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

"The Reader as Photomonteur": Beyond the Image as Virus

Boaz Levin

1 – "Ein neuer Wettbewerb mit vielen Preisen: Unsere Leser als Fotomonteure" (A New Competition with Many Prizes: Our Readers as Photomonteurs), a page from *VI* (*Volks-Illustrierte*), no. 8, 23 February 1938, Estate of John Heartfield. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

On 23 February 1938, *Die Volks-Illustrierte* (*People's Illustrated*, the renamed *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (*AIZ*), which was published from exile in Prague as of 1936), featured a full-page announcement for a new competition: "Unsere Leser als Foto-monteure" (Our Readers as Photomonteurs). Long, slightly cartoonish, leather boots with spurs – a swastika and fasces, symbol of the Italian fascists, in place of the metal rowels – were offered as the main components for a future photomontage, to be combined by the readers with additional image-parts and paired with a fitting caption. "The readers of our paper are all familiar with John Heartfield's photomontages, and he is often the subject of the letters to the editor we receive." The editors wrote in their announcement, "If several issues are published without John Heartfield's photographic commentary on current

events, we are immediately asked about him by this or that reader". Since Heartfield was "up to his ears" with other work and couldn't deliver one of his famous photomontages in time for publication of that issue – the editorial explained further – it was decided to delegate his task to their readership. The winners would be awarded book prizes, to be selected from a list featured in the same issue. And indeed, just as promised, five issues later the winners were announced on 30 March 1938, and a selection of photomontages were featured in the paper.

"Der Diener in den Stiefeln seiner Herren" (The Servant in His Master's Boots) depicts an elegantly dressed cartoon figure, donning a top hat, neatly folded pocket square and cane – the caricature of a capitalist, one could safely assume – drowning in the tall leather riding boots of his Nazi puppet-master. It was the work of one Dr. Boßhard, from Zurich. Other entries were submitted from Belgium, Palestine, Switzerland, France and Scandinavia. The semi-anonymous thirteen-year-old J. R., who only used his initials, sent an image with the caption "Wohin geht der nächste Schritt" (Where Does the Next Step Lead?), while Gershon Kronfeld from Tel Aviv accompanied his composition titled "Herr Stech" (roughly, "Mr Stab") with a poem, whose concluding verse reads: "doch nicht besann Herr Stech die andere Seite, die jede Sache stets bringt mit – noch eh er fand den Weg ins Weite, lag Stech erstochen und mit ihm sein grauenhafter Schritt", ("Yet he did not consider the flipside, which everything does bring – before he could get very far, Stech lay stabbed to death and with him, his gruesome stride."[1]).

A similar competition had been announced the previous year, in 1937 – "Bild ohne Worte" (An Image without Words) – inviting readers to add a caption to an existing photomontage. The image provided by the magazine depicted a dove clasped in an eagle's talons, both resting on (or riding?) the barrel of a gun emblazoned with a swastika and the Krupp logo.
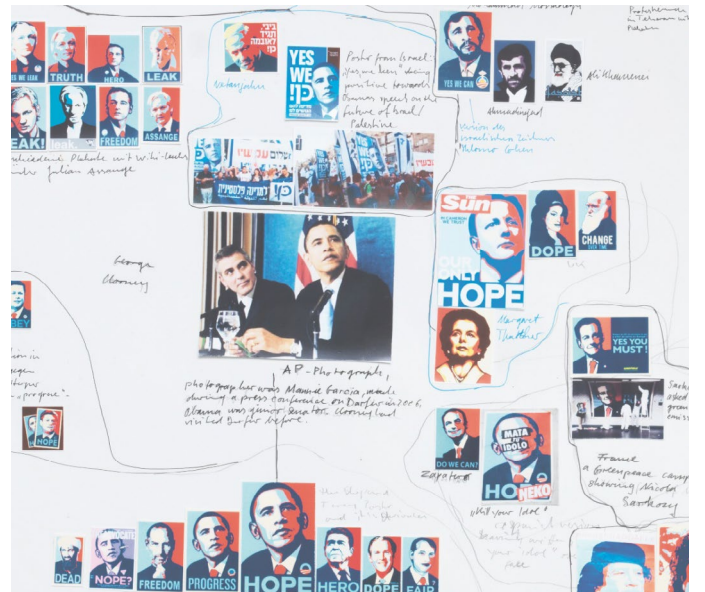
Can Heartfield be of any help when grappling with the challenges and contradictions of our current visual and political culture? Today – as we are inundated by images travelling across digital networks – merely blurring the roles of viewer and producer, reader and writer, might seem quaint, if not complacent: Isn't that what internet "users" are supposed to do? The notion that people could and should produce their own content which

2 – "Die Leser als Fotomonteure" (Readers as Photomonteurs), a page from *VI* (*Volks-Illustrierte*), no. 13, 30 March 1938, Estate of John Heartfield. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

3 – D.H. Saur, *Hope 2008–17, Version I*, 2017, collage on non-woven fabric. © D.H. Saur

would then be hosted and disseminated on online platforms, gained traction with the advent – now over a decade ago – of the so-called "web 2.0." Not merely stars for fifteen minutes, as Warhol would have us believe, each and every person now became their own one-(wo)man enterprise: editor-in-chief, PR agent, celebrity, paparazzo, and spy, all in one. Media platforms, in turn, gained unrestricted access to users' data, to be harvested and employed for targeted advertising based on predictive algorithms. Thus "social networks" were born.

Untethered, these "memes" now travel, morph and shift across platforms, taking on new meanings as they do so. First coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, a "meme" can be viewed as the cultural corollary of a "gene": small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation. As Limor Shifman has written, nowadays an "Internet meme" is "commonly applied to describe the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet."[2] The term, however, should give us pause. There is nothing neutral about projecting Darwinist processes of "natural selection" on cultural and visual phenomena, naturalizing and, in the processes, depoliticizing them. The image isn't a mere virus propagating on its own. And indeed, perhaps that's where Heartfield's photomontages differ from contemporary vernacular practices. His approach took in a fully politicized and rhetorical understanding of the image and its context. Just as Walter Benjamin, paraphrasing Tretyakov, proposed in his 1934 address "The Author as Producer" held at the Institute for the Study of

Fascism in Paris, the *AIZ* and Heartfield announced that their "mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively."[3]

What might such an active intervention in the circulation of networked images look like today? Titled *Hope 2008-2017* (2017), the work of D. H. Saur traces the dissemination and morphology of the HOPE meme from its inception by street artist *Shepard Fairey* during the campaign towards Barack Obama's first presidential campaign until the election of Donald Trump. Saur's work places the individual manifestations of the HOPE image – often from opposing political camps – in relation to one another, meticulously tracing their elaborate trails, links, and transformations in a forensic-like pictographic study. His work seems to follow some of Heartfield's key lessons: that photographic meaning is constructed through a dialectic between what the image depicts and its context; that this meaning can be changed, undermined, sabotaged, derailed by a monteur; that wielding the "camera as a gun" doesn't necessarily entail pointing it at a target, but rather, deflecting "its image-bullets" as they circulate, mid-air.

1 All translations are my own.
2 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014, p. 2
3 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927– 1934, Cambridge, MA, 1999, pp. 768–782