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Beautiful Contradictions: News Pictures and Modern Magazines

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Magazines tell their own stories. They are designed to do so. From their covers to their tables of contents, from their editorials to their staff, magazines are privileged objects within the history of modernism in that they display, as part of their appeal, the history of their manufacture. Magazines, like other serialized publications, reflect upon their own origin, purpose, distribution, and reception. It is often within (and through) a magazine itself that one garners the most information about its publication history. For magazines with limited print run, specialized content, or that originate in locations or at times that have not yet caught the attention of historians, it is too often only from within the magazine itself that scholars can reconstruct information about its history, including the work and lives of the writers or artists involved with its production. Most importantly, and perhaps counterintuitive to working with ephemeral mass culture, a close and sustained analysis of magazines brings forward issues that are both media-specific and of broad cultural interest. Since magazines are both self-referential and inter-textual objects, our knowledge about them depends on looking deeply within and across the archives in which they are conserved, as well as studying the cultural histories located beyond their binding. Thus, as a nexus for period-specific knowledge, magazines both illuminate and confound expectations, often within the same page and frequently across the same publication.

Recent scholarship about magazines has paid special attention to the undeniable and complex relationship between paginated content and advertising sections.¹ Publicity on billboards and posters, and advertisements on postcards and in magazines, forcefully occupied the public sphere. Especially in the early twentieth century, and with growing impact during the interwar period, artists and intellectuals were coming to recognize the insistent role that photography played in making the rhetoric of fantasy and persuasion visible.² From the turn-of-the century forward, there are examples aplenty of the productive dialog, manifest in print culture, between various serial forms of publication and the work of artists, both independent and commercial.³ As numerous scholars have shown, the precincts of fine art and commercial design were inextricably bound during the early twentieth century.⁴ The result of this particularly modernist synergy was loudly displayed in illustrated magazines.

What has been explored significantly less is the relationship within single magazines between two sides of the high modernist coin: the photographic advertisement and the news photograph. I want to

focus on the complex issues that arise when high gloss advertisement and cutting-edge photojournalism exist side-by-side. In this regard, it isn't a matter of merely considering advertising sections that were cordoned off from a magazine's intentional, editorial content, but rather taking into consideration those magazines in which the aesthetic that developed around advertising, and formed part of the early twentieth century's golden age of publicity, permeated publications to such a degree that the seemingly serious work of journalism and the capricious display of luxury were conflated.

During times of war, the juxtaposition of news photograph and advertisement gains troubling poignancy, as magazines then become platforms for the exhibition of war and commerce, photograph as testimony and fantasy. Magazines published during wartime face an additional challenge: to operate within established conventions while also providing an account of life at war and in the rear guard. How do magazines both feature and provide a context for the news photograph during war? How do magazines, with their heterogeneous content, frame news photographs so that they are legible to readers, normalized as an expected part of its content, yet at the same time exceptional in the information or emotion they seek to convey? One of the most startling examples of the incursion of the atrocities of war into the realm of the high glamour illustrated magazine was the publication of Lee Miller's experience as a front-line journalist and her accompanying photographs of war, and especially the Dachau concentration camp, in *Vogue*.

But, what of juxtapositions that are less startling, wartime content that is less shocking, and lesser known magazines and photographers? What do these examples tell us about the place of the news photograph in the illustrated magazine? And, what constitutes a news photograph when the definition of both "news" and "photograph" are themselves made the subject of a magazine's wartime content? Without the benefit of reader response or editorials published at the time on specific wartime content, how are scholars to understand the contamination of commerce with the news, and news with advertising? How are we to make sense of these aesthetic (and ethical) trespasses? These are troubling questions because they bracket off a discussion of the news photograph as unintelligible shock—a topic meditated upon by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag most notably—and reintroduce issues around the potential beauty and consumption of banality during times of war, as framed and delivered within the pages of the illustrated press.⁵

A key arena in which to study the blurred lines distinguishing the news photograph as documentation or fabrication, and the relationship between news photograph and advertising, is the Spanish Civil War, in which hundreds of magazines and other serialized publications were available in the rear guard and the front. Of the many magazines representing trade unions, political parties, military units, women's organizations, and government agencies,⁶ the three issues of the large-format illustrated magazine called *Nova Iberia* (New Iberia), published in multiple languages by the Commissariat de Propaganda of the Generalitat de Catalunya in Barcelona, provide an exceptional opportunity to study the different ways in which what constituted news was communicated through a range of photographic styles and subject matter that were solicited from a variety of international and Spanish authors. Most notable, and what sets *Nova Iberia* apart, are the ways the magazine modeled its presentation of wartime content after earlier large format illustrated magazines that were emblematic of the conspicuous modernity of graphic and industrial design in Spain, prior to the outbreak of the war. It is not that other wartime magazines did not evolve out of the rich design environment of the 1930s, or that there were not other popular magazines that featured both wartime news photographs and material from everyday life and culture, but, as a whole, *Nova Iberia* was the most declarative in setting itself up as a magazine-object, one that converted design, layout, and photographic content into a form of propaganda.

Nova Iberia inverted the hierarchy of importance given to different forms of photographic representation, and ultimately absorbed wartime news into a neutralized, safe environment of design and consumption

that, in defending progressive ideas about art, literature, and culture, became a powerful instrument of Republican propaganda as pictured through a decidedly Catalan lens. Before attending to the magazine itself, and one specific photographic image, let us consider the cultural history of the magazine's place within a broader framework of propaganda efforts in Barcelona during the Civil War, which will help illuminate how it became a nexus for the joining together of news and publicity, and explain, at least in part, its prominent position among wartime magazines.

The government agency that published *Nova Iberia*, the *Comissariat de Propaganda* of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, was formed in October 1936 and led by a charismatic intellectual and political agitator named Jaume Miravittles, who had been a childhood friend of Salvador Dalí, made an appearance in Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929), and was in exile in France during the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923–30).⁷ During the Second Republic, Miravittles was a prominent organizer within Communist circles in Barcelona. When the military coup erupted in July 1936, he was on the executive committee for the People's Olympiad, which was to be held in Barcelona as a protest to Hitler's Olympics in Germany. During a short time span, Miravittles transitioned from being a leader within the Leftist militias that emerged in Barcelona to defend the city against the coup to being appointed director of the *Comissariat de Propaganda*. Through his adroit leadership, Miravittles put into place an efficient, well-organized propaganda agency that produced some of the most strident and visually arresting imagery of the war. Miravittles was well connected with intellectuals and artists in Spain and abroad and he leveraged these contacts to assemble the city's most progressive designers in the fabrication of the *Comissariat's* propaganda.

Most relevant to a discussion of the place of the news photograph and publicity in *Nova Iberia* were the photographers who Miravittles brought into the *Comissariat's* fold. While there may have been variability with regard to their political affiliations or their support of Miravittles's political objectives, all of the photographers whose work appeared in the *Comissariat's* publications appear to have supported the same belief in photography as a necessary tool for the promotion of Catalonia as a symbol of modernity. Through the adoption of a photographic style that embraced close-ups, experimental angles, visual narratives, and front-line reporting, Miravittles's publications showed the world (and Barcelona's own inhabitants) evidence of the city's progressive reforms, which ranged from the education and health of its children and elderly to the protection of its artistic, literary, and cultural patrimony. The photographers who contributed to the *Comissariat's* publications bear witness to the *Comissariat's* ability to fuse together the work of different photographers seamlessly into the government's wide array of illustrated books, periodicals, postcards, and posters. Whether from Barcelona (like Gabriel Casas and Agustí Centelles), or part of the international cohort (like Margaret Michaelis, Robert Capa, and David Seymour), all seemed to concur with a belief that photography was a necessary and instrumental part of the success of the *Comissariat's* propaganda campaign, a sentiment that was strongly, if paradoxically, expressed in what would become *Nova Iberia's* final issue: "The quality of the photographs provides assurances that *Nova Iberia* will continue to surpass itself, just as it has been doing up till now with every number."⁸

One of the guiding forces behind the prominence of photography within the *Comissariat's* materials was undoubtedly its director of publications, Pere Català-Pic, who was one of the most widely published voices on photography in Spain prior to the war. His 1933 declaration in defense of new technologies and practices such as photomontage and research-based ideas about publicity was made with polemical force when it appeared as the lead article in the city's dominant amateur photography magazine *L'art de la llum*. In the years that followed, and throughout the Civil War, Català-Pic published numerous articles about his own photographic practice, innovations in the use of applied psychology in advertising, and

reviews of the work of various other European artists and photographers, including Man Ray and Henri Cartier-Bresson.⁹ Though he only authored one poster during the war, it has become one of the most widely recognized and iconic, featuring a single foot, wearing an *alpargata* (a sandal worn in Catalonia) above a broken swastika and featuring, in some editions, the phrase in Catalan “Aixafem el feixisme,” “Let’s smash fascism” (Fig. 2.7a).¹⁰



Figure 2.7a Pere Català-Pic, *Aixafem el feixisme*, 1936–7 (poster). Courtesy of the Tamiment Library and Wagner Labor Archives.

The poster epitomized Català-Pic's ideas about the power and efficiency of visual images to communicate complex ideas simply, across public space, and with great impact. If we understand this poster as representational of the Comissariat's goals in creating buzz-worthy propaganda, we begin to see how the agency was able to leverage the instability of photographs to communicate a direct wartime image (realistic, believable, and compelling) that was, at the same time, based on high modernist principles of design and publicity.

While reviewing the whole of the Comissariat's publications is valuable for gaining an overview of the importance of news photographs as propaganda, to understand the intentional force that came of bringing together the news photograph with the aesthetics of publicity during the war, one needs only to flip through the pages of *Nova Iberia*. The magazine prominently displays the wartime investment the Comissariat made in photography, offering a kind of micro-tribute to its prominence in Barcelona during the decade before the outbreak of the war. Even more, the issue transfers into a wartime context Català-Pic's high praise of Barcelona's ability to reach its peer cities in the production of well-designed illustrated magazines with exceptional photographic content. In "La fotografia i els bells magazines" (Photography and beautiful magazines) from 1935, Català-Pic highlights the importance of good photography as a mark of modernity and success for an illustrated magazine (and its originating city). After commenting upon a recent issue of the French review *Photographie*, he turns his attention to the Barcelona-based magazine *D'ací i d'allà*, "The publication of this trimester magazine, as much for its publicity as for its literary and artistic content, represents a joyful motif for us, given that it is the first of its kind in value and modernity to be edited in the Peninsula."¹¹ Throughout the remainder of his reflections on this magazine, Català-Pic returns over and over again to the importance of good photography, as both the foundation for a high quality magazine and as the stimulus for a receptive audience. Indeed, because *Nova Iberia* modeled itself after the highest profile popular interest magazine to be published in Barcelona prior to the war (*D'ací i d'allà*), it differentiated itself from other wartime propaganda magazines, which tended to use their visual content more prescriptively. By announcing itself as a quality magazine, with richly integrated photographs, typography, and articles written by leading intellectuals, *Nova Iberia* leveraged its similitude to other high profile international magazines to demonstrate that revolutionary Barcelona and the Leftist reforms of the Second Republic should not be feared as a threat to international order, but rather embraced as a defender of civilized culture. In this equation, photography and the aesthetics of publicity become the proof.

That *Nova Iberia* might be viewed as a wartime homage to *D'ací i d'allà*, and by association a monument in print to Barcelona's pre-war prestige as a haven for modernity in design, is abundantly clear after reviewing its photographic content, especially that of its second issue of February 1937. The issue deftly brings together some of the Comissariat's leading photographic contributors as well as key moments from the reforms in arts and letters during the Second Republic. But, what stands out, much more than the front-line photographs of bombed out buildings or the features on the treatment of the civilian population, is the final image of the issue: A photogram featuring diaphanous materials, pills spilled out from a glass tube, a perfume bottle, and cotton balls slightly pulled apart, appears with the caption (printed directly over the bottom left corner of the photogram) "War Gases and Peaceful Industries" (Fig. 2.7b).

It is this single image that serves as the issue's exclamation point, by turning a photographic technique used as a benchmark for avant-garde experimentation by Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and later usurped by graphic designers in high-end publicity, into a public service announcement about the dangers of everyday materials in the confection of chemical warfare. More important still to the ways



Figure 2.7b Josep Sala, photogram published in *Nova Iberia*, no. 2, 1937. Courtesy of the Tamiment Library and Wagner Labor Archives.

Nova Iberia inverted the relationship between news photograph and publicity in the fact that the author of the photogram was Josep Sala, one of the artistic directors for *D'ací i d'allà* and one of Barcelona's leading commercial photographers during the 1930s. Shocking at first, and seemingly out of place, Sala's elegant photogram is nonetheless both news photograph, because it announces the horrific use of chemical warfare, and retrospective homage, because it points back to Barcelona's heyday as a producer of luxury goods and high-end illustrated magazines.

The lesson learned about news photographs in magazines from this singular example is that, during the 1930s, as illustrated magazines were reaching a golden age and photojournalists were emerging as a new kind of professional image maker, there was still a great deal of productive instability. What may strike today's reader as anomalous or out of place, may instead be the photographic key to unlock the meaning and potential of photographic creativity during war, a creativity that relied upon intelligent (and sometimes irreverent) image makers like Pere Català-Pic, the photographers he employed, and the director of the propaganda agency they worked for.

Notes

- 1 Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," *PMLA* 121:2 (March 2006): 521.
- 2 On graphic design and advertising in the twentieth century see, Michele Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 3 Kirk Varnedoe, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990) and Janine Mileaf, Christine Poggi, Matthew Mitkovsky, and Judith Brodie with Sarah Boxer, *Shock of the News* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/Lund Humphries, 2012).
- 4 Elaine Lustig Cohen and Ellen Lupton, *Letters from the Avant-Garde: Modern Graphic Design* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); Deborah Rothschild, Ellen Lupton, and Darra Goldstein, *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 5 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message (1961)," *Image Music Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988): 15–31; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).
- 6 For a much more extensive treatment of the role of artists in Spanish civil war magazines, see Jordana Mendelson, *Revistas y Guerra 1936–1939/Magazines and War 1936–1939*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2007); Jordana Mendelson, ed., *Magazines, Modernity and War* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2008); <http://www.revistasyguerra.com>.
- 7 For an excellent overview of Miravittles' political writings and evolution, see: Enric Pujol, "Jaume Miravittles and Marxism: a Twentieth-Century Voyage," *Journal of Catalan Intellectual History* 3 (2012): 29–45. On Miravittles and the Commissariat, see: Rafael Pascuet and Enric Pujol, dir., *La Revolució del Bon Gust. Jaume Miravittles i el Comissariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya (1936–1939)* (Barcelona: Viena Edicions, 2006).
- 8 Translations by the author unless otherwise indicated.
- 9 Jordana Mendelson, "Desire at the Kiosk: Publicity in Barcelona during the 1930s," *Catalan Review* (special issue on Barcelona and Modernity) XVIII: 1–2 (2004) [Pub. 2006]: 191–208.
- 10 Miriam Basilio, "Catalans! Catalonia! Catalan Nationalism and Spanish Civil War Propaganda Posters," in *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 436–449.
- 11 Pere Català-Pic, "La fotografia i els bells magazines," *Mirador* (14 February 1935): 7.