

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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Dialectic Montages? John Heartfield's and Peter Jackson's Responses to the First World War

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The First World War is thought to have been the first “media war”. Alongside photography made during this period, film was also employed explicitly as an instrument of propaganda. The warring factions influenced film production and used moving images as a weapon on a mental battlefield. Strategic planning informed filmed documentation of battle scenes, the production of propaganda films and the choice of feature films shown in cinemas at the front. In Germany, responsibility for propaganda was overseen by the Supreme Army Command, an authority that founded the Bild- und Filmamt (BUFA) in 1917 and commissioned media productions. In Great Britain, the government’s “Department of Information” was put in charge of a similar propaganda task force.

John Heartfield and George Grosz – both pacifists and internationalists (who anglicised their German names in protest against an increasing rise in German national sentiments) – were intrigued by the new visual media. Harry Graf Kessler established contact between them and the German Foreign Office’s news department, and the two artists drew up a series of ideas for propaganda films. Only one of their ideas was realised: the animated film *Sammy in Europa*, 1918. Parody and caricature served as this artist duo’s preferred stylistic means, as did playing with cultural stereotypes.

John Heartfield produced his first photo collage in this period: *So sieht der Heldentod aus* (This is what heroic death looks like, 1917–18) shows two images of corpses on a battlefield, connected by the handwritten title between them. (ill. 1) Resignation, irony, but also cynicism lie behind this description. In this work Heartfield laid out the foundations for the techniques of dialectic montage. Several images or image and text elements are linked together in counterpoint. Their internal dialogue also creates something new, which manifests as an intellectual jump made by the viewer. The process is related to the *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre and the dialectic film montages in the works of Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin. The unusual combination of several elements initially triggers a moment of irritation, pause and introspection. However, Peter Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) does not rely on an “active audience” to decipher such contradictions.

The Australian director has made use of British documentary footage from the First World War, which he has extensively restored, edited, set to music, and reassembled into a very successful documentary film. Jackson stated that his purpose was twofold: He wanted “to enlighten” a younger generation about the First World War, but he also wanted to give back to the soldiers “their voices” and “their dignity”. (ill. 2)

The footage that Jackson used came from the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and was digitised for the project *European Film Gateway 1914*. In his choice of material, Jackson predominantly shows young men who naively go off to war, hoping for adventure. They are confronted by the horrors of war and are welded



1 – John Heartfield, *So sieht der Heldentod aus*, 1917–18.
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2 – *They Shall Not Grow Old*, directed by Peter Jackson (2018). Imagery showing the mobilisation is initially captured in a standard-definition 4:3 frame, in black-and-white. The recordings become coloured, enlarged and are cut to fit the widescreen format 1.85:1 only after the outbreak of war. © 2018 Imperial War Museum. Photo: Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures | Warner Bros. Entertainment GmbH

together by a spirit of comradeship. More than 100 contemporary interviews with eyewitnesses from the archives of the BBC and the IWM provide off-camera commentary. The world portrayed remains diegetic, and critical reflection amongst the veterans is limited. Only in their encounters with prisoners of war do they note their surprise that the enemy seems to be made up of guys much like themselves. Otherwise, a nostalgic, uncritical perspective dominates. Those responsible for the conflict are not named. War is inevitable here, just as the propaganda of that period suggested – it was viewed as a natural necessity.

Where Jackson presents young, innocent faces to us in slow motion, Heartfield used his montage to raise awareness about the perversion of war and the dishonesty of those responsible. Soldiers wearing gas masks and indistinguishable military columns say less about the fate of individuals than about the dehumanisation of the masses and the senselessness of war. (ill. 3–4) Psychological damage and trauma are not addressed in Peter Jackson's work, nor is the war itself questioned. Nevertheless, it has been officially reported that shell shock alone affected more than 80,000 soldiers in Great Britain – while the number of unreported cases is likely to have been much higher. Instead, a constant flood of commentary by contemporary eyewitnesses does not allow for pauses, let alone for reflection. And when the comments do express anger, they are not directed against the war-mongers, but the incomprehension of post-war civilian society.

John Heartfield cited press reports during the First World War as the inspiration for his photomontages: He noticed "how photographs were used to lie to people [...] by false titling or by mislabeling them. [...] Photos of war scenes were used to support the political agenda meant to encourage perseverance."¹ While the cogs in the state's propaganda machine covered up their sources and knew how to reinterpret statements through false labelling, Heartfield decided to adopt an enlightenment strategy. He did not do this by researching the actual sources, however, but instead by using his montages to expose the manipulative techniques themselves and by challenging the viewer's radar for contradiction while doing so.

Jackson also uses collage techniques in his film, when he cross-fades moving images and propaganda posters in the segment on mobilisation. (ill. 5) But like his additions of visuals and off-camera commentary, here, too, the combining of two elements does not serve to create a dialectical contradiction, but rather to reinforce it. Jackson's continuation of a war propaganda perspective becomes most evident through the use of Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoons. His humorous series about daily life in the trenches was published at the time in a soldier's magazine and was considered part of the official care of the troops. This joviality was anything but subversive; it primarily served to relieve stress and lighten the mood.

Jackson's choice of imagery was, of course, dependent on the visual productions of the propaganda ministry. Like footage of war crimes, actual battle scenes are lacking. When Jackson intervened in the imagery, which he sometimes did on a massive scale, it led both to a smoothing effect and emotionalisation. For instance, explosions were artificially magnified and entire sec-



3 – John Heartfield, Photomontage used as window decoration at the Malik-Verlag, 1924. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin



4 – John Heartfield, Photomontage for the cover of Johannes R. Becher's novel (*CH C1 = CH) 3As (Levite) oder Der einzig gerechte Krieg*, 1926. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

tions of an image replaced by retouching (buildings were replaced by green trees, for example) to make the imagery “more pleasing”. Even the colouration of still photographs he included (the red of the blood especially stands out) cannot reproduce the shock of seeing authentic images. (ill. 6) Heartfield uses red as a political reference and as a provocation; in contrast, the colour red in Jackson’s work stands for the nobility of heroism and attests to the sacrifice of bloodshed. When the buzzing of flies accompanies imagery of corpses, the effect is much less startling and disturbing, because it adds to the fictionalisation.

The director of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-03) can hardly be blamed for perfectly mastering the means of dramatisation and so skilfully staging the battles for Middle-earth. However, in this documentary, in addition to the choice of images and montages, the impact and effects of each of the restoration and editing techniques employed deserve theoretical consideration. And because Jackson advertised this project as a “humanisation” with a moral and enlightening function, it should be examined critically. Although staged heroically and with pathos, what we experience is the celebration of a normative, self-contained white male world. The film does not provide the promised enlightenment; there are neither references nor critical commentaries. In its place is a war memorial for veterans, one that ultimately carries on by using old propaganda strategies without reflection.

Susan Sontag has studied the reception of war images extensively. She concluded that such images rarely lead to a change in attitude or even action. And particularly those with a perfect surface – the ones in which documentary images mostly closely resemble their fictional counterparts – tend to have a distancing effect rather than provoke genuine shock or emotion in the viewer. Quite the opposite, a dialectic montage on Heartfield’s terms sets out to make contradictions and ambivalences palpable.

1 Interview with Bengt Dahlbäck, 1967, quoted from Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef (eds.), *John Heartfield*, Cologne, 1991, p. 14; here in translation.



5 – *They Shall Not Grow Old*, directed by Peter Jackson (2018). Image collage showing mobilisation. © 2018 Imperial War Museum. Photo: Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures | Warner Bros. Entertainment GmbH



6 – *They Shall Not Grow Old*, directed by Peter Jackson (2018). Transportation of corpses and wounded men, highly coloured. © 2018 Imperial War Museum. Photo: Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures | Warner Bros. Entertainment GmbH