The Russians are Coming! Alta Films and the Spanish Discovery of Soviet Films in the Late Cold War Years (1969-1993)

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The revamping of the Spanish distribution company Alta Films after the end of the Franco regime in 1975 challenges some of the prevailing narratives about film cultural circulation in the late decades of the Cold War. From a territory whose own existence was deeply intertwined in the geopolitics of that time (Franco's dictatorship built over decades its international position on its anticommunism), and which has been usually considered peripheral in film historical terms, Enrique González Macho's company was key in the Spanish discovery of those films which had been previously banned for more than four decades from the national screens. At the same time, Alta's transactions with Sovexportfilm also made possible the successful export of Spanish productions to the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

This essay looks at the evolution of these arrangements over a period of more than ten years which culminates in the establishment of Alsov, a company co-owned by Alta Films and Sovexportfilms. Although this enterprise ended abruptly, the activities of Alta Film brought together two countries usually quite distant in film historical terms and involved in a-synchronic processes of political transformation.

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> "In the eighties, did Spain and Spaniards know anything about the cinematography of the socialist countries? Little, very little. So starting to distribute films from the USSR and China could have been a very good and surprising move or just quite the opposite."
> (González Macho 2020, 181)

It is surely unusual that an independent film distribution company receives any attention on the pages of a leading national newspaper. And yet, in April 2013 a long article in the Spanish daily *El País* informed about the end of the 44-year-old Alta Films. The episode was interpreted in connection with the impact of the financial crisis of 2008 on the cultural consumption in general and on the attendance at movie theatres in particular, as well as on the definitive collapse of the DVD industry. But the article also focused on the company's historical relevance for the national film culture: the company that was now closing its doors had "allowed tens of thousands of film fans to access the films of the best Spanish, European, Latin American, Asian and American directors" (Hermoso 2013). Indeed, for decades, Alta had been central for the import and circulation of international independent movies in Spain, many of them also distributed through its own cinema chain, and, starting in 1992, for the production of national and international movies—among them titles by Ken Loach, Icíar Bollaín or Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Yáñez 2009). This text focuses on the first 25 years of the company (approximately from 1969 to 1993) and specially on the relations that it helped build between Spain and the USSR and, later, the Russian Federation. The case study will mainly focus on the Spanish perspective. Acting from the periphery of the Cold War, Alta challenges some of the prevailing narratives about film cultural circulation in those years (on the Soviet-Spanish relations in the late Cold War years, see Garrido Caballero 2019).

During the late 1970s and 1980s the company was central to forming the tastes of Spanish audiences towards both classic and contemporary Soviet films. The impact of this initiative was very relevant, as these titles had been previously banned for more than four decades from the national screens. The business networks built on this exchange also helped channel the export of Spanish titles to the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s and culminated, between 1990 and 1993, in the Spanish-Soviet joint management of one of Moscow's oldest cinemas, Khudozhestvenny, with the sole purpose of screening Spanish films.

This article will first reconstruct these strategies on industrial terms. The archive of the company and in-depth interviews with its director since 1984, Enrique González Macho, provide valuable material in this regard.[1] Focusing on the 1970s and 1980s, the history of Spanish film distribution is usually interpreted along the lines of gradual market concentration around American majors (already key players in the Spanish film industry since the 1940s) within a context of crisis of theatrical film consumption. This narrative also highlights the growing state intervention (towards rationalization) through a series of film policies usually known as the Miró Law (Meneses 2016) circulation and reception of contemporary Spanish cinema. The policies were considered an important step toward the political, economic and cultural integration in the European Community in

1 The three interviews took place on 26 February 2024, on 14 March 2025 and on 15 April 2025.

1986, which was the final goal for a country leaving behind its dictatorial past and becoming—as often stressed by contemporary voices—a *normal* (West European) democracy (Triana-Toribio 2016, 18–19). Against this (clearly insufficient) framework, the Alta case study questions this interpretation; this may be one of the reasons for it being ignored in more traditional histories of Spanish cinema (usually not interested in its industrial aspects; see Sánchez Noriega 2017).[2] The *transnational turn* of the last two decades has had a strong impact on the conceptualization of Spanish cinema,[3] and researchers today have a much better understanding of the *industrial nature* of Spanish cinema than years before. However, the combination of both areas still presents some blind spots when focusing on previous decades. Considering the 1970s and 1980s, existing research still tells the story of an atomized industry, with problems regarding its international projection and dependent on small companies.[4] It is precisely this lack of financial muscle that ends up being an obstacle also from a historiographical point of view, as it has usually led to only a partial reconstruction, based on secondary sources and memories.

It is thus rewarding to question this interpretative framework and to interpret Alta as an example of a model of alternative film distribution and exhibition that since the 1970s flourished in the Spanish film industry, often exploring new forms of international film relations. This is an example which is very national in its specifics,[5] but also very transnational in its interactions and parallels. It stands as a model which defied traditional ideas about international film circulation and forces us to rethink centre-periphery relations in a way that goes beyond this simplistic dichotomy. From a synchronic perspective, this case study also challenges the researcher to understand the history of Spanish cinema of that time by considering its different and deeply intertwined analytical layers (film culture, industry, policy interventions, international diplomacy, etc.) through an approach that reflects this complexity.

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2 In the chapter about the international presence of Spanish cinema in a more recent book dedicated to *Marca e Identidad del Cine Español* (García Fernández 2015), the authors do not mention Alta; distribution companies are also barely discussed. As usual, its focus is still on the festivals and policy support, with a special interest in Latin America and the US.

3 Nuria Triana-Toribio asked herself rhetorically in 2007 if everyone was "going 'transnational'" (Triana-Toribio 2007, 151). See in this regard the central transnational dimension of *A Companion to Spanish Cinema* (Labanyi and Pavlovic 2013).

4 On exhibition, see García Santamaría (2015, 174), who indicates how roughly in the same period covered by this study (1968–1994), the number of cinema screens went from 7,761 to 1,773. Distribution is still an important blind spot in film historical terms. This article will tackle it by relying mainly on the material provided by the annual reports prepared by the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography (later Spanish National Film Agency ICAA [Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales].

5 See Francisco Hoyos' *Cinecompany* (since 1984), Javier de Garcillán, which predates many of González Macho's interests through the combination of independent film distribution (Musidora, 1975) and exhibition (Alphaville Cinemas, 1977), and Andrés Vicente Gómez (with the distribution company Cineteca SA and later producer with Lolafilms). For the case of Musidora, with a focus on exhibition, see the recent work by Caballero Ruiz de Martín-Esteban (2024), especially its fifth chapter.

TRANSITIONAL TIMES

Alta was founded in 1969 by the painter Juan Miguel López Iglesias and his wife, the actress Yelena Samarina.[6] Its inception reflects however a longer history of exile and new beginnings that go back to the late 1930s. Born in 1927, López Iglesias was the son of Spanish republicans who had left the country to go to the USSR during the Spanish Civil War. He studied painting in Moscow and in 1956 returned to Spain, where he (still constantly under state surveillance) had some success as an artist.[7] By the late 1960s he had started a collaboration with the Sovexportfilm, the All-Union Association in charge of the exports of national films and purchasing of foreign ones. Thanks to his knowledge of the Russian language and of the mechanisms of the Soviet administration, López Iglesias and Samarina facilitated for instance the relations between Spanish and Soviet delegations at the 1968 and 1969 San Sebastian International Film Festival.

Alta edited books and imported Soviet films to Spain. According to the yearbooks provided by the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography,[8] its actual distribution activities started however in 1973.[9] In 1974, the company was already managing six titles. Alta increased the number of films distributed around 1977–1978 (11 and 20 titles respectively) and by the end of the decade it was already managing around 20–25 titles a year.

Except for the Dutch production *Cha Cha* (Herbert Curiel 1979), all of them were Soviet films. While there were some contemporary arthouse productions, such as *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky 1972), *Dersu Uzala* (Akira Kurosawa 1975) or *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven* (Emil Loteanu 1976), the bulk of those titles were the classics of Soviet cinema: *Mother* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926), *Arsenal* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko 1929), *Earth* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko 1930), and Sergei Eisenstein's *The Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1925) and *The Old and the New* (1929). Relevant titles of the thaw years such as *The Cranes are Flying* (Mikhail Kalatozov 1958), *Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigory Chukhray 1959) or the documentary *Ordinary Fascism* (Mikhail Romm 1965) were also already in circulation by the end of the 1970s.

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6 The engineer Ramón López Barrenechea and the real estate broker Visitación Peralta Álvarez were also part of the founding of the company, their participation was however minimal. According to the Official Business Registry, each contributed with 5,000 of the total 150,000 pesetas, while López Iglesias provided 140,000. They did not have any meaningful impact in its managing (Riambau and Torreiro 2008).

7 López Iglesias exhibited two of his paintings (*Estepa* and *Día gris*) at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1962.

8 According to the yearbooks provided by the Ministry of Culture, Alta distributed 5 films in 1975, 5 in 1976, 11 in 1977, 20 in 1978, 25 in 1979 and 34 in 1980. *(Boletín Informativo de Control de Taquilla*, n.d.)

9 The yearbooks analysed (from 1969 to the early 1990s) provide specific data about Alta's distribution activities, which complement the material found in the archives. In 1973 the first films were the musicals *Sleeping Beauty* (Apollinarij Dudko and Konstantin Sergeyev 1964), *Circus Story* (Ilya Gutman 1972) and the animated film *The Wild Swans* (Mikhail Tsekhanovsky and Vera Tsekhanovskaya 1962), probably selected as they did not pose any ideological difficulties.

Limited in their commercial impact—these films circulated mainly among cultural associations and film clubs with *non-commercial* exhibition licences (González Macho, interview by the author, 14 March 2025)—Alta's activities in the 1970s can be seen as a perfect product of the cultural opening that characterized the years of the Spanish transition. Francoism had been systematically banning Soviet productions for decades (with some exceptions after 1966), and although things were starting to change (censorship would be abolished in December of 1977),[10] most of the films were still difficult to screen. In specific circles, this increased their appeal.

For obvious ideological reasons, Soviet cinema had enjoyed enormous prestige among most politically active Spanish cinephiles during the Franco era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Spanish Communist Party had been the central force behind political and cultural anti-Francoism and one of the main forces (together with the Catholic Church) behind the organization of film clubs, magazines and journals or at the State Film School (Ramos Arenas 2024). For a generation brought up with the "moral obligation to contribute to intellectual debate, a commitment to intervene in industry or society and the conviction that each ideology has its cinematographic correspondence and that taste is not only an aesthetic option, but also a political one" (Pujol Ozonas 2011, 151; my translation), the references of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s still felt very contemporary in more or less clandestine film club sessions. But its relevance was also growing in more official circles: in February and March 1965, the Ministry for Information and Tourism had already permitted retrospectives of classic Soviet cinema during the first film screenings organized by the National Film Archives. Soviet representatives were also usual attendees at the San Sebastián International Film Festival since the late 1960s while the specialized Festival for arthouse cinema in Benalmádena became, under the communist Julio Diamante, a stronghold for Soviet cinema in late Francoism and the first years of the *Transición* to democracy: the festival had already programmed Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublëv* (1966) in 1972 and *Solaris* in 1973. That same year the retrospective *Kozintsev y Trauberg: la fábrica del actor excéntrico* included other Soviet films; in the following years the focus was on the 1930s Soviet productions (1974), Eisenstein and Vertov (1976) or on the recovery of previously banned materials (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010, 103).

Commercial screenings were however scarce, with some exceptions starting in the late 1960s and including Grigory Kozintzev's *Don Quixote* (1957, it premiered in Madrid in 1966), the four-part *War and Peace* (Sergei Bondarchuk, 1966–67) and Kozintzev's *Hamlet* (1964, it premiered in 1968); their artistic *respectability* as literary adaptations apparently protected them against political suspicions (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010).

10 It is in this regard important to note that most of the Soviet films under discussion had already received their distribution licences in the previous months. The official abolishment of censorship can be therefore seen as the culmination of a gradual process of cultural liberalization that had already started with the dictator's death in 1975.

The exceptionality of these examples shows that normalization was needed. Parallel to the abolishment of censorship, in December of 1977, the Asociación Cultural Hispano-Soviética was founded. At the beginning of 1979 (19 January), an Agreement for the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (*Convenio de Cooperación Cultural y Científica*) between the Kingdom of Spain and the USSR was signed in Moscow, thus preparing the way for the increasing cooperation over the next decades (Garrido Caballero 2006, especially chapter 7).[11] Alta was both part and effect of these transformations.

As the *Transición* years were coming to an end, things were also changing at the company internally. In 1984 Enrique González Macho bought Alta for three million pesetas from Samarina after López Iglesias's death (Riambau and Torreiro 2008, 387). Until then, he had worked mainly as a producer for Spanish films and for international coproductions shot in Spain. He had also gathered some experience with Cinema2000, a distribution company founded in 1978 with Carlos Galán and specialized in Spanish cinema. It was in this context that he knew López Iglesias and Samarina, from projects such as *Las Truchas* (José Luis García Sánchez 1978), where the latter had a small role. With Alta he bought the films and licences for their non-commercial distribution, as until then these had been screened mainly at film clubs and cultural associations. In his memoirs González Macho talks about "semi clandestine" activities regarding the circulation of these titles (2020, 83). After the takeover he kept the name—a fusion of the first two syllables of the names of López Iglesias' and Samarina's children (Alejandro and Tatiana)—but he was also planning to revamp the company for more ambitious goals.

THE REVAMPING OF ALTA

It was a bumpy start. Shortly after taking over Alta in 1984, the new owner was contacted by Soviet representatives who wanted to prevent him from further dealing with the titles that had been acquired during the years under López Iglesias and threatened him with not letting him enter the USSR. González Macho claimed his right to do so, based on the contract he had signed with the previous proprietor (González Macho 2020, 82). The Soviet representatives came back some time later; this time he was offered collaboration, apparently based on his relevance for the Soviet Union's international relations.

11 While Spanish-USSR relations in this period have been only scarcely covered, there have been some PhD dissertations in the last decades. Apart from the already mentioned work by Garrido Caballero, see also *Presencia de los intereses soviéticos en las Islas Canarias: Sovhispán: 1971–1991* (Yanyshev-Nesterova 2019), which mainly focuses on commercial relations, and Jesús Centenera Ulecia's *Relaciones Hispano-Soviéticas de 1976 a 1986* (2007), which covers mainly the diplomatic side. The internationalisation of Spanish firms promoted by the National Institute of Industry towards the market of the Soviet Union within the context of the Cold War and East-West economic collaboration has been covered by Yanyshev-Nesterova (2024). A Russian perspective on this same subject and covering the 1960s and 1970s is provided by Georgy Filatov (2019).

The contacts already established with Oleg Rudnev, general director of the foreign trade association Sovexportfilm, proved crucial in the next step of the enterprise. A deal was prepared that allowed Alta to further acquire Soviet films and distribute them in Spain. In exchange, to balance commercial trade between Spain and the USSR, the company would sell (or rather contact Spanish producers interested in selling, as Alta wasn't producing films at the time) titles to the Soviet Union.[12] According to González Macho (2020, 87), this allowed him to acquire more Soviet films (which were cheaper) than the Soviet representatives could do with the Spanish productions (valued in around 100,000 dollars per film).

González Macho mentions that he only mediated between the Soviet representatives and the Spanish producers, who then prepared their own contracts. While this episode refers to very specific, almost anecdotal terms, it was also tightly connected to broader changes in the national film industry. Since the appointment of Pilar Miró as Directora General de la Cinematografía in 1982, the new Spanish social democratic government was interested in implementing a set of measures towards the rationalization of its industrial structures. With an eye set on the integration in the European market after 1986, Spanish cinema had to be made more competitive internationally and private initiatives such as Alta were welcomed. In 1985, Cinespaña, the company that the state had controlled since 1968 to support the export of Spanish cinema, was closed. While in the 1970s it had sometimes assisted the national producers in their international adventures, thus fulfilling some of its objectives, in the 1980s its meagre staff, lack of clear economic guidelines and financial control had made it ineffective and definitively obsolete (Martínez 2014).

For approximately ten years (three or four times each year for more or less ten days), González Macho became a regular visitor to the USSR (González Macho 2020, 84). He visited festivals (Moscow and Tashkent), invited Soviet filmmakers and bureaucrats to the Spanish premieres of their films (González Macho 2020, 92 and 182–183) and decided which films he should acquire for Alta after watching them in Moscow with the help of a translator. In his memoirs and during the interviews for this project, he insisted that he always had the final say about which films he would buy, usually against the wishes of the Soviet functionaries, who were more interested in selling contemporary, commercial films, while he was more interested in the classics with a certain artistic pedigree. This personal account gains special relevance against the background of a broader transformation of the Soviet industry in those years: it was in 1986, after the Soviet Filmmakers' Union Congress that elected Elem Klimov as its representative, that the authorities of the USSR permitted the export of many Soviet films that had been banned for years. The 1987 Cannes Film Festival

12 These limitations were typical for the Soviet side since 1958, when the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement facilitated film exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. The USSR looked for equality and "mutually acceptable financial terms", not just to buy films from abroad (which generally were considered more expensive than Soviet films) but also to export their own (Kozovoi 2016, 5).

showed already some of these titles—*Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze 1984) won the grand prize of the jury—but the consequences could be also felt in more prosaic ways on the Spanish screens.

Thus, over the 1980s, Alta kept providing Spanish cinemagoers with the renowned works of the classic Russian avant-garde (among the 27 films distributed in 1987, the company was still offering *Battleship Potemkin*, *October* or Pudovkin's *The End of Saint Petersburg,* 1927). But at the core of the company's revamping after González Macho's takeover was the focus on more recent works that highlighted the contemporary relevance of Soviet cinema: these included Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), *Andrei Rublëv*, *Solaris*, *Stalker* (1979), and modern masterworks like *The Ascent* (Larisa Sheptiko 1977), *Farewell* (Larisa Shepitko and Elem Klimov 1983), *Repentance or My friend Ivan Lapshin* (Aleksey German 1984). Writing for *El País* in January 1988, the film critic Ángel Fernández Santos pointed out how the films of younger filmmakers such as Klimov, Tarkovsky, German or Mikhalkov "have been successfully released and their names are beginning to leave the small circles of connoisseurs to enter the vocabulary of the general public" (Fernández Santos 1988). The collaboration with the Soviet authorities had allowed some members of the industry to visit Spain with the support of Alta Films, such as for the retrospective that the 1987 Valladolid Film Festival dedicated to Aleksey German.

The great variety of titles now in circulation meant also the implementation of different forms of marketing. Especially the older films such as *Potemkin* or the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1944 and 1958) kept being shown with subtitles in smaller arthouse cinemas feeding thus Alta's traditional cinephile audiences.[13] But there was also a parallel development towards broader publics. A key event in this transformation of the company was the relaunch of Akira Kurosawa's Soviet-Japanese coproduction *Dersu Uzala* in August 1984.[14] The film had already circulated among some clubs in the late 1970s but was now presented in a double version (dubbed and with Spanish subtitles).[15] Aiming at broader audiences, the dubbed version premiered in the central Madrid theatre Palacio de la Música and gathered the impressive number of 223,000 spectators only in 1984 (the original version with Spanish subtitles attracted another 50,000). This dubbed version was the 62nd most watched foreign film in Spain in that year.

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13 As one of the highlights of those years, the Cine Club Universitario de Belagua, at the University of Navarra, organized in 1988 a retrospective on all Tarkovsky's work, which was visited by the director's widow and son (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010, 104).

14 Although the film had been licenced to Alta since 6 September 1976 and González Macho highlighted it as one of the main successes of the company, the yearly reports by the General Direction of Cinematography state that the film was distributed by Cinema2000, a distribution company for which González Macho had also been working. This discrepancy couldn't be explained.

15 The film had already been shown since 30 October 1976 in smaller cinemas such as Bellas Artes and Duplex I.

For Alta the distribution of these new Soviet films provided important visibility. It was then, around the mid-1980s, that González Macho decided to import and distribute titles from other countries: in 1987 Alta already managed a West German action flick (*Euer Weg führt durch die Hölle*, Ernst Ritter von Theumer 1984), the Argentinian *Otra historia de amor* (Américo Ortíz de Zárate 1986) and the Malian *Yeleen* (Souleymane Cissé 1987), as well as the older Spanish production *Fulgor y Muerte de Joaquín Murrieta* (Luis Calvo Teixeira 1975). As time went by, Alta also took over the distribution of independent Spanish movies, later as Alta Classics. This proved an important success, that again points to the relevance of those years (late 1980s and early 1990s) as transitional times in the national film industry, as the old structures were dismantled and new, independent companies could try their luck with other kinds of productions. Coming out of the dictatorship, González Macho indicated, Spanish cinema was not correctly distributed:

> I tried it, and it worked out. There was a time [around the late 1990s] when Alta had a 35–40% market share of Spanish cinema in Spain. Later the multinationals understood that this could also make money, and they got involved [in the business of independent film distribution]. Something that I always thought was very bad for everyone. (Gonzáles Macho as quoted in Yáñez 2009, 201; my translation)

While this expansion set the basis for the later development of Alta in the 1990s, in the mid-1980s many of its films still struggled to reach broader audiences or even find their space in commercial cinemas. The decision to incorporate an exhibition branch came to fruition in May 1986 with the opening of the cinemas Renoir Princesa.[16] They represented the first parts of a broader network that included the management of around 85 theatres and 200 screens in eight Spanish cities: Madrid, Barcelona, Majadahonda, Palma de Mallorca, Zaragoza, Cuenca, Guadalajara and Santa Cruz de Tenerife (Belinchón 2020). The collaboration with the Soviet film industry continued over those years through the import of Soviet films, the export of Spanish titles, the visits of filmmakers and state representatives to festivals and premieres in both countries; this exchange culminated in the founding of Alsov, a company co-owned by Alta Films and Sovexportfilm, that for almost three years (1990–1993) managed one of Moscow's oldest cinemas, Khudozhestvenny, to screen Spanish films.

16 The cinemas screened the Soviet title—distributed by Alta—*A Cruel Romance* (Eldar Ryazanov 1984), the Polish film *Yesterday* (Radosław Piwowarski 1985), as well as *Dangerous Moves* (*La diagonal del loco*, Richard Dembo 1985) and *Stranger Kiss* (Matthew Chapman 1983).

"HAVING MORE LUCK THAN HITLER AND NAPOLEON"

The history of the creation of Alsov and Alta's involvement in Khudozhestvenny reaches back to 1988, when a first report[17] was addressed to the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Finance documenting the interest in constituting a Soviet-Spanish joint venture. Alsov was entering new terrain in the commercial relations of both countries. The report stated the following (broad) goals for the new company: "export, import, production, distribution and exhibition of audiovisual productions of all kinds". In the document, Alta is presented as a company that has been collaborating with the USSR for twenty years, being also "responsible for the introduction of Spanish film production in that said country". Its ambitious plans would situate the new company "in a privileged situation with regard to the distribution of Soviet production in the Spanish-speaking countries and even in the European Community, where there is currently no society of the characteristics of the one intended to be founded" (all my translations).

This European orientation is a remnant of the original project, conceived as a joint venture with French exhibitors and distributors that did not get off the ground. "Curiously, it is now I alone, with a mixed Spanish-Soviet partnership, the one able to have a cinema open in Moscow before they [other foreign companies] do," (Muñoz 1990b; my translation) commented González Macho retrospectively. The cinema was the first of this kind (supported by a foreign private corporation for the exhibition of Spanish films) that opened in Moscow. Later came the French, with Cinema Mir; the British did so one year later, with Cinema October.

It took almost a year for these plans to be implemented. The company was finally founded in November 1989: its shared capital was 10 million pesetas. Sovexportfilm contributed with 500 shares, Alta Films S.A. with 400 and a private investor, Gilbert López-Atalaya, with 100. Alexei Rastorov,[18] who had been collaborating with Alta for years as a national delegate for Spain from Sovexportfilm, was now the Soviet representative in the company and received a Spanish visa. Khudozhestvenny's lease agreement was then signed for five years starting at the end of 1990.

At the same time, this initiative had to receive the approval of government officials.[19] González Macho also mentions in this regard the crucial intervention of the film producer Elías Querejeta and the Minister of Culture Jorge Semprún

17 "Exposición", by Emilio Asensio Ramírez, dated 30 December 1988, in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir.

18 Alexei / Alejo Rastorov Benito de Quirós had been also, like Juan Miguel López Iglesias, one of those children that left Spain in the late 1930s following the Spanish Civil War.

19 Jesús Centenera Ulecia (2007) has covered the diplomatic framework of these initiatives. The transformation of the relations between both countries since the early 1980s, and especially after the social democratic party PSOE came to power in 1982, facilitated some of these initiatives; these were however also put under pressure by Spain joining NATO in 1982.

(González Macho, interview by the author, 14 March 2025). The agreement received the Hague Apostille ensuring its recognition in other countries. Indeed, the Spanish Ministry of Culture supported the initiative and already in June a Spanish delegation led by the Director of the National Film Agency ICAA visited Moscow (Muñoz 1990a) before finally presenting the project at the Ministry on November 5, 1990 to the Soviet ambassador. The diplomatic efforts culminated a few weeks later, when the official gazette of the Spanish State, Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE), published a Film Relations Agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to "widen and strengthen film collaboration" between the two countries.[20] It explicitly mentioned in its sixth article that both states shall "support the development of initiatives from the public sectors, from joint ventures or from the private sector, which have as their objective the distribution, exhibition or promotion of Spanish films in the USSR and Soviet films in Spain" (BOE, 23 November 1990).

Just three days before that, on November 20, 1990, Khudozhestvenny had premiered in its new fashion as a film theatre for Spanish films. As the press material originally prepared by Alsov highlighted and the news coverage duly repeated, this cinema had been for decades a central venue for the history of Soviet cinema. The 771-seat theatre had opened its doors in 1909 and was thus one of the first permanent movie theatres in the Russian capital; it hosted, among other relevant events, the premiere of *Battleship Potemkin* in 1926. It was located in a very central area, at 14 Arbatskaya Street, just 800 meters from the Kremlin. The press reported plans to screen 2,000 Spanish productions in five years, and González Macho explicitly mentioned the support of Moscow's mayor between 1990 and 1992, Gavriil Kharitonovich Popov (González Macho 2020, 118). It is telling to see how the state support was minimized in public announcements, in favour of an interpretation that presented it as a private initiative. The experiences of Cinespaña seemed to still be very present among the participants. Jorge Semprún, at the time Minister of Culture, highlighted how the initiative came

> from a businessman, Enrique González Macho, who has not only helped to raise awareness of Soviet cinema in Spain but also supports Spanish cinema as much as he can [...] This is the most remarkable thing for the Ministry of Culture, and we have supported it and will support it with everything we can; but the most important thing is that it is an initiative of the private sector. (Muñoz 1990b; my translation)

As a private enterprise, Khudozhestvenny had however certain peculiarities. The cinema had no commercial goals and was intended as a promotional tool for the Spanish cinema, "mainly because the cinema ticket in Moscow is worth about 40 pesetas and, in addition, the Soviet currency, the ruble, is quoted very

20 One year prior to the agreement, the Georgian filmmaker Revaz Chekheidze had already prepared a series on *Don Quixote* (*Zhitie Don Kijota i Sancho*), which was cofinanced by Gosteleradio, the Basque public broadcaster Euskal Telebista (ETB) and a Spanish private investor (Producciones Cinematográficas de Toledo, Procint). It aired in October and November of 1989.

low in the foreign exchange market," indicated González Macho (Muñoz 1990b; my translation). The main goal was the promotion of Spanish films, offering thus a first opportunity for Soviet distributors and exhibitors to come to terms with the Spanish producers and distributors to market their films in the USSR. At the same time, the venue could also "project and organize in parallel other types of activities—short films and documentaries from Spanish companies that want to be known in the USSR—and the business will be in private sponsorship" (Muñoz 1990b; my translation).

Khudozhestvenny finally opened its doors on November 12 with a *Week of Spanish Cinema*. General Director for Cinematography Enrique Balmaseda, critics, state representatives, and the most important names of Spanish cinema were in Moscow supporting the event. Among the attendees was Pedro Almodóvar, proclaiming his intention to conquer Russia with his films, or, as he wittily declared: "having more luck than Hitler and Napoleon" (Muñoz, 1990c; my translation). He was not alone. The week opened with *Letters from Alou* (M. Armendáriz 1990), and included *The Heifer* (Luis García Berlanga 1986), *Padre Nuestro* (Francisco Regueiro 1985), *The War of the Madmen* (Manolo Matji 1986), *Year of Enlightenment* (Fernando Trueba 1986), *Baton Rouge* (Agustín Díaz Yanes 1988), *Wait for me in Heaven* (Antonio Mercero 1988), *The Enchanted Forest* (José Luis Cuerda 1987), *El Lute: Run for your Life* (Vicente Aranda 1987), *Rowing with the Wind* (Gonzalo Suarez 1988), *Oh Carmela!* (Carlos Saura 1989), *Montoyas y Tarantos* (Vicente Escrivá 1989), *The Things of Love* (Jaime Chávarri 1989), *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (Pedro Almodóvar 1989) and *Boom boom* (Rosa Vergés 1990). This was a good collection of Spanish middlebrow productions of the late 1980s. The selection was González Macho's responsibility, and so was that of the films screened in the coming two years (González Macho, interview by the author, 15 April 2025). Meanwhile the Soviet part took over the everyday management of the cinema. As a promotion tool, the initiative was indeed a success: according to a report prepared by Alsov for the first ten months of 1991,[21] the films were usually screened 5 to 6 times a day, gathering 239,229 spectators in 874 screenings, hence averaging 265 viewers per screening. Beyond the screenings, activities included an exhibition of Spanish film posters (January), special events in cooperation with the *Days of Spanish Literature* (April), a retrospective on the actress Sara Montiel (June) and a collaboration with the Moscow International Film Festival to promote the films participating in that event (July). An *International Week of Spanish comedy*, originally planned for September, could take place only partially due to the Soviet coup attempt in late August.[22]

21 "Resultados de la exhibición de películas españolas en el cine Judogestveni [*sic*] (1 de enero – 31 de octubre 1991)", in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir.

22 While it is difficult to calibrate the real impact of these initiatives in Moscow, the press coverage seems to reflect its relevance. According to a report prepared by Alsov ("Relación de informaciones aparecidas en periódicos y revistas de emisiones por televisión y radio", 1991, in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir), the events were intensively followed by newspapers and magazines, among them *Vechernia Moskva* (30 October 1990 and 5 November 1990), *Moskovskaia Pravda* (4 and 18 November 1990), *Trud* (11

While the cinema was still successful among cinemagoers, the insecure situation of the country hindered its further development. The enterprise ended abruptly in 1993; González Macho claims in his memoirs (González Macho 2020, 123) that in that year he received a telex informing him that the *mafia* had taken over the cinema. That was the end of Khudozhestvenny and of Alsov. The impact could be felt more generally in Alta. It was the same year that the company started producing films, starting with the American independent comedy *In the Soup* (Alexandre Rockwell 1992). Soviet films did not fully disappear from its distribution catalogue but became increasingly rare in the first half of the 1990s, as national audiences got increasingly interested in other regions of international cinema and Russian productions struggled to reach the quality of previous decades. By 1995, Alta had already begun depositing its copies of Soviet films in the Spanish National Film Archives *Filmoteca*. Its business commodities were becoming history.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

What is the significance of Alta's relation to the USSR? The story exposed on the previous pages allows for different levels of interpretation. It is first tempting to understand these 25 years of transformation in broader historical terms, thus reading these episodes of international cultural exchange that flourished in Spain along the evolution of two countries, leaving behind their dictatorial past. The analysis obviously focused on the Spanish side; the company benefited from the partial liberalization of late Francoism; its first successes were based on the cultural openness of the late 1970s, while its further development in the 1980s can also be read parallel to the transformation of its film industry along European guidelines. In more general terms, and although this enterprise ended abruptly, the activities of Alta had been capable of bringing together two territories involved in an asynchronous process of profound political transformation.

At the same time, the company's success could benefit from the normalization of diplomatic relations between both countries and the reforms that permitted the recuperation of silenced Soviet filmmakers after 1986. The document is especially interested in showing how this transformation helped Soviet cinema reach broader, more commercially oriented audiences and allowed for the import of Spanish films in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s. The three-year adventure of Khudozhestvenny can be read as both the culmination of these developments and the realization of their limits.

Secondly, and considering now its relevance within a history of the European film industry in the late Cold War era, Alta contributes (through the inclusion of the Spanish case) to enrich our understanding of this phenomenon, providing

November 1990), *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (14 November 1990), and *Ecran iscena* (12 and 19 November 1990). Moscow's local television did the same on the 1, 2, 10 and 12 November. The specialized programme *Kinopanorama* informed about the festival in December 1990. *Radio Mayak*, *Soyuz* and *Vecherni Couier* covered it on 12 November 1990.

some valuable information on the widely under-researched history of Spanish cinema exhibition and adding another component to its multipolar logic. It also channels our attention towards a certain type of (micro, small, and medium-sized) companies that, escaping Hollywood's frame of reference, have been usually overseen in the film historical accounts that for years explained the continent's industry.

Alta's case study was analysed with a focus on the distribution activities, but its ties to film exhibition, production or even broader policy and diplomatic shifts are also key in its history. They are, in fact, the key, as these different layers of activity help us connect the particular to the general in a long history of the European film industry. By the beginning of the 1980s, when Alta was reaching its first zenith, the company was one among 215 distributors (yearly report of the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography from 1980) operating in Spain. Some of these companies were surely tiny and somewhat irrelevant both in industrial and cultural terms, but many others were central in the development of Spanish film culture and industry of the 1980s and 1990s, helping to safeguard its diversity and richness. Thus, while the company's history reminds us constantly of the specificities of the Spanish case—López Iglesias' exile in the USSR, the relevance of a left-wing cinephilia interested in recovering old Soviet titles in the 1970s, the market reconfiguration of the mid-1980s following the Miró Law—it is also possible to see in Alta an example of the different voices and parties that had historically characterized many of the continent's film industries and were central to ensure its cultural diversity. The focus of the international alignments and reconfigurations of these small and medium-sized companies can help us broaden our understanding of the last two decades of the Cold War while it also highlights the challenges that came along with the reconfiguration of the EU audiovisual market from the 1990s onwards.

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