Abstract

This research explores three artists during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) who utilized a surrealist aesthetic while promoting the causes of the Fascist, Nationalist front through their work. By focusing on artists Salvador Dalí, Alfonso Ponce de León, and José Caballero, the usage of “Fascist Surrealism” is explored to analyze its stylistic differences with “traditional Surrealism”. Through paintings and variations in artistic techniques this research questions what factors led to the usage of Surrealism, a movement founded with a fundamentally anti-Fascist, left-wing, agenda, by artists who held vastly different political beliefs. This research examines prior political activities of the conventional Surrealist movement to illustrate their attempts at political change, and the factors that led to argumentation and disagreement among the group’s members. By analyzing its foundational characteristics, Surrealism’s ideological basis is compared with that of Fascism to identify their shared features, and the possible factors that led to their convergence.

Introduction

In 1936, a military coup led, mainly, by generals, Emilio Mola, José Sanjurjo, and Francisco Franco attempted to overthrow Spain’s existing government, the Second Spanish Republic, subsequently sparking national polarization and the start of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). 1 As Spain divided itself into the challenged Republican front and the rebel Nationalist front, Spanish artists began to assist in wartime efforts through the production of propaganda and politically charged art. Becoming increasingly aware of their potential to incite social change, Spanish avant-garde artists, previously focused on commercial success, created pieces to raise international awareness of wartime atrocities and their ideological goals.

This paper identifies the intersection of Fascism and Spanish Surrealism within the context of the SCW through the works of three artists. Beginning with a brief overview of the SCW and the Surrealist movement, this paper illustrates why the usage of surrealist aesthetics by Nationalist artists remains especially intriguing within the evolution of the conventional Surrealist movement. Prior work on Surrealism during the SCW, most notably, Robin Greeley’s (2006) work Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War, has identified Surrealism’s political ambiguity and associations with Fascism. 2 However, specific connections between the ideologies of Fascism and Surrealism, and the factors that led for Spanish Surrealists to utilize Fascism, have yet to be fully explored. While Greeley has examined the difficulties Surrealism encountered whilst promoting progressive causes, this paper explores how the same characteristics that problematized the movement’s progressive agenda ultimately led to its utilization by the Nationalist front during the SCW. Due to the significance of this usage, this paper will refer to the intersection between the two philosophies as “Fascist Surrealism” to illustrate how the Surrealist movement evolved over time and strayed from its original intentions within the context of Spain’s political turmoil.

The body of this paper is broken down by artist. Section Three examines Alfonso Ponce de León’s 1936 self-portrait to illustrate how a Falangist painter, perhaps unintentionally, adjusted Surrealism to fit a new cast. Section Four focuses on José Caballero’s 1937 cover for the Nationalist publication Verticé, to clearly demonstrate Surrealism’s ability to blend with Fascist aesthetics. Section Five explores Salvador Dalí’s crucial role within Surrealism, his personal fascination with Fascism, and his overall disagreements with Surrealist leaders, within the context of his 1939 painting The Enigma of Hitler.

Through the exploration of these works, this study will illustrate how, and attempt to answer why, “traditional Surrealism”, or the largely progressive/leftist movement headed by André Breton prior to the SCW, branched off into certain semblances of “Fascist Surrealism”. By identifying and exploring Surrealism’s initial political context, this paper addresses which of the movements’ foundational characteristics allowed for it to be rebranded into “Fascist Surrealism” while maintaining its overarching “Surrealist” identity. Essentially, through an analysis of the movements’ central tenets and beliefs, this paper concludes that Surrealism and Fascism share many core principles. From these findings, and the subsequent rise of “Fascist Surrealism”, the goals and motivations that defined André Breton’s “traditional Surrealism” are contextualized within their own historical evolution. Ultimately, by identifying this evolution, as it occurred throughout the course of the SCW, this paper argues that artists’ usage of “Fascist Surrealism” can be partially attributed to Surrealism’s inherent fluidity and its philosophical similarities with Fascism.

1 This paper will refer to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) with the acronym “SCW”.

2 See (Greeley 99-110) for previous insight into the connection between Surrealism and Fascism.
Spanish Fascism and the Surrealist Movement

Prior to the SCW, Spain was experiencing a cultural milieu from the dramatic cultural shift brought on by the formation of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931. Spain’s new secular, progressive government led to the rise of avant-garde movements in the country: one such example being Surrealism. While disregarding traditional artistic technique, Surrealism began in France with revolutionary political goals and flirted with far-left causes. However, it was not until the SCW that Spanish Surrealism became politicized as artists used the aesthetic to criticize the rise of Fascism and the Nationalist front (Greeley 99). Through world renowned pieces such as Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, Joan Miró’s The Reaper, and Miro’s Aídez L’Espagne (Help Spain), artists who sympathized with the Republic hoped to draw attention to the Nationalist’s crimes and atrocities. 3

Although there is no historical consensus on the definition of the term “Fascism”, the rise of the Nationalist front prior to and during the SCW contained clear Fascist undertones. Nearly half of Spain supported the Nationalists due to fears of social change surrounding the Second Spanish Republic’s progressive agenda (Thomas 182). From its calls for a return to tradition, the Nationalists gained support from Conservatives, Monarchists, and Catholics by painting Progressives, Communists, and the Non-Religious, all represented in the Republican bloc, as a common enemy. Despite these early semblances of Fascist rhetoric, however, the Nationalist movement did not become overtly Fascist until it began identifying with the previously outlawed Falange party in 1937 (Casanova and Douche 286). In order to establish a concrete identity, and appeal to the sympathies of Italy and Germany, the Nationalists converged with the Falangist party, which, inspired by the Italian Fascist movement, aimed at revolution by targeting capitalists and the bourgeois (Payne 107). Following its new Falangist identification, the Nationalist movement became increasingly radicalized—justifying the use of violence against those who were seen as “enemies” to Spain. The Nationalist side’s violent, Fascist rhetoric led to most Spanish Surrealists allying themselves with the opposing Republican bloc. Despite the Republican’s support from the Soviet Union, Mexico, and a cohort of foreign volunteers, the Surrealists encountered difficulties appealing to the Spanish working class, possibly, due to their elitist origins (Brigstocke 2). Originating in post-World War One France, Surrealism’s founders were university educated artists and not, often, members of the working class (Greeley 99). Surrealisms’ basis in prior avant-garde movements (Cubism, Dadaism, and Futurism), and their fundamental disregard for traditional artistic techniques, perhaps, made the group’s experimental and nuanced approach to social protest particularly alienated from its target audience.

In 1924, André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement, published the First Surrealist Manifesto outlining the group’s basic beliefs in an attempt to organize their efforts. Claiming that the “reign of logic” over life and art was based on “mediocrity and hate”, the Surrealists, and Breton, desired real social change (Breton 2-5). However, while Surrealists generally believed creative endeavors could function as a method of social revolt, the movement struggled to find common ground with other revolutionary causes. By focusing on the spiritual and metaphysical conditions of man, the Surrealist movement, from its inception, established a rift with Marxism and its focus on material and economic issues (Short 20). 4

When Breton and five other Surrealists joined the French Communist party in 1927, most Surrealists did not share his political sensibilities and openly criticized his later decision to coauthor a manifesto with Leon Trotsky, Un Art révolutionnaire independent (Vaneigem 87). Met with severe scrutiny from the group’s Communists and Non-Communists alike, the manifesto’s proclamation that “the Communist Revolution is not afraid of art,” and denouncement of Fascism and Stalin, was criticized by many Surrealists including Pablo Picasso (Diego and Breton 3). Upset by the group’s ideological differences, in the Second Surrealist Manifesto (1929), Breton specifically attacked members for their lack of collective action which led to further tension and division within the group (Queneau 7). As the movement spread to Spain, prominent Spanish artists began to see Surrealism as an instrument of personal expression and an opportunity to achieve commercial and financial success (Minik 178). Spanish Surrealists tended to deny any association with French Surrealists and sought to distance themselves from the ideological purity of the movement, instead, using the aesthetic as a kind of “floating reality” to advance ideologies (even that which it had initially rebuked such as Fascism) (Brihuega 65).

Alfonso Ponce de León and “Post-Surrealism’s” Fascist Sensibilities

Alfonso Ponce de León was born in 1906 to a family of minor nobility and strong military traditions. He started his artistic career at the School of Fine Arts in San Fernando and was introduced to artists Salvador Dalí, Maruja Mallo, Federico García Lorca, and his future wife Margarita Manso. After joining Lorca’s theatre group, La Barraca, in 1933, Ponce moved to Madrid and drastically changed his societal and artistic outlook. Growing to detest the capitalist and bourgeois aspects of Republican Madrid, Ponce became increasingly radicalized and eventually joined the controversial Falange party. Ponce’s involvement with the party led him to create caricatures which critiqued what he saw as a consumeristic and consumption driven culture through depictions of sleazy “fat cat” capitalists. Despite his early cartoonish work, Ponce’s caricatures remain secondary to his later “Post-Surrealist style”.

3 See Appendix Figures 1, 2, and 3

4 For more information on Surrealism’s internal politics, see the 1930 pamphlet Un Cadavre and The Second Surrealist Manifesto (1929).
While undoubtedly drawing influences from “traditional Surrealism”, Ponce developed “Post-Surrealism” as a more “serious” critique of society. Today Ponce’s style is considered “magic-realism,” however, this paper identifies the surrealist connotations in his work and believes it remains Ponce’s primary influence.

While in the middle of developing his “Post-Surrealist” style, Ponce’s life began to change drastically with the outbreak of the SCW. For their association with the Falange party, Ponce and his siblings became targets of the underground Republican police or Checas. Although initially remaining free to carry out his daily routine, and not a priority of the Checas, the Nationalist’s advances towards Madrid initiated widespread panic on the Republican side.

Ponce was eventually arrested and tortured before being shot and killed in 1936- months before General Franco stormed Madrid. Following his death, Ponce’s brother and father were executed by firing squads, his Mother later committed suicide, and his wife broke down and fled to Italy. Although he was posthumously found to be the leader of an ‘underground resistance’ to Republican forces in Madrid, Ponce’s role in the SCW was largely unrecognized until the late 1990s and his 2001 exhibition at the Reina Sofia Museum (Stradling 65).

Just months before his death at the hands of Republican soldiers in 1936, Ponce painted a grim self-portrait representing his unique style. Although not as experimental as conventional Surrealism, Ponce’s self-portrait, depicting the artist’s lifeless body, represents the artist’s “Post-Surrealist” style through an apparent foreshadowing of his own death. A homage to the absurdity of pre-Nationalist Spain, Ponce’s self-portrait includes several surreal elements. Interestingly enough, Ponce appears to utilize his own body for those elements: a plant growing out of the palm of his hand, the subtle flotation of his body, and a rock impaled in his eye. In contrast to the absurdity of his physical condition, the painting’s background appears as a more traditional conventional form of reality: representing a contrast with traditional Surrealism’s often immersive, dreamlike atmosphere. Displaying a car, some foliage, and a wooden sign, Ponce’s self-portrait juxtaposes the irrational with the rational- a subtle nod to the notion of transcendence. Appearing as absurd and strange, the surreal features of the artist’s body seem to rise above the material conditions of the physical world.

From his early use of caricatures, one can understand Ponce’s position as a staunch anti-capitalist and fervent proponent of revolution. It can be interpreted that Ponce’s decision to nitpick certain surrealist elements, while avoiding the usage of an overtly surrealist back drop, was a conscious move to avoid his bourgeois associations with Surrealism. Ponce’s early involvement in the theatre group La Barraca exposed the artist to a wide variety of avant-garde movements. It is possible that, since his initial exposure to Surrealism came through an elite avant-garde movement, Ponce associated Surrealism with his detest for the privileged class of Madrid.

José Caballero: “Angelismo” and Artistic Desperation

In 1932, José Caballero enrolled in the San Fernando School of Fine Art working under Daniel Vázquez Diaz who introduced Caballero to the Spanish art scene. Caballero quickly befriended Federico García Lorca and, in 1934, was invited to join Lorca’s theatre group: La Barraca. Caballero’s association with La Barraca exposed him to several prominent avant-garde artists and introduced him to a unique blend of artistic styles. Although influenced by the styles of constructivism, expressionism and lyrical figuration, Caballero was most intrigued with Surrealism and began to utilize its aesthetic in 1934. Caballero, despite not even being aware of the French Surrealist movement, consistently worked under more experienced Surrealists such as Alfonso Ponce de León, Benjamín Palencia and Maruja Mallo until the outbreak of war.

The Spanish Civil War drastically changed the young artist’s life. In his own words the war became his life’s “axis” and permanently impacted him. At the outbreak of war, Caballero was visiting his hometown, Huelva, which was shortly captured by Francoist troops. In 1937, Caballero was recruited for his position as an artist and forced to work for the Nationalist front. Until the end of the war in 1939, Caballero produced illustrations for several propagandist publications including Verticé. Caballero was deeply pained by his tenure with the Nationalists, and in his own words described his emotional state, “everything was brutally silent and there was nothing left of that previous joy” (Caballero 353-354). Caballero’s growing cynicism would come to permanently alter the artist’s work and his life’s trajectory.

6 Biographical information is taken from (Stradling 198-200)
7 Figure 4 in appendix.
8 Biographical information on José Caballero from (González 1-20).
From early on, the usage of explicit surrealist techniques in Francoist propaganda inspired controversy. While overseeing the production of Nationalist propaganda, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, an avant-garde artist and one of the first intellectual advocates for Spanish Fascism, deliberately attacked experimental artists such as Caballero. Giménez Caballero believed it was wrong to, “let our fighters risk their lives by crushing the enemy”, while artists were, “caressing the red spirit” (Giménez Caballero 12). Giménez Caballero condemned the usage of surrealist aesthetics within the Falange movement, and, as a result, Caballero transformed his surrealist aesthetic into “Angelismo”: masking its themes with the usage of angels. Believing they could not hold any overt meaning, Caballero intended to use angels to express personal feelings of melancholy and destruction as angels were seen as “irresistible spirits of force” prior to the war (Madrigal Neira 210).

In 1937, Caballero drew his first war-time illustration for the propaganda magazine Vertice. An early representation of Caballero’s new “Angelismo” style, one can clearly see the evidence of Caballero’s coverup (Madrigal Neira 204). However, upon first glance, the inclusion of an angel appears to accentuate the painting’s surrealist connotations instead of simply muddling them. It is important to note that José Caballero was aware Giménez Caballero had an avant-garde background, however, the everyday onlooker would not quite see the inclusion of angels as a “coverup”. It seems Caballero’s personal usage of angels to depict tragedy and despair cannot be understood through the piece itself. Instead, as angels (a traditional religious icon) are synthesized with seemingly miscellaneous elements in the painting (i.e., die, shells, scrolls) “Angelismo”, instead of appearing as a new style, demonstrates a new kind of Surrealism. As a dream-like desert overlays a combination of traditional religious symbolism and conventional surrealist elements, the painting appears as a homage to Francoist Spain and its Catholic foundations.

Following the conclusion of the SCW, Caballero returned to Madrid and immediately became distraught and disheveled upon experiencing how his country had changed. Influenced by these feelings, the artist completely abandoned the style of Surrealism, instead, opting to utilize an Expressionist aesthetic in the latter half of his life. Caballero felt as if Surrealism no longer expressed who he was, perhaps, due to the style’s newfound political connotations. Evidently, Caballero did not intend to create Fascist connotations with Surrealism as he resented the Nationalists and was coerced into producing Fascist propaganda. Nonetheless, Caballero through his “Angelismo” style blended the two ideologies together: effectively creating a form of Surrealism that carried with it the cultural foundations of the Nationalist side. A claim supported by Caballero’s refusal to adopt the style in his post-war career.

Salvador Dalí: “Paranoiac-Critic” and the Fascist Fantasy

Salvador Dalí joined the Surrealist movement in 1929 and quickly became involved with its leftist political causes (Gibson 34). However, despite his initial adherence to Surrealist Orthodoxy, from 1933 onwards Dalí began taking increasing apolitical stances. With his new “Paranoiac-Critic” method, Dalí regularly incorporated Fascist themes into his work while simultaneously refusing to denounce the ideology (Dalí and Haakon 145).

Starting in 1930, Dalí began to develop a new artistic method to solve issues arising from Psychic Automaticism (Surrealism’s primary method). Labeled as “picturesque”, “cliché”, and lacking in revolutionary fervor, Psychic-Automaticism disregarded any active role of the artist and, as a result, frequently carried elitist connotations (Greeley 120). The Paranoiac-Critic method, meanwhile, utilized the artist directly by denoting reality as a “construct” born out of subjective experience (Dalí and Haakon 233). Despite Paranoiac-Critic’s widespread acclaim, Dalí was heavily scrutinized for his tendency to portray Fascist material with the style.

Although not excommunicated, Dalí was put under trial by the Surrealists for including a swastika in his 1933 The Weaning of Furniture Nutrition. Following the trial, Dalí stood ideologically distant from the Surrealists—remaining so for the entirety of the SCW (Gibson 36). While remaining explicitly neutral, Dalí expressed his disapproval of the Surrealist’s interpretation of fascism. Labeling the Surrealists “reactionary” and arguing they were implicated in similar values, Dalí believed they missed an opportunity to understand Fascism’s origins (Greeley 134). Through his 1939 painting The Enigma of Hitler, Dalí believed that Fascism could be understood through the lens of sexual perversion and desire.12 The inclusion of the word “enigma” in the painting’s title, absent from any overt negative connotations, implies Dalí’s skepticism and perhaps fascination with Fascism. Reflective of this attitude, The Enigma of Hitler displays a wondrous amphitheater-like atmosphere of which Hitler is the epicenter. Appearing as a small photo, the likeness of Hitler is portrayed as closer to reality than anything else in the painting. The inclusion of a transparent umbrella, an aggrandized megaphone, and a wilted tree absent of a base, reflect a fundamental disconnect between the realistic image of the subject, Hitler, and his external world. It seems The Enigma of Hitler displays Hitler as the only constant in a subjective, plastic reality. In return, reality appears only as an amphitheater through which the individual can carry out his will.

9 Ernesto Giménez Caballero was a Falangist cultural administrator while José Caballero is the painter being referenced.
10 Figure 5 in appendix.
11 Figure 6 in appendix.
12 Figure 7 in appendix.
For Dalí, there is no underlying ideology of “Fascism”, but only the individual who has acted in accordance with his internal psychosexual struggles. This focus on the internal landscape of the individual (Hitler’s sexual perversions) allowed Dalí to appropriate surrealist ideas and justify the ideology. Instead of critiquing the ideological basis of Fascism, Dalí romanticizes the ideology by viewing it as an internal struggle between the individual and his desires.

After the victory of Francisco Franco in 1939, Dalí quickly praised the Falange movement and its respect for Catholic values (Gibson 67). Dalí’s appraisal of Franco, and previous creation of The Enigma of Hitler, was enough to finally have him expelled from the Surrealist movement. After his excommunication, Dalí was criticized by the Surrealists for his frequent commercialization and hunger for fame, but it is unlikely that Dalí’s association with the Francoist regime was solely for commercial purposes. It is possible that Dalí’s sister, Anna Maria Dalí, who was raped, tortured, and imprisoned by Republican soldiers, influenced his decision to advocate for the other side (Rubío Coromina, 76). However, it is more likely that Dalí was attracted to the Falangists because of their emotionality, irrationality, and overall “mystique”.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the three aforementioned pieces, the malleability and appropriation of the surrealist style is demonstrated by the ease at which it expresses Nationalist/Fascist causes. From Ponce’s “Post-Surrealist” style to Caballero’s “Angelismo” and Dalí’s “Paranoia Critic”, the three artist’s inclusion or omission of surrealist techniques varied according to personal sentiment.

The development of Ponce’s “Post-Surrealist” aesthetic illustrates the evolution and implications Surrealism held over time. An anti-capitalist and revolutionary himself, Ponce’s willingness to adopt semblances of Surrealism demonstrates that Fascist movements, based on radical and emotional appeals to revolution, could find commonality with Surrealism’s own irrationality and spiritual basis. Ponce’s decision to ground his self-portrait in reality, with surrealist elements, reveals the artist’s objections with the style and desire to circumvent its elitist connotations. As previously suggested, Surrealism’s basis in, oftentimes, elite avant-garde circles created obstacles for Republicans/leftists who intended to use the style for social change. Perhaps, paradoxically, as Fascists became attracted to the movement’s revolutionary fervor and blatant anti-capitalism, they too encountered difficulties juggling the movement’s elitist connotations.

Caballero’s development of his “Angelismo” style for the Falangist publication Verticé reflected his need to mask the Surrealist style with the inclusion of angelic imagery. However, through the analysis of his 1937 Verticé cover illustration, this paper stresses the inclusion of angels accentuates the work’s surrealist implications. The synthesis of angels (a traditional religious symbol) with random objects muddles the divide between surrealist and Falangist aesthetics—successfully promoting the Nationalist cause. Caballero’s inability to sufficiently distinguish the surrealist aesthetic reveals its inherent flexibility. Instead, it seems Surrealism’s spiritual and emotional basis, intended to serve leftist or anti-Fascist causes, allowed for its appropriation by revolutionary Fascist propaganda.

Dalí’s development of the “Paranoia Critic” method stemmed directly from Psychic Automatism’s inability to spark revolutionary fervor. The philosophy of Psychic Automatism, and the artist’s role as a mere medium in the technique, revealed that Surrealism’s groundbreaking methods were fundamentally removed from the goal of social change. The original elitist connotations of “Psychic Automatism” allowed for Dalí to develop “Paranoia Critic” and subsequently revealed Surrealism’s ability to romanticize Fascism. An ability, which, sprung from Surrealism’s original elitism and spiritual approach to reality.

Ultimately, Surrealism came to represent the very thing it sought to destroy. Grounded in hazy left-wing political goals, the nature of the Surrealist project, and its focus on the unconscious and dream realm, implicated the movement in elitist circles from the start. While desiring important societal change, the Surrealists themselves were oftentimes privileged and alienated from the working class. Although seemingly allied with the Marxists, paradoxically, Surrealism’s focus on the spirit, rather than material conditions of man, remains closer to Fascist sentiments. On the surface, Fascism’s emotional appeal, irrationality, and detest for greater bourgeois society appears ideologically compatible with Surrealism.

One could argue that Surrealism itself remains ideologically neutral and lies beyond the realm of political or social implications. However, while art does not need to carry political connotations, Surrealism’s appropriation by Fascist causes remained possible, perhaps, because of Surrealism’s lack of a foundational structure. The Surrealist project, based on a rejection of reason, capitalism, and contemporary society, loosely resembles many right and left-wing revolutionary movements of the 20th century, thus, allowing for its appropriation.
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Miró, Joan. The Reaper. 1937.


Appendix

Figure 1. Guernica


Figure 2. The Reaper

Miro, Joan. The Reaper. 1937.

Figure 3. Aidez l’Espagne (Help Spain)

Figure 4. Autorretrato (Self-Portrait)


Figure 5. Sin título (Untitled)


Figure 6. The Weaning of Furniture Nutrition


Figure 7. The Enigma of Hitler