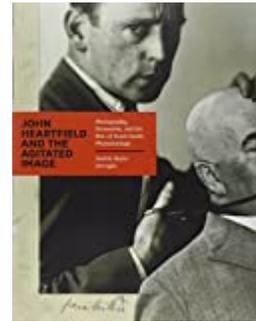




**Andrés Mario Zervigón.** *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-garde Photomontage.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Illustrations. 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-98177-2.



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## Prosecutor with Scissors: John Heartfield and the Photomontage

For artists like John Heartfield, manipulating and combining multiple images to create something new not only was productive but also helped to normalize the photomontage (especially on the political left) as a means to convey political and social satire to the masses. Artists and intellectuals subsequently turned to photographs as the medium of choice for disseminating information and, inevitably, propaganda. Most notably, the photographic combinations appearing in the left-leaning *German Workers' Illustrated* (*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* [AIZ]) represent some of the best-known photomontage work by Heartfield. Between 1930 and 1938, the AIZ printed hundreds of Heartfield's photomontages, either as the paper's front or back covers or occasionally as double-page spreads. Heartfield developed his own distinctive, experimental photographic aesthetic by cultivating relationships between the text and the pictorial fragments, between the images and social commentary, and between the issues made visible in the photomontages and the perspectives of the articles in the magazine.[1] Artists and intellectuals both praised and re-

jected Heartfield's biting social commentary depicted in the photomontages; some lauded the attempt (see, for example, Bertolt Brecht) to create a novel artistic medium for social criticism, whereas some claimed that Heartfield's work was too formalistic in its approach to the masses.[2]

*John Heartfield and the Agitated Image* by Andrés Mario Zervigón adds to recent scholarship on Heartfield's fascinating work and life. This volume, coming in at just over three hundred pages, presents one of the best resources to date for scholars working on Weimarer media, leftist propaganda imagery, and the development of political photomontage. This review cannot discuss in detail all of Zervigón's arguments and findings; instead, it will highlight a number of noteworthy points. In his introduction, Zervigón begins with Heartfield and his legacy, calling him a "prosecutor with scissors" (p. 1). Characterizations like this one throughout the book provide food for thought and one need only to turn to the many images by Heartfield that accompany Zervigón's text to find proof; see, for example,

the photomontage on the cover jacket of the book (also found on page 3) entitled “Self-Portrait with Berlin Police President Karl Zörgiebel” (1929), which juxtaposes photographs of Heartfield, Zörgiebel, and a pair of scissors. Heartfield cut and rearranged the images in such a way that shows him holding Zörgiebel’s head with one hand, while the other slices through his neck. Indeed, as Zervig points out, the nature of Heartfield’s photomontages are so “punchy” and direct that many required no captions at all.

Zervig asserts that Heartfield’s goal was not simply to expose “truth” in mass media imagery through montage and reappropriation, but rather to “reinvent photographic truth altogether” (p. 2). The fundament of this thesis is not entirely new. However, the ways in which Zervig frames and historically contextualizes the photomontage work are impressive. In fact, he performs juxtapositions with great skill, setting numerous images against others to create a visual dialogue for the reader. The author remains true to the title of his study as he consistently returns to the notions of agitation, persuasion, propaganda, and photography. *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image* succeeds in reassessing the “relation between photography’s rapid entry into the public sphere and the destiny of German avant-garde art, specifically photomontage” (p. 12). Heartfield’s primary contribution to German avant-garde art in this period was to show how one could manipulate and carefully provoke an affective response to media imagery (mostly photographs), and perhaps more important why left-leaning thinkers, critics, and artists should be doing such pictorial autopsies: to correct a photograph or, in Zervig’s words, to “agitate” images.

In chapter 1, Zervig demonstrates how Heartfield developed his montage techniques. His techniques achieved a transformation of the “static opticality” of the photograph into a politically charged, multisensory assault on the reading public. To reinvent photography and the ways in which spectators interact with images, Heartfield sought to harness the potential of the photomontage to create a “screeching performance” of almost cinematic quality. Heartfield’s long-time collaborator Kurt Tucholsky played a major role in the early stages of combining image and text (especially in the German literary context), and indeed in the nascent development of the photomontage, arguing for the radical juxtaposition of contrasting images for social criticism. Zervig asserts that Heartfield was the artist “perfectly prepared” to realize Tucholsky’s charge (p. 7). One need only to read Tucholsky and Heartfield’s later

image-text work *Deutschland, Deutschland Aber Alles* (1929) to realize how artistically well these two operated in tandem. Heartfield’s photomontages and photographic intrusions into Tucholsky’s texts provide counterpoints to Tucholsky’s tongue-in-cheek comment of the “‘Unmöglichkeit, eine Photographie zu textieren’” (impossibility of captioning a photograph). He also argues convincingly that Heartfield’s montages can be best understood as an ongoing act (thus as agitated images) rather than something static.

Heartfield’s experience and artistic output during World War I is the subject of chapter 2. Heartfield’s response to the horrors and trauma of the war and its aftermath for German artists led him to create something equally shocking, both in its message and delivery (as seen, for example, in his postcards and posters). His collaboration with George Grosz led to direct critique of popular visual culture in Germany that was increasingly devoid of meaning. Many Berlin Dadaists, Heartfield included, viewed photography as the most effective medium to visually represent the traumas from the front lines of trench warfare.

While chapter 3 traces the invention and trajectory of Heartfield’s public and artistic personae, chapter 4 delves into very thought-provoking discussions of Heartfield’s “curious stint” as a director of animated propaganda films. Zervig explains how Heartfield’s work in the cinema allowed him to explore simulations in the sensations of sound and touch using only images. Film, as Heartfield saw it, could serve multiple purposes: a medium that was cutting edge in its approach to the masses that employed photography, design, and sound to strike (agitate) audiences with a blend of “madness and political dissent” (p. 9).

Chapters 5 and 6 explore Heartfield’s post-Dada production. During this time, he changed course and focused on more traditional, sober forms of photography in line with the New Objectivity movement prevalent during the mid-to-latter part of the Weimar Republic. Heartfield and other Communist agitators called for a renewed sense of urgency in politics, a rejection of romantic idealism, and, above all, an artistic program to counteract the political right. With radicals on both sides of the spectrum clashing in the streets of Berlin, Heartfield’s photomontages sought to reignite the revolutionary aspirations of the working class. To his disappointment, the German Communist Party (KPD) had all but condemned his style, regarding photomontage as too formalistic and whose shock value contributed to “bourgeois decadence”

which thus confused the broad masses.

*John Heartfield and the Agitated Image* is an important contribution to Heartfield scholarship and to our understanding of culture and politics from the beginning of World War I to the twilight moments of the Weimar Republic. Zervigón's lucid arguments and thoughtful readings do not place Heartfield and his work in a bubble but instead invite readers to extend boundaries. This study includes many of Heartfield's contemporaries, from Tucholsky and John Dos Passos, to Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer as well as the major players of the literary and publishing scene, such as Malik Verlag, the AIZ, and *Neue Jugend*. Zervigón goes further and engages with Heartfield in unusual but nonetheless fruitful pairings, such as *Struwwelpeter* (the mid-nineteenth-century children's picture book by Heinrich Hoffmann) or Fritz Lang's classic film *M* (1931). An index of images or list of illustrations would have been helpful to readers for quick reference; the sheer number of images included in this study can be daunting. One of Zervigón's claims in the epilogue does not sit quite well. He argues that Heartfield is the example of the German Communist artist and that photomontage, as developed by Heartfield, became the art form of German Communists. It is true that Heartfield's 1928 election poster for the KPD "The Hand Has Five Fingers" became an iconic image associated with class struggle and the fight against the growing tide of fascism in Germany. While this provocative idea has merit, it disregards some of the arguments made in the previous chapters that so deftly and thoroughly document Heartfield's collaborations with other artists.

It also does not fully take into account the inherent distrust by many leftists of images and imagery. If one could salvage this claim, it would be to argue that Heartfield's photomontage contributions attempted, at the very least, to bridge the gap between Communist and Marxist mistrust of deceptive images and the need for art that could expose and critique social situations.

These rather insignificant criticisms notwithstanding, Zervigón's book is an excellent and most welcome edition for scholars in German studies and art history working at the intersections of literature, culture, and media studies. As is the case with most volumes published with Chicago University Press, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image* is a handsome book, exhibiting both first-rate design and top-notch editing with very few mistakes (except for the unfortunate "Kurt Tucholsk" entry in the bibliography on page 293). Subsequent studies dealing with Heartfield and his "agitated" images will need to begin with Zervigón's work.

#### Notes

[1]. See Alfred Durus, "John Heartfield und die satirische Photomontage," in *John Heartfield: Photomontagen zur Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Konrad Farner (Zurich: Vereinigung Kultur und Volk, 1945).

[2]. See, for example, Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlev Müller (Berlin and Frankfurt: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1989), 23:154.

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