

# MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

## Photogeneity, Cinematic Montage, Fake, Progress?

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Visual rhetoric, the art of combination and artistic fabrication largely dominate analyses of John Heartfield's photomontages. Press and news agency photographs, newspapers and magazines – Heartfield availed himself of a wide range of materials. But on what iconographic basis and according to what visual potential did he select and combine this found footage? From a semiotic point of view, "charging" of visual objects via their technical representation leads to their perception as iconic objects and, in particular, to the specific form of expression known as photography. Almost 100 years ago, an attempt was made to define the difference between banal and particularly "charged" images with the term photogeneity.



1 – Book cover for James Thomas (ed.), *Illustrierte Geschichte des Bürgerkrieges in Rußland 1917-1921*, Berlin, 1929. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

### Overcoming Photogeneity in Film

In the early 1920s, Louis Delluc's *Photogénie* sparked a debate about this new aesthetic category,<sup>1</sup> which deliberately "charges" purely technical representations or alluringly pleasing objects, faces or bodies with deliberate meaning. Young Soviet directors and film critics countered these phenomena, which had a more superficial focus, with a deeper, cinematographically informed concept of photogeneity. Leo Mur believed that visual objects could be made "photogenic", when photographed from a particular perspective or with the right lighting; that everything depended on the taste and biosocial imprinting of the viewer. "Someone who loves pineapple, will consider an image of dark rye bread to be 'unphotogenic'."<sup>2</sup>

For Boris Eikhenbaum an aesthetic object was produced once individual images were projected as a moving image sequence. The illusion of the cinematic, spatio-temporal continuum arises from the dynamics of static "single frames", whose photogenic expressiveness serves the filmmaker as a means and process for selection. The selection represents a decontextualisation and allows for a "new vision", a new way of seeing.<sup>3</sup> According to Yuri Tynjanov, by establishing a film syntax, the mimetic photogeneity of the individual image is placed in a context it cannot elude, and becomes a sign charged with meaning. Through emphasis, elements of the visible world are not just presented in film, but are also transformed due to their semantic correlation.<sup>4</sup>

Dziga Vertov, on the other hand, took a radical factographic approach to the "fabricated nature" of every film document and engaged in the eradication of standardised perception. In his film, *Tscheloweck s kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929), a multi-staged scene clearly exemplifies the dissolution of cinematographic illusion. Thus, on the actual cinema screen the setting of a cinema auditorium with a screen is projected, on which a film of a man riding a motorbike is being shown, onto which a camera has been mounted that is shooting the subsequent sequence. The process is deliberately exposed here, whereas Sergei Eisenstein's approach was quite the opposite. For Eisenstein, light, perspective, framing, etc. served not only to portray an object, but to also make it approachable from an

intellectual and emotional perspective.<sup>5</sup> He believed that photographic representation increased its level of abstraction; that montage was more inclined to compound associations, rather than real events. The collision of elements should be the method of choice, which could create a cinema that was not only mimetic but also intellectual.<sup>6</sup>

#### Revelation, Exposure, Forging

Expressive photogeneity, contextualisation, the fabrication of images, transformation, conflict, montage to create a surplus of intellectual value – Heartfield also applied these concepts to his photomontages, which differ categorically from moving images. As early as 1922, he had started to use film stills, photographs taken on set and cinema advertising materials, which he transformed into “film-like narratives”.<sup>7</sup> This includes the “cinematographic compression”<sup>8</sup> of a scenario into a single, still image: a couple embracing “was instantly comprehensible, promised adventure and love, and depicted prototypical characters in American cinema”.<sup>9</sup> Or the aerial view of the Chicago slaughterhouses, which is reminiscent of an *establishing shot*, a typical cinematic device.<sup>10</sup> Heartfield also availed himself of cinematic personae, such as Gloria Swanson in close-up, or the expressive still image of a woman in panic, from the Soviet film *Buchta smerti* (*The Bay of Death*, 1926).<sup>11</sup> He integrated classic film genre images into his photomontages, such as a still from Eisenstein’s *Oktjabr* (*October: Ten Days that Shook the World*, 1928, ill. 1)<sup>12</sup> or one from Arnold Fanck’s *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926), starring Leni Riefenstahl as the dancer Diotima, which Heartfield had planned to use for a book cover (ill. 2).<sup>13</sup>

In 1931, Heartfield travelled across the Soviet Union for almost a year, during which he worked on a magazine, gave lectures and had an exhibition. His work for the publishing houses and magazines of a media conglomerate known as the “Münzenberg Trust” attracted much interest within the Soviet Union, and was also much plagiarised. Posters created by the film poster department of the German-Russian film studio Mezhrabpom Film (1921–36), which Münzenberg founded, affirm influences of Heartfield’s montage techniques of using photos or film stills (ills. 3 and 4). In *Oktjabr* analogies arise between the process of an exemplary Heartfield montage and Eisenstein’s “intellectual montage”: “Revelation of contradictions, exposure, to forge the right intellectual notion, to form the right opinion. [...] *Adolf, der Übermensch: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech* (Adolf, the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk) [...] From the sensuality of the individual elements of the montage an intellectual thesis ‘blossoms’ [...]”.<sup>14</sup> It is also present in the poster (ill. 5).

#### Crisis of Authenticity

In photomontage the fabrication of images is made can largely be obscured through retouching and different stages of reproduction. Today we might assume that this kind of media technology is outdated and no longer in use. In fact, due to the use of photo manipulation, photo filters in social media, film

compositing, and the real-time production of programmes in virtual reality, de-/construction has captivated the masses and evolved into a new line of business. In deepfakes, where faces and voices in existing images or films are indiscernibly replaced with someone else’s likeness<sup>15</sup> by applying time-consuming software processes, photomontage becomes a means of agitation once again. Heartfield’s works are occasionally debated as “fake photographs”, despite the fact that their effect is generated precisely by revealing how they were assembled and created conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Heartfield sought to counter visual experiences that he perceived as false or incomplete with his own visual realm.<sup>17</sup> Today we are experiencing an ethical and ontological crisis regarding the authenticity of images, in which “fake” or “fabricated” are no longer attributes that can be objectively recognised at a glance. Fakes are not contrasted against existing imagery, but are added to it instead. They erode the trust previously placed in “images”, and our ability to detect in montages any decisive deviations from reality. This breach of trust could become a societal problem, if, in a visually oriented world, nothing can be clearly substantiated or refuted any more, and if photogeneity, factography and abstraction no longer allow us to gain reliable insights.



2 – Proof of the book cover for Mynona, *Graue Magie – Ein Zukunftsroman* (not used). © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Heartfield used a still from the film *Der heilige Berg* (1926) by Arnold Fanck. Leni Riefenstahl starring as the dancer Diotima can be seen in the background.



3 – Poster for *Mat* (Mother, USSR, 1926, directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin). Poster design: Sergey Kozlovsky (Russian State Library, Moscow)



4 – Poster for *Pozelui Meri Pikford* (A Kiss from Mary Pickford) (USSR, 1927, directed by Sergey Komarov). Poster design: Semjon Semjonov (Russian State Library, Moscow)



5 – Poster for *Oktjabr* (October [Ten Days that Shook the World], USSR, 1928). Poster design: unknown artist (Russian State Library, Moscow)

- 1 Louis Delluc, *Photogénie*, Paris, 1920
- 2 Leo Mur, "Fotogenija", in *Kinoshurnal A.R.K.*, no. 6/7 (June–July), 1925, pp. 3–6, especially p. 6; here in translation
- 3 See Boris Eikhenbaum, "Problemy kino-stilistiki", in Boris Eikhenbaum (ed.), *Poetika kino*. Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, pp. 13–52, here p. 48f., hereafter Eikhenbaum 1927
- 4 Yuri Tynjanov, "Ob osnovach kino" [The fundamentals of film], in Eikhenbaum 1927, see note 3, pp. 55–85
- 5 See Sergei Eisenstein, Warum ich Regisseur wurde [1944], in Naum Klejman and Walentina Korschunowa (eds.), *Sergej Eisenstein. Yo. Ich selbst. Memoiren*, vol. 1, Vienna/Berlin, 1984, pp. 56–80
- 6 See, for instance, Sergei Eisenstein, Tschetertoe ismerenie w kino [The Fourth Dimension in Film], 1929, German version in Oksana Bulgakov and Dietmar Hochmuth (eds.), *Sergej Eisenstein: Das dynamische Quadrat. Schriften zum Film*, Cologne, 1988, pp. 90–108
- 7 Andrés Mario Zervigón, John Heartfield's book cover designs, in Freya Mülhaupt (ed.) *John Heartfield. Zeitausschnitte. Fotomontagen 1918–1939 aus der Kunstsammlung der Akademie der Künste, Berlin*, Berlin, 2009, pp. 46–63, here p. 63 (in translation), hereafter Zervigón 2009
- 8 Zervigón 2009, see note 7, p. 60. Book cover for Upton Sinclair's *Der Liebe Pilgerfahrt (Love's Pilgrimage)*. Malik-Verlag, Berlin, 1928
- 9 Zervigón 2009, see note 7, p. 54; here in translation
- 10 Book cover for Sinclair's *Der Sumpf (The Swamp)*. Malik-Verlag, Berlin, 1926
- 11 For the book cover for Otto Rühle, *Illustrierte Kultur- und Sittengeschichte*, Neuer deutscher Verlag, Berlin, 1929, which Heartfield took from the magazine *Das neue Russland* (1928, no. 374, p. 49. See Lux Rettej (ed.), *John Heartfield. Buchgestaltung und Fotomontage. Eine Sammlung*, Berlin, undated [2014], p. 86, hereafter Rettej 2014. The director of the film was Abram Room.
- 12 German title: *Zehn Tage, die die Welt erschütterten (Ten Days that Shook the World)*, 1928, for James Thomas, *Illustrierte Geschichte des Bürgerkriegs in Russland 1917–1921*, Neuer deutscher Verlag, Berlin, 1929. See the original montage JH 1098: <https://heartfield.adk.de/node/3345>, i.e. the book cover JH 924: <https://heartfield.adk.de/node/1956>
- 13 JH 3055: <https://heartfield.adk.de/node/4034>, for Mynona, *Graue Magie. Ein Zukunftsroman*. The design was not used.
- 14 Fred Gehler and Ullrich Kasten: "Die Küche der Fotomontage. Werkstattnotizen", 1978, in Roland März (ed.), *John Heartfield. Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit. Testimon, Erinnerungen, Interpretationen*. Dresden, 1981, pp. 547–553, especially p. 552; here in translation. Gehler and Kasten made these observations as part of their Heartfield documentary film.
- 15 See for instance Fabian A. Scherschel, *Deepfakes: Neuronale Netzwerke erschaffen Fake-Porn und Hitler-Parodien*, <https://www.heise.de/newsticker/meldung/Deepfakes-Neuronale-Netzwerke-erschaffen-Fake-Porn-und-Hitler-Parodien-3951035.html>, accessed 1 June 2020
- 16 See Vera Chiquet, *Fake Fotos. John Heartfields Fotomontage in populären Illustrierten*, Bielefeld, 2018
- 17 See Rettej 2014, see note 11, p. 160