Film called into action: Juan Piqueras, Léon Moussinac, Harry Alan Potamkin and the '*Internationale*' of film pedagogy

In 1931 New York critic Harry Allan Potamkin published a manifesto titled 'A Movie Call To Action!' in which he encouraged film critics to educate workers, calling for the creation of a Film Action Federation.[1] Its ultimate goal was to mobilize the cinematic apparatus beyond commercial purposes, envisioning a pedagogical role that would educate spectators in social justice and political action. His arguments and concrete proposals are strikingly similar to those of French critic Léon Mousinnac, who only a few months before had announced his project for a Fédération Ouvrière de Ciné-Photo (Cine-Photo Worker Federation, from here on FOCP) in Paris.[2] Two years later, Spanish critic Juan Piqueras would publish a very similar manifesto titled 'Hacia una Federación de Cineclubs Proletarios' (Towards a Spanish Federation of Proletarian Film-clubs), echoing Potamkin and Moussinac's arguments.[3] All three manifestos, and the corresponding initiatives they spurred, advocated for a radical educational imperative. Together, these overlooked geographies of film culture allow for a triangulation of the spaces where film, education, and politics came together. They are a testament to the porous boundaries between film theory and practice, through which the medium inserted itself into the everyday realms of social and political struggle throughout the 1930s.

Echoing Gramscian educational theory, I argue that pedagogy was the driving force behind such practices, relations, and discourses.[4] I understand pedagogy both as a set of practices involving educational uses of film, and as a cultural imperative towards the creation of new social orders. Cinema was seen by many as an educational resource to instruct the population, given the elevated levels of illiteracy and the ability of the medium to captivate amazed audiences. For critics like Piqueras, Moussinac, and Potamkin, it was also the perfect vehicle for

political revolution and solidarity. Cinema spoke the global language of images, connecting their different pedagogical efforts into a tacit '*Internationale'* of film education. In this, they anticipated the discourses on critical film spectatorship and political action of the long sixties.

This network capitalized on existing practices of international film circulation that had been developing in previous years. Take for instance the journal *Close Up* (1927-1933), published from Switzerland by a group of American, Scottish and British artists called The Pool Group. It had correspondents in Moscow, Berlin, Paris, Geneva, London, New York and Los Angeles, and an equally international list of authors devoted to "theory and analysis" instead of "gossip."[5] On the other side of the Atlantic, *Experimental Cinema* (1930-1934) followed a similar path, exploring the "principles of world cinema" in order to "orient those individuals and groups scattered throughout America, Europe and U. S. S. R. that are working to liberate the cinema from its stereotyped symbolism."[6] Beyond the pages of film journals, the growing institutionalization of film in government initiatives saw the creation of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECI, 1928-1938) in Rome. Its creation was decided in an International Congress of Cinema held in Paris in 1926. Although scholars rarely mention it, congresses on film were not uncommon at the time, with topics ranging from educational cinema, censorship, amateurism, independent cinema, and even geopolitical relations. For instance, in 1930 Spain celebrated the first Congreso Hispanoamericano de Cinematografía (Hispano-American Film Congress), with the objective of creating a united Spanish-speaking front against Hollywood's control of local markets. All these examples make evident that film was discussed as much as a social and political form as it was an 'art form'. Film culture travelled, and with it ideas about the medium's function in society beyond elite cultural circles and aesthetics.

Consequently, this article will also reassess the shift from a formalist to a materialistic avant-garde. All three critics gradually departed from the autonomous aesthetic circles that had initially nurtured their fascination for film, moving towards the use of film culture to revolutionize life as a whole.[7] Contrary to Burger's notion that the avant-garde was only institutionalized after World War II by what he calls the "neo-avant-garde" (and thus losing its revolutionary potential) I show how the materialistic avant-garde put forward by Piqueras, Moussinac, and Potamkin embraced institutionalization precisely as a way to transform everyday life. In their vocation for travel, foreign-language publishing, and mobility they also followed what Raymond Williams describes as "the true social bases of the early avant-garde", challenging the borders of the old order.[8] For instance, we know that Léon Moussinac and Juan Piqueras travelled to the USSR in the early 1930s, and that they knew each other when the later moved to Paris in 1930. The both attended the II Congres International du Cinéma Indépendant (International Congress of Independent Filmmakers, from now on CICI) in November 1930.[9] In the congress serious tensions between the aesthetic and politicized avant-garde's erupted.[10] Likewise, Harry Potamkin attended the I Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov (6-15 November 1930) as part of a delegation of the leftist newspaper *New Masses*.[11]

Ultimately, my conception of the avant-garde is inspired by the *New Literary History* special issue "What is an Avant-Garde?", which poses such a question as a "productive site for methodological and historical invention, and not merely a monument to the glorious past of radical art".[12] In other words, we have to take into account the transformative spirit of the avant-garde as creative horizon, but also understand how this impulse was present in many other practices that surpassed it. With this idea in mind, new genealogies of 1930s film culture emerge,

some of them crucially connected to later developments in film education, documentary cinema, and radical film criticism.

Instead of following a chronological order –from Moussinac to Potamkin and finally Piqueras – I begin with the Spanish critic in order to then trace back how the work of Moussinac and Potamkin echoed beyond their respective contexts, all of them intersected in the diffused, sometimes erratic, but influential genealogy of radical film culture during the 1930s. Opening with the work of Piqueras is also a way to recognize his centrality in the consolidation of such developments, despite having been ignored for decades by scholars until recently.[13] His mobile position – both in terms of geography and critical thought – is key for the triangulation of interwar film culture undertaken by this article, leaving the boundaries of established film history to provide a different map of film culture circulation.

Against ideological poverty: Juan Piqueras and the creation of a proletarian film culture in Spain

In 1932 Juan Piqueras created *Nuestro Cinema*, the first Marxist journal specifically devoted to film published in Spanish. The journal was directed by Piqueras from his home in Paris, printed in Barcelona, and had its headquarters in Madrid. Film historian Georges Sadoul described it as "the best film journal in capitalist Europe," longing for a similar journal to appear in France and highlighted *Nuestro Cinema*'s role in the organization of film-clubs of "great interest" in Spain.[14] It published thirteen issues from June 1932 to October 1933, and four more issues from January to August 1935. Amongst its collaborators were Béla Balázs, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Joris Ivens, León Moussinac, René Clair, and Spanish critics and writers such as Juan Piqueras, César M. Arconada and Luis Buñuel. The journal was devoted to the promotion of proletarian and social cinema, in opposition to the capitalist oriented film

industry that dominated Spanish screens at the time – mainly Hollywood and French productions –[15] as well as local folkloric-driven escapist films known as españoladas. In this context, as Eva Touboul mentions, "*Nuestro Cinema* placed itself at the cleavage point between bourgeois and social revolutionary cinema."[16] The journal published very little reviews on films, devoting much of its pages to theoretical articles on a wide range of aspects regarding the industrial, ideological, artistic, and political nature of film and its relationship to the social fabric.

Figure 1. Cover of *Nuestro Cinema* Issue 3 with still from Sergei Eisentein's *Oktyabr/ October* (1928).

It may seem quite striking that the "best film journal in capitalist Europe" –according to one of the most important film historians of the era– appeared in a country like Spain. It certainly is the case if we follow the traditional map of film history, which focuses on commercial film production and is thus blind to other forms of cinematic circulation. For instance, a survey of early 1930s Spanish film culture shows more than forty film-related journals and dozens of film clubs throughout the country. Spain also had a Comité de Cinematografía (Film Committee), created to institutionalize film, organize congresses, and provide a regulatory framework for the medium in terms of censorpship, taxes, and safety conditions in movie theaters. Moreover,

Spanish film culture looked beyond its borders, sending delegates to the IECI in Rome and the CICI congress in Brussels. In 1935, the government gave a travel scholarship to M.F. Alvar to seek out – and, concomitantly, learn from – educational uses of film throughout Europe. His findings were published a year later in a book titled *Cinematografía Pedagógica y Educativa*.[17] This is the thriving cultural milieu into which Juan Piqueras launched *Nuestro Cinema*. His decision to publish a journal in Spanish, despite living in Paris, speaks to the decentralized nature of film culture at the time.

Piqueras had moved to Paris in May 1930, and was introduced in the orbit of the French Communist Party (Partie Communiste Français, PCF) via figures like Georges Sadoul and León Moussinac. At the same time – and fulfilling the original intention behind his relocation – he also entered the avant-garde circles of René Clair, Germaine Dullac and the like. Indeed, when *La Gaceta Literaria* described Piqueras's move to France, they used the following description;

> Inspired by his great vocation –and devotion– to cinema, Juan Piqueras has gathered all the theoretical cinematographic knowledge acquired in Spain, and has gone to Paris to study the seventh art from the inside, in its practical mechanics. From this first step that is Paris, he will later on jump –very soon– to the dominions of the greatest and most universal movies; New York and Hollywood.[18]

It is true that Piqueras did attempt to work in the Joinville studios – which had been bought by Paramount Pictures to produce French and Spanish speaking versions of Hollywood films – however, he rapidly became dissatisfied with the types of films produced there, and consequently spearheaded a campaign to boycott Paramount Spanish-version films on the basis of their "mediocrity, falsehood, and lack of personality."[19] The studio offered Piqueras a considerable amount of money to silence his criticism, but he refused and intensified his attack on capitalist cinema. Given this incident, and Piqueras's subsequent steps towards the promotion of proletarian cinema, it is clear that the move from France was not going to be towards Hollywood,

but back to Spain – via Paris and USSR – in order to help transform the film culture of the country.

In his account of this first year in Paris, for newspaper *La Semana Gráfica*, Piqueras detailed that after giving up on the Joinville Studio job he travelled to the Second Congress of Independent Filmmakers in Brussels in November 1930. There he served as the Spanish delegate alongside Ernesto Giménez Caballero.[20] He delivered a talk discussing the situation of Hispano-American cinema, the absence of good filmmakers, and the positive influence from Soviet cinema. Next, he mentioned plans to travel to Moscow in August, in order to witness Soviet film production in person. His objectives were, in his own words, to "travel, read, learn, write, produce, teach", a description that can be attached to Potamkin and Moussinac's own goals as engaged internationalist film critics with a clear pedagogical spirit.

Around the same time, René Clair invited him to work as assistant director in his film *À nous la liberté* (1931).[21] But instead of following through with this adoption process into the avant-garde circles of Paris, Piqueras found himself at odds with what he saw as Clair's "humanist sentimentalism", which "whipped the dominant classes but without defending the oppressed classes or their concrete ideals."[22] Immediately after abandoning the film's set, Piqueras began to prepare *Nuestro Cinema*, which, under the subtitle 'International Notebooks of Cinematographic Evaluation' ('Cuadernos Internacionales de Valorización Cinematográfica'), sought to defend "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 is not the current one, which is in the hands of those who are interested in a mass ignorant of what cinema could teach them."[23]

This position was certainly not exempt from paradox, especially in terms of how much the proletarian class was actually an active part of these developments rather than just an imagined subject talked about by leftist intellectuals. Indeed, the fact that Juan Piqueras, and many of the writers in *Nuestro Cinema*, came from working class backgrounds – instead of the usual wealthy upbringing of avant-garde members – hints at the emergence of what Antonio Gramsci calls an "organic" proletarian intellectual in Spain.[24] But there was also a great distance between the ideal working class spectator envisioned by them and the actual interests of the public. For instance, Piqueras claimed in 1932 that "the public, despite how badly oriented and treated it is, despite the social and aesthetic disdain it endures, has decisively turned his back to superficial cinema, to imperialist films disguised as pacifist, to individualistic cinema that ignores complex problems, to operettas, to white comedies, and in sum to everything old and expired."[25] It is true that from 1933 to 1936 the percentage of foreign films gradually declined in relation to the emerging local film industry. But the fact is that spectators enthusiastically endorsed these folkloric and stereotypical films called "españoladas", which dispensed with social commentary altogether in favor of escapist entertainment.[26]

Nonetheless, Piqueras's efforts mark an important moment in radical film culture, when the utopian future tense of the avant-garde was replaced with the present tense of worker struggles against capitalism. This new framework is exemplified in Piqueras's comments on *Nuestro Cinema*'s first survey on the medium, launched in Issue 2 (July 1932) of the journal. Questions included the role of the social in cinema, genres beyond commercial cinema, or the status and possibilities of a Spanish film industry. In his analysis, the critic noted the absence of replies from members of the "old literary avant-garde, intellectuals, and Hispanic film-club snobs" that had arrived to cinema after the "great public". To them, he opposed the anonymous

replies of "unknown voices through which we perceive new feelings, aspirations, and formations."[27] Taking into account how Léon Moussinac and Harry Allan Potamkin had moved from aesthetic based film criticism to political and ideological action in the previous years, it is clear that Piqueras internalized their own eschewal of avant-garde purist cinema, in favour of a radical film pedagogy that would operate beyond intellectual elites.

Two issues later, later Piqueras would formally introduce León Moussinac to Spanish readers, with a foreground to Moussinac's review of *Zlatye Gory*/ The Golden Mountains (Sergei Yutkevich, 1931). Piqueras described him as the only genuinely independent French film critic:

> His attacks to capitalist bourgeois cinema, his eminently *pedagogical* role with the proletarian readership of L'Humanité, his acidic campaigns against all those films imposed upon us, his own books on cinema, make León Moussinac the first *militant* of this cinematographic journalism created by the revolutionary press.[28]

I have highlighted in italics the terms *pedagogical* and *militant* used by Juan Piqueras, as they neatly summarize the change in priorities for the critic, who had left for Paris in search of 'the center of cinema' – with an eye on Hollywood – and landed in the French film avant-garde circles. But he had then become involved in educational initiatives such as the Hispano-American Cinema Congress, the IECI, and different film-clubs in Spain. He had finally found in Léon Moussinac the mirror into which to project his aspirations as film critic and cultural agitator. Piqueras recognized in him a new mode of cultural activism and engagement that combined a defense of an alternative cinema to the commercial system with a clear political positioning, directed towards the proletarian cause.[29]

In this sense, Piqueras' 1932 use of the term *militant* speaks to a radical change in the conceptualization of the public role of socially committed film critics, which arguably shifted from criticizing commercial capitalist cinema to capitalism in itself. Not only this, but their realm

of influence expanded from weekly or monthly columns in film journals to a whole array of activities interrelated with politics and education. The birth of this engaged film intellectual implied – for Moussinac, Potamkin and Piqueras – the end of a previous formation, the avant-garde, which had spearheaded the resistance against capitalist commercial cinema. In Issue 7 (December 1932) of *Nuestro Cinema*, Piqueras translated an article by Moussinac tellingly titled "Death of the Avant-garde". The French critic solemnly pronounced the death of a cultural formation that had "fought – to a certain extent – against the mercantilist impulse of cinema" and "revealed new personalities, modes of education and propaganda", but could no longer, given the technical and economic crisis of the medium, be sustained or become effective.[30] For Moussinac, the absolute focus on aesthetics – and a concomitant disregarding of economics – by the avant-garde was to blame for this premature death, and only "a strong power in origin, a revolutionary organism, could be able de develop this experimental effort methodically."

This veiled mention of the USSR as the guarantor of a new avant-garde is telling of the polemic direction that many intellectuals took during the 1930s. Their political commitment created an irreconcilable split in the avant-garde between those who defended the independence and autonomy of artistic creation and those who thought art should be instrumentalized by the proletarian cause, following the Stalin-imposed turn to "socialist realism."[31] *Nuestro Cinema* clearly aligned itself with this second option, since, for the journal, it was in the Soviet Union that the "living pulse of cinematography" could be found, in opposition to the dead-end of the avant-garde. [32] The methodological shift advocated by Piqueras, Moussinac, and Potamkin – from aesthetic-based approaches, in line with 1920s impressionist French film theory, to a Marxist-materialist historiography that foregrounds above all the economics of the production process – was informed by similar political objectives (mainly a proletarian revolution) but the

pacing and tactics were certainly not homogeneous. In other words, they were inspired and guided by the Soviet model, but their projects for a radical pedagogy were directed to transform their own local film cultures, establishing the link between cinema and society – in political and economic terms – that artistic autonomy had explicitly rejected until then:

> The true "Art for all" should never consist of turning people into spectators, rather the opposite: it consists of mastering what was previously the particular property of the specialists of art –mastering all of the qualities and abilities necessary to build and organize raw material. That comes first. Second is the involvement of the masses in the processes of "creation", which until now only individuals have used to conduct their "liturgies."[33]

These words, taken from Sergei Tret'iakov's 1923 essay "Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art", summarize the Soviet-inspired participatory spirit behind the cultural actions sponsored by Piqueras, Potamkin, and Moussinac. However, and I will stress this throughout the essay, although united by a common objective and inspiration – the transformation of the artistic realm to serve the proletarian cause – their actions developed asymmetrically. In the case of Spain, Piqueras realized that a large-scale proletarian film production faced insurmountable obstacles, and opted instead to promote more informal networks of solidarity. He called for the creation of a Spanish Federation of Proletarian Film-clubs, in order to disseminate a revolutionary film culture throughout Spain.[34] The idea was to unite the growing number of proletarian oriented film-clubs, such as the Sindicato Banca y Bolsa (Madrid), Cineclub Proletario (Santander), Cine Studio Popular (Valencia) or Cineclub Avançada (Terrasa) into a well structured distribution network of militant films, that would bypass the government's censorship of official commercial channels.

Although the project was focused on distribution and not production, it was hoped that the propagation of a militant film culture would also motivate a localized proletarian film

production. This had already happened in the Sindicato Banca y Bolsa, which produced a film – *El Despertar Bancario*, which is unfortunately lost – on the labor conditions of the workers, but there is little to no evidence of similar examples elsewhere.[35] To try and give momentum to the Federation of Cine Clubs, *Nuestro Cinema* inaugurated its own 'Studio Nuestro Cinema' in 1934, a cine-club in which film critics affiliated with the journal introduced international films and discussions were held after the projections. The price of admission was lowered in order to attract actual workers, but the audience remained majorly bourgeoise.

Figure 2. "Studio Nuestro Cinema" session cards and announcement. *Nuestro Cinema,* Issue 16.

With this project, Piqueras attempted to emulate the success of Les Amis de Spartacus (Friends of Spartacus), a proletarian film club created by León Moussinac in 1928, which will be analyzed later. Sessions were held every Sunday in the Pleyel cinema in Madrid, and different branches were established in other Spanish cities like Valencia. Discussing the objectives of the initiative, Antonio del Amo said; "we have organized these sessions so that, once the series end,

attendees draw instructional conclusions that allow them too see with more clarity the perspectives that cinema can offer as an art and as an educational instrument."[36] The film club was structured more as a course rather than individual screenings, covering a wide range of film styles and ideologies to try and give audiences a comprehensive understanding of the history of the medium. Across its nine sessions it showed films from Sergei Eisenstein, Olga Preobrazhenskaia, G.W. Pabst, Joris Ivens, King Vidor, Jean Renoir, Walter Ruttman and Luis Buñuel. Although it largely failed to reach the working class audience it envisioned, the initiative was, in line with similar projects spearheaded by Moussinac and Potamkin, a key step towards creating a critical spectatorship pedagogy. However, the political context in Spain – with the Civil War about to break out – didn't allow the necessary time for such an initiative to develop.

Given the urgencies of an increasingly radicalized Spanish society, and to enhance the actual possibilities for a proletarian film production, Piqueras inaugurated a section in the last issue of *Nuestro Cinema* devoted to amateur cinema, with a manifesto titled "Our Amateur Cinema in Nuestro Cinema."[37] The article called for a proletarian appropriation of amateur cinema in order to begin an alternative cinema movement that "depicts the life and essential struggles of the proletariat in the world, that shows its ideas and initiatives, its labors and problems." In other words, Piqueras saw amateur film as a way to document the life of the workers by introducing it into the public visual sphere of the time. He signalled the "countless" advantages of small gauge filmmaking over mainstream production, including cost, ubiquity of projection and the absence of state censorship over sub-standard formats (8, 9.5, 16 and 17.5 mm), the latter of which was a key loophole through which a proletarian film culture could be introduced in Spain, given that Soviet films were still banned by the II Republic government.

Although the federation of film clubs and amateur film production projects were hardly implemented, they still stand as a remarkable attempt to mobilize film for political action in a critical moment in the country's history. Moreover, they show how film culture was expanding its realms of action well beyond the limits of commercial cinema. In the following sections we will see how Léon Moussianc in France, and Harry Potamkin in the USA, had already proposed similar projects and ideas. Together, they were part of a network of film critics, directors, scriptwriters, and technicians that had grown discontent with both commercial capitalist cinema and avant-garde apolitical positioning. In their search for a viable alternative to such problems, they experimented with the possibilities of the medium beyond movie palaces, traditional star-oriented film journals, film criticism or even professional filmmaking, exploring the political usefulness of the medium.

A matter of education: Léon Moussinac and film pedagogy

It is important to stress that Moussinac, Piqueras, and Potamkin certainly didn't always think of cinema in such straightforwardly political terms. As with most avant-garde film critics during the 1920s, the defense of an autonomous realm for cinema as art was their main guiding principle. But this allegiance to the avant-garde did not exclude a growing awareness of the social possibilities of the medium beyond artistic expression. As scholars such as Valerie Vignaux contend, the sharp distinction between a 1920s "cinephilic" approach to film as the seventh art and a sudden turn towards "activist" cinema in the 1930s is a much more nuanced story.[38] For her, the early work of León Moussinac already prefigures the later widespread politicization of French film culture. Already by 1925 he had created a travelling movie theater called the Cinéma du Peuple (Cinema of the people), with the objective of educating a critical

public against capitalist cinema. Shortly after, Moussinac highlighted the educational role of film in his column for *L'Humanité* (Communist newspaper and main organ of the PCF from 1920 to 1994), suggesting "if cinema inspires us because of its prodigious expressive possibilities from an artistic point of view, it captivates us no less for the pedagogical role its bound to fulfill."[39] Education, then, emerged as a central element alongside aesthetics in the struggle for an alternative to commercial fiction cinema.

In 1929, Moussinac founded the film club Les amis de Spartacus (Friends of Spartacus), which became the most important alternative distribution network to the commercial theatre system in France, with an estimated 10,000 members.[40] It was aimed at a mixed audience of working class people and highbrow cinephiles, and devoted most of its programming efforts to introduce Soviet films like Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mat/Mother* (1926) and *Konyets Sankt-Peterburga/The End of St Petersburg* (1927), or Sergei Eisenstein's *Oktyabr'/October* (1928) and *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battlesip Potemkin* (1925). Although shut down only months later by French authorities, the successful experience – in terms of exhibition and distribution – of *Les amis de Spartcus* proved that a sizable organization against capitalist cinema was possible.

In this sense, scholar Timothy Barnard states that the film club could have become a space of encounter between the avant-garde and documentary, fostering a strong activist cinema that would have blended both traditions.[41] But he then reminds us that subsequent developments in leftist French filmmaking during the 1930s raise important questions about such affirmation. Barnard focuses his argument on the problematic relationship between Léon Moussinac and the French Communist Party (PCF), and their distrust of proletarian film production. The critic was worried about the production of films with small-gauge formats – such as 9.5, 17.5, and 16mm – since they would "destroy" the plastic qualities of images and become a "dangerous experience

for the party."[42] On the other hand, the PCF had sponsored its own production company ´Huma Films´, and was most probably afraid to sponsor a grassroots initiative that could easily escape control from the party's centralized organization. But if one looks at subsequent developments, such as the PCF's use of amateur produced proletarian documentaries during the 1932 election campaign, or Moussinac's later insistence on sponsoring small-gauge worker films, we can see how film production was certainly never discarded by both, just approached with some suspicion. It is true that it didn't take off in the way Les Amis de Spartacus did as an exhibition circuit; however, one has to account for the added difficulties of production in terms of expenses and supply of material, not to mention proper training in basic cinematographic techniques.

Such issues prompted Moussinac to remain cautious about the effectiveness of grassroots and amateur worker filmmaking, but it certainly didn't imply a categorical rejection of its coming to fruition. It is important to contextualize his hesitant view on amateur cinema as a response to Victor Barel's (secretary of the PCF in the Alpes-Maritimes region) proposal in *Cahiers du Bolchévisme*, in which Barel advocated for the use of small-gauge cinema for propaganda purposes.[43] Barel's relegation of the aesthetic qualities of potential films in favor of their revolutionary content alarmed Moussinac, who was politically committed but also a fervent advocate of the expressive values of cinema. But scholars have focused solely on Moussinac's reservations regarding aesthetics, leaving aside other aspects of Barel's proposal that were incorporated by the French critic in later projects towards a proletarian cinema. In this sense, Barel not only discussed the production of amateur films with Pathé-Baby cameras in quite some detail – including prices of equipment, programming examples, and exhibition considerations – but also put forward the general need to document the life of the worker from a local perspective, as well as the creation of a "Cinémathèque Centrale" at the service of proletarian associations

nationwide. In the following pages we will see how Moussinac eventually incorporated such ideas into his plans for a radical filmmaking federation. The scope of these developments, and their absence from most film historical accounts, speaks to how incomplete our understanding of film's imbrication in 1930s society is.


LÉON MOUSSINAC

NAISSANCE DU CINEMA

J. POVOLOZKY & CIE PARIS

Notre point de vue

UN SUCCÈS

Il s'agit de la collaboration active des spectateurs et du critique. Cette collaboration, commencée à propos du film Mariage, se développe et se précise de telle façon que personne, aujourd'hui, ne peut plus croire que les lecteurs de l'Humanité soient incapables d'assurer complètement le commentaire de l'actualité cinématographique.

Aujourd'hui, pour la première fois — c'est une date — trois colonnes du journal sont occupées exclusivement par des critiques de spectateurs, par des documents communiqués par les rabcors.

C'est un succès, un premier succès.

La tâche du rédacteur-critique se limite donc à coordonner et diriger l'effort des correspondants ouvriers, à organiser la documentation en vue des nécessités de sa présentation dans le journal, à compléter un tel ensemble par ce dont, justement, sa connaissance plus approfondie, plus spécialement technique aussi du moyen d'expression lui-même, lui crée un devoir de parler : sa tâche réelle.

Il faut aller plus loin encore : il s'agit, comme il a déjà été recommandé, notamment pour les critiques de films, de condenser davantage la pensée. Le manque de place nous y oblige, et c'est aussi une nécessité pour le lecteur de trouver dans ces colonnes, chaque semaine, l'essentiel d'un renseignement, d'une observation.

L'expérience prouve qu'il est rare qu'un texte soit si précis, si strict, qu'on ne puisse y faire des coupures sans nuire à son sens.

A l'ouvrage, camarades, avec patience et volonté.

Léon MOUSSINAC.

Critique des spectateurs

I. — Sur **Big House** :

Du camarade G. P., à Paris :

C'est un film qu'il faut voir, mais pas pour en tirer les conclusions que j'ai entendues venant de divers spectateurs et dans le goût de celles-ci : « La vie dans les prisons américaines est épouvantable » ; — ou bien : « C'est du bluff » ; — ou bien encore : « En France, ça n'est pas ainsi », etc., etc.

Je comprends parfaitement que le public et nos copains naïfs que nous sommes — ce dont je les félicite — et que ceux qui ne font que s'en vanter soient... Cependant, mettant toutes autres considérations à part, technique du film, du montage, des sons, de la présentation, etc., toutes choses qui me paraissent bonnes, l'intrigue qui est à mon sens, c'est-à-dire quelle, je déclare et peux prouver que si la Prison centrale américaine est vraisemblable à « Big House », elle est un véritable lieu de délices à côté des Centrales françaises : Poissy, Fontevrault, Beaulieu, Thouars, Melun, Riom et Clairvaux, qui sont des bagnes immondes où prévalent, surmenage, brimades ne provoquent pas des révoltes ouvertes, car la discipline est de fer, mais un pourcentage de mortalité très élevé.

« Nos » Centrales sont de véritables foyers de tuberculose. Etant détenu-infirmier à la Centrale de Fontevrault, j'ai eu dans ma salle d'infirmerie « 22 morts » de cette maladie (sous toutes ses formes : pulmonaire, intestinale, osseuse) en 12 mois !

Quant à la pourriture « morale » qui y sévit, tant chez les gardiens que chez les détenus, elle est inexistante.

On n'en sort que mort ou taré à jamais. Les punitions y sont terribles. Quatre-vingt-dix jours de cachot sont presque un arrêt de mort et cet arrêt est prononcé fréquemment (pour avoir été trouvé en possession de tabac, même d'un simple mégot, c'est « 90 jours ! »

Mauvaise volonté au travail (généralement provoquée par incapacité physique) est un motif qui va de 30 jours de salle de discipline à 60 jours de cachot.

Avoir été pris à causer (en l'occurrence quelques mots échangés à voix basse sans même tourner la tête), c'est 15 jours, et le reste à l'avenant...

Pour conclure, je dirai seulement que « Big House » est un film qui doit nous encourager à la lutte pour la destruction des parasites capitalistes et d'un régime qui, aux déchus — « ceux qu'il a fait déchoir » — n'offre qu'une sorte de relève-

Figure 3. Léon Moussinac's influential book *Naissance du Cinema* (1925) and Spectator Critics / Critique des Spectateurs column in *L'Humanité*.

After the shutdown of Les Amis des Spartacus, Moussinac continued to promote an expanding activist film culture. It certainly didn't have the financial means to fight commercial cinema in its own terms, but it set the base for the later emergence of what we now consider ´political filmmaking´, especially given the role of the French Popular Front-sponsored films during the Spanish Civil War –we will explore this in more detail later on. This turn towards an active proletarian film culture intensified in the early 1930s. In February 1931 Moussinac published an article titled 'Pour un cinema ouvrier' ('Towards a proletarian cinema') in *L'Humanité*. He called for the organization of proletarian cinema against "capitalism's

formidable propaganda instrument."[44] This proletarian cinema enrolled active spectators in movie theatres that would cheer or whistle films, as well as amateur filmmaking groups that would create worker newsreels and short political documentaries. The project also included a catalogue of approved films, including Soviet and commercial works, to be projected in organizations, Communist councils, etc. through a shared system of distribution. The resemblance to Barel's ideas are remarkable. The article ended with the question "Which organization will take the fortunate and necessary initiative of creating the proletarian cinema of France"? Only a month later Moussinac announced the birth of such organization; the FOCP.[45]

The Féderation was to be constituted by a congress that would gather every proletarian-oriented organization involved in "methodically educating through cinema and photography." This included unions, cooperatives, sections of the local Workers International Relief (WIR), the Fédération Sportive du Travail (Worker Sports Federation, FST), Maisons du Peuple (House of the People), local councils, study groups, clubs, etc. Moussinac laid out a very clear idea of the Federation's structure, which would be organized in five sections;

> 1. A propaganda and administration section that will spearhead and further develop models for leaflets, regulations, information cards for every film, circulation of films, conferences, etc. This section will also consider the publication of a regular bulletin that will act as liaison between the different groups, as well as other practical brochures, etc.
>
> 2. An operating section that will organize the repertoire of acquired films, as well as those produced by the Federation itself or its different sections. This section will also guarantee the distribution of films and leaflets, and regulate rental conditions, etc.
>
> 3. A technical section that will inform itself about practical problems that may come up, such as the installation of projection spaces, the purchase of devices, their maintenance, etc.
>
> 4. A production section that will study the possibility of creating "Proletarian Newsreels" and documentary films on the life and struggles of the proletariat, as well as the first works of amateur filmmakers.

> 5. A photography section that will be in charge of resolving any issues posed by amateur photography groups, guaranteeing as well the liaison with other sections of the Ciné-Photo Proletarian Federation.

Although the lack of state support and necessary means reduced the scope of his project, I argue that it still stands as a remarkable attempt to reorient the avant-garde into an explicitly activist cinema. The overlaps with Piqueras's projects addressed before also testify to the influence of such ideas in the expanded leftist cinematic front. Likewise, Moussinac's projects also found echoes beyond the pages of *L'Humanité* and the Ciné-Photo Proletarian Federation. In 1932, the first issue of the journal *L'Educateur Prolétarien/* The Proletarian Educator) included an article titled 'Le cinéma éducateur' Educational cinema), which announced the first "Social Film" award of the journal to the educational film *Prix et Profits* (Price and profits, 1932), made by a proletarian cooperative.[46] The article was written by R. Bayou, a teacher from the small town of Camblanes. It inaugurated a permanent section on educational cinema, sponsored by formations such as Coopérative Interscolaire du Jura. It included technical tips,

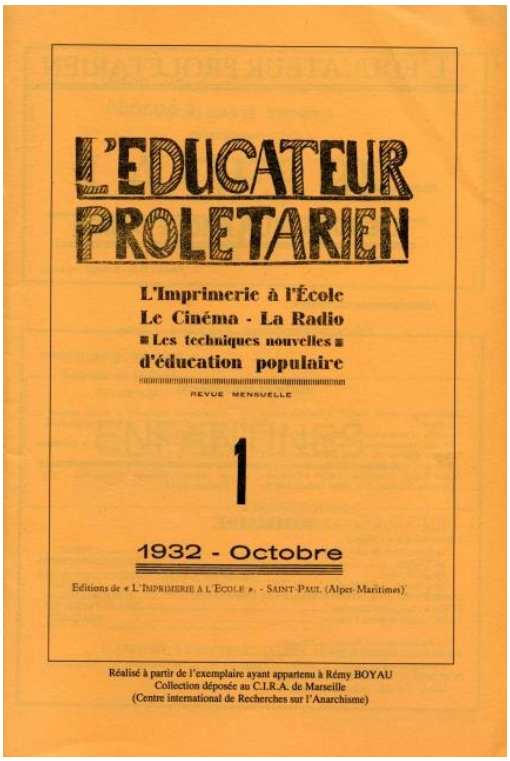


Figure 4. ***L'Educateur Proletarien*** **Issue 1, October 1932**

amateur equipment sale notices, contests, and information on relevant developments on educational cinema around the world. Bayou praised the attributes of a film where "the stars are the potatoes" and the drama is centered on "everyday life", inviting further submissions for a script contest on similar educational and proletarian themes. During the following years, *L'Educateur Prolétarien* would continue to promote educational cinema – both state sponsored and amateur initiatives – intuitively putting into practice Moussinac's plans for a proletarian film production.

Despite their importance for the development of film and education, initiatives such as *L'Educateur Prolétarien* have been overlooked by film historians, who focus on more cinema-oriented primary sources. For instance, in Spain a similar journal devoted to educational film appeared in 1931, *Acción Cinegráfica* / Cinegraphic Action, but the initiative only lasted for one

issue. In the United States we can think of *Visual Education* (1920-1924), the journal of the ´Society for Visual Education´. Accepting the imbrication of film in a wide variety of realms beyond the commercial screen necessarily widens our research scope and allows for key discoveries in unexpected places. For example, the extension of Moussinac's film activism cannot be fully grasped unless we look beyond his writings in film-specific journals. It was in the pages of leftist newspapers like *L'Humanité/* Humanity and *La Scène Ouvrière* (´The Worker Scene´, monthly journal of the Fedération du Theatre Ouvrier de France) that Moussinac developed his discourse on educational uses of film. In December 1926 and January 1927 the French critic published a series of articles in *L'Humanité* that called for government funding to be directed towards educational film programs in schools. The objective was to encourage the general development of education and culture.[47] Later on, he would use the pages of *La Scène Ouvriére* to present his project on spectator criticism, aimed at "transforming the taste of the public, educating them with a marked dialectic sense."[48] Both objectives, the use of film to enhance education and the training of critical spectatorship, are the driving forces behind the film pedagogy "*Internationale"* I am mapping out in this article.

Continuing his expanding activities, in 1936 Moussinac created, together with Jean Renoir and Henri Jeanson, the journal *Ciné-Liberté*. It was the publication of the Alliance du Cinema Independent (ACI),[49] which had adopted the same name (*Ciné-Liberté*) at the end of 1935, producing the film *La vie est à nous* (Jean Renoir, 1936), proletarian newsreels, and propaganda films in support of the Spanish Second Republic. The main objective of the journal was to "fight for a truthful French cinema" and "defend cinema" in general, in line with the 1935 Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture (International Congress for the Defense of Culture) plead to defend all forms of culture against the impending fascist threat.[50]

The warning became dramatically real in July 1936, when the Spanish Popular Front – which had won the general elections a few months before – came under attack by a Fascist rebellion lead by general Francisco Franco, inaugurating the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Right before the outburst of the conflict, the PCF had been intensifying its link with the PC as the situation radicalized in Spain. Juan Piqueras had resurfaced – after recovering from stomach ulcer surgery and closing down *Nuestro Cinema* – to become the liaison between *Ciné-Liberté* and its Spanish counterparts. In the wake of the Civil War, Moussinac and Piqueras's radical film projects were finally meeting 'on the ground', joining forces in the fight against Fascism. Unfortunately, Francoist forces detained Juan Piqueras during the first days of the conflict in a train station near Valladolid, where he had to stop due to sudden stomach ulcer complications. He was found in possession of an authorization by *Ciné-Liberté* to manage the exchange of newsreels for the Popular Front, and a letter with PCF letterhead that authorized *Nuestro Cinema* to distribute *La vie est à nous* in Spain.[51] In a tragic twist of fate, the encounter between Moussinac and Piqueras's projects was fatal for the Spanish film critic, who was assassinated a few days later, at 32 years old. As Georges Sadoul would write reporting on his death, the world had lost a "defender of culture", who "could have been, in the midst of the civil war, the organizer of an important and truly Spanish cinema", but had nonetheless set the bases for a future generation of successful revolutionary cinema.[52]

In this sense, the destiny of the Spanish critic followed what Scott Mackenzie terms the "hopelessly doomed" nature of film manifestos,[53] but with a crucial difference; Piqueras's dramatic interventions in the public sphere may have been "texts of the moment", but they didn't "quickly leave the world of political intervention", since they influenced the revolutionary film culture that spread throughout the country during the war, later enjoying an afterlife as points of

reference for militant critics in the long sixties in Spain.[54] In a similar vein, and following a history of untimely deaths and short life spans, we now turn our attention to US film critic and activist Harry Alan Potamkin, whose premature death at age 33 – from a stomach ulcer – also affected the consolidation of radical film pedagogy in the United States. Beyond their health problems and young age, they both shared, alongside Moussinac, a central – and very active – role in the creation of a radical film culture in quite adverse contexts. In the case of Potamkin, he was working, so to speak, from within the 'belly of the beast', in the country that had colonized commercial film screens around the world, especially since the advent of sound cinema. But the consequences of the Great Depression had also allowed for radical leftist ideas to spread throughout the country, embarking intellectuals on proletarian cultural projects akin to the ones taking place in France and Spain.

A "Dance in a Cul-de-Sac"; Potamkin and US radical filmmaking

If scholars have paid little attention to Léon Moussinac and Juan Piqueras, despite their pivotal roles for the leftist cinematic front – and film culture in general – in interwar Europe, the case of Harry Allan Potamkin in the United States is even more surprising, given his influence both in film criticism and proletarian film production. His position in the geography triangulated by this article discovers a much closer, and complex, relationship between North American and European interwar film culture. A trip to Europe in 1926 – where he engaged with film critics Ricciotto Canudo, Lois Delluc or Germaine Dulac, and avant-garde films in the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier*, the *Studio des Ursulines* or *Studio 28* –[55] deeply affected him, and upon his return to the United States he decided to become a film critic. He became a key figure in what has been called the 'missing chapter' of American film history; the social and political film culture of the

1930s.[56] The influence of both North American and European film criticism shaped his distinct view on the medium, preoccupied both with aesthetic, industrial, and social considerations.

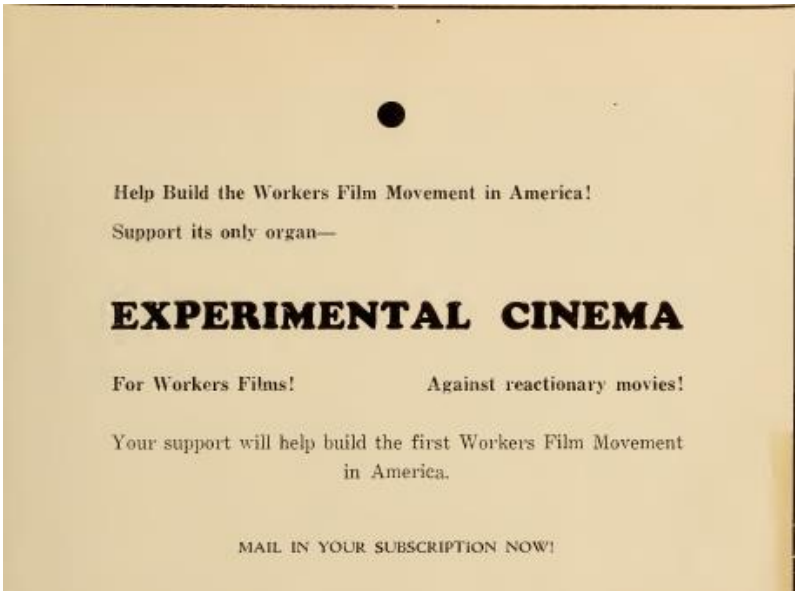


Figure 5. Experimental Cinema subscription advertisement

He was cofounder of the Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL), and regular contributor to the most important English-language modernist film journals of the time: *Experimental Cinema* and *Close Up*. The former described itself as the only organ of the workers' film movement in America, while the latter advertised itself as the only magazine devoted to film as an art, but also had a marked social tendency. Moreover, Potamkin was at the center of a heated conflict between both journals, ignited by his attacks on some American critics he judged as "novitiates" (clearly questioning their critical abilities).[57] *Experimental Cinema* replied to Potamkin in an equally harsh letter that *Close Up* refused to publish. The letter accused Potamkin of forgetting about his pledge to the worker´s cause in favor of aesthetic and intellectuall considerations. The battle continued throughout the following months across the Atlantic, giving an excellent example of how internationalised film criticism was in the 1930s.

This tacit network of international film culture put him in close intellectual contact with Moussinac and Piqueras. *Experimental Cinema* was advertised regularly in Piqueras's *Nuestro Cinema*, and some original articles translated into Spanish. In issue 12, Piqueras echoed Seymour Stern's (director and Hollywood correspondent of *Experimental Cinema*) international campaign against Upton Sinclair for the mutilation of Sergei Eisenstein's ¡*Que Viva México!* (1932).[58] Stern's lengthy protest letter was translated, and readers of *Nuestro Cinema* were encouraged to "send letters of protest to Upton Sinclair, Beverly Hills, California, US. Or to Juan Piqueras, director of *Nuestro Cinema*, who will send them out himself." [59] Regarding Léon Moussinac, he was associate editor and contributor to *Experimental Cinema*. In issue three (February 1931) of the journal Potamkin and Moussinac became the subjects of an editorial note; part of the conflict previously mentioned. The article harshly criticized Potamkin, who had attacked the French critic's "social understanding of the cinema".[60] The editors lamented Potamkin's inability to grasp Moussinac's importance for the creation of "a theoretical and practical basis for a workers film movement in America". The text ended with a rhetorical question; "Harry Alan Potamkin, where do you stand?", which we can extend to all three critics analyzed in the article. The move from aesthetics to social consciousness was certainly not a one-way street, placing them on constant shifting ground.

Beyond *Close Up* and *Experimental Cinema*, Potamkin published in a wide variety of outlets, including popular culture and fashion magazine *Vanity Fair*. However, he also wrote for the *National Board of Review Magazine*, the outlet of the National Board of Review, an organization created in 1909 to influence 'proper' content in Hollywood productions. In line with other educational reformer movements, it created standards for endorsing or rejecting films, but also attempted to "establish the viewer, rather than the film text, as the site of a struggle for

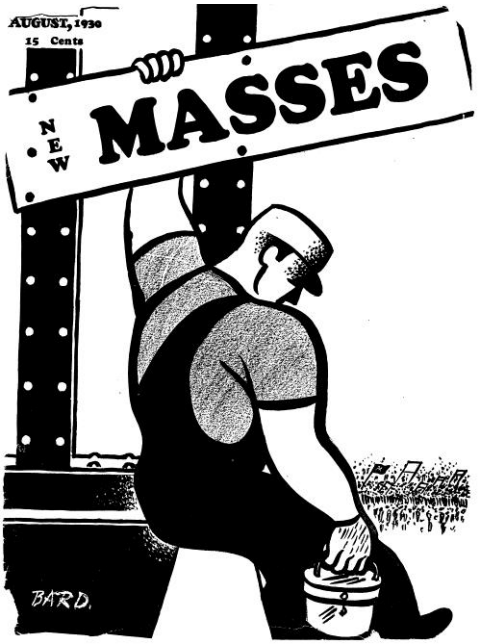
control."[61] Lastly, we can cite *Movie Makers*, the publication of the American amateur film movement. This journal became a forum for the quickly expanding movement of amateur film in North America.[62] Such spectrum not only demonstrates Potamkin's open mind as a critic, but is also a testament to the richness of interwar film culture, which now encompassed modernist, avant-garde, proletarian, popular culture, educational, Hollywood, and amateur cinema realms.

As the effects of the Great Depression worsened, Potamkin become more openly politicized. By 1930 he was mentioning the need to "liberate the genuine social energies" in order to create films that would speak to local realities.[63] But the problem remained the same; how to create conscious spectators, capable of demanding such films? In other words, what could the film critic do beyond the pages of the journals they wrote on in order to mobilize a different film culture? In 1931, Potamkin addressed these issues in "A Movie Call to Action!", a programmatic manifesto, written for the WFPL, in which he explicitly addressed the responsibility of film critics – specifically those that avowed a social conscience – in "creating a basis for understanding and action" towards a critical spectatorship.[64] For him, the pedagogical role of the critic went well beyond anti-Hollywood rhetoric, superficial praise of Soviet films, and egocentric quarrels. Instead, he suggested organizing with the workers to view, criticize, and ultimately make films, with the hope of also affecting what he called "non-worker" groups such as the National Board of Review. This educational effort was to be structured by a "Broad League for Film Action" that united the efforts of different organizations – such as the John Reed Club[65]– in a federation that would:

> 1. Educate the workers and others in the part the movie plays as a weapon of reaction
> 2. Educate the workers and others in the part the movie plays as an instrument for social purposes –in the USSR
> 3. Encourage, support and sustain the left critic and the left moviemaker who is documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportions in our present economy

> 4. Create a chain of film audiences who would morally and financially guarantee such films
>
> 5. Publish a periodical devoted to our purposes
>
> 6. Fight the class abuses of capitalist censorship
>
> 7. Attack the invidious portrayal in the popular film –of the foreign– born worker, the Negro, the Oriental, the worker generally
>
> 8. Oppose the interests of the institutions like the church as they participate in the shaping of the monopolized film
>
> 9. Make use of, when feasible, certain methods of direct action (I do not know that this is an immediate weapon, although the protest demonstration has been mobilized already. Large-scale boycott is something to look forward to)
>
> 10. Distribute suppressed films of importance, and defend artists abused by reactionary elements (as in the Eisenstein case)
>
> 11. Re-discover and present neglected films of significance
>
> 12. *Educate* the critic and worker by closer contact with the worker
>
> THE SECOND PART OF NUMER 3 IS EVENTUALLY OUR MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE! THIS PURPOSE IS MADE MEANINGFUL BY *NUMBER 12*![66]

If we compare Potamkin's proposal with Moussinac's previously quoted plan for the Fédération Ouvrière de Ciné-Photo, we can see striking coincidences in objectives, structure, and organizational bodies.[67] But beyond these concrete correspondences such as the creation of a bulletin, the production of proletarian-oriented films, the circulation of censored films, and modes of direct action – we can think here of Moussinac's call to whistle or cheer films – there is a shared pedagogical spirit contained within both initiatives. That is, the ultimate objective of both proposals was to create a new film culture deeply imbricated in society, especially in the life of the working class. To this note, I have highlighted in italics the explicit mention in point number 12 of education, and the ascendancy it is given in the last point of the manifesto, to show how the movie call to action was very much thought of as a way to translate educational theory into facts, following Potamkin's stance that "action without theory is aimless. Theory without action is sterile."



Figures 6 & 7. Cover of *The New Masses*, Vol 6 (3), August 1930 and *Workers Film and Photo League* Logo

This position was also reflected in Potamkin's film criticism. See for instance his review of the prison films *The Big House* (George W. Hill, 1930) and *Numbered Men* (Mervin LeRoy, 1930) for *New Masses*, the leading journal of the left in the United States. Potamkin criticized them for not showing the real conditions of imprisonment or questioning the society behind such a repressive system. For him, this reflected how "the society that is callow in its cinema is callous in its attitude towards imprisoned men."[68] This coupling of film criticism with social commentary was the new task of the critic, since "[…] there is one criticism that is ever present, the film itself. It is the business of the critic to present in full this evidence of which the movie speaks."[69]

As with Léon Moussinac's role as leading film critic for *L'Humanité*, and Juan Piqueras's editorial work in *Nuestro Cinema*, Harry Allan Potamkin had realized the importance of the critic in pointing readers towards the ideological power of cinema. But this task was not enough,

since the critic had to actively "instruct" viewers to become critical spectators on their own. A few months later, in October 1930, he would attack *New York Post* critic Creighton Peet. who had defended American fiction films against Soviet instructional tendencies. Peet contended that the American public wanted fiction, to which Potamkin replied; "this is not only the synonym for "entertainment." 'Fiction' is what the American public gets: fake experiences!"[70] The public would learn how to dismiss these "fake experiences" with the pedagogical aid of the Workers Film and Photo League, which would "instruct the film audience in the detection of Hollywood treachery."[71] This was to become one of the central functions of the WFPL, alongside the fostering of a truly proletarian film production that would counter dominant Hollywood cinema.[72]

In 1931 Potamkin published an article in the Dutch journal *Front* titled "The Death of the Bourgeois Film", foreshadowing Moussinac's "Death of the Avant-garde" piece in *Nuestro Cinema* that was discussed before, which would be published only a few months later. In the case of Potamkin, his focus was not solely on the avant-garde, but on any type of cinema that ignored the social: "The bourgeois cinemas everywhere are devoted to the gratification of the "minimum" – the maximum of illusions to guarantee a minimum of dissent."[73] Potamkin spared nobody in his tout court critique of global cinema, including René Clair – and, by extension, the French avant-garde – who he attacked with very similar arguments than the ones put forward by Juan Piqueras, including a later article entirely devoted to the French filmmaker, who is labelled as a "directorial playboy of the western world."[74] In the "Death of Bourgeois Cinema" article, French filmmakers are described as "pictorial *cineástes*" who had made "films of merit as personal lyrics." He continues on to suggest that Clair in particular "has not *said* very much in

satire (social humor) as yet."[75] To this he opposed, as did Moussinac and Piqueras, the rise of the proletarian film, either in the form of features or worker newsreels.

For Potamkin, the main difference between the "dead bourgeois film" and the rising social cinema could be located "at the source – in the aim, the social mind, the subject matter" of the latter. The films produced by the dominant class served the purpose of diminishing dissidence, in an enchanting "Dance in a cul-de-sac."[76] Potamkin attempted to exit this dead end for cinema through his film criticism and pedagogical initiatives, engaging with the growing network of international leftist film culture, but also adopting an increasingly pragmatic view of the role film could play in social change. He was conscious that the task was not a simple one, and that it could only be undertaken through institutions such as film clubs, journals, and filmmaking cooperatives. The "Movie Call to Action!" manifesto (1931) can be read as a tentative road map in this direction, which Potamkin tried to follow in the next years in all possible directions.

One of his important actions was to promote the creation of film clubs throughout the United States, cast in the mould of those he had attended on his trips to Europe, though with a crucial difference. Instead of using them to create an autonomous space for an appreciation of film as an art, "the film club has its ultimate justification only when it recognizes itself as an educational forum. […] I want to oppose in this discussion the cult idea of the film club, where gentlemen and ladies in high hats and evening gowns are shown Mickey Mouse to satisfy their sense of the exquisite."[77] These words are from a transcription of a speech he gave in the annual conference of the National Board of Review, of which he was a member. It may seem paradoxical at first that the proletarian-oriented film critic belonged to such an organization. But it is yet another example of the porosity of film culture in the effervescent interwar years. For

Potamkin, the National Board of Review's ties to the industry were not an obstacle but an opportunity to influence commercial films through the different "Motion Picture Study Clubs" and "Better Film Councils", and their ties to ample and active spectator communities. As Chris Robé mentions, US radical film criticism was expansive in nature, going beyond boundaries and narrow definitions of the left.[78]

In a second part of the speech, transcribed as a separate text, Potamkin discussed educational plans to involve children as active cinema audiences, suggesting "it is pretty well agreed that the motion picture is a pedagogical instrument", and "you cannot solve the problem of the child in relation to the film unless you solve his problem in relation to society."[79] By gradually introducing children to socially engaged cinema – via mainstream films – a moment would arrive in which they would not only be able to determine the false and truthful elements of the film, but of society itself, "encouraging [children] to make [their] own deductions."[80] Such initiative would be structured in an educational pattern that would include "movies in the manual arts and movies in the social subjects." These ideas have to be contextualized in the overlooked history of educational film in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. As the edited collection *Learning with the Lights Off* argues, the sheer amount of publications and initiatives on the subject at the time suggests its relevance not only to film, but also to cultural history in general.[81] In this article I echo their argument, expanding it to an international level.

Potamkin also proposed the creation of a university level film school, mirroring similar developments in the Soviet Union –a reference to the VGIK film school, established in 1919.[82] An actual proposal was published posthumously in the literary magazine *Hound and Horn* in October 1933, three months after his death. It had been drafted for an unspecified large university, and included a comprehensive four year program with details of courses – for

instance, "The Forms of Cinema, Sociology of Cinema, History of Aesthetics, Theory of Direction, or Cinematography" – plans for a film library, and potential faculty such as Iris Barry, Evelyn Gerstein, Carl Freund, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Lewis Milestone, Walt Disney, G.W. Pabst, and Robert Flaherty. The proposal showed that, as with his colleagues in the materialistic turn of the avant-garde, Potamkin was not shy of embracing institutionalization.

Potamkin's sudden death interrupted these plans, and many others, but his proposal greatly influenced the next generation of film pedagogues in the United States. As Dana Polan mentions, in the 1940s Jay Leyda lamented the lack of comprehensive plans for film education in the USA, recalling Potamkin's "inspiring memory."[83] Potamkin had in fact taught a course on the 'Critical History of Film' at the New School for Social Research in 1932, and the WFPL established the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School in 1933 to teach filmmaking to workers, although the initiative only lasted one year. The influence of Potamkin in both the institutionalization of film education in private universities and more grassroots leftist educational initiatives speaks to the scope of his pedagogical project, which attempted to unify efforts and avoid unnecessary sectarianism in both workers and critics. By the mid 1930s, the leftist film culture that Potamkin had helped develop in New York was being invoked as inspiration by their European peers. In January 1935, the 'News from Hollywood' section of *L'Humanité* mentioned that the New York Film and Photo League had successfully presented their film *Sheriffed* (Nancy Naumburg and James Guy, 1934-35),[84] which depicted the struggle of US farmers and their strikes for better working conditions. The article also mentioned four other films on the way, and finished with a rhetorical question; "When will we have a "French Society of Proletarian Films"?[85]

Potamkin, and the different initiatives he was part of, had managed to avoid the "Dance in the Cul-de-sac" of bourgeois cinema but without assuming a marginal space for socially engaged film culture instead. The purpose, though, remained crystal clear; "there can be no propagating art without criticism…for a cinema permanently great, strong, and productive there must be criticism. The conversion of this criticism, the social theme, into its form is art, cinema."[86] Regardless of their differences in tactics, approaches, and outcomes, Juan Piqueras, León Moussinac, and Harry Alan Potamkin followed this guiding principle to its logical conclusion, with – as in the case of Juan Piqueras – occasionally fatal repercussions. In the process they changed the avant-garde's course from the defense of cinema as an autonomous art form to an educational imperative deeply inserted in society. They created institutions, devised plans for film schools, and consolidated networks of international film culture circulation. In other words, they thought about film in expansive terms, well beyond the limits of the commercial screen. This allowed film culture to became a useful resource where film production was not possible or very difficult.

Moreover, we can trace the influence of these developments in later formations and networks of participatory film culture. For instance Juan Piqueras's projects were a source of inspiration for 1970s militant film culture in Spain.[87] Proletarian amateur film collectives and Marxist film theorists put his ideas, silenced by decades of dictatorship, into practice. In France, Moussinac became director of the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques, IDHEC) in Paris after WWII.[88] He was now operating from within the institution. The extent to which film is engrained in French education, from schools to university, owes much to this fact. We have already mentioned Potamkin's inspiring memory for film pedagogues in the United States. But his influence went beyond North America. The course

he taught at the New School greatly influenced Cuban critic José Manuel Valdés-Rodríguez, who introduced film education in Cuba.[89]

The afterlives of the *Internationale* of film pedagogy testify to the generative consequences of calling film to action in the interwar years. A more comprehensive history of such practices and formations lies ahead. This article focused only on Juan Piqueras, Léon Moussinac, and Harry Potamkin to indicate the amount of film initiatives left in the shadows of accepted film scholarship geographies. Many other territories of film culture remain to be adequately triangulated once we look beyond them. They reveal not only how film's intervention in society was imagined, but also how it was put into practice in everyday cultural, political, and social realms.

Notes

[1] Harry Alan Potamkin, 'A Movie Call to Action!', *Worker's Theatre*, July 1931. In Harry Alan Potamkin and Lewis Jacobs, *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin* (New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1977), p. 583.

[2] Léon Moussinac, 'Une Fédération Ouvrière de Ciné-Photo' ('A Cine-Photo Worker Federation'), *L'Humanité*, 8 March 1931.

[3] Juan Piqueras, 'Hacia una Federación de Cineclubs Proletarios' (Towards a Spanish Federation of Proletarian Film-clubs'), *Nuestro Cinema*, vol. 13, October 1933.

[4] Borg, Carmel, Joseph A. Buttigieg, and Peter Mayo (eds), *Gramsci and Education.* Culture and Politics Series. Lanham, Md. ; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 41.

[5] James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds, *Close up: 1927-1933 ; Cinema and Modernism* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 10.

[6] Anon, 'Announcement', *Experimental Cinema*, no.1, February 1930, p. 1.

[7] See Peter Burger, 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde', *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no.4 (2010), p. 697.

[8] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 59.

[9] Juan Piqueras mentions meeting Léon Moussinac at Brussels in an article on Joris Ivens published in his journal *Nuestro Cinema*; Juan Piqueras, 'Con Joris Ivens, cineaste holandés, realizador de *Komsomol*, film soviético sobre las juventudes en URSS', *Nuestro Cinema*, vol. 12, June-July 1933, pp. 177-182.

[10] Laura Vichi, *Henri Storck: De l'avant-garde au documentaire social* (Liège: Yellow Now, 2002), p. 12.

[11] 'A letter from Soviet Russia', *New Masses*, November 1930, p. 14 and Douglas C. Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 187.

[12] Jonathan P.Eburne, and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', *New Literary History*, Vol 41, no. 4 (2010), p. vi.

[13] See Masha Salazkina. 'Introduction to Juan Piqueras: Amateur Cinema in *Nuestro cinema*', Cinema Journal, vol. 51, no. 4 (2012), pp. 138-143.

[14] Georges Sadoul, 'Memento', *Commune*, January 1935, p. 645.

[15] As an example, the number of Hollywood Spanish-versions made in 1932 and 1933 was almost the same as the whole production of films by Spanish companies (21 against 23). See Román Gubern. *El Cine Sonoro En La II República (1929-1936)* (Barcelona, Editorial Lumen, 1977), pp. 41, 71.

[16] Eva Touboul. 'Entre divertissement et arme: le cinéma selon nuestro cinema (1932-1935)', *Les travaux du crec en ligne*, Vol 2, February 2006.

[17] M.F. Alvar, *Cinematografía pedagógica y educativa* (Madrid: J. M. Yagües, 1936).

[18] Juan Manuel Llopis. *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español* (Valencia: Filmoteca, Generalitat Valenciana, 1988), p. 78.

[19] Idem, pp. 81-82.

[20] Idem, p. 82.

[21] Idem, p. 87.

[22] Juan Piqueras. *Cinegramas*, 8 March 1936.

[23] Juan Piqueras. 'Itinerario de Nuestro Cinema' *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 1, June 1932, p. 1.

[24] Antonio Gramsci, 1971, p. 5.

[25] Juan Piqueras. 'Nuestro Itinerario: Política y Cinema', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 4, September 1932, pp. 110-111.

[26] Emilio C. García Fernández, *El cine español entre 1986 y 1939 :historia, industria, filmografía y documentos* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2002), pp. 256-257.

[27] Juan Piqueras. 'Colofón a la primera encuesta de Nuestro Cinema', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 7, December 1932, pp. 198-203.

[28] Juan Piqueras. 'Los Nuevos Films; Montañas de oro, filme soviético de Youtkewitch', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 4, September 1932, p. 119. My italics.

[29] It is important to stress that I don't mean to project the 1960s signification of the term *militant* into the 1930s, but to suggest instead that the imaginary associated with committed intellectuals in cinema can be traced back to the internationalist networks I describe in this essay.

[30] Léon Moussinac, 'Muerte de la vanguardia', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 7, pp. 204-205.

[31] This split is usually explained through the "Aragon affair" incident in 1932/33, when André Breton and Louis Aragon exchanged a series of articles on the convenience of submitting art's independence to a particular political cause and institution such as the PCF. The incident ended with Breton's intervention in the 1935 AEAR Congress and the definitive split between Surrealism and Communism. See Raymond Spiteri, 'Surrealism and the Question of Politics, 1925-1929', In David Hopkins ed, *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2016), pp. 110-128.

[32] A.W. Lunarchasky, 'El cine revolucionario ruso', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 1, June 1932.

[33] Sergei Tret'iakov, 'Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art', *October*, no. 118 (2006), pp. 11-18.

[34] Juan Piqueras. 'Hacia una Federación de Cineclubs Proletarios', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 13, October 1933.

[35] As mentioned by Cineclub Sindicato Banca y Bolsa director Julio González Vázquez in *Nuestro Cinema*; Julio González Vázquez, 'Cineclubs en España', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 15, February 1935.

[36] Antonio de Amo, 'Apertura de Studio Nuestro Cinema', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 14, January 1935.

[37] Juan Piqueras, 'Nuestro cine amateur en Nuestro Cinema', *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 17, August 1935.

[38] Valérie Vignaux, 2011. "Léon Moussinac and L'Humanité as a Cinematic Force." Translated by James Gussen. *Études Photographiques*, no. 27 (May).

[39] L. Moussinac, "Cinéma et enseignement", L'Humanité, 24 décembre 1926.

[40] Timothy Barnard. 2000. "From Impressionism to Communism: Léon Moussinac's Technics of the Cinema, 1921-1933." *Framework* 42, p. 4.

[41] Ibid, p. 6.

[42] Léon Moussinac. "Quelques précisions necéssaires." *L'Humanité*. 7 October 1928.

[43] Victor Barel. "Comment attirer des assistants à nos cau series pour sympathisants." *Cahiers du Bolchevisme,* July 1928. Kraus Reprint (1977), pp. 672-674.

[44] Léon Moussinac. "Pour un cinema ouvrier." *L'Humanité*. 1, February 1931.

[45] Léon Moussinac. "Une Fédération Ouvrière de Ciné-Photo." *L'Humanité*, 8 March 1931.

[46] R. Bayou. "Le Cinéma éducateur." *L'Educateur Proletarien* (1), October 1932.

[47] See Léon Moussinac, "Cinéma et enseignement," *L'Humanité*, 24 December 1926; "À Propos du film d'enseignement. Conclusions", *L'Humanité*, 14 January 1927.

[48] Léon Moussinac, "La voix des spectateurs, les critiques ouvriers", *La Scène Ouvriére*, 1, January 1932.

[49] Dudley Andrew. *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995. p. 217.

[50] Anon. "Enfin Voici *Cine-Liberté*, un vrai journal de cinema." *L'Humanité*. 22 May, 1936.

[51] Román Gubern and Paul Hammond. *Luis Buñuel: The Red Years, 1929-1939*. English ed. Wisconsin Film Studies. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, p. 252.

[52] Georges Sadoul. "La mort de Juan Piqueras Le 'Delluc espagnol' fusillé par les rebelles." *L'Humanite,* 11 March, 1933

[53] Scott Mckenzie. *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures : A Critical Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (2014). pp. 19-20.

[54] See Carlos and David Pérez Merinero, eds. *Del Cinema Como Arma de Clase: Antología de Nuestro Cinema* 1932-1935. Valencia: F. Torres, 1975.

[55] Sonia García López. "Harry Alan Potamkin: palabra cinematográfica para los tiempos de crisis." *Archivos de la Filmoteca* 67, abril 2011, p. 138.

[56] For a detailed account of this missing chapter see Robé, Chris. *Left of Hollywood: Cinema, Modernism, and the Emergence of U.S. Radical Film Culture*. 1st ed. Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 2010: Morey, Anne. *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913-1934*. Commerce and Mass Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 200; Ross, Steven Joseph. *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998.

[57] Harry Allan Potamkin. "Film Novitiates, etc.", *Close Up*, November 1930

[58] Seymour Stern, "El caso de ¡Viva México!. El film de Eisenstein bárbaramente mutilado", *Nuestro Cinema* 12, June/July 1933, pp. 182-190.

[59] Idem, p. 190.

[60] Anon, "Editor's note", *Experimental Cinema* 3, February 1931.

[61] Anne, Morey. Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913-1934. Commerce and Mass Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 31.

[62] See Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919 - 1945.* Wisconsin Studies in Film. Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1995: Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Movie Making, 1923-1960.* Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.

[63] Harry Potamkin. "Tendencies in the Cinema." *American Cinematographer*, June 1930.

[64] Harry Potamkin. "A Movie Call to Action!." *Worker's Theatre*, July 1931.

[65] The John Reed Club was a proletarian organization created in 1929, with the objective of promoting cultural works from young proletarian talents. It was associated with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). See Sonia García López. "Harry Alan Potamkin: Palabra Cinematográfica Para Los Tiempos de Crisis." *Archivos de La Filmoteca: Revista de Estudios Históricos Sobre La Imagen*, no. 67: 134–45.

[66] Harry Alan Potamkin, "A Movie Call to Action! In Potamkin, Harry Alan, and Lewis Jacobs. 1977. *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*. Studies in Culture & Communication. New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, p. 585. My italics.

[67] Although at the end of the manifesto, Potamkin attacks Léon Moussinac for not having a unified point of view in relation to social criticism, accusing him of insufficient contact with "the social stratum most concerned with the implications of his criticism…namely the class-conscious worker." Given all the projects Moussinac was involved in –such as the Cine club Spartacus, the *Federatión Ouvrier Ciné Photo* or the later Critique des Spectateurs– this criticism seems quite unfair. But we might find an explanation in the difficulties, in the 1930s, of keeping up with the writings and initiatives of someone across the Atlantic ocean.

[68] Harry Alan Potamkin. "Movies." *New Masses*. Vol 6 Num 3; August 1930, p. 13.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Harry Alan Potamkin. "The Bourgeois Movie Critics." *New Masses*, October 1931.

[71] Harry Alan Potamkin. *New Masses*. May 1932.

[72] For more information on the film production of the WFPL, Nykino, and Frontier Films see: Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Haymarket Series. London: Verso, 1996; Thomas Waugh ed. *"Show Us Life": Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1984; Russell Campbell. *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-1942*. Studies in Cinema, no. 20. Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1982; Richard Meran Barsam. *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*. *Rev. and expanded*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

[73] Harry Alan Potamkin. "The Death of the Bourgeois Film." *Front.* April 1931.

[74] Harry Alan Pitamkin. "René Clair and Film Humor." *Hound and Horn*. October 1932.

[75] Potamkin's italics.

[76] Harry Alan Potamkin. "The Death of the Bourgeois Film." *Front.* April 1931.

[77] Harry Alan Potamkin. "The Ritual of the Movies." *National Board of Review Magazine*. May 1933.

[78] Chris Robé, *Left of Hollywood*, p. 23.

[79] Harry Alan Potamkin. "The child as part of the cinema audience." *National Board of Review Magazine*. June 1933.

[80] Harry Alan Potamkin. "Films." November 1939 (Published Posthumously). (215 Jacobs)

[81] Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds. Learning with the Lights off: Educational Film in the United States. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 15.

[82] See Masha Salazkina. (In press), '(V)GIK and the History of Film Education in the Soviet Union, 1920s-1930s'

[83] Dan Polan. *Scenes of Instruction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 237.

[84] As identified by Russell Cambell, who mentions that the film is unfortunately lost. See Russell Cambell, "Radical Documentary in the United States: 1930-1942." In Tom Waugh, ed. *"Show Us Life": Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1984, p. 79.

[85] A.S. "Nouvelles d'Hollywood'. *L'Humanité*. 11 January 1935.

[86] Harry Allan Potamkin. "Tendencies of the Cinema." *American Cinematographer*, June 1930.

[87] See Carlos and David Pérez Merinero, eds. *Del Cinema Como Arma de Clase: Antología de Nuestro Cinema 1932-1935*. Valencia: F. Torres, 1975.

[88] Léon Moussinac,, Valérie Vignaux, and François Albéra. *Léon Moussinac: un intellectuel communiste, critique et théoricien des arts*. Paris: Association française de recherhce sur l'histoire du cinéma, 2014.

[89] Irene Rozsa, (forthcoming). "Film Culture and Education in Republican Cuba: The Legacy of José Manuel Valdés-Rodríguez," in Rielle Navitski and Nicolas Poppe, eds. *Cosmopolitan Visions: The Transnational Horizons of Latin American Film Culture, 1896-1960*.