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Photomontage:
Between Fragmentation and Reconstruction of Experience

Abstract:

In the twentieth century, due to the development of mechanical reproduction and press, photomontage became a popular means of communication – popular and diverse in its nature and methods of exploitation (considering press in Germany or in the Soviet Union and individual works of art). It is one of the cultural phenomena related to the change of rhythm of life and a sense of its increased pace, and an impression of fragmentation of reality. This article questions the role of photomontage in such an experience. The said role is complex: sometimes photomontage allows for expression of that experience, and sometimes it is meant to evoke it, in the spirit of modernity; it is both a tool of agitation and critique. In order to answer this question I shall assume the approach of Walter Benjamin, who diagnoses the crisis of experience and the loss of storytelling skills – and describes the potential of photography. This potential is differently approached by artists and scholars who point out contradictory purposes and results of using photomontage. Referring to various works of art shall make it possible to define the tensions characteristic of photomontage. Due to its plasticity and the ambiguity of a photograph, and the potential for (de)contextualization and (de)construction, photomontage can function in a hard to understand, rapidly changing world and address the fragmentation of experience.

Keywords:

photomontage, photography, fragmentation, reconstruction, content of experience

As a twentieth century culture phenomenon, photomontage is an expression of social and economic changes; an articulation of the new experience resulting from urban development, mass media, technological reproduction and rationalization of various areas of life in the fashion of an assembly line.[1] It serves as a carrier of quick, precise, efficient and mass communication. It is used in entertainment, advertising or campaign posters, and it is a part of the press industry. Photographs on their own are subject to manipulation. The presence of their silent, assumed objectivity, is picked up and defined in accordance with a given idea as part of the added narration. Yet photomontage, cutting out fragments from newspapers and arranging them together, emerges as a creative and critical strategy. It expresses the need to create new art, free from the order of representation and academic norms like in the case of collage, and yet it functions as a coping mechanism in the face of hermeneutical crisis – the crisis of experience, as Walter Benjamin would say. The aim of this study – an analysis of different forms of photomontage – is to answer the question about its role in experiencing the fragmentation of reality.

Photomontage is a complex cultural phenomenon and its role in experiencing the fragmentation is ambiguous. In order to provide a broader and more detailed description of this phenomenon I shall refer to works of various artists and scholars. My guide is Walter Benjamin: with his category of crisis of experience, contemplations of the loss of storytelling skills, and the subject of the potential of photography. This potential is differently approached by artists and scholars who point out contradictory purposes and results of using photomontage. In the first part of my article, I complement this perspective with Ricoeur's thoughts on the synthetical function of intrigue in a narrative in order to describe the model of experience of reading a book. Which, in turn, allows me to better define the particular character of storytelling skills. I shall also refer to Peter Bürger's concept of the organic work of art. It is an important point of reference for the problematization of photomontage as a means of (de)construction of content based on removal from the context; problematizing the photographed objects and thus making them more available, and so forth. I shall present various examples of using photomontage in the works of, among others, Hannah Höch, Kazimierz Podsadecki, Gustav Klutsis, and Debora Vogel's literary montage, to extract the characteristic of these works. Photomontage can also be an expression of the disintegration of experience, a means of communication conveying the spirit of modernity, an element of entertainment and sensation, or a tool for creating persuasive, critical or agitational content. In the further part of this article I shall focus on photomontage as a tool of thinking which allows for creation of content against the existing categorization, both in reference to history (in case of Aby Warburg – to history of art) and to current events and the existing sociopolitical discourse (as in the case of Bertolt Brecht's journals). I shall be referring to analyses and conclusions of Georges Didi-Huberman. Photomontage turns out to be not only a tool for fragmentation, but also a way of coping with the sense of fragmentation and a means of orientation. Such diverse references shall allow me to define the series of tensions within which the photomontage functioned.

Fragmentation of Experience and Storytelling Skills

The crisis of experience, diagnosed by Benjamin, consists of many phenomena of technological and historical changes. Some of them correspond to shifts in communication and perception, such as the loss of storytelling skills, which results from the trauma of the community in which the world of old values and traditions are mutilated by war. This coincides with the increasing pace of life connected to large cities, industrial development, replacing craftsmanship with work at an assembly line, and domination of the capitalist exchange relation. Such shifts define the rhythm of work, the daily schedule together with free time and the need for

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entertainment; they affect the methods of communication, as well as the quality and quantity of the received data. Along with the means of mechanical reproduction, there is a shift in perception itself and in the attitude toward the world – which appears more intimate, more available, but also fragmented. "The lost storytelling is synonymous with the ability to pass one's world to the next generations, for example through stories from one's own life, lives of others, life of the community."[2] Active storytelling, as Paul Ricoeur would call it, broadens the reader's and listener's horizon while including them in the cycle of tradition and community (and their multiplicity and diversity). This is the concept of experience as *Erfahrung*: assembling separate moments in one narrative body, extended over time and connected to the learning process. It is the opposite to *Erlebnis* (lived experience) as one-time sensations.[3] Reading a book is the same model of experience. The book was supposed to offer a comprehensive and complex experience. It is comprehensive in the sense that because of its internal structure and temporality it has a beginning and an end; and each element affects the flow of events and the reception of the presented ideas. It is complex because it depicts a chain of events, motivations, and mutual relationships in an appropriate order. Ricoeur observes this synthetical aspect of the narration in the function of intrigue. The latter is the axis of a novel that does not simply connect the events. It makes them the necessary elements of a one story. One described event influences another and together, step by step, they push the story and show how characters develop and affect each other. The intrigue binds together such heterogeneous elements as motivations, expectations, circumstances, events, characters' actions and their results. It includes them in the temporal order of the story – along with the delays, anticipations, the tension between the experienced time and the chronological time – in such a way that they complement and reveal their meaning. All these elements form a teleologically oriented entity with a beginning, middle and end. Composition of a novel is not necessary in the strong sense, but it is probable, and from the perspective of the ending – essential. Its purpose is to bind the elements in a sequence; such connections do not need to be drawn from experience, but they must be subject to narrative planning. Good planning causes a specific emotional impact on the reader and presents them with a complex meaning – a certain vision of the world.

Presenting a vision of the world and introducing the reader to a particular world is set by the three-fold *mimesis*: it is based on a prenarrative structure of experience, it processes it within a narrative framework and turns it into a vision of the world, which opens itself for the reader's world. Storytelling is based upon a prenarrative structure of experience and at the same time it reveals and intensifies it. It turns movement into an act which cannot be explained by the cause and effect relationship described by natural science. This act defines the relationships between the circumstances, motivations and so forth. Only the identification of those allows for understanding of a particular behavior. In a novel, close relations between motives, agents, circumstances, and consequences of actions are fully expressed; they become concrete and merge. They become defined and connected in accordance with the narrative framework. As Ricoeur states, "imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality."[4] In a way, it is a form of expression from the very core of life which, through literary construction, takes a comprehensible form available to another person and the one who experiences it.

During the course of reading, a sequence of sentences evokes a particular world as its intentional correlative. The reader concretizes the work, filling the gaps by using their imagination and recognizing the work as a whole. The text itself leads the reader's imagination until the reader can imagine the whole on the basis of

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2)   Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 731.

3)   Martin Jay states: "Although by no means always the case, *Erlebnis* often suggests individual ineffability whereas *Erfahrung* can have a more public, collective character." Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 11–12.

4)   Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 64.

the order within the work. It is a complex entity which, along with shifting perspectives, accumulated action, and constant modification of one's own expectations, can be grasped while reading. In this way the text – and during the reading, the world – constitutes itself, sentence after sentence. The reader's and the work's horizons merge, broadening the reader's store of meanings; it is also the process of *worldliness* in which the environment acquires meaning: "the world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved. To understand these texts is to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all those meanings that, from a simple environment (*Umwelt*), make a world (*Welt*)."[5] Literature gives tools for interpreting people, their behaviors and emotions, and for ordering one's experiences into a narrative to give them meaning and direction. Moreover, it offers a certain vision of the world, into which the reader can project their life and its possibilities.

However, I do not claim that any literature, or any book, always offers the reader a comprehensive experience by entering a shared world – Benjamin doubted in such a possibility in case of a novel, which increasingly becomes a hermetic world of the reader's individual imagination.[6] A book, as a model, depicts the lost skill of a communal experience that storytelling was supposed to be. An equivalent of this category is the organic work of art described by Peter Bürger; its main feature is that it conceals the act of its own creation, thus imitating nature.[7] It means that the synthetic form of a work of art makes it seem that the work has its own need to exist, and at the same time it is a reflection and expression of reality. In this sense, a work of art is a reconstruction in accordance with rules of synthesis. It shows an image of reality, which is a certain whole – a unity of elements which provide a cohesive, comprehensible image of human reality. Such a work can be easily subjected to the hermeneutic approach since it creates an impression of wholeness in which particular elements suggest and create the unity of the depiction; a part refers to a whole and it allows to anticipate the latter and finally, the whole emerges as the unity of the parts.

Experience of Fragmentation of Reality

With the invention of photography as mechanical reproduction and development of cinematography, the world become fragmented, and focus – dispersed. Fragmentation means that the elements of reality are drawn forth and examined in detail, and yet they remain removed from the wider, familiar context. Therefore, Benjamin compares the camera's intrusion into the visible world to a surgeon's actions.[8] Unlike a magician (or a with doctor), a surgeon penetrates the patient's body, destroys their integrity and focuses on a specific organ. On the other hand, a witchdoctor keeps their distance from reality and the sick person's body. They treat them as a whole and heal them with the power of their authority. A camera operator, unlike a painter, penetrates reality and tears away images which they then assemble according to their own, different laws. A painter needs to keep their distance and treat the view as a whole in order to reproduce and synthesize its image. A painting allows for contemplation and encourages focused attention – from sacral art to cabinet paintings with complex structure and lots of (sometimes hidden) details to be gradually revealed to the viewer's eye. On the other hand, a film – consisting of multiple rapidly displayed images torn from reality – creates the impression of movement, a story unravelling in front of the viewer. However, the viewer is meant to watch it without focus, they are pulled into action and subjected to multiple audiovisual stimuli: as in a large city, so in cinema.

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5) Ibid., 81.

6) Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 334–335.

7) Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

8) Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 35.

However, fragmentation of reality is not only an aspect of camerawork, but an expression of a tendency which is perhaps more apparent in avant-garde collages than in films. According to Bürger, the cubist collage is the major example of a nonorganic work of art. Such work of art is an artifact which no longer reproduces reality or creates its image, but it rather tears away fragments from reality and arranges them into a composition. It consists of two techniques: illusionism, which means incorporating fragments of real objects, such as a piece of a chair, tile patterns, fragments of fabrics, wallpapers, newspapers, or even found objects, like in *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) or *Guitar* (1913) by Picasso. The artists also used fragments of texts and letters from newspapers, treated as a visual part of urban reality. Posters, signboards and newspapers use words while creating the visual layer of new reality. Such fragments are further subjected to abstraction; they do not represent a figure in a mimetic sense, but they form compositions of fragments. They are not subject to what they represent, but to the play of proportions.

The experience of fragmentation and randomness, transformed into artistic strategy in collages and ready-mades, is also expressed in literature; not just by quoting or reprinting older texts, but as a way of building the content and describing experiences. Such are Debora Vogel's literary montages. Her works were characterized by simultaneousness – she juxtaposed various elements of reality based on their simultaneous appearance – regardless of their hierarchy of importance. The aim was to express the banality of everyday urban reality in which scent of flowers, homeless people, signboards and kitsch coexist. At the same time, her montage would inscribe the matter of the objects into what is evoked by associations and experiences, and empty moments. It presents all together: Karmelica street, tango refrain coming from the Femina bar, memories of a lady in a stylish costume, thoughts about lost years, pedestrians.[9]

Literary montage consists of associations, flow of images and records of events in the fashion of stream of consciousness, abandoning the strict classical narrative order. Vogel assembled quotes, fragments of random conversations, or street songs, just like visual artists included fragments from newspapers or pieces of objects in their collages. She expressed the rhythm and noise of the streets, where lots of sounds, people, objects, or conversations coincided. She was aware of the big city experience, with its flood of information, wealth and aesthetic of the shopping windows – a multitude of stimuli. This is characteristic of modernity in general, as a shock and splitting of the individual experience, and distraction, about which Benjamin wrote extensively. They both were immersed in such reality and they chose montage as an adequate means of expression – expression of that reality and an individual immersed in it; as illustrated by *The Arcades Project* or *Akacje kwitną*.[10] Benjamin and Vogel treated texts and their own impressions as photographs, easy to reproduce and juxtapose to show everyday and banal things, outside of hierarchy of importance.

Distraction, multiplicity of stimuli, change of the pace of work in the capitalist economy, and along with it the development of entertainment affect the perception of time and, as Benjamin concludes, humans are not bored anymore. However, when people told stories while doing handwork, boredom was the underlying condition: "People who are not bored cannot tell stories. But there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives. … reason, then, for the decline in storytelling is that people have ceased to weave and spin, tinker and scrape, while listening to stories."[11] In place of storytelling we have a set of associations and condensed information. Photomontage is a form of communication which corresponds to the twentieth century pace of life. According to the principles of the Circle of New Advertising Designers (German: *Neue Werbegestallter*) founded by Kurt

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9) Vogel, "Życie," 38.

10) This is a way how to express the experience which becomes privatized after losing by the objects their constant meaning fixed by tradition – as would say Gyorgy Markus. Markus, "Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria," 18.

11) Benjamin, "The Handkerchief," 658.

Schwitters in 1928 (in the Weimar Republic), communication should be precise, quick, efficient, mechanical, deindividualized, consistent with rationalization, developed on the base of an assembly line: "the rationalized means of production to be progressive and the communication process to be a natural extension of factory production."[12] Photomontages were meant to present the information in the possibly most condensed form, evoke certain associations and spur into action – in this case, consumptional and ideological, in accordance with the vision of prosperity: "modern man has the right to expect communications in the shortest possible time."[13]

Photomontage served ambivalent purposes in Dada collages, which crossed the aesthetic borders of the cubist collage. Newspaper cutouts and the advertisement aesthetic allowed for participation in current events; they expressed the fascination with novelty and dynamism, and at the same time they showed the process of photo-manipulation. Such collages oscillated between fascination and critique of the modern world and big city life. Among them are famous montages by Hannah Höch, such as *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919–20), or *Life and Work in Universal City, 12:05 Noon* (1919) by George Grosz and John Heartfield.

Höch uses photographs published in popular newspapers. She does not create a compact composition, but rather scatters the fragments as if shattered by the "Dada knife" and open to new relations, and along with that – for creating a new order in Germany. The Dadaists stand with Marx, Lenin, and also Einstein; they are the engineers of revolution and a sign of progress, and also – through the presence of dancers and actresses, and the exchange of heads and bodies – they are shown as the main implementers of the modern choreography in the rhythm of machines working. In this rhythm, however, they are subject to the machines and inspired by them. The central character is Niddy Impekoven, a dancer and a bra advertisement star; it is as if her rotation sets the whole composition in motion. The machines, the cogwheels, the locomotive lifted by a gigantic crane process the existing reality and makes it more dynamic. There is a promise of utopian future and an advertisement for the Dada itself. The montage promises a mechanical revolution. The critical aspect is targeted at the political establishment of the Weimar Republic, reactionist against the Dada revolutionary activity.[14]

The works by Grosz and Heartfield often oscillate between the critique of and fascination with culture mass industry – especially the photomontages concerning America.[15] *Life and Work in Universal City, 12:05 Noon* consists of fragments of newspapers, photographic tape, slogans like "Cheer, boys cheer!", logotypes and pictures – related to play, cinema and weapons. The composition spreads from the bottom left corner to the right. It creates a cavalcade, a cacophonic collection led by a saxophone, in which crime and play become one.

This outlook is also present in Polish photomontages, for example in Kazimierz Podsadecki's works, in which there can be found elements of entertainment and fascination with gangster films – with dangerous city life (Chicago and shootings), and human achievements (a flying machine, physical fitness, sport records). In *City, Mill of Life* (1929) all of this is shown against the background of stacked skyscrapers. The picture hits the viewer with intensity of emotions, and the composition is dominated by a face of a screaming woman.

A photograph can be subject to so many re-arrangements because, as an automatic recording of light on a photosensitive material, it is non-literal. It is a trace of reality, stops the movement, but it remains silent. It is in opposition with a story as such and requires hermeneutical action. This is why it is so important to learn

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12) Lavin, "Photomontage, Mass Culture, and Modernity," 51.

13) Ibid., 54.

14) Czekalski, *Awangarda i mit racjonalizacji,* 27–29.

15) Other works by John Heartfield are directly critical, such as the famous photomontage "Adolf, the Superman, Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin", recreated in 1932, showing the gold of wealthy industrialists in Hitler's throat. Often the fascination with America was connected to the resistance against German nationalism and middle-class culture.

to read pictures, and to add commentary to photographs or place them in the context of other photographs. Benjamin demands from a photographer "the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture as will rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value,"[16] while Georges Didi-Huberman observes that only the sequentiality of montage can make the images less unclear: "each sequence constructs a specific response to the constraints of visibility."[17]

This aspect of photography opens it to its viewers and users: it appears in front of them and offers what it depicts. Thus the relationship between closeness and removal between the perceiver and their world is changed. The latter loses its aura, the impression of removal and distance, and its temporal and spatial context. This removal allows for new configurations of interpretations. There are two significant approaches to photomontage: dadaistic and constructivist photomontage, represented by Russian artists, such as Gustav Klutsis and Alexander Rodchenko. Stanisław Czekalski in his excellent book *Awangarda i mit racjonalizacji* points out that German and Russian photomontages represent two different approaches to objectivity of photography. In the first case, photomontage discredits the unambiguous message of a photograph as an illustration of certain events. Montage allows for violation of the rules of interpreting photographs in a given cultural code and reveals multiple potential meanings, sometimes contradictory. On the other hand, Soviet propaganda photomontage was based on the belief in its power of authentication: introduction of multiple perspectives was supposed to reveal the wider context of a given event and strengthen its message. Czekalski states, "Soviet propaganda photomontage, similarly to dadaist photomontage, was supposed to stimulate awareness, yet not by creating a critical distance to reality and freeing utopian imagination, but by raising the awareness above the wretchedness of everyday reality and inspiring enthusiasm toward the visions it clearly defined and with which it replaced reality."[18] "We Will Build Our Own World" from 1931 by Klutsis is a good example of it.[19] It depicts two smiling faces of workers towering above the horizon as *pars pro toto* of the crowd whose photo is pasted next to it. The crowd and faces emerge from the view of smoke coming out of the chimneys of factories. Also, the way these photos are combined is different than in the case of German photomontages: here the photos intertwine. In the foreground there is a factory and smoke, and from it a crowd and huge faces emerge. Similar aesthetics were used in the work: "Let Us Fulfill the Plan of the Great Project" (1930), in which a huge, partially transparent palm dominates a crowd of people (with outstretched hands); the "representation of the collective voice."[20]

Photomontage as a Tool of Thinking

The photograph's ability to alter the perception of reality also results from its power to shrink[21] – it shrinks buildings, rock massifs and landscapes and lets people hang them on walls or place them in an album with other photographs. Along with cutting and removing from tradition the thing which it reproduces, the photograph offers itself for use, for exploitation, experimentation and manipulation. Thus a photograph can be found in an archive, a museum, a family album or a newspaper. A photograph, especially black and white and in a similar size, causes uniformisation and overturning the hierarchy of things, for example between a small Mesopotamian figurine and a work of architecture. This offers new ways of comparing objects – noticing

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16) Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 24.

17) Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 32.

18) Czekalski, *Awangarda jako mit racjonalizacji*, 29.

19) Tupitsyn, "From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics," 107.

20) Ibid., 99–100.

21) Benjamin, "The Little History of Photography," 523.

similarities, unity, or regularity; it also requires creative contextualization, restoration or conferment of the object's place in history.

Because of the potential of photograph exposition, which allows for its ready use in the press or a family album, montage can become a tool of thinking; it can facilitate disjoining and combining the content and can cross the categorical (discursive) boundaries. Aby Warburg observed and used this potential in *Mnemosyne Atlas* in order to create new maps of art history motifs. On plates, he creates constellations of photographs, reproductions of works of art (paintings, sculpture, architecture), old coins, cutouts from newspapers, and post stamps. These heterogeneous elements are picked and twice transformed through photography. Distinct in their time and place, historical and social context, their size or color; the reproduced objects become a part of a monochromatic atlas. Then the plates with the photographs would be photographed again. This transcends the historical, artificial narrative of influence, chronology of events, schools and styles. Instead, the scholar looks for different connections, similarities, and regularities despite the lack of continuity, on the base of correlation and epiphany. Warburg inspects the transformations of motifs on plate 64 on which he juxtaposes classical images of Helios, his renaissance depictions and contemporary images on post stamps, or the Schneider trophy poster and advertisements for fish consumption.[22] Warburg compares a shift in motifs and gestures to a shift in themes that can occur in a language during inflection or grading a particular word. Yet the formal transformation in the core of a word does not lead to disappearance of the original meaning, but to its strengthening.[23] The scholar observes such shifts in the migration of motifs, for example in the dance of Biblical Salome referring to the Greek maenad.

The plates can be also interpreted as a limited area, subject to the montage representation of a general motif common for every element. The constellations depict simultaneousness of what is distant and different on many levels and what is present. Warburg's collage evokes similar effect to what Benjamin describes as a dialectical image. Such image reveals itself for a short time, suddenly, as a quick moment of recognition during continuous watching of fragments in various configurations. It can be compared to a short circuit; it appears in overload, in concentration, which shortens the distance, allows for observing the elements in their collision. The dialectical image shows the past and the present at once; it allows for capturing the present in one moment: "where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a configuration saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad."[24] As Benjamin states, "where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought … it is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest."[25] Within it, "then" appears together with "now," which Benjamin distinguishes from the temporal continuum between the past and the present. Such an image causes shock and delays the moment of the ultimate recognition. It forces us to return to the starting point, from which more constellations, full of contradictions and collisions, can be constructed.

Working on images which are free from temporal, periodic and hierarchical restrictions is a sign of posthistoricism in art. It can be seen in drawing inspiration (in terms of form and content) and choosing quotes from various sources, regardless of their historical context. It stems from a shift in approach to history itself, which is no longer defined by traditional chronology. According to Arthur Danto, modern art does not mark its boundaries by dissociating itself from the past, but the art of the past is an open reserve of motifs and

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22) Rampley, "Archives of Memory," 100.

23) Warburg, "Mnemosyne. Introduction," 110.

24) Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

25) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N10a,3.

formal solutions. Artistic montage and a museum where historically, culturally and geographically distant things can appear together are a sign of this, or even a paradigm: "the museum is a field available for constant rearrangement, and indeed there is an art form emerging which uses the museum as a repository of materials for a collage of objects arranged to suggest or support a thesis."[26] There are no more uncrossable divisions and orders; everything can be brought closer according to the artistic and critical intentions.

Thus montage opens the door to the past, but also to the present. Just as it allows to restructure the approach to the existing divisions, it allows – through assembling the pieces in a different way – to search for the meaning of the current events. This potential of the photomontage was discovered and used by Bertolt Brecht in his work called *Arbeitsjournal*, which he wrote during his wanderings in Europe. Juxtaposing photographs and texts, which he practiced, was a strategy in the difficult process of identifying the social and political situation. As a literary form, it refers to the habit of writing down interesting everyday events encountered by the author. It is also a psychoanalytical work in which the artistic sense allows for coping with current events, as Brecht's exile, and confronting him with the trauma of the World War I. A "journal" can also mean a newspaper presenting the most important economic, political and social events from a particular region. Brecht's work extends beyond an intimate journal and taps into political events; it deals with individual as well as international affairs. It is a record of thoughts, a report of hermeneutical work, an assembly table upon which a thought can be experimented, compared, and solved – a thought performing a reflective judgment. It requires assuming different perspectives, putting together pieces which are spatially and ideologically distant, but which affect each other. It requires the ability to bind, to notice relationships; this ability is both metaphorical (observing similarities) and narrative (observing the relations between influences, motivations and actions).

An example of such a juxtaposition is in the entry from May 16, 1942; in a sequence of photographs there is Hitler with a member of his staff, an oil field at the Caribbean Sea, and a painting of a bison from the Cave of Niaux in Agriège. The key to solving this graphic riddle is the last piece – the animal whose heart is pierced by an arrow.[27] Recognizing this spot (the invisible within the visible) gives the hunter magical powers. Creative mimetic work becomes a cognitive act and also a performative act – not only does it describe reality, but it is supposed to facilitate its transformation. A possible relation appears between the bison's heart and the significance of fuel for Hitler's army: "to reach Hitler's heart and defeat him one must first shoot the oil industry, this nerve of war."[28] Static photographs become dynamic and gain meaning – they are hieroglyphs to be deciphered.

Brecht's approach, marked by distrust toward the photographs themselves when considered separately, is in accordance with Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage. In directorial practice of film theory he regards the photograph not as a basic, meaningful unit to be placed next to others, but an ambiguous and not entirely understandable hieroglyph. It gains meaning only when situated in an appropriate context among other photographs. An image becomes legible "only in context, just like a hieroglyph, acquiring a specific *meaning*, *sense* … only in *combination*."[29] The connections, like rebuses to be solved, arrange photographs into contextual frameworks and sequences – and multiple different combinations. They do not offer a sum, but a product; a third value – a meaning that cannot be grasped outside of that connection, and they reveal a new kind of reality.

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26) Danto, *After the End of Art*, 9. Examples of such installations include the work of Fred Wilson in Maryland Historical Museum or Joseph Kosuth's *The Play of the Unmentionable* in Brooklyn Museum.

27) Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, 297–303.

28) Ibid., 300.

29) Eisenstein, "The Fourth Dimension in Cinema," 182.

Brecht collects cutouts from national and foreign newspapers, photographs, art reproductions, statistics, still life, economic graphs, and landscapes. First, the chosen photograph (or a text) is removed from its context, thus ceasing to be a solid unit – an image with one meaning, (a photograph perceived in a specific way) – and becomes ready for montage. Brecht confronts it with other photographs and contexts, destabilizing their reception and opening it up for new meanings. He places the photograph on an arranged display, exposing it for new comparisons. Thus he causes misarticulation, "deconstruction of regular perception," and recognition of relationship between objects.[30] He does not tell, he shows: "he gave up discursive, deductional or demonstrational aspects of representation – since to show is to explain, to clarify, to tell in the right order – in order to effortlessly extract the aspect of an icon, a picture, a display."[31] In this way Brecht achieves a new perspective: he removes the restrictions of narration and seeks new relations, risky similarities, regularities and clashes. He opens new narratives, but does not fulfill the promise to close them.

In the entry from June 15, 1944 Brecht placed three photographs and newspaper headlines on one page.[32] In the upper right corner he put a photograph of field marshal Erwin Rommel and his generals standing around a map on which the field marshal outlines further military strategies. On the left, there is a photograph of pope Pius VII in his official garment, raising his arms in the gesture of blessing. Below on the right we can see a photo of grieving women discovering a mass grave in the woods – the caption explains it is a *Nazi Abattoir in Russia*. Further we can read that twelve thousand corpses were buried in the Katyn Wood.

What brings these images together? According to Didi-Huberman, the time and the gesture. The pope is raising his arms in what becomes an empty gesture when confronted with discovered graves and the cruelty of World War II. Rommel is raising his arm while explaining his strategy, while the women are bent over kneeling and crying in a pose resembling Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The montage also introduces a dangerous similarity between the gestures of the pope and the field marshal and *encourages* us to consider the relationship between them, their meaning which emerges from such a juxtaposition. The field marshal's gesture pointing to the place of a planned attack echoes the pope's gesture; they are gestures of power contrasted with gestures of suffering, lamentation and powerlessness of the women digging up and embracing their dead. The combination of pictures and texts does not certainly define the meaning of the montage (and what happened in the narrative order), but, as a demontage it rather causes cracks in the assumed discourse and the reception of these photos. It is not a political argument nor a work of art – it is rather a historical and anthropological reflection on the events, gestures and power distribution. It points out the cruel similarity and coexistence of these – so very different – gestures, which are a part of the same history.

Brecht's photomontage works like a metaphor: it brings temporarily, spatially or semantically distant elements together and subjects them to a risk of new contexts. This can be dangerous because while the elements do not lose the echo of their initial placement, their previous meaning is both undermined and preserved. Thus Ricoeur's living metaphor is a continuous oscillation between the familiar and unfamiliar, proximity and tension. This is how linguistic imagination works:

> … imagination, accordingly, is this ability to produce new kinds by assimilation and to produce them not above the differences, as in the concept, but in spite of and through the differences. Imagination is this stage in the production of genres where generic kinship has not reached the

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30) Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, 79.

31) Ibid., 31.

32) Ibid., 90.

level of conceptual peace and rest but remains caught in the war between distance and proximity, between remoteness and nearness.[33]

Such preservation of differences and therefore ambiguity protects the metaphorical expression from the obviousness of the idea. Thus through its juxtapositions the montage sparks contradictions and leads to suspense rather than allowing them to synthesize. The montager's dialectics is a process of postponing in an irregular rhythm.[34]

The purpose of this is not to cause misunderstanding of the images appearing in the montage or befuddlement with them, but to broaden the potential of understanding by multiplying the perspectives. Neither is it supposed to get rid of the meaning while loosening the ties to the previous context – it is not a collage understood as a fragment removed from reality and functioning as an empty sign.[35] The dialectical play requires a good sense of harmony to keep the balance between the meaning and its crisis. An image can both reveal and conceal the view. On the one hand, it offers certain messages and distances itself from them. It allows for defining a particular phenomenon and referring to it. On the other hand, an image (understood as images in a wider circulation, like films or television) offers the view without a distance, not allowing a definition and semantic possession of the object; it stops the viewer in the lack of presence, since the object is too close and is absolutely unavailable, it eludes us and causes apathy. Working with images and thinking with images makes this risk inevitable. It also requires the difficult art of reading images – not in the iconological, but in the montage sense (offering potential meanings of what the photograph echoes). The dialectics of image is this kind of acrobatics (which can lead to a fall).[36]

Brecht approaches the problem of learning to read images in his second work, namely in his *Kriegsfibel* atlas, which in a way continues the work of visual thought from *Arbeitjournal*.[37] The name of the journal is surprising in itself: the German word *Fibel* means a guide or a primer, *Krieg* means war. In its strictly orderly form, the atlas resembles an alphabet book for children. Thus *Kriegsfibel* is a perverse textbook for learning to read, to understand the situation of war, and also – as Ruth Berlau, co-author of the atlas, writes – to read images, especially those that are difficult and unclear, almost hieroglyphic. The book consists of single photographs cut out from the papers, placed against the black background and provided with short, four-verse commentaries – epigrams. This refers to the Greek tradition, where such short literary forms were sculpted on graves and statues. Epigram is both a simple form and a variation. It can be serious, moral and humoristic, or even satirical, at the same time. Brecht exploits both aspects and blatantly juxtaposes the epigrams with the photographs.

On one of the plates there is a photograph of laborers working with large metal sheets, while the epigram is a humorous commentary on the terrifying reality of war:

"What's that you're making, brothers?" "Iron wagons." "And what about those great steel plates you're lifting?" "They're for the guns that blast the iron to pieces." "And what's it all for, brothers?" "It's our living."[38]

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33) Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," 148–9.

34) Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, 103.

35) This is how Peter Bürger describes avant-garde art, to which the collage belongs. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

36) Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, 311.

37) The year 1955 is the liminal moment – entries in *Arbeitjournal* end, entries in *Kriegsfiebel* begin. Ibid., 37.

38) Brecht, *War Primer,* 6. Hereafter referred to in text as WP followed by a page number.

Epigrams complement and strengthen both meaning and message of the photograph, but the gravity is in their juxtaposition, for example placing a photograph of an American soldier standing over a dying Japanese soldier, shot by him (WP, 56). The shooter's stance, his smoking of a cigarette, his facial expression, all show relaxation and satisfaction from a well fulfilled duty. The original commentary, the soldier's words, add to the impression: "I was walking down the trail when I saw two fellows talking. They grinned and I grinned. One pulled a gun. I pulled mine. I killed him. It was just like in the movies." (WP, 44) Short sentences are placed like countershot in a simultaneous montage, their content resembles a crime or even a gangster film. It makes the image more dynamic by introducing a narrative aspect: event, motivation and action. Brecht's commentary almost repeats the soldier's words with emphasis on the moment of suspense when the soldiers stand, look at each other and smile. What kind of a smile could it be? The photograph refers to another page from *Kriegsfibel*, on which there is a photograph of Winston Churchill in a top hat, smiling, holding a gun and smoking a cigar (WP, 16). It is one of fifteen portraits of the prime minister, cut out from a Swedish newspaper from 1944. Brecht's epigram suggests that the gangsters' world and gang law are not strange to him and therefore he can save the world (WP, 23). Juxtaposition of the photographs and commentaries suggests a relationship between the spheres of influences, wealth and war, capitalism and terror, film stylization, propaganda and legitimization of violence. Efficient political action must require unofficial methods and illegal means.

The clarity achieved by Brecht in his montages is at least two-fold: it juxtaposes two discourses, two truths presented from different points of view, like in case of juxtaposing two texts next to another photograph of a murdered Japanese soldier and an American soldier standing over him. According to the information from the newspaper, the American had to kill the Japanese man hiding behind a boat because he posed a threat to the brigade. The caption refers to a specific situation on a beach. Brecht's commentary is a bitter question about the root cause of this necessity and who was behind it, who forced them to do it; it also reveals a broader outlook. The second truth shows the bodies of the killed as victims of war between two world powers – colonial powers. Observing this duality and preserving it in complete suspense together, but without annulment or synthesis in the same concept, results from the juxtaposition of montage.

However, montage does not offer a complete picture of reality, it cannot be a base for clarification; it rather provokes thinking and allows only for fragmentary interpretations. In Brecht's hands, montage means arranging differences and organizing the audio-textual space where the co-appearance exists through conflict. The arrangement of things appears with upsetting the order of appearance of things in the existing discourse. In this case, montage seems to be anti-synthetic; it emerges where synthesis is impossible (if the reality is too complex and it reveals itself through the opposites) or when a synthetic image (an image which, in order to offer a unified view, must simplify and cancel the differences) needs to be destroyed. It works through mini-syntheses which make it possible to recognize a photograph as a photograph and the objects it shows (matching a silhouette to a historical figure), but it makes it impossible to present a situation in a comprehensive and unified way and it distorts meanings of a concept and the unity of narration (Churchill's role in the war and his attitude).

There was artistic and critical continuation of Brecht's atlas. Adam Broomberg and Olivier Chanarin made a sequel to *Kriegsfibel – War Primer 2*.[39] They added contemporary photographs to Brecht's journals, combining them with the original pictures, sometimes covering them and confronting them with the old captions, for example to the photograph of the smoking American they added a photograph of a smiling female soldier with her thumb up, bent over the enemy's burnt corpse. The artists make Brecht's work more up to date, relate it to

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39) Broomberg and Chanarin, *War Primer 2*. Another re-edition of the work, a creative transformation in repetition, was done by Lewis Bush. This time he focused not only on the relation between images and war, but he also addressed the issue of social inequalities, jobs and capital. Bush, *War Primer 3*.

the contemporary context and at the same time they set is as a point of reference, a perspective for interpretation of the new photographs. In an interview for the *Lynx* magazine the artists themselves emphasize that "images and their collective noun, archives, are dangerous things, open to interpretation and beholden to no one."[40] They do not claim to reveal a hidden truth, but they attempt to take a stand and consider the difference between the right and evil. They superimpose pictures, juxtapose photographs and texts to distill the differences.

The real power of montage is that it does not offer one whole picture, but, as Didi-Huberman states, it is

what causes it never to be an "only-image," a "whole-image." What consigns it to multiplicities, aberrations, differences, connections, relationships, ramifications, changes, constellations, meta-morphoses, and finally – montages. Montages which construct views and reveal deformations: which will show us what the world looks like and how it warps.[41]

A montage does not offer an unambiguous approach or a closed narrative which can be told from the beginning to the end, but that does not mean that it is a collection of random photographs. It allows for bringing forth particular relationships and a whole network of connections hidden beneath the smooth surface of an image. Neither is it accidental; the editorial cut depends on the cutting subject, who might not be homogeneous, but by multiplying perspectives they seek a principle of events and connections between them. The subject, through the experiment of montage, attempts to find themselves in a particular event, orient themselves and take a position. This also means assuming an appropriate distance through fragmentation and focus on the detail. Just as Brecht does, through deconstructing the visual and ideological order of American newspapers by cutting out photographs and arranging them in different contexts in order to question their homogeneous meaning and thus create a distance. It is a difficult and important task, as we have to cope with – firstly – the disappearance of the *aura*, or the distance, and – secondly – the overflow of information and media images. Only assuming a point of view allows for evaluation of, for example, a certain event. In this case, judgment is only possible because of the montage play, which creates various constellations, reveals similarities and gaps, and is actually the process of developing a perspective. A play in this understanding constitutes a gesture of resistance against the situation of dispersion which surrounds the viewer of mechanically (and now digitally) reproduced images.

Photomontage and Fragmentation of the Content of Experience: Conclusions

First of all, photomontage is the expression of a particular experience connected with the shifts in social life: the development of industry and press, the increased circulation of information and the pace of urban life. The montage itself got its name from an assembly line, on which the parts are assembled into a certain object – from construction units to entire machines and devices. Both in Vogel's writings and press photomontages from the 1920s and 1930s, montage is the articulation of experiencing fragmentation together with annulment of the order of recognition, and befuddlement with various stimuli. Linear structure, connected to an order of a story unravelling over time or a complex order of a text, is replaced by short information put together of which the main features are speed and efficiency. The linear structure of the stories, which created an impression of a whole, becomes replaced also because of the experience of the decay of the old world and traditions,

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40) Interview with Adam Broomberg, Olivier Chanarin, entitled *Storytellers*, interview by Dobromiła Błaszczyk, *Contemporary Lynx* no. 2(18) 2018.

41) Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*, 317.

accompanied by the sense of dispersion, increased tempo of fragmentation and alienation. Such a situation provoked both fear and fascination – photomontage, as a technique and a method of arranging the content, stems from that experience and expresses it.

Photography is the reason why montage is possible both materially and formally. A photograph is not only a material object that can be easily cut out (or developed) and juxtaposed to another photograph, but as such it changes the attitude toward what it shows. It offers the richness of the world: photographs of architecture, works of art, people, movement, everyday things, or exotic objects. Through its medium, photography displays and unifies them. In this way, architecture is subject to a single glance in the same way as a tiny detail or a previously unnoticed moment of movement. Multiplicity of photographs creates a reserve of equality, and montage becomes a method of navigation in this multiplicity. Sometimes it exposes simultaneousness of experiences, objects or events, like in Vogel's works, and sometimes it facilitates the search for supra-historical connections and a presence of permanent motifs, or allows for showing metaphorical and narrative connections.

Thus montage is an instrument of thought that reveals connections by engaging imagination and the work of association. It provokes thinking and it is a form of communication – photomontages are meant to be read. Montage affects imagination, allows to perceive an event in a different context – from a different perspective. It does not lead to the ultimate synthesis, but it inspires thinking because it appears in the tension between construction (creating constellations, building metaphors) and deconstruction (removing from context, destroying associations). In other words, demontage is inextricable from the montage.

Montage, as potential demontage, can function among fragments and traces, and allow them to be arranged into greater compositions. As such, it can be an instrument of thought in the face of a shattered experience (an experience in a crisis, in a situation of loosening of traditional connections between events, values and actions). However, the ability to create meaningful connections is the ability to observe similarities, the development of events (even if it is paradoxical), the confluence of motivations, actions and consequences; and also to bind elements into narrative structures which reveal the connections between the effect of one event on another. On the one hand, montage is an expression of fragmented reality and the fascination with it; on the other hand, it is a method of dealing with it and a tool for seeking connections and meaning: a tool for reading images and distancing oneself from them. It stems from the need to understand.

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