

Abstract

John Heartfield's AIZ-Photomontage as 'Operative Art'

Heekyeong Yun

The Invention of photography in the 19th century let the visual art go into a new phase. The traditional premise of art, namely the realistic depiction of nature, was abandoned and two different routes opened. One route led to the examination of the properties of pictorial elements, which resulted in the birth of abstract painting. The other route was that of the Avant-Gard artists who investigated the inherent characteristics of the new artistic expressions of photography such as reproducibility and actively deployed it in their artistic creation. This research focuses on the latter and investigates the photomontage of the Berliner Dadaist John Heartfield, especially the artistic strategies, relating to the operative aesthetic of Tretjakov.

In his works, Heartfield used popular media and techniques to make his work penetrate into daily life of the mass. By doing so, he attempted to provoke effectively their revolutionary leftist consciousness. His work as such has been recognized as a successful case, in which operative aesthetic, founded by a Russian leftist artist Sergj M. Tretjakov and practiced at first in the literature theory, is realized in visual art. The most representative 'operative' work by Heartfield is the photomontage for AIZ (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung) in the 1930's, which has aimed to criticize the fascist ideology propagated by photography-based mass media. Heartfield took the photographs from fascist magazines and newspapers and combined them in a new way in order to deconstruct their original meanings. By doing so, it provides a successful example of the new art form having political efficacy in the age of mechanical reproduction, which is illuminated by Walter Benjamin in his culture theoretical treatises.

Heartfield deployed for his AIZ-Photomontage three artistic strategies, namely suture, alienation and metamorphosis. His photomontage conceals the rupture and seams of the combined images and creates the illusion of visual wholeness. The first impression of wholeness created by suture is, however, soon violated by the cognitive disjunction, which is caused by the alienation between images, between texts and between image and text. This strategy allude to the paradox status of photography - as an 'analogon' with the depicted, namely the sign without code on the one hand and at the same time as a coded sign on the other hand, as it is pointed out by Roland Barth. This nature of photography is an important condition for mythmaking use of photography in mass media by the ruling party. Through making semblance of reality by using the strategy of suture and the following alienating effect, he reveals that the photo-based fascist ideology are actually sheer myths. By doing

so, his works offer a radical leftist critique of mass-circulated photographs and their conveyed political ideologies. As a result, appreciators realize the truth, namely the deceptiveness of the fascist ideology propagated by mass media. Sometimes, the operation of suture, the seamless transition from one thing to another, incorporates with metamorphosis. That is, the operation fuses with the trope favored by surrealists for its destabilization of the signifier and the signified. This way of work visualizes the fatal consequences of the fascist ideology.

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