

Title	Manufacturing discontent: John Heartfield's mass medium
Authors	Kriebel, Sabine
Publication date	2009-08
Original Citation	Kriebel, S., 2009. Manufacturing Discontent: John Heartfield's Mass Medium. <i>New German Critique</i> 107, 36(2), pp.53-88.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1215/0094033X-2009-002
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Download date	2024-10-16 04:16:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/215

Manufacturing Discontent: John Heartfield's Mass Medium

Sabine Kriebel

The readers of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) were formally introduced to John Heartfield and his incisive art of photomontage in the second week of September 1929—on page 17 of issue 37 (fig. 1). Ceremonially clad in coat and tie as if dressed for a formal portrait, brow furrowed, fierce glare commanding the beholder's gaze, Heartfield presented himself in the act of beheading the Berlin police chief, Karl Zörgiebel. Note that the blade separating the police chief's head from his body is not the solitary edge of a guillotine, executing the condemned with a single merciful thwack, but the twin edges of long-handled shears, slowly decapitating the victim with a repetitive joining and separating, each gesture widening the gap between head and body, helped along by Heartfield's tugging fingers.

Zörgiebel was the figure held accountable for the unprecedented police violence toward the communist demonstrators on May Day 1929, soon dubbed *Blutmai*, or Bloody May, by the radical Left. Five months earlier, in December

This essay condenses arguments from my forthcoming book *Revolutionary Beauty: John Heartfield and the AIZ*. My continuing thanks go to T. J. Clark, Martin Jay, Anton Kaes, and Anne Wagner for their critical input on an earlier version of this material. I am also grateful to audiences at the University of York, the University of Glasgow, and Columbia University whose comments aided in refining my argument. Finally, I thankfully acknowledge the Publication Fund of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Science, University College Cork, for assisting with the reproduction costs of this article.

New German Critique 107, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2009
DOI 10.1215/0094033X-2009-002 © 2009 by New German Critique, Inc.



Figure 1. John Heartfield, *Self-Portrait*, 1929. Courtesy Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Kunstsammlung, Inv. Heartfield 1491/KS-FS-JH 318. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

1928, Zörgiebel prohibited all outdoor meetings and demonstrations in response to violent street clashes between and among communists, socialists, and National Socialists. He then extended the prohibition to include the May Day marches, a highly symbolic annual working-class tradition (socialist as well as communist) that demonstrated working-class pride and solidarity. The communists, taking this gesture as provocation by the socialist regime, appeared en masse to protest Zörgiebel's prohibition peaceably, only to be met by specially

drafted riot police with rubber truncheons and pistols in hand, armed and psychologically primed to disperse the crowds.¹ Toward evening, as the legal indoor meetings disbanded, the crowds in the streets grew, resulting in clashes with police throughout the city. Dozens were beaten or arrested simply because they were on the wrong side of the street or as they attempted to flee an onslaught of bullets; others were beaten on sidewalks, in police vans, and at station houses; still others were shot because they happened to be on their balconies or on an evening stroll.² Shocking exposés later revealed unwarranted police violence against disabled war veterans and innocent children.³ In the following days, the police placed entire districts of working-class Berlin under martial law, mobilizing armored cars and occasionally directing their fire at house fronts to penetrate the barricades erected by the district's inhabitants. Thirty civilians were killed, more than half of them innocent bystanders; nearly two hundred were wounded; and more than twelve hundred were arrested.

Blutmai 1929 proved a turning point for both German working-class consciousness and the German Communist Party (KPD), further polarizing the political landscape of the late Weimar Republic. The events only appeared to confirm the theory of "social fascism" promoted by Joseph Stalin and the Communist International after the Sixth Congress in 1928, asserting that socialism was the precursor to fascism, a treacherous postulate that divided the Left in Germany, eroding unified resistance against the Nazi Right in the years to follow.

Enter Heartfield, scissors in one hand, scalp of Zörgiebel in the other, on the seventeenth page of a mass-circulation magazine. The *AIZ* was communist in its orientation but not directly affiliated with the KPD, answerable instead to Moscow's Communist International. This subtle distinction was one that Willi

1. In the weeks before May 1 the German Communist Party (KPD) encouraged protest demonstrations in the press and through wall posters, at times using incendiary language. Heartfield wrote a celebratory agit poem, "Erster Mai," for the communist journal *Das rote Sprachrohr* in April 1929, rpt. in Roland März, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit* (East Berlin: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1981), 149–50. The Berlin police, for its part, was on highest alert, and thirteen to fourteen thousand policemen were specially drafted for the event. My retelling of these events draws on both contemporary press accounts and historical reassessments, including Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Thomas Kurz, "Arbeiter und Putschisten: Der Berliner 'Blutmai' von 1929 als Kristallisationspunkt des Verhältnisses von KPD und SPD vor der Katastrophe," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 22, no. 3 (1986): 297–317; and H. A. Winckler, *Weimar, 1918–1933* (Munich: Beck, 1998).

2. See "Kampf-Mai der Berliner Arbeiterschaft," *AIZ*, no. 20, 1929, 2–3; "Die Toten klagen an!" *AIZ*, no. 21, 1929, 3; and Carl von Ossietzky's chronicles "Zörgiebel ist schuld!" and "Abdankung, Herr Polizeipräsident!" *Die Weltbühne*, May 7 and 14, 1929.

3. See Ossietzky, "Zörgiebel ist schuld!" and "Abdankung, Herr Polizeipräsident!"

Münzenberg, the *AIZ*'s publisher, was careful to underscore, because it allowed the *AIZ* relative independence in Germany.⁴ Heartfield's photomontage not only gives the social fascist a face but also thematizes the fight against him; Zörgiebel the victimizer becomes the victim. In the form of popular politics, the righteous photomonteur Heartfield dispenses justice on behalf of the radical Left, avenging the dead, injured, imprisoned, and politically dispossessed as a result of Socialist Party politics, in payoff for Bloody May 1929.

Though twice framed by the slogan "Use photography as a weapon"—once above the self-portrait and once below, exclamatory headline and sober undertitle—Heartfield's commanding and violent act makes us wonder if it is indeed the photograph, rather than the *monteur's* savage scissors, that is the actual weapon. Heartfield's scissors declare their own deed, their long blades pointing to the abrupt border of the self-portrait, where the background cedes to the incursion of the adjacent exhibition photograph. "I did this," the scissors seem to say, calling our attention to the retracted frame, the mutilated edges of Zörgiebel's chin, the discomfiting rift between his neck and shoulders. Scissors in hand, Heartfield wields the instrument of his art, as well as his weapon.

The prereproduction mock-up of the montage lets us revel in the savagery of cutting—the act of making itself—that is muted, though not absent, in the *AIZ* reproduction (fig. 2). We can imagine the vengeful pleasure of decapitating a loathed enemy, the gratification of slicing scissors through a photographic likeness, the satisfying grind of the blades as they sever the imaged body on thick photographic paper, sundering head from shoulders. The raw edges of Zörgiebel's vulnerable pate evoke a visceral response, summoning forth an open or scarring wound, the white of the paper revealing itself from beneath the photographic image like slit flesh. The eye registers the imperfections of cutting, the hesitations of the scissors, underneath his chin, for example, as they excised Zörgiebel's head from the cozy bourgeois interior with which it was originally photographically fused.⁵

The wide readership of the *AIZ* would have delighted in this staged fantasy of beheading Zörgiebel. The *AIZ* was a leftist alternative to the illustrated

4. I discuss this issue in greater detail in my article "Photomontage in the Year 1932: John Heartfield and the National Socialists," *Oxford Art Journal* 31 (2008): 97–127; and in "Revolutionary Beauty: John Heartfield, Political Photomontage, and the Crisis of the European Left, 1929–1938" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

5. Heartfield excised Zörgiebel's head from a public relations photograph of the police chief and his wife seated at home. Heartfield preyed on one of those awkward and unfortunate moments of the snapshot: Zörgiebel blinked as the shutter opened. Heartfield capitalized on the police chief's unfortunate expression, recontextualizing his closed eyes to make him look dead.



Figure 2. John Heartfield, *Self-Portrait with Police President Zörgiebel*, mock-up, 1929. Courtesy Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Kunstsammlung, Heartfield 430 © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

magazines, or *Illustrierten*, flooding the German market during the 1920s. With a print run of nearly five hundred thousand, it was the second most popular *Illustrierte* in circulation, outsold only by the left-of-center *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (*sic*), whose readership extended into the millions.⁶ Geared toward a broad-based, left-wing readership, the purpose of the *AIZ* was to propagate a communist viewpoint to nonparty members and the so-called homeless Left. Its brilliance lay in its ability to speak to the broad spectrum of

6. This is according to the *AIZ* itself, which published in 1931 the journal's growth rates (rpt. in Heinz Willmann, *Geschichte der Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung, 1921–1938* [Berlin: Dietz, 1974], 122–23). *BIZ* circulation in 1930 was 1,844,130 (quoted in *Sperlings Zeitschriften Adressbuch* [Leipzig: Börsenverein der deutschen Buchhändler, 1930]).

Lefts during the Weimar Republic, many of whose members felt disenfranchised by both the radical KPD and the more moderate Socialist Party. For instance, the artist Käthe Kollwitz and the satirist Kurt Tucholsky contributed regularly to the *AIZ*, disagreeing with the intransigence of the KPD but nevertheless supporting radical left-wing politics on philosophical grounds. The *AIZ* reached its readership by way of newsstands, local bookstores, and a posse of street sellers. Readers were encouraged to pass the journal along—to leave it on park benches, on buses, in cafés, for the neighbor, for the milkman—thereby expanding the leftist community during a period when the Nazi Right was on the rise.⁷

Heartfield's beheading is of course a fantasy—of the disenfranchised, of power, of the agency of the artist. Between the bloodshed of *Blutmai* and the time that Heartfield's murderous self-portrait appeared in the *AIZ*, the KPD paper *Die rote Fahne* was banned not once but twice, per Zörgiebel's order, for "the protection of the Republic."⁸ The Rote Frontkämpferbund (RFB), the communist paramilitary organization, was similarly prohibited, while the Nazi equivalent, the Sturmabteilung (SA), and the socialist equivalent, the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, remained legal. These are examples of an asymmetrical justice system in the Weimar Republic that tended to punish the radical Left while often turning a blind eye to infractions of the radical Right. In 1929 the KPD was a party under siege. Its response was to adopt and mobilize the indignant, militant tone peculiar to those under threat, its imagery and language reflecting and reinforcing a sense of embattlement among its constituents.⁹

Heartfield's fantasy was nevertheless a publicized fantasy, available for twenty pfennig at all newspaper stands, intervening, albeit four months later, in an event well covered in the press. In this turbulent political climate, Heartfield's 1929 self-portrait would have resonated. Using scissors as his weapon, Heartfield resolutely combats the so-called *Gummiknüppelherrschaft*, the billy club reign, of the late Weimar Republic.¹⁰ The spectator summoned by this image is incensed by the street violence, witness to its inequities, and galvanized by the picture's vengeance, delighting in Heartfield's aggression. For a moment, Heartfield's self-portrait provides the beholder with resolution, satisfaction, retribution, pleasure.

7. See, e.g., *AIZ*, no. 41, 1931; or *AIZ*, no. 36, 1932.

8. The paper was banned May 3–23, 1929, and May 26–June 22, 1929.

9. Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?* 61.

10. For another account of communist cultural practice that straddles the line between KPD policy and the real, everyday politics of the streets, see Richard Bodek, *Proletarian Performance in Weimar Berlin* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997).

Amplifying that viewer-image relationship is Heartfield's gaze, directed at the viewer, away from his activity of bloodless violence. In the instant his fierce look was captured on film, Heartfield acknowledged the camera that froze his face for posterity, his eyes directly confronting the lens. However, that impassioned glare was intended for the viewers beyond the camera, addressing an imaginary audience to witness an execution. Heartfield's declarative look insists on a moment of caesura, a pause separating the acts of summoning and making. Heartfield not only is aware of his audience but deliberately enjoins it, sparking a preternatural continuity between this static photographic likeness and its beholder. I consider this visual summoning a metaphor for Heartfield's *AIZ* project, which essentially began with this self-portrait and lasted until 1938, surviving forced exile to Prague in 1933, fueling international diplomatic scandal, and generating at least 237 photomontages. Like the self-portrait, Heartfield's photomontages labored to stimulate political consciousness through compelling visual means during a period of extreme political and social upheaval. The ultimate goal was to create a community of revolutionary-minded citizens who would actively contribute to radical social change. The beholder of the photomontage completes the work, which, I aim to show, is a cognitive operation woven into the conception of Heartfield's project. The viewer is as integral as photography and scissors to his political weaponry.

This montage is a show of Heartfield's technique, and a performance of his social identity as artist, as he conceived of it, in 1929. Like his self-portrait, Heartfield's very name relies on an audacious politics of protest. "John Heartfield" came into being in 1916, as the story has it, the pseudonym of the man baptized Helmut Herzfeld in 1891.¹¹ Anglicizing his German name in the midst of World War I, according to Heartfield legend, was to signal a brazen refusal—a cheeky rejection of the "spontaneous and irrational" anglophobia that took hold of Germany shortly after the English entered the war on August 4, 1914.¹² At the close of the war Heartfield signed up with the fledgling KPD, allegedly at its first congress on December 30, 1918, receiving the *Parteibuch* from Rosa Luxemburg herself. Heartfield's subsequent involvement with Berlin

11. The often-repeated anecdote that Heartfield adopted his pseudonym as early as 1916 to protest German anglophobia has come under increasing scrutiny, as has the date of his actual membership in the Communist Party. Heartfield's entry into the German Democratic Republic in 1950 was clouded by official suspicion for several reasons, including his "formalism" and his affiliation with Willi Münzenberg; certain facts may have been embellished to shore up Heartfield's radical political commitment. I leave it to Andrés Mario Zervigón's forthcoming study to present this material in detail.

12. Matthew Stibbe, *German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.

Dada, whose art and actions were provoked by the traumatic war and the failed revolution of 1918–19, was an antibourgeois, prorevolutionary protest that mobilized photomontage as a political weapon, representing the Weimar Republic as a disorderly verbal-visual cacophony. Although the radical proclivities of the Dadaists waned in the mid-1920s, Heartfield remained, for better or worse, a dedicated agitator for the communist cause, designing election posters, book jackets, and, beginning in 1929, satirical photomontages for the *AIZ*.

It is worth remarking here that the *idea* of communism was often at odds with the policies and politics of communism, as dictated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and enacted by the KPD. Münzenberg's journal, as noted earlier, bridged the gap between party members and far-Left sympathizers. Heartfield's pictorial agitation and his politics, I maintain, were a politics "on the ground," to borrow Eric Weitz's phrase,¹³ and sought to balance (sometimes more, sometimes less, successfully) the ideological terrain of bureaucratic communism with what has been called *Gefühlskommunismus*—a humanistic communism—in dialogue with, and deeply contingent on, the cultural politics of daily life. I mean neither to depoliticize nor to minimize Heartfield's commitment to communism and all that this entailed in the 1930s, but to point to the balancing act that such a resolute commitment required and to challenge one dominant view that Heartfield was no more than a propaganda-generating Stalinist ideologue. Given this essay's focus on the politics of pictorial manufacture, I shall signal here only that the story of his political commitment is more nuanced than many assessments have acknowledged.¹⁴ At the same time, however, we cannot ignore that the period 1929–39—essentially the years covered by Heartfield's work with the *AIZ*—also framed Stalin's most heinous acts, from forcible collectivization to incarcerating and executing tens of millions. Why Heartfield chose not to leave the Communist Party, as did his friend and fellow artist George Grosz, is a complicated question.¹⁵

13. Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 235.

14. A prominent exception is Michael Krejsa, "Wo ist John Heartfield?" in *Kunstdokumentation, 1945–1990, SBZ/DDR*, ed. Günther Feist (Cologne: DuMont, 1996), 110–26, which offers the most thorough account of Heartfield's complicated relationship to the Communist Party to date. I discuss Heartfield's response to Communist Party policies in specific contexts in my dissertation "Revolutionary Beauty." I also address some aspects in "Photomontage in the Year 1932."

15. For an account of George Grosz's complicated relationship to the KPD, see Barbara McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918–1936* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). According to McCloskey, Grosz was increasingly estranged from the party's radical and inflexible policies of the late 1920s, while the party was less and less supportive of Grosz's polemical, nonheroic, and complex satires, particularly when Grosz mocked the

It has to do, I think, with Heartfield's seemingly unshakable commitment to the *idea* of communism, beyond (or in spite of) its particular bureaucratic manifestations, bringing him to endure the various expectations, inconsistencies, purges, and accusations that would pursue him from the 1928 Wittorf affair to his vexed reception in the German Democratic Republic after 1950.¹⁶

While Heartfield's artistic identity derived from a deeply rooted and subversive politics of protest, his 1929 self-portrait is assertively violent, produced in the aftermath of *Blutmai*, when the Communist Party increasingly embraced violence as a viable form of political struggle.¹⁷ The politics and the production of Heartfield's work are legible and accessible in this image, understandable to the broad readership that comprised his mass audience; the montage vehemently asserts its rupture, the scissors declare their ability to maim. This visible process of making foregrounds violence, not simply because Heartfield's act of beheading literally does so but also because the semantics of rips, fissures, gaps, hastily cut-and-pasted passages convey a rhetoric of savagery, issuing a disturbing psychic charge. This self-portrait exults in the materiality of its production, asserting its handmadeness, intervening in the impersonality of photographic reproduction and mass circulation on which it relies.

As other writers have noted, both the manufacture and the consumption of photomontage involve a degree of violence. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1935 that Dada montage "hit the spectator like a missile," forcefully intervening in the beholder's consciousness.¹⁸ Brigid Doherty has demonstrated how the disjunctive form and aggressive content of Dada montage embodied the alienating experience of modern industrial life and war trauma, using the phrase "montage as violent vivisection" to describe works of Berlin Dada.¹⁹ Maud Lavin, to mention a third case, remarks on the disruptive and violent effects of Hannah Höch's photomontage, noting the allusive readings and aggressive

party and the communist Left now and again. Grosz refused to accede to party expectations: "I don't consider it necessary to satisfy the demands of a 'hurrah Bolshevism'" (129).

16. See Krejsa, "Wo ist John Heartfield?" and Kriebel, "Revolutionary Beauty," chap. 1.

17. Both Rosenhaft (*Beating the Fascists?*) and Weitz (*Creating German Communism*) detail post-1929 KPD violence.

18. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," second version, rpt. in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 119.

19. Brigid Doherty, "Figures of Pseudorevolution," *October*, no. 84 (1998): 75. Doherty's argument about shock and montage was first articulated in "Berlin Dada: Montage and the Embodiment of Modernity, 1916–1920" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996); and was further developed in "See? We Are All Neurasthenics! or, The Trauma of Dada Montage," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1997): 82–132.

responses they solicit from their beholder.²⁰ These and other interpretations correlate the disruptive experiences of modernity—rationalized production, capitalist phantasmagoria, technologized warfare, destabilized gender roles—with the assaults of photomontage.

Moreover, these pictorial ruptures make evident that human hands have constructed the image, insisting on the artifice of assemblage and the infiltration of the symbolic order, denying the photographic rhetoric of unmediated access to the material world. As Rosalind Krauss writes, “It is spacing that makes it clear—as it was to Heartfield, Tretyakov, Brecht, Aragon—that we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign.” The experience of spacing and gaps is powerful in Dada montage, Krauss notes, thereby denying the image the illusion of “presence,” or simultaneity, or “the seamless integrity of the real,” which are photography’s most persuasive effects.²¹ Peter Bürger, drawing on Bertolt Brecht, argues that pictorial disjunction offers a model for politically engaged avant-garde art, provoking in the viewer an alienated and therefore critical response to the represented world, rather than summoning a false, idealized reconciliation with that world.²² For Bürger, the fragmented picture makes clear that that picture is an aesthetic artifact—subjective, partial, heterogeneous—thus destroying any sense of superordinate coherence. As a form of representation, photomontage offered a way to disassemble and reassemble the world order, making it possible to construct a new world or to issue an ideological critique by deconstructing conventional representations. As such, photomontage was considered the ideal form of Marxist critique, because juxtaposing material imprints of “the real” enabled the viewer to understand the relations between things—social relations, political relations, commodity relations.

Given the legible politics of pictorial rupture and the immediate psychological charge that violent disjunction begets, how do we interpret the aesthetic politics of Heartfield’s very next image for the *AIZ*, just five months after his 1929 self-portrait? *Wer Bürgerblätter liest wird blind und taub!* (*Whoever Reads Bourgeois Papers Becomes Blind and Deaf!*) of February 1930 is deeply invested in *concealing* all traces of manufacture (fig. 3). There are no fissures, no visible joins of material where separate parts have been fused, seemingly

20. Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 6, 32.

21. Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” in *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 107.

22. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 78.



Figure 3. John Heartfield, *Wer Bürgerblätter liest wird blind und taub!* (Whoever Reads Bourgeois Papers Becomes Blind and Deaf!) AIZ, 1930. Courtesy Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Kunstsammlung, JH-F-467, photograph by B. Kuhnert. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

a deliberate rejection of disjunctive form. In this portrait a head, mummified by newspapers, asks its viewers by way of the prose in the lower-right corner: “I am a Cabbagehead, do you know my leaves?” Though inquisitive, the man can neither see nor speak, for he is blinded and muted by the newspapers that wrap themselves over his eyes and mouth, enveloping his head. Nor can he hear, according to the boldface type beneath the image, because “whoever reads bourgeois papers becomes blind and deaf.” The bourgeois press, in this instance, refers to *Vorwärts*, the press organ of the Social Democratic Party, and *Tempo*, a mainstream socialist paper. The violence of this image operates not on the register of vicious cut-and-paste but on that of psychological

discomfort, generated by the disturbingly realistic representation of a man smothered by newspapers.

As Cabbagehead's nonseeing visage confronts the reader's scrutinizing one, the picture's seamless illusionism weaves us into its hallucinatory extension of reality. The beholding *AIZ* subject would recognize the beheld as distinctly other; between the papers he reads and the uniform he wears—purportedly the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, though probably laborer's attire—Cabbagehead is coded as socialist, the communist adversary. The verbal-visual pun of the picture turns on the word *Blätter*, which means both newspapers and (cabbage) leaves, transforming a nationalist Prussian song, "Ich bin ein Preuße, kennt ihr meine Farben?" ("I am Prussian, do you know my colors?"), into an indictment of the socialist picture press.²³ I take the awkward space of prose in the lower right, where text competes with material texture, hindering the move from signifier to signified, as a sign of both the limits and the ambition of creating a seamless visual field. Language wants not to intrude on the senses but to effect a visual continuity between text and photograph.

The purpose of this apparition is to provide its audience with a persuasive cautionary tale—to read the socialist press is to tempt political blindness, to read the *AIZ*, whose pages sandwich Cabbagehead between them, is to open our eyes and ears to political reality, free our mouths to speak. The photomontage thematizes the ideological subjectivity produced by the press, through an implicit dialectic between the suffocating mental imprisonment of socialist illustrated newspapers and the empowering *AIZ*. The montage seeks to produce a new communist subject, one who will participate in unraveling meaning, who is the antithesis of the passive socialist Cabbagehead. Heartfield's visually welded photomontage solicits absorption, engaging the reader to immerse in the relay between image and text, explicit meaning and latent meaning, negotiating visual puns and political parody. Our seeing face confronts this sightless one, an uncanny counterportrait of ourselves, a *Doppelgänger* threatening impotence.

Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages wanted to transfix their beholders not only visually but also psychologically, to mobilize them to act. The effect of his *AIZ* photomontage is not that of a missile, felling the viewer's senses or miming the "shock" of Dada montage, but instead involves a more subtle, guileful conception: the photomontage aims to seduce, absorb, and captivate

23. While I can highlight only salient elements of the montage here, I discuss this work at length in *Revolutionary Beauty*, attending to its critical interventions in Weimar press culture, text and image debates, and postwar mourning.

the viewer with its photographic illusionism. The beholding body under attack was not that of the staid bourgeoisie but that of an *AIZ* readership to be critically provoked and engaged. We are in the territory of agitational propaganda, or agitprop, whose purpose is simultaneously to stimulate and to ideologically reeducate its viewers.

In his *AIZ* work Heartfield sought to eliminate traces of making, flattening any visible seams by pressing and reworking the montages between glass plates.²⁴ The montages were then retouched (often the hand of Willi Wolfgram) to heighten tonal contrasts and smooth transitions, creating the illusion of a continuous reality—of the “seamless integrity of the real,” to borrow Krauss’s evocative phraseology.²⁵ That seamless illusionism was augmented by the process of production and reproduction, which involved rephotographing the preparatory artwork and replicating it through the copperplate photogravure process in which most *Illustrierten* were printed. The result was a montage characterized by continuity of surface, bound into (and thus integral to) a mass-circulation journal, in critical dialogue with the photo-reportages that preceded and followed it—occasionally in content but primarily through imitating their matter, their medium, their form. Heartfield’s process was painstaking and often obsessive; he pushed his retoucher and photographers to the breaking point. One of his collaborators later said, “He strove for nuances which I could no longer even perceive.”²⁶ Heartfield attended minutely to the precision of visual information, fine-tuning his photomontages’ effects as objects of reproduction and mass circulation; he was known to insist on making photographs of real things rather than uncomplicated substitutes, using live frogs, dead doves, pregnant proletarians, and pungent mustard to make his photographic illusions as convincing as possible. In addition to its integrity, this practice anticipated an intelligent viewer of images, one neither satisfied nor convinced by proxies. Heartfield aimed to lend his photomontages import through that dimension of veracity, asserting their contiguity with the world

24. Heartfield’s experiments with seamless, narrative form began with his book jackets for marketing purposes, according to his brother Wieland Herzfelde, and extended to some of his late-1920s posters as well, but it was in his *AIZ* work that he explored its techniques and effects extensively. Heartfield’s process is discussed in detail by Eckhard Siepmann, “Johnny montiert,” in *Montage: John Heartfield, vom Club Dada zur Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung*, ed. Eckhard Siepmann (West Berlin: Elefant, 1977), 190–92; and David Evans, *John Heartfield, AIZ/VI, 1930–1938* (New York: Kent Fine Art, 1991), 23.

25. Krauss, “Photographic Conditions,” 107.

26. János Reismann [Wolf Reiss], “Als ich mit John Heartfield arbeitete,” rpt. in März, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit*, 188–91, excerpted and translated in Peter Pachnicke, *John Heartfield* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 114.

beyond the image and disallowing them to fall into the category of a mere joke, as Georg Lukács so famously asserted about photomontage.²⁷ These montages wanted to reverberate beyond their wit, luring the beholder through their visual and entertainment value but resonating with their trenchant insight. Heartfield insisted on a convincing illusionism and a virtually seamless bonding of separate pieces to suture together an alternative visual world, repressing the construction of the image to heighten the sensation of looking at an organic totality.

Yet, in theoretical terms, organic illusionism has been associated with auratic bourgeois representation, harmonious dreamworlds, and fascist aesthetics—not radical Left critique. It was precisely Heartfield's pictorial (some have even argued “painterly”) organicism that prompted criticism from his Soviet peers—Gustavs Klucis most vocally—who asserted that Heartfield's emphasis on illusionistic space and visual narrative allied itself with traditional, bourgeois figurative easel painting and was therefore retrograde, not revolutionary.²⁸ Benjamin considered unified organic completeness, as Russell Berman concisely phrases it, “a deception that imposes enervated passivity on the recipient”—a passivity that Benjamin linked to fascist aesthetics.²⁹ While Benjamin's theoretical construct has since been energetically countered by scholars of Italian fascism, Nazi photomontage aesthetics, from Herbert Bayer's 1936 Olympics brochures to Egon Eiermann's 1937 monumental exhibition montages in “Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit!” (“Give Me Four Years!”), certainly conjured a holistic, heroic totality, using montage's dislocations to emphasize continuity between part and whole, *Führer* and *Volk*, subordinating the beholder to its awe-inspiring spectacle.³⁰ In late Weimar

27. Georg Lukács's comments about photomontage are reprinted in Fredric Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1990), 43.

28. Evans, *John Heartfield*, 35. On seamless, utopian montage in Soviet art, see K. Michael Hays, “Photomontage and Its Audiences: El Lissitzky Meets Berlin Dada,” in *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910–1930*, ed. Gail H. Roman and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992), 169–95.

29. Russell Berman, “The Aestheticization of Politics: Walter Benjamin on Fascism and the Avant-garde,” in *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 38. See also Benjamin, “Work of Art”; and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977).

30. On Italian fascist aesthetics, see Mark Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” *Art Bulletin* 84 (2002): 148–69; Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). The literature on Nazi photomontage is more sparse, often treated as a minor subset of photography. See Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Faktography,” *October*, no. 30 (1984): 82–119; Rudolf Herz, *Hoffmann und Hitler: Fotografie als Medium des Führer Mythos* (Munich: Klinkhardt and

Republic advertising literature, by contrast, neither passivity nor awe was ascribed to organic continuity in photomontage, but calm and pleasure, inducing commodity desire; this was conceived in contrast to the “feelings of aversion” evoked by the multiperspectival photomontages used in early 1920s advertising graphics, inspired by Dada montage.³¹

Although Heartfield was instrumental in developing that very Dada montage, reveling in a pictorial field that conjures a heterogeneous, fragmented reality, he elected to move away from this assertively disjunctive syntax to a seamless fictional world.³² If we extended the line of reasoning that correlates heterogeneous photomontage with the disjunctions of modernity, then of which modern phenomenon is suture the symptom? If rupture suggests a trauma—to the spectator, to the represented body, to the body politic—what does its suppression, its suture, suggest? We have not entirely grasped the metaphorical operations of photomontage—that “symbolic form” or “paradigm” of the modern³³—until we have understood the role of suture, and its suppression of pictorial rupture, in Heartfield’s work. Although several writers have noted Heartfield’s “artificially constructed homogeneity,” as one recently termed it, there has yet to be a sustained account of what is essentially a purposeful, and presumably politically motivated, rejection of Dada montage—one that goes beyond variations of the orthodox line that Dada was a bourgeois, anarchist phase that the mature Heartfield left behind to properly serve the revolution.³⁴ Given the

Biermann, 1994); Berthold Hinz, ed., *Die Dekoration der Gewalt: Kunst und Medien im Faschismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Anabas, 1979); Kriebel, “Photomontage in the Year 1932”; Rolf Sachsse, *Die Erziehung zum Wegsehen: Fotografie im NS-Staat* (Dresden: Philo Fine Arts, 2003); and Peter Zimmermann, “Zu Einflüssen des Bauhauses auf die Bildpropaganda der Nationalsozialisten,” *Bildende Kunst* 8 (1989): 39–41.

31. See, e.g., Bert Ert, “Reklame durch Fotos,” *Seidels Reklame*, July 1928, 275; Walter F. Schubert, “René Ahrlé,” *Die Reklame*, July 1929, 500–505; and Carl F. Ronsdorf, “Die Photographie in der technischen Werbung,” *Die Reklame*, February 1932, 105–7.

32. Importantly, the aesthetics of rupture did not immediately disappear from Heartfield’s repertoire. In 1930–31 Heartfield grappled with the idiom of Dada and its pictorial and political implications, for it offered a language of instability and disruption with which to malign the socialist order. “Vandervelde or the Absolute Lack of Shame,” *AIZ*, 9, no. 22, 1930, pillories the socialist system by way of an information overload to indict the violent conflicts in socialist-run countries and to perturb the viewer, while “One Must Have a Special Disposition to Suicide . . .,” *AIZ*, 10, no. 13, 1931, illustrates socialist violence and deceptions through visual disorder.

33. Klaus Honnert, “Die Montage als ästhetisches Prinzip und als Modell der Alltagserfahrung,” in *Montage als Kunstprinzip*, ed. Hilmar Frank (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1991), 17; Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff, *Technik und Tendenz der Montage in der bildenden Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Lahn-Giessen: Anabas, 1978), 7–31; Matthew Teitelbaum, ed., *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 22.

34. Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Anti-modernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 171.

copious attention to the tactics of Dada montage in the last several years, the question of Heartfield's subsequent rejection of rupture and embrace of sutured illusionism strikes me as particularly vital, offering new insights into the modalities of this paradigmatic modern form, into leftist strategies of critical-mass mobilization, and as a model of ideological critique.³⁵

Here I wish to pursue a particular aspect of this larger inquiry, one that suggests that a leftist political critique, in Heartfield's case, resides in pictorial seamlessness, or suture. Heartfield's *AIZ* works, I argue, offer a radical Left critique of the mass-circulated photograph and its production of political consciousness by internalizing and miming its very means through photomontage. Through that mimicry—which Heartfield exceeds in the form of parody and caricature—these works critically intervene in an illusionistically reproduced reality through the device of *suture*.³⁶ In using that term to discuss Heartfield's *AIZ* work, I resort to medical terminology—mending a rupture—but I also mean to invoke its use in film theory, attending to how the assembly of image material activates the beholder as psychological and ideological subject.³⁷ In film theory, suture is used to theorize how the construction of various shot-to-shot relationships bind or weave the viewing subject into the film. Generally speaking, the term pertains to how the viewer is made unaware of the filmic experience as constructed, is enveloped into what is essentially a passive reception of fictional totality. For my purposes, the concept is useful for two reasons: first, for its treatment of the repression of the construction of images, and second, for the notion that the construction of juxtaposed images activates the viewer as an ideological subject. That is, I am using the term *suture* both as a way to describe the seamlessness of Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages and as a prompt, a conceptual spur, to interpret how

35. Although I cannot pursue this dimension here, I am aware, thanks to several queries by literary historians, of a parallel tactic of suture and viewer-reader address in 1930s–1950s avant-garde literature and theater—a trend away from overt estrangement that scholarly literature has underaddressed.

36. On mimicry and modernism, see T. J. Clark, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," *October*, no. 100 (2002): 154–74. "Modernism," Clark writes, "always existed in close, dangerous proximity to the realm of appearances it fed on. . . . Modernism's motto was the great phrase from the young Marx's critique of Hegel: Modernists believed it was necessary for any art, any Realism, to take the forms of the present deeply inside itself, at the risk of mimicry, almost ventriloquism; but that out of that might come the possibility of critique, of true destabilization—they would 'teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song'" (161).

37. For semiotic analyses of suture in cinema, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 194–236; Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)," *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977–78): 24–34; and Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

that seamlessness contributes to producing a subject in relation to a particular discourse.³⁸ Given that Heartfield manufactured his photomontages for the readership of a mass-circulation magazine and that the aim of these pictures was to provoke revolutionary consciousness through visual means, the structure of viewer address strikes me as pivotal, though it has largely been overlooked. That viewer does not belong to a uniform category, however, and part of my larger project is to analyze just what sort of viewer is projected by Heartfield's photomontages at any given time and why. Thus Heartfield's works simultaneously employ the language of sutured illusionism, binding the viewer into the image through various psychological and corporeal tactics while violating suture through cognitive disjunction, wordplay, parody, and direct address. His aim, after all, is to produce an active viewer.

While I draw on film theory, I maintain that Heartfield's sutured works are deeply embedded in the burgeoning photographic culture industry of the Weimar Republic. Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages ask their beholder to indulge in a reality that is two-dimensionally staged, on a handheld journal page. The closed visual space of the "image/screen" of illusion that Krauss posits for glossy, two-page spread, magazine photography is generally punctured in Heartfield's case by photo-reportage on the facing page.³⁹ In the instances that subtly bind readers' bodies into the work—either through an uncanny counterportrait, like *Cabbagehead*, or by images of clenched fists (fig. 4) echoed by our hands clasping the journal, transforming our act of holding into an inadvertent endorsement of communist politics—we are invited to experience a self-conscious corporeality, one either of radical difference or of politicized unity, not of submission. This scenario of active picture reading is fundamentally different from the film viewer who, seated in darkness, is absorbed into a

38. In addition, my work is an endeavor to explore the applications of suture theory for photography and its critical relation, photomontage. I am aware of a few other such attempts, such as Margaret Olin, "Gaze," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 318–29, and Rosalind Krauss's account of Irving Penn's slick double-page advertisements in "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," *October*, no. 31 (1984): 49–68. My thanks to Olin for calling my attention to this aspect of Krauss's work. But in general, photography theory has bypassed analysis of viewer identification; as Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, "Whereas film theory deploys concepts such as 'suture' to describe how the viewer is bound up and interpellated into the film, there exists no comparable formulation to account for subjective identification and projection in photography, and in any case, questions about forms of spectatorial investment in the image, either ideologically or psychically, are, as I have remarked, basically ignored" ("Ontology, Essences, and Photography's Aesthetics: Wringing the Goose's Neck One More Time," *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins [New York: Routledge, 2007], 258).

39. Krauss, "Photography and the Simulacral," 65. The rare two-page Heartfield montage is the exception that proves the rule.

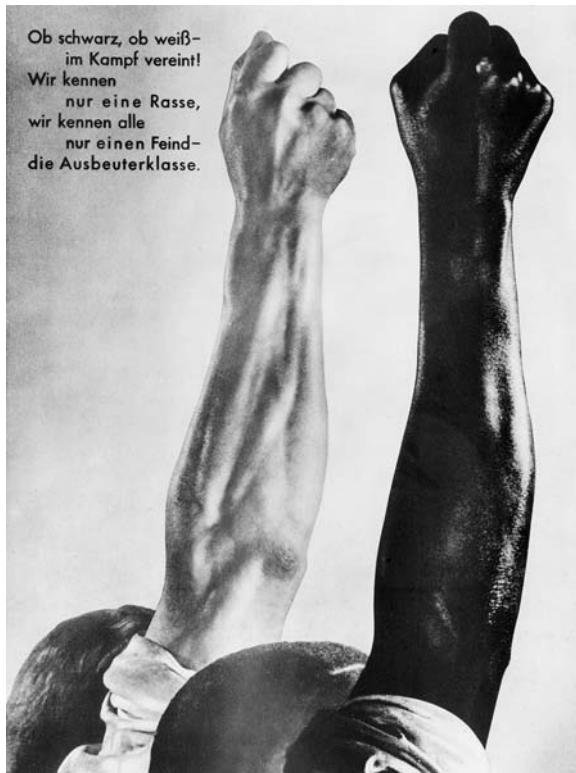


Figure 4. John Heartfield, *Ob schwarz, ob weiß* (Whether Black or White), 1931. © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

moving narrative and soundtrack. Rather, Heartfield asks his viewer to operate in the context of photographic magazines and their accompanying discourses of text and image, information and disinformation, public events and private interpretation.

Heartfield's medium—those carefully sutured cut-and-paste photographs and text subsequently rephotographed and reproduced as photogravure—intervened in a mass visual culture that hinged on the photographic image. Refinements in photogravure technology, which enabled text and image to be printed simultaneously and at high speed, spurred a new publishing industry in the 1920s that centered on the mass-replicated photograph. As a source of infor-

mation, the photograph was suddenly everywhere—in books, newspapers, campaign posters, advertisements, billboards—and a new market of *Illustrierten* emerged, including Münzenberg's *AIZ*.⁴⁰ In addition, the increased mobility and flexibility of photography, enabled by rapid developments in photographic technology in the postwar period, including the invention of the lightweight 35 mm Leica camera, of perforated film in place of ungainly light-sensitive plates, of increasingly photosensitive film and photographic paper, and of the wide-aperture lens and the flashbulb, resulted in a new and self-consciously modern photographic world. Buzzwords such as “New Seeing,” “New Vision,” “New Photography,” and the omnipresent *neue Sachlichkeit* (new sobriety) indicated a novel sense of visual purchase on the world.

To intellectuals of the time, the mass-reproduced photograph was an element of a new consciousness industry, a subjectivity specific to the postwar period. This proliferation of photographic images in the growing market of journals, photography books, and advertising produced a simmering anxiety about the import of mass-reproduced photographs. Critics spanning the spectrum from left to right remarked on photography's superficiality, its contingency, its lack of critical depth, its spiritual meaninglessness—for many, signs of bourgeois triviality and consumer capitalism. In particular, the semantic, and thus political, instability of photography caused distress. Without a contextual frame, be it pictorial accompaniment or textual explanation, a photograph is a highly unstable carrier of information, despite its claims to objective representation. Add text, or another photograph, and a picture can signify whatever the editor might like. “In this fashion,” Münzenberg frets, “a clever editor can falsify every photograph into its opposite; he can influence the politically uneducated reader in any desired direction.”⁴¹

This malleability of photographic meaning was particularly disturbing to many during the early 1930s, when the German political landscape polarized and the economic situation destabilized after the stock market crash of 1929. Photography was increasingly mobilized as political propaganda, trading

40. Establishing a market niche as the left-wing alternative to the plethora of *Illustrierten*, the *AIZ* originally evolved out of an international aid campaign, established by Münzenberg in 1921 at V. I. Lenin's behest, for the famine victims of postrevolutionary Russia. Its umbrella organization was the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH), or International Workers' Aid, of which Münzenberg became general secretary. To support the IAH, Münzenberg published the monthly journal *Sowjetrussland im Bild* (*Soviet Russia in Pictures*), which changed to *Sichel und Hammer* (*Hammer and Sickle*) in 1922. The *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* emerged out of *Sichel und Hammer* in 1924, appearing at first monthly, then biweekly, then, in 1926, weekly.

41. Willi Münzenberg, “Aufgaben und Ziele,” *Der Arbeiter Fotograf*, May 1931, 99.

on the photograph's authority to promote particular party politics. As one writer noted, "The same snapshot of a strike in *Woche* and *AIZ*, for instance—and how often does one encounter the same photos in the newspapers of different, antagonistic parties—certainly serves two very different opinions about the meaning and justification of this strike."⁴² By 1931 German democracy was under threat. The republic was virtually ruled by Chancellor Brüning's emergency decrees, the infamous Article 48, in effect putting a slow end to parliamentary democracy.⁴³ Economically, in the wake of the crash, industrial production plunged by nearly half, such that observers anticipated the disintegration of the German capitalist system.⁴⁴ A crisis was brewing, politically, economically, made manifest in soaring unemployment, bankruptcy, volatile politics, and ever-increasing street fights between communists and National Socialists.

Paradoxically, during this period of mounting crisis, Heartfield's photomontages propagate fictions of wholeness, of the world as a concrete and continuous reality. Rather than produce a holistic communist imagery of desire, however, Heartfield's images slide into the realm of the absurd, the hallucinatory and the fantastic, welding together a photographic world of psychic instability while insisting on its rootedness in contemporary journalistic discourses. His *AIZ* photomontages stage our illusory, unstable apprehension of the world by *exploiting* the discourses of illusion, by engaging in and reproducing its very terms. In manipulating the discursivity of photography as an imprint or transfer of the real—as a "photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers," to use Krauss's phrase—Heartfield provides an illusionary, seemingly transparent, relation to that world.⁴⁵ Yet he undermines that transparency, estranging us from those illusions, through irony, puns, distortion, and conceptual incongruity. Heartfield's work functions within the conventions of photographic practice while subverting them, questioning the privileged place of photography in constructing consciousness. Thus the viewer experiences a constant relay between illusion and disillusionment, myth and demystification, accompanied by a baseline of seditious laughter.

Louis Althusser's notion of the ideological imaginary—and as Kaja Silverman notes, its stress on invisibility—is most useful in getting at what I per-

42. Ernst Kállai, "Schöne Photos, billige Photos," *Die Weltbühne*, November 12, 1929, 736–38.

43. Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 193.

44. Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 251.

45. Krauss, "Photographic Conditions," 110.

ceive to be at the core of Heartfield's project.⁴⁶ In Althusser's conception, ideology is the imaginary relationship, the necessarily "distorted" relation, that human beings have to the real conditions of their existence. "What is represented in ideology," writes Althusser, "is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the relations in which they live."⁴⁷ Importantly, those "imaginary" ideological relations are not immaterial, penetrating our consciousness by virtue of the air we breathe; rather, they are propagated by material structures (Althusser's ideological state apparatuses), which include not only educational or legal systems but also communications and cultural organizations, such as the press, the cinema, and the arts. In a word, ideological (imaginary, distorted) relationships are conditioned by and through culture, and they are continually reproduced within that culture.

In Althusserian terms, Heartfield's work represents the "real" conditions of human existence—economic relations, power relations, production relations—while working within the conventions of representation in capitalist society that reinforce those "imaginary" relations, focusing on the illusionistic and ideology-reinforcing devices of photographic journalism. For instance, Heartfield's 1932 photomontage *Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses* (*The Meaning of the Hitler Salute*) mimics the tropes of photojournalistic news reporting, with captions, quotations, and "documentary" photography serving its subversive political message (fig. 5). Rather than reinforce the widely circulated press images of Adolf Hitler, arm thrust vigorously forward in a Nazi salute to millions of admiring supporters, Heartfield shows his 1930s viewer the "real" relations behind the National Socialist facade in his parodic photographic testimony. "Millions stand behind me," declares the caption—Hitler's own proclamation—while the montage reports the source of Hitler's electoral support: Hitler's hand reaches back behind his shoulder to receive the "millions" in financial aid from an oversized capitalist.

What Silverman, in her extrapolation of Althusser's claims, has claimed for cinema also applies to photojournalism, namely, that the viewer is "encouraged to establish a relationship not with the apparatuses themselves, but with their fictional representation—i.e. that the viewer's real relation to the cinema is concealed by an imaginary one."⁴⁸ That is, the consumer of press images is

46. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 123–73; Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics*, 215.

47. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 165.

48. Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics*, 216.



Figure 5. John Heartfield, *Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses* (*The Meaning of the Hitler Salute*), 1932. Courtesy Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Kunstsammlung, JH-F-647. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

asked to engage with them not as the material product of a series of choices, belief systems, and values but as a natural extension of the world “out there” presented to the viewer in unmediated fashion. We can understand the insistent seamlessness in Heartfield’s *AIZ* work—its pictorial suture—as an allusion to the illusions, asking the beholder to indulge in their fictions while undermining them through incongruity, distortion, and wordplay.

In a photomontage of 1931, a slick-haired capitalist smoothly metamorphoses into a savagely growling tiger (fig. 6). It is a demonic possession in which the primitive and the bestial supplant the human, civilized by black coat and a hallucinatory tie whose decorative pattern of dots transmogrifies into skulls and back again. Conjoining sinister head and spectral tie is a swastika



Figure 6. John Heartfield, *Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD* (*On the Occasion of the Crisis Party Conference of the SPD*), 1931. Courtesy Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Kunstsammlung, KS-FS-JH 2520, photograph by Roman März. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

pin, insinuating that capitalism, socialism, Nazism, and death are analogous, as interpenetrable as the mutating death's-heads that effortlessly blend into the necktie's fabric. The event that occasioned this nightmarish visage was the 1931 Social Democratic Party conference in Leipzig, whose objective was to come to terms with the escalating world economic crisis. Heartfield's tiger-capitalist, white teeth bared, is an astringent response to the trade unionist Fritz Tarnow's remark: "Social democracy does not want the breakdown of capitalism. Like a doctor, it wants to try to heal and improve it." Tarnow, chair

of the Woodworkers' Federation, was known for his view that since the capitalist system was not in danger of imminent collapse, unionists needed to adapt rather than reform it.⁴⁹

Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD (On the Occasion of the Crisis Party Conference of the SPD) conflates culture with nature, civilization with death. This polymorphous gestalt negotiates historical specificity—a Socialist Party congress in 1931—with semantic and psychological uncertainty, suggesting both a nightmarish future and a haunting past in the necktie's hovering skulls. This image wants to be read photographically, as if the oneiric beast were "real." Supplemental text has been carefully relegated to the frame, outside the photographic field, heightening the picture's fantastic illusionism. We are seduced into its psychic dystopia, simultaneously aware of its pictorial deceptions and momentarily asked to refuse that awareness, suspending disbelief to participate in its imaginary world, not unlike how we "accept" photographs as imprints of the real, in direct contact with reality, all the while knowing that this is not entirely the case—indulging in the "Yes, I know, *but*" of photography. Like *Cabbagehead*, 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. As Stephen Heath notes, suture is meant to sustain the spectator.⁵⁰ Works such as this one simultaneously suture, or psychologically weave, the spectator into the work and break that suture, disrupting passive absorption with the cognitive dissonance of enigma and ironic text.

The seamless transmogrifications perform transition and change in the world, suggesting a lurking presence of things beneath the surface, of one thing transmuting into another, and of the interpenetration of seemingly unrelated phenomena. That is, in addition to visual seduction, suture in this work demonstrates transition, process, and contingency. The montage stages the presence of illusion in reality, to make clear that under (photographic) surfaces lurk ideological presences. Of course, in this act of revealing ideological "truths" beneath photographic surfaces, another ideological presence reveals itself, namely, Heartfield's adherence to "social fascism."

In this work, the operations of suture, the seamless and naturalized transition of one thing into another, fuse with metamorphosis, that trope favored by the surrealists for its destabilization of signifier and signified. While the relation between communism and surrealism was notoriously vexed—indeed,

49. Evans, *John Heartfield*, 68.

50. Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, 76.

Heartfield later adopted the orthodox line that surrealism amounted to reactionary, individualist fantasies of mind rather than a politics of the working class⁵¹—during the 1930s he reconciled surrealist devices with radical politics, producing a pictorial world that united the psyche with political activism, the irrational with realism, the collective unconscious with historical consciousness. These terms also locate Heartfield's work within the contentious 1930s debates of socialist-realist art, whose advocates agreed that art should offer verisimilitude, historical transparency, and Marxist analytics, but they vehemently disagreed over the relation between individual subjectivity and the political.⁵² Heartfield's fusion of the unconscious with radical politics placed him decisively in the camp of subjectivists, winning him the adulation of Louis Aragon, ex-surrealist turned radical communist.⁵³

Yet metamorphosis as a privileged sign extended beyond the tight circle of avant-garde experiment in France, weaving its way through the interwar European imaginary. The tropes of bodily transformation or metamorphosis made regular appearances in German painting, photography, and film, suggesting that something about them captured the period mind.⁵⁴ I suspect that metamorphosis was a metaphor for the interwar era itself, a period where the transmogrification of signs and symbols textured everyday life. Its hallmarks were everywhere: in a postwar economy distressed by a roller-coaster currency, in which the denomination of paper notes increased exponentially overnight (while their value plunged); in a world economic crisis that upset the relative value of goods and services; in parties that used the same economy of signs to

51. Francis D. Klingender, interview with John Heartfield, 1944, rpt. in März, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit*, 48–64.

52. I discuss Heartfield's position in the context of debates surrounding the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress in Moscow at length in my dissertation "Revolutionary Beauty." For a thorough account of the Congress, see Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

53. Aragon broke with the surrealist movement in 1932 because he found communism and surrealism incompatible. However, after the 1934 Congress, he penned "John Heartfield et la beauté révolutionnaire," an essay published in the April 1935 edition of *Commune*. An impassioned endorsement of Heartfield's work, Aragon's essay celebrated the reconciliation between fantasy and realism that he found lacking in surrealist investigations. Heartfield's "poetry" and "imagination" were essential, not auxiliary, to the political content of his works. Fabrice Ziolkowski's English translation of Aragon's essay appears in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 60–67.

54. The postwar painterly trend of *neue Sachlichkeit* was also called "magical realism," a term intended to incorporate the irrational and subjective. Many of these representations toyed with the transformative, the unreadable, and the enigmatic in a pictorial language of stark restraint. See Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus, magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925), which grapples with understanding this new tendency.

convince and propagate their views no matter where they stood on the continuum from left to right;⁵⁵ in gender relations, where “new” women looked like men.⁵⁶ So acute was this anxiety about signification that the ensuing National Socialist regime sought to rectify this semantic instability with dogmatic intransigence.

In *Deutsche Naturgeschichte—Metamorphose* (German Natural History—Metamorphosis) of August 16, 1934 (fig. 7), Heartfield again recruits the language of metamorphosis, in this instance to deconstruct (rather than reconstruct) political transformation. The fantastic tiger fed by socialist doctors and communist distortions in 1931 had transformed into fascist reality by 1934, and Heartfield had since fled Berlin for Prague. In contrast to the tiger-capitalist, where hallucinatory reality is conjured in eliminating text from the visual field, *German Natural History* asserts itself as constructed, the explanatory text imitating the authoritative tone of a picture encyclopedia while its assertions are verified by photographic “proof.” In the photomontage Friedrich Ebert, president of the Weimar Republic from 1919 to 1925, whose head has been seamlessly fused with the body of a caterpillar, steadily ascends the bare base of an oak branch, a traditional symbol of Germany. Jaw firmly set, Ebert fixes the viewer of the picture with a steady gaze. Paul von Hindenburg, German president from 1925 to 1934, hangs as a cocoon from the fragile branch like a pathetic sack, looking down morosely at three worm-eaten oak leaves. The delicate silk threads that keep Hindenburg hanging on to the German oak call to mind the strings of a marionette, suggesting his role as a political puppet. Freeing himself from the oak branch, freshly liberated wings stretched wide, staring fixedly into the distance, into the future, is Hitler himself, in the form of a *Totenkopffalter*, a death’s-head moth. Between Hitler’s head and torso, where Heartfield’s snarling tiger-fascist sported a symbolic tiepin, a phantom death’s-head hovers, the *Totenkopf* that gives the moth its name. On the death of Hindenburg, two weeks previous, Hitler had declared himself Germany’s *Führer*—the event to which this photomontage responds.

In this image Heartfield characterizes the development of the German nation as the life cycle of a caterpillar to cocoon to moth—from Ebert’s socialism to Hindenburg’s (dormant) military conservatism to Hitler’s National Socialism, fused with death. The montage is an indictment of capitalism,

55. Heartfield’s April 19, 1934, photomontage *Mimikry* prods at this phenomenon: Goebbels affixes Marx’s beard to Hitler’s face. See Evans, *John Heartfield*, 206–7.

56. For a discussion of androgyny in the Weimar Republic, see Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*.

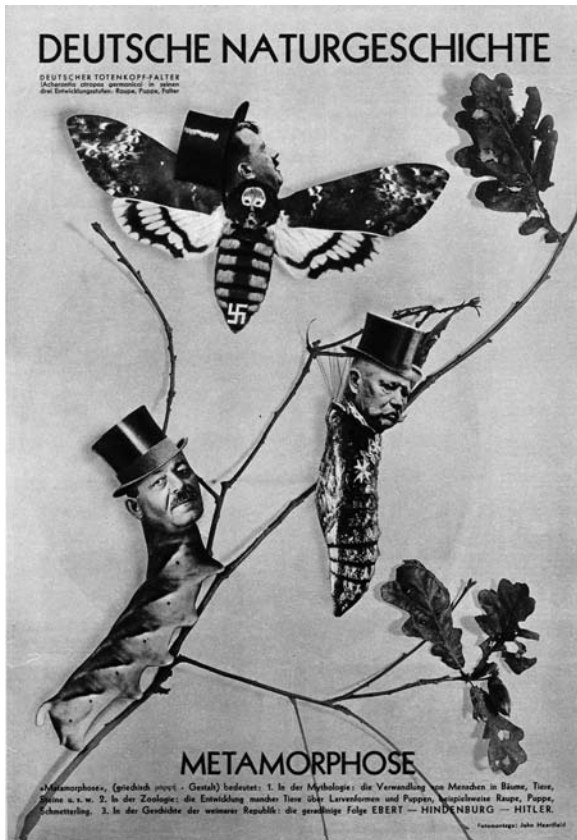


Figure 7. John Heartfield, *Deutsche Naturgeschichte—Metamorphose* (*German Natural History—Metamorphosis*), 1934. © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

predicated on a brand of Marxist historical determinism, which sees the inevitable development of capitalism to expansionist imperialism to war—from bourgeois top hats to military mummies to death’s-head moths. Thus Hitler flies free, elsewhere, swastika displayed brazenly on his backside, to engage in the (deadly) imperialist expansionist politics that Marxist theory sees as the inevitable outcome of capitalist overproduction. Heartfield uses natural history to offer an allegory of political history, not as “myth” but as

some sort of immanent truth.⁵⁷ Heartfield's curious insistence on projecting the shadows of branches, leaves, and insects onto their indeterminate background asserts that this constructed nature belongs to the real world of things, not imaginings, for specters cast no shadows.

In this montage, a natural form of a death's-head moth transmutes into an ominous sign, providing the viewer with meaning in already existing forms. According to Hal Foster, natural mimicry fascinated the surrealists, because it confused the boundary between natural form and cultural symbol, engendering a psychic transformation of the visual world.⁵⁸ Initially, it would seem that Heartfield is less interested in destabilizing the visual world in this image than in providing insight into German political events through a communist lens, using signs in the natural world and the parodic language of caricature to do so. Yet the *Totenkopffalter* is where Heartfield's (ambivalent) affiliation with the surrealists evidences itself. For here, in this photographic capture of a natural phenomenon, Heartfield delights in mimicry and dissimulation, visual enchantment and natural enigma, asking his viewers to do the same. While the pictorial suture produces the illusion of historical and natural continuity, its psychological suture anticipates the seditious pleasure taken in cognitive disruptions, here engineered by parodic doubling and wordplay. While we are seduced and entertained by the pleasures of mimicry, metamorphosis, and allegory, Heartfield insists that the play between truth and hallucination, nature and history, remains in the service of heightened political consciousness.

I understand metamorphosis as a figuration of suture in Heartfield's work, thematizing the seamless transition of one thing into another while tantalizing us with its multivalence. I also understand metamorphosis as related to Heartfield's other devices of caricature—hybridization, anthropomorphism, and metaphors of scale, to cite David Evans's enumeration⁵⁹—in that all of them represent an exaggeration or transformation of the visual world, be it comic, grotesque, disturbing, to subvert reality. Importantly, their valence relies on the supposed truth value of the photographic medium, its causal relation to the phenomenal world, at the same time that their wit is dependent on Heartfield's transformation of that world. While metamorphosis and caricature are in different (though arguably related) rhetorical figurations, in Heartfield's case they are part of an artillery of change.

57. For an interpretation of allegory and Heartfield's "Metamorphosis" photomontage, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 60–62.

58. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 23.

59. Evans, *John Heartfield*, 15–18.



Figure 8. John Heartfield, *Das ist das Heil, das sie bringen!* (*This Is the Salvation They Bring!*), 1938. © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

While the seamlessness of *German Natural History* naturalizes political transformation, the fictional continuity of *Das ist das Heil, das sie bringen!* (*This Is the Salvation That They Bring!*) of June 29, 1938 (fig. 8), elucidates change by making manifest two phenomena simultaneously. Heartfield has used photographs of airplane stunts to metamorphose into skeletal hands and back again, revealing the militaristic underpinnings of seemingly innocuous aerial acrobatics—the sort one might go see on a Sunday afternoon for entertainment. The exhaust that would normally dematerialize into thin air

rematerializes as a nightmarish prophecy of death. Like most of his works, the photomontage is a response to a specific incident, namely, an article in the Nazi journal *Archiv für Biologie und Rassenforschung*, which justified the aerial bombing of Spanish cities because they were largely inhabited by the *Lumpenproletariat*, whose deaths, as the Nazi logic went, would only secure the purity of the superior race. The work plays on the Nazi greeting "Heil Hitler!" and the irony that the word *Heil* means healing or salvation while the Nazis bring about mass extinction. Implicit in the photomontage is that communism would provide the antidote, the "salvation," to fascist-capitalist militarism.

In its haunting representation of a death's claw, the photomontage, like many in Heartfield's oeuvre, plays on the traumatic memory of World War I. The public discourse (as opposed to private mourning) surrounding the legacy of World War I began only around 1930, largely provoked by the publication of Erich Maria Remarque's controversial best seller *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1929 and the release of the film adaptation in 1930.⁶⁰ A flood of war literature, film, and imagery inundated the market, a symptom of the widespread need to grapple with the memory and horror of the war. Embedded historically and art-historically in a discursive context of anxiety, the irrational, and the surreal, Heartfield's work recruits a common form of psychic experience of the post-World War I epoch to influence the viewer psychologically and politically, enlisting mass anxiety for the communist cause. While the origins of that anxiety reside in war trauma, the fear of the uncontrollable and the invisible manifested itself in responses to many aspects of public life in the 1920s and 1930s, from volatile economic forces to violent and radical politics. Eric Leed has suggested that economic conditions in the aftermath of the October 1929 stock market crash precipitated mass mourning and "closed the gap between civilian and ex-soldier," noting that "the population as a whole was victimized, reduced to a level of abjectness and dependence."⁶¹ Following Leed, I argue that Heartfield's works mobilize past and present, remembered horrors and contemporary events, so as to summon not only the traumatized war veteran but also the average citizen who sees himself or herself at the mercy of rationalized technology and unseen, opaque, economic and political forces. To propose, as I do, that Heartfield mobilizes the traumatic memory of

60. See Modris Eksteins's fascinating discussion of Remarque, his book, and its public reception in the context of delayed public memory and mourning in *Rites of Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 275–99. See also Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

61. Leed, *No Man's Land*, 192.

the war is to read his images as his viewers might; his imagined audience suggests itself through the pictures themselves.⁶²

Temporally speaking, the vacillation between history and the present, past and future, is uncertain in many of Heartfield's montages. Although the images are firmly anchored in a particular, present moment, responding to a specific event (a party congress, a journal article, a speech, etc.), circulating in mundane daily life as an AIZ issue with a number, a date, a page, they also gesture backward while looking forward, such that the viewer is not quite certain if what is represented is a tragic history or an impending future. These complex temporal structures draw on a socially traumatic memory to point to the future, suggesting not transcendence but a potential duration of desolation in fascism. Paul de Man articulates this subtle temporal relationship in the context of Romantic poetry, noting that "the power to anticipate is so closely connected with the power to remember that it is almost impossible to distinguish them from each other."⁶³

In Heartfield's photomontages, stable meaning blends with deferred meaning, mixing alchemically with the photograph's temporal instability—what Roland Barthes calls its "madness." Rather than offer us a firm hold on the universe, the photograph is a "temporal hallucination," Barthes writes, in that the object captured in a photo "is not there" (it is just a photochemical trace) at the same time that "it has indeed been." Thus "this is"—asserted by the photograph's physical presence—conflicts with "this is no longer," making clear the fact of passing time, bringing the dead to life, history to the present, and anticipating further annihilation.⁶⁴ As visual documentation collides with the rhetoric of vulnerability and loss, markers of the past combine with the present and an impending future to issue an eerie warning.

In the last three Heartfield works I have discussed, visual seamlessness cedes to an optics of transition, of metamorphosis, of temporal change, rooted in the discourses and anxieties of 1930s Europe. Heartfield's interest in the ambivalence of metamorphosis is ultimately that of an allegorist deploying

62. While these pictorial expressions of anxiety are historically contingent, they are also subjectively informed, for Heartfield himself was drafted into military service and provoked a medical discharge through a convincing simulation of nervous illness. Heartfield's simulation was as much a symptom of the social awareness of neurosis as it was an act of self-preservation. See Wieland Herzfelde, *John Heartfield: Leben und Werk* (West Berlin: Verlag das Europäische Buch, 1986), 18.

63. Paul de Man, "Time and History in Wordsworth," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar of 1967 and Other Papers*, ed. E. S. Burt et al. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 83.

64. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 115, 97.

multilayered and unstable meaning as an effective and compelling didactic tool. Metamorphosis as a trope offers a model of temporal duration, of transience, a visually and psychologically disturbing form with which to resist the photograph's illusory truth status. This ideological critique in a culture inundated with mass-reproduced photographs coupled hallucinatory visions with the supposedly documentary truth value of the photograph, demanding that we resist the visual rhetoric of witnessing to engage with a discourse of deception, doubleness, and ambiguity.

Heartfield's so-called negative imagery—one based on anxiety, ambiguity, and counterexample—resists the “communion, adhesion, identification” that Régine Robin identifies with socialist realism.⁶⁵ This is manifest in the way that his *AIZ* images provide a seamless representation of reality to solicit psychological suture, only to locate the viewer in a dystopic, alienating, and radically mutable world. The social imaginary presented by Heartfield's photomontages cannot conceive of harmonic communion, perhaps because that communion would be at the expense of the individual irrational idiosyncratic subject. (Indeed, irrationality has no place in easy harmonic visions.) Heartfield's work is insistently confrontational, always assessing, countering, dissociating the viewing subject from the represented world. Not only does Heartfield's work allow for, but it actively enlists, the irrational viewing subject in addition to the analytic, critical one who can interpret (and derive pleasure from) puns, ambiguity, allegory.

In this way Heartfield's imagery offers a deeply understood position about a nonauthoritarian, heterogeneous leftism—one that insists that the viewing subject is always already in a critical relationship with the visible world. As Robin notes, the values of “communion, adhesion, identification . . . [make] it possible to stir up crowds,” but they are left with “no tools for analyzing the social world, the tensions that come to light in it, or any possible or imaginable solutions.”⁶⁶ Heartfield's project, which simultaneously indulges in and resists the operations of the photographic mass media, offers the viewer a set of critical tools with which to assess them. But rather than suggest that the world is essentially transparent, as socialist-realist theoreticians would like, Heartfield shows that our understanding of that world will remain partial and ambivalent, contingent on those very values propagated by mechanically reproduced photographs and text—that is, our relationship to the conditions of existence remains imaginary and distorted as often as it is illuminated by

65. Robin, *Socialist Realism*, xxxvi.

66. *Ibid.*



Figure 9. John Heartfield, *Zur Intervention des Dritten Reichs* (*On the Occasion of the Intervention of the Third Reich*), 1934. © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

insight, because we cannot transcend our creaturely existence as ideological subjects. To some degree or another, we are all Cabbageheads.

In a photomontage of May 3, 1934, something insidious eats away at the pictures (fig. 9). A corrosive presence transgresses their frames, disintegrates their matting, threatens to dissolve the photographic caricatures on the page. Rough bricks emerge in their stead, their lumpen, abrasive texture a gritty contrast to the smooth, civilized surfaces of the picture planes, thus staging, in insistently material terms, the unlikely encounter between a prison and a

picture gallery. Iron-barred windows hold wake over the bloodied corpse at the base of the picture, as we work to decipher the stakes of this improbable juxtaposition. The white headline orients us historically, telling us what and where, if not entirely why: "On the occasion of the intervention of the Third Reich against the International Caricature Exhibition at the Mánes Art Association in Prague." At the bottom of the photomontage, a seeming contradiction: "The more pictures they remove, the more visible becomes reality!" At play here is the familiar Heartfieldian dialectic between insight and occlusion, optical parable and linguistic paradox. This photomontage was Heartfield's rejoinder to an international diplomatic scandal provoked by his anti-Nazi montages.

The episode culminated in the widely publicized removal, under police surveillance, of five Heartfield works (and two by another artist) from the International Caricature Exhibition in Prague in the spring of 1934. The provocations of Heartfield's work ignited what *Die neue Weltbühne* (as the exiled Left-liberal *Die Weltbühne* was renamed) called "the first diplomatic incident between the new Germany and Czechoslovakia."⁶⁷ A week after the exhibit opened in April 1934, the German envoy to Prague, Walter Koch, dispatched an official protest to the Czech Foreign Office over what he considered defamations of Hitler, other German statesmen, and German political symbols in a well-trafficked area in the middle of Prague. Koch requested that the Czech Foreign Office remove the offending images immediately.

The response of Czech foreign minister Kamil Krofta banked on the sanctity of the artistic realm, insisting that he could not intervene in matters of art. But for purposes of diplomatic cooperation, Krofta asked the exhibitors to remove Heartfield's *Adolf the Übermensch*—not entirely from the exhibition but from the display window visible from the street. The montage was replaced by caricatures of Stalin, the Austrian chancellor Dollfuß, and Czech politicians. To journalists at the time, it appeared that, at least for a moment, Czech democracy had triumphed over Nazi dictatorship.

A second German diplomatic note soon followed, however, intensifying pressure on the Czech government. Krofta, again attempting to uphold democratic process, proposed to the show's organizers that they might, "of their own free will," remove the offending images from the exhibition.⁶⁸ They refused. Yet they did transfer all caricatures from the display window into the galleries to circumvent further diplomatic intervention. In response, the public flocked to the show in record numbers, often exceeding three thousand visitors daily.

67. "Deutschland zensiert Europa," *Die neue Weltbühne* (Prague and Zürich), April 26, 1934, 17.

68. *Prager Tagblatt*, April 15, 1934, rpt. in März, *Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit*, 337.

As press accounts noted, Heartfield's montages were the center of attention. Yet, despite mass turnout and internal political opposition, Nazi pressure eroded Czech resistance, such that on April 17 the Prague police president signed an official order to withdraw seven caricatures from the exhibition. Police reinforcements arrived an hour after the announcement to ensure that the caricatures were promptly withdrawn.

Note that the agent of removal in this photomontage is twofold—there are two operations of “taking away” made visible for us. The first is effected through a direct act of elimination. We are to understand that a human hand, a body of authority, has reached out to remove the framed image, leaving a handwritten sign to stand in for what has been evacuated: “Withdrawn due to the objection of the German embassy.” The hand-scripted text thus becomes an indexical presence—the trace of physical intervention—for that which is absent, declaring its having-been-taken-away.

While pictures in Heartfield's photomontage disappear by act of a human hand, an invisible corrosive agent also dissolves them, replacing the immediacy of having-been-withdrawn with a dissolution of uncertain duration. This second means of removal suggests an insidious presence, not a palpable material agent—such as a hand, a policeman—but a pervasively immaterial one. Only its effects are visible. The elusive alchemical presence leaves no handwritten indexical sign, no material trace, of what was.

What is rendered visible, however, is the transition from one state to another, elucidating the process of change from pictures to prison wall. By making manifest the effects of an imperceptible annihilation—the gradual passage from one thing to another—Heartfield makes concrete the invisible effects of ideology. For it is the unseeable ideology of National Socialism that eats away at the pictures, transgressing borders, liberties, art, spirit, dissolving artistic freedom and replacing it with human restriction and surveillance. In contrast to censorship through excision, which leaves an eloquent void and a handwritten sign in its place, fascist ideology dematerializes the pictures as if they had never existed, suggesting the forces of complicity, the slow erosion of democratic resistance through intimidation and adaptation. Ideology is, in essence, intangible, but corrosion offers one way to name its effects. Police intervention is, of course, another.

As something that slowly permeates and disintegrates existing structures, fascist ideology is figured here as something distressing that continues to grow, advance, and eat away, troubling the minds of viewers. Its deeds are of uncertain duration—does it corrode slowly, imperceptibly, or does it disintegrate rapidly, efficiently deleting matter from existence? Uncertainty generates

an unease, one that accompanies transition; it is the anxiety that escorts instability and change. Heartfield's *AIZ* audience in Prague, now reduced to a print run of twelve thousand, was composed in large part of an audience displaced for an uncertain period of time, on a continent strained by political tension, increasingly threatened by totalitarian regimes, be it Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy—and, much as communists preferred to repress it at this moment, Soviet Russia. Heartfield's montage is designed to resonate in a climate of psychic unease, both explaining the present and warning of an impending future.

In its dual representation, the image thus stages censorship as both material and immaterial, the product of visible state authority and invisible ideological forces. Together, they form an optical parable about repressive control, beginning with the censorship of human production and ending with its radical termination—death—emblemized by the bloodied corpse at the base of the montage. That the dead form overlaps, and thus seems to supersede, the photomontages makes the picture's warning all the more ominous.

In a satisfying semiotic twist, this photomontage about suppressing representation also performs the two processes of manufacture used by Heartfield to lay bare what censorship obstructs. The image can be read on two levels, allegorizing photomontage while producing its destruction. Photomontage, in Heartfield's hands, is both an art of excision and substitution as well as an imagery of seamless transition and invisible transformation. It is an art of rupture that reveals by taking away, that adds and recombines to clarify relationships. Photomontage is also an art of concealing and carefully suturing transmutations to elucidate change. These works critically engage with the photograph's duality, as something at once hallucinatory and yet grounded in some sort of empirical reality, and in contending with these terms, we are forced to engage with, interpret, and disentangle the dialectics of illusion and disillusion, lies and truth telling, that are at the heart of Heartfield's project of leftist enlightenment.