CHAPTER 4.

Seeing the World Anew:

Soviet Cinema and the Reorganization of 1930s Spanish Film Culture

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> The hour is coming when Spanish cinema will trespass its borders in order that a new cinema, one for which our fallen comrade has fought so much, becomes a reality. Much of the credit will be due to Juan Piqueras. The logical triumph of a revolutionary Spanish art will herald the future of a new Spain, forged in the antifascist trenches of the country.
> --*Frente Rojo* and *Adelante* newspapers on the death of film critic Juan Piqueras.[1]

On February 6th 1937, eight months after the execution of film critic and Spanish Communist Party member Juan Piqueras by fascist forces, the first articles about his death began to appear in both national and international newspapers. Georges Sadoul would write for the newspaper *Commune* to condemn his assassination, lamenting that Piqueras "could have been, in the midst of the Civil War, the organizer of an important and truly Spanish cinema".[2] Piqueras had been forced to stop near the Venta de Baños (Palencia) train station in July, 1936, to take care of a stomach ulcer. There, he was unfortunate enough to encounter the advance guard of Franco's forces, in revolt against Republican Spain. A label from a Moscow hotel, to where Piqueras had presumably travelled recently, was deemed enough cause for his arrest. When he was searched, they found among his possessions the manuscript of an anti-fascist article he had published in the Marxist film journal *Nuestro Cinema* in October 1933 about the creation of a

[1] Juan Manuel Llopis, *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español*, Textos / Ediciones Filmoteca 1A-B (Valencia: Filmoteca, Generalitat Valenciana : Generalitat Valenciana, Conselleria de Cultura, Educació i Ciencia, Institut Valencià d'Arts Escèniques, Cinematografia i Música, 1988), 112–13. Translated by Enrique Fibla (applicable to all texts from now on).

[2] Llopis, 114–15.

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.[3] Filmmaker Luis Buñuel and fellow film critic Antonio Del Amo, who also belonged to the Spanish Communist Party (PCE, Partido Comunista Español), attempted to rescue him in those first chaotic days of Civil War, but the roads were closed and Piqueras was executed around the end of July.

These three figures – Piqueras, Buñuel and Del Amo – are key protagonists in the largely forgotten story of Spanish radical film culture of the late 1920s and early 1930s. That short-lived culture, brought to an end by the outcome of the Civil War, began with the circulation and appreciation of Soviet cinema in Spain, and ultimately took aim at transforming Spanish cinema into an instrument for promoting the social revolution to come. Their main outlet was the journal *Nuestro Cinema*, described by Georges Sadoul as the "best film journal in Capitalist Europe."[4] The journal released 13 issues from 1932 to 1933, and four more in 1935, creating a shared proletarian cinematographic imaginary through its editorials and articles written by Piqueras and Del Amo and Spanish critics, writers, and artists such as Rafael Sender, Cesar M. Arconada, Buñuel or Josep Renau, as well as translations from Béla Balázs, Sergei Eisenstein, Ilya Trauberg, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Joris Ivens, Léon Moussinac, Georges Méliès, René Clair, and its film stills, illustrations and advertisements. The journal had a marked internationalist spirit and included an "International News" section that covered Europe, the USSR, North America, Latin America, and Asia. This dimension was highlighted in the journal's self-promotion, which

[3] Román Gubern, *Luis Buñuel: The Red Years, 1929-1939*, English ed, Wisconsin Film Studies (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 252.

[4] Georges Sadoul, "Les Rebelles Ont Fusillé Le Louis Delluc Espagnol Juan Piqueras," *Regards*, January 28, 1937, 159 edition.

declared itself to be "the only truly international Spanish journal, written by international collaborators and inspired by an international direction."[5]

Beyond *Nuestro Cinema*, Piqueras, Buñuel and Del Amo were also involved in Comintern-aligned cultural organizations such as the French section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (AEAR, Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires)[6] and its local Spanish branches, largely organized around the journal *Octubre*, which in its first (June 1933) and second (July 1933) issues already promoted a joint antifascist and antiimperialist front under the slogan "United against the imperialist war!."[7] Their activities were also made visible through the proletarian newspapers *Pueblo* and *Mundo Obrero*, which were managed by the famous Comintern propagandist, Willi Munzenberg.[8] Through their ties to the Communist Party, they were in dialogue with many of the leftist artists and intellectuals who were participants in the thriving experimental cinematic culture in Europe and the Soviet Union.

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[5] *Nuestro Cinema* 14 (January 1935). Issues 14-17 of the journal had no page numbers, applicable to all other such references.

[6] As we will see later, Buñuel worked for the AEAR during the Civil War coordinating the production and distribution of newsreels in defense of the Republic. A less known fact, which I recently discovered while consulting Piqueras's file in the dictatorship's archives, is that Piqueras was working in 1936 for the Alliance du Cinéma Indépendant (which directly depended on the AEAR). See "Juan Piqueras to Cine Teatro Club", 20 May 1936, Fichero General Político-Social (ES.37274.CDMH/9.8.10), Expediente Nº 00056261, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca. For more information see Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez, "Traduire l'avant-Garde : Léon Moussinac, Juan Piqueras et La Pédagogie Critique de Cinéma," *1895, Mille Huit Cent Quatre-Vingt-Quinze, Revue d'histoire Du Cinéma*, no. 84 (Spring 2018): 41–67.

[7] M. De los Angeles Egido León, *La Concepción de La Política Exterior Española Durante La II República: (1931-1936)*, Aula Abierta (Madrid: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, 1987), 589.

[8] Willi Münzenberg was a key figure for the USSR's internationalization policy, both as a propagandist and a recruiter of intellectuals for the Communist cause. For more information on his trajectory see footnote nine.

These histories of the Spanish intellectuals' and artists' collaborations provide us with an opportunity to explore the transnational dimension within interwar European leftist culture. All too often this history has been narrated through an exclusion of Spanish cinema from this key moment in the institutional development of cinema across Europe. As we will see in the following pages, the personal trajectories of our three leading figures – who made the transition from the cultural avant-garde to the forefront of political struggle in a few years – display an exemplary sensitivity to the context in which the Comintern intervened.[9] The goals of this essay, therefore, are twofold. On the one hand, it focuses on the cultural activities of the Comintern beyond Soviet Russia and Germany, considering instead the Comintern-aligned cinematic front elsewhere in Europe. Until recently, the discussions of the relationship of the Comintern to cinema have largely circled around Willi Münzenberg and Francesco Misiano, and examined the role of the Mezhrabpom Studio, which produced and exported many of the most important films of the period in Soviet Russia, resulting in their wide circulation across Europe.[10] This essays follows instead the cultural networks supported by the Comintern, and the role they played in the creation of a lively international cinematic culture in Spain.

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[9] Recently there have been a few English-language works on such networks. See Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez, "Film Called into Action: Juan Piqueras, Léon Moussinac, Harry Alan Potamkin and the Internationale of Film Pedagogy," *Screen* 58, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 412–36, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjx041; Fernando Ramos Arenas, "Film Criticism as a Political Weapon: Theory, Ideology and Film Activism in *Nuestro Cinema* (1932–1935)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 214–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1167466; Eva Touboul, "Entre Divertissement et Arme: Le Cinéma Selon Nuestro Cinema (1932–1935)," ed. F. Etienvre et S. Salaün, *COLLECTION Les Travaux Du Crec En Ligne*, 2004, 184–208; Gubern, *Luis Buñuel*.

[10] See for example Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137546869; S. McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West, 1917-1940* (Yale University Press, 2003); Sarah Wilson, "Comintern Spin Doctor: Willi Münzenberg, Artiste En Révolution, 1889-1940," *English Historical Review* CXXVII, no. 526 (2012): 662–68.

While it is indisputable that the Spanish Civil War was one of the great epicenters of the internationalist communist experience of the period, an importance amplified by foreign film productions focusing on Spain during that time (most notably, perhaps, through Joris Ivens' and Romen Karmen's famous films),[11] surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the Spanish context preceding these developments, often assuming its intrinsic poverty. Therefore, the second aim of this essay is to demonstrate the vibrancy of film culture in Spain of the 1920s-30s, and the degree to which its key figures were active participants on the international leftist scene.[12] Most accounts of Spanish cinema of that period generally omit this important relationship between leftist politics and aesthetics, and the role Comintern-aligned activities played in the various attempts to transform the country's film culture. This was a process which could not be reduced to a mere reflex of Soviet cinema, but instead allowed for the ideologically and artistically complex negotiations between local and transnational motivations and effects of this relationship. As such, the first part of this essays focuses more explicitly on the situation facing the Comintern in Spain, while the rest is concerned with the dynamics of the reception of Soviet cinema, taking a particularly close look at the position and role of *Nuestro Cinema* in this process.

The paradox at the heart of this story taps into the very problem which plagued the Comintern leaders throughout the 1920s and 30s – how to create an "authentic" proletarian

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[11] For example *Ispaniya* (Esfir Schub, 1939), where Karmen is listed as camera operator, or the famous *The Spanish Earth* (Joris Ivens, 1937), in which Ernsest Hemingway and John Dos Passos collaborated. See Sonia García López, *Spain Is Us: La Guerra Civil Española En El Cine Del Popular Front, 1936-1939*, Història (València: Universitat de València, 2013).

[12] See also Fibla-Gutiérrez, "Film Called into Action"; Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez and Pablo La Parra-Pérez, "Turning the Camera into a Weapon: Juan Piqueras's Radical Noncommercial Film Projects and Their Afterlives (1930s-1970s)," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017): 341-362., https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2017.1380148.

culture within the confines of the bourgeois sphere, taking advantage of the politicization that had generated a splinter progressive bourgeois sector as a reaction to the rise of fascism. In Spain, the Spanish bourgeoisie's desire for modernization and dissolution of an old order opened a window of opportunity for leftist politics to spread via cultural production and appreciation of revolutionary aesthetics. Antonio Marichalar's review in the journal *Revista de Occidente* – founded in 1923 by philosopher José Ortega y Gasset as an elitist cultural referent for a new enlightened Spain – of the first screening of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin/ Bronenosets Potemkin* (1925) gives a perfect example of how Soviet cinema was seen as a model for translating revolution to the Spanish cultural elite. According to Marichalar, Eisenstein's film "is not a Communist but a revolutionary film. Its effect is not to persuade, convince, praise, or propagate something. Its objective is to disturb one's spirit […] A film like this can ignite anyone with a minimum instinct of rebellion and critical spirit. It can turn him against constituted power, regardless of his convictions and the regime he supports."[13] The challenge facing pro-communist cultural activists was to find a way to transfer these revolutionary energies aroused by Soviet aesthetics from minority intellectual circles to proletarian masses. Piqueras, Buñuel and Del Amo sought to use the Comintern's support to provide a solution to this problem.

1. The PCE and the Comintern in context

To understand the dissemination of a leftist political aesthetic in Spain, it is necessary to look at the political and cultural aspects of the Spanish Communist Party's (PCE) relationship to the Comintern during this period. The Spanish Communist Party was formed as a split from the Spanish Socialist Worker Party (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español) in 1920, and was

[13] Antonio Marichalar, "Visto y Oído," *Revista de Occidente*, no. 95 (May 1931): 195–97.

officially recognized as the Third International representative in Spain in November 1921.[14] Spain in the twenties underwent the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923-1930), which gave way to an authoritarian regime lead by General Berenguer (1930-1931), finally ending in the proclamation of the Second Republic (14th April 1931). In response to this authoritarian political culture and its legacy, Comintern policy towards Spain in the Second Republic was split between those who thought the country was in the ideal state for a proletarian revolution, and those who believed that the defense of the democratic republic was more important to assure a future workers' rule. The end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the overthrow of King Alfonso XII interested the USSR, which until then had paid very little attention to Spain, despite the marked cultural and political changes it was experiencing.[15]

The PCE only had around 1000 members at the beginning of 1931, and it initially failed to gain significant presence in the first months of the Spanish Second Republic due to its ambivalent attitude towards the Republican government. For party militants, the Republic was seen as a hopelessly bourgeois enterprise. Among other factors, the competition with the Anarchists for loyalty among the Spanish workers, and the repression of strikes by the

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[14] María Teresa Gómez, "The Long Journey: The Cultural Politics of the Communist Party of Spain, 1920-1939" (McGill University, 1999), 83.

[15] Already, the last decades of the 19th century witnessed a generational intellectual change. The Free Institution of Education (ILE, Institución Libre de Enseñanza), founded in 1876, became a pivotal institution in the modernization of the country's old-fashioned knowledge production system. It established the Students Residence (RE, Residencia de Estudiantes) in 1910 to take promising students from all over Spain into an environment in which were fostered creative interests in different cultural realms such as poetry, writing, theater, painting or film. Amongst its pupils we find key leftist intellectuals like Antonio Machado, Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel, as well as those with more ambiguous political sympathies, like Salvador Dalí. Its mission was not only to embrace avant-garde thought, but also to popularize a version of modernism contoured to the needs of Spanish society. To meet these ends, it created the Board for the Extension of Studies (JAE, Junta de Ampliación de Estudios), which established the first grant system for Spanish intellectuals to travel abroad.

government, made it difficult for the PCE to be anything but oppositional. Nevertheless, the PCE's membership grew steadily as the cultural and political relationships between Spain and the Soviet Union intensified and the volatile political situation called for unexpected – in relation to Comintern directives – changes in political strategy.[16] Indeed, the relationship between the Spanish leaders of the PCE and foreign Comintern representatives was often strained in the years leading up to 1936, in part due to the initial ignorance in Moscow of the Spanish social and political reality.[17] In October 1932 the entire executive of the PCE was summoned to Moscow and replaced due to their support of the democratic Republic; José Bullejos, party leader, had branded the slogan "For the defense of the Republic" after a failed coup by general Sanjurjo in Seville.[18] This position clashed with the Comintern's program to attack socialists and anarchists. In 1933 Heinz Neuman, who had been in the German communist party (KPD) with Willi Münzenberg, was sent to Spain on behalf of the Comintern to reorganize the PCE.[19]

These maneuvers should be put in the context of the rise of the fascist threat in Germany with Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, which increasingly concentrated Stalin's attention on a rising military threat. In response, Communist party policy gradually changed from one of supporting international revolution to one that called for the defense of the true socialist state

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[16] By 1934 the PCE had 25 000 members, and by 1936 it had grown to 100,000, with an increasing political weight in the Republican governments during the Civil War, when Jesús Hernández Tomás was appointed head of the "Minsitry of Education and Fine Arts" (Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes).

[17] Edward Hallett Carr and Fernando Santos Fontenla, *El ocaso de la Comintern, 1930-1935.* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), 317.

[18] Gómez, "The Long Journey: The Cultural Politics of the Communist Party of Spain, 1920-1939," 231.

[19] Babette Gross, *Willi Münzenberg: A Political Biography* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 242.

(the USSR), even if this meant the subordination of revolutionary activity elsewhere. By 1935, the popular front strategy against fascism was adopted at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress, a policy enthusiastically greeted by the PCE.[20] The Soviet Union's warming to progressive political factions of the Republic nullified the policy of attacks on other progressive forces (socialists and anarchists). Third Period policies were abandoned with relief, since in Spain this strategy could only prove negative for the workers.[21] Shortly after, when the Civil War broke out, the desperate need for Soviet aid consolidated relations between the PCE and the Republican government, united this time under the Popular Front against fascism.

1.1 A transversal fascination: the Comintern and intellectual circles.

Although the PCE was in constant political turmoil, it did develop a cultural policy that it hoped to make attractive to the new cultural elite represented by the so-called Generation of '27/ Generación del 27.[22] As we have already mentioned, the PCE was not a strong political force in 1931, and although in the following years the party membership grew steadily, it was still far less popular than the Socialist party (PSOE), the leading left-wing political force; it was even smaller than the different Anarchist movements of the time. This was mirrored in its problems creating a

[20] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 1; Carr and Santos Fontenla, *El ocaso de la Comintern, 1930-1935.*, 311–40.

[21] As the constant conflicts between anarchists and communists during the Civil War later proved. In May 1937 an open armed conflict between them exploded in Barcelona, causing more than 1000 dead and seriously debilitating the Republic's opposition to the advancing Francoist troops. See Manuel Aguilera, *Compañeros y Camaradas: Las Luchas Entre Antifascistas En La Guerra Civil Española* (San Sebastián de los Reyes (Madrid): Actas Editorial, 2012).

[22] Historians use this phrase to refer to the artists, writers, and poets that came to the fore of Spanish cultural production in the 1920s and 30s, heavily influenced by avant-gardist culture and modernity. Many of them gathered in Seville in 1927 to commemorate the 300 anniversary of the death of baroque poet Luis de Góngora (hence the name).

popular cultural policy, since most intellectuals were suspicious of the all-encompassing state associated with Soviet Communism, preferring either the bourgeois liberalism of the Republicans or the more libertarian strains of leftism, such as Anarchism, which abhorred centralized governments and defended personal freedom.[23] To try and turn this situation around, the PCE received the help of Comintern representatives, who most likely recommended the recruitment of intellectuals to the cause as per the Comintern policy in France and Germany.[24] Indeed, the Communist International had already started a large-scale operation to promote both the USSR's image abroad and to attract intellectuals from all over the world to Communist related organizations.

Led by Willi Münzenberg, former Young Communist International head and German Communist Party (KPD) member, the operation involved the management of several newspapers and magazines across Europe, as well as sponsoring talks to international worker organizations, including one in New York. It was under these auspices that Mezhrabpom Film Studio, a

[23] This divergence in political affiliation of leftist intellectuals can be exemplified in the crossed accusations between *Popular Film* (directed by Anarchist Mateo Santos) and *Nuestro Cinema* (directed by Communist Juan Piqueras) journals. The latter accused the former of using its lack of political consistency to advance the interests of capitalist film companies and even defend Nazi film policy. See Juan Piqueras, "En Torno a Una Polémica de Popular Film," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 13 (October 1933): 213. *Popular Film* replied by accusing Piqueras of "wanting everyone to think…as ordered by the USSR, who pays for it" (Mateo Santos, "Posiciones. La de Juan Piqueras y La Mía," *Popular Film*, no. 384 (December 21, 1933); Jean Bécarud and Evelyne López Campillo, *Los Intelectuales Españoles Durante La II República*, 1. ed, Estudios de Historia Contemporánea Siglo XXI (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978); Coloquio sobre Historia Contemporánea de España, *Los Orígenes Culturales de La II República*, 1. ed, Historia (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1993).

[24] De los Angeles Egido León, *La Concepción de La Política Exterior Española Durante La II República: (1931-1936)*, 541.The Comintern mantained its control over the PCE throghout the 1930s via its liasons Victorio Codovilla (until 1937) and Palmiro Togliatti (until 1939). N. LaPorte, K. Morgan, and M. Worley, *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-53* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 171–72; A. Elorza and M. Bizcarrondo, *Queridos Camaradas: La Internacional Comunista y España, 1919-1939*, La España Plural (Planeta, 1999).

production and distribution (under the name Prometheus-Film) company with headquarters in Berlin but physically located in Moscow, was created.[25] Amongst the films it produced one finds *Storm over Asia*/ *Potomok Chingiz-Khana* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1928)*, The End of St. Petersburg*/ *Konets Sankt-Peterburga* (Vsevolod Pudovkin and Mikhail Doller, 1927) and *The Road to life/ Putyovka v zhizn* (Nikolai Ekk, 1931), which were amongst the first Soviet films screened in Spain.

While Willi Münzenberg's activities have received significant attention, his relationships with key Spanish cultural figures related to film have been largely unexplored. From 1933 he oversaw anti-fascist propaganda in Paris, after fleeing Berlin,[26] which put him in contact with many Spanish intellectuals, such as Julio Alvarez Del Vayo, who helped introduced Soviet cinema into Spain in the late twenties.[27] When the 1934 Asturias October revolution failed, Münzenberg became actively engaged in helping many of the political refugees that fled to France. This threw him into the same spheres as Piqueras, who was hosting some of those same refugees in his Paris house.[28] Likewise, Piqueras's job in Paris selecting films for the distribution and production company Filmófono had to put him in contact with Münzenberg through

[25] Gross, *Willi Münzenberg*, 148.

[26] Gross, 270.

[27] Gross, 271. Alvarez del Vayo was a Soviet film enthusiast, and would be appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1936. According to Babette Gross, Del Vayo and Münzenberg had met in Berlin years before, were the former worked in a Latin American newspaper and the latter was beginning his career as a propaganda impresario for the USSR.

[28] Llopis, *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español*, 138.

Prometheus, the distribution branch of Mezhrabpom that managed the international circulation of Soviet films.[29]

The German propagandist became an important connector in the international solidarity campaign with the Spanish Republic during the Civil War. He was in contact with Buñuel,[30] who was in Paris working for the Spanish embassy, coordinating the production, exhibition, and circulation of documentaries and newsreels in solidarity with the Republic.[31] Del Amo worked as the assistant director and cameramen for these films, presumably with a camera that Buñuel had given him.[32] The particular trajectory of Del Amo, from a twenty-year-old film critic for *Popular Film* magazine, to Piqueras's disciple and director of *Nuestro Cinema* in Spain, to PCE member, to battlefront newsreel filmmaker in only four years is exemplary of the vertiginous rhythm of cultural and political transformations in the Spain of those years. It also testifies to the success of the Comintern's recruitment of intellectuals as the political situation in Spain radicalized. As we will examine in the next paragraphs, the propagation of USSR culture happened transversally

[29] Founded by businessmen Ricardo Urgoiti in 1929, the company 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 of selecting films for Spanish distribution from France. Although Urgoiti was not a communist he was indeed aligned with a left-wing ideology, actively supporting the Republic after the fascist rebellion. He can be considered as a key "financial benefactor" of the film culture analyzed in this article, both as employer of its most relevant figures and financial supporter of Piqueras' *Nuestro Cinema*.

[30] In an interview with fellow Spanish exiled writer Max Aub, Buñuel acknowledged that in August 1936 he carried money from the Spanish Republic war ministry in Madrid to Münzenberg in Paris, although the details of the operation, especially what the money was for, are unknown. See Max Aub, *Buñuel, novela* (Granada: Cuadernos del Vigia, 2013), 156.

[31] Gubern, *Luis Buñuel*, 262.

[32] Gubern, 245.

across Spanish society, catching the attention of a broad spectrum of intellectuals, from leftist poets to bourgeois amateur filmmakers.

From afar, the USSR appeared as the materialization of the kind of society that was being demanded by scientists, writers, artists, teachers, and filmmakers. It seemed to have successfully merged progressive culture and politics with economic planning in a decade in which the economic slump was taken to signal the death knell of capitalism. These cultural figures created the first "friends of the Soviet Union" associations and even become active members of the PCE. As described by Julián Marías and Manuel Tuñón de Lara, Spanish intellectuals had become politicized in the wake of the loss of the colonies in 1898 known as "El Desastre del 98" (the '98 disaster); their anxieties about Spain's supposed backwardness fed their own self-image as the vanguard that would push their country into modernity.[33] For them, it was of primary importance to break down the wall isolating Spanish intellectuals from international, or at least European, contexts, under Miguel de Unamuno famous phrase, "[…] Spain remains to be discovered, and it will only be discovered by Europeanized Spaniards."[34] However, this sense of a national project did not necessarily produce any single political identity, but was, instead, directed towards the urge for economic, cultural and political modernization of Spain under a variety of ideological guises.

With the radicalization of the political context after the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923-1930), critics, writers, poets, filmmakers, artists, scientists and journalists, who could see Spain's backwardness compared to other European countries, started to become politically

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[33] Julián Marías Aguilera, "España Ante La Historia y Ante Sí Misma 1898–1936," in *Historia de España*, ed. Menéndez Pidal (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1994).

[34]. "[…]España está por descubrir, y sólo la descubrirán españoles europeizados" (Translation EF). Marías Aguilera, 68.

involved at different levels of militancy. Some took an institutional approach, attaining appointments to positions of power, the symbolic figure here being the first president of the second Spanish Republic, Manuel Azaña, lawyer and writer. Others – such as poet Rafael Alberti and writer María Teresa León – made use of the Republic's policy of cultural exchange and traveled to countries like Germany, from which they could visit the Soviet Union.[35] Given the reality of a semi-industrialized economy, widespread rural poverty, harsh working conditions, and the growing power of worker organizations, it is not surprising that Soviet culture and society, which was also rapidly modernizing a country known for its uneven development, would seem to be a model for the Spanish intellectual elite.

But the fascination with Soviet society and culture was not only an affair of the left, since bourgeois creative sectors also turned their attention to the USSR. Even the amateur film section of the Catalan Excursionist Center (CEC, Centre Excursionista de Catalunya), a stronghold of the powerful and conservative Catalan industrial elites, admired Soviet filmmaking. In issue 10 of their journal *Cinema Amateur*, for instance, they published a translated article from the American Society of Filmmakers that included praises for Eisenstein's montage by Karl Freund.[36] 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 limited quantity of film stock available. Likewise, the CEC's strong anti-commercial film bias position made the Soviet film industry a

[35]. They were given a scholarship from the Committee for Extended Studies / Junta de Ampliación de Estudios to research new forms of theater in France and Germany. For a complete account of their journeys see Allison Taillot, "Les intellectuelles européennes et la Guerre d'Espagne : de l'engagement personnel à la défense de la République espagnole," *Cahiers de civilisation espagnole contemporaine. De 1808 au temps présent*, no. 11 (September 26, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4000/ccec.4760.

[36] Freund Karl, "I Qué Es Muntatge?," *Cinema Amateur* 1, no. 10 (January 1936): 62–63.

logical place to look for suggestions, in spite of their lack of sympathy for Communism. Issue 11 also devoted the "foreign collaboration" section to Soviet cinema, in this case with an article by V. Solev on Soviet sound experimentation, focusing on the "drawn sound" films by E. Sholpo in his Petrograd laboratory.[37]

Antonio Bonet is another good example of this class-crossing bourgeois admiration for Soviet cinema, which the Comintern capitalized on. He was a prominent architect and member of the Group of Spanish Artists and Technicians for Contemporary Architecture (GATEPAC, Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles Para la Arquitectura Contemporánea), which put out a journal called *A.C. Documents of Contemporary Activity/ A.C. Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*. In its issues, one is surprised to find numerous mentions of Soviet cinema among pleas and plans for an elitist, rationalist architecture and design. As an example, in the fourth issue of 1931 there is an article devoted to Nikolai Ekk's *The Road to Life/ Putyovka v zhizn* as "the first Soviet sound feature."[38] What is even more surprising is that the anonymous article, quite possibly written by Bonet himself, praises the communal aspect of Soviet society. Considering the difficulties for the circulation of Soviet films in Spain at the time, it is noteworthy that the article is contemporaneous to the release of the film (June 1, 1931, in the USSR), showing how connected certain intellectuals were with the cultural life of the Soviet Union.

The bourgeois intellectual imagination was, as well, captivated both by the will for experimentation and the utopian transformative projects taking place in the USSR, so much so

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[37] V Solev, "Música Absoluta Amb Só Dibuixat," *Cinema Amateur* 2, no. 11 (Spring 1936): 88–89.

[38] "El Primer Film Sonoro de La URSS," *AC Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea*, no. 4 (1931): 29.

that the radical politics of a worker revolution were left to one side. Coming out of a dictatorship and decades of relative cultural isolation, the newness of the Soviet project – which was arriving late to Spain, compared to other European countries – appealed greatly to these self-fashioned Spanish intellectuals precisely as a stimulating horizon onto which to project their hopes and aspirations for a different Spanish society in cultural terms. This attraction to "all things Soviet" by cultural tastemakers coexisted with the rejection of an old and seemingly discredited Catholic bourgeois code. Similarly, a host of younger intellectuals such as Del Amo, Buñuel, Alberti, León, Arconada or Piqueras staked their work on the Soviet experiment, which meant sometimes violently disassociating from the countless political, cultural and social projects of the previous decades that had all failed to lift either the level of living or the tone of the country. Film, that new medium which had so rapidly put itself at the center of mass culture, seemed to provide a unique instrument for shaking off the pessimism of a culture nostalgic for a failed empire and producing the mindset, at least, of a modern European state, just as it had done, or so it was sometimes claimed, in the USSR.

In a way, this strong attraction to the USSR reflected the extreme crisis of the Spanish mindset, which was desperately striving to break with the conditions that made the past rather than the future the privileged image of utopia, but without a clear image of what the socio-political future was supposed to look like, or what role was to be allotted to the "mass" or the "people" in this transformation. The Soviet Union seemed a viable model to follow for some intellectuals, but for many others it was "[…] more than a revolution, a social dissolution."[39] These ideological disparities reflect the complexity of what Gerald Brenan called "the Spanish labyrinth"; the complex political and social paths, often blocked, folding one on the other, into

[39] Luis Araquistaín, "Comentarios: La Nueva Dialéctica Histórica," *El Sol*, May 18, 1925.

which intellectuals led themselves, identifying their pursuit of power with their pursuit of a better future.[40] In the following sections we go into this labyrinth through cinema, exploring the relationship between politics and aesthetics that made the USSR an appealing project to the eyes of the Spanish rebelling citizen and the bourgeois amateur alike.

2. Learning revolutionary aesthetics; the appeal of Soviet cinema in Spain

> "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 […]" (Juan Piqueras, 1932).[41]

In most historical accounts of the cultural relationships between Spain and the USSR, the Civil War overshadows the key prior period (1929-1936), when a number of intellectuals, directly or indirectly in the Comintern orbit, actively encouraged Soviet film appreciation with an eye to creating a revolutionary Spanish cinema. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the critical reception of Soviet cinema and the discourses associated with it in Spain during the late 1920s-early 1930s, placed within the broader context of the Spanish film culture of the time.

The absence of a strong Spanish film industry during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship had permitted French and American domination of the Spanish market, with local competition confined to the so-called "españolada" – cheap productions based on popular melodramatic

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[40] See Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Canto ed (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[41] "Nuestro Cinema no puede admitir – amistosamente – más que un cinema capaz de librarle definitivamente de la pobreza ideologica del de hoy. Es decir, un cinema con fondo, con ideas amplias, con contenido social…Un cinema que nació con Eisenstein, con Pudovkin…". Juan Piqueras, "Itinerario de Nuestro Cinema," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 1 (1932): 1.

romances and old values, one-act farces, and basic comic sketches. Spain 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 hugely popular. Moreover, the centrality of Spanish cultural production in previous centuries to the construction of both European and Latin American culture 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,[42] but beyond its borders Spain was fixed in the public imaginary as an exotic failed empire, always in the shadow of what happened in Paris.[43]

The advent of the Second Republic in 1931 promised to drastically change the cultural landscape of the country. Education and the creation of a new national cultural policy became a priority for the liberal authorities, who attempted to unite Spaniards through their rich artistic heritage.[44] At the same time, a local film industry began to develop in Madrid and Barcelona, although most films reproduced the "española" model. Critics were divided between those who accepted this type of cinema as a necessary first step in the consolidation of a Spanish film

[42] For a comprehensive account of the relationship between culture and nationalism in Spain see Sandie Eleanor Holguin, *Creating Spaniards: Culture and National Identity in Republican Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Jordana Mendelson, *Documenting Spain: Artists, Exhibition Culture, and the Modern Nation, 1929-1939*, Refiguring Modernism 2 (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

[43] See for example Eric Hobsbawn's description of the country; "Spain was a peripheral part of Europe, and its history had been persistently out of phase with the rest of the continent from which it was divided by the wall of the Pyrenees." Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914 - 1991*, 1. Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 156.

[44] This policy earned the opposition of most political factions. The Catholic conservatives criticized their lack of religious content, radical leftists saw it as bourgeois intellectualism and asked for an end of Soviet film censorship, and regional nationalisms in Catalonia and Basque Country were insulted by the absolute centrality of Spanish language and culture in these initiatives.

industry, and those who opposed it tout court. For the latter group, the model to follow were the films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin or (perhaps, more surprisingly to us today) Olga Preobrazhenskaia, which retold the narrative of the "Russian people", creating a new history of proud citizens (referred to at the time as "the masses"), busy in the collective construction of a promised future. As one review of Preobrazhenskaia's *Baby ryazanskie* (1927, *El Pueblo del Pecado*) – the first commercially exhibited Soviet film in Spain – remarks:

> *El Pueblo del Pecado* resembles no other film. It's 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 masses. The Russian people with its habits, with its tremendous passions, with its eagerness for social sense.[45]

It is important to highlight that, as elsewhere in Europe, the exhibition of Soviet films was mainly confined to film clubs and special screenings, as we will see in detail later. This marginalization – for obvious political reasons – coincided with the expansion of the theatrical exhibition system in Spain, which by 1935 had 3.450 screens – although only 1.550 of them equipped with sound systems –[46] ranking amongst the highest in Europe.[47] And it's important to locate the development of such networks in the complex Spanish historical context as a still semi-industrialized economy, without official diplomatic ties to the USSR, and having inherited

[45] "El Pueblo Del Pecado," *ABC*, March 30, 1930.

[46] Compared to countries like France, Germany, or Italy, Spain was very slow to equip its theaters with sound technology –mainly due to economic reasons– although Western Electric had already fitted out 500 sound cinemas in Spain by June 1932. See Bernard P. E. Bentley, *A Companion to Spanish Cinema*, Colección Támesis. Serie A, Monografías 266 (Woodbridge ; Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2008), 54.

[47] Emilio C García Fernández, *El cine español entre 1896 y 1939: historia, industria, filmografía y documentos* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2002), 247.

seven years of relative isolation from the avant-garde culture that had spread throughout Europe in the years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.[48]

The story of Spanish cinema in this period, when told at all, is largely seen as completely dependent and dominated by the French intellectual circles of the time. Although the influence and importance of the French avant-garde in Spanish intellectuals is without question,[49] this line of scholarship has overlooked the importance of a circle of intellectuals moving in an informal network dedicated to creating a "new Spanish cinema" that would not be a copy of Hollywood and would be politically charged. It is true that the avant-garde in Spain was more about circulation of new works conforming to their vision of cinema (the creation of an avant-garde culture itself) than making films, but one must consider the difficult political and economic context of the country in terms of production and financing. The first important production companies – with more than one film produced in a year – did not appear until 1932 (Orphea in Barcelona and CIFESA in Valencia), and it was not until 1935/1936 that other such companies were founded (for example Filmófono, Exclusivas, or Alianza Cinematográfica Española). Either way, Spain produced a peak 37 feature films in 1935, compared to 45 in the USSR, still far from

[48] The Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid was an exception to this isolation, but it was just a small oasis in a cultural desert regarding avant-garde and revolutionary artistic expressions.

[49] To mention just a couple examples, poet and writer Louis Aragon, who had broken with the surrealists after his support of Stalinism, exercised some influence on Luis Buñuel (Gubern, *Los años rojos de Luis Buñuel*, 316). 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, where he met Georges Sadoul, Jean Cocteau and Germaine Dulac, amongst other important cultural figures of the time (Llopis, *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español*, 136.) Many of them collaborated at some point in his journal *Nuestro Cinema*, which he directed from Paris, where Buñuel also lived intermittently.

the 525 produced in the USA, 200 in UK, or 115 in France.[50] Given these factors, the film cultural explosion of the late 1920s and early 1930s experienced by the country is even more remarkable,[51] offering a unique example of a national cinema in the making, heavily influenced by the Soviet Union's successful film policy of promoting didactic, avant-garde and political works over commercial films.

The traditional narrative of film history placed France at the center of inter-war avant-garde cinema. Recent scholarship has revisited this thesis,[52] and in the process further emphasized the impact of Early Soviet cinema on cinema world-wide, which began to be explored in scholarship and criticism in the late 1960s-early 70s.[53] In the interwar period, with most European countries in political turmoil and facing radical social and cultural transformations, Soviet cinema provided an apparently perfect synthesis of avant-garde aspirations. Its formal innovation both reflected and set in motion the disruption of an established

[50] Román Gubern, *El Cine Sonoro En La II República (1929-1936)*, 1. ed, Historia Del Cine Español 2 (Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1977), 71, 82; Steven P. Hill, "A Quantitative View of Soviet Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 11, no. 2 (1972): 21, https://doi.org/10.2307/1225047. Both references exclude documentary and educational films

[51] In his study of the film magazines from 1930 to 1939 in Spain, scholar Aitor Hernández Eguílez identifies at least fifty eigh film specific magazines published throughout those vibrant years. See Aitor Hernández Eguíluz, *Testimonios en Huecograbado: el cine en la 2® República y su prensa especializada 1930-1939* (Valencia: Instituto Valenciano del Audiovisual y Cinematografía, 2010), 28.

[52] Ian Christie, "Eastern Avatars: Russian Influence on European Avant-Gardes," in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945* (New York: Berghahn, n.d.), 143–61; Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939*, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Masha Salazkina, "Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map," *October* (January 1, 2012): 97–116, https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00082.

[53]. See among others, Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," in *Film Culture Reader*, by P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 404–22; Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," *Studio International* 190, no. 978 (December 1975): 171–75.

social and political regime in the name of a utopian future. It was a cinema that could both reflect and advance the new world order formally, thematically, and in its very organization.[54] Piqueras described this as the synthesis of "emotion" and "education" when describing the film *Turksib* (Viktor Turin, 1929), a documentary on the construction of the Siberia-Turkestan railroad.[55] In his essay "Educational and Cultural Meaning of Soviet Cinema" the critic finds it important to quote the film's director's assertion that "The central theme of Soviet art is the building of a socialist society, the new life that emerges in the Soviet Socialist Republics. Our reality provides the artist's creative genius an infinite variety of themes. And these new themes demand to be treated in new ways."[56]

Statements like this provided a new generation of Spanish film critics with a language of revolutionary aesthetics in its capacity to dissolve the old conservative order. While the role of Early Soviet cinema as a historical point of reference for building a national film industry and a culture of film education has been generally acknowledged, the appeal of the Soviet model to "peripheral" countries in Europe like Spain and Italy is only beginning to be explored.[57] Not to

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[54]. As the scholars previously mentioned have shown, tensions between different avant-garde factions soon emerged, especially after the Stalin imposed turn to socialist realism. Art and politics were either *too close* or *too apart* for them. Although still formally innovative, the ties of Soviet aesthetics to Stalin's national project was not accepted by many members of the avant-garde, a conflict epitomized by Lois Aragon and André Breton's fallout in 1933 (known as the "Aragon affair").

[55] Juan Piqueras, "Sentido Educativo y Cultural Del Cine Soviético," *El Sol*, January 1, 1931, 8.

[56] Piqueras, "Sentido Educativo y Cultural Del Cine Soviético."

[57] Masha Salazkina, "Soviet–Italian Cinematic Exchanges: Transnational Film Education in the 1930s," in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, ed. Malte Hagener (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 180–98; Enrique Fibla Gutierrez, "Revolutionizing the 'National Means of Expression': The Influence of Soviet Film Culture in Pre-Civil War Spain," *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 95–111, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.8.1.95_1.

mention its appeal in more distant contexts such as Latin America, which has been recently explored by Sarah Ann Wells, establishing suggestive parallelisms with the Spanish context.[58] To ascribe this attraction solely to fascist nationalisms' search for possible models of propagandistic visual regime overlooks the existence of competing modes of nationalist discourses within the countries' cultural and political spheres of the time, such as the ones promoted by Spanish or Catalan leftist intellectuals throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For them, cinema 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.[59] Soviet cinema provided much inspiration for this transformation. And although many of the Soviet films which inspired the Spaniards belong to what we generally consider the "avant-garde," it was their "realist" capacity – understood as a privileged relationship between the art form and the social material and cultural reality it represents – that held most sway in the discourse of the time.

Take for instance the words of Anarchist critic and director Mateo Santos, responding to a question in a survey published by the journal *Cine Art*: "What orientation (aesthetic, ideological, educational, etc.) should the national production follow?" Santos replied: "The only one possible; that which displays in the celluloid an image and a landscape that can be identified

[58] Sarah Ann Welles, "Parallel Modernities? The First Reception of Soviet Cinema in Latin America," in *Cosmopolitan Film Culture in Latin America*, ed. Rielle Edmonds Navitski and Nicolas Poppe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 151–75.

[59]. Ilya Ehrenburg famously notes in his 1932 account of the first months of the II Republic, *España, República de Trabajadores,* that the anachronisms of Spanish society were unparalleled, vividly describing the differences between urban and rural; millionaires in luxury cars and illiterate peasants traveling by donkey, lavish meals in the Ritz in Madrid and malnourished children in remote villages. Il' i͡a Grigorevich Ehrenburg, *España, república de trabajadores* (Barcelona: Melusina, 2008), 9.

as genuinely Spanish."[60] Santos had regularly defended the need for a Spanish proletarian film culture in journals such as the Marxist *Nuestro Cinema* or *Popular Film*, a politically and content-wise diverse publication – albeit more eschewed towards a libertarian approach – where he was the editor. It's notable that he does not refer to Soviet aesthetics here, expressing instead the generalized sentiment amongst Spanish leftist critics that a future national cinema should develop its own form of realism.

In this sense, Soviet aesthetics was the model of what *could* be done but, as critic and writer Cesar M. Arconada remarked, not what *should* be done, point by point. Instead of copying the Soviets, the Spanish left proposed using the Soviet film industry as an inspiration to develop a form of realism that corresponded to Spanish reality.[61] When in 1935 *Nuestro Cinema* asked five well-known intellectuals – Benjamin Jarnés, Francisco Ayala, Antonio Espina, Federico García Lorca and Ramón J. Sender – about Soviet cinema, they all highlighted the undeniable importance of USSR filmmaking as an educational and cultural model for Spain, praising both technique and content, although Sender specified that content should also be "local", mentioning the importance of linking revolutionary thought with the "national means of expression."[62] Spain hadn't experienced a proletarian revolution, so the transformation of capitalist culture would have to begin from within the system, anticipating the uprising that would "build a new era of justice, where proletarian cinema and art will develop in complete unity with life."[63] In contrast

[60] "Una Encuesta Sobre Cine Español," *Cine Art* 1, no. 12 (1934): 26.

[61] Arconada had by now written two novels inspired by Soviet realism (*Turbina* in 1930 and *Los pobres contra los ricos* in 1933).

[62] "Segunda Encuesta de Nuestro Cinema: Convocatoria y Cuestionario," *Nuestro Cinema* 2, no. 17 (1935): 66–67.

[63] César M. Arconada, "Hacia Un Cinema Proletario," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 8–9 (February 1933): 94.

to the sleek studio productions of Hollywood and their European imitators, Soviet aesthetics made it imaginable to create works that would point to a revolutionary culture to come, propagandizing among the masses in order to effect a grass roots ideological change. More hopefully, it would be a change in which the masses would recognize cinema as their instrument, rather than that of the entertainment industry. As Piqueras's above quote remarks, the aim was to free the worker from the ideological poverty of mainstream films, and the false image of Spanish society that they reflected.

Soviet film's emphasis on the collective over the individual provided the perfect framework for a new narrative foray to be experimented with, taking as its subject the fragmented nature of Spanish society itself, but resolving that discord, a la the Soviet example, with the aid of a state willing to strongly unite them for the construction of a common good – a new and just society. This idea greatly appealed to those tired of the endlessly unresolved dispute for cultural and political hegemony in Spain. It provided a serious alternative to cinema as mindless entertainment and distraction, offering instead a space for collective cohesion that mixed the old and the new with a glorious future in mind. Most importantly, if Spanish art was to aid in the proletarian revolution it had 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 must descend from it. It's not acceptable to walk alone, in a carriage of aesthetics, like an ordinary Oscar Wilde, with impertinence and individual artistic pride.[64]

Arconada, like Piqueras, and Santos defended a notion of the collective subject that would be at the center of a national film project for Spain. The collective principle would work from the top to the bottom: the filmmaker wouldn't walk alone, but alongside fellow technicians and workers.

[64] Arconada, 102.

And the carriage would not be made solely of aesthetics, but of social content and pedagogical intentions. And while this vision was most powerful and clearly articulated among the radical leftist circles in the 1930s – which will be our focus later in the essay – the appeal of Soviet cinema needs to be further explored within a broader cultural context beyond the creation of a specifically proletarian film culture, through the variety of circulatory networks which shaped its reception in Spain.

2.1 Film clubs and the bourgeois introduction of Soviet films in Spain

Although the focus of this article is on how the Comintern capitalized on Spanish intellectual circles of the time to advance a particular proletarian film culture, it is important to stress that the cultural relationship between USSR and Spain happened both on an official and an unofficial level.[65] The varied channels through which the Comintern managed to consolidate a proletarian film culture – despite the ban on commercial circulation of Soviet films, which only

[65] Although in this article we focus more on unofficial (non-government) initiatives, we should mention briefly the importance of VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries/**V**sesoiuznoe **O**bshchestvo **K**ul'turnoi **S**viazi s zagranitsei) and AUS (Friends of the Soviet Union/Amigos de la Unión Soviética), the two most important official venues aimed at disseminating a positive image of Soviet culture and society among Spanish citizens. The former was in the USSR and was administratively subordinate to the Comintern and its Foreign Relations Secretary, while the latter was controlled by the International Committee of Soviet Union Friends (which itself was subordinated to VOKS) and had different branches across Spain, with a central office in Madrid. In the absence of an official Soviet diplomatic mission, they filled this space and helped disseminate a positive image of Soviet culture while at the same time gathering useful information about the Spanish society and its key intellectual figures for the Comintern's use. M. Garrido Caballero, "Las Relaciones Entre España y La Unión Soviética a Través de Las Asociaciones de Amistad En El Siglo XX" (Universidad de Murcia, 2006).

ended during the Spanish Civil War – were quite distanced from the commercial film industry.[66] Specifically, film clubs emerged as a key space for the propagation of revolutionary ideology throughout the country, to the delight of Comintern-aligned initiatives. Such clubs were at first an instrument of the cultural bourgeoisie. Buñuel introduced avant-garde films in Spain in sporadic sessions organized in the Residencia de Estudiantes (Madrid) during the mid-1920s. In 1928 Ernesto Giménez Caballero – director of the journal *La Gaceta Literaria*, the most importance tribune for the cultural expression of the so-called Generación del 27 – founded the Cineclub Español, where Buñuel and Piqueras soon became involved in the programming. Although bourgeois in nature and not meant for workers at all, the Cineclub Español became the center of avant-garde film culture in Spain throughout its three seasons (1928-1931), providing an outlet for Soviet cinema to be shown for the first time in Spain, and inaugurating a film club culture that would rapidly spread throughout the country after the end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.

Informal relations between Spanish and Soviet film culture had started in the late 1920s. In 1927, Julio Alvarez Del Vayo – the future minister of Foreign affairs during the Civil War – traveled to the Soviet Union and, like many sympathetic intellectuals, was put in contact with VOKS and Sovkino representatives.[67] He was an admirer of Soviet film, and would later help Eisenstein in Mexico, where Del Vayo worked in the Spanish Embassy, when the Soviet director

[66] As an example, in December 1935 critic Antonio Del Amo gave notice in the PCE journal *Pueblo* that the Cineclub GECI (Group of Independent Film Writers/Grupo de Escritores Cinematográficos Independientes) and AUS were sponsoring a screening of the Soviet adaptation of Ostrovsky's classic play *The Storm*, followed by a presentation by several AUS members who had recently traveled to the USSR and wanted to share their impressions of the journey. Antonio Del Amo Algara, "Cineclub GECI: Groza, Film Soviético de V. Petrov," *Pueblo*, December 28, 1935, 97.

[67] Daniel Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 333.

encountered problems with the Mexican authorities upon arrival to the country.[68] In his 1927 visit, Del Vayo attempted to buy Soviet films in order to circulate them in the Spanish market. By early May of 1929 he had received copies of Pudovkin's *Potomok Chingis-Khana/ Storm over Asia*, Ivan Pravov and Olga Preobrazhenskaia's *Baby ryazanskie/ Women of Riazan* (1927) and Iakov Protazanov's *Belyy oryol/ The Lash of the Tzar* (1928), although details about these transactions are not known.[69] Shortly after, in January 20, 1930, the first showcase of Soviet films was organized by the Cineclub Español in its ninth session, with a special presentation by Del Vayo on Soviet cinema, where he talked about his experience visiting Russian directors and studios in his trips to the USSR.[70] Curiously enough, only one of the films that he had supposedly purchased just a few months earlier was screened.[71] The program mentions the screening of Olga Preobrazhenskaia's *Baby ryazanskie* (1927, *El Pueblo del Pecado*), and an earlier version of *Ivan the Terrible* directed by Turi Taritsch.[72]

As is the case with most such events across Europe (perhaps except for Léon Moussinac's cultural work in France),[73] the context of this first Soviet film showcase was far removed from

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[68] Román Gubern, *Los Años Rojos de Luis Buñuel*, 1a ed (Madrid: Cátedra, 2009), 284.

[69] Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War*, 334. Since Soviet films were banned in Spain, and diplomatic relationships with the USSR were non-existent at that time, one wonders how did these prints actually arrive to Del Vayo, or rather if they actually ever did.

[70] "La Novena Session Del Cineclub," *El Sol*, January 21, 1930.

[71] Although *Storm over Asia* was shown in the eleventh session, in April 1930. See Llopis, *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español*, 306.

[72] We have been unable to identify what film this is. It may be a lost film, although it is quite possible that the title and/or director name were incorrectly transcribed in the Spanish press.

[73] See Barnard, Timothy., "From Impressionism to Communism: Léon Moussinac's Technics of the Cinema, 1921-1933," *Framework* 42 (2000); Bert Hogenkamp, "Léon Moussinac and The Spectators' Criticism in France (1931-34)," *Film International* 1, no. 2 (February 2003): 4–13, https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.1.2.4; 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).

the original proletarian audiences intended for these films. The Cineclub Español membership was largely bourgeois, and the screening took place in the lavish Ritz hotel in Madrid. This class inversion is partially explained by the fact that the state still prohibited the mass-market exhibition of Soviet films, presumably because of their inflammatory nature.[74] However, these reasons did not apply to an audience of inoffensive bourgeois intellectuals – that is, to the eyes of the Republic authorities – unconnected to any labor movement. What the authorities didn't fully understand was the role of the Cineclub as a pedagogical institution. In their own programming notes they mentioned that "the Cineclub Español has been the first Spanish film school", going on to enumerate the number of directors, producers and distributors involved in the association.[75] It successfully created the first relevant network of alternative cinemas in Spain, and although it was bourgeois in nature, it was of interest to the Comintern, which was already actively attempting to recruit intellectuals by the early 1930s in Spain.[76] Indeed, the fact that Piqueras and Buñuel were involved in different capacities in the Cineclub Español and Cineclub Proa Filmófono, while remaining in the orbit of the PCE and PCF, raises the question of whether the Comintern wasn't at least surreptitiously involved in the enterprise, especially in regards to how exactly the copies of Soviet films were obtained.

The selection of Soviet films for the Cineclub Español was made by Piqueras, whose admiration of Soviet cinema had grown together with his political alignment with the PCE.

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[74] María Antonia Paz Rebollo and Julio Montero Díaz, "Las Películas Censuradas Durante La Segunda República. Valores y Temores de La Sociedad Republicana Española (1931-1936)," *Estudios Sobre El Mensaje Periodístico*, no. 16 (2010): 369–93.

[75] *Cineclub Español*, May 1931, Program handout. This handout included a brief history of the organization, a summary of the films projected, and a reflection on the cultural and educational importance of the organization (it would be the last session of the Cineclub).

[76] The specificities of the Spanish context demanded a less hard-line third period approach, since the first objective of the PCE was to increase its membership and political influence.

Piqueras himself wrote the review of the screening devoted to Soviet cinema for the newspaper *El Sol*, admitting that "[…] cinematographically speaking we had some references of Russia. But we didn't know anything about the *USSR*."[77] With these words, Piqueras was, on the one hand, acknowledging the sparse information about the Soviet Union available to Spanish citizens of the time (1929-1930), and on the other hand conveying the strong fascination and interest for the USSR that those films aroused in film club audiences. The film showings happened, opportunely, on the eve of the proclamation of the Second Republic, after which Eisenstein's *The General Line/ Staroye i novoye* (1929) was shown in Barcelona and Madrid. In August, a local delegation of "Friends if Russia" (Amigos de Rusia)[78] in Alicante had also screened the film. By October of that same year, Catalan architect and urban planner Antonio Bonet was organizing a one-day Soviet film festival with the help of VOKS, screening Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin,* Trauberg's *Blue Express*/ *Goluboy ekspress* (1929), and a documentary.[79]

Beyond the realm of bourgeois intellectual cinephiles, Soviet aesthetics also circulated in the more politicized settings of film clubs open to the working class. With different levels of autonomy and political agendas, these film clubs shared the objective of inciting a political "awakening" through proletarian aesthetics, transforming the bourgeois intellectual type into what they envisioned to be proletarian intellectuals, directly or indirectly at the service of the Communist cause. Examples include the Cineclub Frente Revolucionario, Sindicato Banca y

[77] Llopis, *Juan Piqueras, El "Delluc" Español*, 300.

[78] This organization was a precursor of the AUS, and continued to exist in parallel in the following years.

[79] Daniel Kowalsky 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 26th August 1931 (GARF, f. 5283). Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War*, 335.

Bolsa, Cineclub FUE, Socorro Rojo Internacional, and Juventud Roja.[80] These alternative networks of exhibition and distribution created the conditions for the emergence of the radical film culture that reached its highest point during the Civil War, providing the aesthetic models to produce propaganda films and graphic art. These earlier cinematic experiences which the film clubs provided found their ways into films like *Aurora de Esperanza* (Antonio Sau Elite, 1937), produced during the war to promote solidarity amongst the fighting workers, and the posters of José Renau for that film and others like *Chapaev* (Georgi Vasilyev and Sergey Vasilyev, 1934) or *We are from Kronstadt*/ *My iz Kronshtadta* (Efim Dzigan, 1936). (figure 1).

Figure 1. Josep Renau's posters for *Chapaev* and *We are from Kronstadt*. Courtesy of the Pavelló de la República Library in Barcelona.

[80] Asier Aranzubia Cob, "Julián Antonio Ramírez: Inventario de Actividades Fílmicas," *Ikusgaiak* 6 (2003): 148.

But beyond specific aesthetic models which came to be mobilized during the Civil War, starting from the early 1930s Soviet cinema provided a vision of aesthetic and political education which would resonate powerfully among the intellectuals who were embarking on the creation of a new social and political culture. We will now turn to the evolution of this particular understanding of cinema that shaped the reception of Soviet cinema as a model for the Spanish left.

3. Soviet cinema and the synthesis of education and emotion

In 1930, critic Guillem Diaz-Plaja, who went on to teach the first Spanish university course devoted to cinema, wrote *A Culture of Cinema/ Una Cultura del Cinema*, the first book about cinema published in Catalan, and certainly one of the first to be published in Spain. He emphasized cinema's ability to capture the fast-paced changes of modern life (cars, factories, typewriters, telephones, etc), its valorization of a sensory culture as opposed to an intellectual one, and its potential as an educational instrument, which could contribute to Spain's much needed social and cultural modernization. In the last sentence of the book, Diaz-Plaja mentioned that "Russia is the key to the cinema of the future,"[81] and included a multilingual bibliography with the most relevant books published until then on Russian cinema, bringing forward the theme advanced in his quotation from Sergei Eisenstein that "cinema has to be a bridge between reason and sentiment."[82] He had borrowed from Eisenstein the idea of "cinema dialectic" and proposed it as a didactic model for Spanish cinema.

[81] Guillem Díaz-Plaja, *Una Cultura Del Cinema: Introducció a Una Estètica Del Film* (Barcelona: Publicacions de La Revista, 1930), 114.

[82] Díaz-Plaja, 107.

This model was broadly based on the different approaches of Russian filmmakers, discussed in the book, such as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin. These filmmakers promoted cinema as a form of intellectual education, in particular through specific uses of montage techniques. They saw film as a formidable instrument for epistemological and cognitive – as well as political – transformation, which allowed spectators to understand the inner workings of society. Eisenstein in particular promoted this idea, giving conferences throughout Europe in the late 1920s. He stated the goals of USSR film industry as follows: "The aim of our cinema is not to create entertainment or an enjoyable distraction. For us cinema is always a very serious issue, which has an instructional and cultural nature".[83] His method for such "instruction" was based on the dialectical juxtaposition of images, from which a new meaning would emerge. Eisenstein summarized this process in his lecture *The Principles of New Russian Cinema* (translated and published in *Nuestro Cinema*) as follows: "From the image to the emotion, from the emotion to the thesis."[84] This formula allowed for enormous pedagogical implications, and, in Díaz-Plaja's interpretation, this cinema would be "a link between the language of logic and the language of images, to create a cine-dialectic representative of humanity's aspirations."[85] This, of course, had a formidable propagandistic potential for the different nationalisms that coexisted in Spain, which needed to mobilize the masses around their respective visions of the country. In particular, Catalan nationalist intellectuals from widely different ideological positions were attracted to the USSR because of its explicit defense of self-determination, included in the Soviet Union's 1918 constitution.

[83] Sergei Eisenstein, "Los Principios Del Nuevo Cine Ruso," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 8–9 (February 1933): 105.Conference presentation in Paris transcribed to Spanish by Juan Piqueras.

[84] Eisenstein, 108.

[85] Eisenstein, 107.

Not surprisingly, when the recently elected autonomous Catalan government created a Catalan Cinema Committee in 1933,[86] it drafted an official policy towards cinema as an instrument of culture, including key references to cinema in the Soviet Union, especially regarding the institutionalization of film education.[87] The famous Moscow Film Institute, (V)GIK was, of course, not an unusual point of reference for the institutionalization of film education in Europe and elsewhere. While this process in Europe and North America took place gradually over the course of the 1930s through the 1960s, in the Soviet Union, by the late 1920s/early 1930s, the professional and academic institutionalization of film education was nearly complete and subsequently served as a model internationally for film training which combined practice with theory, and embraced artistic experimentation as a standard curricular requirement for students, all within a centralized educational structure.[88]

This approach to film education attracted critics like Díaz Plaja who, in an article in *Cinema Amateur* titled "The role of the amateur in educational cinema", mentioned the need to

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[86] Officially constituted in 1933 and later renamed Generalitat de Catalunya Propaganda Commissariat during the Civil War.

[87] The document was drafted using several memorandums written by candidates to occupy the Committee's direction, amongst them Domènec Giménez i Botey – one of the main figures of the Catalan Excursionist Amateur Cinema Section. Domènec Giménez i Botey, "Quina Hauria d'ésser La Funció Dels Organismes Oficials per Utilitzar l'acció Del Cinema Com a Instrument de Cultura," May 6, 1933. For a translation of segments of the document see Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez, "What Should the Role of Official Institutions Be in Relation to the Use of Cinema as an Instrument of Culture?," *Film History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 168, https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.30.1.08.

[88]. See Masha Salazkina and Nathalie Ryabchikova, "Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviet Institutional Models for the Study of Cinema, 1920s-1940s," in *Sergei M. Eisenstein. Notes for a General History of Cinema*, ed. Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 405–14; Masha Salazkina, "(V)GIK and the History of Film Education in the Soviet Union, 1920s-1930s," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 45–65, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118424773.ch2.

go beyond "theoretical divagations" and create an official film school that would create "the vision of Catalonia for the eyes of the young".[89] Although ideologically distant from its Catalan fans, the Soviet (V)GIK was the most successful example they could turn to for their institutional plans in Catalonia. According to Josep Carner i Ribalta, one of the main figures in the Catalan Cinema Committee, the film school was almost ready to open in the summer of 1936 alongside a 16mm production studio, but the Civil War disrupted such plans.[90] Either way, the documentary film production of the Generalitat de Catalunya Propaganda Commissariat and its production company Laia Films during the war – including instructional documentaries from Ramón Biadiu and the weekly propaganda newsreel *España al Día* – can be linked to the long-standing admiration for Soviet cinema, and especially Ribalta's later visit to Moscow in 1936, in which he visited the Soyuzkino studios and came back to Catalonia with a handful of educational documentaries that surely influenced Laia titles such as *Catalona Martyr/ Catalunya Màrtir* (1938), *Conquest of Teruel*/ *Conquista de Teruel* (1938, codir. Manuel Berenguer) or *Transformation of the industry at the service of war*/ *Transformació de la indústria al servei de*

[89] Guillem Díaz-Plaja, "Funció de l'amateur En El Cinema Educatiu," *Cinema Amateur* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1933): 36.

[90] Josep Carner-Ribalta, *De Balaguer a Nova-York Passant per Moscou i Prats de Mollo. Memories* (Edicions Catalanes de Paris, 1972), 148–50.

la guerra (1938).[91] These works, alongside foreign revolutionary films, were projected to soldiers in the Aragon front by the mobile exhibition services of the Propaganda Commissariat.[92]

The detail to which Diaz-Plaja goes into regarding Soviet film culture shows that the scholarly consensus per which Spain was an isolated and completely peripheral cultural context needs to be revised. Many Spanish intellectuals and educators were aware of the situation of film in the USSR. Their information derived from both articles in the journals already cited and books on Soviet cinema published in other languages, such as Leon Moussinac's 1928 *Soviet Cinema/ Le cinema Soviétique* (which was translated into Spanish in 1931), or *Art in the new Russia; cinema/ L'Art dans la Russie Nouvelle; Le Cinema* (1927) from Rene Marchand et Pierre Weinstein – from which Diaz-Plaja copied the "Tekhnkium" (as (V)GIK was referred to at the time) class list. By this time, too, there were first person accounts from Spanish intellectuals who had traveled to the Soviet Union. For instance, Julio Alvarez Del Vayo, who in 1925 had published *The New Russia/La Nueva Rusia*, Rafael Alberti's articles for the newspaper *Luz* titled *News from a poet in the USSR/ Noticieros de un poeta en la USSR* (July-August 1933), or Josep Pla's account of his 1925 trip to Russia for the newspaper *La Publicitat*, later on published as book titled *Trip to Russia/ Viatge a Rússia*.[93] Finally, some books on Soviet Cinema were

[91] Carner-Ribalta, 167–68. For more information on the work of Ramón Biadiu and the Generalitat de Catalunya Propaganda Commissariats relationship with the USSR see José María Caparrós Lera, Ramon Biadiu Cuadrench, and Miquel Porter i Moix, *Petita història del cinema de la Generalitat : 1932-1939* (Mataró: Robrenyo, 1978); Mercè Biadiu Ester, *Ramon Biadiu (1906-1984): cineasta d'avantguarda* (Súria; Manresa: Ajuntament de Súria ; Centre d'Estudis del Bages, 2007); Josep Puigsech Farràs, *La Revolució Russa i Catalunya* (Vic: Eumo, 2017); Ramón Breu, *La Catalunya Soviètica: El Somni Que Venia de Moscou*, Primera edició, Sèrie H (Badalona: Ara Llibres, 2011); Enric Ucelay da Cal and Joan Esculies, *Macià Al País Dels Soviets*, Primera edició, De Bat a Bat 35 (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2015).

[92] R.S. Noguer, *El Cine En La España Republicana Durante La Guerra Civil (1936-1939)*, Colección Cinereseña (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1993), 217.

[93] Josep Pla, *Viatge a Rússia: Notícies de l'URSS: Una Enquesta Periodística*, 2. ed, L'Ancora 27 (Barcelona: Destino, 1990).

published in Catalan, like Josep Palau's *Soviet cinema; cinema and revolution/ El cinema soviètic: cinema i revolució* in 1932.[94] But the most important outlet for Soviet film culture-related news was certainly Piqueras's *Nuestro Cinema*, which included articles from foreign and Spanish correspondents in the USSR, filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Joris Ivens, institutional figures from the Soviet film industry, and well-known international critics such as Léon Moussinac or Béla Balázs. We now turn to this mostly overlooked journal, which became a central node for the organization of a new Spanish radical film culture. As in most leftist circles, the journal's approach to cinema was greatly influenced by the heated debates and irreversible split between socialist realism and avant-garde positions.

3.1 *Nuestro Cinema* and the organization of a new Spanish film culture

Piqueras had been the Spanish delegate at the *II Congress of Independent Filmmaking* in Brussels (1930), and later allegedly traveled to the Soviet Union to visit its film industry (circa 1934/35). In Paris, where he worked for Filmófono selecting films to be distributed in Spain, he had ample opportunities to meet the international avant-garde. From the last months of 1929, when he helped select the Soviet films screened in the ninth "Cineclub Español" session, until his murder in 1936, he wrote dozens of articles devoted to this cinematography. For him, the discovery of Soviet cinema marked a progressive break with the canonical avant-garde of Rene Clair, Germaine Dullac or Salvador Dalí, so much so that he abandoned his role as assistant director in Clair's *Freedom for Us/ À nous la liberté* (1931), accusing his friend of indulging in a

[94] Josep Palau was a critic for *Mirador* journal, a key outlet for bouergeois modernist ideas in Catalonia during the 1920s and 1930s. As Domènec Giménez i Botey and Guillem Diaz-Plaja, he was also involved with the Catalan amateurs, and published in their journal *Cinema Amateur*.

bourgeois humanist exercise, instead of adopting a true social perspective, as in the Soviet films he now admired.[95]

At this point it is worth noting that the very period when Soviet cinematic culture (to large extent due to Piqueras' efforts) found its way to Spain was the period of transition from the 1920s avant-gardes to the 1930s realisms, and perhaps nowhere was this divide as dramatic as in the Soviet Union, where the diversity of post-revolutionary modernist and avant-garde movements came to be gradually replaced with a state-imposed unitary doctrine of Socialist Realism. This transition in the Soviet context took place over a decade and was accompanied by intense polemics – political and aesthetic – as well as institutional and ideological power struggles, which Piqueras tapped into and helped translate into the Spanish context.[96]

What did Piqueras find in Soviet cinema of the late 1920s-early 1930s that attracted him so much as to break with the avant-garde circles in favor of what he called a "united front against the screen, in which our worker and peasant base is included alongside the intellectual and revolutionary base that has created vital organizations for the new political and cultural movement in Spain"?[97] The answer is not straightforward, but if we analyze his writings and editorial direction of *Nuestro Cinema*, we can see that Piqueras's fascination with Soviet cinema was rooted in its organizational force and ability to reflect the "reality" of a working class completely absent from mainstream Spanish cinema. This quest for material organizational structures which could impact social reality led him to align himself with materialist approaches to cinema, such as those advocated by French critic Léon Moussinac, who followed a similar

[95] Juan Piqueras, "En Torno a René Clair," *Cinegramas*, no. 78 (March 8, 1936).

[96] For a detailed analisis of such shift see Ramos Arenas, "Film Criticism as a Political Weapon."

[97] Juan Piqueras, "Hacia Una Federación Española de Cineclubs Proletarios," *Nuestro Cinema* 2, no. 13 (1933): 216.

intellectual and aesthetic trajectory.[98] This quest for social realism was intended as a response to the urgent needs to introduce the lives of the workers in the public sphere, rather than as a reaction against avant-gardist experimentation.[99] Such a turn towards notions of realism among the radical left in Spain was (as was also the case in Italy for critics such as Umberto Barbaro and later Guido Aristarco, or even Cesare Zavattini) not so much a matter of aesthetic principle. Instead, it served as a possibility for a productive relation between film and its material and social context.[100] The idea that "Soviet cinema has assigned itself the role of showing, as is, the life of the working class to capitalist country audiences"[101] certainly appealed to those deeply discontent with the escapist nature of Spanish cinema. The visibility and exploration of the life of the working classes in Soviet films was constantly highlighted in the numerous articles on Soviet cinema published in the journal – many of them translated contributions from foreign collaborators, due to the censorship of Soviet cinema in Spain.

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[98] For a detailed analysis of this trajectory see Barnard, Timothy., "From Impressionism to Communism: Léon Moussinac's Technics of the Cinema, 1921-1933," *Framework* 42 (2000); 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).

[99] The defense of a social cinema rooted in realism was also shared by Anarchist critics such as José Peirats, who in 1935 published a book titled *What a social cinema could be* / *Lo que podría ser un cinema social*, in which realism –and the documentary genre in particular– was underscored as the most important feature of the medium. Similar positions were defended in realms such as literature and graphic arts. See for example José Renau's defense of a "new realism" for graphic arts in his book *The Social Function of Advertisement Posters.* See José Renau, *Función Social Del Cartel Publicitario* (Valencia: Tipografía Moderna, 1937), 28.

[100] Salazkina, "Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map," 106–7.

[101] Kurt Kersten, "Los Problemas Del Cine Soviético," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 4 (September 1932): 117.

The way critics discussed realism in *Nuestro Cinema* was varied and at times contradictory,[102] but in many ways it most closely resembled the position occupied by the journal's contemporary Soviet literary and artistic fraction known as Factography – in particular in what Joshua Malinsky describes as Factography's characteristic "recognition of the interrelation of form and content, a turn toward genres that emphasize the immediacy of everyday experience, and a new dialectical relationship between media language and industry."[103] Coincidentally, the name of the journal picked by Piqueras (*Nuestro Cinema)* echoed a key 1928 article by Sergei Tret'iakov – "Our Cinema." Although Tret'iakov is never mentioned explicitly in Piqueras's writings, "Our Cinema" can be read as a programmatic roadmap for *Nuestro Cinema*'s quest against capitalist cinema's "ideological poverty" and "taming of the masses".[104] Factography's own highly problematic relationship to the advent of socialist realism, and its ultimate complicity with it,[105] was mirrored in its Spanish appropriation, and the fact that the journal focused on contemporary Soviet films and criticism (from 1930 onwards), therefore underrepresenting the more experimental Soviet cinema and writings of the

[102]. As highlighted also by Ramos Arenas, who comments that Piqueras chose to "overlook this contradictions", putting "film theory in the service of ideology. Ramos Arenas, "Film Criticism as a Political Weapon," 222–23.

[103] Joshua Malitsky, "Ideologies in Fact: Still and Moving-Image Documentary in the Soviet Union, 1927-1932: Ideologies in Fact," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (December 2010): 357, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2010.01074.x.

[104] Sergei Tret'Iakov, "Our Cinema," *October* 118 (October 2006): 27–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2006.118.1.27.

[105] E.A. Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), https://books.google.es/books?id=cngINQAACAAJ.

1920s, is quite revealing of the aesthetic politics favored by Piqueras (figure 2).[106] With this particular understanding of cinematic realism, *Nuestro Cinema* followed Tret'iakov's dual conception of cinema's role as both "intellectualizer" and "emotionalizer" in the construction of a "new reality."[107]

For instance, César M. Arconada praised Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*/ *Las Hurdes* (1933), arguing that beyond films "which show us what we want to see", there were others that "show us what we wouldn't normally see because of multiple reasons; because it is ugly, sad, vulgar, or bitterly poor,"[108] Arconada celebrated Buñuel's turn to "realism" and his departure from a "complicated intellectualism", without devaluating his previous films *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Age D'Or* (1930), which he also described as "magnificent."[109] Such conception of the new realism as a logical consequence and the maturation of avant-garde experimentation is best illustrated in the critic's description of *Las Hurdes* in relation to Buñuel's career: "the world, in its classic form, in its vertical and concrete lines, has been reintegrated to his deepened and

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[106] When the journal published a special issue on film history in 1933, it included a full-page illustration devoted to the "Soviet Trajectory", including stills from almost only recent films except for *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925). The other films were *Storm over Asia* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1930), *The General Line* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1929), *Road to Life* (Nikolai Ekk, 1932), *Ivan* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1932), *Golden Mountains* (Sergei Yutkevich, 1931), *Les Tartares* (Piotr Tchardynine, 1926), and another a full-page photomontage of *The Blue Express* (Ilya Trauberg, 1930) and a film identified as *Arsenal Humano* (?) from director Alexander Room, which probably corresponds to *Arsenal* from Alexander Dovzhenko (1929).

[107] Tret'Iakov, "Our Cinema," 36. See for example Pedro Vigues's description of Soviet cinema as the "antithesis of bourgeois cinema…It's not only in the technical aspect that Soviet cinema creates its means of expression; its avant-garde visual angles…but the differentiating element is manifested…in its social stance." See Pedro Vigues, "Individualismo y Colectivismo En El Cinema," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 14 (January 1935).

[108] César M. Arconada, "Luis Buñuel y Las Hurdes; El Film," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 15 (February 1935): 9.

[109] Arconada.

misplaced surrealist eyes."[110] This position was shared with other materialist critics, exemplified in Moussinac's description of documentary filmmaking as a "rude but fine path to activism."[111]

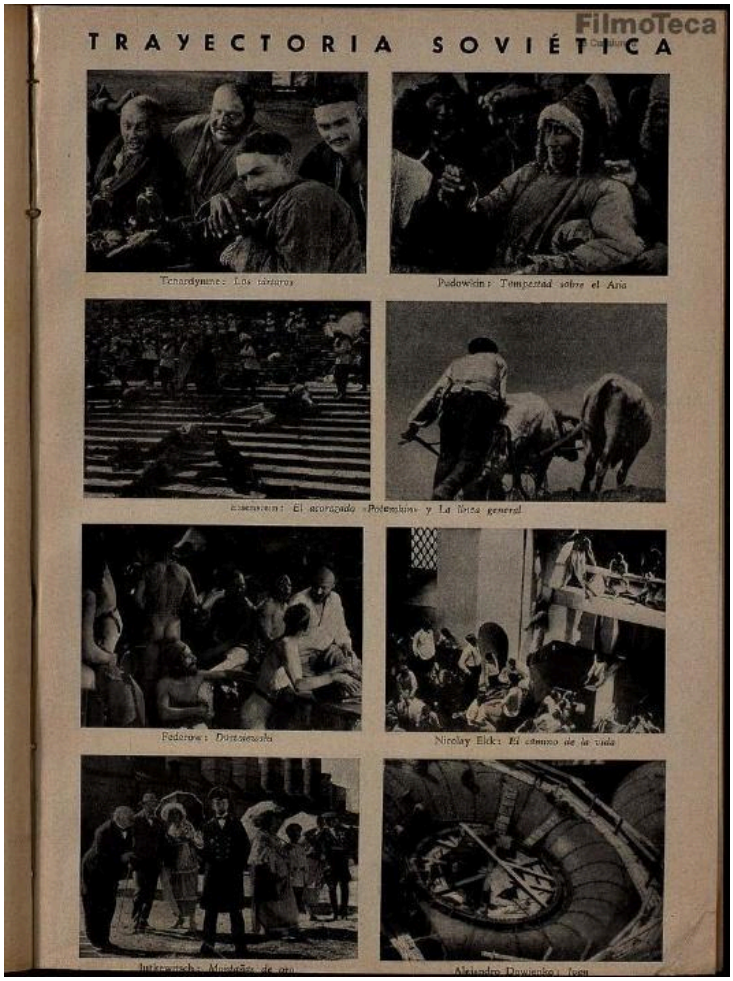

Figure 2. Overview of Soviet cinema's trajectory in *Nuestro Cinema*, issue 8-9. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Catalunya. The more "avant-garde" works of the 1920s, except for *Battleship Potemkin*, are conspicuously absent.

The aesthetically conservative positioning of many of the foreign (i.e., non-Spanish) contributions to the journal can be seen in the choice of their authors, who were often not critics or filmmakers, but institutional and political figures instead. For example, the first issue of the

[110] Arconada.

[111] Barnard, Timothy., "From Impressionism to Communism: Léon Moussinac's Technics of the Cinema, 1921-1933," 8.

journal includes the international Communist leader Karl Radek's famous attack on Dziga Vertov's film *Enthusiasm* (1931) as a confusing "cacophony."[112] In that same issue, Anatoli Lunacharsky – former People's Commissar for Education, representative of the USSR to the League of Nations, and appointed ambassador to Spain in 1933 –[113] was chosen to describe "the state of Soviet Cinema," offering a vaguely reconciliatory position aesthetically, and emphasizing cinema's progressive development.[114]

The most prominent foreign contribution on Soviet cinema in the journal was Ivan Anisimov's – literature professor and future director of the Gorki Institute of World Literature, whose lengthy essay on Sergei Eisenstein was translated from the journal *Literature of the World Revolution* and published throughout issues 3, 4, and 5 of *Nuestro Cinema*. Anisimov's otherwise seemingly celebratory piece nonetheless critiques Eisenstein for "his inability to fully articulate a dialectic alternative to bourgeois individualism" in his films, thus displaying a narrow-minded "petit bourgeois" ideology.[115] The attack escalates to the point of accusing Eisenstein of adopting a "technological fetishism that is the ideology of technique-driven intellectuals…From a gigantic social process, he only sees a technical shell."[116] This harsh "anti-formalist" position was never explicitly supported by *Nuestro Cinema*'s own Spanish critics, who preferred, as mentioned

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[112] Karl Radek, "'La Sinfonfa de La Cuenca Del Don' de Dziga-Vertoff y 'Sola', de Llya Trauberg," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 1 (June 1932): 18–21.

[113] Lunacharsky died on December 26th 1933 in France, on his way to take office as ambassador in Madrid.

[114] A.W. Lunacharsky, "El Cinema Soviético: El Cinema Revolucionario Soviético," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 1 (June 1932): 14. Original Italics.

[115] Ivan Anissimov, "El Cinema Soviético: Los Films de Eisenstein," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 5 (August 1932): 74,76. Anisimov's last name is incorrectly spelled with two s's.

[116] Anissimov, 73.

before, to focus on the material implications of developing and organizing a social cinema in Spain.

In this sense, the article (signed by Soyuzkino's deputy director G. Liss) on the Soviet film industry's organizational efforts towards "the cause of culture and instruction, in helping the propaganda and stirring of the party, the government, and the proletarians; in one word, in building the new socialist society", seems to resonate more with the writings of Piqueras than concrete criticisms of specific films or filmmakers, or debates concerning "formalism" vs. "realism." It is in this spirit that the critic gathered news on the creation of a Soviet film archive, school, and other related institutions (as detailed by Eisenstein himself) that had helped develop filmmaking in small national contexts with a weak film industry, something of great interest to those looking to create a new film culture in Spain.[117] And most importantly, in terms of *Nuestro Cinema*'s main objective of educating readers, the journal underscored advances in critical film spectatorship in the USSR, from where writer Ramon J. Sender reported, describing them as "more sharp every day, educated by the professional press", ultimately reflecting how Soviet cinema "reproduced every modality of Soviet social organization."[118]

From the very beginning of his engagement with Soviet cinema Piqueras, in an article written in 1931, celebrates the specifically educational role of Pudovkin, Dovzhenko and Vertov's new films as Soviet cinema's greatest achievements.[119] The ability of Soviet film culture to go well beyond artistic production, becoming an all-encompassing educational and social

[117] Eisenstein, "Los Principios Del Nuevo Cine Ruso."

[118] Ramon J. Sender, "Notas Sobre El Cinema Soviético," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 13 (October 1933): 220.

[119] Juan Piqueras, "Tres Evoluciones Ideológicas En El Cine Soviético," *La Gaceta Literaria*, no. 105 (May 1931).

process seized his imagination. This didactic dimension of the cinematic apparatus was also the driving principle in Piqueras's later projects for a Spanish Federation of Proletarian Film Clubs and an amateur proletarian cinema. This last project was aimed at overcoming the difficulties of production in the country, envisioning a grassroots cinema that "depicts the life and essential struggles of the proletariat in the world, that shows its ideas and initiatives, its labors and problems."[120] Although these projects either failed or had short lifespans due to lack of funding and institutional support, all together they represented the most comprehensive Spanish attempt to emulate the USSR's cinematic model. The fact that some of Piqueras's ideas would be re appropriated by anti-Franco militant film movements in the 1970s testifies to their long-lasting impact on the oppositional imaginaries in Spain. For example, in their 1976 analysis of Spanish cinema, Marxist collective Marta Hernández explicitly highlighted Piqueras's proposal for a Federation of Proletarian Film Clubs as a point of reference "concerning its direct relationship with a plausible production of proletarian films."[121] It is another long-term ramification in the worldwide genealogies created by the Early Soviet cinema throughout the 20th century.[122]

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[120] Juan Piqueras and Lisa Jarvinen, "Our Amateur Cinema in 'Nuestro Cinema,'" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 142–43.

[121] Marta Hernández, *El Aparato Cinematográfico Español*, Akal 74 ; 51 (Madrid: Akal Editor, 1976), 172.

[122] Masha Salazkina, "Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map," *October* (January 1, 2012): 97–116, https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00082; Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez and Pablo La Parra-Pérez, "Turning the Camera into a Weapon: Juan Piqueras's Radical Noncommercial Film Projects and Their Afterlives (1930s-1970s)," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017): 341-362., https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2017.1380148; Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez, "Traduire l'avant-Garde : Léon Moussinac, Juan Piqueras et La Pédagogie Critique de Cinéma," *1895, Mille Huit Cent Quatre-Vingt-Quinze, Revue d'histoire Du Cinéma*, no. 84 (Spring 2018): 41–67; Sarah Ann Welles, "Parallel Modernities? The First Reception of Soviet Cinema in Latin America," in *Cosmopolitan Film Culture in Latin America*, ed. Rielle Edmonds Navitski and Nicolas Poppe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 151–75.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Soviet cinematic culture resonated strongly amongst a wide array of Spanish and Catalan intellectuals, critics, politicians and educators in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Although formal innovation and disruption of established artistic canons were important factors for them, we argue that the most appealing element of USSR film culture was its pedagogical role in the construction of a new national(ist) narrative. Different Comintern-aligned initiatives, from the PCE to the PCF and other internationalist organizations such as the AEAR, used this appeal – and the organizational force of Soviet cinema described by *Nuestro Cinema* – to tap into the cultural and cinematographic circles of the time. This new model of cinema promised to accomplish what countless well-intentioned Spanish projects had failed at in previous years: a definitive break with the past through a radical transformation of the national means of expression.

The political context accelerated exponentially what Piqueras, Del Amo, Buñuel, and many others had started as a fad among Spanish cinephiles for Soviet films. Their initial artistic admiration rapidly evolved into a larger aesthetic and political commitment, in tandem with the rise of political forces on the left after the end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the beginning of the worldwide economic slump. As Moussinac described in one of the last issues of *Nuestro Cinema*, Soviet film had convinced the "intellectual elite" that the coupling of formal experimentation and social orientation was only truly possible when following the USSR's model, regardless of the medium of expression (literature, art, science, etc.)[123] For him, this was the reason why, despite all the difficulties (in reference to censorship), Soviet cinema had successfully attracted "not only the sympathies of increasingly larger social layers, but also a part

[123] Léon Moussinac, "El Cinema Soviético Tiene Quince Años," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 15 (February 1935): 2.

of the bourgeois intellectual elite." Moussinac ended the article remembering that "such a task demands a specific will, theoretical and practical preparation, and technical organization"; a set of attributes that can be extended to the tireless efforts of Piqueras and other leftist intellectuals to create a proletarian film culture in Spain.

When the Fascist rebellion against the Second Republic in 1936 plunged the country into Civil War, this revolutionary film culture, at least partially under the influence of the Comintern's turn to the popular front strategy, created more space for the kind of engaged cinema that intellectuals had long been calling for. The conflict boosted the production of newsreels in defense of the Republic and the screening of Soviet films increased with the end of censorship, especially at the front. In October 1936, Communist leader José Díaz gave a speech after a projection of Efim Dzigan's *We are from Kronstadt* in the Cine Monumental of Madrid, where he praised the struggle of the "red sailors", reminding the audience that this was the fight they were going to experience in the following months.[124] By the time Diaz gave that speech the foundational work had been done on the cinema front. According to a newspaper report, a few weeks later Antoni Coll, a Republican soldier, emulated a famous scene from the film – in which a Bolshevik soldier destroys an enemy tank with a hand grenade – by taking down several nationalist tanks.[125]

The Comintern had successfully introduced Soviet films in Spain through its network of intellectuals and was now ready to harvest the fruits of a well-planned cultural policy alongside

[124] José Díaz, *Tres Años de Lucha* (Paris: Editions de la Librairie du Globe, 1970), 112.

[125] The story was probably a propaganda manouver from the Republican government to lift the moral of the soldiers defending Madrid, although it was recounted in at least six different sources (*El Sol, ABC, El Mono Azul, Heraldo de Madrid, Ahora*, *Solidarida Obrera*). See José Cabeza San Deogracias, "Buscando Héroes La Historia de Antonio Col Como Ejemplo Del Uso de La Narrativa Como Propaganda Durante La Guerra Civil Española," *Historia y Comunicación Social*, no. 10 (2005): 37–50.

other leftist forces. The film industry was collectivized by the anarchist CNT-FAI (Comisión Nacional Trabajo, Federación Anarquista Ibérica) and Socialist UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores) in Barcelona and Madrid in the first weeks of the war, although the Communist Party also participated through its own distribution and production company, Film Popular (1937-1939), and through the production efforts of the Republican government's Ministry of Education and Public Instruction, headed by PC member Jesús Hernández Tomás.[126] The Spanish Federation of Public Spectacle Industries (Federación Española de la Industria de Espectaculos Publicos, FEIEP), with which all film workers were affiliated, sent a warm greeting to the Comintern during its 1937 foundational congress, describing Soviet leaders as "the most faithful interpreters and conductors of the working class".[127] As *Nuestro Cinema* had predicted in 1933, the widespread circulation of proletarian films pointed to "the inevitable surrender of studios, laboratories, factories, and cinematographers to the workers that labor in them."[128] Only six years after the ninth Cineclub Español session in the Ritz with Soviet films selected by Piqueras, a proletarian militant film culture had been created in Spain with the cooperation of a radicalized bourgeois intelligentsia – a culture which would thrive in the Civil War years, disappear in the first decades of Franco's regime, and reemerge in the venues of an underground anti-dictatorship Marxist-driven movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Indeed, the scope and appeal of Soviet cinema has proven transhistorical as well as transnational throughout the 20th century. In Spain, forty years after the last issue of *Nuestro Cinema* was published, critics Carlos and David Pérez Merinero devoted a book (*Del cinema*

[126] Gubern, *Luis Buñuel*, 268.

[127] José Cabeza San Deogracias, *El Descanso Del Guerrero: Cine En Madrid Durante La Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)* (Ediciones Rialp, 2005), 170.

[128] Juan Piqueras, "Historiografia Del Cinema," *Nuestro Cinema*, no. 8–9 (February 1933): 44.

como arma clase, 1975) to Piqueras and the history of his journal. As elsewhere during this period of "the long sixties," they turned to the 1920s-30s Marxist film criticism as a viable point of reference for militant thought and practice in the 1970s:

> "Cinema has to be, if it wants to achieve its historical mission, an instrument of culture and education against the chloroform of consciences. This pedagogical role has to focus especially in offering the proletariat lessons that can be used in their current struggle for liberation." (1975) [129]

The pedagogical and transformative capacities of Soviet cinema identified by Piqueras, in particular with the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin – "a cinema capable of freeing us from today's ideological poverty" (1932) – thus made their way into the long sixties. This programmatic position reemerged in the form of writings, alternative exhibition spaces, production cooperatives, and films, attempting to finally realize what had begun and was lost in the Venta de Baños train station where Piqueras stopped to rest in July 1936.

[129] Carlos Pérez Merinero and David Pérez Merinero, eds., *Del Cinema Como Arma de Clase: Antología de Nuestro Cinema 1932-1935* (Valencia: F. Torres, 1975), 19.