

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

How Surreal Encounters Depict Violence: From Lautréamont to Heartfield to Cattelan and Ferrari via Magritte

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1 – René Magritte, *Le Plaisir (The Pleasure)*, 1927 oil on canvas, 74 x 98 cm. © René Magritte / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020

“Surreal” is a term rarely used to describe the works of John Heartfield, even though he used visual strategies that artists continue to draw more or less explicitly from the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte to this day. This essay explores how pictorial approaches found in Surrealism are used to allude to violence in areas where it is not directly illustrated. This discussion will address the relationship between Heartfield and Magritte’s respective visual and rhetorical styles.

What is seemingly obvious is highly relevant here: although Magritte was primarily a painter and Heartfield worked chiefly with photographs, both largely avoided addressing their themes in a formally expressive way, choosing instead to work in a relatively naturalistic style. Both artists consciously used their mediums to create signs adhering to verisimilitude (a closeness to reality or truth). They intuitively made use of what Klaus Sachs-Hombach articulated in 2006 regarding image perception in general: “In order to determine *what* is being represented in an image, we can draw primarily from the processes we already have at our disposal, thanks to our ability to perceive and recognise objects.”¹ The degree of a work’s ability to reflect this verisimilitude is of course nuanced. Magritte’s and Heartfield’s images are less tied to picturing reality than *trompe-l’oeil* paint-

ings, for example, but much more so than the art of George Grosz, Ludwig Kirchner, Raoul Hausmann or Otto Dix, whose works diverge more starkly from the visual reality outside them.

Both artists contrasted their styles of verisimilitude with depictions of conditions and events we rarely see in daily life – there is no such thing as an oak tree sprouting gas masks, a man with a paragraph sign for a head or an *Arsch mit Ohren* (Ass with Ears), as Heartfield titled a photomontage from 1929. The relationship is in fact more specific. In both Magritte’s and Heartfield’s work the focus is on an unexpected encounter. They may not have belonged to the circle of Surrealists surrounding the poet André Breton,² but their respective surrealisms are downright paradigmatic when viewed in the vein of Lautréamont. The poet’s famous line from the sixth canto of *The Songs of Maldoror* comparing the beauty of a youth to “the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”³ was just as defining for the Paris Surrealist movement as it was for Heartfield and Magritte.

Lautréamont’s wording reintroduces the “encounter” as a neutral concept both in terms of media and technique. It is meant to describe an ensemble of objects, people or situations originating from different contexts or that appear in unexpected combinations, regardless of whether the techniques being used include collage or are purely painterly or photographic. In this sense, this encounter plays a varying, but always highly significant role for artists such as Hieronymus Bosch, John Heartfield, René Magritte, Leonor Fini, Frida Kahlo, Rosemarie Trockel, Chema Madoz, as well as the duo Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari.⁴ While elegance and visual coherence are essential in Madoz, the latter two artists unlock the potential for violence inherent in any encounter. Like Heartfield, they consciously work towards shock value.

Magritte combined objects when he sensed an affinity between them and aimed to reform the gaze⁵ so that people would “think about what my paintings reveal without needing the pictures to inspire them to do so.”⁶ He tried to liberate us from one-sided and essentially functional relationships with objects. While Heartfield’s images appear to draw their sugges-

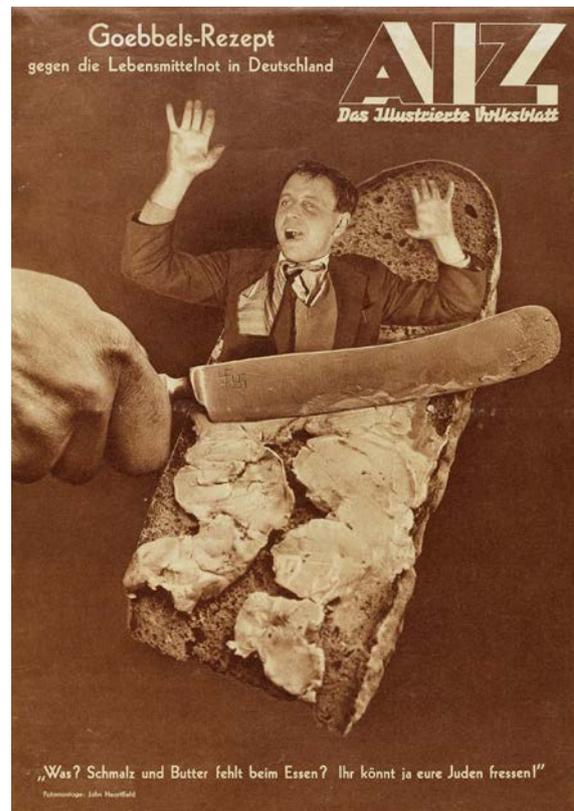
tive power from similar affinities, his encounters were staged with a different goal in mind. He wanted to convey political messages as clearly as possible. Just as in Magritte's work, a symbolic interpretation of the assembled motifs would not go far enough, because their levels of verisimilitude give these encounters a strong and immediate persuasive power before any possible symbolic meaning can be decoded, sometimes making them appear downright uncanny.

Although artists often combine different types of encounters within a single work, I want to delineate five ways in which this method depicts violence: the simple *composition* in which individual elements maintain their autonomy, don't interact directly and are often separated by frames within the image; the *scene* in which various figures or objects enter into a shared narrative; the *substitution* where one object occupies a space intended for another; the *fusion* when objects coalesce to become a hybrid; and the *collage*, not in terms of technique but in the sense of a visual encounter that remains fractured.

One of Magritte's *compositions* that reflects the method described above is titled *The Key to Dreams*; it exists in several versions (incl. 1927, 1930, and 1935). Each rendition shows different objects enclosed in individual frames within the larger picture. Each image-object is assigned a word that almost always describes a different object than the one illustrated. Similar compositions by Heartfield include *Das Wettrüsten zu einem neuen Weltkrieg* (The Arms Race to a New World War), a two-page spread published in the *AIZ* (*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*) on 8 April 1926, as well as the remarkable montage *Wie im Mittelalter ... so im Dritten Reich* (As in the Middle Ages... so in the Third Reich, 1934), which contrasts the image of a man executed on a wheel with that of a naked man being tortured on a swastika – symbolic and physical torture are associatively intertwined; mental and physical pain are equated.

Magritte's narrative *scenes* usually show situations and often appear harmless compared to Heartfield's. For example, Magritte shows a small train exiting a fireplace, an over-sized finger standing next to a staircase or a pipe floating in space. These works seem to strive for poetry over shock. Only rarely do Magritte's paintings come close to the shock value that Heartfield's works can provoke, as in *Le Plaisir* (*The Pleasure*), 1927, ill. 1) which shows a young woman biting into a bird with such force that its blood trickles down her white collar. The meaning, however, remains open for interpretation. In contrast, Heartfield's scenes are as unsettling as their meaning is clear. In *Reservations – Jews driven like cattle* (1938), he shows a group of people being corralled in a pasture for livestock, fenced in by barbed wire and overseen by a giant in military uniform brandishing a whip. The dove of peace impaled on a bayonet in *Der Sinn von Genf* (*The Meaning of Geneva*, 1932) has an effect that is as brutal as it is scenic, as does the representation of a man being spread onto a slice of bread in *Goebbels Rezept* (*Goebbels' Recipe*, 1935, ill. 2).

A *substitution* can be observed in Heartfield's work when, for example, a steel helmet takes the place of the sun. The exchange takes on a threatening flavour when the substituted object carries a positive connotation and the substitution a negative one as they do here. In Magritte's work, images of objects are regularly replaced with their linguistic denotations or with arbitrary forms. He described both approaches in his 1929 lecture "The Words and the Images." In the 1980s, in his untitled photos from



2 – John Heartfield, *Goebbels Rezept gegen die Lebensmittelnot in Deutschland* (Goebbels' Recipe for the Food Shortage in Germany), *AIZ*, 1935. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin



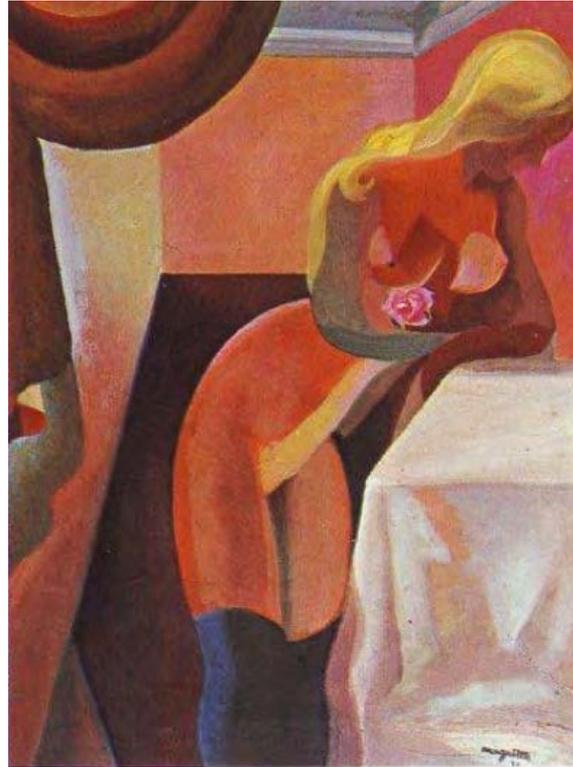
3 – Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari, *Frosch* (Frog) china plate from the series *Seletti Wears Toiletpaper*, 2013–20, ø 27 cm, <http://www.tp0610.com/seletti/>, accessed 23 June 2020. © Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari

1982, Chema Madoz returned to this visual vocabulary when he replaced a man's eyes with two knots in a rope, and later in 1987 when he replaced the smoke coming from a cigarette with a thread. Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari replaced the meat on a hamburger with a full-grown frog for *Toiletpaper Magazine* and turned it into a china plate for the brand *Seletti*⁷ (ill. 3).

The *fusion* that was previously seen in Hieronymus Bosch's imagery, later in Magritte's work, as well as in today's advertisements, is a particularly interesting device. For example, Magritte shows a foot turning into a shoe, an object that appears to be half glass bottle and half carrot, or a candle slithering along the beach like a snake. In Heartfield's work, a gas mask grows from an oak tree or a rear end has ears. He replaced a human face with that of a dangerous wild cat, and a head with a paragraph symbol. The resulting shock seems to stem from a vague fear of interpenetration or a blurring of the boundaries between the organic and inorganic, human and animal, or the natural and the symbolic. The effects anticipated here are also celebrated in David Cronenberg's horror movies, for instance when a human slowly transforms into a fly. *Material fusion* is a specific type of fusion, where the form of one object is combined with the material or texture of another. Madoz achieves it when he creates the form of a cactus, or even a hot air balloon, from stone. Magritte's skin made of wood grain (*Discovery*, 1927) functions similarly, as does his curtain made of sky (*Beautiful World*, 1962), leading to tensions between material and form that provoke a threatening feeling. This type of combination was activated when Sigalit Landau wielded a hula hoop made of barbed wire for her performance *Barbed Hula* (2000).

By the mid-1920s at the latest, Magritte started making *collages*, first using cut-and-paste techniques, for example by cutting out musical scores in the shapes of playing figures or fish. This phase of work is most directly comparable to Heartfield's photomontages. Later on, Magritte would paint almost exclusively, but incoherencies, cuts, outlines and planar forms reminiscent of his early collages recur into his late work. This also led his paintings to take on a heterogeneity more typical of collages, which clearly distinguishes Magritte's work from that of Chema Madoz, whose photographed real-world collages seem to be aiming for more of a sense of coherence.

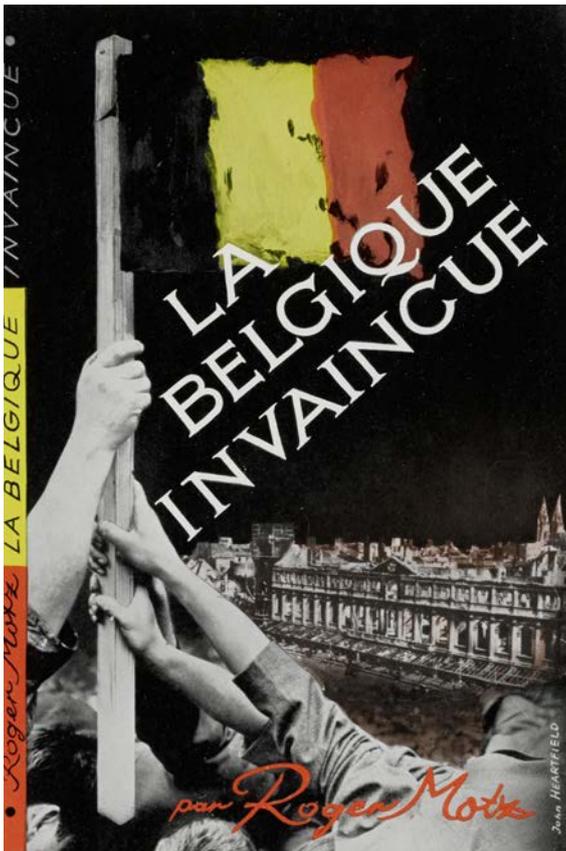
For these artists, the use of a specific medium is never an end in itself, but much more about the condition under which an image is formed. In this sense, Heartfield and Magritte are downright anti-modernist. Magritte admitted in an interview, "I always try to make the brushstrokes as imperceptible as possible, so that they are as invisible as can be."⁸ The painter developed his signature impersonal style, which tried to make all objects represented as immediately recognisable as possible, after noticing that abstract images like *La femme à la rose* (The Woman with the Rose), 1924, ill. 4) convey less of a shocking Surrealist effect than works more true to verisimilitude, such as *The Pleasure* (ill. 1). A style less close to reality certainly wouldn't hurt the



4 – René Magritte, *La femme ayant une rose à la place du cœur* (Woman with a rose instead of a heart), 1924, oil on canvas, 55 x 40 cm. © René Magritte / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020

symbolism in Magritte's or Heartfield's work, and the same ideas could be communicated without it, but all shock value would be lost. It is precisely their style that gives their works this effect. A motif from the *AIZ* in 1935 (ill. 2) that shows someone being mashed into butter and spread across a slice of bread only has the power to shock because Heartfield works with such truly recognisable signs.

Magritte's and Heartfield's surrealisms provoke a reflexive replacement of the images seen with objects from the real world in the mind of the viewer. Without this mechanism they could continue to operate symbolically, but their work would not hold the suggestive power that sets it apart. However, their respective styles adhering to the "real" imply a foregoing of other strategies of intensification. As long as Heartfield only used the paintbrush to cover things up and his brushstrokes remained invisible in the final product, he had to refrain from depicting the violence that can inscribe itself into an image as traces. His unpublished image *Krieg! (Niemals wieder!)* (War! (Never Again!), 1941), in which a moving painterly background poignantly underlines the brutal execution of a dove of peace, shows that he was consciously aware of this. For the book cover of Roger Motz's *La Belgique Invaincue* (Belgium Unvanquished, 1943), Heartfield worked the Belgian flag with such coarse brushstrokes (ill. 5) that the movement of his hand brings the flag into motion and the black marks he leaves behind show that although Belgium may be "unvanquished," it was not *unscathed*. In this work violence is inscribed primarily by painterly means.⁹ The importance of this aspect for the overall impression of the cover becomes



5 – John Heartfield, Cover design for *La Belgique Invaincue*, 1943.
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6 – Unknown, Cover design for the English language edition, *Belgium Unvanquished*, 1943

apparent when compared with the English edition (ill. 6) published at the same time, which lacks its suggestive power. It would be interesting to further explore the development of Heartfield's work in the post-war years as well as how expressive traces break fresh ground in his later works, or disappear again.

- 1 Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium. Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft*. Cologne, 2006, p. 88; here in translation
- 2 Magritte only belonged to this group for a few years and his relationship with André Breton is considered to have been troubled.
- 3 For more on the history of the reception of this quote within Surrealism, see Christa Lichtenstern, *Metamorphose in der Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, Bd. 2. Metamorphose vom Mythos zum Prozessdenken: Ovid-Rezeption; surrealistische Ästhetik; Verwandlungsthematik der Nachkriegskunst*. Weinheim, 1992, pp. 132–149
- 4 For an interview and a representative selection of images, see Dagmar von Taube, "So fing alles an, mit Tellerleeresen ..." *Welt*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.welt.de/icon/design/article172125329/Maurizio-Cattelan-und-Pierpaolo-Ferrari-inszenieren-Essen-und-Sex.html>, accessed 19 June 2020
- 5 See Klaus Speidel, "Zwischen Wahlverwandtschaft und Beliebigkeit. Anmalen gegen die imaginären Grenzen der Imagination", *Magritte. Der Verrat der Bilder*, Didier Ottinger (ed.), Munich, 2017, pp. 56–65.
- 6 Jean Stévo, et al. "Magritte Interviewed by Jean Stévo (I)" in *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, Kathleen Rooney and Eric Plattner (eds.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 157–158
- 7 <http://www.tp0610.com/seletti/>, accessed 20 June 2020
- 8 René Magritte, "Interview par Pierre Descargues II," (French), "Interview Pierre Descargues II," (German), *Sämtliche Schriften*, André Blavier (ed.). Munich /Vienna, 1981, p. 313; here in translation
- 9 For more on brushstrokes and brushstroke narrative, see Klaus Speidel, "Figurerzählung, Spurerzählung und das Problem der Narration im Bild. Theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Evidenz," *Kulturtechnik Malen*, Meret Kupczyk, Charlotte Warsen, Ludger Schwarte (eds.), Munich, 2019, pp. 301 – 328. On brushstrokes and violence, see Klaus Speidel, "Dana Schutz, 'Open Casket': A Controversy around a Painting and an Art World Malady," *Spike Art Daily*, 24 March 2017, <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady>, accessed 19 June 2020; and Klaus Speidel, "Wie kommt die Gewalt ins Bild?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 September 2017. On brushstroke and narration, see Klaus Speidel, "Was die FPÖ mit Metallica verbindet: Wie Pinselstriche Geschichten erzählen," *Der Standard*, 21 September 2019, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000108891102/was-die-fpoe-mit-metallica-verbindet-wie-pinselstriche-geschichten-erzaehlen>, accessed 19 June 2020