

# 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

## Living and Dying and Resisting Montage

Peter Chametzky

When John Heartfield and George Grosz “invented” photomontage in Grosz’s studio at five o’clock one May morning in 1916 they hitched the modern tools developed to communicate with and indoctrinate the mass audience to their own wagon. Like the open truck carrying a brass band that the Berlin Dadaists hired to publicize and distribute the Malik-Verlag’s 1919 *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*, Grosz tells us that their loud montages were developed by Heartfield “into a conscious artistic technique,” intended to rouse the rabble and transport them to a state of mind in which they would be prepared to resist oppressive authority.<sup>1</sup> Heartfield accomplished this with sharp-edged and sophisticated humour, as Sabine Kriebel has shown. In *Revolutionary Beauty*, Kriebel interprets Heartfield’s work through the lens of communist theorists’ ideas about the revolutionary potential of laughter: Georg Lukács’s “holy hate,” Anatoly Lunacharsky’s “revolutionary laughter”, Mikhail Bakhtin’s “revolutionary grotesque,” and Walter Benjamin’s “resuscitation of slapstick and Mickey Mouse for revolutionary purposes.”<sup>2</sup> The tradition of Jew-

ish defensive humour, turning one’s oppressors into laughing-stocks, might also be added to the list. As Jindrich Toman states, on his first exilic stopover in Prague, as the son of deported Jewish writer Franz Held, Heartfield registered with the authorities as a Jew.<sup>3</sup> Four years later the Nazis referred to his brother as “The Jew Wieland Herzfelde” on page 25 of the guidebook to the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. There’s nothing funny about that.

What would Heartfield do today, in the era of the internet, of Trump, the AfD, Pegida, and covid-19? Ralph Keunig asserts: “He’d certainly know what to do with the internet and social media. [...] My children ... are little Heartfields.”<sup>4</sup> Since Heartfield was already a filmmaker, as Jeanpaul Goergen has shown, maybe he, too, would be demonstrating how companies employ montage in attempts to burnish their images and profit from the global pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Tide laundry detergent, for instance, associates itself with the heroism of frontline covid-19 workers (ill. 1). The montage film, *Hey. We’re a Brand*, takes Heartfieldian humorous aim at such online images and films.<sup>6</sup>



1 – “Thank You. Loads of Hope. Tide.” Screenshot of Tide detergent, Facebook post, 30 March 2020



2 – Willi Baumeister, *Jokkmokmädchen*, 1941, collage on a postcard of Adolf Ziegler, *Terpsichore*, 1937, 14.9 x 10.5 cm, Willi Baumeister Stiftung. © VG-Bildkunst, Bonn, 2020

In a 2019 essay, I compared Nazi-era postcards circulated among Willi Baumeister, Franz Krause, and Robert Michel to social media from the first year of Donald Trump’s presidency.<sup>7</sup> In *Jokkmok-mädchen* of 1941, which I first wrote about in 1989, Baumeister pasted-up a parodic deconstruction of Adolf Ziegler’s *Terpsichore*, exposing the Nazi artist’s “Nordic” nonsense masquerading as a muse (ill. 2).<sup>8</sup> Baumeister was not amused. In 2019, I compared works like this with images such as “Twitter,” a 2017 montage that circulated on Facebook, showing our fearful American “leader” in full Nazi garb, posed preening in front of a pseudo-Romanic landscape painting (ill. 3). The analogy, I contended, was false: “Trump’s nativism and racism, while abhorrent, is not, so far as we know, genocidal”. Presenting him as a Nazi also obscures his *Americanness*, his appeal’s roots in *our* history of racism and in the political strategies historian Richard Hofstadter studied in *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964).<sup>9</sup> And yet: Even if not genocidal, Trump’s wanton disregard for human life has become apparent through his response to the pandemic. That the lives lost due his denials of the severity of the emergency skew radically towards people of colour, largely Democratic voters, makes his political calculations all the more insidious. In this dystopian hell world where a deadly disease is used to promote Walmart

and Pepsi (ill. 4), photomontages can provide almost instant commentary – on life, on death, and on the banal everydayness of evil. Perhaps the creator of this “viral” image resisted the Heartfieldian “self-regulation” called for by Charlotte Klonk precisely to invoke the trauma from which Trump claims immunity.<sup>10</sup>

In “From Anti-Nazi Postcards” I cited an online article by political scientist and media theorist Jodi Dean, in which she argues that today “we live montage.”<sup>11</sup> Dean defines what she terms “secondary visuality” as “the incorporation of images into mass practices of mediated social and personal communication.” Dean claims images, including selfies, have become authorless, unmoored from the individual to instead become the face of and in the crowd. Her defense of the selfie bears comparison with Benjamin’s enthusiasm for Mickey Mouse against Adorno and Horkheimer’s charge that the violence done to cartoon characters was the culture industry’s instrument to habituate the audience to violence that could and would also be turned



3 – “Twitter,” Facebook screenshot, 7 September 2017



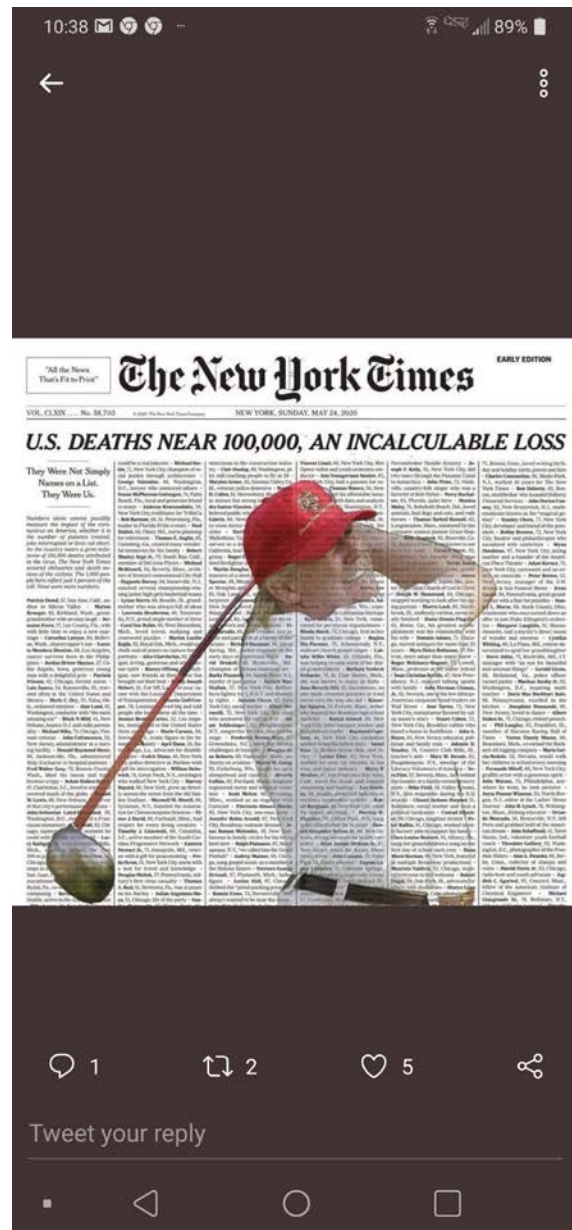
4 – “What absolute dystopian hell world we are living in.” Screenshot of Instagram post by photographer Brennan Booker, May 2020



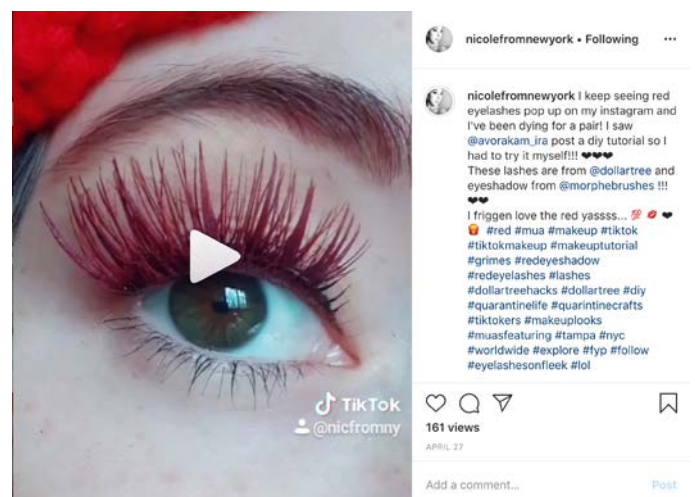
on them. As did Kriebel, Vera Chiquet points out that Benjamin believed “amusement enlightens” and has the ability to awaken outrage at injustice.<sup>12</sup>

If TikTok tutorials (ill. 6) supplant Instagram images that trumped Facebook posts which quashed MySpace profiles, imagine a near future when prosthetic devices beyond our feeble iPhones and Androids will transmit smell and touch from person-to-person and from individual to mass audience. Our social distancing will be complete. Would Heartfield have embraced this? Only, I think, to capture the audience in a vise-grip-like hug, one that could squeeze the life out of his opponents. We who are, as Angela Lammert writes, “ghosts from the future,” look back at Heartfield’s and Grosz’s and Benjamin’s works and their fates, and are inspired, but also fearful.<sup>13</sup> Their images and their flights were matters of life and death. Yet as the artist Tacita Dean points out in her contribution to the extraordinary *Photography Plus Dynamite* catalogue, what Chiquet refers to as “emancipatory fictions” may still be possible.<sup>14</sup> Dean’s example is a DIY “Twitler” sign, deployed in the street and hand-held by a living, breathing, resisting person.

- 1 “What happened was that Heartfield was moved to develop what started as an inflammatory political joke into a *conscious artistic technique*.” Grosz quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-art*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 117
- 2 Sabine Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 179-213
- 3 Jindrich Toman, “An Artist on the Run, John Heartfield in Prague,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, ed. Angela Lammert and Rosa von der Schulenburg, Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2020, p. 189.
- 4 Ralph Keunig in Conversation with John Heartfield’s Grandson Bob Condermeijer, “My Grandfather: When it came to justice, he’d explode like a volcano,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, p. 247.
- 5 Jeannpaul Goergen, “Focusing on Visual Thinking. John Heartfield – Films between Expressionism and Propaganda,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, pp 142-147.
- 6 Ann-Christine Diaz, “This Montage takes the piss out of pandemic montages,” in *Ad Age*, <https://adage.com/creativity/work/montage-takes-piss-out-pandemic-montages/2250301>, last accessed June 30, 2020.
- 7 Peter Chametzky, “From Anti-Nazi Postcards to Anti-Trump Social Media: Laughter as Resistance, Opposition, or Cold Comfort?” in *Art and Resistance in Germany*, ed. Deborah Ascher Barnstone and Elizabeth Otto, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 193-216
- 8 Peter Chametzky, “Marginal Comments, Oppositional Work: Willi Baumeister’s Confrontation with Nazi Art,” in *Willi Baumeister: Zeichnungen, Gouachen, Collagen*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart [exh. cat.] & Stuttgart: Edition Cantz [book], 1989, pp. 251-272.
- 9 Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, New York: Knopf, 1963; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, New York: Knopf, 1964
- 10 Charlotte Klönk, “Terror. When Images Turn into Weapons,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, p. 112.
- 11 Jodi Dean, “Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism,” in *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, December 31, 2016, <https://www.onlineopen.org/faces-as-commons>, last accessed June 30, 2020.
- 12 Vera Chiquet, „‘Clever Traps’. Heartfield’s Fake Photos as a Reflection on the Mass Media,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, pp. 159, 163.
- 13 Angela Lammert, „Material – Procedure – Archive,” in *John Heartfield. Photography Plus Dynamite*, p. 69
- 14 Chiquet, p. 161.



5 – “U.S. DEATHS NEAR 100,000, AN INCALCULABLE LOSS”, Photomontage circulating on Twitter, 24 May 2020, including the front page of that day’s *New York Times*



6 – Screenshot of nicolefromnewyork (photographer Nicole DiGiovanni), coloured eyelash tutorial on TikTok, May 2020