

TWO NARRATIVES IN SIQUEIROS' MURAL FOR THE MEXICAN ELECTRICIANS' SYNDICATE¹

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In July 1939 David Alfaro Siqueiros organized the International Team of Plastic Artists to accept a mural commission from the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate (SME) for the stairwell of its new Mexico City headquarters. Mexicans Antonio Puyol, who with Siqueiros was recently returned from fighting for the Spanish Republic, and Luis Arenal joined Spanish photomontage artist Josep Renau and painters Miguel Prieto and Antonio Rodríguez Luna, newly arrived exiles of the Spanish Civil War, to form a collective organized according to communist ideals.

The Syndicate intended the commission to decorate their new building, commemorate their twenty-fifth anniversary, and treat their ongoing struggle to assert labor's position within the electrical industry. The communist and communist-sympathizing artists, all former members of Popular Front artistic organizations and united in their commitment to the anti-fascist struggle, sought the commission as an opportu-



Josep Renau. Detail from *Testigos Negros de Nuestro Tiempo: un gran film documental*, published in *Nueva Cultura III*, no. 1, March 1937, showing Renau's conception of sequential still photomontages as a film strip.

nity to vindicate the cause of the collapsed Spanish Republic and denounce capitalist and fascist imperialism and militarism. Responding to the need to address multiple factions within the Syndicate as well as their own political imperatives, the muralists developed two complementary narratives in the SME mural: a cinematic montage describing the rise of fascism out of capitalism and its generation of imperialism and war; and a condensed depiction of the production of electricity. This dual narrative structure served to address the parameters of the Syndicate commission, which required that a portion of the mural be dedicated to the role of the SME within the electrical industry,¹ and asserted a parallel and at times metaphorical relationship between the production of electricity and the escalating international conflicts. The changes made to the electricity narrative within the mural suggest the importance of the theme within the struggle for control over the mural's content, and ultimately over its political message.

The Commission and the Development of Themes

The mural was designed for the new headquarters of the SME. This modernist building, built under architects Enrique Yáñez and Ricardo Rivas, has been interpreted as a symbol of the Syndicate's legitimization fol-

lowing their successful strike against the Mexican Light and Power Company, which corresponded to a larger trend of a consolidation of union power under Cárdenas.² The majority of the Syndicate Directors originally intended the mural commission to complement this spirit of legitimization,³ focusing on the Syndicate and the electrical industry.⁴ As Renau describes, however, the muralists were able to convince a significant number of electrical workers of the imperative of addressing the anti-fascist struggle at its moment of crisis following the collapse of Spanish Republic.⁵ The workers were already acquainted with such international political concerns: syndicate representatives had been active with-

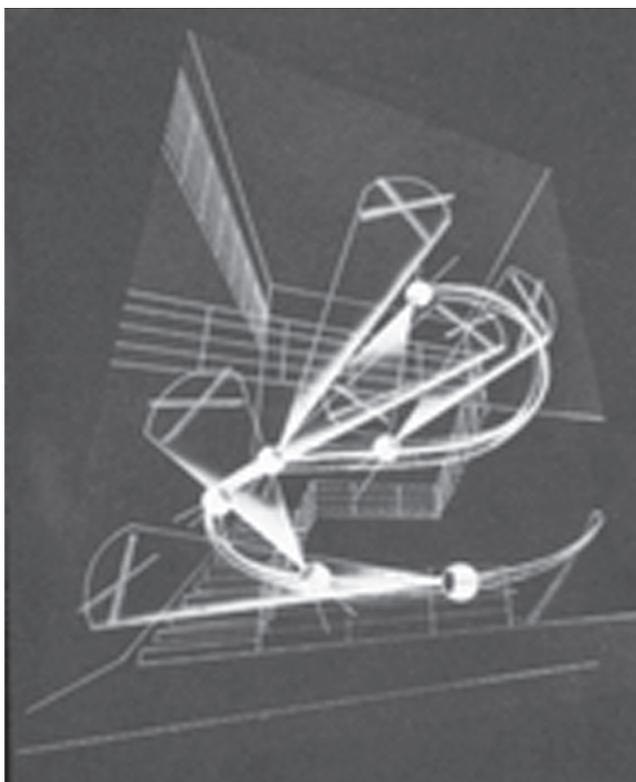
¹Josep Renau reports that one third of the mural was to address the electrical industry, "Mi Experiencia con Siqueiros", in *Revista de Bellas Artes*, (Jan/Feb, 1976): 14.

²Rafael López Rangel, *Enrique Yáñez en la cultura arquitectónica mexicana*, (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Azcapotzalco, Limusa, 1989): 61. López Rangel refers to the 1935 strike as giving impetus to the building project, a *LUX* article on the building puts the project start date as following the 1936 strike, *LUX*, XI:10 (Oct. 1938): special insert.

³Folgarait's interpretation of the mural project focuses on its participation in this legitimization of the labor movement in the 1930s and its contribution to the consolidation of post-revolutionary authoritarianism in Mexico. *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: art of the new order* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁴Folgarait, 141.

⁵Renau, 14.



Photomontage by Josep Renau demonstrating the sequence of six ideal viewpoints, 1969.

in Popular Front organizations, the Syndicate had consistently supported Republican Spain and its refugees, and the rhetoric and imagery of the anti-fascist movement began its regular appearance in their journal *LUX* in 1933.⁶ With the support of the workers and the minority communist-sympathizing directors (including Casanova, the liaison to the muralists), the painters were able to negotiate to expand the original conception of the mural's themes to include international politics.

According to Siqueiros, the first political themes discussed and chosen

by the collective were fascism, imperialism, and war. The muralists had all dealt with these themes in past work: they were staples within Popular

⁶SME delegates were founding members of the National Committee in Defense of the Proletariat (1935), Mexico's United Front organization. Examples of collaboration with LEAR, Mexico's United and later Popular Front cultural organization, can be found in *Frente a Frente* and *LUX*. For example, the SME sent delegates to the discussions preparing LEAR's representatives to the New York Artists Congress of 1936, *Frente a Frente*, n1 (March, 1936): 15. Coverage of international politics from an anti-fascist perspective in *LUX* began in June 1933, and regular coverage of the war in Spain began in September 1936.

Front anti-fascist rhetoric, appearing in art in Mexico and abroad. Soon afterwards, a plan to devise a general theme for the entire ensemble was negotiated, and capitalism became the overarching concept,⁷ shown as driving both fascism and the electrical industry. While critiques of capitalism were common in revolutionary rhetoric, they had been toned down, although not abandoned, during the Popular Front period.

The theme of electricity is present in the muralists' depiction of a subterranean factory and its towers on the ceiling. Within the subterranean factory, in the tradition of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*,⁸ images describing the production of electricity served as a compositional base and allegory for the generation of capital, war, imperialism, and fascism. On the ceiling towering smokestacks, electrical pylons, and a radio transmission tower promise a new technically advanced future, crowned by the flag of the SME. Such an electrical theme also had international precedents and local manifestations; beyond the celebration of electrification found in Soviet art and WPA murals in the United States, Mexican art and imagery at times celebrated and at other moments criticized the process of electrification in Mexico.⁹

In an effort to define a popular art for an audience of electrical workers, the artists illustrated these various themes by selecting and repli-

cating imagery from sources ranging from Mexican and international journals to leftist films, earlier works of art, and photographs taken from electrical factories near Mexico City. It appears the muralists also used formal means to engage their audience of electrical workers and ultimately transform these themes into two distinct narratives. First, they deployed modern perspective tools (projectors), projecting images onto the walls of the stairwell in anticipation of the path followed by an ascending spectator's gaze. This strategy determined the composition of the mural, its filmic and montage-based presentation, and its anamorphic features. Second, they structured the mural's composition according to an abbreviated depiction of electrical produc-

⁷Unpublished text from 1939, "Tesis auto-crítica sobre la obra por el Equipo Internacional de Artes Plásticas" in the *Sala de Arte Público de Siqueiros* archive, p.4.

⁸Luis Urbina also notes *Metropolis* as a precedent of this factory. "Siqueiros y las organizaciones obreras," manuscript in the SME library, p. 2. Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals reference this tradition of the subterranean factory, as well.

⁹An initial sampling of Mexican electricity images, over and beyond those in *LUX*, includes Ramón Alva Guadarrama's critical 1935 mural at the Mercado Abelardo Rodríguez, *Electrification in the countryside*; Fermín Revueftas' 1934 stained glass windows on the benefits of electricity applied to radio and medical technologies for the Centro Escolar Revolución; and Ryah Ludens' murals for the *Museo Regional de Michoacán* in Morelia which celebrate the electrical industry.

tion, forming a base and axis along which the rest of the images were organized. The result is a mural that engages the viewer with a double narrative structure, one relying on affective reception and the other on a working knowledge of the production of electricity.

The Narratives

A *Cinematic mural*. The SME mural was Siqueiros' second attempt to create a cinematically-conceived mural designed to be viewed sequentially by a moving spectator. Recent literature is beginning to focus on Siqueiros' perspectival experiments designed for such a mobile spectator, which during the 1930s were channeled into the creation of cinematic mural art. Mari Carmen Ramírez has rightly posited the SME mural as a successor to Siqueiros' experimental *Plastic Exercise* (1933), a cinematically conceived mural designed to be viewed from a sequence of vantage points and ultimately filmed, and compares his and Sergei Eisenstein's writings on montage in theoretical terms.¹⁰ Crucially, the painter and filmmaker shared an interest in the dynamic potential of cinematography to make a psychological or emotional impact on the spectator and developed an aesthetic based on the Marxist ideal of dialectics. The purpose of dialectics, or conflict, in film aesthetics was to convey the underlying psychological con-

tent of the scene through its structure, to jar and provoke the viewer on an emotional level in response to formal and narrative leaps, and ultimately to inspire political action.¹¹

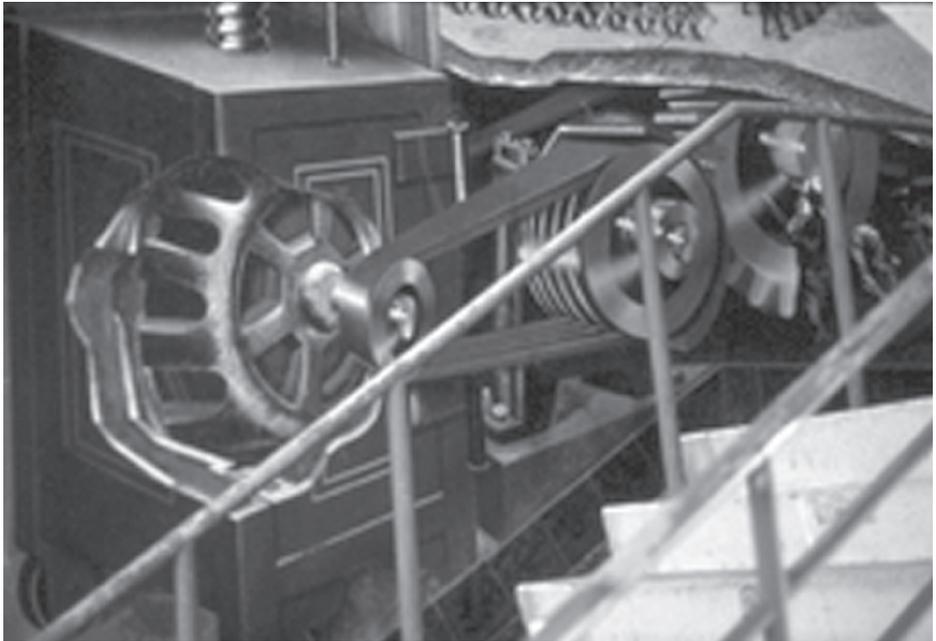
While Siqueiros had experimented with the formal means to realize such a cinematically conceived mural, Renau's Popular Front period photomontage production gave him experience as a "director",¹² creating sequential narratives of still photomontages conceived of as film strips, similarly employing Eisenstein's theories. Together the two artists collaborated to design a filmic narrative that sought to move and engage spectators with its sequence of montaged or dialectical images, characterized by stark contrasts, or leaps, between light and dark, distinct viewing angles, scales and narrative content.

The production of the mural, which emphasized sequence and multiple perspectives, provides the foundation for the analysis of this first, filmic narrative. In 1976 José Renau published

¹⁰ "Las massas son la matrix" in *Retrato de una Década: David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1930-1940*. Ex.Cat. (Mexico, DF: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1996): 69-95.

¹¹ See "Dramaturgy of Film Form" and "Montage 1937" in Eisenstein, Sergei, *Selected Works*, ed. Richard Taylor (London, Indianapolis, Bloomington, 1987).

¹² Renau refers to himself as a director editing a film script when describing creating his photomontages in the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition, *Arte en peligro, 1936-1939* (Valencia, 1980): 26.



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists.
Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: the Safe.

a description of the collective's working method, accompanied by a series of collages and drawings of the mural space.¹³ He describes how the group studied the progression of 100 people up through the stairwell space to chart the path of the average spectator. From this path the group proposed six ideal viewing points. These points were used to design the overall composition, which employed Baroque compositional devices to disrupt the viewer's perception of the four distinct walls of the mural space. The content of the mural was then selected from contemporary photographs and images, and

the six ideal viewpoints were used to determine the principle points from which these images were projected onto the wall for tracing. The effect of these multiple vantage points and projection sites is a mural rendered in contrasting perspective systems, based both on a given photograph's original perspective and on the origin of its projection. When the same image is viewed from different locations, it

¹³Renau (1976). The photomontage studies recreating the formal strategies used by the muralists were created in 1969, as Renau revisited mural theory for a project in East Germany, 13.



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: wall with the Fascist Demagogue.

can appear highly distorted or it can resolve if the original projection point is found. This production process clearly reinforces the expectation that the mural would be experienced sequentially, as one climbed the stairs within the mural space. This sequence is the source of an aesthetic characterized by multiple perspective systems, which makes the most of distortion of vision for dramatic effect. These features are discussed in Eisenstein's writings as characteristics of montage sequences.

In contrast to Folgarait, who has proposed that this designated sequence is illogical to the point of only serving the interest of the muralists to determine "viewer behavior for the sake ... of control alone",¹⁴ I argue that this structured narrative was highly strategic. While this technically determined production process was no guarantee that a viewer would follow a predetermined path,

this conception did provide the basis for the application of filmic devices in a painted environment, with the aim of inspiring *pathos* in the viewer. The result is a narrative based in the communist-sympathizing team members' political ideologies, following the sequential ascent of the stairs and their six ideal vantage points, and is accessible to a viewer familiar with these ideologies and their historical development during the 1930s.

The International Crisis Narrative. Approaching the mural's stairwell from below, the first image available to the viewer is a safe, or a strong-box of capitalism. Its cut-away walls reveal the induction motor inside, which drives the subterranean fac-

¹⁴Folgarait, 161. Folgarait focuses his attentions on the photomontage study of the viewer climbing the stairs and the later ideal view montages, but does not analyze the narrative they create. 142-147, 156-161.

tory's belts and gears and operates a crankshaft that extends out the top of the strongbox. This mechanical strongbox is the origin of the system in the subterranean factory and in the scene above.

Entering further into the mural space and considering the second vantage point, we see that the crankshaft of the mechanical strongbox supports and turns a monstrous puppet-like figure with three arms and a parrot head. A railing hides the crankshaft and puppet nature of the figure from the masses below, but the true nature of this monstrous figure and his speech is exposed to the viewer, revealing him to be a mechanical toy whose motion and orations are produced by the strongbox.¹⁵

This common trope, a monster-headed figure of Fascism and demagoguery, offers a flower to the troops before him with one left arm, while another left arm waves a torch. These superimposed translucent arms evoke futurist painting strategies implying movement and suggest that the figure has simultaneously enticing and dangerous natures. The parrot's head also appears to move as it is depicted both facing the troops to the right and the masses above, signaling double talk.¹⁶

Depicted above and behind this monumental figure, the Masses stream towards the parrot-headed demagogue to hear his speech. As the crowd reaches the figure, two distinct

groups form: protesters to the top and troops to the bottom. Workers emerge from the crowd above to join a chaotic group of protesters in a skirmish with the troops on the steps of a burning classical building. The masses moving past the demagogue are formed into geometrical regiments of troops (Nazi Stormtroopers, Mussolini's Blackshirts, and Camisas de Todos Colores) who march towards the building. The geometric and opaque regiments of troops outnumber the chaotic protesters, painted as faint projections, emphasizing the formal contrasts between the two groups.

The classical building upon whose steps the protesters and troops skirmish is ablaze and the smoke billows up towards the sky depicted above. Its classical style and the inscription in the pediment, "*LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ*", are symbols of Democracy. A moneybag is superimposed over the inscription, suggesting that Capitalism has tainted Democracy. The torches held by the demagogue and the troops stand-

¹⁵In early versions of the mural, the microphone stands on the strongbox; in the final version, the microphone originates within the mechanical safe.

¹⁶Hurlburt refers to the Mexican phrase "*se habla como perico*" (one talks nonsense like a parrot) and the tradition of offering a flower as a gift, which combined with the torch is analogous to the English expression, the carrot and the stick. The Mexican Muralists in the United States (New Mexico, 1989): 288, ff. 97.

ing by the building suggest that this destruction of capitalist Democracy has been at the hands of the Fascist demagogue and the military under him, recalling the destruction of the German Reichstag, perpetrated by Nazis and blamed on the Communists.¹⁷ In the image, however, the hoarding of money in the safe powers the Fascist demagogue in the first place, so that in its entirety, this wall represents the self-destruction of Capitalist Democracy through its generation of Fascism.

The position of the third ideal viewpoint was determined by the group's observation that when climbing the stairs, the viewer's attention would sweep past the central wall and focus on the fiery cloud in the upper right corner. According to Renau, this image of an explosion over an aircraft carrier represents war. En route to this third vantage point, one's eyes might sweep across the central wall, which in the first version displayed a series of offenses perpetrated under Capitalist and Fascist regimes during the buildup towards war: documentary photographs from international journals painted as projections to create a newsreel effect. Hence within the muralists' narrative structure, war follows Fascism's destruction of Capitalist Democracy and the resulting suffering.

The explosive cloud provides a transition to the ceiling, the fourth ideal view, painted in *trop l'oeil* to

suggest a view of the sky above. A grouping of smokestacks, electric pylons, and a radio tower rise above the plant structures. According to the legend above the mural, these towering forms represent peace, justice, solidarity, and work. They point to the sun, which is represented as a series of projections and represents liberty. The muralists' technique of projecting images from multiple vantage points is recorded and represented two-dimensionally in order to imply that liberty is a functional synthesis of a series of viewpoints, or projection points. Further, this ideal vision of liberty and peace is the antithesis of the previous image —war— and the chaos and destruction below. This recalls Eisenstein's strategy of juxtaposing antithetical symbolic content to heighten drama, or the central peaceful chapter of his film *Potempkin* that follows the explosion of the initial conflict on the battleship and precedes the slaughter on the Odesa steps and final confrontation. In the context of the build-up to the Spanish Civil War, it also suggests the brief glimpse of revolutionary society

¹⁷Hurlburt points to similarities between this image and a Heartfield photomontage of *Göring, Der Henker* in front of the burning Reichstag, 241-2. *Life* magazine, a source for imagery within the mural, also included the Burning of the Reichstag, discussed as a Nazi plot to discredit the Communists, in its photographic narrative describing the build-up to WWII. *Life* (September 11, 1939).



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: central wall. First version.

realized in Barcelona following the initial defeat of the Fascist uprising in that region, before the reality of a prolonged conflict (and internal power-struggles) had set in.

Continuing up the stairs, the fifth ideal view represents thematic leap back into the fray as a fighter bearing a red flag dominates the right wall with his rifle, opposing the progress of the tank overrunning a classical building from Spain, while a Madrid apartment building burns. Contrast heightens the scene's main

conflict: the flesh and white shirt of the fighter contrast the dark metal of the tank; the view of the tank and aircraft carrier from a low angle contrasts with the view of the top of the gun and back of the fighter. The distortion and elongation of the fighter's face and gun also heightens the drama and emotional power of the image when viewed from within the stairwell. From this vantage the lone gunman with his red flag is the revolutionary force needed to confront the onslaught of the imperialist war machine.

The final viewpoint reveals the "infernal machine" of the central wall and allows the overall structure of the mural to become apparent. The central vertical axis of the composition is formed by the turbine generator, which extends from the lower reaches of the subterranean factory into the central terrestrial realm. In the first version of the mural, the lowest chamber of the machine held six faces: two men of African descent, a southeast Asian, an Indian, an Asian, and a white man protected by a gas mask. Racial typing was often employed during the 1930s to suggest imperialism. In the central chamber, the team painted often-reproduced images of children killed during the Spanish Civil War. The machine is crowned by a two-headed imperialist eagle/vulture, which would fly in opposite directions if not for the fact that it appears to be spinning atop of the machine. The cables of the

machine encircle figures representing England, France, and the United States on one side and Italy, Japan, and Germany on the other; with their victims painted as projections at their feet. In the background, two columns of soldiers march across the field towards the wall of war, transforming into gas-masked troops as they pass the generator. A mournful, displaced mother and child look on. From the top of the stairs, the distorted face of the fighter resolves. He is positioned above and in opposition to the Fascist demagogue, as the viewer who has ascended the stairs and turns to view the entire scene now confronts this infernal machine.

I have suggested that the narrative of "ascending the stairs" is a montage describing the development of capitalism, fascism, imperialism, their explosion into war and the rise of

resistance to these forces. However even if the viewer did not follow the prescribed path (and what viewer would?), the important element would be their immersion within the painted stairwell, and their experience of this montage over time. Passage through the stairwell was primarily designed to dynamically engage the viewer, barraging him or her with a series of contrasts and conflicts and exposing the dramatic nature of this international crisis.

Upon rising to the top of the stairs alongside the fighter, the depicted conflict is revealed to contain a double narrative. From the top of the stairs, the significance of the electrical factory and the giant generator becomes clear. Here, the thermodynamic production of electricity is the key to organizing the imagery of the mural, and the viewer with mechanical knowledge of this pro-



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: central wall, gas compression chamber. First version.



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: subterranean factory, generator and turbine room.

cess would have the opportunity to structure the stairwell montage into a linear narrative.¹⁸

The Production of Electricity Narrative. The initial parallel between the world of politics and the factory was established by demonstrating that the induction motor within the strong-box controlled both the Fascist figure and the gears of the factory. The subterranean factory contains a narrative that reads from left to right, following the production of electricity in a thermoelectric system.¹⁹ Gears operate pumps that bring in the substance

(often water) that propels the generator. Likewise, the Fascist-demagogue attracts the masses and propels

¹⁸Folgarait also identifies two narratives in the mural. One he characterizes as based in the "highly natural relation of the mural itself to the normal path of the spectator," which according to him begins on the second floor; approaches the stairwell with a clear view of the infernal machine, and then climbs to the top. He contrasts this with a second, contrived narrative that the muralists devised for the sake of controlling the viewer; pp. 156-161. I would not deny that his narratives are ways to experience the mural. However, I do not find them compelling as aids to interpret the content of the mural and the artists' intentions.

them as troops towards the burning building. The liquid would next be sent to the boiler to be heated up, turned into vapor, and then sent to the turbine in pipes seen in the original version of the mural. This section also includes a foundry, where liquid metal is being poured. This depiction of intense heat and high pressures parallels the burning symbol of Democracy above, which increases the pressure on the world stage.

When the vapor enters the central turbine, it is sent to the lower gas compression chamber, where it is heated to yet greater pressures, along with oppressed workers from around the world (the heads of the Asian, Indian, and African men). This appears to correspond to the idea that imperialism, a system under which white capitalists are protected while non-whites are exploited, fuels the war machine and follows Capitalism's creation of Fascism. As the high-pressure vapor escapes into the next chamber, its thermodynamic energy is transformed into the mechanical energy needed to spin the rotors of the generator. In this case, the faces of three children killed in Spain appear to spin in the central chamber of the turbine (their translucent counterparts suggesting this motion), driving the machine and producing energy for war. This turns the magnetic axle above (the metallic imperialist eagle/vulture), whose opposing charges create an alternating current in the surrounding coil, which flows as electricity. If



El Lissitzky. *Dnieper Power Station*.
Photomontage. Reproduced in *USSR
in Construction*, March 1934 and *Nueva
Cultura*, Número Extraordinario,
[Oct-Nov] 1935.

each end of the eagle/vulture is said to represent Fascist and Capitalist Imperialism, then it is their interdependent nature that generates the death and destruction that come with powering war. The ideology evoked in this ima-

¹⁹My knowledge of electrical generation comes primarily from the *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*, 8th edition (New York, 1997), and also from reading *LUX* and its inserts.

ge corresponds to communist policy following the Molotov - von Ribbentrop nonaggression pact of August 1939, which described WWII as an imperialist war between the capitalist democracies and fascists.

In the photographs we have of the first version of the mural, the transformers to the right are intact and prepared to convert and then distribute the electrical energy. This appears to correspond to the image of war, complete with its aircraft carrier and bombers, which promise to enable a long-distance war. The next image, the control panel, is empty but waiting, suggesting that there is a

possibility of controlling, moderating, or even stopping the distribution of these forces.

The final scene in the electric factory is an image of rows of generators from a hydroelectric, not thermoelectric, plant. This image is strikingly similar to images of hydroelectric generators from the Dnieper plant in the Soviet Union, widely distributed to celebrate the achievements of the Soviet State in the journals *USSR in Construction*, *Nueva Cultura*, *El Machete*, and *LUX*, the SME's journal. Most famously these generators comprise a section of an electrification montage entitled *Dnieper Power Station*. In this image, a monu-



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: subterranean factory, worker at control panel.

mental Lenin towers over the newly completed Dnieper hydroelectric dam, its power lines distributing the vast electrical resources represented by the long row of turbines. After a variation of this montage (sans Lenin) appeared in the issue of *LUX* dedicated to the travels of Casanova and two other SME representatives to electrical plants in the Soviet Union, various images of the Mexican hydroelectric factories' turbine rooms appeared employing a similar format.²⁰ It is significant that the muralists used an image linked to this Socialist Realist montage, which represents the ideal of the achievement of Lenin's promise to electrify the country, to suggest the final stage of the electrical narrative. Like the sky above, it promises an idealistic and Communist conclusion to the story of the generation of electrical power in Mexico, using imagery similar to that published in *LUX* during its pro-Soviet period.

Renau's Version

On May 24, 1940 when the mural was almost finished, the group dissolved as Siqueiros led part of the team in an apparent assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Fourth International who received asylum under the Mexican government despite the objections of communists and Mexico's leading labor organization, the CTM. This event compromised the completion of

the project (as Siqueiros, Arenal, and Pujol went into hiding) and exposed differences between the traditionally anarchist SME and the communist muralists, whose party was losing support in Mexico following its reorientation and reorganization.²¹ The directorate of the SME demanded that Renau, who had not taken part in the attack, repaint sections of the mural to eliminate points of political contention. It appears Renau acted independently of Siqueiros' leadership in making changes to the final version of the mural.

Renau painted over content referring to specific international political crises, intensified structural parallels between the Mexican factory and the struggle above, and increased the presentation of worker oppression and resistance. In effect, as Hurlburt has pointed out, the mural ceased to be a historically specific denunciation of Popular Front enemies, and instead relies on classic revolutionary (anti-Capitalist) rhetoric.²²

²⁰The issue of *LUX* dedicated to the SME delegation's trip to the USSR and including a Dnieper montage is *LUX* IX:11 (Nov. 1936); photos and montages which appear to be inspired by this example appear in *LUX* X:7 (July 1937): 20, X:10-11 (October-November 1937):41, and XI:9 (September 1938): 41, which uses the same format but shows different technology.

²¹See Barry Carr, "Crisis in Mexican Communism: the Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party," parts 1 & 2. *Science & Society*, 50:4 (Winter 1986): 391-414 and 51:1 (Spring 1987):43-67.



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural, detail: central and right walls.

What must be noted, however, is that the most striking changes were made to the electrical imagery. These changes suggest that the narrative describing the production of electricity was determined to be somewhat inaccessible to many viewers, or that parallels between the two narratives were too weak in the first version. Further, it appears that the imperative of addressing such parallels had renewed importance.

Photographs of the first version are selective and make comparison

of the left side of the electrical factory difficult, however the changes to the central infernal machine and the factory to the right are extreme. At the center of the mural, squid-like tendrils emerge from the turbine to suck workers from the factory into the compression chamber. As their blood passes through the chambers of the turbine, it transforms into coins that spill out of the machine. Of the two regiments of soldiers



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists.
Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural. First version.

marching towards the machine, only one passes by as gas-masked troops. The other regiment is replaced by power lines, which conduct the energy produced by the machine up to the corner war cloud, revealing that this capitalist machine turns the blood of the workers into money and soldiers into energy in order to power imperialist war.

To the right of the infernal machine, the crisis within the subterranean factory increases: the transformers that store and regulate the flow of electricity are on fire. Much like its counterpart in *Metropolis*, the subte-

rranean factory is being destroyed, the fire below corresponding to the war above. The floor separating the worlds of the factory and the international crisis begins to crack. To the right, a worker on a raised platform is at the circuit board, taking control of the crisis much like the Revolutionary on the wall above. Finally at the far right, the ideal factory remains in its orderly state. This narrative carries the apocalyptic message of much Revolutionary thought, common in the pages of *LUX* by the summer of 1940: the excesses of Capitalism will lead to its self-destruction, however

if the proletariat –or the SME– seizes this opportunity it can lead the way to the new society.

Conclusions

Implicit in my argument is the idea that the SME mural was designed for certain kinds of viewers. The viewer who follows the mural narrative climbing the stairs must want to share the muralists' "point of view," or vantage points. Knowledge of international events, communist rhetoric, and imagery produced during the Popular Front era allows this viewer to access and make sense of much of the imagery. With or without this information, however, this montage was designed to be affective, and expressive of conflict. In contrast, the electrical narrative was originally designed for a viewer who had specialized knowledge of the generation of electricity. This would encompass many of the syndicate members themselves (especially those enrolled in the SME's education programs' Electricity course), as well as those individuals who had read descriptions of electrical production circulating in journals to introduce people to the new electrical technology.²³ In the final version of the mural, this electrical narrative became more accessible, relying instead on familiar revolutionary metaphors like those found in *Metropolis* (the capitalist factory

will engender its own destruction) or in Pablo O'Higgins' murals at the Mercado Abelardo Rodríguez (where corn is transformed into coins for the capitalist while the people suffer from malnutrition).

Beyond addressing the needs of the diverse constituencies, or audiences, at the SME –including the Directors, members concerned with international politics, and the muralists themselves– the double narrative served two functions within the mural. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, the second narrative allows the viewer to organize the barrage of information received on the path through the mural in a logical and linear fashion by employing their mechanical knowledge. In effect, the muralists relied upon the viewers' affective responses (or *pathos*, in Eisenstein's terms) to the montaged, sequentially experienced content, as well as their technical expertise or education to process their experience of the mural. Such a strategy relied on the notion that the stairwell mural would have been experienced first while climbing the stairs, and second from the hallway above where the school, office of the Secretary of Education and Propaganda, and offices of the Justice Commission were originally located.

²³ One such description can be found in *Maestro Rural*, VII:7 (October 1, 1935): 18-22.



Siqueiros and the International Team of Graphic Artists. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate Mural.

Second, by creating two narratives, best viewed after climbing to the level of these offices, the muralists aspired to convince the viewer to consider the relationship between the electrical factory in Mexico and the political crisis on the international scene. This relationship was at the heart of the initial debate about the subject matter of the mural, especially in 1940 when the Syndicate directorate attempted to lead the SME away from the engagement with international and Mexican politics that had characterized its Popular Front-era coalitions. With the start of

World War II, this relationship would have been particularly relevant, given that a Canadian company owned the Mexican Light and Power Company, the electrical company that served Mexico City and employed the local Syndicate members. Canada, a dominion of Britain, had entered the war as an Ally.

While some of the SME directors likely saw the mural changes as a means to distance themselves from Siqueiros and Communist-led, Popular Front-era politics in the wake of the attempted Trotsky assassination, Renau's changes kept astride

of changing Communist policy, with its increased revolutionary rhetoric following the Hitler-Stalin pact. The generation of electricity metaphor describing both the crisis on the international stage and the possibility of an ideal world of worker-controlled technology placed the work even more firmly in the realm of traditionally Communist imagery. And Renau was able to preserve (and enhance by contrast) the final image of the

ideal, and soviet-inspired, factory, from the period when the SME was strongly pro-Communist. In this way, the communist muralists inserted a promise that brings to mind Lenin's famous dictum, "Communism is Soviet Government plus the electrification of the whole country".²⁴ The mural adds to this dictum the idea that electrification will require the eradication of imperialist war on the international stage and capitalist imperialism locally.

²⁴ Lenin, VIII Congress of Soviets, December 1920.