Montage or Fake News?

Alexander Schwarz

Visual rhetoric, the art of combination and artistic fabrication largely dominate analyses of JohnHeartfield’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.

Overcoming Photogeneity in Film

In the early 1920s, Louis Delluc’s Photogénie sparked a debate about this new aesthetic category,¹ 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’.²

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.³ According to Yuri Tynyanov, 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.⁴

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, Tschelowek 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 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. 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.

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”. This includes the “cinematographic compression” 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”. Or the aerial view of the Chicago slaughterhouses, which is reminiscent of an establishing shot, a typical cinematic device. 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). 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) 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).

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. 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’ [...]” 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 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.

Heartfield sought to counter visual experiences that he perceived as false or incomplete with his own visual realm. 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.
Montage or Fake news?

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)
Montage or Fake news?

2. Leo Mur, “*Fotogenija*”, in *Kinozhurnal A.R.K.*, no. 6/7 (June–July), 1925, pp. 3–6, especially p. 6; here in translation
4. Yuri Tynjanov, “*Ob osnovakh kino*” [The fundamentals of film], in Eikhenbaum 1927, see note 3, pp. 55–85
6. See, for instance, Sergei Eisenstein, *Tschertetoe ismerenie w kino* [The Fourth Dimension in Film], 1929, German version in Oksana Bulgakova and Dietmar Hochmuth (eds.), *Sergej Eisenstein: Das dynamische Quadrat. Schriften zum Film*, Cologne, 1988, pp. 90–108
9. Zervigón 2009, see note 7, p. 54; here in translation
13. JH 3055: https://heartfield.adk.de/node/4034, for Mynona, Graue Magie. *Ein Zukunftsroman*. The design was not used.
17. See Rettej 2014, see note 11, p. 160