Representing the Past in Photomontage: John Heartfield as a Visual Historian

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The practice of history and the technique of montage seem to have met at some point of their development to forge a new way of thinking about the past. This new paradigm crystallized around the period between the First and the Second World War, when the proliferation of montage techniques in visual arts and film was accompanied by a broad theoretical discussion on the relevance of the new procedure in arranging and organizing photographic ‘facts’. Various European and Russian avant-garde artists deployed montage in order to construct history in images, although their particular aims and procedures diverged significantly. Moreover, this artistic development was concomitant with several archival and historical projects which opened another path for montage into the practice of history. The most well-known examples are Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the new method of the *Annales* historians, or the theoretical work of Theodor Adorno. This convergence of many overlapping but independent practices that combine history with montage informs my approach to avant-garde photomontage as a modern form of representing history in visual art. Although avant-garde art in general doesn’t seem to be particularly interested in the past – most avant-garde artistic manifestos emphasized the necessity to abandon, if not destroy it – there are, nonetheless, instances when important efforts were made to rebuild history according to new ideas and with the use of new technologies.

I) Two models

In the 1920s and 1930s there are at least two competing models of constructing history images from fragments of photographs and scraps of paper. The difference between them can be illustrated by John Heartfield’s *German Natural History* and Aleksandr Rodchenko’s *1917 February Revolution*. Heartfield builds a satirical picture of the supposedly natural growth of Hitler’s Nazism out of the Weimar Republic, illustrated in the form of a larva developing through the stages of chrysalis to moth. To enhance the shock effect Heartfield disguises the traces of the constructing procedure, making an apparently organic image. Rodchenko, on the other hand, makes a sort of instructional device or a teaching chart, where fissure and discontinuity are clearly visible. Both models are anchored in contemporary German and Russian discussions on the social relevance of aesthetics and both have important reverberations in later art practices.

Rodchenko’s series of historical posters depicting the February Revolution and its aftermath were published in *Novyi LEF* on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of these groundbreaking events in Russia. They were his contribution to the vigorous discussion taking place among Soviet artists on how the revolution should be commemorated. They are meant explicitly and straightforwardly to offer a visual history of events that demanded to be recounted after a period during which the idea of history was consigned to oblivion or even actively rejected in a typically post-revolutionary atmosphere. This initial disappearance of any historical interest manifested itself by the removal of history from school curricula and the renunciation of traditional ways of remembering the past (Dickerman, 151). Rodchenko undertook the task of archiving and restoring photographic documents from the Revolution, and by doing so he attempted to create a new form of historical account by means of images. These poster series were in fact commissioned by the recently established Museum of the Revolution and offered Rodchenko an opportunity to use his newly built archive of documents in a concrete project. The sheets are organized chronologically and cover the period from the founding of the party until the present. They portray the 1917 revolution by means of archival photographs, portraits of important figures, newspaper clippings and other documents. All elements of the chart are captioned and clearly separated from the rest.
The posters offer a clash of diverse visual and written materials which can be ‘read’ in many different ways, but there is always a chronological order between each separate sheet. The model of history that Rodchenko proposes in these plates is archival, pedagogical and commemorative. The degree to which it was innovative at the time could be measured by the reaction of the museum that commissioned the work. Rodchenko reports that his project dissatisfied the curators who would have preferred the artist to have worked with drawn illustrations rather than with photographs. It is the use of photography and archival material that makes the series so original and brings a new understanding of how history can be constructed within avant-garde aesthetics. These posters could also be seen as heralds of a new concept of history that is fragmented and discontinuous. Yet the fragmentation and dynamism of the overall composition is somewhat undermined by a rather traditional conception of commemoration in which significant personalities are placed in the foreground as heroes and actors in history. It also shows a deliberate effort to instruct the viewer according to the precepts of the new official propaganda. Using the modern technique of photography and the revolutionary device of montage, Rodchenko constructs a version of history in which heroes and groundbreaking events are established similarly to the traditional written accounts. In comparison, for example, with the innovative experiments of Sergei Eisenstein at presenting a collective actor in history, Rodchenko rather revisits pre-revolutionary techniques of representing the past. By means of the visual charts he re-establishes the chronology of the events and highlights moments and personalities that are crucial in promoting the new official version of history; one that legitimates the authority of the young communist state.

Heartfield’s working method and the character of the images he produces are obviously very different from Rodchenko’s. Although his combined photographs were never meant to construct the same sort of visual narrative of history as in Rodchenko’s case, they nevertheless repeatedly contained historical themes and figures. In fact they were perceived as modern-day history images already by Heartfield’s contemporaries. This view was expressed most clearly by the artist’s brother Wieland Herzfelde who associated the beginning of contemporary historical themes with Heartfield’s poster Ten Years Later: Fathers and Sons, which was hung on the window of the Malik Verlag. Interestingly, this image was also – just like in Rodchenko’s case – inspired by the need to commemorate a groundbreaking event. It refers to the First World War on its twentieth anniversary, and is meant as an indictment of the political forces that had given rise to the war. Yet its context and purpose were clearly different, since its critical and ironic undertone aimed at exposing the perils of the contemporary political situation in Germany rather than enforcing any official version of the past. This first historical photomontage is less complex, but it already contains the main elements of Heartfield’s tactic. It is composed of three photographs: on the right hand side the monumental figure of General Karl Litzmann, in military attire complete with a helmet and an impressive collection of medals, appears to lead a parade of small boys in uniforms, equipped with tiny rifles. Above the boys and behind Litzmann looms a row of skeletons standing at attention before the general. Through the inscription – Ten Years Later: Fathers and Sons – the poster suggests that the current obsession with militarism will lead to yet another war and that the young boys will suffer the same fate as their fathers. The image is a good example of how Heartfield uses photomontage to formulate his statements about the present by means of references to the past. On many occasions he turns to historical subjects in his designs for book covers and especially in illustrations for the workers’ press, always in reaction to topics from current events, yet his strategies become more and more refined. In these montages he connects events and figures, frequently taken from distant or seemingly unrelated moments in history. He aims at showing a hidden development in time that, in many cases, will lead to a cataclysm. This catastrophic thinking of Heartfield’s has affinities with Walter Benjamin’s work, but Heartfield retains a unique sense of humor, which he uses in his cunning word-and-image puns. His aim is to disclose a potential menace that could be avoided if only the lessons of history could be learned.

*German Natural History* exemplifies this strategy quite well, as it combines elements from contemporary politics with historical figures and events; yet it goes even further to include a mock-scientific insect identification chart. It appears at first sight to be a seamless image of an oak tree branch on which the different stages of a moth life cycle are displayed. Yet it is easy to notice immediately the satirical device used by the artist-*monteur*. The heads of the insects are always
replaced by faces of well-known political figures topped with a hat. Friedrich Ebert, the president of the Weimar Republic from 1919 to 1925, is shown as a caterpillar climbing the branch upwards from the bottom left corner. He gazes meaningfully towards the viewer. On a branch right above him hangs a chrysalis with the head of Paul von Hindenburg, shown as if he has fallen asleep. In the upper section of the image a full-grown moth flies away with his wings spread apart so that a skull pattern is clearly visible. This pattern gave him the infamous name of “death’s head” and made him a recurring motif in the literature, art and film of the period where it was often associated with evil and misfortune. The moth’s head appears to be that of Adolf Hitler, gazing upwards, and also in a hat. On the tail of the insect there is a swastika, a readily recognizable symbol that reinforces the visual impact of the skull and explains the particular name given to the species. Heartfield calls it in the caption a German Death’s-Head Moth (Deutscher Totenkopf-Falter), a specific ‘national’ variant of a well-known type of a moth. He also adds the Latin name acherontia atropos, complete with a newly invented sub-species: germanica. Part of the comic effect of this image lies in the paradoxical juxtaposition of a pseudo-scientific title and the grotesque image of politicians as insects. Heartfield aims at criticizing current political developments in Germany by depicting an imaginary historical evolution. In his assumed conception of history there is a parallel between social and political life on the one hand and biological processes of metamorphosis on the other hand. This conception ingeniously resembles the Benjaminian idea of natural history. As a matter of fact, the metaphor of the Death’s Head Moth representing National Socialism which evolved from the chrysalis of the German bourgeoisie later appears literally in Benjamin’s writings (Buck-Morss, 62).
The image conveys a statement about current German politics which can be ‘read’ together with the title, the caption and quasi-encyclopedic definition of metamorphosis.\(^9\) The witty combination of disparate photographs serves to formulate the message in a visually appealing way. This photomontage is also quite dissimilar to the poster series made by Rodchenko, whose vision of the role of montage proved to be radically different. The Soviet artist distrusted the organic and almost painterly qualities of Heartfield’s mock images, indicating their dangerous vicinity to advertisement strategies and popular culture images. The debate which ensued between the two attitudes towards the new technique of montage brings forth arguments that are still very relevant in considering visual forms of representing history.\(^10\) Although from the perspective of Soviet art the method used by Heartfield didn’t correspond to the intrinsic qualities of the modern technique of photography, it is his pictorial strategy of representing history which, I will argue, makes him a visual historian of a particular kind.\(^11\) His methods amount to a new model in which art historical conventions meet new photographic methods and in which the so-called low-culture of the illustrated press is combined with a sophisticated visual literacy. It is also a model in which clear ideological bias is revealed in a seemingly historical theme. Heartfield appears in this context to work similarly to a critical historian – taking this phrase in its Nietzschean sense – who uses the tools of a photo-monteur to undermine the official version of history.\(^12\)

In the history of art the traditional genre associated with representations of historical events is – or rather was – history painting. Deemed the highest form of art at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, this noble genre was subsequently declared dead by the critics of art around the mid-nineteenth century.\(^13\) However, certain forms of history painting and the particular aims characteristic of its aesthetics survived its foretold death. If there is a question of the continued existence of history painting in the period between the wars, it is usually Pablo Picasso’s monumental Guernica that comes to mind as a classic example. In this painting cubist forms and composition are employed to represent a historical subject. Yet I will try to demonstrate that there are other artistic forms which may also contain elements from history painting. Photomontage responds to the changed conditions of modern society, but it can equally be employed to construct a historical representation.

The aim of this essay is to show some of the implications of the different formal and aesthetic choices the artist-monteurs made in their original attempt at building history from photographic images. In the following I will focus on John Heartfield’s work which, as I will try to demonstrate, can be seen as a missing link between nineteenth century history painting and contemporary representations of history in art. It is the impact of some recent experiments with representing history which urges us to look back at the very influential modernist discussions between organic and fragmented montage, critical and monumental history rendered in visual form.\(^14\)

II) Photographic veracity

Photomontage makes use of the new technological invention of photography, which has often been said to have accelerated the turn towards visuality in thinking about history. In his comment on the 1996 exhibition Face à l’Histoire\(^15\), Stephen Bann asserted an unprecedented “contamination of history with visuality, that, he continued, has helped to determine the form in which we register the presence (and absence) of the past.”\(^16\) This contamination, which implies that we understand or ‘perceive’ history in more and more visual terms, took place shortly after the so-called death of history painting. It was provoked by, in the first place, a growing ‘exhibitionality’ of history, apparent in the proliferation of exhibits and displays which documented or illustrated the past. Yet another profound stimulus for this development was given by the invention of photography, the medium of technical production and the multiplication of images. There are several conflicting theories about how radical was the influence of photography on the growing visuality of history. Some, for example Vilem Flusser, posit a drastic departure from the understanding of history as a linear development of events, which led to the formation of a new paradigm called by him post-historical.\(^17\) In post-history it is the photographic image that informs the way historical facts are organized. Although other recent scholarship has shown that the allegedly radical novelty of
photography is overstated and that there are many more continuities than ruptures between the pre- and post-photographic era, it can hardly be contested that photography influenced the way people think about remembering and registering the past. This impact is clearly visible in modernist discussions of the new medium and in their reactions to the growing importance of photojournalism.

The champions of journalistic reportage often argue that photographs are ‘first drafts of history’, letting us all participate, even if indirectly, in the events which shape our idea of the past. As Michel Frizot noted, since around the 1920s it is first of all the photographer who has to stand face-to-face with history and bring a visual account of his confrontation with world events. Frizot took his argument even further when he stated that an event can be deemed historical only when it is photographable. Referring to history painting he further noted that indeed Picasso didn’t need photographs to paint his Guernica. Most probably, he didn’t use any. But this doesn’t change the fact that the photographs were there; even more so, that they were available in great numbers. Their omnipresence cannot be overestimated because their impact on the viewer is much stronger than was the case in painting or lithography. Photographs claim to have a very particular relationship with their referents. They are believed to show a ‘slice’ of reality, which makes them function as proofs of what really happened. Such uncritical acceptance of photographic veracity obviously creates endless possibilities of manipulating the documents or fabricating ‘media facts’ that became the daily bread of our present-day society, where television and – more recently – the Internet are the main sources of information. The negative side of this evolution towards visuality was recognized already by Siegfried Kracauer in his very pessimistic account of the rise and flourishing of illustrated magazines, such as Life or Paris Match, and the consequent overabundance of press photographs. Undoubtedly, there is an apparent duality in the approach to the new technique of photography. Feared by some and praised by others, it became the site of an animated debate in which modern forms of representation gradually took their shape. According to Kracauer and other thinkers associated with the Frankfurt school, the proliferation of photographic images supplants the working of memory, which in consequence leads to an erosion of historical continuity. Others, especially those involved in the production and dissemination of photographs, see it as a superior means of conveying source material for history as it really was.

This duality is evident in theoretical comments made by the Russian constructivists who recognized that a photograph was more readily understandable by the public, which made it the perfect replacement for now ‘obsolete’ painting. El Lissitzky extolled this transparency of meaning when he assured his readers that “no kind of representation is as completely comprehensible to all people as photography". Sergei Tretiakov, a Russian theorist writing in 1931, praised photography for its effectiveness in conveying a specific message. According to him, “it is immeasurably simpler and more comprehensive” than painting, and is therefore the most suitable technique to take over the role of painting. In both models represented by Rodchenko and Heartfield photographs are employed in order to convey a statement about contemporary history, yet they differ in their relationship to the tradition of painting. Rodchenko’s camp pursues an aesthetic ideal of photography in its pure form. This quasi-Greenbergian ideal implies that photography possesses intrinsic characteristics different from old techniques such as painting or etching. A new medium demands new rules of composition and of montage, which will make its essential qualities come forth. In the wording of Gustav Klutsis, “the photograph possesses its own possibilities of montage and they have nothing to do with composition in painting”. In reality this meant a radical departure from traditional rules of image making and a renunciation of those practices that displayed any affinities with superseded techniques. The position taken by Heartfield is quite different, although he also, in his own way, explored the possibilities of the new media. The difference between the two attitudes becomes apparent in a montage in which Heartfield literally appropriates a nineteenth century painting.

III) Photomontage as history painting

Let me first return to Tretiakov. After praising photography above painting, he notes that a single snapshot is often insufficient to capture “a moment that is characteristically expressive”
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(Tretiakov, 74). In other words, it is difficult to convey the complexity of the social and political reality in one single image. “Snapshots are contingent” and therefore need to be enhanced “quantitatively or qualitatively” (Tretiakov, 73). Tretiakov argues for composite images or photographic series that will allow more points of view. He adds that “it is no longer possible to talk about war with a single picture, be it a Delacroix or the skulls of Vereshchagin” (Tretiakov, 73). As in riposte to that statement Heartfield appropriates a Delacroix in his photomontage Liberty Fights in Their Ranks. The picture is composed of two very distinct elements. The image in the foreground is cut out from a photograph taken in Barcelona on the day Republican troops left for the Front during the revolution against Franco in July 1936. In the background, as if rising behind the Spanish insurgents, the figures from the Delacroix painting Liberty Guiding the People of 1830 repeat their outstretched poses and agitated gestures. The two fragments, although very different from each other – one is a nineteenth century painting of a great master, the second a contemporary press photograph – fit very well together because of their visual affinities. Although they remain distinct through the effect of fading in the fragment appropriated from the painting, they seem to belong together. Note how the man in the front and the figure of Liberty behind him hold a shaft with a banner and take on similarly dynamic poses of rising and calling to fight. This visual affinity makes us accept that they perfectly match each other, although we also immediately recognize that they are parts of independent images. Heartfield does not attempt to dupe the viewer into believing this constructed picture is one integral photograph. He adds a short caption in the upper right corner of the image, where he explains the origin of both pictures. His political intention is clarified in the title, visible at the bottom of the image. Freedom fights in their ranks means not only that a contemporary event is compared with the historical symbol of the revolution. It implies that the allegorical figure of Freedom endows the actions of the Spanish people with a deeper meaning, lending them a historical legitimacy. A photograph of a minor event from the point of view of the whole conflict of that period is given a symbolic significance.
Die Freiheit selbst kämpft in ihren Reihen
Fotoentwurf: John Heartfield
Heartfield chooses one of the many photographs that appeared in the weekly illustrated press. Instead of searching for a visual synthesis of the events that could replace a description – a sort of decisive moment in Cartier-Bresson’s sense – he selects a scene of relatively small significance. In it, he discovers a potential symbolic meaning that lies in the formal affinity to the painting of Delacroix. It is his proposition to remedy Kracauer’s pessimistic judgment of the illustrated magazines’ “assault of [the] mass of images”; their overabundance, according to Kracauer, overwhelms memory and prevents us from understanding what all these visual records really mean (Kracauer, 432). Heartfield shows a minor event and an anonymous crowd, but he chooses to conflate it with the Liberty painting, a symbol par excellence of the heroism of ordinary people. This visual resemblance turns the picture of the Spanish Republican fighters into a memorable image. If it remained just one of the many similar photographs from the civil war in Spain, it would not convey the message that the montage communicates through the combination of visual and textual elements.

There is another reason why this picture is interesting as a proposition of a modern history painting. It happens to refer to the same historical events which made Picasso paint his masterpiece Guernica. This classic example of twentieth century history painting was made in protest against the Nazi bombardment of the Basque village Gernika. In his photomontage Heartfield stands on the same side as Picasso, yet his means of expression are fundamentally different. He uses the most advanced technology of photography; more than that, he employs it in a way which resembles advertisement strategies more than historical illustration. At the same time he employs a photograph of a painting which stands for a tradition that artists such as Picasso hoped to overcome. The position taken by Heartfield is therefore quite complex. Clearly, his attitude to the art-historical tradition is far from the radical rejection characteristic of most radical artistic movements such as Cubism and Constructivism; and especially of Dadaists to whom he initially belonged. Not incidentally, he incorporates a picture in his montage which is a landmark of nineteenth century history painting. His aim is to show a connection between the allegorical image of freedom-fighters at the time of the July Revolution in 1830 Paris and the Republican opposition in 1936 Spain. The painting obviously belongs to the vast repertoire of visual resources which can be cut and recombined in order to build new meanings. Yet it is also a significant piece of material and Heartfield uses it with acute awareness of its status and symbolic power. Delacroix’ Freedom Leading the People endows the photograph of the Spanish Republican fighters with dignity and respect, transforming it into an idealized image and raising an ordinary snapshot to the level of history painting. By using it Heartfield engages in a dialogue with the tradition which, in the high peak of modernism, is seen as irrevocably dead or in the best case retrograde. Not surprisingly, when he made his first photomontage together with Georg Grosz, they signed the finished picture with the inscription ‘Grosz-Heartfield mont.’ (abbreviation from ‘montiert’ – assembled), which is an allusion to the traditional ‘pinx.’ (pinxit – painted) found on so many old paintings (Herzfelde 18). As a matter of fact, Grosz, who collaborated with Heartfield for many years, abandoned his earlier ambition of becoming a history painter.77 This coincidence indicates that both artists shared aims that were not dissimilar to those of traditional history painting, at least as far as political engagement and historical subject matter is concerned. They clearly did not shun the tradition, as most avant-garde manifestos did. Rather than simply destroying it, they drew on it in order to confront the present. It is thus also hard to say that they cherished the past – be it tradition, history or art – in any conventional way. In their work, rather, elements taken from the past are assembled together according to a certain idea taken from the present and supported by pictorial affinities.

IV) Cut-and-pasted history

The identification with past events by means of showing visual similarities, which in consequence are to indicate deeper, intrinsic links between two distant facts or personalities is a characteristic strategy of Heartfield. This tactic discloses a certain view of history. Some facts are selected and isolated from their chronological context in order to make new connections that are
meaningful to the Monteur-Historian. This tactic bears some affinities with the textual montage of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* or the pictorial arrangements in *Mnemosyne Atlas* by Aby Warburg. History appears as an immense inventory that can be reshuffled and dynamically rebuilt in order to reveal the meaning of the present.

If Tretiakov, in his appeal for composite images, thought mainly about the effectiveness of such pictures in conveying a message and serving propaganda, another Russian writer, Boris Mixajlovič Eejxenbaum, saw montage as an intrinsic characteristic of history itself, even if he didn’t actually use the term directly. This formalist literary theorist wrote in 1929:

> We do not apprehend all the facts at once; it isn’t always the same facts we take in, and not always the same correlations of facts we need bring out. Not everything we know or could get to know makes a connection in our minds under some specific conceptual sign, that is, turns from sheer contingency into a fact of a certain particular meaning. The immensity of the past, stored as documents and various kinds of personal papers, finds its way onto the printed page only piecemeal (and not always as the same material), in so far as theory gives us the right and the possibility of incorporating a part of that store into a system under some conceptual sign. […] The very need for some particular set of facts, the very prerequisite of having some particular conceptual sign – these are conditions dictated by contemporary life with its specific problems. History is, in effect, a science of complex analogies, a science of double vision: the facts of the past have meanings for us that differentiate them and place them, invariably and inevitably, in a system under the sign of contemporary problems. Thus one set of problems supplants another; one set of facts overshadows another. History in this sense is a special method of studying the present with the aid of the facts of the past.  

In a similar way, Heartfield combines two events that are chronologically distant, because they make sense together from the perspective of the present and more importantly, from the perspective of a particular – politically biased – standpoint. From this very specific angle, the monteur builds his complex analogies which explain and give meaning to the present. Crucially for his proposition, the concept of a constructed history is here translated into visual terms, which can result in peculiar combinations. History which becomes more and more visual can be also organized according to the laws of visual perception. So, for example, even his adherence to secular communist ideals does not prevent Heartfield from using religious symbols. In the montage *As in the Middle Ages . . . so in the Third Reich* (*Wie im Mittelalter so im dritten Reich*) he juxtaposes a medieval relief sculpture of a martyr broken on a wheel with a nude body spread on the ‘wheel’ of a swastika.
The upper image is a photograph of an authentic piece of medieval art and is captioned “a man broken on the wheel in an old collegiate church in Tübingen”; the lower one is made by combining a staged photograph of a male nude appearing on the all-too-well-known symbol of Nazism. Like in Ejxenbaum’s description of historical practice, from the immense repertory of images from the past the historian selects only those elements that will be relevant for his concept of a particular historical event. Facts that seem to be unrelated can gain a new meaning when they are summoned under a new idea. Heartfield translates this method into a visual language of sorts by combining images with certain formal affinities – in this case the circular form and the dead body spread on it. Through this new connection he visualizes his idea of the Nazi regime as responsible for the death of many political opponents. Communists and Marxist socialists were put in prison camps, tortured and killed. In his pictorial puzzle Heartfield clearly compares them with Christian martyrs. This tactic of merging two seemingly unrelated items is justified in his view as long as it is effective. It carries a message that is clear and powerful in its meaning. The press for which he published his montages continuously reported on the atrocious practices of the Nazi authorities and the image only complemented and strengthened the message present in adjacent texts. Interestingly, in this montage Heartfield uses a photograph that he commissioned from a professional photographer. He couldn’t in every case find an existing image that would suit his
idea, although he is reported to have spent long hours skimming illustrated press and books for pictures that were potentially useful in his montage work. When he didn’t find them, he designed a photograph that had to be executed with extreme exactitude by a photographer who collaborated with him on a regular basis. The lower part of As in the Middle Ages . . . is such an image and it demonstrates how the artist searched for the strong visual impact of photography. Similarly to the previous example, two photographs are combined because of their visual affinities. Yet the risk of such a tactic is that the iconic correspondence remains quite superficial. It grasps only generalities, neglecting the particular details, specific facts or names of persons. This is quite unlike Rodchenko’s ordered plates from the February Revolution. In them, the objective hierarchy of importance is established by the size and positioning of certain photographs, which always retain their documentary value. Heartfield employs photography in such a way as to create a distance between the image and its referent. As a result, the montage generates what Frizot called a discursive space, in which different meanings can be invested by accompanying inscriptions and cultural connotations present in the combined fragments. This tactic seems to work most effectively when it is used as a critical tool.

V) Montage as a critical tool

On several occasions Heartfield turns towards visual facts of the past in order to demonstrate a discredited part of the tradition. In the montage The War (Der Krieg) he appropriates another painting, this time by the German artist Franz von Stuck. This symbolist tableau from 1894 depicts a nude Teutonic horseman crossing a field of dead bodies. The idealized image of war is updated by Heartfield, who adds a small and ridiculously clumsy figure of Hitler behind the impressive horseman and inserts a swastika-shaped bolt of lightning to the sky behind. The inscription below says it is a timely montage of von Stuck painting. On the one hand the composition alludes to Hitler’s love for symbolist art and his recourse to the Germanic ideology that is implied in this type of representation. On the other hand it complements the critique of Hitler’s expansive politics, in which the need of war is justified by the ‘natural’ Germanic-Teutonic urge towards the East. The image appeared in AIZ next to an article which discussed the growing militarism of the Third Reich and criticized Hitler’s plans of invasion. Again, the photomontage is used at a particular moment in time and has the task of exposing the fraudulent nature of Nazi politics. But it is also interesting to see how Heartfield exposes another, equally bankrupt, part of the pictorial tradition. For although it is hard to blame von Stuck retrospectively for the horrendous development which turned the sentimental idea of Teutonic culture into the ideology of the most deadly military regime in the history of Germany, it is undeniable that Heartfield’s montage makes it difficult to see the original painting unblemished by this horrific later history. In visual terms, it is hard to erase the small figurine of Hitler from behind the imposing Teutonic hero painted by von Stuck.

This type of imagery, although very convincing on the pictorial level, demands a certain amount of explanation provided by the adjacent text. We need some knowledge of this particular painting, its history and its affiliation with Nazi ideology, or even the personal preference for it of the Führer. A visual literacy seems to be a necessary condition of understanding the history represented in Heartfield’s photomontage, precisely because of the gaps and loops it makes across time. This is contrary to Rodchenko’s poster series, which offers a well organized, chronological information chart that could effectively be used to study history at school. The pieces of documents and photographs on these posters remain separated, so that the viewer easily distinguishes them and recognizes their fragmentary nature. One of the main charges against Heartfield’s montage pertains to its organicism, which means that separate parts of the image are merged into a seemingly organic whole, just like in traditional art. Yet in Heartfield’s work the organic quality of the image usually serves to critically expose invisible connections between disparate elements. For example, on his portrait of Hitler the bust of the Führer is merged with that of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The typical attributes of the monarch, complete with the mustache, contribute to a comic effect. Behind this satirical appearance, however, there is an important assumption about similarities between the two personalities. Again it is the added text that makes
the historical reference clear: *S.M. Adolf (Seine Majestät)* identifies Hitler as a descendant of the emperor. The text below subverts the meaning of an official state portrait. Instead of the emperor’s assurance about future victory, it discloses a sham. Heartfield makes Hitler solemnly admit that he will lead Germany to bankruptcy. Hitler’s plans for a large-scale armed conflict that would make the Third Reich a world power are compared to the dubious political achievements of the Kaiser. To make the picture complete, Heartfield inscribes another bitterly earnest promise on the Führer’s breast. On the order in the shape of the Maltese cross we can read: *Pour le profit*. It is a travesty of the famous legend on the order *Pour le Merite*, which was Prussia’s highest military honor, abolished in 1918 and subsequently re-established by the Nazis. This inscription refers to the financial support Hitler received from affluent industrialists and suggests his decisions were often dictated by the interests of his patrons rather than any ideological motivation. The theme reappears quite often in various other montages. This merged portrait of Hitler as the Kaiser uses a critical visual device to point to historical parallels between past and present. It is suggested that the military failure of the Kaiser during the First World War will be repeated in Nazi Germany.
On another occasion, Heartfield reverses his own strategy and unmasksthe ideological falsifications of history in Nazi propaganda. In *Mimicry*, Goebbels is shown attaching a Karl Marx beard to Hitler in a desperate attempt to win the support of the workers movement. This false attire is, in Heartfield’s view, a misplaced effort on the side of the Nazi propagandists to appropriate parts of history – in this case the Marxist ideology – that are completely alien to them but which were judged suitable to achieve their political goals. In that way Heartfield makes a bitter comment on Hitler’s appropriation of Marxist rhetoric while at the same time gesturing ironically towards his own tactic of montage, which itself relies on the tactic of appropriation. Attaching Marx’s beard in order to be more convincing for the workers is a strategy that could be plotted by Heartfield himself, were he on the side of the Nazis. Foregrounding this aspect of his work by disclosing these methods ensures that his photomontage functions critically in relation to
its own *modus operandus*. Similarly, in the image issued on the occasion of the foundation of the German state church, entitled “The Cross was not yet heavy enough”, Heartfield makes a Nazi fasten four additional wings to Christ’s cross in order to make this central Christian symbol look more like a swastika. The small text above reads: “The Catholic Adolf Hitler organized the Evangelical German State church and nominated a Reich bishop”. Again his aim is to unmask the falsifications committed by the contemporary regime. Yet it is quite significant that he accuses Hitler of using a similar device that he used in the work *As in Middle Ages...* described earlier. In it, Heartfield resorted to visual similarities between a medieval relief and the swastika as a wheel of torture. Here he metaphorically portrays a Nazi attempting to adapt the symbol of Christianity to the shape of a swastika. By doing this Heartfield exposes the constructed nature of any historical account or ideology. This self-critical character of his montage, not found in Rodchenko’s posters, allows him to build a model of the representation of history which makes us aware of its constructed nature.
Zur Gründung der deutschen Staatskirche

Der Katholik Adolf Hitler organisierte die evangelische deutsche Staatskirche und ermunterte einen Reichskirchen

Das Kreuz war noch nicht schwer genug
Heartfield is a visual historian of a particular kind. Many characteristics of his montages are determined by the context and purpose of their publication. He usually works from the position of a critic who relentlessly traces vicissitudes and mystifications of the Nazi ideology. His critique becomes ever fiercer the more suppressed and eventually banned his published illustrations are in
Hitler’s Germany. Rodchenko’s poster project, on the contrary, was conceived on commission of the newly established state museum. Clearly, the Soviet artist engages in creating a symbolical and artistic justification of the new political order after the October Revolution. He also uses the new photographic medium in a way that reflects his constructivist convictions. According to this position, the technique’s intrinsic values are distinct from the old artistic forms such as painting. Therefore, photographs are unaltered and combined together on one plate so as to clearly distinguish them from each other. In this way they retain their documentary character, strengthened by the captions and short descriptions. In Rodchenko’s eyes, they provide the posters with a scientific quality and can successfully serve history as a university and school discipline. Photography appears here as a technique that supplants painting and demands new rules of composition and imaging. Heartfield’s relation to the new medium is much more flexible and instrumental. He uses these qualities of photographic images which serve his critical message the most sufficiently. Quite often, photography turns out to be the perfect means of access to the vast reservoir of images, which can be reproduced, cut and assembled in endless combinations. Documentary, or ‘straight’ photography, can appear next to (or combined with) a reproduction of a classic work of art. Paraphrasing Ejzenbaum, Heartfield builds a history of complex visual analogies which receive meaning in the perspective of contemporary issues. Although he is at pains to produce a seemingly organic whole from the selected fragments, therefore making an image that is at first sight visually convincing, he nevertheless remains self-critical towards his own means of communication. By occasionally exposing the constructed nature of the photomontage he allows a broader discursive space within the image. He seems to be aware that his photomontages remain just one proposition of history by means of images.

Notes

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5 The first monograph on the artist was titled Photomontage on Contemporary History; cf. John Heartfield. Photomontagen zur Zeitgeschichte, ed. Konrad Farner (Zürich: Kultur und Volk, 1945).

Hezfelde writes about this poster that, “exhibited on 4 August 1924 in one of the windows of the Malik Bookshop to commemorate the outbreak of war in 1914, it was a warning against the increasing influence of certain forces that were preparing for a war of revenge” (Hezfelde, 21).

The idea of natural history in this sense seems to have been used for the first time by Theodor Adorno, who engaged in an implicit polemic with Martin Heidegger. It also appears in Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk. It is a dialectical term, in which the concepts of history and nature dynamically oppose each other (Buck-Morss, 59). Although the first implies change by progress and the second a circular return and rebirth, both Benjamin and Adorno speak about ‘natural history’ (and Adorno speaks also about ‘historical nature’ in his Aesthetic Theory).


According to Heartfield’s critics, his use of organic montage connects him to the tradition and technique of painting, which doesn’t correspond with the essential qualities of photography. See Brandon Taylor, Collage: The Making of Modern Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 90-93.


My research has been inspired by David Green and Peter Seddon’s seminal book History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). The authors argue for a “reassessment of the legacies of history painting” in contemporary art, which seems to be more and more preoccupied with history. My main purpose is to look at Heartfield in this contemporary perspective in order to see in what way his work sheds light on the contemporary discussions around representations of history in art; and reciprocally, what aspects of Heartfield’s oeuvre become clearer when seen from this contemporary point of view.

Exhibition Face à l’Histoire 1933-1996. L’artiste moderne devant l’événement historique was organized by the Centre Pompidou in December 1996 – April 1997.


One of the advocates of this position is the already mentioned Stephen Bann; cf. an excellent analysis by Wolfgang Ernst, “Let there be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archeology in Parallel lines”, Art History 28.5 (November 2005): 582-603. Another interesting interpretation of the impact of photography on the understanding of history.


22 Walter Benjamin in *The Short History of Photography* also demonstrates an optimistic view of the role of photography in visualizing historical events.


24 Sergei Tretiakov, “From the Photo-Series to Extended Photo-Observation”, *October* 118, (Fall 2006): 71-77.

25 See Taylor, 89.

26 Published in *Volks Illustrierte* 1, no.1 (19 August 1936): 16. See Evans, 391-392.


29 Published in *AIZ* 13.22 (13 May 1934): 352. See Evans, 217-218.


31 Published in *AIZ* 12.29 (27 July 1933): 499. See Evans, 139-140.


33 Published in *AIZ* 13.16 (19 April 1934): 241. See Evans, 205-206.

34 Published in *AIZ* 12.23 (15 June 1933): 403. See Evans, 127-128.