Title

Revolutionizing the 'national means of expression'; the influence of Soviet film culture in pre Civil War Spain

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of the USSR on the film culture of 1930s Spain. It focuses on the years before the Civil War, researching the role that Comintern-aligned initiatives had on Spanish nontheatrical educational and political filmmaking, as well as institutional developments associated with these movements. It analyses the complex dynamics of representation fostered by film as a tool for cultural and social progress, in a country that was desperately seeking new models of political organization and modernization. In particular, I explore how cultural exchanges with

the USSR were mediated through film journals, film-clubs, festivals and congresses, fostering nationalist and internationalist imaginaries in which the interests of very different social actors paradoxically converged. Ultimately, the article explores how the introduction of Soviet aesthetics in Spain by a group of intellectuals since the late 1920s paved the way for the radicalization of the Spanish cultural landscape during the Civil War.

Keywords: Comintern, Nuestro Cinema, Juan Piqueras, Proletarian Film, Film-clubs, USSR.

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> Nuestro Cinema can't but accept, on good terms, a cinema capable of freeing us from today's ideological poverty. That is, a cinema with depth, with an open mind, with social content […] A cinema that was born with Eisenstein, with Pudovkin […] (Piqueras 1932: 1).

The last room of the National Art Museum of Catalonia (MNAC, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya) contains a newly revamped modern art collection, and is currently devoted to the propaganda efforts made during the Spanish Civil War. The visitor encounters an impressive display of posters devoted to the fight against fascism, to working class movements, to brotherhood with the USSR, and to the promotion of Soviet films like *My iz Kronshtadta/Los Marinos de Cronstadt* (Dzigan 1936). There is also a loop projection of different newsreels from 'Laia Films', the propaganda production company of the 'Government of Catalonia' (Generalitat de Catalunya) that flourished during the war, and which also distributed Soviet films

until the disappearance of the company in 1938. Both elements are a testament to the central presence of Soviet aesthetics in the cultural production of the time, devoted to the defence of the Popular Front against Franco's fascist rebellion. But the enthusiastic reception of Soviet films, novels, theatre, and graphic art, which run parallel to the exponential growth and influence of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE, Partido Comunista Español) during the war, did not materialise from thin air. Many intellectuals such as Josep Renau, Juan Piqueras, Rafael Alberti, César M. Arconada or Luis Buñuel had been absorbing and disseminating revolutionary aesthetics through journals, film-clubs, worker unions, and 'Friends of the Soviet Union' associations, paving the way for the radical change in the Spanish cultural landscape after Franco's rebellion on 18 July 1936. These initiatives had different levels of autonomy and diverse political agendas, but they all shared the objective of inciting a political awakening and transformation of bourgeois intellectualism into a form of proletarian culture that, directly or indirectly, was put at the service of the Communist cause. In the background of these developments, we usually find the influence of the Comintern, the institution founded in 1919 by Lenin to coordinate the different international Communist parties from Moscow (see Carr 1984, McDermott and Agnew 1996).

Although much scholarly work has been expended on the presence and influence of Comintern-aligned culture during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) – see, for instance, Crusells (2003), or García López (2013) - less attention has been paid to the key first years of the Spanish Second Republic (1931-1936), when this culture began to develop. The generally accepted narrative is that Spain was of little interest to the USSR until the Asturian miners' strike of 1934, the subsequent adoption of the Popular Front against fascism strategy in 1935, and the eruption of the

Civil War in 1936. However, in this article I argue that a very different history emerges if we look beyond the political presence of the USSR in Spain, and focus on the influence of Soviet culture within the ideological milieu of the early period of the Spanish Second Republic. Likewise, classic monographs of Spanish film history, like Rob Stone's *Spanish Cinema*, published in 2002, include very briefly the type of non-commercial film cultures I analyze in this article, foregrounding commercial cinema instead. This has created the persuasive notion that Spain had a meagre film culture at the time, a 'dream' that was barely kept alive by a handful of intellectuals (Stone 2002: 21).

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to address this gap in the scholarship by emphasizing the vibrancy of film culture in 1920s-1930s Spain, and the degree to which its key participants were intrinsically linked to the international leftist scene. In this context, one must be careful not to reduce these developments to a mere reflex of Soviet cinema, but to give full play to the ideologically and artistically complex negotiations between the local and the transnational context.

The Comintern and intellectual circles

On 6 February 1937, eight months after the assassination by fascists of film critic and Spanish Communist Party member Juan Piqueras, the first articles about him appeared both in national and international newspapers. Film critic and historian Georges Sadoul wrote an article in February 1937, for the *Commune* newspaper (published by the French Communist Party), to condemn his assassination, mentioning that Piqueras 'could have been, in the midst of the Civil War, the organizer of an important and truly Spanish cinema' (Llopis 1988 Vol 1: 115). Due to a stomach ulcer, he had stopped to rest, for a few days, near Venta de Baños (Valladolid) in July 1936, where he was unfortunate enough to encounter the advance

guard of Franco's forces, then in revolt against Republican Spain. He was searched and, among his possessions, was a copy of an anti-fascist article he had published in his Marxist film journal *Nuestro Cinema* in October 1933 (discussing the creation of a Spanish Federation of Proletarian film-clubs), and an authorization from the French communist cooperative *Ciné-Liberté* to manage the exchange of newsreels for the Popular Front (Gubern 2009: 278). Filmmaker Luis Buñuel and fellow film critic Antonio del Amo, who also belonged to the PCE, attempted to rescue him in those first chaotic days of Civil War, but the roads were closed and Piqueras was executed by the end of July.

These three individuals - Juan Piqueras, Luis Buñuel and Antonio del Amo - were essential in the Spanish Marxist film culture of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which promoted the circulation and appreciation of Soviet cinema in Spain and aimed, more importantly, to link the necessary transformation of Spanish cinema, as they saw it, with the future social revolution. Their personal trajectories - from cultural elite circles to the forefront of political struggle within the space of a few years - exemplify the context in which the Comintern intervened. They belonged to the PCE or the French Communist Party (PCF, Parti Communiste Français), and their main outlet was the Marxist journal *Nuestro Cinema*, described by Georges Sadoul as the 'best film journal in capitalist Europe' (Montero 1977: xi). The journal appeared over thirteen issues from 1932 to 1933, with four more published in 1935. With a clear transnational vocation, it circulated a proletarian cinematographic imaginary through advertisings, film stills, editorials, and articles from Juan Piqueras, Antonio del Amo, Béla Balázs, Sergei Eisenstein, Ilya Trauberg, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Joris Ivens, León Moussinac, Georges Méliès, René Clair, and Spanish critics and writers such as Rafael Sender, César M. Arconada, Luis Buñuel or Josep Renau.

Beyond *Nuestro Cinema*, these intellectuals also participated in Comintern-aligned cultural organizations such as the 'Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists' (AEAR, Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires) and its local Spanish branch, which was largely organized around the journal *Octubre*. They also found outlets in the proletarian newspapers *Pueblo* and *Mundo Obrero*, which were managed by the famous Comintern propagandist, Willi Münzenberg. The ties to the Communist Party put them in touch with a broader international circuit of leftist artists and intellectuals and, in particular, with the thriving experimental cinematic culture in Europe and the USSR. The stories of Piqueras, Buñuel, Antonio del Amo, and many other critics and intellectuals from that period provide us with a unique opportunity to explore how the transnational dimension within interwar European leftist culture existed well before the Civil War and, by doing so, they also help to place Spain within the broader narrative of the institutional development of cinema, from which it has been largely excluded.

In 1932, poet Rafael Alberti and writer María Teresa León travelled for the first time to the USSR, using a scholarship from the 'Board of Extended Studies' (Junta de Ampliación de Estudios) to research new forms of theatre in France and Germany. Founded in 1907, this organisation offered financial support to scholars, artists and scientists that wanted to engage in cultural exchanges throughout the world. Although they were not supposed to travel to the USSR, they were fascinated with the cultural, political, and social events that had taken place since the 1917 revolution, and thus managed to enrol in one of the 'Intourist' (for-profit foreign tourist agency founded in 1929) regular trips organized from Berlin every month (Taillot 2013). They would return twice again, in 1934 and 1937. As we have seen with the cases of Buñuel and Piqueras, intellectuals were starting to embrace a

partisan ideological standpoint, which had generally not been the case during the previous decades of political unrest.

From afar, the USSR appeared as the materialization of the society longed for by scientists, writers, artists, teachers, and filmmakers, who would create the first 'Friends of the Soviet Union' associations (AUS, Amigos de la Unión Soviética) and even become active members of the PCE. As described by Manuel Tuñón de Lara (1993) and Julián Marías Aguilera (1994), Spanish intellectuals had become increasingly politicized after the loss of the colonies in 1898, an event that became known as 'the great disaster'. Feeling anxious about Spain's backwardness, they saw themselves as the vanguard that would push the country into definitive modernization. For them, it was key to break the isolation of Spanish intellectuals from international contexts, with Miguel de Unamuno stating that 'Spain remains to be discovered, and it will only be discovered by Europeanized Spaniards' (Marías Aguilera 1994: 68). But this sense of a national project was not necessarily related to any concrete parties (with exceptions) and was, instead, directed towards a generalized urge for economic, cultural and political modernization of Spain.

With the radicalization of the political context after the relatively calm Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923-1930), critics, writers, poets, filmmakers, artists, scientists, and journalists started to become involved in different forms of militancy, tired of the limited progress made in the social and cultural realms in comparison with their European neighbours. Some attained appointments in positions of power in progressive or conservative governments, and the first president of the Spanish Second Republic - known as the 'Republic of the intellectuals' - was lawyer and writer Manuel Azaña. Given the reality of a semi-industrialized economy, widespread rural poverty, harsh working conditions, and growing worker organization, it is not

surprising that Soviet culture and society, which was also going through a process of modernization, would seem to be a model for the Spanish intellectual elite.

But this fascination with communist aesthetics was not only due to the political commitment of those on the left, since conservative bourgeois creative sectors also turned their attention to the USSR. For instance, the amateur film section of the 'Catalan Excursionist Centre' (CEC, Centre Excursionista de Catalunya), a stronghold of the powerful and conservative Catalan industrial elite, admired Soviet filmmaking. These bourgeois amateurs included, in their journal *Cinema Amateur*, a translated article by Karl Freund - via the American Society of Filmmakers - in which Eisenstein's montage was praised (Freund 1936: 8). For them, the expressive qualities of Soviet montage were a much better example of what could be done with film than the elaborate production numbers in Hollywood, given the material limitations of working without sound and with reduced quantities of film stock. Also, their strong anti-commercial film position made Soviet film industry a paradoxical - given their lack of political sympathies for Communism - but logical place to look for an alternative model of film culture. In the final issue of *Cinema Amateur*, they also devoted their foreign collaboration section to Soviet cinema, in this case, with an article by Solev on Soviet sound experimentation, dealing with the 'drawn sound' films by Sholpo in his Petrograd laboratory (Solev 1936: 6).

Antonio Bonet is another good example of this class-crossing bourgeois admiration for Soviet cinema, on which the Comintern capitalized. He was a prominent architect and member of the GATEPAC (Group of Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Culture), which edited a journal called *A.C. Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*/*A.C. Documents on Contemporary Activity*. Devoted to an elitist notion of rationalist architecture and design (with,

admittedly, some regard for social aspects), the journal includes surprisingly, numerous reviews of Soviet films. As an example, in the fourth issue of 1931 there is an article focusing on Nikolai Ekk's *Putyovka v zhizn*/*The Road to Life* (1931) as 'the first Soviet sound feature' (Anon 1931: 29) What is even more striking is that the article, which has no author but may have possibly been written by Bonet himself, praises the communal aspect of Soviet society. Taking into account the difficulties of circulating Soviet films in Spain at the time (as they were banned from commercial circuits), it is noteworthy that the article is contemporaneous to the release of the film (1 June 1931 in the USSR), showing how closely connected certain intellectuals were with the cultural life of the USSR.

The bourgeois intellectual elite was captivated both by the interest in artistic experimentation, and by the utopian transformative projects taking place in the USSR, to the point of leaving the radical politics of a worker revolution aside. Emerging from a dictatorship and decades of relative cultural isolation, the newness of the Soviet project, which was arriving late to Spain (at least compared with other European countries), appealed greatly to these self-fashioned Spanish intellectuals precisely because they saw it as a stimulating horizon into which to project their hopes and aspirations for Spanish society. This fascination by the elites with both the openness to experiment and the perceived 'artistic freedom' in the USSR, coexisted precisely with the rejection of the old, Catholic bourgeois cultural elitism, attracting younger intellectuals such as Antonio del Amo, Luis Buñuel, Rafael Alberti, María Teresa León, César M. Arconada and Juan Piqueras, to name a few.

In a way, this paradoxical fascination with communist aesthetics and Soviet society reflected the extreme polarization of the Spanish mindset, which was desperately striving to break with the past without having a clear image of the socio-

political future ahead and, especially, the role that the 'mass' or the 'people' should play in this transformation. For instance, the first (and only) issue of the journal *Acción Cinegráfica*, devoted to film and education, published an article entitled 'Los cinemas obreros y el cinema en el campo'/Proletarian cinemas and film in the countryside (Anon 1931: 30). This publication contained several references to films in the USSR as examples of worker participation in the modern political sphere. The USSR seemed a viable model to follow for some intellectuals, but for many others it was 'more than a revolution, a social dissolution' (Araquistaín 1925: 1). These ideological disparities reflect the complexity of what Gerald Brenan (1960) described as 'the Spanish labyrinth': the complex political and social context into which intellectuals of the Spanish Second Republic immersed themselves in the pursuit of a better future. As Brenan concludes, perhaps too much change was attempted in a country that needed a radical social transformation, but experienced, instead, an accelerated political revolution that confronted (on the one hand) the old Catholic conservative regime with (on the other) the bourgeois republic and the defenders of a socialist dictatorship, prompting panic amongst the wealthy and the intervention of reactionary segments of the military on 18 July 1936 (Brenan 1960: 314). In the following sections, I explore this very labyrinth through cinema, which was instrumental in making the USSR an appealing project in the eyes of the leftist Spanish citizen, and as a model to adopt in the fight against fascism.

Soviet culture in Spain before the Civil War: the case of cinema

As mentioned above, most historical accounts of the cultural relationships between Spain and the USSR focus solely on the Civil War, overlooking a prior key period (1929-1936) in which a series of intellectuals who fell, directly or indirectly, into the Comintern's orbit, and actively encouraged Soviet film appreciation with a

view to creating a revolutionary Spanish cinema. As elsewhere in Europe, the exhibition of Soviet film was mainly confined to film-clubs and special screenings, glossed by articles in the numerous movie and culture magazines of the time. In his study of film journals from 1930 to 1939 in Spain, scholar Aitor Hernández Eguíluz (2008) identifies at least forty-two film-specific journals published throughout those vibrant years, while Caparrós Lera mentions at least 29 film-clubs that appeared during the Second Republic (1981: 29). It is important to locate the development of such networks in Spain's still semi-industrialized economy, during a period when it lacked official diplomatic ties to the USSR, and when it had endured years of relative isolation from the avant-garde culture that had spread throughout Europe in the first decades of the century.[i]

The history of Spanish cinema in this period, when told at all, is largely seen as either inconsequential or dominated by the French intellectual circles of the time. Since most film historians focus solely on the production of commercial films, more modest film-related experiences, such as film-clubs, journals, militant cinema, amateur film, educational cinema, and informal exhibition networks, are dismissed. Moreover, the few directors that are mentioned are treated as exceptional cases, separated from the context in which they began their careers. For instance, in his *History of Film*, Román Gubern describes Luis Buñuel as a 'meteorite' that passed through Spain (2006: 262), without mentioning his relationship with leftist film circles of the time, to which he later devoted a book: *Luis Buñuel; the red years* (Gubern 2009).

The influence and importance of the French avant-garde for Spanish intellectuals is not, however, in question. Poet and writer Louis Aragon, who had broken with the surrealists as a consequence of his support for Stalinism, was an

influential figure for Luis Buñuel (Gubern 2009: 316), while Juan Piqueras was himself influenced by fellow Marxist film critic Léon Moussinac, a member of the PCF who introduced him, together with Louis Delluc, into the film circles of Paris. There, Piqueras met Georges Sadoul, Jean Cocteau and Germaine Dulac, amongst other important cultural figures of the time (Llopis 1988: 137). Many of them collaborated at some point in his journal *Nuestro Cinema*, which he directed from Paris, where Buñuel also lived intermittently.

However, most scholarship has overlooked the importance of what I argue was, in fact, a coherent circle of intellectuals and informal institutions, devoted to the transformation of Spanish cinema culture from an anaemic local version of Hollywood to a 'new cinema' committed to social change. It is true that the avant-garde in Spain was more about the circulation of new works than the actual creation of material, but one has to take into account the difficult political and economic context of the country in terms of production and financing. Given these factors, the film cultural explosion of the late 1920s and early 1930s is even more remarkable, offering a unique example of a national cinema in the making, heavily influenced by the USSR's successful film policy.

What I suggest, then, is to shift the framework used by film historians to evaluate the 'importance' of film culture in a particular context. Rather than solely focusing on the film industry, commercial films, and the canonized avant-garde, I argue that there are relevant histories to be found in what might otherwise be considered to be 'failed' attempts and uncertain initiatives. Even if Piqueras' project to create a Soviet-inspired film culture did not fully succeed in terms of production or widespread circulation, it helped to establish the base of what would later become Spanish 'militant' cinema throughout the tumultuous twentieth century. Moreover, it

provides a different reading of the influence that USSR film policy had on European film culture, especially in relation to the Spanish Civil War.

The complex relationship between the European avant-garde and Soviet aesthetics has been recently revisited by a series of scholars (Hagener 2007, Salazkina 2012, Christie 2014) who have broadened the scope of these ties to other contexts, beyond the previous emphasis on France as the centre of avant-garde cultural expressions (Michelson 1965, Wollen 1975). Generally speaking, Soviet aesthetics provided an apparently perfect synthesis of avant-garde aspirations: formal innovation, disruption of an established social and political regime, and an orientation to a utopian future. As these scholars have shown, tensions between different avant-garde factions soon emerged, especially after Stalin imposed the turn to socialist realism. Art and politics were either 'too close' or 'too far apart' for radical tastes. Although still formally innovative, the ties of Soviet aesthetics with Stalin's national project were not accepted by many members of the avant-garde, a conflict epitomized by the fallout, known as the 'Aragon affair', between Lois Aragon and André Breton in 1933.

What has been explored in less depth is the strong appeal for peripheral countries, like Spain or Italy, of the nationalistic narrative, pedagogical model, and institutional framework behind Soviet film culture. Masha Salazkina (in press) provides a comprehensive analysis of the Italian case, but the Spanish context has not yet been explored to the same extent. Marta García Carrión recently published *Por un cine patrio* (2013), an account of nationalism and cinema in Spain between 1926-1936 that mentions critics such as Juan Piqueras and Mateo Santos, always from a national - rather than transnational - perspective. In general, the relationship between moving images and national narrative has been ascribed solely to the search of fascist

nationalisms for a visual regime of their own, overlooking alternative modes of nationalist discourse, such as the ones promoted by Spanish or Catalan leftist intellectuals throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For them, film provided a unique opportunity to change the countries' backward and stereotyped narrative, creating a new image and institutional model that could encourage the much-desired leap of the country into general modernization - that is, beyond industrialized and urban Spain.[ii] Take, for instance, the words of Anarchist critic and director Mateo Santos when answering the question 'What orientation (aesthetic, ideological, educational, etc) should the national production follow?'. He replied: 'The only one possible; that which displays in the celluloid an image and a landscape that can be identified as genuinely Spanish' (Santos 1933: 27). Santos had regularly defended the need for a Spanish proletarian film culture in journals such as *Nuestro Cinema* and *Popular Film*, which he edited. Why did he not make an explicit reference to Soviet aesthetics in his reply, and chose instead to talk about a 'genuine Spanish image'? I would argue that his reply embodies the generalized sentiment amongst Spanish politicized critics that a future national cinema should develop its own form of realism.

In this sense, Soviet aesthetics was the model but, as critic and writer César M. Arconada (who had by now written two novels inspired by Soviet realism: *Turbina*, in 1930, and *Los pobres contra los ricos*, in 1933) remarked, this did not mean that Spain had to copy exactly the USSR film industry and aesthetics, but develop its own form of realism according to the characteristics of the Spanish context. The proletarian revolution had not taken place in Spain, so the transformation of capitalist culture would have to begin within the system, waiting for the uprising that would 'build a new era of justice, where proletarian cinema and art [would] develop in complete unity with life' (Arconada 1933: 94). Due to their lack of means of

production, Soviet aesthetics was especially important for radical film critics as a way of creating the material conditions for a revolutionary culture. It was not so much about making Soviet-style films, but about educating the masses on the social function of cinema as a tool for the ideological transformation of the country. As Piqueras' opening quote indicates, the aim was to free the worker from the ideological poverty of mainstream films, and from the false image of Spanish society that they reflected, looking to inaugurate an entirely new visual regime.

Such discussions continued throughout the following years and, in a 1935 survey promoted by Piqueras' Marxist journal *Nuestro Cinema*, the following questions were asked:

> 1) Should censorship authorities treat Soviet cinema differently or the same as any other foreign cinema? 2) Do you consider Soviet cinema as a factor to be taken into account in the cinematographic, artistic, and cultural development of Spain? 3) If so, is it due to its technique or its content?' (Anon 1935: 66).

Five of the most relevant intellectuals of the time - Benjamín Jarnés, Francisco Ayala, Antonio Espina, Federico García Lorca and Ramón J. Sender - quickly replied. All of them firmly opposed any form of film censorship, except perhaps for what they called 'stupid' American films, and highlighted the undeniable importance of Soviet filmmaking as an educational and cultural model for Spain, praising both technique and content. Sender specified, however, that content should also be 'local', mentioning the importance of linking revolutionary thought with the 'national means of expression'. They also focused on the degree of reception that Soviet films had amongst the masses, an issue that Spanish critics and educators considered to be crucial in order to achieve a truly modern society. Why, then, were most intellectuals

so critical of Spanish cinema, constantly calling for its radical transformation to resemble the likes of strong national cinemas, such as the USSR's?

The paradoxical absence of a strong Spanish film industry during the nationalistic Primo de Rivera dictatorship had paved the way for French and American domination of the Spanish market, with the exception of some local films that basically reproduced the stereotypes of the so-called '*españolada*', or cheap productions based on Zarzuelas, melodramatic romances and old values, one-act farces, and basic comic sketches. Spain thereby exported - and imported - an image of a stratified and ignorant society that had very little to do with the everyday reality of the country, but that was, nonetheless, very popular. Moreover, the utmost centrality of Spanish cultural production in previous centuries was completely eclipsed by this new backward image, relegating Spain to the periphery of cultural production and academic attention, where it has more or less remained ever since. Its rich cultural history would be re-appropriated by both conservative and liberal nationalisms from time to time (see Holguín 2002, Mendelson 2005) but, beyond its borders, Spain was fixed in the public imaginary as an exotic failed empire, always at the expense of what happened in Paris.

The advent of the Second Republic in 1931 drastically changed the cultural landscape of the country. The creation of a new national cultural policy became a priority for the liberal authorities, which attempted to unite Spaniards through their rich artistic heritage. This policy faced the opposition of most political factions. Catholic conservatives criticized its lack of religious content, radical leftists saw it as bourgeois intellectualism and asked for an end to the censorship of Soviet film, and regional nationalisms were insulted by the absolute centrality of Spanish language and culture in these initiatives. These discussions developed in the numerous film journals

of the time, which included editorials, surveys, and articles referring to the situation and future of a Spanish national cinema.[iii]

At the same time, a local film industry began to develop in Madrid and Barcelona, although most films reproduced the '*españolada*' model (see above). Critics were divided between those who accepted this type of cinema as a necessary first step in the consolidation of a Spanish film industry, and those who opposed it *tout court*. For the latter group, the model to follow was based on the films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin or Preobrazhenskaia, which retold the narrative of the 'Russian people', creating a new history of proud citizens - the masses - busy in the collective construction of a promised future. Spanish supporters of the Russian model were oblivious to the problems that this situation actually presented, too seduced by the powerful Soviet aesthetics to question what lay behind them. As one review of Olga Preobrazhenskaia and Ivan Pravov's *El Pueblo del Pecado*/*Baby ryazanskie* (1927) - the first commercially exhibited Soviet film in Spain - remarks:

> *El Pueblo del Pecado* resembles no other film. It is unique. It has nothing of the other movies. It doesn't even have a protagonist. In *El Pueblo del Pecado* the protagonist, allow me the expression, is everyone; the people, the mass. The Russian people with its habits, with its tremendous passions, with its eagerness for social sense (Anon 1930a: 30).

Tired of the countless failures of political, cultural and social projects associated with the previous decades, film seemed to provide a unique opportunity for a rebranding of the Spanish national narrative from 'failed empire' to 'modern European nation', just as had appeared to happen in the USSR.

The emphasis in Soviet films on the collective over the individual provided the perfect framework for this new narrative, given the fragmented nature of Spanish

society. The images of the Russian people, not necessarily homogeneous but strongly united for the construction of a common good (a new and just society), greatly appealed to those who were tired of the endlessly unresolved dispute for cultural and political hegemony in Spain. It provided a serious alternative to the type of cinema that seemed to offer mindless entertainment and distraction, creating instead a space for collective cohesion that, mixing the old and the new, had a glorious future in mind. Most importantly, if Spanish art were to facilitate the proletarian revolution in any way, it would have to get rid of the individualism that characterized the despised bourgeois intellectual. As Arconada claimed,

> It is convenient to say that art is naturally a vehicle towards a proletarian world. But when arriving at the end of the journey, one has to descend from it. It is not acceptable to walk alone, in a carriage of aesthetics, like an ordinary Oscar Wilde, with impertinence and individual artistic pride. (Arconada 1933: 102).

Instead, critics like César M. Arconada, Juan Piqueras, and Mateo Santos defended a collective national film project for Spain where the filmmaker would not walk alone, but alongside fellow technicians and workers, and the carriage would not be made solely of aesthetics, but of social content and pedagogical intentions.

Seeing the world anew: education and cinema

In 1930, Guillem Díaz-Plaza – a writer, educator, and cultural historian who coordinated the first Spanish university cinema seminar in 1932, when Eisenstein's and Aleksandrov's *Romance Sentimentale* (1930) was shown - published *Una Cultura del Cinema*, the first book about cinema published in Catalan. From the perspective of Spain's much needed social and cultural modernization, he discussed the ability of cinema to capture the fast-paced changes of modern life, the emphasis it places on a

sensory culture as opposed to an intellectual one, and its educational potential. In the last sentence of the book, Díaz-Plaja mentioned that 'Russia is the key to the cinema of the future', and included a bibliography with the most relevant books that had been published on Russian cinema (1930: 114). Shortly before, he had cited Sergei Eisenstein's statement that 'cinema has to be a bridge between reason and sentiment', mentioning the importance of thinking a 'cinema dialectic' as a didactic model for Spanish cinema (1930: 107).

This model was based on the different approaches of Russian filmmakers, such as Sergei Eisenstein, Esfir Schub, Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin, to cinema as a tool for intellectual education through montage (Eisenstein 1949; Pudovkin 1935; Vertov 1984). Eisenstein gave conferences throughout Europe explaining the USSR's film policy, stating that 'the aim of our cinema is not to create an entertainment or an enjoyable distraction. For us cinema is always a very serious issue, which has an instructional and cultural nature' (1933: 104). The Soviets saw film as a formidable instrument for epistemological and cognitive transformation, allowing spectators to understand the inner workings of society. The method was based on the dialectical juxtaposition of images from which a new meaning would emerge, as summarized by Eisenstein himself, 'from the image to the emotion, from the emotion to the thesis' (1933: 108). These filmmakers attempted to create a new universal language, capable of transmitting the abstract world of ideas into moving images. This, of course, had a formidable propagandistic potential for the different nationalisms that coexisted in Spain.

Not surprisingly, when the new Catalan autonomous government commissioned Domènec Giménez i Botey - one of the main figures of the Catalan Excursionist Amateur Cinema Section - to draft an official policy on cinema as an

instrument of culture in 1933, the document included key references to cinema in the USSR, especially regarding the institutionalization of film education (Giménez i Botey 1933). In a section devoted to a future Catalan Cinema Academy, the text mentioned the names of courses taught at the Tekhnikum film school in the USSR. Later known as (V) GIK, the Tekhnikum was the first state-sponsored film school of its kind. While the process of institutionalizing film education was not fully achieved in other contexts until after the Second World War, the USSR had done so by the late 1920s-early 1930s, becoming 'a model for many film educational structures around the world' (Salazkina in press). Its training was based on a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as the maintenance of an open mind regarding experimentation.

This approach to film education attracted people like Giménez i Botey and Guillem Díaz-Plaja who, in an article in *Cinema Amateur*, mentioned the need to go beyond 'theoretical divagations' and create an official film school that would create 'the vision of Catalonia for the eyes of the young' (Díaz-Plaja 1933: 36). Although ideologically removed from the bourgeois nature of the Catalan amateurs, the Soviet Tekhnikum was the most successful example they could turn to for their institutional plans in Catalonia. Likewise, Giménez i Botey suggested, in his proposal to the Generalitat, the institutional production of films that would become the 'propaganda of our country' (1933: 46). Although not explicitly mentioned in the document, this project was modelled on the example set by the USSR, whose films had made an impression on Spanish intellectuals (see above). Although in 1933 Giménez i Botey was already thinking of exporting these institutional films, the idea was later picked up by the Generalitat during the Civil War, creating the propaganda production

company ‘Laia Films’, which produced over 137 documentaries and newsreels in support of the Republic.

Beyond movie palaces: reconsidering the circulation of film culture

The detailed studies by Díaz-Plaja and Giménez i Botey, regarding Soviet film culture, do not match the generally accepted idea of Spain as an isolated and completely peripheral cultural arena. Many Spanish intellectuals and educators were well aware of the situation of film in the USSR. News arrived via books on Soviet cinema published in other languages, such as Leon Moussinac’s (1928) *Le cinema soviétique*, which was translated into Spanish in 1931, or *L'Art dans la Russie Nouvelle; Le Cinema* (1927), by René Marchand et Pierre Weinstein, from which Díaz-Plaja copied the Tekhnikum class list. In addition, updates were also received from first-person experiences of individuals such as Julio Álvarez del Vayo who published *La Nueva Rusia* in 1926, and Rafael Alberti, who wrote a series of articles titled ‘Noticieros de un poeta en la USSR’/‘News from a poet in the USSR’ for *Luz* newspaper between July and August 1933). There were also several books published on Soviet cinema, like Josep Palau’s (1932) *El cinema soviètic: cinema i revolució*, not to mention the regular articles published in journals and newspapers from all political stances, such as the bourgeois *Mirador*, *La Revista de Catalunya* and *D’aci i d’ alla*, the Marxist *Nuestro Cinema*, and ‘Star System’-oriented publications such as *Cinegramas*, *Cine Art*, and *Popular Film*.

Discussing Soviet cinema was, therefore, very common at the time, but watching films was an entirely different matter. Since the Republican government did not remove the ban on Soviet films implemented during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the only chance to watch such films was in the film-club circuit. In January 1930, the elitist CINECLUB ESPAÑOL organized, in its ninth session, the

first showcase of Soviet films, including a special presentation by Álvarez del Vayo on Soviet cinema and his experience visiting directors and studios in his trips to the USSR. The selection of Soviet films was made by Piqueras who, in the review of the screening for the newspaper *La Gaceta Literaria*, admitted that 'Cinematographically speaking we had some references of Russia. But we didn't know anything about the USSR' (Llopis 1988: 300). With these words, Piqueras acknowledged the scarce information about the USSR that was available to Spanish citizens at the time while also conveying the strong fascination and interest for the USSR that those films aroused in film-club audiences. Shortly after, the same month the Second Republic was proclaimed on April 1931, Eisenstein's *The General Line/Staroye i novoye* was shown in Barcelona and Madrid, and by August a local delegation of 'Friends of Russia' (Amigos de Rusia)[iv] in Alicante had also screened the film. By October of 1931 Catalan architect and urban planner Antonio Bonet was organizing a one-day Soviet film festival with the help of VOKS, with screenings of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin/Bronenosets Potemkin* (1925), Trauberg's *Blue Express* (1929), and an unspecified documentary (Kowalsky 2004).[v]

After the disappearance of the CINECLUB ESPAÑOL in 1931, new film-club initiatives including Soviet or proletarian films in their programmes emerged. Buñuel and Piqueras directed CINECLUB PROA-FILMÓFONO, an initiative that stemmed from the production and distribution company Filmófono, founded by businessmen Ricardo Urgoiti in 1929.[vi] It mirrored the bourgeois membership of CINECLUB ESPAÑOL, with screenings taking place in the Palacio de la Prensa in Madrid. This would attract some criticism, curiously enough from Piqueras' own *Nuestro Cinema*, but also positive comments for the film-club's efforts in bringing Soviet films to public notice (Hernández Eguíluz 2013). Piqueras attempted to break outside the

charmed circle of well heeled aesthetes by calling, from the pages of his magazine, for the creation of a Spanish Federation of Proletarian film-clubs (Piqueras 1933: 214) and, later on, by creating the STUDIO NUESTRO CINEMA, in 1934, a film-club headed by Antonio del Amo that aimed to appeal to popular classes.

Very little is known regarding the different proletarian film-clubs that Piqueras attempted to unite through his federation initiative. In his study of film-clubs during the Second Republic, Aitor Hernández Eguíluz (2013) mentions the existence of the CINECLUB FRENTE REVOLUCIONARIO (organized by revolutionary students of Madrid), the CINECLUB FUE (which showed Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*/*Bronenosets Potemkin* (1925) in 1934, which prompted a courtesy visit from the Civil Guard)[vii] and the CINECLUB DE BANCA Y BOLSA (created by the union of banking and stock exchange employees). This last example demonstrates the growing influence of proletarian-oriented initiatives in the heated cultural and political context of the country. Its founder, Julio González Vázquez, stated in a *Popular Film* article that

> Precisely this is our role. We are prepared to bring Soviet films from Paris. In Paris there is a large number of them. We will appeal to Moscow if necessary. We have to get them at all costs. We intend to offer truly popular sessions soon. Our aim is to disseminate an authentic cinema anywhere and anytime. Especially amongst workers (Amo Algara 1933).

Finally, scholar Asier Aranzubia Cob also mentions a few other proletarian-revolutionary film-clubs that developed in Madrid in the years prior to the Civil War and were attached to organizations such as *Socorro Rojo Internacional*, *Cine-Teatro Club*, or *Juventud Roja* (2003: 148).

The apparently marginal role of these film-club experiences and radical film initiatives may not appear historically significant at first glance. However, their importance lies in the fact that they constituted an antecedent to the developments that followed this period: considering how central political film became for both fascist and republican propaganda (especially for the latter) from the very beginning of the Civil War, it becomes apparent that these networks of propaganda film circulation and production adapted the aforementioned informal film infrastructures. The alternative spaces of exhibition, distribution, and production that came to the fore during the Civil War originated, therefore, from the precarious militant cultures that we have attempted to reconstruct in this essay. The urgencies of the war exponentially accelerated what Juan Piqueras, Antonio Del Amo, Luis Buñuel, and many others had started. I do not mean to imply, however, that the use of film by the Republican side during the war is a direct consequence of the Comintern's policy, but that it was certainly influenced, and enhanced, by the paths previously opened by these radical film critics. We have to remember that they were the ones who introduced revolutionary and proletarian aesthetics in Spain, inspiring film directors (such as Antonio del Amo and Mateo Santos) editors, and newsreel camera operators during the conflict.

What started as a fad for Soviet films among Spanish cinephiles evolved rapidly - as political unrest became more widespread - into an expanding proletarian film culture. The radicalization of Spanish politics in the following months, which in turn created the backlash that underpinned the 1936 Fascist rebellion against the Spanish Second Republic, had an immediate effect in this revolutionary film culture, at least partially conditioned by the Comintern's turn to the popular front strategy. The Civil War boosted the production of newsreels - as we saw with the example of

'Laia Films' - in support of the Republic, and the screening of Soviet films also increased. In October 1936, communist leader José Díaz gave a speech after a projection of *My iz Kronshtadta/Los Marinos de Cronstadt* (Dzigan 1936) in the Cine Monumental in Madrid, where he praised the struggle of the 'red sailors' and reminded the audience that this was the fight they would experience in the following months (Díaz 1970: 112). A poster to promote the film - displayed in the MNAC room mentioned in the introduction - was designed by artist and critic Josep Renau, who had brought Marxist thought into the analysis of Spanish culture via the journal *Orto* (1932-1934), and who had regularly contributed to Piqueras' *Nuestro Cinema*.

The Comintern, which had successfully introduced Soviet films in Spain through its network of intellectuals, in the hope that it would eventually spread to the politically radicalized Spanish society, was now harvesting the fruits of a well-planned cultural policy. Only five years after that ninth CINECLUB ESPAÑOL session in the Ritz, a revolutionary film culture had been created in the midst of a set of bourgeois cinephile avant-gardists, transforming the base of a Spanish militant cinematic culture that would thrive during the Civil War and disappear in the first decades of Franco's regime, before re-emerging in the different underground anti-dictatorship Marxist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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[i] The 'Students Residency' (Residencia de Estudiantes), which was founded in 1910 in Madrid to break this isolation, selected promising students from all over Spain to foster their creative interests in different cultural realms such as poetry, writing, theater, painting or film, encouraging them to look beyond Spain for cultural referents. Amongst its pupils, we find writers such as Antonio Machado, Rafael

Alberti, Eugeni d'Ors and Federico García Lorca, filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel, and artists such as Salvador Dalí and Manuel de Falla.

[ii] Ilya Ehrenburg (2008) notes, in his 1932 account of the first months of the Spanish Second Republic, *España, República de Trabajadores*, that the anachronisms of Spanish society were unparalleled, illustrating the differences between urban and rural environments by describing millionaires in luxury cars, that contrasted with illiterate peasants travelling by donkey, and lavish meals in the Ritz in Madrid, very different from the image of malnourished children in remote villages.

[iii] See, for example, 'Consejos a los directores Españoles'/'Advice for Spanish directors' (Anon 1934a: 1), 'A survey on Spanish cinema'/'Una encuesta sobre cine español' (Anon 1934b: 26), 'Spanish Cinema: cul-de-sac'/'Cinema español; Callejón sin salida' (Piqueras 1935: 3), and 'Towards a proletarian cinema'/'Hacia un cinema proletario' (Arconada 1933: 92).

[iv] This organization was a precursor of the Madrid-based 'Friends of the Soviet Union' (AUS, Amigos de la Unión Soviética), which actively promoted the USSR in Spain.

[v] Kowalsky (2004) mentions the celebration of this one-day festival in his account of Soviet-Spanish cultural relations before 1936, quoting a letter from Antonio Bonet to VOKS from 26 August 1931 (GARF f. 5283).

[vi] Ricardo Urgoiti and his company Filmófono would be of vital importance for both Buñuel and Piqueras, providing financial support as their main employer in the early 1930s. The former would be hired as director of the film production department in 1934, and the latter was responsible for selecting French films for Spanish distribution. Although Urgoiti was not a communist, he was certainly on the Left,

actively supporting the Republic after the fascist rebellion. He can be considered a key ‘financial benefactor’ of the film culture analyzed in this article, both as employer of its most relevant figures and as financial supporter of Piqueras’ *Nuestro Cinema*.

[vii] In an interview conducted by Aranzubia Cob (2003), Basque intellectual Julián Antonio Ramírez recalls how the screening was stopped halfway to inform the audience that the Civil Guard was waiting outside the venue in order to arrest the attendants of this CINECLUB FUE session on the grounds of ‘revolutionary’ activities.

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