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Photomontage as a revolutionary agent

Fotomontaje como agente revolucionario

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Abstract:
In this article, the practice of photomontage is presented as a revolutionary agent capable of reconfiguring real events and creating new narratives based on political interests. To this end, two different approaches to the role of photomontage are presented, both carried out in a context where the political scenario was undergoing deep restructuring.
In the first case, described through an analysis of a set of works by John Heartfield, the photomontage is characterised by a discourse of opposition to a rising fascist political regime in Germany, revealing this practice as a potential medium to propose a rereading of real events and to appeal to the critical sense of the public. In this context we can say that photomontage acts as an (anti)political weapon.
In the second case, described through the analysis of a set of works by authors such as Klutsis or El Lissitzky, photomontage is characterised by a discourse in accordance with a new political era taking place in the Soviet Union in the sequence of the October Revolution.

Resumen:
En este artículo, la práctica del fotomontaje se presenta como un agente revolucionario capaz de reconfigurar eventos reales y crear nuevas narrativas basadas en intereses políticos. Para ello, se presentan dos enfoques diferentes sobre el papel del fotomontaje, ambos llevados a cabo en un contexto en el que el escenario político estaba experimentando una profunda reestructuración.
En el primer caso, descrito a través de un análisis de un conjunto de obras de John Heartfield, el fotomontaje se caracteriza por un discurso de oposición a un régimen político fascista en ascenso en Alemania, revelando esta práctica como un medio potencial para proponer una relectura de eventos reales y apelar al sentido crítico del público. En este contexto, podemos decir que el fotomontaje actúa como un arma (anti) política.
En el segundo caso, descrito a través del análisis de un conjunto de obras de autores como Klutsis o El Lissitzky, el fotomontaje se caracteriza por un discurso de acuerdo con una nueva era política que tuvo lugar en la Unión Soviética tras la Revolución de Octubre.
Desde su invención, la fotografía ha asumido un papel fundamental como documento social, un medio riguroso de representar la realidad, perpetuar eventos y crear un retrato de la historia de la humanidad. Como sugirieron Hine (1909/1980), Berger (1972b) o Sontag (1979), la fotografía informa la verdad de los hechos, de lo que sucedió y actúa como un medio de información que presenta de manera realista un inventario de imágenes de eventos. El carácter verídico inherente a la fotografía, la universalidad y accesibilidad de su lenguaje, su potencial persuasivo y la viabilidad de su reproducibilidad han hecho de este medio no solo una forma de inventariar y diseminar

eventos, sino también un medio para transmitir mensajes ideológicos o, como Berger (1972a) refiere "un arma de lucha política" (p.118).
Autores como George Grosz o John Heartfield en las décadas de 1920 y 1930 entendieron el potencial de la fotografía como medio elemental de sus fotomontajes propagandísticos, construido y utilizado como crítica del régimen político en ascenso en Alemania. Más que usar la fotografía como una imagen documental de una realidad camuflada por el poder político, Heartfield manipuló la imagen creando composiciones que buscaban exponer las incongruencias de los hechos reportados en las revistas ilustradas y revelar los verdaderos intereses políticos y económicos del fascismo. De esta forma, a través del fotomontaje, propone una relectura de los acontecimientos, utilizando la ironía y la sátira. Alternando la realidad y la representación, sus composiciones apelaron a una visión crítica del público en relación con los acontecimientos, actuando al mismo tiempo como obras de propaganda política. Sus fotomontajes se han convertido así en verdaderas armas ideológicas de una intención revolucionaria contra las políticas sociales y económicas dominantes en este país.
En la URSS, el fotomontaje también asumió un papel importante en la propaganda política, no como un arma contra un régimen en ascenso, sino para apoyar el nuevo escenario político. Autores como Gustav Klutsis o El Lissitzky utilizaron esta técnica para representar las intenciones de la política post Revolución Rusa y el progreso tecnológico e industrial soviético. De hecho, con la Revolución Rusa, el arte y, sobre todo, la propaganda desempeñaron un papel de liderazgo en la educación, la información y la persuasión de las masas en un país donde la tasa de analfabetismo era alta y había diferentes idiomas. En este contexto, la fotografía se reveló como un medio realista y convincente, universalmente inteligible. Según Lissitzky (citado en Ades, 2002), "ningún tipo de representación es tan comprensible para todas las personas como la fotografía" (p. 63), siendo que, si el nuevo mundo necesitaba un espejo, esto podría encontrarse en "fotografía y cine" (citado en Drutt, 1999, p.1 5). Y para Klutsis (1931/2012), la capacidad de la fotografía para capturar y fijar con precisión hechos reales le confería una naturaleza documental que le permitía "tener un efecto mucho más poderoso sobre el lector que una imagen gráfica" (p. 117) podía haber tenido alguna vez.
Así, la capacidad de la fotografía y el fotomontaje para transmitir mensajes visualmente, para representar o simular la realidad de una manera potencialmente creíble, y para reducir la necesidad del uso del texto han convertido a estas técnicas en medios de comunicación privilegiados para informar y, sobre todo, para educar y persuadir a la población de masas a menudo poco instruida. Siguiendo las orientaciones del Partido Comunista, que abogó por la creación de mensajes accesibles al público de masas, en particular de la clase obrera, autores como Klutsis o Lissitzky comenzaron a incluir elementos fotográficos en sus composiciones constructivistas, utilizando el fotomontaje como un medio de difundir ideales de un nuevo régimen político establecido en ese país.
Mientras que Heartfield utiliza el fotomontaje para exponer las contradicciones sociales en Alemania y denunciar los peligros del régimen político del país, Klutsis y El Lissitzky utilizan esta práctica para enaltecer a los líderes de la URSS, apoyar su política y camuflar una realidad pautada por la creciente desigualdad social. Los enfoques de Heartfield y de Klutsis y El Lissitzky son claramente diferentes, sin embargo no dejan de otorgar a la práctica del fotomontaje un papel importante y esencial como agente revolucionario al servicio de las revoluciones históricas.

Keywords:
Photomontage; Political photomontage; Propaganda; Heartfield; El Lissitzky; Klutsis.

Palabras clave:
Fotomontaje; fotomontaje político; propaganda; Heartfield; El Lissitzky; Klutsis.

1. Introduction: revolutionary uses of photomontage

Since its invention, photography assumed a fundamental role as a social document, a rigorous means of representing reality, perpetuating events and creating a portrait of the history of humanity. As suggested by Hine (1909/1980), Berger (1972b) or Sontag (1979), photography reports the truth of facts, of what happened, and acts as a medium of information that realistically presents an inventory of images of events.

And by stagnating a fraction of time, a precise event, photography becomes more easily memorised than the moving image that shows a continuous succession of events, each vanishing as they succeed (Sontag, 1979).

Hine (1909/1980) dedicated himself to social photography, observing its potential to register and document reality. Due to its universal character, he considered the image “the language of all nationalities and of all ages" (p. 111).

According to Berger (1972b), while portrait of events, photography also carries a message. For this author,

> Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us (Berger, 1972b, p. 182).

Berger and Barthes (Trachtenberg, 1980) stress the power of persuasion of the image, namely “as a carrier of ideological messages in everyday life” (p. xiii). Authors such as Brecht (Fabris, 2003) and Kracauer (1927/1993), for example, have observed how photography has often been put to the service of mass publications, not to show the reality, but to camouflage it, influencing public thought and becoming, in Brecht's words (as cited in Fabris, 2003), “a terrible weapon against the truth” (p. 22). The principle of reproducibility of photography allows it to be propagated, broadening its potential as a means of communication and dissemination of messages (Berger, 1972b).

The indexical character inherent to photography, the universality and accessibility of its language, its persuasive potential and the viability of its reproducibility have made this medium not only a way of inventorying and

disseminating events, but also a medium for conveying ideological messages or, as Berger (1972a) suggests, a "weapon of political struggle" (p. 188). And this is how authors like George Grosz or John Heartfield in the 1920s and 1930s understood the potential of photography as a structuring element of their propagandist photomontages, constructed and used as criticism of the rising political regime in Germany. More than using photography as a documentary image of a reality camouflaged by political power, Heartfield manipulated the image by creating compositions that sought to expose the incongruities of the facts reported in illustrated magazines and to reveal the real political and economic interests of nazism. Through photomontage, he proposes a rereading of events, using irony and satire. Alternating reality and representation, his compositions appealed to a critical view of the public in relation to events, acting at the same time as works of political propaganda. His photomontages have thus become true ideological weapons of a revolutionary intention against the dominant social and economic policies in this country.

Kracauer (1997) observes that if in the mid-nineteenth century the realism in photography prevailed, being this medium understood as a means of reproducing the reality as it was, at the turn of the century, this perspective gave rise to a concept of photography that, according to the author, was inscribed in two tendencies: one that, following the realistic tradition, describes photography as an imagetic testimony of the personal vision of the photographer; and another tendency that, taking advantage of technological evolution, understood photography as a means of visual expression and experimentation, that is, photography as an experimentalist approach where to the photographer's new vision were combined "artifices and technics - among them, negatives, photograms, multiple exposure, solarization, reticulation, etc. — in order to mount pictures which are palpably designed to externalize" (p. 10), according to Leo Katz (as cited in Kracauer, 1997), "subjective experiences", "personal visions" and "dynamics of our imagination" (p.10).

It is in this context that the concept of photomontage arises, in the early twentieth century, in the post-war period (World War I), describing a new art form based on the composition of photographs and photographic fragments

that acted as central and structuring elements of the artwork, and could be combined with newspaper and magazine clippings, with typographies and drawings to create images of strong impact. Therefore, photographs and fragments were recontextualised, creating new narratives and obtaining several simultaneous readings and a discontinuity effect of the space. Once the photomontage was built, it could be photographed or printed, resulting in a flat image capable of successive reproductions, similar to the photograph.

Photomontage emerged within the Dada movement of Berlin, a politicised movement, described by Hausmann, Huelsenbeck and Golyscheff (1919/2002), in the first issue of the publication *Der Dada*, as "the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism" (p. 318). Authors of this movement, such as Hausmann, Höch, Heartfield and Grosz, understood the potential of this technique to manipulate images and convey ideological messages, that is, a means of election for political propaganda.

If Heartfield or Grosz used photomontage as a weapon against the rising political regime in Germany, in Russia, authors such as Gustav Klutsis or El Lissitzky used this technique to enhance the political ideals following the Russian Revolution, as well as the soviet technological and industrial progress.

In fact, with the Russian Revolution, art and, above all, propaganda played a leading role in the education, information and persuasion of the masses in a country where the rate of illiteracy was high and there were different languages. In this context, photography revealed itself as a realistic and convincing medium, universally intelligible. According to Lissitzky (as cited in Ades, 2002), "no kind of representation is completely comprehensible to all people as photography" (p. 63), and if the new world needed a mirror, this could be found in "photography and cinema" (as cited in Drutt, 1999, p. 15). And for Klutsis (1931/2012), the ability of photography to capture and accurately record real events gave it a documentary nature that allowed it "to have a much more powerful effect on the reader than a graphic image" (p. 117) could ever have.

Thus the ability of photography and photomontage to visually convey messages, to represent or to simulate reality in a potentially credible way, and to reduce the need for the use of text made these techniques privileged means of communication to inform and, above all, to educate and persuade the population of masses.

Following the orientations of the Communist Party, which advocated the creation of messages accessible to the mass public, namely the working class, authors such as Klutsis or Lissitzky began to include photographic elements in their constructivist compositions, using photomontage as a means of disseminating ideals of a new political regime established in that country.

1.1. The subversive meaning of John Heartfield's photomontage: the satirization of a rising regime

John Heartfield's first experiments in photomontage were done together with George Grosz in 1916 (Frizot, 1991). By the end of that year, when Heartfield served on the Western Front, Grosz sent him an order with collages from ad clippings, labels of bottles and images of picture papers assembled at random. These collages gave rise to the creation of postcards that these authors began to use for correspondence, believing that, from the overlapping images, they were able to create and convey messages that, if written, would be subject of censorship and punishment (Ades, 2002; Fabris, 2003).

From these experiments came the first photomontages, among them the compositions by Heartfield for *Neue Jugend*, a publication of Malik-Verlag[1] with anti-fascist artistic and literary works, dadaist works and satirical periodicals. In this context, the first photomontage of political content was published in February 1919 on the cover of the only issue of the satirical-political magazine *Jedermann sein eigner Fussball* of the publication *Neue Jugend* (Ades, 2002). It was a composition made from photographs of political leaders and recognised officers of the Weimar Republic, including President Ebert and Gustav Noske. The images of these political leaders are distributed

[1] Publishing company founded by Wieland Herzfeld, brother of John Heartfield, during the First World War. It published works of the Dada movement, leftist political propaganda and experimental literature (Meggs & Purvis, 2016).

along a lady fan, as if they were in a sales showcase and, at the front, above the fan of leaders, Heartfield superimposed the image of General Erich Ludendorff, Paul von Hindenburg's[2] chief of staff as first Quartermaster general. In this photomontage underlies the idea of a gallery of illustrious figures in a satirical composition built under the title "Contest! Who is the Prettiest??" and the caption "German male beauty nr. 1".

It is noteworthy that this publication was published a few weeks after the Freikorps, under the command of Noske, put an end to the Spartacist revolt, resulting in the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, founders of the anti-war *Spartacus League*, which later gave rise to the German Communist Party (KPD). The evidence of the political criticism underlying this photomontage, as well as the communist nature of other contents in this publication, resulted in the censorship of *Jedermann sein eigner Fussball*, after its first issue.

From early on, the photomontages of Heartfield[3] were ruled by satire and irony, evidencing a political intentionality. If at first this intentionality was not always explicit, but implicit with a certain subtlety, with the rise of fascism in Germany, the messages became more evident and persuasive, acting as effective political propaganda and aiming to elucidate the masses. Using photographic fragments collected from periodicals of that time, Heartfield recontextualises them in graphic compositions in a provocative attitude, pretending to alert the population to the incongruities and dangers of the current political regime. For the author, the ability of photography to present real facts in a universal language transformed it in a potential medium for mass agitation. To emphasise the underlying meaning of his photomontages and make them clearer to the public, he often used visual rhetorical figures such as satire, hyperbole, irony, allusion or metonymy, among others.

In the photomontage *Every Decade, Father and Son*, held in 1924 for the bookstore window of Marlik Verlag, Heartfield places a large scale image of

[2] Responsible for the appointment of Hitler to Chancellor.

[3] Born Helmut Herzfeld, in 1916 John Heartfield adopted this english name in a critical attitude towards nazism and the German government that was engulfed in a campaign of hatred against England (Fabris, 2013).

Hindenburg superimposed on an army of skeletons, also in a large scale. At the bottom an army of children, in a smaller scale, alludes to the birth of a new army in Germany, while the large-scale skeletons seem to haunt this new army by suggesting an image of past events and the warning of what should not happen again (King & Volland, 2015). Underlies here the use of the hyperbole, as well as in the exaggerated size of Hindenburg as the leading figure of this army.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Heartfield produced several anti-fascist photomontages for the German Communist press, among them periodicals and magazines such as *Der Knuppel* (1923-1927), the KPD satirical-political periodical *Die Rote Fahne*, and *AIZ – Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers Illustrated Magazine). In fact, Heartfield shared socialist and anti-militarist ideals, becoming a co-founder member of the KPD in 1918 (Berger, 1972a; King & Volland, 2015). From early on, much of his work was devoted to denouncing fascism and underlying economic interests through satirical photomontages, which were often complemented by texts and captions aiming to highlight the content of the messages and to elucidate the mass audience.

In the composition *The Face of Fascism*, created for the cover of the periodical *Italy in Chains* published by the Communist Party in 1928, the images used are superimposed on a fragmented structure, but legible and with a clear message. Heartfield places, in the central area, a close-up of an image of Mussolini's face to which he superimposed the image of a skull, satirising the phrase of this political leader transcribed in the lower part of the composition: “I will change the face of Italy in the next 15 years so that no one will recognise it again.”.

Mussolini's face, according to Heartfield, is surrounded by four photographs illustrating the meaning and repercussions of this dictator's statement. On the left side of the face, at the top, the image of a bourgeois capitalist merges with the image of a group of armed fascists appearing at the bottom; on the right side, the image of the Pope and other dignitaries of the Catholic Church appears in the upper part and, at the bottom, the image of victims of violence lying on the ground. In addition to the satire underlying the superimposition of the skull on Mussolini's face, the use of hyperbole is also evident in the exaggerated size

of this leader's face to reinforce the idea of a dominant figure, responsible for the events portrayed.

In 1929, Heartfield's work gained visibility at the exhibition Film und Foto, the first large-scale exhibition of modern photography, held in Stuttgart and later exhibited in other countries. In one of the rooms devoted to Heartfield's work were several photomontages of the author created for newspapers and magazines, book covers and posters. Under the slogan "Use photo as a weapon" created by Heartfield, this exhibition explored the relationship between photography and art, advertising and journalism, and presented a new vision of photography (Sudhalter, 2012).

On the exhibition, Moholy-Nagy, responsible for the design of most of the rooms (with the exception of the Soviet room, designed by Lissitzky) and responsible for the selection of several works presented (Sudhalter, 2012), stressed (as cited in Neudörfer, 1929/2002) "the profound social responsibility of the photographer, who with the given, elemental materials of photography, carries out a task that could never be performed by other means: the task of providing an undistorted documentary record of contemporary reality" (p. 700). In this sense, the value of photography resided not so much in its aesthetics but in the "social intensity of the content" (p. 700) expressed by the image.

It is precisely this social intensity of the content that stands out in the photomontages of Heartfield, whose resulting image is aimed increasingly at the exposure of the social contradictions experienced in Germany. The graphic language of his work tends, therefore, to become clearer and more objective in the 1930s, aiming to improve the legibility, readability and accessibility of the implicit and explicit message. His work process involved the composition/juxtaposition of photographs or photographic fragments and the result was then photographed and retouched to achieve a clearer and more objective image regarding the author's propagandistic intentions (Hollins, 2002). The use of elements that reported the actuality of the country, such as photographs, texts and speeches collected from the press of the time, allowed him to give a certain sense of reality and veracity to his compositions, making them often more shocking, as happens in *The Finest Products of Capitalism*,

from 1932. In this photomontage, the division of social classes is presented through the juxtaposition of two figures representative of the extremes of social stratification. In the foreground, an unemployed miserable man shows a sign hanging around his neck with the phrase "I'll take any work!" as if he were for sale. The man is stepping on a long veil of a bride positioned in the background on a pedestal. The use of these antagonistic figures denounced a German reality based on the differentiation of social classes and increasing unemployment. These two figures personified the social differences resulting from capitalism and politics. In the original caption it could be read "Wedding dress for 10,000 dollars, 20 million jobless" (as cited in Ades, 2002, p. 45).

According to Berger (1972a), "the peculiar advantage of photomontage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at *things* and only afterwards at symbols" (p. 185). Photography is a record of what has been seen and therefore it is not illusory, but a record of what happened (Barthes, 1993; Berger, 1972b). The fact that these images are recontextualised in new unexpected scenarios, breaking the continuity of the photographic originals, evidences the message of these compositions and enhances their symbolic ideals, perpetuating a new reading of real events.

In 1930, Heartfield begins a series of photomontages for *AIZ*. This magazine appears in a golden period of the German press marked by the flourishing of journalistic production. In the late 1920s, more than 2,500 daily newspapers and magazines were published in Berlin, among them *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, *Der Tag*, *Berliner Nacht-Ausgabe*, *Berliner Tageblatt* and *Die Vossiche Zeitung* (Fabris 2003). The illustrated newspapers using photography as a form of validation of their contents were multiplied. According to Kracauer (1927/1993), these newspapers reproduced vast quantities of images that, under the concept of photography as a faithful means of representing reality, shaped the reader's thinking. The author notes:

> Never before has a period known so little about itself. In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding. Even the colorful arrangement of

> the images provides a not insignificant means to successfully implement such a strike. The contiguity of these images systematically excludes their contextual framework available to consciousness. (Kracauer & Levin, 1927/1993, p. 432).

In the first photomontage that Heartfield did for *AIZ*, named *Whoever Reads Bourgeois Newspapers Becomes Blind and Deaf*, published in February 1930, the author seeks precisely to alert citizens to the way the media of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was shaping the population's perception of events and social reality. He presents a human figure whose head is wrapped by two newspapers of the SPD, *Tempo* and *Vorwärts*, and the caption "Whoever Reads Bourgeois Newspapers Becomes Blind and Deaf: Away with These Stultifying Bandages!".

The whole image of this photomontage has a very strong symbolism. The head, presented as a kind of newspaper cabbage, reveals a critique to the media and how they manipulate the perception of society when reporting events. Indeed, by placing the newspapers around the head, Heartfield conveys the idea that reading these newspapers blinds the citizen, a concept that becomes clear through the phrase added "Whoever Reads Bourgeois Newspapers Becomes Blind and Deaf."

The police harness, on the upper body of the character, denounces the connections between the security forces and the SPD. And the text, placed at the bottom right of the composition, is a parody of the nationalist song *I am Prussian, do you recognize my colors?*, in which Heartfield replaces the original lyric with a text underlying the denunciation of a silent, paralysed and conniving population regarding the emerging political scene:

> I am a cabbage head, recognize my leaves?
> Sorrows make me lose my mind
> But I'll stay quiet and hope for a saviour
> I want to be a cabbage head, black, red and gold
> Don't want to see or hear
> Stay clear of politics
> And even if they strip me naked
> The red press won't come in my house! (as cited in Bostanci, n.d.).

It is noteworthy that this photomontage was published in *AIZ* along with an article that denounced precisely the way the media manipulated the photographic image according to their interests. On the page before this composition, the original photograph of a painter with a knee-length skirt appeared, seated in front of an image of the Pope, and next to this photograph the same image of the woman appeared with a longer skirt covering her legs. With these two images, it was intended to illustrate the practices of the Catholic and bourgeois press (Bostanci, n.d.).

According to Fabris (2003), Heartfield "aims to propose a critical rereading not only of reality, but of the mechanisms of knowledge of reality through the mass media" (p. 35), using the photographic assembly to reveal a reality camouflaged by the media. In Fabris' words, "the transfiguration pursued by him, far from confirming the dominant discourse, provides elements for detecting the ideological process of construction of the news, and therefore he does not dispense the association of the image with a text whose function is to reinforce the counter-news" (p. 36) that he builds in his photomontages.

In 1931, Heartfield created the photomontage *The Crisis Party Conference of the SPD*, in a criticism to the SPD that had depreciated KPD members slandering them as "social facists" who stand in the way of revolution (King & Volland, 2015). This photomontage, published in *AIZ* at the time of the SPD conference in Leipzig, was based on a speech by Social Democrat Fritz Tarnow, where he tried "to conciliate Marxist instances and monopolistic instances, in a panorama characterised by deep economic contradictions within the alliance that held power" (Fabris, 2003, p. 37). In his speech, Tarnow attributed to the SPD the role of doctor who sought to heal and improve capitalism. Drawing from the metaphor used by the deputy, Heartfield represents the "doctors" of the speech in the figure of a veterinarian whose head is the muzzle of a tiger, symbolising capitalism, in an authoritarian and aggressive pose. At the neck, a tie with a pattern of figures that seem allusive to skulls, accentuate the demonic character of the image. In the tie knot, the swastika symbol stands out, according to Kriebel (2009), "insinuating that capitalism, socialism, Nazism, and death are analogous" (p. 75).

In this photomontage, Heartfield also resorts to visual rhetorical figures – allusion (to Tarnow's speech) or metonymy (the use of swastika to represent German Nazism, the skulls on the tie as a symbol of death or the image of the tiger's muzzle as a symbol of capitalism) – to emphasise the underlying message, which fostered a greater involvement of the observer. As stated by Kriebel (2009) "this photomontage insists that we participate, decoding cultural symbols and resolving enigma, provoked by the beguiling transitions of seamless metamorphoses rather than the alienation of ruptures" (p. 76).

To clarify the message and reinforce a parallel with Tarnow's speech, Heartfield adds the quote from the deputy "Social democracy does not want the breakdown of capitalism. Like a doctor, it wants to try to heal and improve it" and the caption "Vets of Leipzig: 'Of course we will break the tiger's teeth, but first we must nurse him back to health and feed him.'".

Also inspired in the SPD's Leipzig conference, *The latest wisdom of the SPD: "Down with Marxism!"* presents, in the centre of the composition, the figure of Karl Marx with the KPD newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* under his arm. To his left, three policemen are preparing to arrest him, obeying the orders of the Berlin Police Chief Karl Zörgiebel, positioned to the right of the philosopher. The photomontage illustrates Sollmann's[4] speech at the congress, in which Marx's ideals were criticised for being considered reactionary. The text placed at the bottom reads: "You are arrested as a false prophet, Mr. Karl Marx — it is not only our chains that we have to lose, but our feeders and ministerial chairs". According to Fabris (2003), these words highlight the content of the photomontage that reveals the deviation of the SPD from its initial ideals and exposes an emerging repressive policy in Germany.

As political events succeed in the country, marked by oppression, censorship, the rise of fascism and social inequality, Heartfield intensifies an approach to photomontage based on these events, but proposing a rereading of the facts and a more critical view of the public. Works like these aimed at inciting the population to a social revolution. According to Aragon (1935/2012), his

4 Interior Minister of the Weimar Republic.

photomontages were, in fact, “realistic images of our life and struggle which are poignant and moving for millions of people who are part of this life and struggle” (p. 121). The author thus compared Heartfield's works with the art produced in Russia under Lenin's regime, considering them as “a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the Proletariat” (p. 121).

The nature of his artwork and his visible opposition to the German political regime forced Heartfield to take refuge in Prague in 1933, where he continued his work of photomontage, increasingly with a revolutionary and critical message against fascism and Hitler's policies.

In the first photomontage he did in Prague, *Through Light to Night*, in 1933, Heartfield portrays the literary censorship practiced in Germany, which culminated in the burning of more than 80,000 books by authors considered “non-Germanic” such as Jews, Communists or Socialists (King & Volland, 2015). Led by the Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, this proclaimed “Action against the Un-German Spirit” was held in Berlin on May 10 of that year, and reproduced in several cities of the country. Heartfield publishes a photomontage in *AIZ* alluding to this event, positioning the image of Goebbels in the lower left corner with his arm raised and pointing the index finger upwards as if giving an order. Behind him, a mountain of books, among them works of Lenin, Karl Marx or Thomas Mann, are destroyed by the blazing fire in front of the Reichstag image.

At the bottom the caption “Thus spoke Dr Goebbels: Let us start new fires lest the blinded awaken!” reinforces Heartfield's intention to expose acts of political leaders aimed at shaping the thoughts of society in the light of their interests. Similar to what happened in *Whoever Reads Bourgeois Newspapers Becomes Blind and Deaf* underlies a criticism of the “blindness” and inaction of German people.

Four months after, in September 1933, Heartfield proposes again a rereading of real events, having as a subject the fire occurred in the Reichstag, on February 27th of that year. The photomontage, known as *Goering: The Executioner of the Third Reich*, was published in a special issue of *AIZ*, coinciding with the time

when the trial of those to whom responsibility for the incident was attributed was being held. In the foreground, on a large scale, Goering's image wielding an ax emerges with uniform and a butcher's apron superimposed on the image of the burning Reichstag. The figure of this politician imposes itself with an expression covered with anger. Heartfield places a small text at the bottom of the composition, denouncing how the defendants were being unfairly judged and calling them the true victims of this heinous crime, while the real criminal (Goering) would not be brought to court. Also at the bottom, the caption "Goering's face was taken from an original photograph and not retouched" (King & Volland, 2015, p. 111) highlights a realistic character of the composition, accentuating all the violence underlying this photomontage. The stains of blood strewn on Goering's clothes and the ax he holds in his right hand convey realism and reinforce the idea of this politician as a criminal.

The visual dialectic of these photomontages was clear and the underlying meanings were understood not only by the figurative content of the images but, as already mentioned, by the frequent use of visual rhetorical figures that accentuated the critical nature of the messages and, at the same time, gave them a poetic beauty. It is, therefore, recurrent the use of satire to ridicule speeches and acts of political leaders and denounce their contradictions in relation to social reality, the use of the allusion conveyed in the topics addressed referring to real events, the use of hyperbole in the representation of political leaders (exaggerating their scale in the context of the other elements of the composition to symbolise power and responsibility over events), or the use of metonymy as in the last example – *Goering: The executioner of the Third Reich* –, in which the ax in Goering's hand and the drops of blood in his garments give the idea of a butcher or executioner; among other rhetorical figures.

Also from 1933 is *A Pan-Germanist*, a photomontage made from the juxtaposition of two images. The first one is a photograph of Julius Streicher, a Pangerman leader and director of the anti-Semitic journal *Strümer*. The second image is a photograph of a bloody man lying on the ground[5]. It was a

5 Photograph by Franz Roh.

photograph of the Stuttgart police, originally published in the *Photo-eye* under the caption "peace-time murder victim" (Ades, 2002, p. 45). The two images are superimposed, resulting in the figure of the Nazi leader stepping the bloodied victim in a posture that reflects both authority and indifference. Streicher's gaze appears expressionless as if indifferent to the tragic scenario at his feet. In his coat, traces of blood denounce the evidence of his involvement in this tragedy.

Heartfield created a version of *A Pan-Germanist* for *AIZ* magazine, entitled *Like Brothers Like Killers*, where he added the figure of a paramilitary of the Italian fascist movement (organised by Mussolini). This figure appears with a raised arm holding a dagger from which drops of blood flow, as if this paramilitary had participated in the tragedy. Fabris (2003) observes how this photomontage alludes to a real event, the "delivery of the Italian Fascist Party's dagger of honour to Rudolf Hess[6]", being the caption of the composition an index of this allusion and of the underlying critical intentionality: "The Blackshirt to the Brownshirt: 'You deserve the dagger! – You've outdone us in assassinations'".

In most of his photomontages, Heartfield takes advantage of materials published in the press, which contributed significantly to give a more realistic character. Nevertheless, the author also thought of new photographic images, working together with Wolf Reiss who produced these images and collaborated with Heartfield in their revelation and printing. In certain cases, Weiss made an overprinting of images which allowed to blur the discontinuities caused by the junctions of fragments from different sources and to confer a kind of aura around the figures represented, accentuating a more demonic character, as in *The Face of Fascism*.

The work developed by Heartfield was remarkable and probably the most striking in the context of photomontage of political criticism. According to Berger (1972a), his photomontages, made during the 20s and 30s, constitute "a subtle but vivid means of political education, and more precisely of Marxist education" (p. 185). Working often from elements of real-life events

6 Deputy Führer of Hitler.

photographed, Heartfield created surprising, original and unexpected narratives, and built a clear and objective political message about his positioning against the German regime. To this end he used a graphic language where an attitude of provocation prevailed in a visual discourse characterised by the frequent use of rhetorical figures and, clearly, a revolutionary stance against the political, social and economic scenario that dominated the country.

1.2. Revolutionary photomontage: from persuasion to the glorification of political leadership

After the Russian Revolution, art took on a social role in that country, engaging many artists in the production of propaganda to support the Revolution and, later, the communist regime. In the USSR the photomontages of authors such as Gustav Klutsis or El Lissitzky sought to extol the ideals of the Russian Revolution, aiming through the recontextualisation of photographic fragments to educate and persuade the population in the light of the goals of the new regime as well as to announce its great achievements.

For Klutsis (1931/2012), photomontage was an artistic practice that responded to the needs of a new social order resulting from the proletarian revolution. It was a "product of industrial culture" (as cited in Frizot, 1991), and the *photomonteur* (as he called those practicing this technique) was someone that acted as an image mechanic who assemblies elements from various sources on a surface. The compositions should combine different photographic scales, use colour and graphic elements, as well as political slogans, aiming "to serve the purpose of the class struggle, force the photo to tell the story, to agitate, to explain" (Klutsis, 1931/2012, p. 117). He further argued that if photography had the potential to freeze a specific moment, photomontage allowed to reveal the dynamics of life, achieving a huge expressive power and revolutionising traditional methods of visual representation.

According to Klutsis (1931/2012), he was the author of the first photomontage in the USSR, in 1919-1921, with the work *Dynamic City*. In this composition, with strong structural resemblances with his suprematist painting also known as *Dynamic City*, Klutsis uses a geometric structure on which he distributes

photographic fragments alluding to a future world that was under construction in the USSR: skyscraper facades, steel beams and men working in construction. Thus, on the circle – representative of the earth –, skyscrapers seem to be built in a composition that was intended to symbolise the idea of a world under construction – the socialist world.

In his early photomontages, a visionary image based on technological progress prevailed, as in *Electrification of the whole country* (1920), where Klutsis depicts the world in progress in an allusion to the electrification process envisaged in Lenin's modernisation and industrialisation program (F1). In this photomontage, the figure of Lenin appears with a high-voltage tower at the top of which is a building with the title *Electrification of the whole country*. The political leader moves toward a circular form alluding to the new communist world, on which is the image of another building.

F1. *Electrification of the whole country*, 1920. Gustav Klutsis.

For Klutsis (1931/2012), photomontage was "an agitation-propaganda form of art" (p. 116) targeted to mass audiences. The author argued that "agitation art required realistic representation created with maximum perfection of technique, possessing graphic clarity and intensity of effect" (p. 116). Previous forms of abstract art had become obsolete, not responding to the needs of the artistic panorama after the Russian Revolution, while the use of photographic

elements conferred to the works a more realistic and comprehensible image for the masses.

In his 1920 photomontage *The Old World and the World Being Built Anew*, Klutsis uses again Lenin image on a large scale in the centre of the composition, reflecting a concern with the visual representation of this leader's relationship with the mass audience (Fabris, 2005). This image is placed in the foreground, superimposed on a background composed of two circles. A smaller circle, placed in the lower left corner, is filled with chains, whips and the image of the prison, in allusion to the old world. The other circle with a greater dimension in the upper right corner is placed under Lenin's head, with images of buildings and skyscrapers, alluding to the new world being built. Lenin's image is strategically positioned turned back to the old world, the Soviet past, and facing the new world, the promising future.

Devotion to Lenin is also visible in several photomontages of El Lissitzky. This author uses, for the first time, the image of the leader in the 1920 composition *Lenin Tribune*, which was based on an architectonic suprematist project of the student Ilia Tchachnik (Drutt, 1999). To the original of the student, at the top of an architectural structure, Lissitzky superimposed a picture of Lenin giving a speech, aiming that “the impulse of structure” emphasised “the gesture”, as he said in a letter to his wife Sophie Küppers (as cited in Drutt, 1999, p. 21). At the top of the composition, a poster displays the word “Proletariat”.

In 1924, in the fourth issue of *Lef* magazine, an article called “Photomontage” was published, where this practice was described and highlighted the documentary value of photography considered as an exact fixation of reality, capable of influencing the viewer in a much more effective way than the drawing. It was emphasised the potential of photography to represent reality and to persuade the public and it was criticised the use of this medium in past times as a form of artistic representation similar to painting (Ades, 2002).

Later, also Klutsis (1931/2012) described photomontage as “a precise new method that combines documentary precision with compositional accuracy” (p. 117), using this technique extensively in his propagandist works.

In his photomontages, the diagonal composition often predominated, accentuating the dynamism of the displayed elements. In his 1930 photomontage *Let Us Now Fulfill the Plan of the Great Projects*, the images of a large-scale hand and several other smaller hands are raised along a diagonal axis representing the unification of the Soviet people in the electoral process. This photomontage was part of a set of photomontages created between 1928 and 1930 for posters aiming the dissemination of the first *Five-Year Plan*, in which, as referred by Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, and Joselit (2011), "the metonymy of a raised hand is used as an emblem of political participation and a key image of the actual representation of the masses in the voting process" (p. 178).

It should be noted that the development of photomontage in the USSR coincides with the time when the montage in film was also developed, a new approach to film production. According to Ades (2002) and Meggs & Purvis (2016), we can draw several parallels between the approach to photomontage and Russian cinema of the early twentieth century. The cinematographic experiments of authors like Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein or Lev Kulechov, who explored the "dynamic spatial-temporal unity" (Ades, 2002, p. 87) intercalating moments of image breaks and joining multiple images, alternating close-ups with panoramic images, and applying juxtapositions and double exposures, also appeared in the approach to photomontage.

In this sense, Tupitsyn (1999), Ades (2002) or Stoltzfus (2017) observe the influence that the documentaries of Vertov and other authors had, for example, in the compositions that El Lissitzky produced for the *International Press Exhibition*, also known as *Pressa*, held in Cologne in 1928. This exhibition was intended to show the development of the Soviet press, as well as the country's progress in the field of industrialisation and electrification, society's everyday life (in particular the proletariat) and agricultural production in the new socialist state. It aimed to show the world a nation in full development and a full and happy society under the socialist regime (Pohlmann, 1999).

For *Pressa*, Lissitzky, along with Sergei Senkin, created an extensive frieze, 23.5 meters long by 3.8 meters high, with a photomontage called *The Education of*

the Masses is the Main Task of the Press in the Transitional Period from Capitalism to Communism. This frieze was characterised by the alternation of disparate photographic formats and the juxtaposition of documentary images, presenting, in a stately way, a scenario based on the technological advances of the Soviet press and celebrating the ideals of communism. It contained enlargements of photographs from the press that showed the Soviet people in various daily social activities (working in industry and agriculture, in the army or doing sport). The portrait of Lenin, on a large scale, is used alongside representational images of mass society and the proletariat, where the human figure appears on a much smaller scale, being thus established a kind of hierarchy of social structure through the sizes of the images. These images are combined with others of the press and industrialisation, evolution and technological progress, in a multiplicity of viewing angles and photographic scales, alternating close-ups and panoramic images, which gave the photomontage a vivid and dynamic character, similar, effectively, to the contemporary cinematographic approach of authors such as Vertov.

According to Stoltzfus (2017), this frieze "captured the volatility and modernisation of the Soviet Union, as the newly established country underwent a radical transformation".

It should be noted that this composition is far from the visual result obtained in works previously done by Lissitzky, revealing a closer proximity to the visual dialectics of photomontages of contemporary authors like Senkin (coauthor) or Klutsis. This perception led Pohlmann (1999) to suggest that Klutsis participation in this frieze may have been more significant than believed. And it should be mentioned that in a letter sent by Klutsis to his wife Kulagina in June 1928, this artist effectively identified himself as coauthor of the *Pressa* frieze, showing his deep discontent at the fact that his name did not appear associated with the project (Tupitsyn, 1999).

Although Lenin died in 1924, the use of his image in photomontages of propagandist content remained for several years in a kind of glorification of the leader. In addition to the aforementioned example, where Lenin image appears on a large scale, Lissitzky's photomontage *A Conversation Between Two*

Worlds, published in the *SSSR na stroike* (*USSR in Construction*) in 1932, also serves as an example. In this composition, the author was inspired by the speech given by H. G. Wells, in which he questioned the viability of the electrification project proposed by the Russian leader. On the right, the image of Lenin on a large scale is superimposed on the image of Wells, on a smaller scale, holding a page of his book *Russia in the shadows*[7] on an exaggeratedly disproportionate scale. Among these figures, symbolic images of the electric network stand out surrounded by others allusive to the past, conveying the idea of a promising future of the USSR and opposing Wells vision.

Like Heartfield, Lissitzky and Klutsis also resorted to visual rhetorical figures to emphasise and clarify the meaning conveyed in their photomontages. Nevertheless, unlike Heartfield, the use of these rhetorical figures did not aim to expose contradictions of a political regime in relation to social reality, but to camouflage them, extolling the political leadership. They often resorted to the antithesis, exposing a negative past world *versus* a promising future, the hyperbole, positioning the figure of Lenin (and later Stalin) on an exaggerated scale or the metonymy, using the red colour representative of socialism.

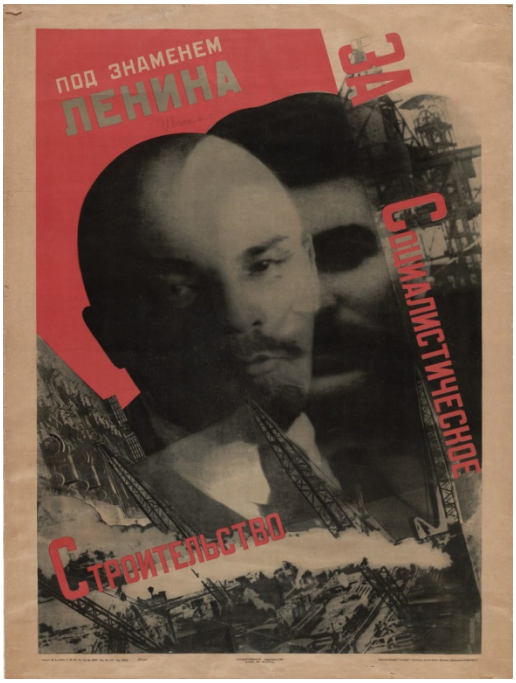
With Stalin's rise to power, the political and propagandist content of photomontages remained in the USSR, gradually becoming the new political leader the centre of various compositions. If in the first photomontages of Klutsis, the photographic fragments and photographs used are recontextualised, creating a narrative whose documentary character of the image tends to dilute among the added graphic elements, this documentary character, combined with the realistic aspect of the image, becomes more evident in the compositions he does during the 1930s, already under the regime of Stalin.

According to Fabris (2005), his compositions of this decade "undergo a process of 'normalisation'" (p. 115), reducing the use of diagonals in favour of an approach based on a symmetrical composition under a vertical structure. At the beginning of this decade, the author uses images of Lenin and Stalin in works

7 Book published in 1921 with several articles where the author makes a rather pessimistic portrait about the future of Russia.

such as *Under the Lenin banner for socialist construction, Raise the banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin!* or *With the banner of Lenin*... to evidence a sharing of ideals of these leaders, to legitimise the succession and transfer of powers, and to symbolise the continuity of the Soviet political regime, now under the tutelage of a new leader.

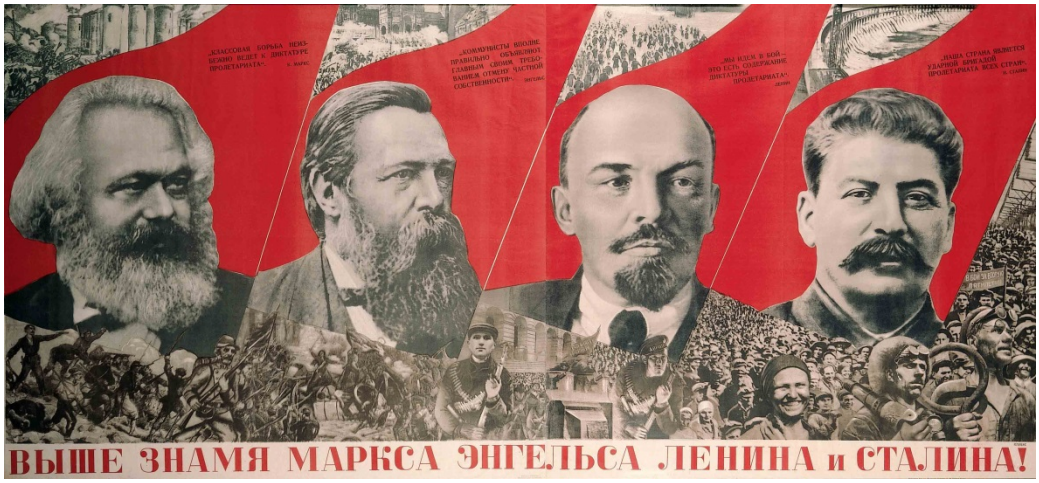
In the first case, *Under the Lenin banner for socialist construction*, from 1930, the figure of Lenin overlaps that of Stalin, as if the latter appeared in the shadow of the first (F2). According to Pisch (2016), in this juxtaposition underlies the idea of Stalin as a disciple of Lenin, that is, as the "Lenin of today" (p. 137). These images are combined with other documentary photographs alluding to Russian industrialisation and construction. The composition is oriented in a diagonal structure on a red background that contrasts with black and white images, giving it dynamism and determination.



F2. *Under the Lenin banner for socialist construction*, 1930. Gustav Klutsis.

In 1933 photomontage *Raise the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin!*, Klutsis presents the image of Stalin under a red flag flanked by the figures of Marx, Engels and Lenin, each of them also overlapping a red flag (F3). These figures appear on a similar scale, arranged according to a chronological order in an allusion to the history of communist doctrine. On the one hand, the

composition refers to the longevity of this doctrine and the rise of communism to power through images of people struggle that appear in the lower left part under the images of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and, on the other hand, it presents a more current reality portrayed in the images of a mass society happily marching through the streets of Russia, under the image of Stalin.

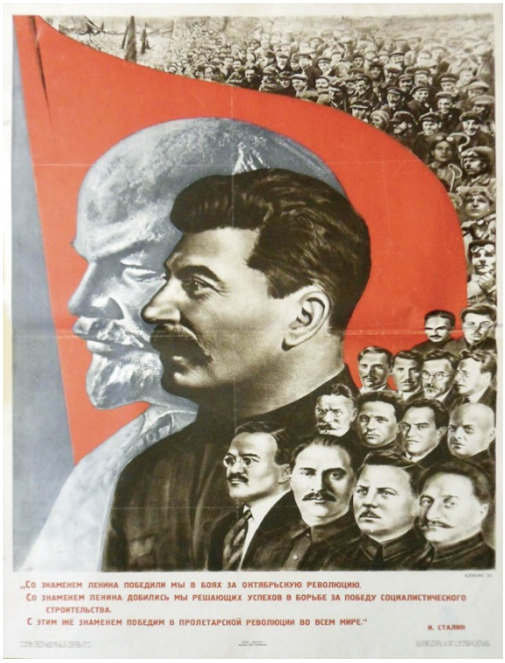


F3. *Raise the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin!*, 1933. Gustav Klutsis.

In *With the banner of Lenin…*, also from 1933, Klutsis again superimposed the figures of Lenin and Stalin, but with an inverse order in relation to the photomontage *Under the Lenin banner for socialist construction*, done three years earlier (F4). The figure of Lenin is represented in large scale by his statue, referring to the idea of a past figure dignified and exalted by the stone sculpture. The photographic image of Stalin overlaps the statue of Lenin, but on a smaller scale (although in large scale), leading to the belief, according to Pisch (2016), that the basis of this photomontage remains effectively the Leninism. Behind the political leaders, stately placed on a red undulating flag, a large mass population emerges in an allusion to the Soviet people, loyal follower of Stalin.

This representation of Stalin on a large scale and emerging within a lower scale crowd is frequent in the author's photomontages symbolising the idea of the mass population as a faithful follower of the leader and evidencing a hierarchical structure. Fabris (2005) adds that this representation contributes to "the mythologisation of his figure" (p. 116), which tends to be monumental in

relation to other members of the Communist Party and even in relation to Lenin.



F4. *With the banner of Lenin*..., 1933. Gustav Klutsis.

Gradually, the image of Lenin disappears, and that of Stalin assumes greater proportions as in Klutsis' 1932 photomontage *Victory of Socialism in our Country is Guaranteed* in which Stalin image appears exaggeratedly large in relation to the image of a vast crowd behind him. Ahead of the image of the Russian leader, a photograph alluding to industry brings us back to the idea of technological progress driven by the collective action of the Russian people led by Stalin. The use of a large red shape on which texts are superimposed reinforces the connection with Soviet socialism, enhanced by the introduction of political slogans.

This grandiosity of Stalin's figure and the frequent display of working people engaged in production and technological progress contrasted effectively with Soviet social reality characterised by precarious employment and the lack of consumer goods (Fabris, 2005).

It is worth mentioning Tupitsyn's (1999) observation on the political photomontage of the 1930s in USSR, noting that "the unintentional 'surrealisation' of the image became frequent" partly due "to a growing demand

of revolutionising a diversity of narratives with a universe of very varied images" (p. 48). As an example, Tupitsyn refers the photomontage produced for the album *Food Industry*, in late 1935, which included a photograph of the People's Commissar of the Food Industry, Anastas Mikoyan, captured during a speech where he encouraged workers to increase their productivity. Around the image of Mikoian several portraits of men and women were distributed, with their names appearing at the bottom under the caption "the best of the food industry". According to Tupitsyn, this set of portraits resulted in what she called "a confused mass of contiguous heads, which differ in size, direction and expression" (p. 48). Indeed, painting appeared as a more effective technique for representing the reality that was intended to be disseminated in political propaganda, that is, to conceal the disparities between social reality and the propagandist image. Gradually, photomontage was therefore replaced by socialist realism conveyed through painting.

2. Conclusion

Although photomontage has been used in various areas of the graphic and fine arts in the early twentieth century, this practice has taken on its own and very relevant contours in the political context as an agent of propaganda, either to express opposition to a new social order emerging in Germany, or through a clear commitment to a dominant political discourse in the post Russian Revolution period.

In the first case, through the work of John Heartfield, this practice took great notoriety expressed in a repertoire that proposes a rereading of events that took place in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, denouncing the incongruities of a fascist regime in full rise and instigating the public to a critical view of these events. The author focuses on real situations and images for a recontextualisation in new narratives that aim to expose and clarify realities camouflaged by political power. Photomontage thus operated as a political weapon and as an agent of incitement to revolution.

In the USSR, by the hand of authors such as Gustav Klutsis or El Lissitzky, photomontage became a documentary medium at the service of the Russian Revolution (and subsequently at the service of communism) aimed at educating and persuading a society characterised by high levels of illiteracy. In contrast to Heartfield's approach, these authors intended to camouflage a social reality dominated by poverty and inequality, and to glorify the political leaders, first Lenin, then Stalin, through a dialectic based progressively on the realism of the image.

These approaches being clearly distinct, they do not fail, however, to give the practice of photomontage an important and essential role as a revolutionary agent at the service of historical revolutions.

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