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Requested: 2009-10-07 / Received: 2010-02-10
Accepted: 2010-05-28 / Published: 2010-10-01

DOI:10.3916/C35-2010-02-07

Language and Collective Identity in Buñuel. Propaganda in the Film «España 1936»

Lenguaje e identidad colectiva en Buñuel. Propaganda en el filme «España 1936»

ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War occupies an important place in the European collective memory. The film language and depiction of that conflict provide an important platform from which to study certain features of the European cultural matrix. This paper examines propaganda films produced by the Republican government, especially those films produced under the supervision of Luis Buñuel, the Spanish surrealist filmmaker. At the start of the war, the Aragonese filmmaker returned to Paris following a summons by the Spanish Foreign Ministry to collaborate with the Spanish embassy in Paris in counterespionage and propaganda. Buñuel's main task was to gather, organize and edit pro-Republican footage. Unlike films made for viewing in Spain, the Paris-produced propaganda films were aimed at audiences in Europe with the objective of changing the doctrine of non-intervention in the conflict. They are also characterized by Buñuel's theories and conception of documentary film-making, in which reflection and the psychological resources that motivate action or move an individual conscience predominate. This paper describes and analyses the film language and practice of that era, in particular the unique and emblematic film «España 1936» (1937).

RESUMEN

En la memoria colectiva de los europeos, la Guerra Civil española ocupa un lugar destacado. El lenguaje cinematográfico y la representación fílmica de esa contienda forman un ámbito relevante en el que estudiar algunos rasgos de la matriz cultural europea. El presente trabajo selecciona parte de la producción fílmica de propaganda del gobierno republicano, en concreto los filmes de montaje supervisados por Luis Buñuel. Al inicio de la contienda el cineasta aragonés vuelve a París siguiendo las indicaciones del Ministerio español de Asuntos Exteriores para colaborar, en la embajada española en la capital francesa, en diversas labores de contraespionaje y propaganda. Entre ellas y principalmente, Buñuel se ocupa de reunir, organizar y montar diverso material fílmico prorrepblicano. A diferencia de otras producciones proyectadas en España, los filmes parisinos de propaganda republicana se caracterizaron, en términos generales, por estar dirigidas a públicos de distintos países europeos con el objetivo de romper la doctrina de no intervención en el conflicto y se inscriben dentro de las teorías y concepción de Buñuel sobre el documentalismo filmado, donde primaba lo reflexivo y los recursos psicológicos que motivaran a la acción o a la toma de conciencia individual. El presente texto se ocupa, en ese contexto, de la descripción y el análisis del lenguaje y las prácticas fílmicas en esos años. De todas ellas, el filme «España, 1936» (1937), es a la vez un ejemplo emblemático y singular.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Documentary film, propaganda, film montage, film language, European history.
Cine documental, propaganda, montaje cinematográfico, lenguaje fílmico, historia de Europa.

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1. Introduction

In the construction of the European identity and the awareness of belonging to a common geographical and cultural space, the wars waged across Europe in the last century helped spread the idea that the countries of the Old Continent could no longer remain isolated from events in neighbouring states. The Spanish civil war is the first significant conflict that entered the consciousness of all Europe. Far from being just a national confrontation, it came to reflect the antagonistic conceptions of the same idea of European civilization: totalitarianism and democracy, idealism and social experimentation, internationalization and non-intervention, which overlapped in all their complexity in the Spanish conflict. The media's representation of the war, especially in photography, radio broadcasts and film, led to a constant impulse and renewal of styles, as well as the use of propaganda techniques that were tried out and transmitted across the world. Film-making developed as a result of innovations in form and language, which all sides used to further their cause during the war by creating myths and social imagery (Zunzunegui-Díez, 2007: 53). We will examine the documentary and propaganda output of the Germans and Italians in support of the military uprising, the prolific output of Soviet cameramen, the independent British perspective and the North American viewpoint as stated by New York intellectuals.

2. Material and methods

The first aim of this paper is to discuss the Republican propaganda films produced by the Spanish embassy in Paris under the supervision of Luis Buñuel. These are unique and differ from the rest of the propaganda broadcast by the Republic. We analyse their form and language, and the values transmitted with regard to their intended audience across Europe, in particular the French, through whom these films on the Spanish civil war entered the European collective memory. Of equal importance is Buñuel's theoretical conception of documentary cinema in these films, and the hybridization with the traditions of Soviet cinematic propaganda and the North American documentary schools of the 1930s. We will refer to authors such as Gubern (1986), Crussells (2003), Kowalsky (2003), Herrera (2006) and Sánchez-Biosca (2007) among others who have studied the propaganda films of the Spanish civil war. We will also examine the principles of film narrative in Gómez-Tarín (2007: 76). The analysis in this paper focuses on two aspects: a selection of films produced by the Spanish embassy in Paris with an emphasis on European audiences; Buñuel's

role in producing these films, and an analysis of film language in «España 1936». This film is important for understanding the innovation of film language and the crossbred style of the structure of propaganda. Other factors also underline its importance: its objective to move French public opinion, the call for help to the Republic and its production as part of Buñuel's work at the Spanish embassy in Paris. This paper analyses the structure, planning and montage of «España 1936» as well as the film's objectives as they emerged during its making. It also describes the process of production and editing as part of Buñuel's film-making in Paris during the war, and the influence of other documentary makers on the film.

3. Results

The Republic's propaganda film output was prolific during the civil war despite an uncertain start: in 1936, propaganda was the responsibility of the Propaganda Section of the Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts; a year later it was transferred to the new Ministry of Propaganda when the government relocated to Valencia; in May 1937, the government created the Undersecretariat for Propaganda, as part of the Ministry of State, which produced the bulk of the Republic's propaganda films. Amid the administrative chaos of wartime this department attempted to bring all production of propaganda films under its control, while Buñuel's film workshop in Paris remained largely independent. In contrast to the films produced for Spain, the Republican propaganda films coming out of Paris were adapted for export, with the aim of presenting the Republic's claim to legitimacy in a balanced and objective way. These films also reflect Buñuel's theories and ideas on documentary making, which not only showed the tragic consequences of war but also projected the strength of staying alive. As supervisor, he steered clear of fervid revolutionary sloganeering such as socio-economic justifications, and his stamp can be seen in many descriptive shots that are serene but also psychologically charged to move the spectator to action or stir the conscience. The documentary style emerging from Buñuel's workshop in Paris differed from the work produced by the propaganda section of the Ministry of State in Spain. The latter are films of three or four minutes' duration that rely heavily on effects. They are formally creative and aim for maximum impact by using montage and collage. These short film reports were meant for projection at cinemas across the Republican zone, and their structure and content follow the Soviet canon on agitation and propaganda (Gubern, 1995: 172).

Buñuel was in Madrid when civil war broke out in mid-1936, and his attitude towards the resulting popular disturbances was ambivalent. On the one hand, he was carried along by the emotion surrounding the outbreak of war: the propositions for the breakdown of the social order that he had advocated, first in Surrealism and later in Communism, were materializing before his eyes. But he was soon shocked by the excesses. At the end of September 1936, he was summoned by Minister Álvarez del Vayo to Geneva, from where he was to travel to Paris to work at the Spanish embassy under ambassador Luis Araquistain (Pérez and Colina, 1933: 41). He was to take charge of Republican film propaganda aimed at the French, although his other tasks at the embassy have remained a mystery. Buñuel already knew several filmmakers in Paris through the French director Jean Grémillon and Juan Piqueras, who had edited the left-wing film journal *Nuestro Cinema* (París, 1932-35) and procured films for Buñuel to show in Madrid, at the Cine club Proa-Filmófono, a cinema forum for leftist intellectuals and secular liberals. Thanks to Piqueras, films like *Entr'acte* by René Clair, *La chienne* by Renoir and Eisenstein's *October* were first shown in Spain.

For their part, the Soviet cameramen Roman Karmén and Boris Makaseiev arrived in Spain on August 23, 1936 to document the conflict as part of the Soviet Union's strategic interest in the outcome of the war and the Popular Front strategies of the Komintern. They produced considerable material that was put to many different uses: firstly, as news reports, together with scripts written by Koltzov, for *Events in Spain*, which was shown in cinemas across the Soviet Union between September 1936 and July 1937. The work of Karmén and Makaseiev was extensive, varied and paid great attention to detail, going beyond propaganda to examine daily life in wartime and the human emotions aroused by the conflict. Their work was also used to make other propaganda material. Footage appeared in the propaganda documentary *Ispanija* by Esfir Shub, recounting the ardour of battle in epic and heroic terms when it appeared in October 1939. Their material was also put to use, in a more balanced

and objective way, in medium-length films made under Buñuel's supervision and, as Sánchez-Biosca (2007: 77) notes, the Soviet cameramen shot some of the most striking images that exist of the Republican defence of Madrid. Of all the Republican propaganda films coming out of Paris, one of the most interesting is «España al día: España 1936» (Espagne 1937 in France). In Spain, the film was called «España 1936» or «Madrid 36», as most of the film action takes place in the capital. It was also named «España leal en armas», a title used by Ado Kyrrou in one of the first Buñuel biographies in 1962.

Another of Buñuel's tasks during his exile in Paris, besides his propaganda and agitation work (Buñuel, 1982: 158), was the distribution of film propaganda

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and assistance and support for film production inside Spain. He went several times to the border to deliver equipment to the team led by Sobrevila, who was filming «La división perdida», or to hand over films by Malraux (*Sierra de Teruel*) or Joris Ivens (*The Spanish Earth*). The Republican government provided Buñuel with considerable film-making resources, and had recruited directors and intellectuals to the Republican cause, such as Ivens, Ernest Hemingway and Norman McLaren among others.

The importance of the films made at Buñuel's workshop in Paris also lies in how the montage, archive or compilation films were created. Although difficult to catalogue (Reisz, 1960: 174), the films are a type of non-fiction that mixes and orders archive footage or film made especially for a past or present event

in order to construct new meaning. For some authors, this intellectual task of film-making must entail a metamorphosis, adding quality to the final artistic product (Koningsberg, 1987: 60), while others see it as a historical documentary style (Bordwell and Thompson, 1979: 17) used in certain eras, such as in the wartime or ideological propaganda of the Spanish civil war or World War II, or the most Existentialist and politicized cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Of course there are similarities between these films and techniques of propagandist collage and photomontage, one of whose most active practitioners during the civil war was

Quintín» el amargao. This is a Buñuel who is regulatory, pedagogical but simultaneously heretical (Reia-Baptista, 1995: 108).

Many of these films were shown at venues run by the then powerful French Communist party, as well as being presented at the Spanish pavilion of the International Exposition in Paris in 1937 in a film cycle produced by Buñuel. But «España 1936» is without doubt a work that is unique for its collective collaboration: Buñuel's ideas on documentary making merge with techniques of Soviet agitprop, and acknowledge US documentary makers and intellectuals, contributions from a nucleus of New York intellectuals such as John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Leo Hurwitz, Paul Strand, among others, within the context of the New Deal; ideals that are more often romantic than a reflection of effective social commitment. All of these factors are assembled within the context of the civil war in which ideologies and utopias clash at international level. Significant exceptions were the traditionally active documentary makers of Great Britain (celebrated directors like Paul Rotha or John Grierson), who showed little interest in the Spanish civil war, as Román Gubern noted (1986: 60). The films made by North American directors and the propaganda films from the

These are montage films made with archive footage, material from various sources some of which are often far removed from the propaganda films of the time. In the audience's eyes, this strengthens the supposed objectivity and credibility of the theses proposed by the discourse, which are the legitimacy and social justice that the Republican government represents, the dignity of its supporters and the need to come to its aid in the conflict. The photography has great variety in style, with close-ups of objects and faces that enhance the symbolism and identification of the spectator with the protagonists, together with emotive micro-fictional tales and a formalist propaganda and strong dialectic montage.

Josep Renau, who had already used images of the film *Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan* (1933) in the magazine «Nueva Cultura» (1935: 14). Here any material, original or borrowed, justifies the ends of sensitizing international public opinion to the illegitimacy of the military uprising, the just cause of the Republican government and fomenting a change in the non-intervention policy that was penalizing the Republican government.

This policy is not in opposition to Buñuel's artistic impulse: in his creative phase just prior to working in Paris as a member of the Filmófono production company, when he propositioned Urgoiti to produce several commercial films, becoming a Hollywood-style executive producer in 1935-36, surrounded by a team of collaborators, controlling the financial as well as creative aspects of films like «Centinela alerta» or «Don

Spanish embassy in Paris differ in their treatment but share a similar strategy of raising awareness among North American and French public opinion to lift the arms embargo against the Republic. A typical example is «The Spanish Earth» (1937) which originated in the Contemporary Historians group and was directed by Joris Ivens with cameraman John Ferno. It deals not only with the need to redistribute land but also with the defence of Madrid, with a narrative, dramatic and fictional documentary technique that lacks balance but is very passionate. «España 1936» is a more balanced work.

Produced by Cine-Liberté, the production company linked to the French Communist party, it is a medium-length film whose images are taken, as mentioned before, from many and various sources: part of

the material had already been filmed by Karmén, and other images came from Manuel Villegas and other anonymous Spanish cameramen. The film was edited by Le Chanois, and the commentary read by Gaston Modot, the lead actor in Buñuel's surrealist film «L'âge d'or» (1930). The text narrated by Modot was written by Buñuel and Pierre Unik, whom Buñuel had worked with on «Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan». Buñuel also chose the film score, which has a substantial symbolic effect on the work, including excerpts from Beethoven's 7th and 8th symphonies. Buñuel provided the production company with audiovisual material and funding to make the film; he also supervised the final product (Aranda, 1969: 181). At this point the film structure was a selection of documentaries from which he chose a set of images in line with the film's didactic tone, explicative and apparently neutral and objective with the aim of gaining international support for the Republic. There are five clearly visible strands running through the film, of varying importance and duration. A synthetic description of them would be the fall of the monarchy and the first reforms, the military uprising and the war, the battle of Irún, action inside and outside the Republic and the Madrid front. Each differs in length and structure in accordance with the contrasting film material and documentary sources used. The final section is the longest, hence the film was also called «Madrid 1936», and includes a preamble that establishes analogies between the Madrid front and Verdún to motivate French intervention in Spain. It also contains a general epilogue as a final reflection on the entire film, with highly symbolic images relating to the idiocy of war and the solitude of the human condition. The conclusion is quite shocking and contradictory in that there are several spoken messages during its exposition that deviate from the film's objectives of Soviet-style propaganda, the call to the French to intervene, the Republic's reforms and social achievements, in order to draw the audience onto a more humanistic and reflective terrain.

The first part of the film uses techniques more closely related to reportage or film newsreels than to the documentary structure of the great North American or British documentary makers. In effect, the first part feels like a collage that starts off in a very neutral tone acquiring a more propagandistic cast as it develops. It mixes the image of a monarchical statue which, as the camera turns appears upside down, with others depicting Republic reforms, such as reform of the Army and agrarian reform after the French model, and election posters, maps, etc. These printed documents have a demonstrative value that establishes the credibility in

the eyes of the audience of what is about to unfold. Throughout the film the tone is calm, restrained, with the occasional exception, and highly didactic when relating the events of the war, in particular in the initial images that describe the causes of the war starting with the downfall of the monarchical regime. The formal resources of Soviet avant-garde cinema and the advances in montage from Eisenstein are also visible in the film. Shots charged with symbolism emerge now and then to break the somewhat monotonous tone. An equestrian statue representing monarchy is turned on its head to symbolize the successes of the Second Republic: education, reform of the Army, the Statute of Catalonia, elections and the increasing participation of women in public life. The film avoids fervid revolutionary causes or slogans and visually emphasises the illegality of the military uprising, using the outbreak of war and the figure of Franco and other military mutineers as counterpoint. Headlines (July 17, 1936) and maps recur, and their function is both informative and reinforces the credibility of the narrative.

In terms of its documentary style, the film makes a successful counterpoint between the more obvious Soviet agitprop, together with the symbolism and avant-garde montage of directors like Eisenstein, and a particular psychological description and poetic reading that appears to come from Buñuel's own documentary conceptions. The film's link to «Battleship Potemkin» (1925) is clear from Buñuel's own admission that the Republican government charged him in August 1936 with the making of a propaganda film in the style of Eisenstein's masterpiece, but the assignment was unrealistic: financial and technical difficulties meant it was impossible to shoot or even stage the film in the timescale required. Buñuel also believed Spanish films on the war should simply record events in all their harsh reality, and distance themselves from the epic and myth-making (Obermann, 1937). He settled on documentary realism, which by no means excluded raising individual awareness, poetry and expressive symbolism. In addition, he had a method and production routines that had to adapt to the context and immediacy of the serious events unfolding in the war, to overcome technical problems and lack of funds, to use and reuse materials from many different sources, making the most of all the resources of Realist films but which were not short of formal expressive qualities: symbolic or poetic shots, short narrations to intensify the commentary, the individualization of feelings against those of the masses and the collective, camera angles or movements to elicit a certain effect, etc.

The second section of the film narrates the deve-

development of the military uprising and its consequences. It indicates the zones controlled by the two sides and shows civilian life in both. Then there are images showing Franco's forces, the Falange, the regular Army and the Moroccan troops alongside the mobilization of the population in defence of the Republic. The first effects of the war are now apparent, and the images convey not some distant conflict but general views of buildings in ruins followed by still images and close-ups of windows and homes: this is a war that is close and familiar. Ideological extremes are accentuated in the polarization of the visual representation of the combatants of both sides: Franco's Spain is always shown as a rigid military organization that also characterises civil life; there is a contrast between shots of large bustling Republican crowds and the martial rigidity of Franco's civil society; images of the Republican side show the warm, human, spontaneous enthusiasm of the multitudes who support the Republic, the organization of the people's army with eager fighters joining up, passion for the fight for a just cause, and a sense of responsibility and common effort which is reinforced by the film score. Many of the images and their sequencing are influenced by Soviet agitprop techniques.

The next section contains one of the first battles fought, which was significant for the techniques in warfare used by Franco. It shows the siege and taking of Irún by Franco's troops and the aftermath. The battle of Irún informs international public opinion that the conflict is one-sided in terms of troop numbers and material. It depicts the Nazi war machine at work in the Basque Country and the terrible consequences of the fall of Irún. Without directly stating the fact, this imbalance in forces is a metaphoric call for military aid for the Republic to allow it a fighting chance. The visual strength of the image of the city in flames at night, people filing into exile or the French trains that have to return to Hendaye dramatically portray these consequences. As the film progresses highly symbolic elements appear in greater number, reinforced by the film's construction: the destruction of the city and subsequent repression, and the first exiles. The dramatic resources are numerous: civilians fleeing bombardment, explosions, people looking skywards warning of an aerial bombing, destruction of buildings and fires. The commentary ceases and all that is heard is an ambient diegetic sound, of flames, explosions or the silence of people tramping into exile. The symbolism makes the viewer stop and think, alternating with an anti-fiction and non-formal realism that Buñuel was advocating at the time as a guarantee of truth in the

documentary. The elements of agitation and motivation for French intervention are apparent in the reconstruction of executions by firing squads and political repression. The death of two French journalists is a key resource in the film's objective of breaking the Western democracies' non-intervention policy.

A fourth section of the film focuses on legitimacy and the just actions, which are balanced and not fervently revolutionary, taken to safeguard the people and the government of the Spanish Republic. The film again resorts to a graph, the didactic intent is always present, that shows the political parties that backed the Republic and the government of the Socialist Largo Caballero. It was important for international public opinion to see that civilian life under the Republic was normal, with no hint of revolutionary disturbance or unrest. The daily life we see is thus peaceful, orderly and quite pleasant: farmers at work, uninterrupted public transport and communications, children at school, the training of the people's army. It is a life of progress and freedom that the war threatens to destroy. The formal and dramatic treatment is similar to that in documentaries like «The Spanish Earth» which depicts both the redistribution of land through agrarian reform and the defence of Madrid, embellishing the film with small fictional dramatizations. While the previous section showed how the victory of the insurrectionists was due to organization and military equipment supplied from abroad, this section sees the Republic getting organized, alone but dignified. It portrays daily life in the shops and bustling street markets alongside the organization of industry, law enforcement and the army, which comes together out of sheer enthusiasm to defend freedom.

From the cinematographic perspective, «España 1936» is very interesting as a compendium, an amalgam of techniques and documentary resources that leftist French and North Americans film directors were experimenting with at the time, together with the formal montage of Eisenstein and the more obvious and banal techniques of Soviet agitprop. Furthermore, «The Spanish Earth» is a kind of trial run for the documentary cinema of Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz in their film «Native Land» (1942). The film was also used to collect funds in support of the Republic (Sánchez-Biosca, 2007: 79). «España 1936» is also indebted to a French Communist propaganda film called «La vie est à nous» (1936), with its shots of Hitler and Mussolini, and its images of German and Italian military hardware and manoeuvres.

The fifth and final section of «España 1936» describes the frontline defence of Madrid. It starts with a

map depicting a pincer movement closing in on Madrid. Then we see a placard with the words «No Pasarán», and images of civilians and Republican politicians. The French audience is warned that Madrid is about to become another Verdún: the capital will resist, with self-sacrifice and faith in victory but there is no hint of the epic. The film score enhances the monstrous reality of the daily lives of the citizens and their defencelessness by using the sounds of sirens, ambulances and explosions. As a counterpoint, silence is also deployed to dramatic effect in the bombing sequences; buildings in flames, bomb craters and buildings collapsing, the bodies of women and children abandoned in rooms full of coffins.

The long description of the Madrid front and its struggle is where «España 1936» or «España leal en armas» reveals its greatest expressive and discursive potency. It is also where Buñuel's visual references to his previous films are most abundant. As in «Las Hurdes», tierra sin pan, the highly contrasted black and white photography transmits a strong sense of drama with close-ups that enhance the familiarity and identification of the spectator with human suffering. Several formalist techniques are also used to add considerable expressive value, such as panning shots and cross fading to encourage the spectator to think, along with the dynamics of contrast and shot composition, and skewed and extreme camera angles.

This section of the film centred on Madrid is pervaded with a certain poetic realism and, quite often, with extreme pessimism which naturally sits awkwardly with the Soviet agitprop reportage. There are yet more resources at work to convey authenticity, such as milestones, placards in Madrid and the frontline at the Casa del Campo, the park on Madrid's outskirts. Another element that injects dynamism and reality are the short fictional tales that heighten the film's dramatic feel, for example when some parents visit their son who is fighting on the same front. The organization of life in Republican Madrid and the defence of the capital are seen in terms of full civilian cooperation, a collective effort. Even children play their part. Childhood is a recurrent theme in the film, amply reflected in images of children at school and as active defenders of the Republic. Nothing seems to be left to chance: artistic treasures are removed for safekeeping;

underground stations are used as air-raid shelters. This barrage of positive activity is tinged with tragic melancholy, and death is always nearby. There are no traces of heroism in the struggle: suffering and death are close at hand; on film and in reality they gradually become the touchstone and main theme of this section of the film, to the point where dead bodies start to appear on screen alone and abandoned. Here Buñuel constructs a kind of poetry of suffering, as he had done in *Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan*. These images break from the context (the battle for Madrid) to stand alone as reasons for reflection on the human condition. The film ends by addressing the audience in more agitprop terms. The person filmed in close-up standing alone in contemplation, or the absurdness of barbed wired wrapped around wasteland make for a poetic statement on the human condition and the horrors of war. The commentary closes with the question: «When

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will this monstrous war end?» There are no heroic rallying calls or enthusiasm on the part of combatants. As Kowalsky (2003: 184) rightly points out, many of the images shot by the Soviet cameramen contradict the sense and ideological orientation of the prevailing Soviet propaganda of the time, due to their attention to detail, representation of daily life and the absolute tragedy of individual men and women.

4. Discussion

The production of propaganda films during the Spanish civil war, their cinematographic language and slogans are important parts of the European identify. Not only for the enormity and consequences of the conflict but for the essentially didactic tone of the films we have analysed: the films produced at the Spanish embassy in Paris aimed at influencing European public opinion.

These are montage films made with archive footage, material from various sources some of which are often far removed from the propaganda films of the

time. In the audience's eyes, this strengthens the supposed objectivity and credibility of the theses proposed by the discourse, which are the legitimacy and social justice that the Republican government represents, the dignity of its supporters and the need to come to its aid in the conflict. The photography has great variety in style, with close-ups of objects and faces that enhance the symbolism and identification of the spectator with the protagonists, together with emotive micro-fictional tales and a formalist propaganda and strong dialectic montage.

In these works, the traditional concept of the authorship of a film made for a cause and with a persuasive intentionality is diminished. «España 1936» is a collective work but which bears the stamp of Luis Buñuel, as well as that of Soviet cameramen who provided footage, and even the cinematographic resources of French documentary makers and North American intellectuals. Although the film is inconsistent, it is important for the crossbreeding of and experimentation with film techniques at a time when documentary cinema practice and strategy were still in their infancy. Buñuel's mark on the film is its realism, in the defence of Madrid, although it was the sum of varied materials put together for the cause. Buñuel's business-like attitude towards the film comes from his experience immediately prior to his work in Paris, when he worked for the Filmófono production company (1935-36). He had to adapt to production guidelines in which time and money were tight. But the aesthetic, language and structure of «Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan» with its pessimism and contemplation, and where death becomes an independent theme in its own right, is also present.

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