mainly in separate environments such as festivals, museums, cultural centers and digital platforms (Cerdán, 2014, 2015; Karelou, Liz & Vidal, 2014; Fernández Labayen & Oroz, 2015; Palacio & Ibañez, 2015; Cobo-Durán, Fernández & Hermida, 2016). This filmmaking approach has been labeled in different ways, like *new Spanish cinema*, *low-cost cinema* or *other cinema*, the latter being the most pervasive amongst critics, scholars, and official bodies. All those terms point to an innovative, low budget, and alternative model, as opposed to the commercial one.

This independent cinema has bourgeoned and gained traction because of the economic crisis and the ensuing recession in the national industry, highly dependent on public funds, at a time where the weakening of the State’s protectionist role has sparked intense debate. In Spain, the discourse around cinema as a good of cultural interest, which has favored legal protection for independent production, has remained current in this millennium, mainly throughout the Socialist Party term (2006-2011), although playing a residual role, in the face of a relentless media consolidation and private financing of the cultural industries, set in a transnational market of cultural content (Triana-Toribio, 2014). Throughout the Popular Party term (2011-2018), the pressure on the film industry increased, with austerity becoming the central axis that governed the course of action (Binimelis, Cerdán & Fernández Labayen, 2015). In 2012, when the rescue of Spanish banks was carried out, the economic recession caused a severe impact on the sector: public funds reduced by 35%, and the eleven existing lines of support limited to six, while the VAT on cultural industries increased from 8 to 21%, a measure that was maintained up to July 2018, when it was lowered down to 10%.

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish case is quite significant—the number of Swedish female filmmakers increased from 26% to 50% in just three years (2012-2015), thanks to the measures implemented by Anna Serner, head of the Swedish Film Institute, throughout that period.

In short, digitalization, economic crisis, and the weak role of the State, with a reduced intervention, together with the domination of media holdings, has driven to an uncertain and segregated situation. In 2011, Elsa Fernández Santos, a film critic from *El País*, made it abundantly clear, “Spanish cinema is undergoing one of its most critical transitions, increasingly polarized between large budget productions and an extremely low cost, almost home-made, cinema that tries to make its way on the fringe of the traditional commercial circuits” (2011). By the end of the decade, the concentration trend benefiting Hollywood studios (Pardo & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2012) is confirmed by the reports of the 2015–2018 three-year period: a small number of big-budget national features (65, 11.22 %) supported by the large media groups and distributed by majors, takes three-quarters of the domestic box office, while 500 independently distributed films compete for the 24% remaining audience (Lara, 2019, p. 300).

On the other side of this oligopolistic model, we find those “almost home-made” and “extremely low cost” films mentioned by Fernández-Santos, which are frequently produced for alternative circuits. An independent cinema with a growing status within the national filmmaking scene which has injected “a non-quantifiable dose of cultural capital into the ailing body of Spanish cinema” (Karelou, Liz & Vidal, 2014, p. 146). In their double condition of practices related to “residual” (Triana-Toribio, 2014) or “emerging” (Karelou, Liz & Vidal, 2014) cinematographic discourses, the *new other independent cinemas*, arising in Spain and other countries from the Eurozone severely affected by the economic crisis, have contributed to the prestige of their respective film industries thanks to their participation in renowned international festivals. They have also played a leading role in the media due to their innovative and risk-taking nature while fostering the articulation of somewhat formal communities<sup>2</sup> (Karelou, Liz & Vidal, 2014; Palacio & Ibañez, 2015).

Hence, studying the presence of women in independent cinema, especially in their role as directors, is of utmost importance. Firstly, this perspective allows supplementing the reports on commercial production mentioned above. Secondly, it will facilitate a more in-depth scrutiny of the degree up to which the independent scene is more likely to embrace female participation, as pointed out by several quantitative studies carried out within Spain and on an international scale, which will be covered further on. Thirdly, and lastly, focusing on the circulation of films enables the discussion of gender as a relevant category when it comes to establishing the visibility of independent works within their circuits, which in turn has consequences for the economic and symbolic capital that filmmakers and their oeuvre accrue in their successive exhibition environments. For this research, we consider that circulation, which covers both promotion and exhibition (Hesmondhalgh, 2007), is a more appropriate concept than distribution, as generally speaking independent cinema lacks promotional budgets. More to the point of our topic, as highlighted by Garnham, “*It is cultural distribution, not cultural production, that is the key locus of power and profit*” (1990, p 161, original emphasis). Therefore, this approach can underscore the obstacles, already observed in other European countries (EWA, 2006), faced by female filmmakers to sustain their careers and that stem from the distribution and exhibition logics; barriers that can have their counterpart in the independent circuit.

Our starting point is the alternative nature of the analyzed practices and circuits. And the term independent cinema or *other cinema* is used, in the fashion of Karelou, Liz and Vidal, “as coterminous [to minor cinema] on the basis of the dynamics of recognition that constrain

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this would be the creation of FOG (Filmmakers of Greece), an association hosting most of the filmmakers from The Greek New Wave. In Spain, many filmmakers that would later become associated to the *other cinema* signed a manifesto against the Cinema Law (Ley 55/2007) viewing it as detrimental to cultural diversity. Subsequently, some of them founded the Unión de Cineastas (Filmmakers Union), an association advocating diversity, the preservation of the film heritage, the integration of the audiovisual language in educational environments, and the measures aiming to promote distribution (Galán, 2014).

the work of the filmmakers under study, of their perceived disadvantageous position in the ‘game’ of film culture” (2014, p. 134) to examine if gender is a category that articulates an otherness within this otherness.

## **2. Independent cinema in Spain and the gender perspective**

The independent and/or alternative cinema has always established itself in terms of otherness, championing aesthetic values, production models, and circulation and reception modes set apart from commercial cinema. So, it is often a category operating on an identity basis, both for filmmakers and interpretive communities (Newman, 2011). Its discourse has been associated to values such as authenticity and personal expression over against the restrictions imposed by the industrial system, while also carrying a superior moral and political significance since it is presented and perceived as a type of cinema that tries to “represent reality” in contrast with the “lies” of the large-scale industry (Ortner, 2013, p. 3).

In Spain, as mentioned above, independent cinema over the last decade has been labeled as *other cinema*, a term used by the prestigious magazine *Caimán. Cuadernos de Cine* (formerly *Cahiers du Cinéma. España*) in its September 2013 issue. Its op-ed bestowed legitimacy upon a bunch of works released early in the decade, in “a period of economic precariousness and institutional confusion,” and that explored “the riskier and most stimulating margins, and the most daring aesthetic and linguistic boundaries” and “new creative pathways as well as new production and distribution alternatives” (Heredero, 2013b). The stress on formal rupture was shared with the new production and circulation modes developed within the context of a crisis and articulated in contrast with “a conformist industry” (*ibid*).

In spite of questioning its conformation, scholars who have approached the *other cinema* agree on the three factors already mentioned: an oppositional aesthetic based, broadly speaking, on a narrative and formal minimalism, and/or realism; its lower budgets, often with a do-it-yourself ethos; and circulation outside of the conventional circuit, with the exploration of new distribution channels as one of its defining characteristics (Cerdán, 2014, 2015; Karelou, Liz & Vidal, 2014; Fernández Labayen & Oroz, 2015; Palacio & Ibañez, 2015).

Another key trait of independent cinema or minor film practices like the documentary is that they constitute production niches where women have traditionally enjoyed a more significant presence. This factor has enabled them to articulate counter-narratives and to develop careers that, occasionally, has seen them establish themselves as auteurs (Ortner, 2013, p. 173–198; White, 2015). Martha Lauzen’s latest reports (2019a, 2019b) for the 2018–19 period show that women directed 29% of the narrative feature films and 35% of the documentaries exhibited at the main independent cinema festivals in the USA, while the number of female directors in the highest-grossing features only reached 8%. In Europe we find a more considerable amount of female documentary filmmakers (23.8%) than fiction directors (16.1%), which shows a marked gender imbalance, considering that, although women receive funding for the production of documentaries more often than men, the lower budget of the genre means that the total funding is below that of their male counterparts (EWA, 2016). In Spain, case study’s research on alternative funding modes show similar female participation trends: the figures of female directors and co-directors for crowdfunded productions (16%) are higher than in the traditional industry (Binimelis & Espasa, 2018). And yet, the analysis of other collaborative independent production modes fostered by digitization points to persistent exclusion patterns like the access to promotional means through cultural and social capital (masculine and masculinized), which in the end drives to the absence of female creators (Pujol, 2013).

In short, alternative circuits are more receptive to the participation of female filmmakers but, judging by collected data detailed above, women find it more challenging to complete their films and keep sustained careers. This can be ascertained through the qualitative research carried out by the Sundance Film Institute which lists some of the obstacles faced by

women: gender-related financial barriers, persistent sexist stereotypes regarding film roles, male-dominated networks, the struggle to achieve a work and family balance, and exclusionary hiring decisions (Smith, Pieper & Choueiti, 2013). Other factors related to the reception and subsequent circulation of the works, found both in commercial and independent cinema, could also be considered. Firstly, the programming policies in festivals that, while promoting specific outlooks such as authorship or the aesthetic autonomy of the work, sideline feminist cinema or films made by women or treat them patronizingly (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; White, 2015). Secondly, the role of film criticism, a distinctly masculine and normative cultural domain (Pujol, 2011), which represents and reproduces similar logics, thereby introducing significant female omissions. For instance, the issue mentioned above of *Caimán* devoted to the *other cinema* provided a list of representative authors from this movement where both the presence of female filmmakers (7 women against 45 men) and those excluded<sup>3</sup> stood out sharply.

### **3. Periodization, methodology and research questions**

The study covers the 2013–2018 six-year period, which ends in the most recent year with available data. While the origins of the *other cinema*, as an amalgam of diverging trends and modes of production, can be traced to the mid-2000s (Cerdán, 2014, 2015; Palacio & Ibañez, 2015; Cobo-Durán, Fernández & Hermida, 2016), 2013 can be considered a key moment for the consolidation of the Spanish contemporary independent cinema. It was then that it started gaining public traction and establishing itself as a differentiated practice as against commercial cinema.

The analysis of the circulation, as well as the uncertain and relational character of the topic of research (independent cinema), requires designing a specific methodology that, here, combines qualitative and quantitative techniques. For the quantitative side of the study, a representative sample has been compiled addressing three areas that are not only linked to independent cinema, but also define it: specialized film festivals, video-on-demand (VOD) platforms, and film distributors, including those mainly devoted to the cultural domain. The sample is detailed in the corresponding subheading, since the selection obeys to its representativeness when they come to shaping discourses about Spanish independent cinema.

In these three areas, unless specified, the nationally produced features and short films produced since 2012 have all been computed. Following the ICAA guidelines, the films counted as shorts are those with a running time under 60 minutes. As to festivals, we have followed the categorization carried out by the events when programming short films, often under specific sections. The data has been obtained from printed and online catalogs of the analyzed agents, while also verifying them occasionally with the ICAA yearbooks. The empirical analysis has been supplemented with a press analysis and a bibliographic review, essential for contextualizing the dynamics of the circuit, getting acquainted with it, and assessing its evolution.

Whereas the relevance of this study has already been covered in the introduction, the main objectives are the following: quantifying the number of national productions directed by women in the primary circuits of Spanish independent cinema and thereby providing some qualitative assessments to understand the conditions of their presence/absence in them.

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<sup>3</sup> The included filmmakers were Neus Ballús, Mar Coll, Cristina Diz, Virginia García del Pino, Mia de Ribot, María Ruido and Carla Subirana. Some of the notable absences would be, for example, Mercedes Álvarez, Lupe Pérez and Ariadna Pujol.

## 4. Results: Mapping the Spanish independent film circuit and women's presence

### 4.1. Film festivals

Film festivals are a key platform for the visibility and outreach of independent cinema as, frequently, they are their main exhibition windows owing to the limited or inexistent access to commercial cinemas. They play an essential promotional role, as they are a meeting point for critics, programmers, and distributors, while also operating as the primary source of legitimation for films to achieve a cultural value (De Valck, 2007; Ostrowska, 2010).

In Spain, together with other agents not covered by this study, such as universities and film criticism, these events have proved essential for the recognition of independent practices and their subsequent shaping as the *other cinema* (Cerdán, 2014, 2015; Palacio & Ibañez, 2015; Cobo-Durán, Fernández & Hermida, 2016). According to Cerdán, within the national sphere “some specialized festivals [were] the first to detect the phenomenon and to operate as hubs for the alternative exhibition” (2015, p. 38). This aligns with the idea that, in no small degree, this label has established its prestige also at the international level through the awards in competitions such as Rotterdam International Film Festival or Locarno Film Festival. This success has introduced the narrative of the other cinema as a break with mainstream national cinema (Palacio & Ibañez, 2015), and it has implied its redefinition as a growing cultural movement demanding financial support from political bodies (Fernández Labayen & Oroz, 2015).

Considering the large number of film festivals dispersed across the Spanish geography –more than 134 (Hereadero, 2019, p. 387)–, an outstanding fact for the purpose of this research is the gradual reshaping of the national festival circuit to embrace the *other cinema*, during the studied period. Besides the creation of altogether new events specifically linked to this phenomenon, such as Márgenes (founded in 2012), some of the most prestigious have also added specific sections to cover those submissions: the Seville European Film Festival, with its *Las nuevas olas* (the new waves), which enjoys a distribution award, or the D'A Film Festival Barcelona, with the *Un impulso colectivo* (a collective impulse) exhibition, competitive since 2019 with a prize awarded by Movistar+. In other mainstream festivals, sections initially intended as sidebars have achieved a similar status to the official ones, as seen with *Zonazine*, from the Málaga Spanish Film Festival.

In order to analyze the female presence in the main Spanish festivals focused on independent cinema and associated with the *other cinema*, a sample of nine representative events has been gathered, only computing the national works screened in general competitive sections<sup>4</sup>. These works are featured in Table 1, discriminating by sex and setting apart mixed co-directions.

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore, competitive sections focused on regional production found in some festivals have been excluded, while in the case of the Málaga Spanish Film Festival, because of its general and commercial nature, only works present in sections such as *Zonazine* and *Documental* have been computed.

**Table 1:** Film Festivals: National Films in Competitive Sections.

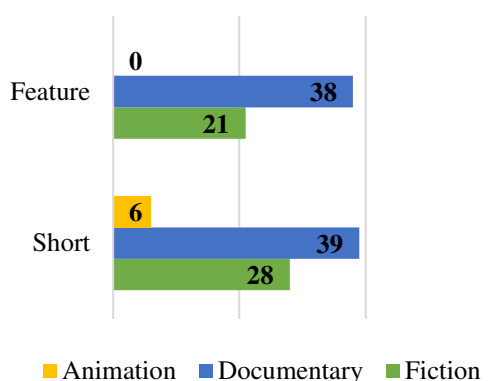
Festival	2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2019		
	M	W	CO	M	W	CO	M	W	CO	M	W	CO	M	W	CO	M	W	CO
Abycine. Albacete International Film Festival	28	5	0	25	4	0	23	6	2	26	2	1	21	6	1	15	10	4
D'A Film Festival Barcelona	2	0	0	1	0	0	3	2	0	4	0	0	5	0	0	1	3	0
Gijón International Film Festival	5	1	0	6	0	0	9	3	0	9	0		18	3		12	9	1
Las Palmas International Film Festival	19	4	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0
Seville European Film Festival	16	0	1	22	2	1	13	1	0	16	7	1	10	6	2	10	1	0
L'Alternativa. Barcelona Independent Film Festival	4	1	1	4	1	0	3	0	1	3	1	0	4	0	0	1	1	0
Málaga Spanish Film Festival	12	5	1	14	2	2	23	7	0	18	4	1	9	8	2	9	3	4
Márgenes Film Festival	5	0	0	2	3	0	3	2	0	3	2	0	2	1	0	3	4	0
Punto de Vista. International Documentary Film Festival	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0

Source: Own elaboration. Printed and online festivals catalogues. Legend: M (directed by men), W (directed by women), CO (mixed co-directions).

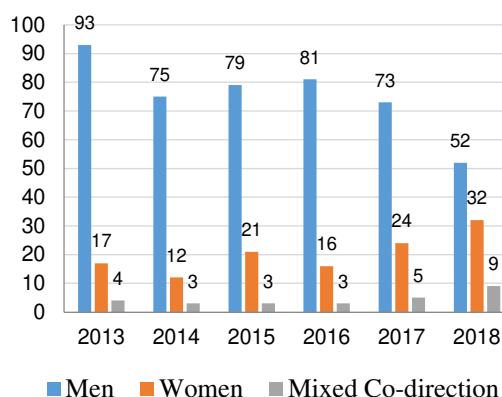
Throughout the studied period, the number of screenings of national film totaled 602, with 122 (20.3%) directed by women and 27 co-directed by mixed teams (4.5%), while those directed or co-directed by men amounted to 453 (75.2%). In addition to this and considering that some films previously computed have been screened in more than one festival, Graph 1 covers exclusively the number of features and shorts directed and co-directed by women within those competitions between 2012 and 2018: 132. Documentary, with 58% of the total (77 works), is the predominant genre in both categories. In principle, this percentage does not allow inferring that women are more inclined to non-fiction, although broadening the festival sample could modify this proportion. Graph 2, in turn, shows the interannual evolution, which allows gauging a female presence below 25 titles. At the same time, in 2018 there is a noticeable increase: in contrast to the 52 films directed by men, there are 41 with female authorship, whether individual or collective, which amounts to 28% of all the works of this kind exhibited over the six-year studied period.

**Who counts? The presence of women directors in Spanish independent cinema through a data analysis of film circulation (2013-2018)**

**Graph 1:** Film Festivals: Films Directed and Co-directed by Women.



**Graph 2:** Film Festivals: Interannual evolution.



Source: Own elaboration.

Perhaps, it is no coincidence that this surge, also detected in the United States (Lauzen, 2019b), is happening just when the discrimination of women in the film sector has become a recurring topic of debate in the public sphere. More specifically, in the last two years, festivals, both renowned ones such as San Sebastián or the Seminci and smaller events like Alcine, have opened forums to discuss the film industry’s diversity problem in the context of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements (Scholz, 2018). Furthermore, competitions like the Gijón International Film Festival or the D’A Film Festival Barcelona have advertised their latest editions by highlighting the presence of female-directed cinema, a fact also remarked by the media with headlines such as “Women at the forefront of cinema” (Villacorta, 2018) or “Women conquer the D’A Festival” (Engel, 2018).

Nevertheless, over the analyzed period, few female filmmakers are present in the festival circuit with more than one work: María Cañas, Virginia García del Pino, Carolina Astudillo, Elena López Riera, María Antón and Natalia Marín; the last three belonging to mixed collectives like lacasinegra and Los Hijos. In all those instances, their work is linked to the documentary and experimental fiction genres.

#### 4.2. VOD platforms

Digital distribution has become an opportunity to showcase and sustain film practices produced outside the industry (Iordanova & Cunningham, 2012; Tryon, 2009; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). In Spain, 2012 witnessed the birth of the first platforms devoted to the *other cinema*, Márgenes, and Plat. The creation of the first one, linked to the homonymous festival, arose, in the words of its director,

From an accumulated frustration over recent years; from observing the tremendous difficulties faced by high-quality Spanish films to reach the audience. It arises from the glaring lack of environments for the exhibition of this type of works. We are intent on showing the most daring cinema born in the fringes of the industry (Rodríguez in Paz, 2013).

The second one, which provides free access and is funded through donations, describes itself as an “online film archive aiming to harness the potential of the Internet to provide a plural vision of Spanish and Latin American cinema” (Plat). Both platforms are thus presented as an alternative space to traditional exhibition and distribution, which excludes not only independent filmmakers but also a potential audience. And the critics welcomed them under those terms, portraying them as a creative alternative (Herederero, 2013a) or as a “real triumph against commercial cinema” (de Pedro, 2013).



With the gradual shift of audiences towards digital screens (Pardo & Etayo, 2014), VOD services have become the leading video consumption model in Spain (Neira, 2019), primarily as a result of the arrival of large international companies such as Netflix, HBO Spain and Amazon Prime Video. Consequently, this concentration trend has hampered the establishment of independent digital platforms as business models with content catalogs able to reach substantial audiences (Álvarez Monzoncillo & López Villanueva, 2015; Aranzubia & Ferreras, 2015). In fact, research on the here analyzed platforms points to negligible audiences (Fernández Labayen & Oroz, 2015).

Their symbolic value, however, cannot be overlooked, as both Márgenes and Plat have been considered virtual spaces of reference to access the *other cinema*. As curatorial and highly specialized platforms, they broaden the exhibition windows and allow global access to the works by relevant agents such as film critics or programmers. They are also services with an added educational value, as they provide viewing guides to understand the key elements of a filmmaker or open the potential of feedback between the traditional exhibition model and the distribution across the Internet, as in the case of Márgenes (Aranzubia & Ferreras, 2015, p. 67-68).

Table 2 features the Spanish contemporary productions<sup>5</sup> found in the catalogs of these platforms, segregated by the sex of the director and the running time of the film.

**Table 2:** VOD Platforms.

Platform	Features			Shorts		
	M	W	CO	M	W	CO
Márgenes	29	8	1	24	10	0
Plat	79	5	4	317	42	5

Source: Own elaboration. Margenes.org y Plat.tv. Queries: February 2019. Legend: M (directed by men), W (directed by women), CO (mixed co-directions).

Overall, judging by both platforms, female authorship, whether individual or collective, is significantly lower, along the lines of film festivals: 65 works directed by women (12.2%), 10 mixed co-direction works (1.9%) and 449 (85.7%) directed by men. Furthermore, the Márgenes catalog provides access to the work of 30 male and 13 female authors, while the number of female creators in Plat is likewise lower: 11 female authors (3 belonging to collectives) against 38 male authors. In terms of genre, most of the works directed by women in both fall under the non-fiction category: in Márgenes, 90% are documentaries, while in Plat, with the exception of 3 short films, all of the works belong to the documentary and/or experimental video genres, amounting to 95%.

As a summary of this subheading, two aspects can be highlighted. Firstly, there is a striking absence of fiction works from women, considering that they enjoy a significant presence in festivals, as it has already been noted. Secondly, as catalogs grow –Plat’s is substantially larger than its Márgenes counterpart–, female presence falls dramatically. One of the explanations for this underrepresentation could be traced to the amateurish character of Plat, which has a mostly static catalog with few additions in recent years, and that has been set up mainly through primarily masculine contact networks –the body of critics, promoters, and festival directors and programmers.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the case of the other agents analyzed, this chart includes productions prior to 2012. This was the year were both platforms were launched and, therefore, their catalogues included previous works, which can be considered the foundation of the *other cinema*. Nevertheless, classic alternative works included in both platforms (such as those produced during the 70s, for example) have not been computed.

### 4.3. *Independent film distributors*

In Spain, the distribution of independent cinema is an extremely fragile sector. Its high atomization—with a large number of distributors, if production companies do not play that role themselves—, the substantial amount of national productions, and the fact that distributors have been forced to assume a share of the digitalization costs of cinemas makes it a sector highly dependent on public funding (Álvarez Monzoncillo & López Villanueva, 2015; Aranzubia & Ferreras, 2015; Lara, 2019). In addition to this, the exhibition crisis and the gradual closing of many cinemas in our country –600 since 2008 (Zurro, 2019)– must also be factored in. Within this increasingly adverse context for Spanish cinema, several exhibition and distribution initiatives, launched by agents focused on the *other cinema*, are looking to build an environment that fosters its visibility beyond the fleeting festival screens.

A relevant movement has been recovering the physical exhibition through the creation of new venues operated as coops, as well as reopening old art-house cinemas, which closed their doors following the crisis, thanks to citizen mobilization or crowdfunding (Morán Ferrés, 2018). Firmly committed to auteur and independent cinema, these initiatives promote film diversity –frequently in small cities like Santiago de Compostela (Numax), Mallorca (Cines Ciutat), or Majadahonda (Cines Zoco)– and, in that way, present themselves as political acts. In the words of Carlos Hidalgo, member of the Numax cooperative,

Having witnessed the closing of a significant number of cinemas –stifled by digitalization, the crisis, and the restrictive distribution model–, we consider Numax as a militant act of resistance. Cinemas and bookshops are both mainly controlled by oligopolies, which hamper smaller initiatives like ours (in Fontecha, 2014b).

Also sharing this resistance and diversity discourse, there is a second phenomenon: the rise of museums and cultural centers as environments with regular audiovisual programming. Significantly, in 2011 and 2013 the National Museum Center of Arts Reina Sofía curated two film series around the *other cinema*, arguing that its role was to “nurture and give circulation to this type of cinema that feels sidelined by the system” (Fontecha, 2014a) while asserting the core nature of the museum as an oppositional space (Prieto, 2013). Since 2010, supplementing the creation of this network of alternative venues, in many instances linked to the circulation initiatives mentioned above, several independent film distributors have been established: Numax Distribución (2015), Márgenes Distribución (2015), Noucinemart (2010) or El Sur Films (2015) –the last two linked to the Festival D’A Barcelona and the Festival REC of Tarragona, respectively.

The existence of these networks that link distributors and alternative exhibition venues is revealing of how, despite cinemas losing their central role, film premieres still bulk large in the film value chain. Not only economically, but also culturally, as this is the space that concentrates and shapes the reception of movies (Fernández Labayen & Oroz, 2015, p. 66). Filmmaker Isaki Lacuesta made it abundantly clear on the occasion of the nomination of his film *Entre dos aguas* (2018) to the Goya Awards, an event that the press greeted as the conquering of the official circuits by the *other cinema*. The director stated: “The success of our films is not measured by their theatrical run, but by other criteria. However, we are not giving up on cinemas” (Belinchón, 2018).

The importance of the films belonging to the *other cinema* is still defined, in no small degree, by their theatrical release. These screens legitimize them in the eyes of the critics and more general audiences and, together with festivals, have enabled “some of the group’s members [having] a highly visible media presence” (Palacio & Ibañez, 2015, p. 32). Analyzing the extent to which female-directed films gain a foothold in them is relevant, as it establishes them as creators in the collective imaginary. The leap to the silver screen of films like *Las amigas de Ágata* (Laia Alabart, Alba Cros, Laura Ríus & Marta Verheyen, 2015) or *Verano 1993* (Carla Simón, 2017), following a successful run on the festival circuit, is a clear case in point,

as they have contributed to public debates, ranging from the celebratory to the vindicatory, about the role of women in the film sector, as well as raising awareness about their female peers and predecessors (Brito, 2016; Engel, 2017; Yañez, 2017).

The Spanish Cinema Law (Ley 55/2007) establishes that the independent distribution companies are those who are not majority-owned neither by a non-EU capital company or a Public Broadcasting Corporation. According to this definition, the distribution sector in Spain is very scattered. For example, if we just consider the Spanish movies distributed in 2018, 83 independent companies can be found, according to data provided by the ICAA. These figures make it impossible to address all the independent companies in this cross-sectional study devoted to circulation. Thus, to assess this field, a sample of 15 distributors –comprising the members of the Asociación de Distribuidores Independientes Cinematográficos (ADICINE), and other recently established companies that, as pointed out, reflect the growing relevance of independent cinema in Spain– has been collated. The results, segregated by sex, are detailed in Table 3, while the list of films directed or co-directed by women can be found in Table 4.

**Table 3:** Number of Spanish films distributed by independent companies.

Company	M	W	CO
Avalon	12	5	0
Bteam Pictures	5	1	2
Capricci Cine	4	0	0
Caramel Films	4	0	0
Cine Binario	5	0	0
Festival Films	4	1	0
Golem	7	0	0
Good Films	1	0	0
Márgenes	11	3	1
Noucinemart	7	2	0
Numax	1	1	0
El Sur	3	0	0
Pirámide Films	2	1	1
Vértigo	2	0	0
Wanda Vision	13	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>

Source: Own elaboration. Distributor catalogs and ICAA yearbooks.

**Table 4:** Spanish films directed or co-directed by women distributed by independent companies.

Film	Genre	Release	Company
<i>La plaga</i> (Neús Ballús, 2013)	Documentary	10/9/13	Noucinemart
<i>Todos están muertos</i> (Beatriz Sanchís, 2014)	Fiction	29/5/14	Avalon
<i>La novia</i> (Paula Ortiz, 2015)	Fiction	11/12/15	BTEAM
<i>La noche que mi madre mató a mi padre</i> (Inés París, 2015)	Fiction	17/4/16	Festival Films
<i>Les amigues de l'Àgata</i> (L. Alabart, A. Cros, L. Rius & M. Verheyen, 2016)	Fiction	8/6/16	Avalon
<i>La puerta abierta</i> (María Szerezevsky, 2016).	Fiction	2/9/16	Pirámide
<i>La propera pell</i> (Isaki Lacuesta & Isa Campo, 2015).	Fiction	18/10/16	BTEAM
<i>María (y los demás)</i> (Nely Reguea, 2016)	Fiction	7/12/16	Avalon
<i>Análisis de sangre azul</i> (Blanca Torres & Miguel Velázquez, 2015)	Fiction	4/3/17	Pirámide
<i>Dancing Beethoven</i> (Arantxa Aguirre, 2017).	Documentary	27/4/17	Márgenes
<i>Verano 1993</i> (Carla Simón, 2017)	Fiction	14/5/2017	Avalon
<i>Julia Ist</i> (Elena Martín, 2017)	Fiction	16/6/17	Avalon
<i>A estación violenta</i> (Anxos Fazáns, 2018)	Fiction	1/6/18	Márgenes
<i>Penélope</i> (Eva Vila, 2017)	Documentary	7/9/18	Noucinemart
<i>Mudar la piel</i> (Ana Schulz & Cristóbal Fernández, 2018)	Documentary	4/10/18	Márgenes
<i>El amor y la muerte</i> (Arantxa Aguirre, 2018)	Documentary	8/11/18	Márgenes
<i>El silencio de otros</i> (Almudena Carracedo & Robert Bahar, 2018)	Documentary	16/11/18	BTEAM
<i>Con el viento</i> (Meritxel Colell, 2017)	Fiction	23/11/18	Numax

Source: Own elaboration. Distributor catalogs and ICAA yearbooks.

The percentage of works directed by women exhibited thanks to these companies reaches 14%, while mixed co-directed works represent 4%, over against 82% of works with masculine authorship. Dwelling on the works directed and co-directed by women, unlike other circuit nodes, in traditional screens fiction (66%) is far ahead of documentaries (33%), which can be put down to the difficulties of the latter to reach the cinemas. In fact, the documentaries found in this list are distributed by Márgenes or Noucinemart –both festival-related companies– or enjoy a special status, as with *El silencio de otros* (Almudena Carracedo & Robert Bahar, 2018), a production backed by Pedro Almodóvar.

These charts show two noteworthy aspects. Firstly, half of the films directed or co-directed by women are distributed by two companies (Márgenes and Avalon). In contrast, seven of the analyzed companies do not include a single female-directed national film in their catalogs, which is especially relevant if we consider the most longstanding and prominent ones, such as Wanda and Vértigo. Secondly, a gradual increase in the number of films made by women can be detected, reaching its peak in 2018, as it was noted in the case of festivals. That year witnessed the release of 33% of the films directed or co-directed by them throughout the six years of the study. At this point, it is by no means idle to point out that, from the 18 mentioned films, 9 had previously gone through the festivals analyzed in the corresponding subheading. This highlights the hierarchy and interdependence that these circuits establish in the films value chain.

The analysis of the physical exhibition is supplemented with the study of two distribution companies identified as agents of the *other cinema* but mainly focused on the cultural sector: Hamaca and Playtime Audiovisuales. The first one is a “not-for-profit association to preserve, distribute and publicize Spanish filmmaking in the national and international sphere,” with works that are “distributed in cultural, educational or social contexts” (Hamaca). In its inception (2005) it focused on video-art. Still, many of its authors belong to the *other cinema* (Virginia García del Pino, Oliver Laxe, or Isaki Lacuesta, to mention a few). The second, founded in 2007, describes itself “as a cultural management and cinema and video distribution platform essentially focused on the most daring and innovative contemporary audiovisual content” (Playtime).

Table 5 features the works added to their catalogs throughout the analyzed period, categorized according to the sex of their directors and their running time.

**Table 5:** Other Specialized Distributors.

Distributor	Features			Shorts		
	M	W	CO	M	W	CO
Hamaca	3	1	1	48	32	6
Playtime	8	9	1	12	6	1

Source: Own elaboration. Hamaca and Playtime.

Hamaca hosts 56% of male filmmakers over against a non-negligible 36% of female filmmakers, with 8% of co-directed works. Playtime offers even more balanced figures, with 54% of films directed by men and 41% belonging to female authors. 5% of these works would fall under productions co-directed by mixed teams. Two aspects should be noticed at this stage. Firstly, both companies are directed by women: Eli Lloveras and Natalia Piñuel, respectively. Secondly, their criteria for the inclusion of works in their catalogs differ from those of the previous companies. In the case of Hamaca, the selection is made through public calls, carried out along with the Reina Sofia Museum, and following the resolution of a committee. In the case of Playtime, the open commitment to gender equality by Piñuel is worthy of note: “When programming, there is a need for research, to go a step further, and that is our approach when giving visibility to the women that are making an impact on cinema” (in Brito, 2016).

## 5. Conclusions and discussions

While some partial findings have already been mentioned, the main ones are summarized here, along with some further discussion. According to data collected and analyzed, the presence of female filmmakers is higher in independent circuits compared to mainstream production, but it is still a minority hovering around 20%. Thus, only 24.8% of the works selected by the studied festivals in their official sections have been directed by women or mixed teams. In VOD platforms, these works represent 14.3%, with a growing gender gap as catalogs increase in size and, opposite to what it would be expected, when the initiatives have an amateur approach. For independent distribution companies, the female-directed works released in cinemas represent 18% of the total. The most substantial, almost balanced, female presence is found in specialized distribution initiatives that operate on a minor scale and liminal spaces linked to the art world and which, as in the case of Hamaca, enlarge its catalog through horizontal dynamics, such as public calls. Nevertheless, regarding these initiatives, further research would be needed to analyze the actual circulation of their works.

Generally speaking, female filmmakers find a favorable environment in documentaries and short films to develop their initiatives, with these being genres and formats requiring

lower budgets and smaller teams, but with less exposure and media coverage. When addressing features directed or co-directed by women and distributed by the leading independent companies, and linked to the *other cinema*, the documentary is a minority (33%).

It has been pointed out that the independent circuit –composed of disparate agents in terms of their roles, funding sources, business volume and model, and rooting– hosts works that bulk large in national cinema from a cultural and symbolic perspective. Likewise, it has been noted how these agents feed back into each other or expand their original activities with an explicit commitment to ensure the visibility of *indie* cinema. Building upon its *otherness*, this cinema shapes itself as a field that questions commercial cinema and advocates diversity as one of its defining characteristics. This is a core concept for audiovisual industries within the digitalization context, embraced by the policies for the protection and promotion of audiovisual diversity (UNESCO, 2005; Albornoz & Leiva, 2019). This discourse, however, ignores, or at least leaves unattended, the lower presence of women in the distribution and exhibition domain. A case in point would be the public aid policies of the ICAA aimed at festivals, which ambiguously call for diversity–programming European, Spanish and Latin American cinema, animation, documentary, and shorts–but exclude the gender variable (Ley 55/2007).

While this assessment opens many future questions, according to our research, one of the reasons for the female underrepresentation in the Spanish independent circuits could be traced to its internal logic. Unlike commercial cinema, which enjoys guaranteed exhibition and only receives a prestige bonus from festivals, independent cinema needs these competitions as an essential showcase for the blessing from film critics, to boost their presence in the surrounding environments or achieve commercial distribution. The remaining circuit nodes –VOD platforms and distribution companies– are immersed in a sectorial readjustment and face many obstacles that hamper their consolidation. Clearly, they cannot provide a channel for all the works shown in festivals. Still, it is also noteworthy that, while we find more than 120 female filmmakers in festivals over the six-year analyzed period–the directors of the 132 features and shorts quantified–, barely 24 make their break to other channels. In this regard, we have already pointed out that the contact networks and the masculinization of the sector can exacerbate the hierarchy and interdependence dynamics of the circuit.

In 2017 and 2018, there is a noticeable increase in the presence of women in festivals and the access of their films to exhibition screens. As in other contexts (Lauzen, 2019b), it seems plausible to explain the exponential growth detected over this period as a result of the rising power of female voices in the public sphere –in their double condition of critical points of views and/or belonging to renowned authors– and, consequently, a widening awareness of the gender imbalance in filmmaking. On a positive note, which reveals the timid realignment of the sector in gender terms, the commitment of a portion of the studied agents to the work of female filmmakers, especially–although not exclusively–when women head the companies, is also noteworthy. Whereas this effort has not corrected the imbalance, it has undoubtedly allayed it. For instance, it has already been pointed out that Playtime includes almost the same number of films directed by women as men due to its clear commitment to gender balance. Meanwhile, María Zamora, director of Avalon’s production branch, has made similar remarks, “This has been a chief focus throughout my career. I have produced features and short films by many women” (María Zamora, 2019). Furthermore, while beyond the scope of the period covered by this study, specific initiatives linked to *indie* agents like Márgenes, such as Mujeresdecine.com (founded in 2019), have also come into being. This VOD service includes works by the emergent and avant-garde female filmmakers and the more seasoned ones. Indeed, this platform opens a future line of research concerning the potential and the impact of online distribution for female-made cinema when labelled under the gender rubric.

Aware of the complex and shaky ground of our research topic, our aim has been asking ourselves *who counts* in the game of the independent culture, with a data-driven assessment to show the role played by female filmmakers in the independent circuits. Given the little academic research with a gender perspective carried out in this field, we believe that these results can pave the way for future studies. However, we are convinced that this topic deserves continued research to establish if the growing pattern remains. Moreover, it would be necessary to include qualitative methodologies that allow analyzing in depth both the opportunities and the challenges faced by women filmmakers in these circuits, and their operational logics. Thus, the account is far from complete.

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