

Exile and Montage: Josep Renau's Reckoning with Community and Self

When the Spanish Republic collapsed in March 1939, the artist Josep Renau fled his native Spain fearing imprisonment or execution by the victorious regime of General Franco. Like many Republicans, Renau crossed the border into France. He found himself interred briefly in Argelès-sur-mer while he waited for a transitory stay in Toulouse, only to end up shortly thereafter in New York City en route to Mexico. Though Renau became a Mexican citizen after he and his family took up permanent residence there, he traded his adopted home almost twenty years later in 1958 for one in East Germany, most likely under duress.

Much is written about displacement and identity. As Stuart Hall suggests in his examination of diaspora, history's interventions or its impressions on people's lives force individuals to see themselves as different, not just from their surroundings, but also from the selves they once recognized (392-403). This process of recognizing difference within the self evolves clearly in Josep Renau's work. This once Spanish Republican political artist turned dabbler muralist and prolific commercial poster man in Mexico, ultimately finds his expression in hyper-exaggerated difference rather than community. Moreover, he contextualizes this extreme difference in the medium of photomontage, drawing clearly on his own progression from political artist, to artistic outsider, to commercial printmaker, to enthusiastic critic of a culture with which he only engages from outside.

Linda Nochlin contends that artists experience exile less traumatically than writers. She adds that “while some art is, indeed, site specific, visual languages, on the whole, are far more transportable than the verbal kind” (318). Renau, to the contrary, felt that “the political poster [was] the expression of an intimate feeling” (Mendelson 160). Losing that outlet or replacing it with the commercial poster, as he did in Mexico, was quite traumatic for him, identity-changing in fact. It was the action that made him realize that he had no community in Mexico and that his difference defined him. Ultimately he also let it define his work. Christopher Fulton writes that while Spanish Communist refugees came from different political factions, the majority tended to be united under the liberal political label and that over time, Spanish Republican intellectuals either became disillusioned with the type of socialism modeled on the Soviet Union, or lost interest in active participation in politics (366). Renau was an exception, though he may have wondered about the communist agenda in Europe. He layered his political and personal experience on top of the transition he made personally from being within a community to being an outsider within, looking critically at the outside.

This paper examines Renau’s artistic progression through two exiles as an example in which an individual defines his cultural identity first in the context of community, a collective leftist-socialist identity, and then as Hall points out in terms of “difference.” When history reveals to him his separation from the community, he has no choice but to find himself in an expression of difference – not from the home he makes

for himself in Mexico so much as from the neighbor he must criticize in order to earn his space among Mexican artists. Ironically he cannot express that difference until he leaves Mexico, and reintegrates back into a community, at least with ties to the one he initially lost.

ARTISTE ENGAGÉ

As a young man, Renau joined the Spanish Communist Party, became a passionate militant, and devoted his work to promoting the ideals of the Spanish Republic. During this period, he founded the review *Nueva Cultura*, served as an important contributor to several other magazines and produced a variety of photomontages. He played an increasing role in the government of the Republic. As the Director of Fine Arts under the Spanish Republic, Renau combined his duty as a communist with his talent for graphic arts by promoting *talleres*. Many of the posters attributed to him were collaborative efforts in which artists shared equipment, responsibilities and images. For Renau, shared visions and multiple accountabilities in artwork, was not only realistic, but also exemplary. It challenged the expectation for singularly contrived reflections on culture by creating more dynamic and egalitarian structures. Renau preferred to collaborate on pieces with multiple contributors and to work with diverse media. For example, he felt that photographic and other visual technologies had tremendous power that could be further harnessed in mixed media presentations. To him, the photograph was a great opportunity for reproducing a real

image from which true art could emerge and speak, not only to the bourgeoisie, but to any seeing individual (Casában).

Renau saw himself as the artist/engineer using his aptitude for photography and photomontage to promote political ideas. He saw design as a solution to social problems, and as an essential element of artistic production. Early in the 1930s, Renau argued that snapshots were not enough to mobilize multiple groups. He proposed that the Republican administration invest in images that would jump off the page, grab the populace and wrestle them into action. In his view, photomontage was an ideal tool because it employed the photograph, which he saw as a reflection of the real, in the process of a design that incorporated artistic expression as well as political motivation. Referring back to Soviet poster artist, Georgi Plakhanov, and filmmaker Vsvolod I. Pudovkin, Renau advocated three dimensional images, suggesting they had more impact because of their visual presence and immediacy (Torres 166-189). His posters incorporated the same ideas, blending elements of photography with practices in graphic design, always using at least three different planes, layered on top of one another, so that images could travel from a point deep in the poster to a more immediate space up front.

Alexander Vergara underscores this point in his discussion of Renau's famous poster "Hoy màs que nunca, Victoria" which pays homage to the Republican Air Force and to Renau's commitment to the cause and to the fight against fascism. Renau's signature use of multiple layers moving from deep within the poster toward the

onlooker is already present in this poster as is his tendency to offer playful reformations on typical graphic structures. The "V" for victory in this image is comprised of layer upon layer of the Republican flag. This creative lettering also directs the eye to the outskirts and to the bottom of the image, where the "Hoy màs que nunca" quotation and the profile of a fighter pilot pull the image together. Renau signed and dated this particular poster, but many of the other posters on which he worked as Director de Propaganda Gráfica del Comisariado General del Estado Mayor del Ejército Popular never carried his signature. For example the Spanish Civil War posters included in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division are attributed to his office in Valencia, the Junta Municipal, Delegación Propaganda.

POLITICAL REFUGEE

In May 1939 Renau found himself aboard the Dutch steamer Vendamm en route to New York, along with his wife Manuela Ballester Vilaseca, his son Ruy (born in 1934), his daughter Julia (born in 1937), and with fellow writers and artists of the Committee of Spanish Culture (García 250). From New York, Renau and his family took a Greyhound bus to Mexico. Carole Naggar writes: "Disillusion, bitterness and anger, together with feelings of being abandoned and of loneliness, all formed part of the heavy baggage of exile that Renau took with him to Mexico. In 1939 he knew he would be an exile. He did not know it was to be exile for life" (262). At that time, Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas had instructed his ambassadors and envoys in Europe to give safe haven and protection to all Spanish exiles. Cárdenas was sympathetic to left

wing ideals: he nationalized the oil industry, the electricity industry, and initiated land reform. One could assume that the similar ideology, the same language, and a historical tie between Mexico and the Spanish Republic would make moving to Mexico a fairly natural transition, at least culturally. However, it was foreign for Renau. He had to learn a new geography, a new history and a completely different lifestyle (Giardinelli 1).

As a refugee artist, Renau occupied a tenuous space in Mexico. His reception there among the artistic and intellectual elite was at best lukewarm. Without any official or state sponsored identity in Mexico, he was already out of place, and despite his political affinity and professional respect for many Mexican artists and technicians, he was not a Mexican nationalist. He had escaped fascism at a cost. At the end of day, he was a 32 year-old family man with no clear prospects for employment. David Alfaro Siqueiros welcomed him, but could not extend any contracts to him. Renau eventually found a job with the printing firm "Imprenta Galas," which specialized in making calendars. This position was far from Renau's vision of using art to reform social structures, but it put food on the table.

MEXICAN MURALIST

Renau did have opportunities to work with Mexican muralists on a couple of occasions, the most notable of which was a government commission to paint "Retrato de la burguesía" in the main stairwell of the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate in Mexico City. As Jennifer Jolly adeptly demonstrates, Siqueiros and Renau were initially in

agreement about their goals for this mural. They saw the commission as an opportunity to reestablish a communist presence in the Mexican Muralist movement. Both thought the mural and its team of painters would embrace the taller model so important to revolutionary Mexican graphics and also to Renau's notion of a truly committed communist art. Both men feared that other Mexican muralists were too individualistic (132). Though Siqueiros stepped back from what he saw as foreign, avant-garde and bourgeois influences, Renau embraced the works of the German artist John Heartfield. Though Renau saw Heartfield as avant-garde, for his part the German Communist was neither foreign nor bourgeois. Nonetheless, both Siqueiros and Renau advocated for stylistic work that would resonate with the working class and the ideals of community ownership and responsibility. The "Retrato" team which included other painters such as Luis Arenal, Antonio Rodríguez Luna, Miguel Prieto and Antonio Pujol split, however, in the wake of Siqueiros' forced exile in 1940. While the original idea behind the joint project fit Renau's version of a proper artists' collective, the reality was wrought with problems. Siqueiros seemed more apt to distribute or dictate tasks than he was to share them. He also shied away from using photographs and from creating a montage of different styles, while Renau embraced them. Siqueiros vociferously criticized Renau's contributions to a collective muralist project and argued that the Spanish artist could not separate the unique Mexican experience of inequality from his essentialist and Europeanist belief in communist ideals. Needless to say the final result, under Renau's tutelage, angered Siqueiros, who chided Renau publically for

prioritizing his Spanish, which Siqueiros equated with European, ideals over the Mexican style (Jolly 129-151).

Renau's commitment to a united Communist mission ran deep and permeated his work. For Mexican artists, nationalism was the ideology of choice. What it meant to Mexican art varied in part because of the freedom the artists enjoyed and also because of their different backgrounds. Some artists saw nationalist art as non-European or, in their eyes, authentically Mexican, which signified indigenous or mestizo themes. Others saw nationalism as a collective movement for promoting forms that were Mexican, not so much in terms of their subject matter, but in terms of their grand scale. Muralists' works occupied primary real estate in most major public spaces, reaching beyond the bourgeois gaze into a more public milieu (Ades 151-93). Likewise nationalist printmakers enjoyed broad distribution through public graphic arts collectives. The artistic collaboration and national funding in both of these media was extensive, drawing on numerous talents through syndicates. Renau appreciated the Mexican notion of a people's art. Nonetheless, he remained an outsider in Mexico. Although he collaborated regularly with Mexican muralists and printmakers, Renau never penetrated their inner circles, at least never enough to gain acceptance among them as a real Mexican. So, he worked on the fringes of Mexican political art, unable to communicate his commitment to structural realignment through art and culture.

One political work, for which the Mexican Ministry of Popular Education commissioned Renau, does reflect some of the rigidity that Siqueiros attributed to him.

In this piece, entitled “La patria mexicana” strong, heavily shaded and intensely angled hands hold a bayonet erect against the angled backdrop of a pyramid. The eagle perches above the architectural structure, snake secured in his mouth. These images all stand upon three vertical rectangles colored for the Mexican flag (Renau). The Mexican symbols are all there, but the piece seems to fall short of an emphatic Mexican nationalist statement. While the colors of the Mexican flag set the stage, Renau’s placement of the eagle and serpent on top of the pyramid, just above their standard position in the middle of the Mexican flag, rejects the opportunity for nationalist reproduction. More prevalent is the space at which the hands, bayonet and pyramid meet directly below the apex of the triangle, emphasizing the worker/soldier rather than the mystical Mexican figure of the eagle carrying the serpent. Renau, thus, prioritizes his statement of international worker solidarity over Mexican nationalism.

POSTER ARTIST

Renau ultimately broke from his ideological confines and expanded into other artistic areas, in this case, movie posters. He moved from political propaganda to commercial propaganda. In Spain, through his posters, he sold the image of an ideology; in Mexico, he sold the image of leisure through film posters, most of which had no real critical content or any real tendency to play on his strengths for mixed media compositions or political commentary. With few and far between commissions, Renau had little choice but to create publicity posters and collect fuel for a more politicized fire during his free time. Thus, he turned to printmaking, where he emerged

as a highly successful poster artist, doing more than 200 Mexican film posters between 1945 and 1954. While some of this work reflected his artistic skill, the commercial purposes of these posters were far removed from his philosophical commitment of expressing political and social ideals in art. Renau's most prolific production came in the latter half of what many call the cinematographic Mexican Golden Age, from 1935 to 1956. At that point, Mexican film began to transition from independent work to highly commercial pieces, several of which helped develop television stations, three of them in the early 1950s. As private collector Rogélio Agrasánchez notes, Renau's film posters sometimes featured his signature inclusion of black and white photographs against a high-contrast color palette (15). Their dramatic play of light also cast reflections and shadows over intensified cubist compositions. Also present were Renau's three dimensional images and efficient use of multiple planes. However, social critiques were not the norm in this medium.

In 1952, however, Renau did engage his passion for photomontage in "El enamorado." This film starred the highly successful Spanish, later turned Hollywood sensation, Sarita Montiel and Pedro Infante, the famous Mexican actor/singer. This poster, unlike the other film posters he created in Mexico featured the still photography of Gabriel Figueroa against the backdrop of the moving image. Far in the background is what appears to be a still photograph in black and white – perhaps a memory from the Mexican Revolution – bathed in green ink, and set as a backdrop for the impassioned and turbulent relationship of the lead characters. The next layer features a very colorful,

full of life representation of Pedro Infante's character, the cowboy and renegade revolutionary. Moving forward from that image is another cutout of Sarita's character – colorless, with the exception of her sexualized lips.

NEW POLITICS, NEW ART

The faceless and sexed female image became a common motif in Renau's latter and perhaps best recognized work, his catalog book *Fata Morgana: The American Way of Life*. Beginning in 1949, Renau found a new cause: taking on the United States with all its "isms": capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, consumerism, racism, and sexism. This work reveals the intense transition that Renau's art experienced as a result of exile. It is photomontage in the extreme and incorporates advertisements from American popular magazines to challenge the social structures and mores Renau observed in his much hated adopted neighbor. He is an outsider condemning the "American Dream" from Mexico. While the main source of *The American Way of Life* was United States publications, interestingly it also includes Spain and Mexico. The work incorporates photographs, posters, and sculptures from the cultural heritage of Spain, including paintings by El Greco, Goya, Miró, Picasso, and Velázquez, photographs of the Spanish Civil War, and visual quotations from Mexican artists and photographers, including Siqueiros and Rivera (Naggar 262). *The American Way of Life* is not only an attack against the United States; it is also a reflection of Renau's life as an exile. Paradoxically, he is unable to find a publisher in his adopted country.

NEW EXILE IN GERMANY

Renau had become a successful poster artist in Mexico, where he enjoyed the presence of his extended family (his wife, five children, his brother Juanino who was also a poster artist). He gave the impression that he looked at his adopted country as home. And yet, beginning in 1954 Renau started to visit socialist Europe and in 1958, he moved to East Berlin. After nearly 20 years in Mexico, he left and settled in East Germany. The family was broken up. His older children Ruy, Julieta and Totli remained in Mexico or Spain, and the younger children Teresa and Pablo and his wife moved to East Germany with him. It is unclear what forced his departure from Mexico, though there is a suggestion that he felt he was in danger, since he had experienced "accidents" that he may have taken for deliberate attacks against him. The German Democratic Republic offered him the possibility of working for television, and living in financial security. He had the opportunity to publish *The American Way of Life* albeit with some restrictions. It was republished later in Valencia, Spain.

Maybe it was his mentor Heartfield's presence there which drew Renau. This pioneer of modern photomontage had also gone into exile in Czechoslovakia and then England before World War II. Heartfield returned to East Germany in 1950, "believing in the possibilities of a new communist order; as an artist in England during the war years, he had been unable to continue the political artwork he had engaged in during the 1920s and early 1930s in Weimar Germany" (Wolff 50). Whatever the reasons, at age 51, Renau chose the road of exile again. Perhaps, he aspired to reconnect with the ideals of his youth, regain his identity as a militant, and contribute to the building of a truly

Communist society. Things did not turn out the way he hoped, professionally or personally. He and his wife Manuela separated in 1966.

Before his exile to Mexico, Renau's artwork was firmly grounded in Spain during the Second Spanish Republic and within the context of its fight against fascism. Renau adamantly argued that art and culture were tools for forming and reforming the structure beneath social relationships. In Mexico his distinctive approach was -- if not obsolete -- at least tempered by an inability to participate on a significant level in the nationalist artist movement. While some Mexican artists agreed that art and culture could ameliorate social inequities, they were leery of Renau's commitment to their cause and sometimes critical of his delivery. Later on, while he found work with East German television, published articles, and continued to produce photomontages denouncing West Germany -- he became disillusioned with the Marxist economic policies of his new adopted country. Forced away from his home and thrown into an artistic scene that was never his own, Renau struggled to find a place as a man and as an artist.

In an interview with Manolo García, Renau says it all: "I left Mexico because it was the time of the Cold War and I was very isolated there. The Mexican artists then were doing work that was protesting against Spanish colonialism. The Spanish painters were very absorbed with aesthetics. And I was earning a living designing posters" (280). After spending much of his life in exile, Renau did not find a home. At the end of his life, between 1976 and 1982, he made several trips to Spain. His intention was to go

home and live in Spain. But Josep Renau died on October 11 1982 at the Government Hospital in Berlin, "exiled from his land of origin and bearing a Mexican passport" (Manuel Garcia 255). He bequeathed his work and archives to his native city of Valencia.

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