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Fluidity of Image (Photo)Montage in Cultural and Artistic Contexts of the Time

Abstract

The paper explores the fluidity of (photo)montage in image in the cultural contexts of the times, emphasizing the uniqueness of the medium of photography and its ability to transpose the referent as opposed to reality. The text analyses the dialectic between technical mistakes and creative processes that lead to the emergence of new artistic categories and practices. It provokes a discussion on how photography challenges the image. Meanwhile, the processes of spontaneous errors are being examined, including double exposure or accidentally botched photographs for example, that contribute to new forms of artistic interpretation and experimentation. The topic of the imaginative is present throughout the article, from Husserl's phenomenology to Dadaism and Surrealism, with an emphasis on the transformation of dream images and their interpretation. The component of authenticity in montage and photomontage is emphasized, including how these techniques create new visual identities. The text uses theoretical takes of major

thinkers such as Roland Barthes to open up a broader discussion on the ontology of the image and its interpretation, providing a comprehensive view of the transformation and significance of photography in modern art.

Key words

Authenticity. Dadaism. Fluidity. Imaginateness. Photography. Photomontage. Surrealism.

Introduction

The uniqueness of the medium of photography, despite its existential attachment to the technical matters of optics, physics, chemistry, mechanics and electronics, does not only concern the dealing with the so-called technical record, i.e. the reproduction of reality in question. Essential are the qualities of creating – in constant dialectic – new experiences of how any reality is recorded, also thanks to spontaneous lapses generated by different artistic types, new categories or creative practices. In established genres, this is the developmental ambition of photography – the search, investigation and elevation of experiment, error, imagination to new levels of meaning, or the transformation and anchoring of an idea into regular internal rules of how a thing is looked at (interpreted).

The fact of how the image came to be questioned by photography itself is undoubtedly one of the *happy errors* of the medium of photography, with the identity of the image from the very beginning when photography was invented being a clear delineation of its relation to the fact and the causality of reality. Václav Macek (1998) conveys as one of the criteria for excluding the work from the imaginative framework (the assumption that the image is fluid) that photography is dominated by a clear logic of the fact of the everyday, not by the logic of the

dream or the subconscious, and that although while the work might be more or less a subjective stylization of the image of the world, its language is built on routine connections of phenomena while accepting them. It does not “turn them on their head”. Another criterion is factuality, meaning affinity of the work to the art of fact. The logic of error then follows from these postulates; for example, in ordinary, routine photography, when in the early period of photography there were cases of unwanted double or triple exposure on glass negatives. Accidental experimentation could also occur when one forgets to rewind the film roll in medium format cameras, or by accidental malfunction of the photographic apparatus, or by material fatigue caused by an unwanted penetration of light into the interior of the cassette or camera body. The medium of photography necessitated the adoption of certain techniques within the framework of aesthetic principles in order to introduce pictorial-technical effects related to and comparable to paintings, and various techniques were implemented to achieve this goal, such as double and triple exposure, montage, or primarily by dactylic modification of the image (photomontage).

1 Image and Imagination

One of the roots of the word *imaginative* is the Latin verb “*imagino, are – imaginum facer*”, i.e. to make an image. The second

root is to be found in the term *imaginarius*, which translates into English as figurative, apparent and fanciful, and explains the frequent identification of the imaginative and fantasy in art. *Imaginarius* is more closely explained as “*fictum, non verum*”, i.e. something fanciful, untrue, or conjuring up an idea. Similarly, in French: “*imaginaire, qui ne subsiste que dans l'imagination, fantastique*” means that something exists only in the imagination or fantasy. Let us return again to Latin. *Imaginativus* signifies imagery and fantasy, at the same time persisting in delusion, mirage and illusion. Several interpretations of the term imaginative confirm that its basis is close to the term “fanciful”. Imaginative in one of its meanings is also understood as “to create an image”, so the definition of a possible mode of stylization overlaps with the definition of an artistic kind (Macek, 1998).

From a phenomenological point of view, according to Edmund Husserl, imagination is a basic form of eidetic intuition or ideation, enabling one to arrive at the essence of an object or work. Imagination thus has an indispensable role in the process of abstraction. But where should such creations of imagination as, say, Husserl's favourite example of the centaur playing the pipe be placed? Phenomenology, however, will be concerned with imagination in general, which also needs to be defined in relation to *Being* and both to the veracity and falsity of reality. In the case of intuition, for example, based on imagination as

something given, which is, according to Husserl, a fictive intuition and happens spontaneously, we can use it to vicariously create an image of a concrete or an abstract thing (a three-dimensional figure, music, a photomontage, etc.), which may eventually satisfy the criterion of adequacy, so it may be a substance without any relation to experience (Sivák, 2020). In the case of the process of imagination, it is the imagining of a dream – a recollection within a recollection depicting a modification – an experiential connection in the mode of imagining.

The model of activating ideas and synthesising dreams, as presented by Robert McCarley and John Allan Hobson of Harvard Medical School in 1977, describes a purely physiological model of dreaming in which sleep initiates electrical signals to the higher mental centres of the forebrain, creating fantastic but utterly nonsensical images due a lack of external stimuli. According to this theory, the brain automatically organizes these incoming groups of signals into a story – a composition that, if remembered upon waking, we try to rationalize and analyze (Halpern, 2003).

2 Anti-Image - Dada

Dadaism is chiefly marked by the fact that it was more of a non-movement than a movement and more of anti-art than an art. It considered and blamed the then artistic initiatives as one of the factors that contributed

substantially to the development of the contemporary conscience that eventually led mankind to the First World War. Dada representatives held the radical view that it was the intellect and reason of the contemporary establishment that had led mankind to war. It is documented by theorists that other prominent representatives of the Dada movement such as Hülsenbeck, Hugo Ball, Walter Mehring, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Serner, and Hans Arp did not adopt the term anti-art, nor did they use the prefix anti- (McEvelley, 2012). Although the term *anti-* did not become an existential prefix and a creative-social imperative of the Dada movement, according to philological studies, it was Tristan Tzara who first used the term in connection with Dadaism, reflecting on the new terminology of the movement in his textual studies (Mráz & Mrázová, 1988). We find various terms in his writings – anti-dogmatism, anti-goal, anti-man, anti-philosophy, anti-philosopher, anti-dadaist, anti-people, anti-nuance, anti-painting and anti-art (Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, 2002).

In his arguments, Richard Hülsenbeck (1920) pointed to the new medium at the time – which included the techniques of assemblage, abstract collage, montage – as directly related to simultaneity and bruitism, a journey from desire to the reality of small things, with this journey being abstract. In his view, of course, Dada was an “accident” that led to the psychological

factors to which the true Dadaist movement owed its existence. The followers of Dada were interested in anti-systemic forms of sounds, nonsensical, or accidental poetry, which linked different fields of art in the form of automatic drawing, collage, montage, plastic objects, infiltration and appropriation of chance and absurdity. Dadaism was not fixated on a single medium like several creative strategies from previous art movements; it preferred variety, criticality, irony, and subtlety of image. Artists produced *non-art* works that made provocative references to social, cultural contexts with reference to the absurd, provocative or comic (Hülsenbeck, 1920).

The representatives of Dadaism deliberately conceived their works on irrationality and absurdity. The intention was to make the audience question all traditions, art forms and formulas within themselves, including the language on which literature and thought were based. Professor Henri Béhar characterizes Dadaism as an international movement without a “foundation”, without a founding text, without a self-proclaimed leader, without a constitution, without an organizing committee or executive, without a branch (Béhar, 2009). In a way, Dada represented a typical example of non-democracy and anarchism applied to avant-garde initiatives. Dadaism, by its very nature, expressed confusion, proclaimed links between opposites, and negated the principle of non-contradiction. Philosophically and

critically speaking, the movement tended to install *idiocy* everywhere, conceptually and deliberately, just as Tzara proposed in his manifestos. Logically, however, this should not prevent us from any attempt to make an art historical, geopolitical and interpretative systematization, centred on the contexts of our subject – montage and photomontage.

3 Correction of the ‘Anti-’ in Surrealism

The goal of Surrealism was not destroying culture, art and philosophy (the primary goal of Dadaism) completely, but rediscovering and performing art and philosophy as new components of culture, an ideological form, and a renewed connection with an older tradition. André Breton, along with a small group of friends, attempted to coin a definition of Surrealism that would satisfactorily distinguish it from Dada while he was an active part of it. Several of the basic elements of Surrealism – experimentation with automatism, accidents, biomorphism, found objects and commitment to social revolution – were present in Dada to some degree, but in a fragmented and chaotic state. Breton called random encounters an “objective accident”, or more aptly, coincidences and unpredictable images of revelation, in which the power of surprise was intensified by feeling (emotion) because, as he argued, they were preordained by the hard-to-define mystery of necessity. These incidents

are part of what Breton called “everyday magic”, by virtue of which consonance and contrast take on the significance of portents and at the same time become the key to the knowledge of being and its destiny (Lippard, 1970).

Breton defined Surrealism as follows: “Pure psychic automatism, by which we wish to express, whether in writing or orally or in any other form, the real workings of thought. It is a dictate of thought without any control exercised by reason, being outside any aesthetic or moral considerations.” (Pijoan, 1991, p. 31) The Surrealist image – or work – was anchored in a belief in a higher reality of certain associative forms that had hitherto been disregarded, in the omnipotence of the dream and in the impartial process of thought. The ontology of the image was directed towards the definitive destruction of all other psychic mechanisms in order to take their place in the solution of the main problems of life (Pijoan, 1991).

Surrealism, specifically the stabilization of the mutability of dream images as a specification of “deception” in the expression “trompe l’oeil” (optical illusion), reveals a certain weakness of the process of creation in the very root of the word. It characterizes reality and illusion as one of many antinomies, while it is generally desirable to dissolve the image in a qualitatively higher synthesis of surreality, which in this case “resolves the dualism of perception and representation” (Breton, 1973,

p. 278, as cited in Krauss, 1981, p. 10). For Breton, the perception of the psychoanalysis of automatism, of contingency, represented a truer phenomenon because it was more immediately experienced, whereas representation always had to remain “suspect” because it is never anything other than a copy, a transfiguration and a being in a different form – a set of experiential (empirical) signs.

4 The Image in Sigmund Freud’s Legacy

The power of the image is a fundamental property of imagination, conceptualized in the interaction of studies of the mind’s function inspired by Sigmund Freud. What was meant as therapy by Freud became a philosophy, a creative and literary starting point for the Surrealists. For them, the warped contours of the mind and human psychology, as Sigmund Freud called them, represented nothing less than an “*afflatus*” (breath, inspiration) that could be transformed into astonishing works of art (Nema, 2017). It is this “dream inspiration” that the Surrealists sought to convey in their works by applying the processes of the unconscious – free association, such as automatism, and the use of dreams, fantasies and diaries.

It is impossible to interpret the Surrealist era, and almost any Surrealist work of art, without connecting it to the work of Sigmund Freud, and his contribution to the psychology of

art cannot be underestimated. It is remarkable that he is one of the few psychologists who have contributed not only to shaping our ideas about psychology, but also about history, art, literature, culture, psychiatric medicine and, not surprisingly, Greek mythology. In examining the contexts, interactions, and overlaps of the Freudian tradition, it is quite clear how René Magritte applied metaphorical symbols in exploring problems of visual perception and optical illusions, and how Salvador Dalí used Freudian symbols, to embark on a grand depiction of the human dream world, and how Frida Kahlo finally found her peace by channelling the boiling cauldron of her traumatic past found in her subconscious into her radiant paintings (Nema, 2017).

Sigmund Freud is considered to be a controversial man with “ridiculously thought-provoking ideas” for many critics from different denominations, yet to understand Freudian ideas more clearly, it is important to point out his teaching process of psychology, which includes concepts such as the id, ego and super-ego, dream analysis, the motivated unconscious, and so on (Nema, 2017). Freud’s influence is so extensive that the words and phrases he introduced through his theories are still being reflected and thematized in many pictorial projects through the medium of photography and art, such as collage, montage, photomontage, paintings, sculptures and intermedia works.

In 1925, André Breton began theoretically exploring the theme of free association, characterizing painting in bipolar terms – involving automatism and dream, or absolute reality, in which the two opposites, reality and dream, are intertwined (Lippard, 1970). According to William Rubin, the Surrealist movement represented a formal heterogeneity that oscillated between the abstract transposition of Joan Miró on the one hand and the austere realism of René Magritte or Salvador Dalí on the other. Art history registers two poles of Surrealist endeavour: automatism/abstraction and academicism/illusionism; two poles corresponding to the “Freudian” double pre-requisites of Surrealist theory. Namely, this is the problem of automatism (reality) and free association (dream). Despite the fact that these two pictorial modes look different, they can be unified and called the concept of the irrationally conceived metaphorical image (Rubin, 1968).

5 Authenticity as an Ethical and Image Appeal

The montage and all its *pendants* (generics) have always depended on a basic source – mechanically reproduced photographs – fragments through which the artist, by pasting, manipulating, cutting, cropping and combining into new units, created a new imaginative identity of reality. The precision and speed of the camera made it possible to take photographs of a variety of subjects considered by painters to be too difficult to

capture and often impossible to paint on an easel. The dynamic development of the technical options of cameras made it possible to take photographs of any given subject from multiple angles, from above, from below, without the image losing its authenticity – being a faithful reproduction of the reality in question.

The problem of the presence of the principle of authenticity in photomontage is traceable in general interpretation in the studies by Charles Taylor, who examines the genesis of authenticity from several aspects. He gives priority to the consideration of authenticity as a moral ideal; while defending its legitimacy with the justification of establishing its content in today’s culture and art in general. Taylor believes that the ideal of authenticity, as formulated in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried von Herder, attaches fundamental moral importance to the fact that man should remain himself, to be in harmony with his own inner nature, and to live his own life, which becomes a powerful moral ideal, preserving for us the tradition, because the ideal of a certain “original authenticity” lives in each one of us (Palovičová, 2004).

This idea, although it has penetrated very deeply into modern consciousness, shows that modern man cannot admit the idea that he is not the author of his life; for the problem is that man can lose the ability to internalize

the voice because he is subject to external conformity, subject to manipulation, and mistakes authenticity for the legitimacy of rebellion, uncriticalness and loss of self-esteem. Taylor argues that if I am not true to myself, I lose the meaning of my own life; I lose what it means for me to be a human being (Taylor, 1991, in Palovičová, 2004).

According to the genesis and development of the philosophy of authenticity, it has emerged that throughout history three characteristics have become part of the ideal of authenticity: first, an emphasis on creating and revealing an authentic moral relationship with ourselves, our emotional nature; second, originality; and third, frequently an opposition to the rules of society, and even (at least as a possibility) to what we recognize as morality (Palovičová, 2004).

From the point of view of montage and photomontage, and from the contexts of these three characteristics, it is most relevant to examine above all that aspect of authenticity which evokes expressions of value relativism, pluralism and subjectivism, i.e. that which is the essence of avant-garde, modernist and post-modern culture (see, e.g., Pravdová & Ungerová, 2024). Thus, the authenticity of an image (photomontage) is not to be determined purely formally, for example by “originality” or “self-determination”, but also as a product of a specifically individual idea of an aesthetic criterion, it is to contain some substantive

component of personal philosophy (justification and internalization of contradictions), some reference beyond the horizon of the meaning of the created image, i.e., a reference to the symbolic, or iconicity from the aspect of presenting and interpreting the work of art.

The process of creating montage and photomontage as a reflection of life and society can be considered an authentic act, an activity that activates comprehensively all the components of modern rationality, and thus, in a sense, carries out interconnections between modern spheres of values without blurring the distinctions between them or creating one homogeneous field of creativity.

6 Barthes and the Image as a Transfigurator of Reality

The theorists of photography, when aiming to interpret and define the very essence of photography from a philosophical perspective, but also from the perspective of image and meaning, noting the penetration of technology, have inevitably helped themselves with references to analyses of existing works (photographs), especially by renowned authors – photographers. These are, for example, writers, philosophers, semioticians – eminent authors of cultural studies who, since the beginning of the 20th century, have developed the self-reflexive theory and image-sign structure of photography as a medium, as well as the trends of

the development of photography itself. Thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes and their writings on photography are among the fundamental theoretical starting points in elucidating the story of photography. The philosophical ideas of the latter are of particular interest for the understanding of any photographic image and argument.

Photomontage is a pictorial composition of larger or smaller fragments of photographs, and by its formal construct it is a purposeful, no-contingent alternative way of seeing and interacting with the image. According to Dadaist or Surrealist canons, it can be described as the absence of contradiction from the release of emotional tension due to the absence and replacement of external reality by a psychic reality that is governed solely by the pleasure principle of the super Ego (Krauss, 1981). Photomontage used the photographic image as a medium and never as a sketch of it.

Such a record of visual reality thus necessarily contains a referent, in Barthes’s sense of *punctum*. In the metaphor of the “photographic image”, Barthes identifies the punctum as a procedural trap of the “unfolding” of something that has no chance of development, but as the very essence of the emphasizing gaze (the planted wound), it cannot be transformed but only repeated with varying urgency. “This *something* has triggered

me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant)” (Barthes, 1981, p. 49). In the case of image manipulation in the form of montage, we can join Barthes in discussing a “intense immobility”, because the explosion of several images fused into one is linked to a detail (a denotator), igniting the whole surface of the text or photograph (Barthes, 1981).

It is Barthes’s prominent place in the theory of photography, together with his interest in the importance of emotion in the reception of an image, that is of interest in terms of exploring the ontology of photomontage in relation to photography. Roland Barthes, as a fundamental phenomenon in the pre-digital phenomenology of photography, speaks of the life (being) of photography in several levels, involving affinities or differences with photomontage. He admits to relating to photography as evidence of scientific discovery, as fragments of history, but above all, he highlights the importance of the medium of photography as something intimately unique, personal and ultimately unshared, defining photography in this aspect as a “fragment of love” (Gadbois, 2021).

Photomontage, with its inner explosive force, imbues the epistemology of the “wisdom and folly” of photography; the simile has less to do with the hermeneutics of what has been written than with the containment

of the unique, the individual, the original, flowing from the self-perpetuating nature of the image – to produce, to cut, to recycle, to falsify, to be hallucinations of cultural signs. Above all, the problem of photomontage points to the common attitude of art history, cultural studies and the community of experts to express and conceive a system of interpretation. Barthes argues that society is trying to bring photography to its senses, to temper its madness which constantly threatens to explode in the face of the one who gazes at it. Barthes calls this means “banalization” – bringing photography to wisdom means “[...]to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness” (Barthes, 1981, p. 118). The history of photomontage (photography) in the era of Dadaism and Surrealism provoked the most serious and strange disputes about the (photographic) image, the image of society, the interior of man and the individual perception of the relationship between the image and the unconscious, because, as argued Annie Duprat, the image does not articulate reality, but stages it in order to make a representation of it that is subject to different logics, according to the orderer and the recipient, according to the modalities of dissemination (Duprat, 2007, in Fišerová, 2019).

Conclusion

Photomontage in processes of hybridization allows the combination of multiple images to create new meanings and contexts. The Dadaists used photomontage to challenge traditional artistic values, while the Surrealists saw it as a means of expressing the unconscious and dream imagery, which was influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Charles Taylor contributes with his reflections on authenticity, where photomontage is seen as a means of expressing individuality and fidelity to the self. Roland Barthes analyses photography as a medium that combines reality with symbolic meaning, with photomontage further deepening this contrast between the present and the imaginary. The linking of photomontage to philosophical and psychological concepts that allow for a deeper understanding of art in a broader cultural and historical context, is key.

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