

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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The Longevity of Photomontage

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The death knell for photomontage had already sounded in the early 1930s, at the very moment that John Heartfield was fine-tuning his pictorially honed, seamless technique for mass persuasion and mechanical replication. This was the very same technique, combined with a complex artillery of affect, that would secure his international renown. Various dismissed as propaganda, populist cartoon, Communist apologism, formalist experiment, or kin to bourgeois advertising, the reception of Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages has been uneven and often unfavourable, obscuring the innovative adaptations Heartfield made to a medium whose semiotic vitality he helped develop in the context of Dada. And as with Dada montage, it has taken decades for the multilayered strategies of Heartfield's *AIZ* images to be appreciated as sophisticated picture making, finely attuned to the contingencies of technological possibility, the historical moment, and the psyche of his projected audience, as I illustrate at length in *Revolutionary Beauty*.

Rooted in technological mutability, photomontage will continue to evolve in the digital age. At the moment, it has reappeared as meme, a topic which I explored in two essays published in 2019 and 2020. As artist Raoul Hausmann observed nearly a century ago, photomontage actively feeds on change – technological, social, psychological. It is as much a method as a medium. "The realm of ... photomontage lends itself to as many possibilities as there are changes in the environment, its social structure, and the resultant psychological superstructures," he asserted, "and the environment is changing every day."¹ The epistemology of pictorial rupture in Dada montage, with its attendant *topoi* of shock, violence, and interval, has ceded to an epistemology of suture in the digital economy, in which seamless transformation begets organic metaphors. Once the laborious product of material cut-and-paste, photomontage is now the result of traceless appropriation and recombination. Digital technologies enable stealth abduction from their source, propagating an offshoot from the pictorial host that resembles genetically modified organisms, seamlessly combined and instantly replicated. These metaphors suggest biological rather than industrial rhetoric once typical of 20th century montage. They also recall the problems of "organic" representation that troubled Frankfurt theorist Peter Bürger. While Bürger was rightly worried about the false reconciliation enabled by homogenous pictorial construction, precipitating his preference for "inorga-

nic", enigmatic structures, I have argued elsewhere that the *cognitive* inconsistencies of seamlessly amalgamated digital photomontage are where the potential for critical intervention lie. It is possible to exploit the discourses of illusion courted by invisible, traceless recombination to engage in the very modes of false cognition to generate pictures that intervene in our current medial landscape.

This landscape begs for an embedded critique within the very codes of relevant media platforms, disclosing the technical as well as ideological structures that organise its logic. I am not arguing for a revival of classical photomontage in the mode of John Heartfield, of which there are several artful instances in the current moment. Rather, I am calling on history's muted prophetic authority to galvanise process as well as product, immersing practise more insistently and self-consciously in today's technological systems of replication. The wider culture that nurtured Heartfield's interventions was aware of and ambivalent about the cognitive potential of new media. These were the fraught seams of progress that Heartfield mined. Let Heartfield's tactics be a beacon for present critical intervention.

Photomontage, for instance, might feed quite easily on the current culture of sensationalism, self-promotion, narcissism, and neo-liberal monetisation in order to reveal its operations; so too, in this culture of lies, alternative facts, fake news, trolls, and invisible virtual malignancies, a practise marinated in illusionism and subsequent laying-bare might generate subversive interference. Effective critique must know its audience and how to solicit critical attention in a matrix of images that is fast, ubiquitous, ephemeral yet lodged in a system with indelible memory. Subversion would work within the local digital environment's vocabulary of attention, sensation, duration, proliferation and archiving.

Importantly, to make good on the messianic claim that historical photomontage holds on the digital age, contemporary montage requires a self-reflexive practise that circumvents surface reconfigurations to reveal something more profound about underlying systems in operation. Photomontage, as I argued in *Revolutionary Beauty*, is at its most vital between pessimism and longing, in the gap of urgent possibility. In photomontage, as our Weimar predecessors observed euphorically, "there are virtually no limits to the play of the imagination".² The range of imaginative possibilities facilitated by the digital universe are of course

immense. Photomontage is far from obsolete, neither in the late Weimar Republic when its newest sparks had begun to take shape in John Heartfield's hands, nor in 2020. Its powerful analytical and social potential remain underexplored in a context of vast technological possibility and shifting superstructures.

- 1 Raoul Hausmann, *Photomontage*, originally published in *a bis z*, 2, no. 16 (May 1931).
- 2 Curt Glaser, Foreward, *Fotomontage*, exhibition catalogue, Kunstgewerbe Museum Berlin, 1931.