

# **Representing the Spanish Civil War: Socialist Realist Nonfiction Filmmaking**

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# ABSTRACT

This MA Thesis aims to analyze the representations of the Spanish Civil War through the Socialist Realist nonfiction cinema by examining three different types of films. Roman Karmen's newsreels *On the Events of Spain*, Esfir Shub *Ispanija* and Joris Ivens *The Spanish Earth*.

It describes this representation baring in mind an interdisciplinary approach of historical contextualization, film theory and technical cinematic analysis. By laying down the definitions and elements of nonfiction film, it gives a theoretical and methodological framework. Giving an overview of the development of nonfiction film in the Soviet Union it contextualizes the analysis that is further developed through the introduction of the filmmakers, the description of the narrative and giving a final overall analysis of how the meaning was constructed.

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# Contents

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
Contents .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THEORY AND METHODOLOGY .....	7
NONFICTION CINEMA IN THE SOVIET UNION: From the Bolshevik Revolution to the Spanish Civil War .....	18
ROMAN KARMEN: K sobitiyam v Ispanii [On the Events in Spain], Soiuzkinokronika, August 1936 – July 1937 .....	33
ESFIR SHUB: Ispanija [Spain], Mosfilm, 1939 .....	51
JORIS IVENS: The Spanish Earth, Contemporary Historians Inc., USA, 1937 .....	62
CONCLUSION .....	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	78
FILMOGRAPHY .....	86

# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the representation of the Spanish Civil War through three types of nonfiction cinema; newsreel, compilation film and committed documentary. My interest is focused on how the war was represented, using aesthetic means, and how the message was conveyed. In order to pursue this analysis my approach is interdisciplinary, linking film theory, technical cinematic analysis and historiophoty.<sup>1</sup>

My research was developed mainly in the Filmoteca Española, the Spanish National Library and the Open Society Archives. I was able to watch several documentaries about the subject as well as pursue an investigation on literary sources. For my analysis I chose Roman Karmen's newsreels *On the Events in Spain*, Esfir Shub's *Ispanija* and Joris Ivens' *The Spanish Earth*. Karmen because he was the official representative of the Soizukinokronica, the Soviet state newsreel production, and his images provide one of the best depiction of war and life in the rear, giving a unique testimony of one of the first European cities being bombed by airplanes, and providing a profound sensibility towards human distress and despair. I selected Shub because with her film she demonstrate the highest skill of compiling material and produced one of the best constructed arguments towards an event that would naturally lead onto other conclusions: by making a defeat seem like a victory. Finally Ivens' *The Spanish Earth*, for its poetic representation and the innovative methods, inserting characterization into documentary filmmaking and building his argument taking an open ideological position towards the war, without giving the sense of subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> "The representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse", Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty", *The American Historical Review*, 93, (1988), pp. 1193 - 1199

The choice of this subject was born by combining two of my most intrinsic interests: documentary filmmaking and the study of the Spanish Civil War. It was by learning the theories of Soviet Cinema and montage, that my curiosity rose towards how this new born cinema industry ought to represent the Spanish imbroglio.

The war came at a moment where the propagandistic value of cinema was being acknowledged, the introduction of sound was just taking place, the *avant-garde* movement was being banned and Socialist Realism imposed to the arts. Documentary filmmaking was structured and a new state newsreel production was conceived with specific propagandistic aims. The Spanish Civil War also braided war and cinema, and in the same way that the Iberian country was used as an arena for experimenting warfare, it also served as a test to the later cinematic propaganda mobilization of the Second World War.

In order to understand how the Spanish Civil War was represented by the three filmmakers under analysis, we must understand the diplomatic and military implication that the USSR had in the conflict. The Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War is one of the most controversial issues and the one with the least consensus among scholars working in this field. The main discussion centers on whether the Soviet Union saved the Republic from an early defeat, or it doomed loyalist Spain. Whether Stalin wanted to transform Spain into a soviet satellite or his involvement was cautious enough not to provoke the western democracies.

The basis of the Kremlin position during the entire Civil War was the weakening and elimination of the right wing forces and not a revolutionary agitation. The priority of the Soviet foreign policy towards Spain was given to a fascist contention through the Popular Front and the defense of the democratic republic. All that could weaken the

antifascist forces was considered as negative. It had to be clear that the popular response to the fascist militarism should not open the way to a Soviet type of revolution<sup>2</sup>.

Back in the Soviet Union the Kremlin and the Comintern acknowledged the potential that the war in Spain had to gather and unite international forces on the side of the Popular Fronts<sup>3</sup>. Having a strong influence and impact in the masses, it had a great propagandistic potential.

By the summer of 1937 there was a major shift in Moscow's policy towards the Spanish republic, the supply of warfare started to decline drastically, Soviet warfare could no longer compete with the rebel's armor and the diplomatic mission was gradually dismissed, added to the fact that the deliveries became more difficult to reach their destiny and the loyalist government had no more means to purchase them<sup>4</sup>.

Nonetheless, the USSR remained engaged with the Republic until the end of the war. The military aid saved it from an early defeat and permitted the loyalist to resist another three years. The modality of the Soviet penetration in the Spanish affairs explains the attitude and the position of the USSR during the conflict; Soviet leadership was involved, but did not want to compromise its own position in the international spectrum. Even though, the "Operation X"<sup>5</sup> was one of the most ambitious military operations set in motion after the Russian Civil War, and the one with the most international projection<sup>6</sup>.

The structure of this dissertation is divided in five different chapters; I start by giving a general theoretical and methodological approach, where I define terms and genres, as well as indicate the possible structure and style of nonfiction. After

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la Guerra Civil de España*, (Barcelona, Crítica, 2003), pp. 24 - 36

<sup>3</sup> ECIC, Protocol n.60, 23th July 1936, RGASPI, in Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, Grigory Sevostianov, (eds.) *Spain Betrayed – The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, (New Haven and London, Annals of Communism, Yale University Press, 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la GCE*, pp. 321 - 338

<sup>5</sup> Name of the Soviet human and logistic operation concerning Spain.

<sup>6</sup> Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la GCE*, pp. 195 - 232

deconstructing the elements that constitute a documentary film, I lay out the possible historiographic approaches and the means by which a historian should analyze a film.

The second chapter is a historical contextualization of the nonfiction cinema in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and the 1930s; how filmmaking evolved from an extremely rich and innovative *avant-garde* movement, where experimentalization and modernism gave birth to the most important cinema masters of that time, to an aesthetic imposed genre that uniformicized the arts, nonetheless producing enduring work of arts. I think the evolution of the nonfiction cinema it is crucial to understand the filmmakers under analysis since their style and methods were constructed within the Soviet nonfiction realm.

The next three chapters are focused on the films themselves. I start by contextualizing the filmmaker and his background and then I pursue a description of the narrative of the film in order to familiarize the reader, inserting in the description comments and technical explanation of how the events where filmed, edited, manipulated and exposed. At the end of each chapter I give an overall analysis of the representation of the Spanish Civil War.

The first chapter analyzes the footage recorded by Roman Karmen in Spain, the newsreels produced by Soiuzkinokronika, the short documentaries edited with his footage and the unedited material later used by other filmmakers. Karmen is one of the most important documentarists of the twentieth century. His images are part of the visual social memory not only of the Spanish Civil War, but also of remarkable events like the Japanese invasion of China, the Nuremberg trials or the revolutionary movements of the South American continent. His work in Spain is crucial for the iconography of the conflict as well as for the subsequent visual reconstructions on the civil war in Spain. I claim that his images helped to construct myths and meanings that



are still part of our imagery and that were endured by the filmmakers that re-worked his material or were inspired by him.

One of those filmmakers is Esfir Shub, and it is on her that the forth chapter is focused on. Shub was one of the most brilliant filmmakers of her time, her most valued skills were those of gathering disperse footage, and by combining them in a different context, give a new meaning to them and construct an argument. Shub started her career by compiling newsreel material and re-editing foreign films; already before the Spanish Civil War she produced compilation films, but it was with Karmen's footage that she achieved the most complete form of compiling filmic material. Her representation of the Spanish Civil War resembles Karmen's representation of it, though the arguments are stronger and the images are assembled in such way that the dramatization is better achieved.

As a last chapter I decided to include a non Soviet filmmaker: Joris Ivens. My decision to include him relies on the fact that he embodies both Socialist Realism and the Soviet *avant-garde* aesthetics. *The Spanish Earth* is a film commissioned by and for a completely different context, but conveying a very similar representation of the conflict. Ivens' film is an ideologically committed documentary, he openly takes a position towards the war and clearly aims to convince and persuade, without ever losing a profound aesthetic concern for abstract associations and pure forms. It shares with both Karmen and Shub the point of view and the manipulation of meanings through image juxtaposition, and it is in a comparative context that I wish to enclose my dissertation with Joris Ivens', *The Spanish Earth*.

The Spanish Civil War was represented as an epic struggle against the forces of fascism. The three filmmakers depict the war as a united republic fighting a rebel uprising aided by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany; all leave the complexities of the

political factions of the left aside, and a romantic image of Spain is transmitted; an idyllic backward and rural country with a fortified capital defending itself symbolizing the anti-fascist struggle of all Europe.

There are several investigations about cinema and the Spanish Civil War, especially in the realm of fiction, but there is almost no research done specifically about the Socialist Realist nonfiction approach towards the conflict. This dissertation thus helps to open a new approach to the understanding of the cinematic mobilization towards the civil war in Spain.

## THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The nature of my dissertation has at his basis as primary sources nonfiction films and newsreels. Due to this filmic approach of the representation of the Spanish Civil War, my analysis relies on the specificity of cinematic language that through a combination of elements and its formal presentation constructs its own representation of the event. My concerns while analyzing the films were both of historical representation and aesthetics, dragging to the dissertation elements of factual depiction as well as aesthetic description, playing a balanced role in the construction of meaning.

In order to clarify my methods I found pertinent to give space to the definition of what is a documentary, what kind of documentaries can we find, which are the elements that constitute it, and what functions can pursue. Following to this approach and having in mind the intrinsic connection between documentary and history, I outline the relation between cinema and history, how can cinema be used as a historical source, and how a historical event can be used to analyze filmic discourse.

The term documentary itself has a direct relationship with reality, in the sense that it shows us what once was reality, and in theory, what would have been anyway even if the camera was not present. But it's not a mirror, or a direct expression of reality; as John Grierson puts it, documentary is the "creative treatment of reality", it dramatizes scenes, structures the material and builds a coherent narrative in order to engage the viewer. It is never neutral, and every film has a point of view, both literally through the camera lens, and figuratively, through the narrator<sup>7</sup>.

David Ludvigsson added to Grierson's definition the notion that the documentary encompasses a "*creative treatment that asserts a belief that the given*

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<sup>7</sup> Carl R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 30

*object, states of affair or event occurred or existed in the actual world portrayed.”*<sup>8</sup>

Cinema has the capability of representing a multiform reality provided in a specific language, modes of expression and through the decomposition and recomposition of time and space emphasizing the unspoken and the visual impact. In this sense, Raack states that form thus helps to shape content, and there is an intrinsic relation between form and purpose, medium and message.<sup>9</sup>

Hayden White stresses the utility of cinema in the representation of certain historical phenomena, such as landscape, crowd movements and emotions, wars and battles are advantage over written discourse, which cannot give such a broad perspective as the visual discourse.<sup>10</sup>

It has a central connection with history, since the documentary film requires “a representation, case, or argument about the historical world.”<sup>11</sup> But the aim is not merely to inform or instruct; according to Grierson it also has to have a dramatic input, and promote a pattern of thought and feelings. The author stresses that the best use of documentary is for propaganda purposes, where the social purpose of educating the masses could be much more far reaching than any other means. It has been very consensual that the purpose of the documentary must be social, and it must have an argument in order to induce the viewer to draw critical conclusions.

According to Plantinga, “nonfictions are not imitations or re-presentations, but constructed representations. (...) Nonfictions are rhetorical.”<sup>12</sup> By rhetoric in nonfiction film, the author means “the study of the richness, complexity, and expressiveness of

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<sup>8</sup> David Ludvigsson, *The Historical-Filmmaker's Dilemma: Historical Documentaries in Sweden in the Era of Hager and Villius*, Uppsala, University of Uppsala, PhD Dissertation, 2003, quoted in Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, (Pearson, Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 72

<sup>9</sup> R.C. Raack, “Historiography as Cinematography: a Prolegomenon to Film Historians”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, (SAGE, London, Beverly Hills and New Delhi), Vol. 18, (1983), 411 - 438

<sup>10</sup> Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty”, *The American Historical Review*, 93, (1988), pp. 1193 - 1199

<sup>11</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991), pp. 20

<sup>12</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 37-38

nonfiction discourse, and the means by which it is structured to have influence on the viewer”<sup>13</sup>. Nonfiction does not reproduce the real, but make claims about it; it is more than just the juxtaposition of images; it can make statements about occurred events or about abstract ideas, build upon a specifically structured cinematic discourse.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to remember that, as asserted by Rosenstone, “on the screen we see not the events themselves, and not the events as experienced or even as witnessed by participants, but selected images of those events carefully arranged into sequences to tell a story or to make an argument. (...) the documentary is never a direct reflection of an outside reality but a work consciously shaped into a narrative that – whether dealing with past or present – creates the meaning of the material being conveyed.”<sup>15</sup>

It is important to distinguish between *what* is represented and *how* it is represented. The *what* is, as Plantinga calls it, the *Projected World*, a model of the actual world. The *how* is the filmic discourse, its formal presentation, the organization of all the filmic elements and the means by which the *Projected World* is represented. The structure can be narrative, rhetorical, associational, categorical or abstract while the strategies of communication can be selection, order, emphasis and the “point of view”, or “voice.”<sup>16</sup>

The selection process of the material is important to understand: what was selected and what was omitted, and thus to understand the positioning and the rhetorical effects of the selection process.

The sequence and its relation with temporality is crucial, and is done according to the purposes of the film. Through the ordering of information, the film gives relevance to certain elements, and ignores or subordinates other elements. In a film, it is

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 3

<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 38

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film”, *The American Historical Review*, 93, (1988), pp. 1179 - 1180

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 83 - 86

very important what comes at the beginning and what ends it, having an enormous effect on the viewer's apprehension of the whole film. Other technical resources that can manipulate the meaning are frequency and duration which can be equivalent, reduced, and/or expanded. The emphasis can be achieved in numerous stylistic, technical and structural means, drawing or taking away the viewer's attention.

Point of view can have several meanings or layers. According to Plantinga, the term can imply the visual stand point of the spectator or character, the perspective of the character or narrator towards the *Projected World*, and the standpoint of the whole filmic discourse. Plantinga states that "every nonfiction film has a discourse that takes an implicit stance or attitude towards what it presents (...) the use of *voice* denotes the perspective of the narration."<sup>17</sup> The author uses the term "voice" instead of point of view, since the point of view can also be physical (the point of view of the camera).

There are different functions that the documentary can pursue; according to Michael Renov<sup>18</sup> they are four: a) to record, reveal or preserve, b) to persuade or promote, c) to analyze or interrogate, d) to express. These functions can be pursued through different *voices* that deliver the message in various ways. The most common in nonfiction films is the so called "formal voice" that aims to explain the representation of the *Projected World* to the viewer; not only to explain, but also to take a position toward the *Projected World* and thus toward the world itself. Films that use this *voice* tend to be "classical" in form and style, having a coherent, chronological and questioning narrative, a balanced form with historical content. The main function is an epistemological one: to raise questions that the narrative will gradually answer.

As alternatives to the "formal voice" we can find the "open voice" that observes and explores rather than explains, and the "poetic voice" that explores the representation

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<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 98 - 99

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*

itself and stance towards film as an art form. In short, the main differences between these three types of “voices” lies in the fact that “the formal voice is more likely to make broad claims about its subject matter. The open voice usually confines itself to the representation of appearances, and lets the spectator infer generalizations. The poetic voice foregrounds the aesthetic qualities of what it presents.”<sup>19</sup>

As for the structure, according to David Bordwell, the nonfiction film can be narrative, associational, categorical and rhetorical.<sup>20</sup> The most common is the narrative form, especially those films that focus on historical subjects and recounts a chronological set of events. But that does not mean that filmmakers do not mix or use other forms. The associational one is more likely to be used when relationship between elements are the focus of the film. The categorical one exposes and explain elements, whereas the rhetorical form seeks persuasion through argumentation, though we may consider all forms as rhetorical since all nonfiction films implies an ideological position toward the subject depicted.

The film is constructed through several techniques, such as camera movements, angles, framing, lightning, sound and editing and the way in which these techniques are used, gives the film a certain style. The use that a filmmaker makes of style and technique contributes to the perspective of the discourse and to its coherence, as well as having a rhetorical and informational function.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most important techniques of discourse building is editing. This process does not only order the information, but also compare, contrast, draw analogies and gives coherence to the discourse. Plantinga stresses that the discourse coherence lies in the “*communication about reality [which] in no way implies imitation of reality.*”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 110

<sup>20</sup> David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, *Film History: an introduction*, (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1994)

<sup>21</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 147

<sup>22</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, pp. 153

The editing also guides the viewer through the narrative, giving rhythm to the images, in order to catch the attention and engage the audience in the rhetorical subject of the film. In order to enhance details and draw the attention of the spectator the composition of the frame, the camera angle and the scale plays a central role.

Another element that can change and specially manipulate the images is the voice-over. The narrator gives meaning to the images providing information and asserting his authority. The voice-over can also act as an expression of wishes, denunciation, an expression of solidarity or reproach, a plea or argument, giving to the relation of voice and image a very complex and broad connection.

As for music, when related to the images and/or voice, it provides an emotional experience in the viewer, supporting the *voice* of the film, and thus reinforcing the proposed meaning. By itself, music cannot give factual information, but when related to images, it reiterates the meaning, giving them an emotional weight in a synaesthetic way. But music has a more intrinsic relation with cinema, since the editing techniques and montage theories are very similar with music theories, especially regarding rhythm and juxtaposition of images.

The combination of all the sound elements in a filmic product increase the realistic feeling of the images: the synchronic sounds and voices of the filmic document, interview voices, narrators' voice, sounds, music and silence. Every one of these elements can be considered as a commentary, intervening in the building of the meaning and in the emphasis of the message.

According to Bill Nichols, there are six types of documentaries: the *expository*, the *observational*, the *interactive*, the *reflexive*, the *poetic* and the *performative*.<sup>23</sup> Generally, the *expository* documentary has been referred to as *Compilation Film*. This

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<sup>23</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001)



genre is defined by Ira Koningsberg as “a film [that is] generally a documentary, made by combining footage from other films and assembling them in such a way [that] they achieve new significance from their present context.”<sup>24</sup> It deals with the setting and consequent transformation of images in a new context, by compiling archival images (normally newsreels or documentary footage) and giving them a new meaning in a metamorphological way through a dialectical montage<sup>25</sup> technique born within the formalist cinema genre.

The compilation film is a genre and not only a rhetorical element because it problematicized the montage, relating it to the Marxist dialectic where the “whole is more important than the sum of the parts” and where the montage could be used to make narrative associations, metaphors and create a new meaning putting and relating images in a new context. The dialectical montage<sup>26</sup> is thus regarded as the principle of the compilation film, which leads to a direct and clear argument and the aim of inducing strong feelings attempting to convince the audience of the exposed argument.

Bordwell and Thompson define

the category of compilation film by the fact that such a film is produced primarily by assembling images that record certain historical evidence about a topic. Gathering visual and auditory material from archives and other sources, the compilation filmmaker may skip the shooting stage of production and simply assemble newsreel footage to create a film dossier on a given subject.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ira Koningsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, (Bloomsbury, London, 1987), pp. 60

<sup>25</sup> Specifically Eisenstein’s Montage of Attractions that combines two not necessary related shots which, when juxtaposed, functions to create a new state of feeling in the viewer.

<sup>26</sup> These montage theories were developed by the Soviet *avant-garde* filmmakers such as Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Vertov and Pudovkin.

<sup>27</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, (Reading Mass, Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 17

This genre was developed by Dziga Vertov and Esir Shub during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Soviet Union, and later developed in the rest of Europe until reaching a peak in the 1950s and 1960s.

According to Marc Ferro, a compilation film work is constructed with edited as well as unedited newsreel material. It is made by the manipulation of this material, re-editing it in order to construct a coherent narrative, with its own rhythm and a new context. A compilation film can have several types of filmic documents such as: a) edited footage, b) re-edited footage, c) edited footage that was never screened, d) non-filmic material (as photographs and other kind of material). Normally, compilation filmmakers prefer to use material that never went through a montage room. The juxtaposition of all these elements, plus some recent shot material, interviews, fiction scenes, all these can take part in a compilation film genre.<sup>28</sup>

According to Martin Hamdorf<sup>29</sup>, the compilation film has three different functions. First of all, the use of archival material meant to reinforce the supposed objectivity and credibility of the exposed argument. Propaganda films made through compilation usually use strong contrasts and a voice-over (or in the case of silent cinema, intertitles) to interpret the visual material in an apparently neutral and authoritative position. Another application of the archival image is its use as a historical reference, as a source and visual fact that contrast with the supposed subjectivity of a living testimony. The third function is merely aesthetic, and archival images are used in order to give an antique touch to the film.

Ferro claims that films constitute a testimony about the imaginary of the epoch, and it is through the choice of subjects, the trends of a time, the production needs, the

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<sup>28</sup> Marc Ferro, *Cine e Historia*, (Gustavo Gil, Barcelona, 1980), pp. 92, 93

<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Martin Hamdorf, *Zwischen No Pasarán! und Arriba España!. Film und Propaganda im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, (Maks Publicationen, Munster, 1991)

writing skills and the director's "lapsus"<sup>30</sup> that lays the true historical meaning and reality of the films, and not in their representation of the past.

Films of historical reconstruction are important not only by the past that they represent, but also for the representation of the present, the moment in which the film was thought and made. "The past that these films reconstruct it's a mediatized past for their present, perceivable by the choice of the subjects, the "trend of the times", the needs of production, the capability of the writings, the lapses of the creators. It's in the present that the real historical time is situated and not in their representation of the past",<sup>31</sup>

The author asserts that the filmic analysis must focus on the sense given by the whole structure of the film: the examination of how the meaning is produced, having in mind that the meaning wanted by the author is not necessarily the meaning that the historian can find. There is an independent function in each film that requires understanding. The historian must examine the relation between the film and the society that produced it and consume it, articulating the direction, the audience, the finance and the action of the state in it. Analyzing the film putting together what is filmic (shots, themes) with what is not filmic (production, audience, critic, political regime...).

Ferro stresses that the film must be seen as a construction that changes reality through an articulation between image, word, sound and movement. The different elements that build a film – montage, shot, angles, camera movements, light – are all aesthetic elements that forms the cinematic language, giving to the object a specific meaning that transforms and interpret what was captured from reality. The image does not reflect reality, but the reality is reconstructed through images, in a specific language.

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<sup>30</sup> When a director show images that carry a meaning that the director did not aimed to show.

<sup>31</sup> Ferro, *Cine e Historia*, pp. 40 – 41. Author's translation.

The starting point of any film analysis is the image itself. Looking at it not as a work of art, but as an image-object that has value not only for what it shows, but also for all the elements that integrate a film production and the socio-historical approximation that allows, in order to understand not only the work itself, but also what it represents.

The most important contribution of a film analysis for history is the possibility of the researcher to find the “non-visible” elements, since the film goes forward on his own content. Ferro calls it the “counter-history”, which makes possible a “counter-analysis” of society. For Ferro, a film goes beyond the means of the director, revealing aspects of society, behind the images, that express the ideology of a society.

For the analysis of a montage film, according to Ferro the historian must proceed in two different directions: a) the study and critic of the documents used in the film and b) the critic of how these elements were put together in the final result that is not necessarily contemporaneous to the documents used for the editing of the film. There are also elements (images, interviews, voice-over) that are put in during the editing of the film. The critic is made in three different levels; authenticity, identification and analysis.

There are several ways of analyzing whether a filmic document is authentic or not, whether the sequence of shots is a construction or they represent the event depicted. For example we can verify by observing the camera angle - if the event is filmed by only one cameraman -, the film cannot show the foreground and the background of the action. Also by observing the distance between the images of a same sequence and the quality of the negative, the lightning, and other technical resources that can be used in order to manipulate a sequence of images.

By establishing the origin of the footage, identify their characters, places and interpret its content one might identify the source of the footage. This process is more familiar to a historian than the others processes.

As a final approach, the researcher must focus on the context of the production of the film; who produced it, what was the condition of realization, what was the aim and the audience reception to it. It is here that other elements, non filmic elements enter the analysis.

Bearing in mind this theoretical framework, I will analyze the proposed films in this light, centering my attention in how the meaning where conveyed, and not in its historical accuracy. My interest is focused on representations; on how the filmmakers used the means available in order to give their point of view towards the Spanish Civil War, from their personal position as human beings and filmmakers, to the technical means they used to build their representation. All the aforementioned elements are balanced and can bear a rhetorical meaning in the reconstruction, and it is this balance and the meaning conveyed that lays my focus of interest.

## NONFICTION CINEMA IN THE SOVIET UNION: From the Bolshevik Revolution to the Spanish Civil War

In order to understand the analysis of the representation of the Spanish Civil War through the proposed films, it is crucial to understand the development of the Soviet nonfiction cinema since the Bolshevik revolution; both in term of its aesthetic development and its political implications. Even if Joris Ivens it is a Dutch author and his film was commissioned by the North American institution, Contemporary Historians Inc., he was a Socialist Realist, and my analysis of his film is done through the influence that Soviet cinema had in this filmmaker. The following contextualization thus helps to the understanding of the way these representations were conveyed.

Cinema occupies a central position in Soviet Cultural History, as a unique combination of mass media, art form and entertainment industry, as well as a battlefield of conflicts of broader ideological and artistic significance. Being a predominant popular art form, it evolved from a field of experimentation to a mass weapon of propaganda that through entertainment shaped the public image of the Soviet Union and of the new Soviet man.

Cinema was already a central element in the struggle for unification. The Bolsheviks needed a medium that could appeal to the broad, illiterate and multi-national masses. “The great silence”<sup>32</sup> was the perfect medium for spreading propaganda from the center to the periphery at the same time that was visually very appealing to the masses; and being a medium associated to the machine and industrialization, it was seen as an agent of progress. Lenin saw the power of cinema in the revolutionary agitation of the whole country: “We should pay special attention to the organization of cinemas in

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<sup>32</sup> As contemporaries called cinema.

the countryside and in the east, where they are novelties and where, therefore, our propaganda will be particularly successful.”<sup>33</sup>

The Soviet government developed a network of *agitpunkty*, centers of propaganda activity for a large population group, situated in strategic places like railway stations and large settlements. Combined with the *agitpunkty* there were several travel agitational trains that brought revolutionary agitation in the most remote areas. These trains were very well equipped, with a library, a screening wagon, radio and cinema material. They also served for the compilation of footage that was afterward sent back to Moscow where Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, Esfir Shub, among others, edited the footage into newsreels.

The films showed in the *agittrains* were short and explicit, with a direct message and visually appealing, done through the principle of “dynamic montage”<sup>34</sup> to simplify the message and give it strength and dynamism in order to catch a diversified and mostly illiterate audience. The focus on the *Cinefication* [kinofikatsiia] of the countryside<sup>35</sup> would be a major topic in all the future discussions of the role of cinema in Soviet society: the need to reach the masses and thus to make a more intelligible cinema.

If we wish to understand how the regime wanted to be represented, and how the regime wanted certain events to be represented, non-fiction film, or *unstaged*,<sup>36</sup> cinema is a crucial element. In order to analyze the development of Soviet non-fiction films we must focus both on stylistic analysis and in the identification of developing changes of imagery and representation: how themes and types were represented and juxtaposed,

<sup>33</sup> A. M. Gak (ed.), *Samoe vazhnoe iz vseh iskusstv, Lenin o kino*, Moscow, 1973, pp. 42, in Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda – Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, (London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 36

<sup>34</sup> As Eisenstein later called this specific method of montage.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Film Propaganda*, pp. 38

<sup>36</sup> The Russian term for the genre.

and why. The main question was *how* the fact should be conveyed on screen in order to fulfill educative and propaganda purposes according to the directives emanating from the Party.

During the first half of the 1920s the most urgent issue was to organize the cinema industry, nationalized in 1919, but still competing with the private sector. There were several attempts to centralize the industry, first in 1922 with the creation of Goskino (State Committee for Cinematography) and later in 1924 replaced with Sovkino, but neither one of them had the strength to compete with private initiatives. Until the 1930s, Soviet Cinema was more orientated towards commercial rather than ideological purposes, plus the competition with foreign films, rendered the establishment of the cinema industry even more difficult. But on the other side, it left more space of maneuvering to the filmmakers that were freer to experiment and to work independently.

During this time, filmmakers were trying to clearly separate the cinematic art with its connection with theater, and give film its specificity. This specificity was delineated by Kuleshov early in 1917 arguing that the distinctive feature of cinema was montage; “Montage is to cinema what the composition of colors is to painting or a harmonic sequence of sounds is to music”<sup>37</sup>. The “Kuleshov effect”<sup>38</sup> opened the road for experimentation in montage giving the example to others like Pudovkin, Eisenstein with his “montage of attractions” or Dziga Vertov through his Cine-Eye methods.

Dziga Vertov is considered the most influential documentarist of the Soviet *avant-garde*, his experimentations with sound, juxtaposition of images and rhythmic montage eventually led him towards a more poetic interpretation of facts. He was very

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<sup>37</sup> L.V. Kuleshov, “Iskusstvo svetotvorchestva” in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory – Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 45

<sup>38</sup> Placing the same expressionless actor in several distinct situations through the juxtaposition of his image with the different contexts, giving expression through montage.



much influenced by the futurist and modernist movements, and focused on the depiction of the power of machines, urban settings, movement of masses and contributed in the building of the cinematic cult of Lenin.

After working as an editor of the *agitprop* newsreels in the Civil War, he launched a new project, the *Kinopravda* [Cine Truth], a series of newsreels that differentiated from previous ones in format; they were longer and structured around a theme (and not around narrative) in a documentary style, constructing series of events into a thematic whole. These newsreels focused on politics, urban subjects, new technology, leisure, factory scenes, sport, all depicted in an increasingly dynamic mode, with shorter sequences and brief intertitles, concentrating on the appealing visual movements<sup>39</sup>.

For the *unstaged* films, this was the turning point from agitation to a structured propaganda medium. It was also during this period that the debate about films getting away from the theatrical form changed to a debate about the specificity of cinema as an art itself. Vertov, along with Kuleshov were the first who started the debate about the specificity of cinema and Vertov took a more radical position denying all the fictional elements (scenario, actors...), stating that cinema should use the real life, facts from the building of the new Soviet society, in order to get away from “bourgeoisie kind of entertaining”. He proposed giving a new perception of the world, through the camera, the “mechanical eye”, and organizing these perceptions through rhythmic montage and juxtaposition of the “life caught unaware”.

I am the Cine-Eye. I am the mechanical eye.  
 I the machine show you the world as only I can see it.  
 I emancipate myself henceforth and forever from human  
 immobility, I am in constant motion. (...)  
 I juxtapose any points in the universe regardless of where I fixed  
 them.  
 My path leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the  
 world.

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<sup>39</sup> During the production of the *Kinopravda* newsreels Vertov collaborated intensively with the constructivist artist Alexandr Rodchenko.

(...)

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THE OBSERVATIONS OF THE HUMAN EYE

How can we construct our impressions of a day into an effective whole in a visual exercise?

If we film everything that the eye has seen these will naturally be a muddle. If we edit the photographed material skillfully it will be clearer. If we throw out the rubbishy impedimenta things will be even better. We shall get an organized memorandum of the impressions of a normal eye.<sup>40</sup>

Vertov's main concerns were how to capture and make connections of a social reality, by questioning reality but also by making an aesthetic statement towards modernism and futurism. In practical terms, Vertov evolved from a journalistic perspective to a poetic film language of visual forms, hence distancing his work from the masses by producing films that were considered visually too complex for the time.

According to Graham Roberts the initially extreme positions that Vertov took in favor of the non-fiction cinema and the complete refusal of any fictional element in came from his civil war experience, where he was in contact with the "virgin" countryside; "The viewers were illiterate or semi-illiterate peasants. They could not read the subtitles. These unspoiled viewers could not understand the theatrical conventions"<sup>41</sup>. The author also considers that it was the cinematic experience of the civil war that caused the later campaign for a more comprehensible cinema, and thus, the imposition of Socialist Realism to cinema and to the arts in general.

Sovkino started to organize its own newsreels, focused in the major public events and activities around the Soviet Union. It differentiated from previous newsreels since it had some stylistic development; increase of animation and superimposition of images probably influenced by the *Kinopravda* series.

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<sup>40</sup> Dziga Vertov, "Kinoki. Perevorot", *Lef*, 1923, n°3 (June/July), pp. 135 – 143, in Taylor (ed.), *The Film Factory*, pp. 93

<sup>41</sup> Dziga Vertov (ed. S. V. Drobashenko), *Stat'i, dnevniki, zamysli*, Moscow, 1961, pp. 91, in Grahams Roberts, *Forward Soviet! History and Non-fiction in the USSR*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 1999) , pp. 20

Other institutions<sup>42</sup> were born, with the aim of transforming cinema into a more controlled and accessible form, going in a different direction of Vertov's path; even if the message he was trying to transmit was according to the Party line, his method of presentation was not. His approach started to be increasingly criticized by theorists and other filmmakers, and this situation would worsen during the 1930s. The main point of criticism was Vertov's use of rhythmic montage, which according to the critics deformed the facts and changed their meaning. Despite this, Vertov still managed to continue his contribution in the settlement of the fundamentals of Soviet non-fiction films.

The death of Lenin brought a new challenge in cinematic terms, a challenge taken by Vertov through the exercise of myth construction, (later used for the cinematic worship of Stalin) by using archival images for the edition of documentaries. In this context, another filmmaker started to rise. Esfir Ilinichna Shub started her work in cinema by re-editing and re-titling foreign films in order to render them ideologically suitable. This experience in re-editing films according to the Soviet ideology had the most profound effect on Shub's later works and especially in the creation of the *compilation film* genre. She had to create an artistic and ideological coherent work from the material available, mostly newsreels.

According to Shub,

The studio must ... become simply a factory for non-played cinema, where people could work on editing newsreels, films of the history of the Revolution made from newsreel footage, where scientific production films and general cultural films could be made as a counter-weight to played entertainment films. We do not need a factory of facts if it is to fabricate facts.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ODSK [Obshchestvo druzei sovetskogo kino] – Society of Friends of the Soviet Cinema born in November 1925.

<sup>43</sup> Esfir Shub, "Fabrikatsiia factov", *Kino 41*, 1926, in Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 51

Her strongest abilities were the ironic juxtaposition, the capability of presenting arguments through other's footage, "playing" with them. Shub knew very well also how to balance images and words, and when to speak directly to the audience without visual distraction, with strong sentences through the use of intertitles (a mean that she always kept, even with the coming of sound). She wanted to use and show reality, exploit and understand it through visual means and in order to serve propaganda purposes. She wanted to produce

Works which agitate and propagandize the struggle with our class enemies, works which reveal the failures and successes of the only country in the world which is building socialism. Here is our task (...) Nothing is more convincing than the fact which is scientifically verifiable and inventively subjected to the clear aim of serving a social goal.<sup>44</sup>

Shub defended the *unstaged* because it stimulated the collective intellect of the audience instead of distracting it or entertaining it with made-up stories told by fiction films. *Unstaged* was seen as a much farther reached propaganda tool, and a mean to fix on film the complexity of the passing life in such a crucial moment for the Soviet State building.

The celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution brought further discussion about the future of Soviet Cinema, and the debate between fiction and nonfiction cinema continued. Mayakovsky joined the debate, representing the views of the *Novyi Lef*<sup>45</sup> group,

We've strayed away from newsreels. What do we have for the tenth anniversary of October? (...) Sovkino in the person of Eisenstein will show us a fake Lenin (...) I promise that at the most solemn moment, whenever it may be, I shall hiss and pelt this fake Lenin with rotten eggs. It's outrageous. And the blame for this lies with Sovkino who have never been able to appreciate

<sup>44</sup> Esfir Shub, *Zhin'moia – kinematograf*, Moscow, 1972, pp. 264, in Roberts, *Forward Soviets!*, pp. 68

<sup>45</sup> "New Left", a group of *avant-garde* artist and intellectuals connected with the futurist and modernist artistic movements .

the importance of the newsreel and do not appreciate it even now<sup>46</sup>.

(...)

We do not want to see on the screen actors playing Lenin: we want to see Lenin himself, albeit in a small number of frames, looking at us from the cinema screen. This is the valuable aspect of our cinema.

Let us have newsreels!<sup>47</sup>

The debate between fiction and nonfiction cinema continued during the second half of the 1920s, mostly in magazine specifically oriented towards cinema. Shub and Vertov were the main leaders of the defense of the nonfiction cinema, they defended that it was possible to make films with non-staged material that would be richer in quality and purpose than any fiction film, because it worked with real life, with facts and was a testimony of the building of the new socialist state. The non-fictional branch of cinema was having a relatively good amount of success; a theater dedicated only to documentaries opened in Moscow in the late 1920s.

The anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution was also the year of the building of Soviet cinema as an industry, in line with the radicalization of the political economy which started to affect also the arts. Cultural control and homogenization were the main goals of the political approach towards cinema, that was the target in the All-Union Party Conference on Cinema in March 1928: “cinema must be a weapon for the organization of the masses around the task of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and socialist construction, and a mean of agitation for the current slogans of

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<sup>46</sup> V. Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 12 (Moscow, 1959), pp. 353 – 359, in Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 63

<sup>47</sup> V. Maiakovskii, “VI. Maiakovskii – o kino”, *Kino*, November 1927 in, Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 63

the Party”<sup>48</sup>. The Cultural Revolution had to reach the masses, thus creating a more accessible art form.

In terms of artistic form the Party cannot support one particular current, tendency or grouping: it permits competition between differing formal and artistic tendencies and the opportunity for experimentation so that the most perfect possible film in artistic terms can be achieved.

The main criterion for evaluating the formal and artistic qualities of films is the requirement that cinema furnish a “form that is intelligible to the millions”<sup>49</sup>

The main statements of this conference were the need of making films “accessible to the millions”, as well as using cinema as a weapon of propaganda in the education and mobilization of the people in the building of Socialism. At the same time the Party was taking a strong position against artistic experimentalization, dooming the Soviet *avant-garde* movements of the 1920s. Cinema’s role changed from a medium of art to a political tool eliminating all the autonomy that cinema had in the past.

Cinema-oriented organizations started to mobilize the population toward cinema, what in the 1930s meant mobilizing the population toward the task and responsibility of building socialism.<sup>50</sup>

In the several magazines and meetings, criticism started to flourish, among theorist and between filmmakers, accusing one another of formalism and of distorting the Marxist ideology. In the realm of the *un-staged* films, the discussion was still focused in the usefulness of real facts, to be used and shown<sup>51</sup>, or in Shub’s words, “Nothing is more convincing than the fact which is scientifically verifiable and

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<sup>48</sup> A. I. Krinitsky, head of the Party AgitProp Department, Party Cinema, “Conference Resolution: The Results of Cinema Construction in the USSR and the Task of Soviet Cinema”, B. S. Ol’khovyi (ed.), *Puti kino. Vsesoyuznoe partiinoe soveshchanie po kinematografii* (Moscow, 1929), pp. 429 – 444, in Taylor (ed.), *Film Factory*, pp. 208

<sup>49</sup> A. I. Krinitsky, “Conference Resolution: The Results of Cinema Construction in the USSR and the Task of Soviet Cinema”, B. S. Ol’khovyi (ed.), *Puti kino*, in Taylor (ed.), *Film Factory*, pp. 210

<sup>50</sup> Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*, (London, I. B. Tauris, and New York, 2001)

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 68

inventively subjected to the clear aim of serving a social goal”<sup>52</sup> This posture was actually very convincing for the Party and Shub’s *The Great Way* was much celebrated, at the same time that Vertov’s work was being increasingly misunderstood.

Both were re-edited footage and a compromising historical piece, working on the terms of the resolution of the congress, but if Shub provided a “much more coherent impression because its thematic and montage plan has been carefully devised”<sup>53</sup>, Vertov “was doing the right thing but in the wrong way”<sup>54</sup>.

A new documentary genre, “expeditionary pictures” was born in the hands of the cameramen that Sovkino increasingly started to send to the Soviet Republics, as curiosity newsreels and entertainment as well as serving the purpose of reassuring the urban population of the great Union.<sup>55</sup> Yakov Bliokh and Vladimir Erofeev were among these Sovkino filmmakers that represented the “new wave” of documentarists that focused on the recording of life as it happened and presented it in a much more comprehensible and simple way than Vertov and less serious and epic than Shub.

The need for newsreels was acknowledged by the Party and praised by the filmmakers, “(...) you need historical truth, facts, document and the greatest austerity of execution: you need newsreel”<sup>56</sup>. The Party stressed the need for accessibility, “[non-fiction film] can and must address the millions. And its language? Through simplicity and accessibility, through clarity and ingenuity, through evidentness”<sup>57</sup>.

The advent of sound was welcomed between the nonfiction filmmakers, who were not so preoccupied with the impact that sound could have in the visual specificity of cinema, as fiction filmmakers were, claiming that sound will destroy montage and

<sup>52</sup> Esfir Shub, *Zhin’ moja - kinematograph*, Moscow, 1972, in Robert, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 68

<sup>53</sup> Taylor (ed.), *Film Factory*, pp. 226 - 227

<sup>54</sup> Taylor (ed.), *Film Factory*, pp. 227

<sup>55</sup> Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 81

<sup>56</sup> Esfir Shub, “Eta rabota krichit” (This Work Cries Out), *Kino*, 1928, no. 11 (March), in Taylor (ed.), *Film Factory*, pp. 217

<sup>57</sup> “Glubzhe v zhizn”, *Sovetskii ekran*, 23 April 1929, in Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 85

bring cinema back to the theatrical form. According to them, the “only utilization of sound in counterpoint relation to the piece of visual mounting affords the possibilities of developing and perfecting the mounting. *The first experiments with sound must be directed towards its pronounced non-coincidence with the visual images*”<sup>58</sup>

Documentarists saw immediately how the sound film was the most powerful method of propaganda and Vertov was the first one to experiment with sound, and he was actually the only one to use sound in counterpoint relation with the images, in his 1931 film *Enthusiasm*. As for Shub, she was the first to use the direct sound recording in her film *Komsomol – Patron of Electrification*, but the ironic input and the juxtaposition of images to build arguments was replaced by a more complacent representation, where the subject was worshiped rather than explored.<sup>59</sup>

In 1929 the Cinema industry was being increasingly centralized, and Sovkino was replaced by Soiuzkino. Foreign films were banned from the market and Soviet film finally monopolized the cinemas. The newsreels started to change in focus and method; filmmakers were no longer permitted to shoot, edit and screen without supervision, and an increase of image manipulation lead almost to a confusion between staged and *unstaged* films.

The time when newsreel was involved in “the honest” recording of fact, when it was only an organ for information, has gradually withdrawn to the realm of the distant past. Before newsreel stands the complicated task of actively being involved in our socialist construction... The task of informer is turned to the task of organizer.<sup>60</sup>

The newsreels started to have more weight in the propagandist means of the Party, especially in the building of the world-view, both of internal subjects, promoting

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<sup>58</sup> S.M. Eisenstein, W. I. Pudovkin [Pudovkin] and G.V. Alexandroff [Alexandrov], “The sound film – A statement from the USSR”, in James Donald (ed.), *Close Up 1927 – 1933: Cinema and Modernism*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 83 - 84

<sup>59</sup> Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 104

<sup>60</sup> Ya. Bliokh and S. Bubrik, “Opty raboty byezdnykh kinoredaktsii”, *Proletarskoe Kino*, 12, 1931, in Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 115



the Five-Years plan, as well as international issues, where the outside world was no longer depicted as states oppressing the working class that looked with admiration to the Soviet Union, but as a capitalistic world in crisis and aggressive towards the USSR<sup>61</sup>.

The Party renewed its interest in using cinema as a propaganda weapon in the countryside, and returned to the agitational approach by re-implementing the *agit-prop* campaigns in order to spread the achievements of the Five-Year Plan and specially the increment of the railway system throughout the USSR “(...) The all-union trust, “Soyuzkino-newsreel”, has introduced for use the first Soviet film-train, which is a film-studio on wheels, completely equipped for the production of films under conditions of rail transport.” The studio-train reached the newly train connected populations with the slogan “We shoot today – We show tomorrow”.

It was in this context that Roman Karmen and a new generation of filmmakers entered the scene. They were not linked to the *avant-garde* movement thus far from the attacks on formalism or experimentalism, as Shub and Vertov were. Roman Karmen would dominate the nonfiction film making until his death, and his methods and writings would lay the fundamentals of nonfiction in the VGIK<sup>62</sup>.

Born in Odessa in 1906 Karmen started his career as a photographer, taking portraits of regime personalities and important events of the new socialist regime. He then switched the photo camera for a movie camera and became the assistant of important cameraman and filmmakers like Edouard Tissé and Sergei Eisenstein.

His first work as director and cameraman was in 1933, then Karmen started to travel through the whole Soviet Union, filming important political figures as well as unknown peasants. By 1934 Roman Karmen was given most of the documentary commissions while Shub and Vertov found every time more difficult to pursue their

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<sup>61</sup> Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*

<sup>62</sup> All-Union State Institute of Cinematography

projects. The “drama-documentary” was the rising genre, and the ideological framework was “Realism, ideological awareness and party-mindedness”<sup>63</sup>.

Socialist Realism was officially imposed to the arts in the All-Union Creative Conference on Cinematography held in Moscow in January 1935. Formalism, reflexivity and modernism were banned and simplistic directness in filmmaking was the call of the day, a line pursued by Karmen in his projects.

The Party wanted to depict “genuine lives of the people” dramatized and carefully scripted.<sup>64</sup> They wanted to limit the director’s decision making in the whole filmmaking process, giving a strong role to the script writer, even in nonfiction films, by putting history and social reality in accordance to the Party’s view.

Documentary filmmaking became

(...) a rhetorical form which both offers the audience information and attempts to put forward an argument, to persuade the audience to think in a certain way, to do something, to accept the argument. It achieves this by presenting the truth of its argument as self-evident, unified and non-contradictory. Most often, an authoritative voice-over commentary is used to frame and contain the images which are seen as unmediated recordings.<sup>65</sup>

The point was to remove all the subjective elements in the nonfiction aesthetics demanding a simpler and less challenging form. The making of a film became a process of compromise of political content between the Communist Party officials, the film industry, the artists and the Soviet audience.

In this cinematic context the Spanish Civil War began, and the Soviet Union immediately demonstrated interest in exploiting the war to its own propaganda purposes; to gather support for the new Comintern strategy adopted in the III International, the Popular Fronts and to demonstrate the immorality of Fascism. Even

<sup>63</sup> Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 121

<sup>64</sup> Andreev (Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party), reported in *Kino* 1, 1936 in Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, pp. 127

<sup>65</sup> Pam Cook, “Authorship and Cinema”, in Pam Cook (ed.), *The Cinema Book*, (London, British Film Institute Publisher, 1985), pp. 190

before the military aid and the arrival of the Soviet diplomatic mission, journalists and filmmakers were sent to Spain. Ilya Ehrenburg and Mikhail Koltsov as correspondents of the *Izvestia* and *Pravda*, and Roman Karmen with his assistant Boris Makaseiev as filmmakers were sent by the State Cinema Board (GUKF).

They were commissioned to record what was happening in Spain lining with the political position of the Soviet Union: fascist contention through the Popular Front, the defense of the Democracy and not a revolutionary agitation. In this sense, the newsreels had to develop an image of the republican fight as a defense of the legally elected government, a fight primarily mobilized by the Spanish Communist Party.

According to this line of action, Karmen's newsreels did not show any Soviet armor or the work of the Soviet advisors<sup>66</sup>. Spanish men and women are shown working in munitions factory, in order to build the idea that the Republic is making its own warfare. The only Soviet aid shown in the newsreels was that coming from the solidarity campaigns.

Filmmaking in Spain, as well as the military aid was a reflection of Soviet attitude towards the war. Until the summer 1937 warfare was sent to the Spanish Republican territory, but afterwards, it decreased notoriously until a complete withdrawal of the diplomatic mission, the military advisors and consequently, of the filmmakers.

The impact left by Karmen's images about the Spanish Civil War will deeply influence the visual imagery of the Spanish Civil War as well as the further development of Soviet cinema. The images as well as the event itself will be reinterpreted and revisited for several generations.

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<sup>66</sup> There were more than 1.200 advisors in Spain.

This peculiar cultural exchange between Spain and the Soviet Union and the development of high quality work in the battlefield not only produced an extremely valuable documental footage about the Spanish Civil War itself, but also accomplished the marriage between war and cinema.

In the consequent chapters I will analyze Roman Karmen's newsreels, *Events in Spain*, Esfir Shub *Ispanija* (Spain) and Joris Ivens' *The Spanish Earth*. My interest is to grasp how the civil war was represented through Karmen's newsreels, Shub's compilation film and Ivens' committed documentary, the three of them in a Soviet cinematic context.

## **ROMAN KARMEN: K sobitiyam v Ispanii [On the Events in Spain], Soiuzkinokronika, August 1936 – July 1937**

Roman Karmen (1906 - 1982) is probably the most important cameraman of the cinematic iconography of the major conflicts of the twentieth century; he documented the construction of socialism in Russia and the Spanish trenches, the rise of Mao Zedong and the Battle of Stalingrad; filmed the Nuremberg trials, the liberation of Hanoi and Ho Chi Min City. He also explored the South American continent where he followed the Cuban revolution and Allende's Popular Front government. For the visual collective memory of the Spanish Civil War, his work is essential; almost every film made about the conflict used his images, from Luis Buñuel to Esfir Shub, Joaquin Reig, Frederic Rossif, Jean-Paul Le Chanois and Tarkovsky among others. Karmen's experience of the war is thus constitutive for the modern documentary film genre. He rose as a filmmaker at the beginning of the 1930s during the second agitation campaign to bring the cinema to the countryside. He was a cameraman for Souizkinokronika, the official newsreel producer of the regime, and it was in this capacity that the Soviet Politburo approved Karmen's and Makaseiev's cinematic mission to Spain on 17 August 1936, a month after the military uprising.

The Soviet government was interested in showing their audience the Spanish imbroglio, where the new Comintern strategy of the Popular Front was being tested for the first time with communist participation, and this government was fighting against nationalist forces helped by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

The two filmmakers arrived in Paris, where they were assisted by Ilya Ehrenburg, his wife and the journalist Sadovsky. According to Karmen's memoirs,

Ehrenburg advised them to go to the northern front before heading to Madrid, so both filmmakers crossed the border in a memorable experience remembered by Karmen:

Crossing barriers. Red passports. The reaction of the youngsters, dressed in grey flannel uniforms, is instantaneous, effusive. We couldn't restrain ourselves, so Boris and I picked up our cameras and filmed each other passing through the formalities of the border. They hugged us, shouting "long live Soviet Russia!", raising their fists, giving us handshakes, pats on the back, and then, a whole group of people took us to some place (...) The French borderguards looked amazed at all this fuss provoked by the arrival of these Soviet men.<sup>67</sup>

The imminent fall of Irún (north-west near the French border), led Karmen and Makseiev to shoot the besieged city and then moved further west, to San Sebastián. In their first day in Spain they shot eight hundred meters of film, and even though all the difficulties of the beginning, Karmen remembered the first day as a symbolic one: "In this episode there is something like a symbolic image of the Spaniards; an unarmed people who started a war against fascism with muskets."<sup>68</sup>

In a letter written to Roman Grigoriev, who coordinated the editing of the newsreels in Moscow and with whom they kept a rich correspondence<sup>69</sup>, both Karmen and Makaseiev express their concerns about the difficulties of their work:

We struggled in Moscow for the importance of studying the material before shooting. Here instead you arrive, look around and start to shoot. The unknown language, the novelty and the number of themes, the completely new environment makes our orientation extremely difficult. Not to speak about the constant danger, especially during the battles. Not even by night can we relax. Yesterday the fascists bombed Madrid. Sirens were on all night while the sound of the anti-aircraft and the rays of the reflectors were sliding, crossing in the sky. We are learning Spanish as fast as we can. The first sentence that we learnt was: "No mire la máquina!" [Do not look into the camera!]<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Roman Karmen, *No Pasarán!*, (Editorial Progreso, Moscú, 1976), pp. 253. Author's translation.

<sup>68</sup> Karmen, *No Pasarán!*, pp. 259. Author's translation.

<sup>69</sup> Published in full length in the Italian journal "Cinema 60" n° 39, September 1963

<sup>70</sup> Letter of Roman Karmen and Boris Makaseiev to Roman Grigoriev sent the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1936, published in *Cinema 60*, September 1963, pp. 41 – 48, quoted in Román Gubern, 1936 – 1939 La Guerra de España en la Pantalla: de la propaganda a la historia, Author's translation.

The scriptwriter for the newsreels series was Mikhail Koltsov, who was a writer and the *Pravda* correspondent as well as a political commissar to the International Brigades. Koltsov and Karmen remained close during their stay in Spain. Together they crossed along the loyalist region, from the northern front to Catalonia, the siege of the Alcázar of Toledo, the battle of Madrid and the escape of the government to Valencia; then to the south, shooting the battle of Guadalajara until they were sent back to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1937. They depicted war scenes as well as life in the rear, the civil population and the leaders of the loyalist faction.

As soon as they had a considerable amount of footage for a newsreel, they sent it back to the Soviet Union via Paris, together with Koltsov's notes that built the narrative and Karmen's directions for montage. Already while shooting, they carefully calculated the needs of the editing process, such as the right number of angles, close-ups, details of battles and rear, in order to construct a whole picture of the situation. The importance of their mission and of the uniqueness of every shot was quite clear for them, as Karmen remembers: "The feeling of the huge responsibility that every scene that we shoot at this time, in these unique moments, grows day by day (...) each frame shot in these moments is history",<sup>71</sup>

The work developed in the Soviet Union was not the classic newsreel of the time; the newsreels resembled more a "filmic chronicle":

We try to abandon the lame and dispassionate representation of facts (...) and we try to present our own version of reality and use the facts of life for our propaganda purposes. The filmed chronicle should not be just a number of shots that depict real life exactly but we must present this life to our audience through a living narrator who not only tells us the facts, but also interprets them.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Karmen, *No Pasarán!*, pp. 259 – 273. Author's translation.

<sup>72</sup> Viktor Kershennzev, *Kinematograf*, Moscow, 1919 in Sowjetischer Dokumentarfilm, pp. 75, quoted in Wolfgang Martin Hamdorf, *Zwischen No Pasaran und Arriba Espana!. Film und Propaganda im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, Moks Publicationen, Munster, 1991

This set out a clear aim of interpreting facts, interpreting the footage and dramatize their meaning through comments, music, intertitles and montage techniques, in order to make them suitable for the Soviet audience and propaganda purposes.

Karmen's newsreels about the Spanish conflict, *K Sobitiyam v Ispanii* (On the Events in Spain), were a series of twenty episodes of different structure and length. Normally, each episode was between 7 and 9 minutes long with varying incorporation of sound, music and voice-over. It gives a panorama of the Spanish Civil War, introducing the Soviet audience not only to the war fronts, but also to life in the rear, the organization of the International Brigades, life in the besieged cities, as well as showing the major heroes and officials like Dolores Ibárruri, the flamboyant Spanish communist woman, José Díaz, the Secretary of the Communist Party, the communist general Enrique Lister, and the socialist minister Juan Negrín among others.

The general message we get from the newsreels is that of a people defending themselves against a fascist rebel attack, and that the war effort is common to men, women and children. We constantly see civilians enlisting in the Popular Army, women, children and elders helping in the building of trenches, how the peasants keep on working the land to provide food to the front. The countryside is depicted as an idyllic place with workers peacefully working and long shots of the immense lands. Women are carefully depicted as emancipated individuals holding guns and enlisting in the militia, working in factories while men are in the front, or as helpless mothers running away from the bombings with their children in their arms seeking refugee.

The common effort also crosses all the political factions of within the Popular Front. There is a more concentrated focus on the communist political figures, and their role in the war especially in the defense of Madrid, but we also see the socialist government regarding the Soviet Union as a friendly country. The anarchists appear in



several shots, we can see trucks of the CNT and FAI<sup>73</sup> around the cities, anarchist militias fighting on the front and we can actually grasp some kind of sympathy towards the anarchist leader, Buenaventura Durruti who fought and was killed in the defense of Madrid. In episode nº11, Durruti is introduced by the narrator as the “Catalan anarchist who came to defend Madrid” and he greets the camera.

Another constant theme is parades of militias, recently enlisted soldiers or civil demonstrations of support for the Republic. They march with their fists raised – militias, soldiers, civilians, women and children alike. Normally these parades were combined with public speeches of important political figures, where they stressed that Spain was defending democracy and was the symbol of the anti-fascist struggle. In some episodes we see the communist leaders talking directly to the camera, obviously performing for Karmen.

Karmen accompanies the formation of the first international units in Barcelona, a city described as “the Center of revolutionary Catalonia”, in an obvious disregard for the Soviet political line which did not want to show a revolutionary Spain, but a democratic country fighting for the defense of the Republic.

As for the international intervention, there is a strong focus on Italian intervention, less emphasis on German military activity and no sign of the Soviet military help. The only sign of Soviet intervention is the arrival of the ship *Neva* with clothes and other items gathered in the solidarity campaigns in the Soviet Union.

Images of battles are always intertwined with images of the rear, and the bombings are shown in a very careful montage of cause and effect. For example, in several episodes we start by seeing images of Madrid, as a grand and imperial city with the population looking scared into the sky while sounds of sirens imply the imminent

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<sup>73</sup> CNT – Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, National Confederation of Work; FAI – Federación Anarquista Ibérica, Iberian Anarchist Federation.

rebel attack. We see women with children running into the metro station to protect themselves from the bombs, all in very fast and intense sequences. Then we see and hear the explosions, smoke, destruction, buildings burning, dead bodies of children dragged from the ruins, mothers with their children killed. A desperate population looking at the devastation, helpless, carrying their belongings after being made homeless. The focus changes and we see the population building trenches and preparing themselves for the defense, newly enlisted soldiers training and marching to the front, confident and facing the fascist enemy.

Clearly the images juxtaposed in one episode do not correspond to an actual event; Karmen took footage from several situations and edited them in order to create an emotionally engaging sequence. This is a constant technique used during the editing of the Spanish “filmic chronicle”. The aim of creating new meanings for the images filmed was pursued not only in the montage room but also during the actual shooting. A good example of this manipulation technique is the sequence of the San Sebastián’s promenade. In his memoirs, Karmen explains this event:

Before finishing a slow panoramic shot framing a woman pushing a pram, a blast resounds somewhere not far from me. I suddenly turn my camera towards a huge gush of water coming from the bay. I turn my camera again towards the woman who is now running away along the promenade with the pram. At that precise moment the unforgettable and moving sequence of the pram in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* comes to my mind. I rapidly change the lens; I put a telescopic lens and wait for another blast. A gush is spread again as another blast resounds in the bay. I look around: the promenade is empty. Some meters away I see Makaseiev. We are alone in the empty promenade. I shoot the promenade and other blasts.<sup>74</sup>

This event was translated in the following way in newsreel: A panoramic view of San Sebastián, a general shot of a street with elders and children. Then a shot of the

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<sup>74</sup> Karmen, *No Pasarán!*, pp. 261

promenade with youngster walking, we see the woman with the pram, the promenade again and then a sequence of blasts in the water, airplane, another blast, people running, airplane, blast, a woman running with her child in her arms, another couple of blasts and then the empty promenade, and destruction. The episode ends with militiamen marching with their fists raised. The intertitles claim that this was the work of a fascist airplane attack, when it was actually an artillery attack.

This is an example of how the manipulation of images and meanings, the techniques of dramatization, are built. In August 1936, date of the event neither German nor Italian airplanes carried out air raids. But with the juxtaposition of images and the manipulative montage, the editing created an airplane attack for the Soviet audience.

Through this example we can understand how the manipulation of the images started during the shootings, and went on in the montage room, with the clear aim of building events in order to bring a specific message, a reinforced impact of what was happening in Spain. The sequence of cause/effect is recurrent in almost all episodes; the fast juxtaposition of images of different contexts builds a new narrative, normally not corresponding to the actual effect of a particular real sequence.

One of the best achievements of Karmen was the depiction of the rear and civilian life in a war zone. He carefully filmed the human face of the rear, with a considerable number of close-ups, angles, details and reaction of people to the first time a European city was being bombed from the air. He focuses on the weakest among the population: the elderly, women and children. We can see their reaction and scared faces looking at the sky, astonished. The novelty of this kind of war reinforced the emotional weight of the images, and the Soviet audience was following the events of Spain almost day by day.

The images of the destruction and despair provoked by the rebel forces are balanced with images of a country defending itself. We have images of the front line, of the republican trenches fighting back, soldiers fighting street by street, showing that this was a violent war that required fighting back and recapturing the territory meter by meter, by neighborhood and by village. Then we see the human face of the soldiers, saying goodbye to weeping mothers or writing letters from the front, resting, playing chess or even dancing. Again the quantity of close-ups and the recurrent image of the same soldier in a close-up give the sense of familiarity, likely to create bonds between the viewer and subject depicted.

Not only through the battles but also in the rear we see a country concentrating on the effort of winning the war. There are many images of workers working in factories: munitions, textile, building tanks and other warfare products. We clearly see a focus on women working through long and carefully built sequences of the production lines, with women visibly aware of the camera, smiling and nervous, proudly showing their red star badge on their chest, and surrounded by posters of Stalin, Lenin, Voroshilov, “La Pasionaria”, and Manuel Azaña<sup>75</sup>. It gives the idea that Spain had a solid warfare industry and that they were defending themselves alone from the Spanish rebels helped by modern Fascist warfare, without showing the military intervention of the Soviet Union, which leads to a misinterpretation of how the war was actually being fought.

The Spanish government did not have the means to fight back, and without the Soviet weapons the Spanish republic would probably have collapsed within a couple of months. Almost all of the Spanish army was on the rebel side, and the republic was fighting with obsolete weapons and Soviet tanks and airplanes. But through Karmen’s

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<sup>75</sup> President of the Spanish Republic.

newsreels we have the feeling that the loyalists had their own means. No Soviet tanks are shown and the International Brigades are depicted as spontaneous volunteers that came on their own to fight fascism in Spain, without mentioning the role of the Comintern in their organization. Episode nº 17/II focuses on the battle of Teruel, where the International Brigades managed to reconquer the small village. We can see Italian soldiers of CTVs<sup>76</sup> captured, as well as a German tank burning. A symbolic image of one Brigadist erasing from the wall signs of “Viva Italia” and “Viva Hitler” is shown to provide the sense of the conquest and the expulsion of fascism from Teruel.

In order to connect the Soviet audience with the Spanish cause, Karmen introduced them to folkloristic elements, like bullfights, or traditional clothes, while a Spanish map is only shown in the last episode. He also related events in Spain with the Russian Civil War by comparing Madrid 1936 with Petrograd 1919, or by inserting intertitles like “the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, anniversary of the great socialist revolution, the most intense fascist attack was held back”. Karmen also filmed posters of the Soviet leaders side by side with Spanish republican ones and images of streets of Madrid with big signs of “Viva la URSS”. The premiers of Soviet feature films in Madrid are also filmed, showing long queues and posters of *Tchapaiev* and *We are from Kronstad*.

Throughout the episodes we can observe an increasingly aesthetic concern, more detail and staged scenes; scenes are better constructed and carefully detailed in the last episodes than at the beginning. We can also see in the last episodes a less enthusiastic picture of the Spanish people. The music is sadder, whereas in the first episodes we have marching Soviet songs, we can see the republican soldiers tired but still resisting. Good examples of the aesthetic concerns are the staged scenes and the less enthusiastic picture is episode nº17/I. This episode starts with a juxtaposition of images of flowers

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<sup>76</sup> Corpo di Truppe Volontarie, Mussolini's troops sent to Spain to fight with the Nationalists.

and soldiers in the trenches, with their old muskets in their hands, flowers, and images of soldiers eating in the trenches, more flowers. All accompanied by a sad musical theme in crescendo. The frame expands and we see a general view of the trenches and then dead bodies of soldiers. Note that in the first episodes and until the last ones, we only saw civilian casualties, mostly children and mothers with their babies.

We then see images of wounded soldiers in a hospital, and in an obviously staged scene, women entering the room, all at the same time, and each one approaching one of the soldiers with flowers and oranges. On the walls we see pictures of “La Pasionaria” and one of the nurses reading a book of Lenin to a patient. After the hospital scene, we see a close-up of a Stalin poster and then the camera slowly moves from the picture towards a window of a textile factory where women are working, smiling and aware of the camera. Karmen took his time in shooting many close-ups of women’s faces and details of their work. We then see them leaving the factory at the end of the day. Another factory is shown, this time men building tanks, and the episode ends in a parade, with speeches and people marching with republican flags and their fists raised. The whole episode has a heroic input without the slightest reference to the fact that the Republic was losing territory and getting weaker while the Nationalist zone was winning territory and advancing day by day.

As for the style, as stated above, there is an aesthetic concern in the depiction of the elements. The way Karmen filmed the rear, life in the besieged city of Madrid and the evacuation of the Basque children are among the most evocative images of the Spanish Civil War. He carefully shot close-ups of scared children, weeping mothers, a desperate population, as well as smiling workers and resting militias. There are several memorable details, like a destroyed piano in the middle of a bombed building, a dead horse in a besieged village, or a tattered monarchist flag flapping in the wind above

ruins; details that give strength to the visual impact. The most poignant pictures are of course those of the corpses of children and mothers holding their babies, killed in fascist airplane attacks.

Another recurrent theme in Karmen's footage are running cars and motorcycles, dynamically juxtaposed with images of people running seeking refuge in a urban scenery, usually Madrid . This montage technique lends a sense of movement and an intense rhythm to the images; some of the sequences are accelerated, reinforcing the sense of motion.

In my opinion, Karmen had an experimentalist approach in some sequences; the fact that he and Makaseiev filmed each other crossing the border is not a classical newsreel approach, and this was right in the first episode. They filmed themselves in other situations; an eloquent example is episode nº 9 that has a curious montage of a motorcycle passing by, juxtaposed with a shot of Karmen filming the same motorcycle and then we see the motorcycle passing through Karmen's camera. It is not a relevant shot but it shows an aesthetic concern while filming and not only factual. The same episode has another similar sequence; we see shots of the battle front, militia men pointing their guns, lying on the ground, then we see Karmen himself lying on the floor next to the other men, pointing his camera, followed by further images filmed by Karmen's camera fixed in the position we had just witnessed. Then we see the troops advancing through the field, treading carefully and slowly, pointing their guns, and again we see Karmen walking with them, pointing his "gun". The same episode has a sequence of a dynamic movement of cars, motorcycles, and people running juxtaposed with trams passing by. Perhaps what Karmen was trying to show is that the work of a cameraman in a battlefield is as dangerous as the duty of the troops, but even if Karmen wanted to transmit this idea, we cannot truly fit the motorcycle sequence in it.

In this sense, the way that Karmen approaches certain subjects and the fact that he shows his own work as a cameraman is more likely to be a formalist approach to filmmaking than Socialist Realist one. The urban scenarios are also depicted in a more formalist way. As I said before, there is a strong focus on the movement of cars, motorcycles and trams, running in different directions, juxtaposed with people running in different directions as well. While watching these images we have the sense of a confused and fast movement of all these elements that come into the screen from right to left and from left to right, creating confusion and chaotic feelings with a strong rhythm. We can grasp a certain fascination for an image of an imperial Madrid. Only the big and monumental avenues are shown, as well as the immense palaces of Gran Via, and the central square, Sol. The more popular and small neighborhoods are not depicted, only the northern Madrid which was almost totally destroyed is shown, in order to demonstrate the destruction caused by the air raids. When Karmen wants to give a more general view of the city, he films it from above, probably from the “Telefonica” building, one of the tallest buildings that line the main avenue, giving a picture of where the bombs fell and how buildings burn and the smoke rises.

Madrid has a preferential treatment in the newsreels, and the cameraman’s focus on the defense of the capital will help to build the myth of Madrid as the symbol of the anti-fascist struggle. Those days in Madrid were peculiar: the government fled the capital leaving the republican General Miaja in charge of the defense of Madrid, children were being evacuated and the Soviet political and military advisers were taking the initiatives. It was not clear who had the control of the capital, and the feeling of chaos prevailed. In the mean time, the population of Madrid was preparing for the defense, building barricades in a common effort. In this context the International Brigades arrived in Madrid as well as the Soviet military machinery, helping in the



defense of the capital and all this during the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet Revolution. This situation made of Madrid a very interesting location to film in. The city was full of posters stating “No Pasarán!” and “Madrid sera la tumba del fascismo”<sup>77</sup>, posters that Karmen immortalized with his camera. The city became the symbol of the heroic resistance of a defenseless population, against the indiscriminate killings of civilians by the enemy, and of international solidarity.

Karmen’s depiction of Madrid is a mixture of the task of bringing the news, an ideological approach and his own capability of representing a multiform reality. A good example is episode nº 7 of October 1936. It starts with an intertitle “Madrid” and then a grand view of the Gran Via, Madrid’s biggest avenue, covered with propaganda posters calling the population for the defense of their city. We then see farmers being evacuated from surrounding villages and walking towards Madrid with their belongings, disrupted families of only women and children walking barefoot, focusing on the civil population as the main victims of the rebel attacks. We then move on to a speech of the General Secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, José Díaz, to the troops of the communist Fifth Regiment, juxtaposed with images of the preparation of the defense of Madrid. Medical check-ups and military training close the chapter by showing how the defense was being organized. There is an obvious exultation in the leading role of the communists in the overall fight against the fascists, and especially their role in the defense of Madrid. Also, communist leaders speak directly to the camera, clearly staging for Karmen.

The Soviet presence in the capital can be seen throughout the episodes; Karmen filmed the premiers of Soviet feature films in Spanish cinemas and episode nº 18 centered on the commemorations of 1st May, a clear homage of the population of

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<sup>77</sup> “They shall not pass!” and “Madrid will be the grave of Fascism”

Madrid to the USSR. The streets are full of images of the Soviet leaders and signs of “Viva la URSS”. In this episode we have a curious montage of the images of the celebrations intertwined with images of one of the most symbolic hallmarks of Madrid, the Lions of Cibeles in a clear reproduction of Eisenstein’s lions in *Battleship Potemkin*.

One of the last and best achieved pieces of Karmen in Spain was the evacuation of the Spanish children after the bombing of the Basque Country<sup>78</sup>. The scenes are very emotive; after a sequence of an air raid, with people running in the streets, scared and looking to the sky, we see dead bodies and destruction, and then parents kissing their children goodbye in a port, tears in all the faces, and a deep grief, all recorded with plenty of close-ups and intercut by the children walking alone to the boat. We then see the children on board, waving to their parents who are condemned to face the fratricidal war. Then the scene changes and we see the Spanish children arriving in the Soviet Union, received in a big parade by the Soviet pioneers, with bands playing music, children smiling and covered with flowers.

This subject will be further exploited as a propaganda weapon. The children were carefully observed and filmed, and two documentaries were made showing them playing, studying, doing sports well fed and happily living in the Soviet Union.

The practice of editing short documentaries with Karmen’s footage while he was still in Spain started right at the beginning. Souizkinokronica developed a series of documentaries to be consumed not only in the Soviet Union but also in Spain, England and France. They usually made versions in each language of the same documentary, and in some cases, like the documentary about the evacuation of Spanish children, the Russian version and the Spanish one have a different structure that suits the respective audience better.

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<sup>78</sup> 20.000 children were evacuated from the Spanish territory. 3.000 of them to the Soviet Union.

*In Defense of Madrid – La défense de Madrid* (1936) is a documentary about the reaction of the population of Madrid to the rebels' attack. We can see images of the streets, people helping in the construction of barricades, a woman crying in front of a building in ruins. The city is full of propaganda posters proclaiming that "Madrid shall be the grave of fascism". We see the evacuation of children and volunteers enlisting in the Fifth Regiment and receiving instructions and a document stating "Spanish Republic. Popular Militias' Fifth Regiment. Madrid"

There is a strong presence of women, working on the barricades enlisting in the militias and their work in the rear. The music is constant throughout the documentary and ends with the *Internationale*.

*Madrid v Ogníe – Madrid in Flames* (1937) is a documentary which targeted a broad international public. It has intertitles in English and French. Shows the destruction of the city of Madrid, many buildings on fire, bombings and children being evacuated. Visually it is quite strong. We see from above people running in the streets seeking refuge in the metro station, sound of planes and sirens, scared people, mainly women, old people and children. There are images of a market burning during the night, civil houses, and supposedly the next day, we see dead bodies, especially of woman and children, and parts of the city (mainly the north of Madrid) completely destroyed. All accompanied by music evoking tragic feelings. The footage combines scenes of the city being attacked with a calm, imperial and beautiful Madrid, shots possibly taken when Karmen had first arrived in Madrid in 1936.

*Madrid Sibódnia – Madrid Today* (1937) aimed to show the everyday life of Madrid, between the fascist air attacks and life in the rear. We see images of the bombings, and of the damage caused by the bombings, people, mainly civilians, running scared seeking refuge, smoke in the streets and shots of blood running through the

streets. Then there is a very quick montage of juxtaposed images of people running, flames, again people running, blood, wounded, scared people, and again smoke, blood, the sky and Madrid completely empty.

After this fast juxtaposition of images, the rhythm slows down, and we see the effects of the bombings, buildings and monuments destroyed, and on one of the buildings we can read “This is the work of fascism”. The focus then changes and we see the preparations for the celebrations of May Day in Madrid, with people hanging posters of Lenin, Stalin and of the Popular Front. In the streets people are marching, carrying communist flags.

Thereafter, the attention is drawn to the work in the factories, where we see women at work, and then men in the barricades and General Miaja visiting the troops and giving them a speech. The troops are celebrated by women with flowers and we see a confident Miaja. The message is basically that while the fascists are bombing the city and killing civilians, the population is defending itself and producing warfare for the counter-attack. Both men and women have their roles in the defense of Madrid.

In my research in the Spanish Filmoteca I also had access to some unedited footage by Karmen. This footage was not used in the newsreels; however, it appeared in some of the compilation films made afterwards.

Among the unedited footage we see many images of militiamen, and civilian population in general posing for the camera, looking into it, which gives us the perception that Karmen’s presence and intervention was strong. He asked people to raise their fists, pose next to communist leaders’ posters, have a certain attitude while doing a specific task, as working or queuing for food.

We also see more images of the two filmmakers filming themselves, in situations like a hotel room or on a plane, as well as many images of cars, motorcycles, trams, and other vehicles.

Images of the German intervention were clearly left behind in the editing room. There is a visually strong sequence of a German airplane burning, and a close-up of a swastika melting in the flames. We also see Soviet tanks in the footage. By cutting these images, the author wished to minimize the presence of German intervention due to the proximity of the Soviet-German pact, signed in August 1939, and also because the filmmaker did not want to compromise the Soviet position towards the Western democracies by showing their military intervention in the Spanish imbroglio.

The fascinating aspect of Karmen's images is the combination of an indiscriminate depiction of a chaotic reality and the incorporation of these images in a specific discourse that guides the viewer to the aimed meaning. Grasping such reality requires a strong sensitivity to portray dramatic events as well as daily life, which in Madrid meant surviving. It was this sensitivity that made Karmen's images travel from film to film irrespective of ideological affiliation, demonstrating Karmen's ability to portray a chaotic reality.

The fact that *Events in Spain* centered mostly on the defense of Madrid with an emphasis of the leading role of the communists, helped in the construction of the myth of Madrid as the bastion of the anti-fascist struggle, and Spain as the venue where democracy, represented by the Popular Front, was being defended. The film also served as documentary evidence of the fascist cruelty against civilians. This discourse penetrated in the rest of the films made about the subject; the prevalence of images of Madrid and its myth is evident in Esfir Shub's *Ispanjia*, Joris Iven's *Spanish Earth*,

Marcel Rossiff's *Dying in Madrid*, among others, creating a visual collective memory of the Spanish Civil War centered on the defense of the capital.

## ESFIR SHUB: Ispanija [Spain], Mosfilm, 1939

Esfir Shub (1894 - 1953) was one of the most prominent Soviet nonfiction filmmakers; she started her career by re-editing foreign films and make them suitable to the Soviet audience. Her skills were further developed by reassembling disperse footage in order to create a coherent narrative and appropriate argument. During the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s Shub was a strong defender of the development of newsreels and documentaries, as a mean to educate and instruct the illiterate masses. When the Spanish Civil war began, she was already a talented filmmaker, but it was with *Ispanija* that Shub accomplished the establishment of a new cinema genre: the compilation film. This film is a brilliant demonstration of how, with technique, montage skills, and aesthetic sensitivity it is possible to construct a narrative that by compiling disperse material and re contextualizing one can convey the aimed argument. The challenge that she faced, explaining to the Soviet audience the republican defeat, was cleverly undertook by representing the defeat as a moral victory.

While already shooting, Roman Karmen proposed to Mosfilm doing a film about Spain using the footage gathered during his stay in Spain. The project was accepted in 1936; Mikhail Koltsov was asked to write the script while Karmen, together with Esfir Shub were commissioned by Mosfilm to make the selection of the material and the montage.

Karmen returned to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1937 and started to select the material with Shub and with the collaboration of Spaniards living in the Soviet Union, while Kolstov was writing the script. Due to the lack of images available to build a coherent narrative, they decided to buy footage from Spanish cameramen and to gather footage from the Fascist propaganda.

The Spanish Civil War ends with the defeat of the Republican government while simultaneously the political situation in the Soviet Union changes: Stalin offers Hitler the Treaty of Non-Aggression, and all the anti-Nazi propaganda starts to disappear in the country. While Shub remained in charge of the *Ispanija* project, Koltsov falls in disgrace and is arrested, deported and executed circa 1942. At the same time, Karmen is sent to China to shoot the Japanese invasion of China<sup>79</sup> and Koltsov is replaced by Vsevolod Vishnevski<sup>80</sup>.

*Ispanija* reflects the Soviet non-fiction filmmaking of the 1930s and the beginning of war epic documentaries, which will be carried out during World War II. Shub's main focus in the film is underlying the heroism and stoicism of those fighting fascism, stressing the role of the communists in this struggle. With the material available, she managed to transform a failure into a victorious event, all achieved through her montage techniques.

Shub puts forward her great ability of juxtaposing and dramatizing disperse images and creating a coherent narrative through montage. She abandons the factual objectivity of events in order to favor the narrative and dramatize the images; in some scenes, the dramatization of images arrives almost to fictionalization. This material has a diverse provenience; mostly Karmen's footage, probably images of a disappeared documentary *Galicia*<sup>81</sup>, footage of Spanish cameramen from the Republican zone and images of the Fascist propaganda. The fact that Shub used images of the Fascist propaganda, edited through an ideologically saturated dialectic montage, permitted her to amplify the narrative making the enemy visible. This possibility is a privilege of the

<sup>79</sup> He produced two documentaries about China; *Kitaj v borbe* – China fighting, and *V Kitae* – In China

<sup>80</sup> He attended in Spain the Second Congress of Intellectuals for the defense of the Spanish Republic. He was also the scriptwriter of *We are from Kronstad*, Efim Dzigan, 1936

<sup>81</sup> As stated by the former director of Film Popular, Manuel Colino in Wolfgang Martin Hamdorf, *Zwischen No Pasarán! und Arriba España! Film und Propaganda im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, (Munster, Moks Publicationen, 1991), pp. 117



compilation film genre that by synthesizing diverse materials from different sources puts the viewer in a position of an omnipresent observer.

Idyllic images of the countryside introduce us to Spain, in a long sequence of peasants working, with a voice-over explaining how, with the Popular Front government, the workers now work the lands for themselves, and not for the rich landowners. We see people of all ages, a sunny country and a confident people working a land rich in resources. Spain is described as “The reign of lemons, oranges and grapes” and long shots of many regions cover the first minutes of the film. We then have a fictive dialogue that is added to the images of two farmers, as if they were talking with each other about the political situation that the country was living:

- Did you hear? The *Cortes* proclaimed new rights for us!
- Yes, but how are the landowners going to react?

This dialogue puts forward the argument that the reaction of the right wing conservatives land owners to the new Popular Front’s policies was a cause of the fascist military uprising, overlooking the political chaos and the violence atmosphere that Spain was dealing since well before.

After the depiction of the countryside we see “Fascinating Madrid” through images of the Gran Via and Dolores Ibárruri, “La Pasionaria”, giving a speech about the role of the Popular Front in the Spanish society and in the country’s development.

An intertitle explains that while fascist landowners, military and capitalist were preparing an uprising, the people were carrying on a normal life and we are shown a long sequence of a bullfight. This sequence can be interpreted as symbol of combat and death, preparing the viewer for images of combat and death of the Spanish republic. The political chaos and the violent climate that Spain was living since the proclamation of the republic is ignored and we are shown more idyllic images of a sunny afternoon in

July 1936; clear sky and children playing in the water, images of people walking through a promenade, children playing, water reflecting the sun and gulls flying in the sky are intertwined. Slowly, the images of the seagulls are skillfully replaced by images of planes flying in the clear sky.

The next scene is an even more dramatized sequence of Karmen's images of the supposed bombing of San Sebastián, described in the last chapter. We see a woman with a pram, the juxtaposition of planes with explosions in the bay that progressively entangled images of the bombings of Madrid, in a very fast, dramatic and rhythmic montage. Destruction and dead children are shown in a chaotic environment of people and cars running fast.

A call to the arms is made to defend the republic, an effort that must be pursued by all political factions of the Popular Front, as well as by people of all ages and gender. José Diaz, the communist leader is shown communicating this message and mobilizing the population, while we see people enlisting, accompanied by the anthem of republican Spain.

Then images of Franco are shown, as the fascist military, who in the Asturian uprising of 1934<sup>82</sup>, "torture children in front of their mothers", and who failing to take over the republic, had to seek help within Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany fighting in the meanwhile with Moroccan mercenaries. Long sequences of battles are shown, in the streets, roofs and countryside, showing how the fight was pursued meter by meter, heroically; "resist Spanish brothers, you are not alone!" and an intertitle explains how the Soviet Union, through their military advisors and the solidarity campaigns offered an invaluable contribution to the republican cause. After a sequence of images of a Soviet ship arriving to a Spanish port with aid, received by an enthusiastic crowd

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<sup>82</sup> In October 1934, the Astutians coal miners rose in an armed insurrection that managed to resist the military intervention for more than two weeks, and a Commune was established in the mountains. They were then brutally repressed and many thrown in jail.

holding posters of “Salud a los camaradas de la USSR”<sup>83</sup>, we see the communist leaders singing the *Internationale* and a voice-over stating that “Spanish communist are mobilizing the people of Madrid” while we see images of civilians enlisting in the Fifth Regiment<sup>84</sup>, accompanied by the Fifth Regiment song in Spanish. The focus is then centered in the arrival of the International Brigades, received by Andre Marty<sup>85</sup> and greeted by the population of Barcelona while they march, together with militia men and women of the UGT<sup>86</sup>, through the Catalan Arc of Triumph.

Shub then changes ground and we are introduced to Burgos, the capital of the Nationalist Spain where “reactionary forces are mobilizing against popular forces”. This scene is one of the most eloquent demonstrations of Shub’s ability in manipulating images coming from a completely different context. By re-appropriating images of the Fascist propaganda, Shub creates a dark and almost medieval scene of requetés<sup>87</sup>, falangists<sup>88</sup>, friars and Catholic militiamen slowly marching with their dark and heavy clothes, militia on their knees praying and being blessed by a Bishop while the commentary states that “the Church fights for Franco. These men come from the richest families of landowners”, all musically accompanied by archaic *Zarabandas*<sup>89</sup>. By this sequence Shub depicts the enemy as a dark reactionary force, highlighting the Catholic Church intervention almost to a mystic level.

The context changes again and we are shown the most dramatic scenes of the bombings of Madrid, a sequence of Karmen’s footage of people running and seeking refugee while the city is heavily bombed, in a fast montage of chaos and despair, “we

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<sup>83</sup> Greetings to the Soviet comrades.

<sup>84</sup> A Communist unit of the Popular Army, lead by Enrique Lister.

<sup>85</sup> Member of the French Communist Party, Secretary of the Comintern and Chief Organizer of the International Brigades in Albacete.

<sup>86</sup> Unión General de Trabajadores – Socialist trade union.

<sup>87</sup> Monarquic militia

<sup>88</sup> Members of the Spanish Fascist political party, Falange Española, that had an armed branch and became an important part of the fascist militia fighting on the side of Franco.

<sup>89</sup> Spanish medieval folk songs and dances.

must not forget these images” the narrator says, while scared faces in close-ups of people in the metro station, mainly women and children are shown. This long sequence of the bombings of Madrid, followed by many images of dead children with their mothers, children being pulled out from the ruins, and blood in the street is reinforced by a sad and tragic music. The narrator urges that “these crimes cannot be forgiven”, “fury and revenge” is, according to the narrative, the common feeling that makes all of the population work together in the defense of the capital and of their own defenseless citizens.

Population building barricades, children helping in the construction of trenches, and Dolores Ibárruri and José Díaz with a shovel digging the ground prepares the viewer to the republican counter attack and marks the preeminence of the communist role in the defense of the Republic. Images of the battle of Madrid’s University City are shown, where the Popular Army, the Fifth Regiment and the anarchists, with the help of the International Brigades held the rebels’ advance, in what is called the “miracle of Madrid”, since no one expected a victorious turn out. It was during this battle that the famous phrase “No Pasarán!”<sup>90</sup> and “Madrid será la tumba del fascismo”<sup>91</sup> were born. Images of Italian fascist troops and Moroccan mercenaries imprisoned by the republicans are accompanied by the statement that “these are the men that Fascism was launching against the European civilization”, arguing that what was at stake in this civil war was not only the Spanish republic but democratic values and the entire European civilization that fascism was threatening to destroy.

After an escalating rhythm, the sequences slow down and we return to the idyllic countryside, relating the work of the farmers with the front line, they work in order to provide food to the front, where we see “the best leaders of the Popular Army: Lister

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<sup>90</sup> “They shall not pass”

<sup>91</sup> “Madrid will be the grave of fascism”

and Máte Zalka<sup>92</sup>” who are capable of mobilizing civilians to join the fight. We see images of Lister giving a speech in the countryside and then images of farmers enlisting in the Fifth Regiment. Also children are mobilized, “they want to follow the example of their parents”, and we see children of 13, 14 years old being trained, pointing guns and learning how to fire. Women working in factories are seen confident and smiling as portrayed through Karmen’s camera.

There is no sign of the political chaos or the unstoppable advance of the rebel troops. Only the consolidation of the front line and a heroic population defending itself are seen, fighting back and working together mobilized by the communist leaders, with the only aim of winning the war.

The position of the non-intervention committee was interpreted as a betrayal towards the Spanish republic, whereas the Fascist and Nazi intervention was ignored. A multiform betrayal, from western democracies, Trotskyites, members of the Fifth Column<sup>93</sup> and some elements of the Spanish republican government<sup>94</sup> provides evidence for the adverse turnout of the republic.

The film does not end with the defeat, on the contrary, it depicts a heroic resistance of a republic that was fighting with its own means produced and bought during the war, without mentioning that the main warfare supplier was the Soviet Union

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<sup>92</sup> Máte Zalka whose real name was Béla Frankl was a Hungarian military man and writer that during the First World War joined the Bolsheviks and was awarded the Soviet nationality. He was sent to Spain to lead the 12<sup>th</sup> International Brigade under the pseudonym General Lukács. He died in the front of Aragon and was portrayed as a hero who died fighting fascism and defending the Spanish Republic, while the other Generals in the same situation fell in disgrace and were killed or imprisoned in their return to the Soviet Union.

<sup>93</sup> The Fifth Column is an expression used by the rebel General Mola who stated that some saboteurs where infiltrated in the Popular Army in order to support the nationalist’s victory through espionage and boycott. The existence of this Fifth Column was never proved, but it did manage to threaten the unity of the Popular Army and it was an obsession especially within the communist discourse.

<sup>94</sup> According to *Ispanija*’s argument, the main traitor of the Spanish republic was General Miaja and Casado, who at the end of the war tried to agree an armistice with Franco, who denied agreeing upon and pursued his war until the fall of Madrid.

and that the republic did not have the means to produce material in order to win this war.

Towards the end of the film, there is an optimistic view of the events, with the republican air planes shooting down Fascist planes with effusive comments like “this one is for Madrid!”, and as an army not only defending but also attacking the rebels and winning victories, such as the Ebro battle and the conquer of Teruel, both victorious ones, only until the rebels take back both the village and the other side of the Ebro river.

Karmen’s image of a brigadist erasing the “Hitler” sign from a wall is shown, as well as Dolores Ibárruri visiting the troops in the front and giving an optimistic speech. An intertitle argues that “in the direct confrontation the Fascist didn’t manage to defeat the republicans, it wanted to conquer the republic through hunger”. This argument wants to imply that the rebels were pursuing a blockade and that they were letting the people starve, and that this was a cause of defeat and loss of territory, not the strong difference of military power.

The last month of fighting is shown as even more stoic; “it is better to die than to live humiliated”, showing images of villages completely destroyed, without any wall standing, as if the republicans resisted until the last moment, the last man. Tragic images of the exodus towards the French border, of women, children, elders and wounded, an appeal for the opening of the borders answered with silence, juxtaposed with images of destruction gives us the sense that Spain was abandoned by all but the Soviet Union, that evacuated 15.000 children, 3.000 of them to the USSR. We see the striking images shot by Karmen of the evacuation of the Basque children, crying and leaving their homeland and their family condemned to face the war, with a few belonging walking alone towards the huge ship.

The succession of betrayals continues, this time with the unkept promise that the Italian and German troops would be withdrawn if the International Brigades would as well. The republicans kept their promise and the International Brigades bid farewell in a big parade in Barcelona. Mussolini lied and the population was left alone fighting.

The film ends with accusations of conspiracy and traitors that opened the doors of Madrid to Franco. The population of Catalonia, a betrayed region, escapes from Franco's troops while "La Pasionaria" is seen speaking directly to the camera affirming that she and the people of Madrid will wait for the ultimate fascist attack, and the voice-over ends the film by stating that

the Spanish people will not surrender to colonialism and fascism, it will resist. It had weapons and fought back the enemy. These people will not be defeated. Even if traitors open the doors of Madrid to Franco, even if the best comrades were executed, Madrid will continue fighting day and night. The people will not surrender, will not kneel

With an image of a republican flag the narrator continues "and that is how it went: the memory of the heroes that faced fascism and gave a lightening example of strength, courage and unity will remain alive forever".

The end is not clear; we are not told that Franco entered Madrid without any resistance, where a starving and tired population did not have the strength or the means to continue resisting, and being the only city left to conquer, it had no chances. Franco established a dictatorship, the republican government fled, and anyone who had connections with republican forces was victim of a brutal repression. Until the end, the images give the impression of victory as the population of Madrid marches with slogans saying "never!" and "No Pasarán!"; Shub, through a rhetoric narrative and montage techniques manages to transform the losers of this war into the moral winners.

The way events are presented gives the impression that this was a war between communism, mobilizing and unifying the Spanish population and fascism, as an external force, invading Spain and violently decimating the population by bombing their cities and letting them starve. Communism is portrayed as defending democracy and the values of the whole European civilization, as the ones who mobilized the population to fight fascism through a common effort and by enlisting in the communist Fifth Regiment. The internal causes of the war are practically ignored, only the country side dichotomy between workers and landowners is approached in an “oppressors vs. oppressed” perspective, and the political chaos, the fractures within the republican government are completely ignored, as well as the purges pursued in Barcelona in May 1937<sup>95</sup>.

Like Karmen’s newsreels, Shub’s *Ispanija* also contributes to the myth of Madrid as the bastion of the anti-fascist struggle. Being Madrid’s images of Karmen are the only ones available of the capital, we have the same perspective of an imperial and grandiose city, and the same feeling of a defenseless population being bombed indiscriminately of which the main victims would be woman and children. Shub gathers all of Karmen’s images of dead children that put together are even stronger.

The film also has references to the great Soviet cinema classics; the farmers of Galicia can be compared with the Ukrainian farmers of Dovjenko, the depiction of the monumental Madrid can be related of the grand city of Saint Petersburg in Eisenstein or Pudovkin’s movies and the Soviet ship arriving to the Spanish port is familiarly depicted as the Battleship Potemkin.

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<sup>95</sup> Barcelona and Aragon where controlled by anarchists and POUM – Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, a trotskist political party. With the excuse of taking the Telefonica building from the CNT – Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores, an anarchist trade union, the governmental troops tried to take over the building. The confrontations spread through the city for several days. The Government collapsed, the CNT was divided and the POUM illegalized. The government of Negrín, who followed Largo Caballero’s government had a stronger communist presence and was more affiliated to the Soviet political line.



Even if the film had sound, Shub used intertitles, in order to give more direct information, normally context or important information, put in an intertitle in order to keep the attention of the viewer without any visual distraction. The voice-over is clearly opinionated, triumphalist and subjective, giving its own vision of facts, interpreting the images. The music of Grigorii Popov and A. Reutmann is a crucial element of the film's dramatization: the revolutionary songs give the images a structure and a leitmotiv, and the melodies are in accordance with the rhythm of the montage. The music also underlines the emotional state of the subjects depicted and of the images shown. It helps to relate the Spanish images with the Soviet audience, and the Spanish revolutionary songs give them an exotic element.

The rhythm of the film is well-balanced, between a slow sequence of long shots of the countryside, and a rapid and rhythmic juxtaposition of images of people running and buildings being bombed. A good example of rhythmic montage is the visual translation of the escalation of the Spanish political events through a vertiginous car ride from Valencia to Madrid.

*Ispanija* is one of the most significant compilation films. It was with Esfir Shub that this genre consolidated, and in this film that we can recognize all the elements that constitute the compilation film; the montage of archival footage from different and ideologically opposed provenience, the re interpretation and “re-representation” of an historical event, and the manipulation of meaning through editing, voice-over, music and juxtaposition of images, as well as the use of cinema as a propaganda weapon aimed to a specific audience. This film would contribute strongly in the Soviet collective memory about the Spanish Civil War as well as set an example of how a compilation film is done and achieve its aim.

## JORIS IVENS: The Spanish Earth, Contemporary Historians Inc., USA, 1937

Joris Ivens (1898 - 1989) is one of the filmmakers with a longest career; he compiled his first film in 1911 when he was 13 years old and continued to make films until 1988 in more than twenty different countries.

He was influenced by the French surrealist *avant-garde* movement and by the Soviet fiction of the 1920s, embracing in the 1930s Socialist Realism. His first films were more focused on technique, poetic interpretation and abstraction; he pursued poetic documentaries such as *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929), then turning his interest to the possibility of social intervention through documentary. Together with Luis Buñuel, he was among the first to develop the Committed Documentary, a genre focused on social and human issues and the denunciation of oppression and injustice. For him, documentary filmmaking had to entail setting down a record of reality and organizing his observations in the light of his political involvement. Although he embraced the social cause in his work, he never abandoned the aesthetic concerns and his interest with pure form; Ivens subordinates his technique to the argument, but does that with strong expressiveness.

At the beginning of the 1930s he spent 2 years in the Soviet Union filming a documentary about the construction of the Magnitogorsk factories. He was deeply influenced both politically and artistically, embracing officially in 1934 Socialist Realism. He spent another couple of years in Europe, until he moved to the United States where he remained until 1946. In New York he was involved in the communist intelligentsia movements and organizations, connected to the III International and committed to the politics of Popular Fronts.

My interest in including Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* is focused on how it conveyed the representation of the war; the rhetorical use of images and text, building an argument and a personal point of view of the events as well as a skilful montage technique that reconstructed events linking cause and effect through disassociated images. It is clearly a Socialist Realist film influenced by Soviet fiction and non-fiction cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, and even if uses archival images<sup>96</sup>, I do not consider it a compilation film because the narrative is not constructed through the actual compilation of unedited footage from disperse provenience, but from his filmic material gathered during the four months that he spent in Spain. It is an ideologically committed documentary that shares with the compilation film genre the same purpose: propaganda and the construction of meaning through a rhetorical reconstruction and image juxtaposition.

Ivens can be considered at this time both as the West interpreter of Socialist Realism and a Soviet *avant-garde* nostalgic, combining elements from both movements such as the introduction of a positive exemplary hero, allegoric images of social transformation easily understandable "for the millions" with Dovschenko's pastoral lyricism, Pudovkin's romanticism and Vertov's kinetic metaphorical montage.

He was also an innovator, openly introducing the element of fictionalization of characters in the documentary; he called this device "personalization" which was intended to dramatize as well as humanize the depiction of the war through the appropriation of fictive codes of narrative. Ivens wanted to reach as much audience as possible, "for several reasons, it is important to personalize the documentary. We would never break into commercial distribution without it"<sup>97</sup> finding in this formula a perfect way of entering the commercial distribution and a broader audience. This formula

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<sup>96</sup> Of an Italian newsreel: image of the bombing seen from an airplane.

<sup>97</sup> Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), pp. 210 – 211

would be further elaborated in the World War II documentaries and beyond until the advent of Cinema Verité in the 1960s.

*The Spanish Earth* was produced by Frontier Films and financed by Contemporary Historians, Inc., an association formed by intellectuals like Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Archibald McLeish, Lilliam Hellmann, and Dorothy Parker among others. It had clear propaganda purposes: to influence the North American politics towards the republican cause and to gather funds to aid the loyalists<sup>98</sup>.

The initial plan was to make a compilation film through newsreel material plus footage gathered in Spain. Hemmingway was in charge of the script and Ivens arrived to the besieged republic in the beginning of 1937 with a complete synopsis of historical reconstruction starting from the departure of King Alfonso XIII<sup>99</sup>. But once in Spain, he realized that the current situation and the paths towards socialism that Spain was pursuing was far more interesting, and he developed a new plan: he needed to find a village somewhere between the road that connects Madrid to Valencia. At the time Ivens and his crew<sup>100</sup> arrived, the republican government had left the besieged capital and fled to Valencia, Madrid was constantly being attacked and this road was crucial in order to maintain contact between the government and the capital, and in order to provide food and other primary needs to Madrid.

He found a village, Fuentedueña, and the film develops in two different but interdependent settings, the village that was about to pursue an irrigation project in order to provide food for the capital, and Madrid, where the people on arms was fighting against Nazi and Fascist war machinery. For Ivens, it is in Fuentedueña that

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<sup>98</sup> The funds collected, 70.000\$, were destined to purchase 18 ambulances and send them to Spain.

<sup>99</sup> After the elections of 1931 that gave victory to the Republican Party which lead to the proclamation of the Spanish Republic in April 1931.

<sup>100</sup> Among them the cameraman John Ferno, a protégée of Ivens that later became a respectable film director.

lays the true cause of the Civil War: the fundamental clash between rich landowners and exploited workers.

The link between the village and the city was to be made by Julián, a young peasant soldier from the village fighting in Madrid's frontline. Julián is just a representative character, functioning as an identification figure for the audience, not overemphasized in his characterization. The end of the movie was supposed to be with Julián back in the trenches, but when they had to shoot these scenes, he had disappeared in the front, and all efforts to find him failed.

The urban/rural tasks and the civilian and military effort ought to represent the unity of the struggle, the common goal of defending the republic and contribute to the war effort. In Madrid the Popular Army was fighting a war for peace and progress, in Fuentedueña they were peacefully working for the war front. Food production was seen as essential to the defeat of Franco.

*The Spanish Earth* does not claim historical accuracy; it is an epic poem, a work of politically committed reportage that with great simplicity and palpable feelings depicts a people fighting a war machine, fighting against the enemy from outside and against their traditional oppressors.

The film starts with a romantic view of rural Spain, long shots of the landscape and Hemmingway's imposing voice:

This Spanish earth is dry and hard, and the faces of the men who work on that earth are hard and dry from the sun. This worthless land with water will yield much. For fifty years we've wanted to irrigate but they held us back. Now we will bring water to it to raise food for the defense of Madrid

Slow and peaceful images of the people going from home to work the land, their land; carefully studied angles and shot gives the viewer the sense of accompanying these men to build ditches, while the close ups, and the expressions filmed by Ivens give

a human face to the population of the village. They work for a common purpose, not only to provide food for themselves: “irrigating the waste land of the village will give ten times as much grain, as well as potatoes, wine and onions for Madrid,” narrates Hemmingway.

While seeing images of the population of Fuentedueña working the land, we hear music that slowly intertwines with sounds of gunfire, coming from the frontline: Madrid. The same way farmers were depicted, closely, and deeply humanized, are depicted the troops; according to the commentary, there is no acting, no staging since “men cannot act before the camera in the presence of death”. We see the population of Madrid, military and civilians, gathering all the material that can be used for the trenches, preparing to defend the capital, as well as seeing troops resting, shaving, eating and reading the newspaper; “When you are fighting to defend your country war as it lasts becomes an almost normal life”.

We are then driven to the battle scene, to the University City where the fighting is filmed close to the men, with a constant sound of gun fire and explosions; long silences and just images that visually tell the viewer how the battle is being fought. We see the enemy far away, in another building, fighting back, and Julián, “a boy from the village” writing a letter to his parents, announcing his visit.

After this battle scene we are introduced to the meeting held to unite all the militia into the new Popular Army, “the clenched fist of republican Spain”. In these scenes we are introduced to the communist leaders, Enrique Lister, José Díaz, and “the most famous woman in Spain”, Dolores Ibárruri, all giving speeches, about how they are fighting for the Spanish republic and for the government they had chosen. There is

no mention of their role in the communist party, and are simply introduced as soldiers, member of the parliament, and as the “wife of a poor miner in Asturias”<sup>101</sup>.

We go back to the front line where we can grasp the proximity of the enemy

living in the cellars of the ruined building are the enemy. They are Moors and Civil Guards. They are brave troops or they would not have held out after their position was hopeless. But they are professional soldiers fighting against the people on arms. Trying to impose the will of the military on the will of the people, and the people hate them, for, without their tenacity and the constant aid of Italy and Germany, the Spanish revolt would have ended six weeks after it began.

Through Hemmingway’s narrative, the film’s dichotomy of the war is evoked—the will of the people against the will of the military—people on arms against professional soldiers, oppressed against oppressors.

After the frontline, we see Madrid, heavily bombed, and soldiers rescuing works of art from the Duque de Alba’s palace, in contradiction with the images of the rebel propaganda that depicted the republicans as savages burning churches and destroying the cultural patrimony. There is interesting detail in these images; we see a soldier opening a book, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes, juxtaposed with an image of the statue of Don Quixote holding a red flag. A small detail that probably passed unnoticed by the more conservative North American audience.

Still in Madrid, we see images of the life in the besieged capital, people walking through bombed streets, calmly, long queues in front of a groceries stores, woman and children waiting in line. There is a dead body lying on the floor that almost passes unnoticed by the passers-by; while an ambulance comes to pick up the body and put it in a coffin, the narrator explains “this is a man who had nothing to do with war. A bookkeeper on his way to his office at eight o’clock in the morning. So now they take the bookkeeper away but not to his office or to his home”. It is quite a strong and

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<sup>101</sup> Evoking the 1934 miners uprising in Asturias

impressive sequence that reaches the viewer who can easily identify with the innocent victim: a simple man on his way to work.

Madrid as depicted by Ivens is a besieged city where civilians are suffering the casualties, and the victims are indiscriminate and innocent, but where the population keeps on living their lives. The camera films them at the eye level, giving the viewer the feeling of mingling with the people, contrasting with the way the countryside is depicted, with long and steady shots filmed with tripod.

Scenes of the evacuation follow. We see posters of the government appealing to the citizens to evacuate Madrid. These images are accompanied by a commentary in the first person; as if we were hearing what the people are thinking and saying “The government urges all civilians to evacuate Madrid. But where will we go? Where can we live? What can we do for a living? I won’t go, I’m too old”, keeping the viewer close to the events, to the feeling of despair. After the evacuation scenes, civilians enlisting in the army give a more optimistic continuum and minimize the drama.

“Meanwhile in Valencia” we see President Manuel Azaña cheered by a crowd and entering a packed room in order to give a speech. In this scene I found a discrepancy between the actual speech and the subtitles that translated it. Azaña focuses on the general fight against the rebels, on the fascist attack against the people and the surprise of the fascist with resistance, opposition and solidarity towards the capital, while the subtitles translate a text more suitable to the film’s argument “we the people of Spain obtained the land and the right to cultivate it by democratic elections but fascist landlords try to take our land away. Now we are forced to fight for the defense of the Spanish earth. Even in the smallest villages...” and the image smoothly passes from Azaña speaking, to Fuentedueña, where the population is preparing to build a pump in



order to bring water through the ditches into the dry fields, “our irrigation project must be completed in time for the new defense of Madrid”.

Julián arrives to the village in a highly staged sequence, we see him coming in the truck, and then walking to his home, where he is received by his mother, who embraces him. The meeting between father and son is filmed with different camera angles and plenty of close-ups of smiling faces, and embraces, a scene that would not had been possible to shoot in one take, without stopping and repetitions. We then see Julián training the boys of the village and those images are transported to images of civilians training in a quarter; “in Madrid a future shock battalion of bullfighters, football players and athletes is drilling”, in order to point out the adhesion of men of all backgrounds to the Popular Army, making at the same time the bond between the countryside and the capital, central to the balance of *The Spanish Earth*.

Images of troops going to the front line, after saying goodbye to relatives, “that sound the same in any language”, discreetly implies the presence of the International Brigades. Images of people running on the streets seeking refuge from the bombings are accompanied by Hemmingway’s commentary, “Death comes each morning to these people of the town, sent from the hills two miles away”, we hear a sound of a bomb falling and the camera turns towards the sky. Explosion; “The smell of death is acrid, high-explosive smoke and blasted granite”, while ambulances pass by and people walk by the damaged building. We see images of boys who “looks for bits of shell-fragments as they once gathered hailstone”, another bomb explodes and we see two dead children lying on the floor and a men with a bicycle passing by, indifferent. The commentary claims that that bomb came from the German artillery. We pass to images of a village; “before death came when you were old or sick. But now it comes to all this village. High in the sky and shining silver it comes to all who have no place to run no place to

hide”. The reconstruction of an air raid to a village and of the bombings of Madrid braids again the two settings, urban and rural, through death.

Death comes to the enemy side as the film shows a German plane shot down and corps of Italian troops. The battle comes closer to Fuentedueña, and the viewer is aware of the movement of the front line by constant graphic exhibition of a map of the region throughout the film, pointing out the capital and Fuentedueña, and the road that connects Madrid to Valencia, though never showing a full map of Spain.

The final climax of the film is the battle of Jarama, for the control of the bridge that crosses the Tagus River and connects the capital with Valencia, passing right through Fuentedueña. We see the governmental troops gathering in the front line, preparing for the battle, juxtaposed with images of the farmers finishing the irrigation project. While “troops are rushed from the North to the counterattack”, “the village works to bring the water”. The battle scene is very slow and expressive where the loneliness of the fight is further dramatized by Hemmingway’s words, “the slow, heavy-laden, undramatic movement forward. The men in echelon in columns of six. In the ultimate loneliness of what is known as contact. Where each man knows there is only himself and five other men, and before him all the great unknown”. We can sense the importance of this battle, since it is crucial to feed Madrid, and the victorious event is achieved thanks to the courage of the troops, “This is the moment that all the rest of war prepares for, when six men go forward into death to walk across a stretch of land and by their presence in it prove this earth is ours.”

The film ends with the inextricable connection of civilians and soldiers, village and capital, water<sup>102</sup> and revolution, through images of republican trucks crossing the bridge, and irrigation shots where we see the water spreading through the hard and dry

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<sup>102</sup> Water was a recurrent element in Joris Iven’s films

land. The last image is the one of an unknown soldier, pointing the rifle and Hemmingway last remark: “The men who never fought before, who were not trained in arms, who only wanted work and food, fight on”.

There is no hint of the tragic defeat that it’s about to come and the face of the unknown soldier embodies the film’s meaning: a man aware of the meaning of the fight, confidence tempered with solemnity. The final metaphoric montage of *The Spanish Earth* can be traced back directly to Dziga Vertov’s finale of *The Eleventh Year* where a similar metaphorical montage links land workers with military, water with revolution, as Ivens’s film, reflecting the willing of orchestrate through emotional and poetic means, popular understanding of and commitment to the political imperatives of the Spanish Civil War<sup>103</sup>.

According to Ivens, important events exist in small ones and it is in Fuentedueña that lays the true cause of the Civil War, the fundamental clash between rich landowners and exploited ones that gives a visible motivation for the struggle. Ivens does not claim objectivity; on the contrary, “on issues of life and death, democracy or fascism, the true artist cannot be objective”<sup>104</sup>

The goal of the film; recounting and denouncing the aggression combined with a profound poetic understanding of the calm courage of everyday life and the social transformation behind the lines is done through an interpretation of facts combined with aesthetic concerns, where he proves the ability of highlighting details without losing sight of the whole. His talent of using associations and the gentle change of tempo and settings connects a popular level of understanding with the maximum artistic rigor.

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<sup>103</sup> Kathleen Vernon, *The Spanish Civil War and the Visual Arts*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 16

<sup>104</sup> Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York, International Publishers, 1969), pp. 17

Simplicity, humanity and political opinion work together through the iconography of peace and war, represented by water, bread, blood and earth<sup>105</sup>.

The images of war and destruction, seen through the aerial bombings must be understood through the impact that such images had in a virgin audience of 1937 that had never seen before images of bombings of civilians. *The Spanish Earth* has three devastating sequences, synthetically edited and highly fictionalized scenes, constructed in the editing room, showing real bombs, killing real children, situated inside the narrative pathos for major rhetorical effect.

The climatic montage corresponds, in visual terms, to the basic argument, offering a final rhythmic manifesto of defiance and support; it is through montage that the two image-concepts of the film, military defense and social revolution are bonded. The editor, Helen Van Dongen, organized the material as it progressively arrived from Spain, in small thematic groups: Fuentedueña, Madrid, Jarama, bombings... and constructed small logical sequences. When she got the final script, she intensified the effects in order to strengthen the message<sup>106</sup>. A lightening example is the sequence of the bombings: she edited images of bombs, explosions and smoke followed by images of destruction and death, constructed with disperse material, in order to create a cause-effect sequence. Van Dongen tried to limit the music and the voice when the images conveyed the explanations, giving priority to visual against oral communication<sup>107</sup>.

The text and the voice over that accompanies the images are of Hemmingway; he wanted to be as apart as possible from the newsreel voice over, a distant and detached account of events, giving the narration in the first person, poeticizing the

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<sup>105</sup> Vernon, *The Spanish Civil War and the Visual Arts*, pp. 19

<sup>106</sup> Maria Antonia Paz and Julio Montero, *Creando la Realidad: El cine informativo 1895 – 1945*, (Barcelona, Ariel, 1999), pp. 149

<sup>107</sup> Paz, *Creando la Realidad*, pp. 150

struggle and the work of the peasants, giving more strength and familiarity to the argument.

With *The Spanish Earth*, Joris Ivens settled a framework of interpreting conflicts that would repeat thereafter<sup>108</sup>. The film showed a conflict between the Spanish people and their oppressors, like if there was no other political motivation, or there were no concrete political lines and factions within the republican side having independent initiatives. But he did not aim to explain, but to change the viewer's position towards the war and gain support.

His humanity and capability of depicting a population facing a fratricide war reached the aimed audience,

Not since *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, has such dramatic use been made of the human face. As face after face looks out from the screen the picture becomes a sort of portfolio of portraits of the human soul in the presence of disaster and distress. There are earnest faces of speakers meetings and in the village talking war, exhorting the defense. There are faces of old women moved from their homes in Madrid for safety's sake, staring at a bleak, uncertain future, faces in terror after a bombing, faces of men going into battle and faces of men who will never return from battle, faces full of grief and determination and fear.<sup>109</sup>

The film was premiered the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1937 in the White House, in presence of President Winston Churchill who stated that “this is a film that everybody should see.”<sup>110</sup> But even if the film had a considerable success and the blessing of the President of the USA, it did not manage to change the non-intervention policy towards the war nor provide more political influence to the American Popular Front.

<sup>108</sup> Paz, *Creando la Realidad*, pp. 150

<sup>109</sup> *Time* (Aug. 23, 1938), quoted in Vernon, *The Spanish Civil War and the visual arts*, pp. 18

<sup>110</sup> Román Gubern, *1936 – 1939 La Guerra de España en la pantalla: de la propaganda a la Historia*, (Madrid, Filmoteca Española, 1986), pp. 369

## CONCLUSION

With this dissertation I aimed to pursue an account on how Roman Karmen, Esfir Shub and Joris Ivens constructed a rhetorical representation of the Spanish Civil War. By contextualizing the three filmmakers within the realm of the Socialist Realist nonfiction cinema, I tried to understand how they conveyed the meaning ought to express.

In my opinion these filmmakers were innovators, each one of them in its own way; Karmen by its strong sensitivity to portray dramatic events as well as daily life, the ability of combining an indiscriminate depiction of a chaotic reality and incorporating the images in a specific discourse and by giving a unique testimony of the first European capital being bombed by modern warfare. Shub by consolidating the compilation film genre and demonstrating her strong ability to combine disperse footage into a coherent argument and be able to “re-represent” a defeated fight into a morally victorious struggle, setting an example and a framework for future compilation films. Finally Ivens, that established a new method of interpreting conflicts, appropriating fictional narrative processes, such as characterization and poetic discourse. He combines simplicity in his subjects with humanity in his depiction as well as a clear political opinion in a balanced juxtaposition of images and text. The concern with pure forms and aesthetic by bringing to the viewer abstract associations enclose his representation of conflicts with sensitivity and beauty.

Common elements in the analysis are the focus of the indiscriminate killings of civilians, mainly women and children, the protagonism of Madrid in the overall depiction, an idyllic image of the Spanish countryside and the predominance of the role of communism in the effort to win the war. Common is also the indifference towards

the internal political situation, the complexity of the reasons of the uprising and the military and diplomatic role of the Soviet Union.

The sequences showing the casualties of the rebels attack are build in a similar way throughout all the film analyzed. Predominance is given to the air raids in urban areas, a novelty for the viewers of the time. Highly manipulated sequences are constructed in the editing room; we normally see first a chaotic image of desperate individuals, running, hiding and looking scared to the sky, then airplanes flying above and explosions, followed by destruction, despair and dead children. These sequences are edited through rhythmic montage giving the feeling of chaos and confusion, and the final images of innocent mothers and children ought to shock the viewer and proportionate feelings of anger.

Commonly as well, are the images that follow the attacks and the killings: the republic defending itself by the common effort of the entire population that fights back with the means they have available. Images of despair are always balanced with images of hope.

Madrid plays a central role in the imagery of the Spanish conflict, thanks to the presence of Karmen and Ivens in the besieged capital, and Shub's work in the montage room; their focus on this particular front made of Madrid the symbol of the anti-fascist struggle and contributed to the construction of the myth of a people who fought back the Fascist and Nazi war machinery with rifles.

Outside Madrid, we are given a romantic image of the Spanish countryside, especially in *The Spanish Earth*. The depiction of the land and of the workers who cultivate the land is idyllic, slow, made with long shots and accompanied by melodic music or poetic commentaries. It is the agrarian question the both Shub and Ivens find the reason for the fascist uprising, the workers who want to cultivate the land, and the

retrograde landowners who do not want to give up their privileges. It is mainly through this “oppressed versus oppressors” perspective that the filmmakers represent the motivation of the war. The countryside also serves as a balance between the war front and the rear, symbolizing the common effort to win the struggle, as well as linking military defense with social revolution.

Another element that crosses the three representations is the capability to depict the human suffering; the terrified looks to the sky, the despair while seeking refuge, or the desolation in the faces of grieving mothers and wife’s in front of their dead relatives gives a striking element that cannot pass indifferent to the viewer, even 70 years after.

The aim of the films was that of support the communist discourse towards the Spanish Civil War for propaganda purposes. The role of the communists in the conflict is enhanced and emphasized especially when it comes to popular mobilization and military discipline. We almost only see the communist leaders; giving motivating speeches, digging trenches with the population, convincing them to enlist in the Fifth Regiment, facing the rebels with courage and defending democracy. Their role was particularly overemphasized in the defense of Madrid, a reading that still lasts in the overall understanding of Madrid’s “miracle”.

The complexities of the internal political struggle, the role of the socialist, anarchists, Trotskyites and other political faction was overlooked, as well as the other front lines. The rapid advance of the rebel troops and the defeat suffered by the loyalists is not illustrated, nor the magnitude of the Soviet military and diplomatic intervention.

Aesthetically, the newsreels and the films are remarkable; the number of close-ups, the selection of angles and framings, as well as the details and the preoccupation with form, combined with a highly elaborated montage gives these images a value that goes beyond historical significance.



It set forward an example and framework for several generations of filmmakers, not only during the Second World War, but also for the representation of the liberation movements in the colonies and for the revolutionary agitation in South America, among other subjects. The formula of “oppressed versus oppressors”, the romantic view of backwardness, the depiction of the human suffering as well as the capability of constructing cause/events sequences in the editing room and manipulate images giving them a new meaning had its first masters in those who worked the Spanish Civil War.

With the advent of Cinema Verité in the 1960s the unforgettable footage of the Spanish conflict was further re elaborated. Marcel Rossiff produced a well achieved compilation film, *Mourir à Madrid* (1963) where we can find the same elements and conveyed meanings that in the films produced during or right after the war. The rural/urban tie endorses the film narrative; we see the same images of despair and destruction, the stoic resistance of Madrid and the romantic depiction of a rural, backward country. Roman Karmen also returned to the subject, in 1967 compiling *Granada, Granada my Granada*<sup>111</sup>, this was the culmination of a frustrated wish that the filmmaker had of editing his own footage about Spain, since he was never satisfied with the final result of Shub’s *Ispanija*.

With this dissertation I aim to leave a door open for further investigations on representations of the Spanish Civil War through nonfiction cinema, adding to the current analysis other films and other possible interpretations.

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<sup>111</sup> During my research in the Spanish Filmoteca I was not able to see this film due to the fact that the negative was damaged and it was not possible to screen.

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