JOHN HEARTFIELD: ART AS A WEAPON

John Heartfield was an artist who strongly challenged capitalism and Fascism. He developed the technique of photomontage and used it as a weapon towards both the Weimar Republic and Adolf Hitler’s politics. This essay, adopting a Marxist approach, focuses specifically on how Heartfield attempted to radicalise society and how subsequently this work was used as a political weapon. It also critically illustrates some of his photomontage works and their contemporary significances.

The November Revolution of 1918 in the German Empire at the end of the First World War led to a period in which soldiers, sailors and workers took political charge of the biggest German cities. However, with the creation of the Weimar Republic and the governance of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the revolution was betrayed. The foundation of the German Communist Party (KPD), the political instability and the social upheaval had a big influence on Heartfield, as he was one of the artists that joined the KPD (Gaughan, 2004, p. 347). It is essential to look into Heartfield’s background if we want to understand his commitment to the KPD and how the latter shaped his art.

He was born as Helmut Herzfeld in Berlin in 1891. Both his parents were socialists who left Germany in 1895 to escape imprisonment for blasphemy. They moved to Switzerland and then to Austria where they disappeared leaving their four children alone, until a local mayor and his wife took them under their care (Willett, 1997, p. 9). He trained as graphic artist in Munich and Berlin and in the time of the First World War, he and his brother Wieland Herzfeld opposed it. Thus, Helmut Herzfeld became John Heartfield in protest against the
war and against the xenophobia which flourished at that period in Germany. He was not the only one, as his future collaborator Georg Gross did the same and became George Grosz, while his brother changed his name to Wieland Herzfelde (Ibid., p. 12). The two brothers set up a publishing house called Malik. Through Malik’s publications they criticised social democracy and its betrayal of the revolution.

I argue that it was Heartfield’s political interpretation of the certain historical period that made him develop his photomontage as a weapon firstly against the Weimar Republic and secondly against Hitler. That betrayal of the November Revolution radicalised him and made him ‘committed for life to the KPD’ (Ibid., p. 16).

Heartfield’s photomontage is associated with his work for the German magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ: ‘Workers’ Illustrated Paper). AIZ was first published in 1924, and five years later it was selling 350,000 copies. Heartfield started his monthly contribution of montages in 1930. Three years later when Hitler was powerful, the magazine’s sales had surged to 500,000 (Edwards, 2004, p. 420). However, it could be argued that the strong readership did not stop Hitler’s ascendance and hegemony.

It would be useful to look at some of Heartfield’s work of those critical times, in order to realise the use of his photomontage as a weapon against capitalism and Fascism. Moreover, the popularity of AIZ is linked with the nature of his art and can lead us to some interesting conclusions about their relationship.
On March 1932, *The Finest Products of Capitalism* was published in *AIZ* (Fig. 1).
In a visual contradiction, Heartfield presents an unemployed worker and a bride in her wedding dress. The bride looks like a dummy in a shop window. The worker bears a placard which says, ‘I’ll take any WORK’. He has his hands in his pockets and his look is slightly determined. The way that he is dressed is simplistic. On the other hand, the woman is dressed flamboyantly. Her white dressing gown looks expensive, she holds a bouquet and she looks like reflecting on something. She stands on a plinth or steps, while the man stands on the woman’s dress (Spence, 1982/1995, p. 55). There is an added text to the picture that gives us the price of the dressing gown and the numbers of unemployment; the former cost 10,000 dollars and the latter are 20 million unemployed people (Ibid., p. 55).

In *Finest Products* Heartfield is directly challenging capitalism. He does it by basing his photomontage on class opposition. On the one hand, we have the luxury of the middle class; the bride dressed elaborately is represented like a fetishised commodity. On the other, the poverty of the working class; the worker who is dressed plainly and is available to sell only his labour power. This opposition between the two of them is what constitutes the class struggle. Moreover, the worker who stands on the woman’s dress can highlight that struggle and the relationship between the fetishised commodity and the labour that is needed for the production of the former. It is also interesting how Heartfield placed both the bride and the worker as two products available for sale in the shop window; the capital owners can buy both of them (Ibid., p. 55).

While Heartfield is clear about capitalism’s negative effects, I would argue that he is not convincing about the worker’s power. Marx stresses the emergence of communist society from the ruins of the old, capitalist society. Until the coming of the former, society bears the
characteristics of the latter (Marx, 1875/1968, p. 319). How the expression of the unemployed man and the desperate message of the placard can challenge the social status quo effectively? The man looks more like dealing with a defeat.

The word photomontage was first used by Heartfield and the other Berlin Dadaists, who emphasised on communism and Bolshevism. It means ‘photo-construction or –assemblage’ (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 10). They experimented by combining photographs they took from newspapers and magazines. Heartfield in particular, tried to develop revolutionary propaganda with the help of technology and without being cut from the everyday life and the workers. He was closely related with the Soviet Productivism movement and he even travelled in the Soviet Union to participate in some projects (Ibid., pp. 15-16).

I am highlighting this because I want to stress Heartfield’s intention to reach the masses with the most effective and easily accessible medium. His involvement with the AIZ helped him achieve that goal:

If I collect documents, combine them and do that in a clever way, then the agitational- propagandistic effect on the masses will be immense and that is the most important thing for us. That is the foundation of our work. Therefore, it is our task to influence the masses, as well, as strongly, as intensely as possible (Heartfield cited in Evans, Gohl, 1931/1986, p. 19).

Heartfield’s working method challenged established ideologies about the uniqueness of the artist. He constructed, photographed or collected photographs; he printed, cut up and pasted images or used negatives and his texts were mixed and matched with reused
images. That method made his work more radical. Heartfield was critical of capitalist society and Fascism and did that by using techniques of modernism. His intention was to radicalise the masses through works that would be constructed and not just being mere depictions of reality (Edwards, 2004, p. 420).

Although Heartfield’s method is innovative, I am sceptical of its supremacy over realism. Can the immediacy of the latter be exceeded by his approach? Marxist critic Georg Lukács rejected photomontage because its basic element of photography could not represent society’s integral function (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 33).

In *Finest Products*, Heartfield constructs a terrain of oppositions. The dark and white contrast, the ironic title, the expression on the face of the unemployed man and the bride placed as a commodity, demand a reaction from the viewer. Will she or he be equipped with class conscience? Will she be involved in the class struggle? Heartfield does its best to ensure that with his agitprop. The ideological impact of his work is based in the oppositions mentioned above. Engels stressed that the living experience and the effects of capitalism are forcing the working class to embrace political action either for political or for social goals (Engels, 1871/1968, p. 310). Heartfield prepares the terrain for this action. Ten years later in 1944, he spoke to art historian Francis Klingender and declared his aim to be ‘a systematic and consciously guided art propaganda in the service of the working class movement’ (Heartfield cited in Evans, Lundgren, 1944/1992, p. 10).

Heartfield’s *Finest Products* gives the viewer the chance to reflect on capitalism’s injustices. It can do that even with a contemporary audience, taking current European unemployment
statistics into consideration; this test of the cyclical nature of the oppression capitalist society exerts on workers, allows this work to be arguably even just as relevant today (Europa, 2015 [online]). This is an achievement for Heatrfield’s photomontage. However, it cannot contest the living experience. It is the latter, and the political oppression of the establishment that compels the workers to act and not abstain from politics (Engels, 1871/1968, p. 310).

In March 1930, the SPD left the coalition of the government and Hitler’s National Socialist Party gained more power. The economic crisis, the unemployment and the growth of nationalism led to a social polarisation, whilst the KPD tried to respond with anti-Nazi propaganda. Heartfield continued his work through AIZ, but from October 1930 the enemy was Fascism (Willett, 1997, p. 85).
The Meaning of the Hitler Salute was the cover of AIZ on 16 October 1932 (Fig. 2).
In this artwork, a small sized Hitler receives money from a significantly bigger paymaster. Heartfield uses the motto of the National Socialists ‘Millions Stand Behind Me’ which meant that millions of people supported Hitler, to imply that the latter’s power comes from the support of the capitalists (Edwards, 2004, p. 420). There is also an added text saying: ‘THE MEANING OF THE HITLER SALUTE: Little Man Asks for Big Gifts’. Heartfield tries to highlight the connection between capitalism and Fascism and his montage is based on the success of the Nazis to win the Reichstag elections of the past July and Hitler’s effort to have the support of the Rhineland industrialists in January, earlier that year (Evans, 1992, p. 94).

Heartfield uses his photomontage in a clever way. However, we must not forget that Hitler, apart from the support from the capitalists had also the support of workers. When he spoke to the Rhineland industrialists, he stressed the success of the Nazis to be appealing to both of them. Heartfield tried to emphasise that the rhetoric of the Nazis and their practice was contradictory, but neither he, nor any other effort from the Left stopped Hitler’s ascendance to power (Ibid., p. 80).

Looking at the Hitler Salute, we can claim that Heartfield’s intention is to engage the viewer in reflective thinking about who had the real power. Presenting the paymaster larger in a time when Hitler’s popularity was increasing, seems provocative. Even the money is bigger than the latter’s hands. Heartfield’s tactic was to cause shock to the viewers of his photomontage (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 19). He aimed to reveal the linkage between capitalism and Fascism and expose it to the readers of AIZ. By creating striking visual images, he promoted the communist ideas of that historical period (Ibid., p. 20). Even from the earlier days of 1919, Dadaism demanded ‘The international revolutionary union of all
creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism’ (Huelsenbeck, Hausmann, 1919/2003, p. 259). Moreover, Dadaism declared that ‘Dada is German Bolshevism’ (Huelsenbeck, 1920/2003, p. 262).

Heartfield joined the KPD in 1919, trying to put theory into practice and shifting his art to photomontage as a more efficient mode of communist propaganda. Nine years later in 1928, he joined The German Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists (Asso). The opening line of their manifesto was: ‘Art is a weapon, the artist a warrior in the people’s struggle for freedom from a bankrupt system’ (ARBKD, 1928/2003, p. 409). Consequently, we can not argue about Heartfield’s political commitment. However, the effectiveness of his political photomontage can be argued.

Walter Benjamin favoured the revolutionary character of Dadaism which passed into photomontage and referred to Heartfield and his technique that helped him use his art as a political instrument (Benjamin, 1934/2003, p. 496). Art was no more exalted into the realm of authenticity but it was based within the everyday life. Nevertheless, it seemed that it was not enough to stop Hitler’s rule. I would like to explore more the use of Heartfield’s art as a weapon next.

The most significant part of Heartfield’s work came under the collaboration with AIZ. The latter published more than two hundred of his photomontages (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 17). The magazine’s philosophy was to fight capitalism, defend the Soviet Union and present working class life. Heartfield wanted to present the familiar in a radical and innovative way that would help the workers achieve class conscience and act accordingly. Heartfield and
AIZ had the same intentions. Moreover, the readers were encouraged to submit their photographs and become photo-correspondents. Groups were formed in many parts of Germany, in England and the USA (Ibid., p. 18). That proved not only the success of AIZ, but of Heartfield’s influence as well. However, this grassroots weapon was unable to stop Fascism. The *Hitler Salute* could be the proof of the limitations of art within its historical specificity.

Heartfield’s photomontage, no matter the capitalist and fascist ascendance, influenced readers and artists alike. In 1966 when his work exhibited in West Germany, young artists of the new Left were influenced by the radicalism of his work and its strong meaning (Willett, 1997, p. 175). Even when philosophers like Lukács rejected photomontage, others like Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, believed in the power of its technique and its different uses (Edwards, 2004, p. 421). Art critic and writer John Berger claimed that in Heartfield’s best works ‘there is a sense of everything having been soiled’ and that ‘the images themselves...express disgust at their own sordidness’ (Berger, 1969/2001, p. 220). If we look in *Finest Products* and *Hitler Salute*, this sordidness is evident. The bride in the white dressing gown who is treated like a commodity, the worker in black desperately asking for a job and the businessman who gives money to Hitler, all have to do with the owner of the political power. Berger claims that this sordidness comes not of an abstract idea that power corrupts but it is the effect of that certain historical period (Ibid., p. 220).

I argue that Heartfield efficiently represents his epoch and with his photomontage technique gives new possibilities for future montage artists. Berger recognised the originality and aptness in Heartfield’s work and mentioned the latter’s ability to ‘demystify
things’ (Ibid., p. 221). This demystification is based on Marxist education. Heartfield wanted to produce Marxist-Leninist agitprop (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 19). His ability to take photographs from their original context and mix them with texts which represent ideas, gives his photomontage a materialist dynamic that serves his aim. It is also useful for all the future artists as a starting point for new explorations. However, which are the weakest moments of Heartfield’s art? Berger’s approach could be useful to identify the former.

For several years before 1933, the official Soviet propaganda did not distinguish Fascism and social democracy. Both were considered enemies of the German communists. Heartfield’s work was in accordance with the party line, as he did not oppose that Soviet equation which was adopted from the KPD.
On the Occasion of the Crisis Party Conference of the Social Democratic Party was produced in 1931 (Fig. 3).

Heartfield quotes Fritz Tarnow who was a social democrat trade unionist:

Social Democracy does not want the breakdown of capitalism. Like a doctor, it wants to try to heal and improve it (Tate, 2016 [online]).

Moreover, the subtitle is ironic:

Vets in Leipzig (=SPD): obviously we are going to draw the tiger’s teeth (capitalism), but we have to make him better and stronger first (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 44).

Heartfield’s work is a direct attack to social democracy and its links with capitalism, Fascism and death, as a consequence of war. The man in his photomontage has the face of a tiger,
whilst a swastika pin is placed in his tie which is full of skulls. Could things be different if the German communists of the KPD collaborated with the 9,000,000 SPD voters? Could Hitler’s ascendance to power be stopped from a different strategy of the working class? (Berger, 1969/2001, pp. 221-222).

I do not expect from Heartfield’s art all the answers that belong to the subject of politics. However, even an artist chooses sides. He chose to follow the party rules. With that choice he made his photomontage symbolic and although his intentions were to demystify, he rhetorically mystified his agitprop. Nevertheless, we should not forget the moral dilemmas which politically committed artists of that historical period had to answer; how useful they were and if their work was effective and revolutionary enough. Sometimes they even had to suppress their artistic will and freedom (Ibid., p. 222). I argue that Heartfield’s background and the betrayal of the November Revolution of 1918 were the catalysts that made him follow the party line willingly.

In conclusion, Heartfield’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism made him use his art as a weapon against capitalism and Fascism. He lived in a historical period when the working class in Germany tried to take the power and follow the example of the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union without success. He attempted to radicalise the masses by collecting and combining documents in a clever way. His photomontage was agitprop and through the popularity of AIZ he achieved to reach the readers who set their own groups and became ‘class-conscious photo-correspondents’ (Evans, Gohl, 1986, p. 18). However, his work did not stop Hitler’s political hegemony. Heartfield managed to present the familiar in an innovative way by using a mixture of photography and text and by producing an
unexpected message. His originality and innovation did not disobey the party discipline and his methods opened new roads for the future artists. In works like Finest Products and Hitler Salute, we can see the cultural and political struggle against the dominant and reactionary ideologies and that makes Heartfield’s work relevant to today (Spence, 1995, p. 57). The legacy of Heartfield and his success is that it gives us a stimulation to react against neoliberalism.

References


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**Illustration List**

(Fig. 1): Heartfield, John (1932) *The Finest Products of Capitalism*, Photomontage, originally published in *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*. Photo: Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK.

(Fig. 2): Heartfield, John (1932) *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute*, cover of *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library, London, UK.

(Fig. 3): Heartfield, John (1931) *On the Occasion of the Crisis Party Conference of the Social Democratic Party*, Photomontage, originally published in *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*. Photo: David King Collection, London, UK.