

**Josep Renau's *Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo*
An Emblematic Work of the Era of the Scientific-Technical
Revolution in the German Democratic Republic¹**

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Fig. 1 Josep Renau *Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo*, (*Boceto No. 3*), 1969, tempera on paper and wood, 88 x 65 cm, design for a mural for the Academy of Marxist-Leninist Theory of Organization, not executed, Berlin-Wuhlheide, © IVAM, Instituto Valencià d'Art Modern, Generalitat, Depósito Fundación Renau, Valencia, Spain (source: Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Wolfgang Holler and Paul Kaiser (eds.): *Abschied von Ikarus. Bildwelten in der DDR – neu gesehen*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2012, p. 234)

In 1956, Diego Rivera (1886-1957) visited the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and was appointed as corresponding member of the Academy of Arts, Berlin for his lifetime achievements. When in East Berlin, he was asked to create some murals for the then still partly destroyed capital of the GDR, but neither Rivera nor the other two of *Los Tres Grandes* –Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949)– ever executed a mural in Germany. However, in the

¹ This paper is part of a PhD project at the Department of European Art History at Heidelberg University (supervisors: Prof. Dr. Henry Keazor and Prof. Dr. Edgar Wolfrum). It was firstly presented in October 2012 at the international conference "Another Modernity? Pictorial worlds of the GDR – Perspectives of a Neubewertung", held by the Klassik Foundation Weimar. The author would like to thank the editors of *ARARA* for accepting this paper.

late 1950s and early 1960s, the Spanish artist Josep Renau (1907-82), who was exiled in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War for about twenty years from 1939 onwards, brought his theoretical and practical experiences with Mexican *Muralismo* to the GDR. This paper presents Renau's *Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (Fig. 1), an unexecuted project for a Berlin mural of 1969,² deeply inspired and influenced by the Mexican mural movement. I will explain the mural within the artistic and historical background of the so-called era of the scientific-technical revolution of the 1960s, in which there was a belief in an unlimited progress in science and technique. My text analyzes for the first time hitherto unknown archival records from Renau's archive on the history of the mural and its failure. As the mural has never been executed, further analysis refers to the surviving *bocetos* of the Fundación Josep Renau at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM) and of the private archive of Renau's foremost pupil Marta Hofmann.

Although latest art historical research is devoted to the important influence of Latin American art in the GDR,³ especially in the case of muralism, the work and influence of Renau has not been further investigated yet precisely within this context. Therefore, this article will show that Renau's mural of 1969 is much more than just a failed monumental project of the 1960s in the GDR. As it was described by Renau, in the weekly East German journal *Sonntag*, it was meant to be an inspiration for the younger generation or, as he called it, an "aperitif for the youth",⁴ Renau's work unified older visual traditions, scientific dreams of Socialism in the 1960s, and stylistic and formal characteristics of the international avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century, in order to create an image of the visionary, futuristic human being of socialism, the so-called "New Man". In doing so, Renau combined, on the one hand, his intense experience of Mexican muralism –of which he was a key figure in the 1940s– and, on the

² In the GDR, the mural was entitled either as *The Future Worker of Socialism* or as *Man under the Conditions of the Scientific-Technical Revolution*.

³ Markus Kenzler, *Der Blick in die andere Welt. Einflüsse Lateinamerikas auf die Bildende Kunst der DDR* (Münster-Berlin: LIT, 2012).

⁴ "Ein Aperitif für die Jugend. Über Kunst und Wissenschaft unterhielten sich der Maler José Renau und Werkdirektor Richard Mahrwald, Böhlen", edited by Waltraud Schulze, *Sonntag*, 24 Jan. 1971, 3-4.

other hand, contemporary debates on the role of the worker in the period of the scientific-technical revolution in East German socialism. Because of its artistic heterogeneity, Renau's mural represents, even as an unexecuted project, an important example of the role of the visual arts in the GDR during the utopian era of the 1960s. Its importance lies mainly, so my thesis goes, in the fact that it illustrates the continuity of the avant-garde influence of futurism, constructivism, and Mexican *Muralismo* in the visual arts of the GDR, thus breaching the aesthetic paradigm of the Soviet socialist realism of the 1950s.⁵

Methodology: Visual History and Iconic Turn

Recently, the German historian Stefan Wolle characterized the decade of the 1960s in the GDR as the starting point of a socialist Utopia.⁶ Wolle's argumentation is programmatically underlined on the cover of his publication showing Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...* While Wolle does not discuss this artwork in his book, he describes the visual arts of the 1960s in the GDR as capable of creating "icons of the *Zeitgeist*".⁷ According to Wolle, the visual arts of this decade were part of a "colorful mixture of fragments of history of ideas", which drew their utopian and social potential from "irrational worlds of emotions".⁸ Wolle's methodology was influenced by Peter Burke's book *Eyewitnessing* (2001), where he argues that images generally play a very important role for the research on contemporary history of the 20th century.⁹ Especially since the *iconic*

⁵ Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus: Die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2001).

⁶ Stefan Wolle, *Aufbruch nach Utopia* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2011). See also Martin Sabrow, "Zukunftspathos als Legitimationsressource. Zu Charakter und Wandel des Fortschrittspfadparadigmas in der DDR", in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jörg Requate (eds.), *Aufbruch in die Zukunft. Die 1960er Jahre zwischen Planungseuphorie und kulturellem Wandel. DDR, CSSR und Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2004), 165-184.

⁷ Wolle, Op. Cit. 156. All quotations have been translated by the author, unless otherwise noted.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁹ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion, 2001).

turn¹⁰, when images became methodological tools and sources in historical sciences¹¹, historians have discovered the immanence of images for studying the past of the East German state between 1949 and 1989.¹² In addition to this relatively new methodological approach, in my study I will also concentrate on the iconographical analysis of Renau's unexecuted project, following the methodology of the German art historian Erwin Panofsky.¹³

The Future Worker of Socialism: History and Iconography

Before examining the iconography of Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...*, I will give a brief introduction to the historic and biographical context in which the mural project developed.¹⁴ After fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and being exiled to Mexico in 1939, Renau worked closely with Siqueiros in a major mural project for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate executed between 1939 and 1940 in Mexico City. Renau's artistic and practical influence on the mural itself and his innovative collaboration with Siqueiros¹⁵ has been recently addressed by art historian Jennifer Jolly. After living in Mexico for nearly 20 years, he moved to the GDR in 1958 following an invitation by the East German state broadcasting television station (Deutscher Fernsehfunk, DFF) to design several graphic animation movies that dealt with political issues. However, as I will show later, even after his relocation, he was still personally, aesthetically and

¹⁰ Christa Mar and Hubert Burda (eds.), *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder* (Cologne: DuMont, 2004).

¹¹ Jens Jäger and Martin Knauer (eds.), *Bilder als historische Quelle? Dimension der Debatten um historische Bildforschung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009).

¹² Edgar Wolfrum, *Die DDR – eine Geschichte in Bildern* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008).

¹³ For an introduction to Panofsky's methodology see Horst Bredekamp, "Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)", in Ulrich Pfisterer (ed.), *Klassiker der Kunstgeschichte. Band II: Von Panofsky bis Greenberg* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008), 61-75.

¹⁴ For a complete account of Renau's work and life see Jaime Brihuega and Jorge Ballester (eds.), *Josep Renau, 1907-1982: Compromiso y cultura* (Valencia: Universitat de València, Sociedad Estatal de Conmeraciones Culturales, 2007).

¹⁵ Jennifer Jolly, "Art of the Collective: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Josep Renau and their Collaboration at the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate", *Oxford Art Journal*, 1/31 (2008), 131-151; Jennifer Jolly, "Siqueiros' Communist Proposition for Mexican Muralism: A Mural for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate", in Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley and Leonard Folgarait (eds.), *Mexican Muralism – A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 75-92.

stylistically connected with Mexican muralism. This connection with the muralist movement was very important for Renau's artistic career in East Germany.¹⁶ Thus, two decades after his last major project in Mexico during the late 1940s, Renau resumed mural painting in the mid 1960s when planning a four-part cycle of panels for the club room of the DFF in Berlin in 1966, known as *La Conquista del Cosmos*. This was followed by a commission, in 1968, to design monumental mural paintings for the new city of Halle-Neustadt.¹⁷ The 1969 design for the *Futuro Trabajador...* falls into this time period when Renau re-engages with mural painting.

Originally, Renau's mural was to be integrated into the architectural setting of the foyer of the exhibition hall of the Academy of Marxist-Leninist Theory of Organization (AMLO) based in Berlin (Fig. 2). The AMLO was prestigious part of a broader project of the late Walter Ulbricht, head of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), to establish the so-called "New Economic System of Planning and Management" (NÖSPL) in order to overcome the crisis of the GDR economy and society in the 1960s by modernizing its industry and scientific research.¹⁸ The AMLO intended to serve as the state academy for research in Electronic Data Processing like cybernetics and information theory and their application in political and social sciences.¹⁹ According to the archival records of the IVAM, Richard Paulick (1903-79) was the architect of the building complex which was erected between 1968 and 1969 in the Eastern outskirts of Berlin, in the area of Schöneweide. Paulick belonged, like Renau, to the generation of artists and architects in the GDR who were part of the avant-garde before the Second World War.²⁰ Paulick was member of the Dessau Bauhaus and had been exiled in Shanghai since 1933 before his return to East Germany

¹⁶ Josep Renau, "Rango universal de la pintura mexicana", *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Universität Rostock. Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, 1-2/14 (1965), 19-39.

¹⁷ For Renau's mural works in the GDR see Oliver Sukrow, "Ein Rivera der DDR? Josep Renaus Bedeutung als Importeur des mexikanischen Muralismus in die DDR", in Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Wolfgang Holler and Paul Kaiser (eds.), *Abschied von Ikarus. Bildwelten in der DDR – neu gesehen* (Cologne: König, 2012), 217-228.

¹⁸ André Steiner, *Von Plan zu Plan. Eine Wirtschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2007).

¹⁹ Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Geschichte der SED. Von der Gründung bis zur Linkspartei* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009), 174.

²⁰ Wolfgang Thöner and Peter Müller (eds.), *Bauhaus-Tradition und DDR-Moderne - der Architekt Richard Paulick* (Munich, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2006).

in 1949. Being one of the most important architects of the GDR, his oeuvre spread from the classicistic language of the buildings he designed for the Stalinallee in the center of Berlin, during the 1950s,²¹ to the distinct modern rationality of the new town of Halle-Neustadt, built in the 1960s and 1970s.²²



Fig. 2 Unknown photographer. Model of the AMLO complex, around 1969, Berlin-Wuhlheide, Archivbild AMLO, Neg.-Nr. 19/70 © Innovationspark Wuhlheide Berlin, 2013

The sources of Renau's archive at IVAM show that it was Paulick who asked Renau to design a mural. According to a file memorandum of February 1969, Renau and his team –this method of working with a collective of professional artists was inspired by his work with Siqueiros– were commissioned a mural for the foyer of the exhibition hall of the AMLO. Thematic coherence with science and technology was the only criterion for the mural specified by Paulick.²³ The collective soon started preparations for the mural, as shown by a memorandum from April 1969.²⁴ The situation for Renau changed dramatically in June 1969 when Paulick informed the collective that the mural had not been accepted by the state commissioner. The reason given was that Renau's proposal

²¹ The Stalinallee at Berlin, running from *Frankfurter Tor* to *Strausberger Platz*, was the most important urban and architectural project of the late 1940s and early 1950s in the GDR. With its historic style and monumental forms, it represents the political and cultural ambitions of the socialist state as inheritor of the "progressive traditions of the German people" which were mainly seen in the architecture of the Prussian classicism of the early 19th century.

²² Werner Durth, Jörn Düwel and Niels Gutschow, *Architektur und Städtebau in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1998).

²³ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 5 Feb. 1969.

²⁴ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 7 April 1969.

depicted only one figure rather than a group, as was expected by the SED from that point on.



Fig. 3 Unknown photographer. David Alfaro Siqueiros and Josep Renau, Berlin, winter 1970 © Archive Marta Hofmann, Müncheberg, Germany

The SED party also recommended a new program for a mural entitled *Our New Socialist Society*, which was refused by the entire collective.²⁵ Thus, Renau, Paulick, and members of the SED met in July 1969 again to discuss the mural project but this meeting did not have a positive outcome. Berlin-based sculptor, Senta Baldamus (1920-2001), –responsible for the artistic conduction of the project in Wuhlheide, the area where the AMLO was situated, O.S.– explained in a letter to the Minister of Culture, Klaus Gysi, dated February 1970, why the state commissioner was not interested in Renau’s proposal. As explained by Baldamus, the SED representatives were no longer convinced by Renau’s project.²⁶ A concrete reason for the rejection of the design was not given. Notwithstanding, Baldamus noted that Renau’s murals were generally “exemplary and highly interesting for

²⁵ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 20 June 1969, 1.

²⁶ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, letter of Senta Baldamus to Klaus Gysi, 24 Feb. 1970, 4.

all visual artists.”²⁷ She also mentioned that Siqueiros had seen the *bocetos* when he visited Renau in Berlin in the winter of 1970 during his official tour through the Eastern State (Fig. 3). Siqueiros’ visit of 1970 was a prestigious event for the SED because the Mexican muralist was highly regarded throughout the Communist Bloc as one of the most important leftist artists of the 20th century, and was considered at the same time as an example of a partisan cultural politician. Interestingly enough, after Baldamus’ letter, Siqueiros “confirmed [the *boceto* for the mural] as being a good and interesting work”.²⁸ Even though the letter by Baldamus was written to the minister of culture Klaus Gysi in February 1970, after the inauguration of the AMLO in autumn 1969, she still might have hoped that there was a chance for the execution and installation of the mural after the official opening if she addressed this issue to Gysi as part of the party elite of the SED. But, in spite of Siqueiro’s praise and Baldamus’s intervention, Renau’s proposal was ignored and forgotten. In the end, only Paulick’s buildings were erected and the AMLO opened its doors to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the GDR in 1969. Historical photographs of the opening ceremony prove that instead of another mural, large posters of working people were installed at the foyer of the exhibition hall.

A few years later, in 1974, the authorities of GDR cultural policies invited Renau, once again, to develop a mural design for the foyer of the *Palast der Republik* in Berlin. He repeated his proposal of the *Futuro Trabajador...* from 1969. But this renewed project by Renau failed too because in the end the SED decided to commission instead a conservative program of large scale panels by the most prominent artists of the GDR, among them Werner Tübke (1929-2004), Bernhard Heisig (1925-2011), Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927-2004), and Walter Womacka (1925-2010).²⁹ Presumably Renau’s proposal was not only refused because of its ambitious size and technique but also because of its iconographic features and the image of the worker it embodied. When Erich Honecker followed Ulbricht as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED in 1971, Honecker

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Anke Kuhrmann, *Der Palast der Republik. Geschichte und Bedeutung des Ost-Berliner Parlaments- und Kulturhauses* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2006).

fundamentally changed the visual propaganda of his regime. While Ulbricht believed in the utopian image of the “New Man” of the socialist future, Honecker rather promoted “consumer socialism” and focused more on the presence of everyday life. The effects on the visual arts generated by this political shift in the early 1970s have already been shown by the sociologists Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Paul Kaiser.³⁰ These changes also affected the decision of the visual program of the *Palast der Republik* and, therefore, the decision against Renau’s *Futuro Trabajador...*



Fig. 4 Josep Renau, *Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo*, 1969, study of the worker’s head for the final mural, fiberboard, tempera and plaster, white pigment and binder, mass increased, ca. 100 x 70 cm © Archive Marta Hofmann, Müncheberg, Germany

But what were the characteristic features of Renau’s mural *Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo*? The *bocetos* unify many highly symbolic features and represent a combination of abstract and realistic modes of artistic representation discussed by art historian Peter Arlt in the early 1980s.³¹ The *Boceto No.3* (Fig. 1), dated per the inscription “June to

³⁰ Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Paul Kaiser (eds.), *Enge und Vielfalt - Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR. Analysen und Meinungen* (Hamburg: Junius, 1999).

³¹ Peter Arlt, “Der sozialistische Mensch und die wissenschaftlich-technische Revolution. Betrachtung eines Bildes von José Renau”, *Urania*, 4 (1983), 18-23.

August 1969", presents the monumental dimensions of the nine meter high mural with a photomontage of a couple in the lower left. The figures, shown from their backs, lead the gaze of the viewer into the center of the image. In the middle, Renau placed a half-naked figure of a young man whose eyes are looking downwards. According to Marta Hofmann, Renau's pupil at Berlin and later his assistant, Renau's youngest son Pablo (born in 1946 in Mexico) served as model for the figure of the *Futuro Trabajador...*³² The head of the worker was especially treated with great accuracy in Renau's *bocetos*. Several versions of the head survive (Fig. 4). In Renau's own words, "curves and colors inside the head result in the appearance of a thinking human".³³ He also said that "neither objects nor symbols" are necessary to be included in the painting to evoke the appearance of a thinking human.³⁴ The figure is holding a compass in his right hand and in the left a shift lever, which links the figure with the machine below. Other prominent elements in the mural are the grid of parallels and meridians in the upper left as well as the stylized Bohr model of atoms in the lower center of the composition. Surrounding the central figure, Renau depicted abstract forms evoking nebulae, lightings, flames, and neural cells. Back in the 1970s, contemporary voices interpreted those elements as "cosmic matter" and the man in the center as its "highest manifestation".³⁵ The frontal, enthroned, half figure alludes to the iconography of the *Christ Pantokrator*, the all-powerful god, which is mainly depicted in the apses of Byzantine, Greek, and Russian Orthodox churches. Renau modified the traditional icon of *Christ Pantokrator* by replacing the right blessing hand with a hand holding a compass and the closed Book of the Gospels, usually situated in left hand, with the shift lever of a machine. Hence, Renau has transformed the old typology of a religious icon into an image of the ideal man in the context of socialism. This transformation is still grounded in religious beliefs since Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...* is shown as god-like man, as ruler and steersman of

³² Letter by Marta Hofmann to the author, 4 Dec. 2012 (in possession of the author).

³³ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 12 June 1969, 2.

³⁴ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 12 June 1969, 2.

³⁵ Schulze, Op. Cit., 24 Jan. 1971, 4.

the forces of nature and machine. The famous medieval book illustration of a Parisian Bible of the early 13th century in Vienna incorporates God as measurer or architect of the world holding the earth in its left and the compass in its right hand.³⁶ Interestingly, in a memorandum of May 1969, Renau himself refused to give a god-like appearance to the central figure:

The man, depicted in the draft, would be situated over the clouds following this suggestion [by Renau's colleague named Rix, who proposed to add a cloud in the middle of the picture, O.S.] which would lead to the appearance of something god-like. For this reason, the suggestion by comrade Rix can unfortunately not be realized.³⁷

In spite of Renau's critique and refusal to include potentially religiously inspired iconography of the future worker, his ideas for the mural were mainly based on Christian visual language. As already noted by Thomas Weiß in 2005, quasi-religious thoughts played an important role in the era of the scientific-technical revolution of the 1960s,³⁸ especially the ideal of the "New Adam". Also known as the ideal of the "New Man", this concept, inspired by Christian theology, conceived the future people of socialism as the beginning of a new mankind. While Christian iconography and some elements of theology were evident in Renau's mural, these were not the only source of inspiration as the compass and the truncated rhombohedron show. These geometrical figures allude to a second visual tradition in Renau's work: Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514.³⁹ Not only is the symbolic coincidence interesting as a comparison, but Dürer's engraving also combines geometry and visual art. According to Panofsky, the human figure in Dürer's artwork represents a melancholic artist who attempts to reach perfect beauty and harmony by using

³⁶ Gerald B. Guest (ed.), *Bible moralisée – Codex Vindobonensis 2554, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* (London: Miller, 1995).

³⁷ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 27 May 1969, 1.

³⁸ Thorsten Weiß, "Der neue Adam? Denkwänge, Polemik und ein quasireligiöses Menschenbild", in Hans-Christoph Rauh and Peter Ruben (eds.), *Denkversuche. DDR-Philosophie in den 60er Jahren* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2005), 257-280, 267.

³⁹ Art, Op. Cit. 22.

geometry.⁴⁰ Similarly, a fully naked antique hero with a compass is represented in William Blake's *Newton* (ca. 1795-1805) (Fig. 5).⁴¹



Fig.5 William Blake. *Newton*, 1795/c.1805, Color print, ink and watercolor on paper, 460 x 600 mm, Presented by W. Graham Robertson 1939 © Tate, London 2013.

The ideal combination of artistic vision and scientific knowledge connects Dürer's early 16th century and Blake's early 18th century images to Renau's mural design. Renau himself once wrote that the "great men of the Renaissance were [at the same time] aesthetes and mathematicians".⁴² For him, the function of contemporary socialist art was to integrate Dürer's humanist artistic views into the universal movement of the scientific-technical revolution. That is why Renau added the formula of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity to the rhombohedrum in his design for the mural.⁴³ Horst Bredekamp also noticed the strong parallels between geometry (the compass) and the belief in an almighty, supernatural power, as shown in François Chauveau and Robert Nanteuil's engraved

⁴⁰ Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the history of natural philosophy, religion and art* (London: Nelson, 1964).

⁴¹ John Gage, "Blake's Newton", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 34 (1971), 372-377.

⁴² Schulze, Op. Cit., 24 Jan. 1971, 3.

⁴³ IVAM, Fundación Josep Renau, Archivo, Documentación sobre el Mural *El Futuro Trabajador del Comunismo* (1969-1970), 13/2, file memorandum, 27 May 1969, 1.

portrait of Jules Mazarin of 1659. It shows Mazarin's Parisian gallery "with a globe, a compass, a square, a ruler and books" as "those tools of geometry (...) illustrating the basis for mechanics for the earthly utilization of the divine cosmic movement".⁴⁴ Ultimately, the Russian and later Soviet avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s –especially constructivist artists like El Lissitzky (1890-1941) and Gustav Klucis (1895-1938)– promoted this vision of a profanation of cosmic forces for the communist cause after the Revolution of 1918.⁴⁵



Fig. 6 Lee Laurie. *Genius which Interprets to the Human Race the Laws and Cycles of the Cosmic Forces of the Universe, Making the Cycles of Light and Sound*, 1933, entrance of the RCA Building, Rockefeller Center, New York City, photograph Feb. 2013 © Oliver Sukrow

⁴⁴ Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben. Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2000), 31-32.

⁴⁵ Anthony Calnek (ed.), *The Great Utopia - The Russian and Soviet avant-garde 1915-1932* (New York: Abrams, 1994). Hubertus Gaßner, Karlheinz Kopanski and Karin Stengel (eds.), *Die Konstruktion der Utopie. Ästhetische Avantgarde und politische Utopie in den 20er Jahren* (Marburg: Jonas, 1992).

From New York to Mexico City to East Berlin: Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads...* as Model

To my understanding, previous research on Renau's work and East German muralism has not yet explored the iconographic and contextual source of inspiration of Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...* As mentioned earlier, Renau's mural for the AMLO combines very different traditions, namely Christian motifs and avant-garde features of constructivist and futurist influence. However, one very important model for Renau has been overlooked until today. That is Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (1933), originally designed and executed for the foyer of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) building at Rockefeller Center, New York City. Robert Linsley has conducted an exhaustive research on Rivera's mural and its historical significance.⁴⁶ The meta-message of the Rockefeller Center is summarized in a quotation from prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament in Hartley Burr Alexander's inscription above the main entrance to the RCA building "Wisdom and Knowledge shall be the Stability of Thy Times".⁴⁷ This inscription, together with representations of wisdom, sound, and light in American sculptor Lee Laurie's relief entitled *Genius, which Interprets to the Human Race the Laws and Cycles of the Cosmic Forces of the Universe, Making the Cycles of Light and Sound* (Fig. 6), would have led the visitors into the foyer confronting them with Rivera's monumental fresco and its overwhelming appearance. The mural was destroyed in 1934 when the patrons, the Rockefellers, discovered the portrait of Lenin in a prominent position in *Man at the Crossroads...* and Rivera refused to change this political provocation. However, that same year, Rivera executed another version of this mural for the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City entitled *El hombre en el cruce de caminos / El hombre controlador del universo* (Fig. 7). As architectural historians have shown, not only the mural by Rivera was very influential in Mexico and beyond, the architectonic setting of the Rockefeller Center also inspired

⁴⁶ Robert Linsley, "Utopia Will Not Be Televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center", *Oxford Art Journal*, 17/2 (1994), 48-62.

⁴⁷ Isaiah, 33:6: "And the stability of thy times shall be a hoard of salvation--wisdom and knowledge, and the fear of the LORD which is His treasure."

artistic ambitions in Stalin's regime during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁸ According to Sona S. Hoisington, the whole urban and architectural setting of the Rockefeller complex served "as a model" for Soviet architects under Stalin.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the general reception of Rivera's work and Mexican muralism in the GDR in the following decades was also based on Soviet guidelines, changing from high enthusiasm in the late 1940s, condemnation in the 1950s, and back to a positive feedback in the 1960s.⁵⁰ The fact that Rivera's New York mural was originally situated behind a sculptural program at the entrance of the RCA showing a god-like figure with a compass over the main door has been overlooked in existing literature. However, this motif further highlights the connection between Rivera's mural for the RCA building and Renau's proposal for the AMLO: the strong link between socialist propaganda and Christian iconography suggests that the future man in a socialist society can rule over nature and machine.



Fig. 7 Diego Rivera. *El hombre en el cruce de caminos (El hombre controlador del universo)*, 1934, fresco, 480 × 1145 cm, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013 (source: Desmond Rochfort: *Mexican muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*, London: L. King, 1993, p. 239)

⁴⁸ Danilo Udovički-Selb, "Between Modernism and Socialist Realism. Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin's Revolution from Above, 1928-1938", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 68/4 (2009), 467-495.

⁴⁹ Sona S. Hoisington, "Soviet Schizophrenia and the American Skyscraper", in Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Russian Art and the West. A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 156-171, 162.

⁵⁰ Peter Guth, *Wände der Verheißung. Zur Geschichte der architekturbezogenen Kunst in der DDR* (Leipzig: Thom, 1995); Martin Schönfeld, "Das 'Dilemma der festen Wandmalerei'. Die Folgen der Formalismus-Debatte für die Wandbildbewegung in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1955", in Günter Feist, Eckhart Gillen and Beatrice Vierneisel (eds.), *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR 1945-1990* (Cologne: DuMont, 1996), 444-465.

For both, Rivera and Renau, man and machine are the central elements of their mural designs. Surrounded by history (as in the case Rivera's mural), cosmic forces, and natural and mechanical phenomena, the worker rules over nature and machine with his mental and physical powers. Taking Dürer's melancholic genius of arts and geometry as a second starting point –besides the Christian one–, Rivera and Renau transformed this Renaissance motif into a symbol of man as the scientific “planner and disposer” of socialism. Reaching this stage of control and power of man over nature seemed only possible by the incorporation of technique and modern industry. The strict visual separation between machine and human body was no longer possible as both depended on each other. Although Rivera's opinion on technological progress was not entirely a positive one,⁵¹ other murals by Renau in the GDR depict the positive results of technology.⁵² This is also exemplified in the two analyzed murals. While Rivera's hero has the option of choosing between the different paths to the future, with history as guide, Renau's worker *is* already the future. He has reached a stage of entropy in which neither technical nor social development seems necessary and possible.⁵³ A comparable vision in terms of content is the already developed, satisfied, and static socialist society in Womacka's *Our Life in Socialism* (1964). This mural was executed for the central *Haus des Lehrers* at Alexanderplatz, the political and urban center of East Berlin.⁵⁴ Similar to those mural visions of the future character of work, human society and nature, utopists Herbert George Wells and Alexander Bogdanov in their novels *Men Like Gods* (1923) and *The Red Planet* (1908), respectively, anticipated a future completely mechanized leading to the elimination of the physical pain of labour and achieving the Marxist ideal of freedom.⁵⁵ According to Richard Saage, “technical visions” embodied in science fiction novels and artistic utopian thoughts about men and nature were parallel developments since

⁵¹ Linsley, Op. Cit. 60.

⁵² Waltraud Schulze, “José Renau: Die Eroberung der Sonne. Außenwandbild in Halle”, *Sonntag*, 1 Aug. 1971, 7-8.

⁵³ Hubertus Gaßner, “Utopisches im russischen Konstruktivismus”, in Gaßner, Kopanski and Stengel, Op. Cit. 48-68, 50-52.

⁵⁴ Ulrich Kuhirt, “Schmuck und Aussage zugleich. Über das Wandbild Walter Womackas am Haus des Lehrers in Berlin”, *Bildende Kunst*, 10 (1964), 510-517.

⁵⁵ Richard Saage, *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit*, 2nd ed. (Bochum: Winkler, 2000), 310.

the beginning of the 20th century.⁵⁶ Some authors have recently suggested that “technical utopias” in socialist states did not incorporate any critical comment on society and politics but were seen and treated as essential to progress during the scientific-technical revolution leading to communism.⁵⁷ If Rivera’s *Man at Crossroads...* implied an obvious visual critique to the Rockefellers as industrialists and capitalists, ending in the devastation of the mural in New York, thirty years later, Renau’s design for the mural at the AMLO underlined and transcended the mission of the scientific-technical revolution for socialism in the GDR. While Rivera’s New York mural is “divided in two”, as Linsley argued to express the Mexican’s uncertainty “of the future” of civilization,⁵⁸ Renau’s future worker does not show any uncertainty about the development of the working class dominating –not only symbolically– the pictorial space. While Rivera’s visual language was based on the (Marxist) dialectics between good and bad, new and old, life and death, Renau’s mural did not offer a dynamic vision but a static image of the future. It was an anticipation of the future shown, not as changing of the present status through development, but as a fixed moment in the future as matter of fact.

Pictorial Worlds of the Scientific-Technical Revolution

Renau’s design for the *Futuro Trabajador...* is composed, as mentioned above, of various iconographic sources and found its direct precedent in Rivera’s mural for the Rockefeller Center of the early 1930s. In this last section, I will focus on some stylistic aspects of Renau’s proposal that link the mural to the avant-garde movement of the pre-war era. The central figure of the worker is mainly modern in terms of style and form. His naked body follows in its geometrical approach and metallic surface the programmatic credo of the Russian-American designer Alexis de

⁵⁶ Richard Saage, *Utopieforschung – eine Bilanz* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997), 37-40.

⁵⁷ Uwe Fraunholz, Thomas Hänseroth and Anke Woschek, “Hochmoderne Visionen und Utopien. Zur Transzendenz technisierter Fortschrittserwartungen”, in U. Fraunholz and A. Woschek (eds.), *Technology Fiction. Technische Visionen und Utopien in der Hochmoderne* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 11-24, 13.

⁵⁸ Linsley, Op. Cit. 60.

Sakhnoffsky of 1937: "Let's streamline men and women!"⁵⁹ It also evokes the finished characteristic of the bodies in the Art Deco paintings by Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980). However, Renau created similar "streamlined" human bodies even in his earlier works in Spain and Mexico, especially for his advertisements and movie posters. Ernst Jünger, a right-wing German author and intellectual has given a visionary literary description of streamlined humans in his book *The Worker* of 1932. Jünger used the term "galvanization" to describe bodies similar to those depicted in de Lempicka's or Renau's paintings:

The face has also changed (...). It has lost individuality in the scale of its general versions, but has gained sharpness and certainty in its individual singularity. It has become more metallic, its surface is likely galvanized. (...) The view is calm and focused, trained for the vision of objects, which must be recorded in conditions of high speed.⁶⁰

Although Jünger's 1930s vision of a hyper-worker has politically nothing in common with a socialist point of view, it shares the same optimistic approach to technical progress as Renau's worker of the scientific-technical revolution of the 1960s:

(...) as a tight and consistent fusion of man with those tools which are at his service. Regarding those tools, one might speak of an organic construction [of man and machine, O.S.] if the technique has reached the same high degree of self-evidence as inherent in animal and vegetable limbs.⁶¹

Between 1911 and 1915, even earlier than Jünger, the Italian futurist artist and theorist Filippo Tomasso Marinetti expounded similar visions of the fusion of man and machine in his essay "Multiplied Man and the Religion of the Machine".⁶² The fusion of man and machine, worker and technique, is highly visible in Renau's mural. It seems as if the worker has become one with the machine. Linked by the shift lever, they form an entity – a cyborg –, the artificial combination of man and machine, one of

⁵⁹ Armin Zweite, "Vorwort", in Pia Müller-Tamm and Horst Bredekamp (eds.), *Puppen, Körper, Automaten – Phantasmen der Moderne* (Cologne: Oktagon, 1999), 11-20, 16.

⁶⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 112-113.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶² Nicola Lepp (ed.), *Der Neue Mensch – Obsessionen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1999), 94.

the most popular visions of technology and science fiction in the arts since the 1920s. For instance, in Fritz Lang's movie *Metropolis* (1927), mankind is dependent on the power of the human-like robot *Maria* –again an allusion to Christian faith!– and could only be rescued by its demolition.⁶³

The idea that man and machine were alike or compatible and could be described and analyzed with the same theoretical framework represents the fundamental scientific and technological developments after 1945. These developments have also changed the image of the worker in the GDR dramatically. As Humboldt University's mathematician and logician Georg Klaus stated in 1961, besides atomic energy and the conquest of space, cybernetics is "the most important event in science in present times" since it has deep impact on everyone's "material and spiritual being".⁶⁴ In the GDR, as in the Western world, cybernetics was a synonym for progress and modernity. Starting with Norbert Wiener's credo of cybernetics as "control and communication in the animal and the machine",⁶⁵ some ideas of cybernetics, for example the thought of society and art as connected and controllable networks, affected also the cultural sphere as shown by the new studies in German architectural history⁶⁶ and contemporary scholarship on the GDR.⁶⁷ Soon after cybernetics was introduced as a scientific tool and methodology in the GDR, after having been officially accepted in the Soviet Union earlier in the 1950s, it became an eminent part of the earlier mentioned NÖSPL. Ulbricht not only saw in cybernetics and the NÖSPL a way for developing research and sciences in the GDR, but also "as an important key for the stabilization of his power"⁶⁸ in times of a virulent crisis of his regime. Started by some younger economists of the party elite of the SED, the NÖSPL challenged, for the first time in the history of the GDR since 1949, the politicization of economy and supported a more pragmatic and professional approach. In

⁶³ Barbara Orland (ed.), *Artifizielle Körper – Lebendige Technik. Technische Modellierungen des Körpers in historischer Perspektive* (Zurich: Chronos, 2005).

⁶⁴ Georg Klaus, *Kybernetik in philosophischer Sicht* (Berlin: Dietz, 1961), 5.

⁶⁵ Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: Wiley, 1949).

⁶⁶ Georg Vrachliotis, *Geregelte Verhältnisse - Architektur und technisches Denken in der Epoche der Kybernetik* (Vienna, New York: Springer, 2012).

⁶⁷ Heinz Liebscher, "Architektur und technische Revolution", *Deutsche Architektur*, 15/1 (1966), 4-5.

⁶⁸ Malycha and Winters, Op. Cit. 171.

doing so, the NÖSPL paved the way for the establishment of cybernetics as an exact science to control social and economic processes. Before the AMLO was founded, the East German Academy of Sciences incorporated a section for cybernetics.⁶⁹ As I have mentioned, although the AMLO complex was built by Paulick in Berlin, Renau's mural for the information center was never finished and, soon after the Prague Spring of August 1968 and Honecker's coming into power in 1971, the NÖSPL and its ambitious project AMLO were liquidated.

To summarize, it can be said that Renau created an optimistic image of Ulbricht's late era which was characterized, on the one hand, by its orientation toward older representations of the fusion of man and machine and, on the other hand, by its anticipation of the future of workers and labor in the period of mechanization, cybernetics, and the scientific-technical revolution. After Saage, leftists in the 1920s and early 1930s thought that the "New Man" in socialism had "to be designed with technical tools. That is why communist humans are usually marked by their highly technical constructivism."⁷⁰ While Willy Brandt, West German chancellor of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, declared in 1976 that the utopia of the "New Man" had failed,⁷¹ Renau's mural for the AMLO celebrated the vision of a socialist "New Adam" in the era of the scientific-technical revolution.

Outlook: Alternative Depictions of Workers in the Era of Cybernetics in the GDR

Not only did Renau's mural *Futuro Trabajador...* express an optimistic, uncritical view on progress in sciences and technique, it also represented a specific topic of the visual arts of the GDR of the 1960s: the image of the

⁶⁹ Werner Scheler, *Von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin zur Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR* (Berlin: Dietz, 2000).

⁷⁰ Richard Saage, "Zum Problem der Anthropologie in der deutschen und österreichischen Sozialdemokratie vor 1933/34", in Richard Saage, Helga Grebing and Klaus Faber (eds.), *Sozialdemokratie und Menschenbild. Historische Dimension und Bedeutung* (Marburg: Schüren, 2012), 11-46, 42-43.

⁷¹ Helga Grebing, "Das Menschenbild in der Sozialdemokratie nach dem Holocaust", in Saage, Grebing and Faber, Op. Cit. 133-153, 145.

working class. A very brief comparison with two other contemporaries of Renau, A.R. Penck (born 1939 as Ralf Winkler) and Willi Sitte (1921-2013) helps to elucidate this point. While all three artists were highly interested in the effects of cybernetics, automation and information theory in arts and human society, only Penck drew a very different conclusion.⁷² The Halle-based painter Sitte was one of the most prominent artists in the GDR, largely supported by the SED.⁷³ His *Chemical Worker on Switchboard* from 1968 (Fig. 8) is similar to Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...* as they both highlight the male worker, as central figure, interacting with the machine.⁷⁴ Renau and Sitte both represent the worker as a monumental, heroic figure in frontal display. Although Penck's *Systembilder* of the 1960s shows the artist's reflection on the overall scientific process and its effects in human society, Penck refused to work for the SED and to create large paintings for propaganda. The works of Penck drew their outstanding aesthetic character from the visual arts of the GDR and its reduction of motifs and lack of realistic representation of man, worker and machine. As a result, there is a surprising closeness between Penck's paintings and images that have been used to underline theoretical arguments on science and technique since the early 20th century.⁷⁵ Penck's style, therefore, was neither pure abstractionism nor socialist realism. When he and the sculptor Peter Makolies submitted a proposal for a large relief for the façade of Dresden *Kulturpalast* in 1965 (Fig. 9), it became clear that Penck's interest in cybernetics was very different from Renau's and Sitte's. While they both followed an organic idea of the human being focusing on the structure of the body and individual qualities, Penck and Makolies proposed a technical idea of the human being. They represented an image of the function of communication and acting, general principles of exchange of thoughts and ideas, and dynamic conditions or modes of

⁷² Eckhart Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder? Der Kalte Krieg und die deutsche Kunst 1945-1990* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009), 194-200.

⁷³ See Robert R. Shane, "Personal and political: The Dynamics of East Germany art in the painting of Willi Sitte", *art criticism*, 19/2 (2004), 121-142;

⁷⁴ Eckhart Gillen, *Das Kunstkombinat DDR. Zäsuren einer gescheiterten Kunstpolitik* (Cologne: DuMont, 2005), 110-111.

⁷⁵ Martina Heßler (ed.), *Konstruierte Sichtbarkeiten. Wissenschafts- und Technikbilder seit der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: Fink, 2006).

regulations evoking the terminology of cybernetics.⁷⁶ However, as Renau with his mural for the AMLO, Penck failed in his attempt to create a contemporary art for the socialist state because the SED and other state organizations reverted to the visual language of the 19th century and its realistic paradigms. Renau, Sitte, and Penck were all linked in their attempt to create an optimistic, contemporary style and content for the period of the scientific-technical revolution of the GDR. While, as Saage writes, the Western world after 1945 turned away from an optimistic view on industrialization and unlimited progress –expressed also through literary works as Aldus Huxley’s dystopias– the Socialist Bloc continued following a positivistic determination of technique until the late 1970s.⁷⁷



Fig. 8 Willi Sitte. *Chemical Worker on Switchboard*, 1968, oil on hardboard, 147 x 100.5 cm, Stiftung Moritzburg, Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013

⁷⁶ Michael Hagner, "Bilder der Kybernetik: Diagramm und Anthropologie, Schaltung und Nervensystem", in Heßler, Op. Cit. 383-404, 389.

⁷⁷ Saage, Op. Cit. 2000, 366.



Fig. 9 Peter Makolies and A.R. Penck. Design competition for a relief for the Kulturpalast Dresden, 1965, cast 1992, bronze, 54 x 147 x 3.5 cm, Inv. ZV 4188, purchased from Peter Makolies in 1992, Skulpturensammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, image by Hans-Peter Klut/ Elke Estel. For A.R. Penck © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013

As I have showed, Josep Renau's *Futuro Trabajador...* of 1969 is more than an unexecuted decorative mural for a public building. The image represents the vision of a "New Adam" in a socialist, highly developed and modern society; a model for the worker in the automatic and mechanized world. The central figure combines the leftist ideal of a "complete socialist person in mind and body" as well as the unity of "physical and mental work functions".⁷⁸ Finally, Renau's mural represents the climax of the image of the heroic worker who, soon after, lost legitimation in the GDR as it became replaced by everyday characters and their daily struggles. The utopia of a "man at the crossroads looking with hope and high vision to the choosing of a new and better future" became history and a striking symbol for a failed avant-garde project of the socialist modern era.

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⁷⁸ Weiß, Op. Cit. 271.