Photomontage and the Visual Language of Advertising

Paul Messaris

Publications discussed in this essay:


In the world of visual media, the term “montage” refers to the combination of two or more images, with the aim of creating a new meaning through their interaction. Montage is a fundamental ingredient of just about any kind of visual advertising. Most commonly, montage in advertising takes one of three forms:

- linking a product with an image (e.g., a bottle of perfume paired with a romantic scene)
- comparing or contrasting one image with another (e.g., an ad for Braun electric razors, in which shaving transforms an orangutan into a human – see Figure 1)
- combining parts of objects into a single image (e.g., an ad for Witte Molle pet food, in which the body of a bird blends into the head of a dog – see Figure 2).

The distinction between Figure 1 and Figure 2 is crucial. In a study of metaphors in advertising, Gkiouzepas & Hogg have labeled the type of montage found in Figure 1 a “juxtaposed” composition, and the type of montage found in Figure 2 a “synthesized” composition.
Both of these compositional devices, as well as visual links between products and images, can be found in ads from as far back as the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. However, advertisers’ use of montage became increasingly creative and innovative in the period between the two world wars (1918-1939). A major impetus for this development was the work of a group of graphic artists, mostly European, who were experimenting with “photomontage” – cutting and pasting photographic images into visual compositions that might also include hand-made pictures and text. Taken together, the two books listed above can serve as an excellent introduction to photomontage in general and, more specifically, its relationship to visual persuasion.

Photomontage between the Wars (1918-1939) was published to accompany an exhibition based on the Merrill C. Berman Collection. This distinguished collection of graphic art is notable for its inclusion of commercial work, such as posters and other forms of advertising. The book contains the exhibition catalog, whose clear and well-annotated reproductions provide a wide-ranging look at photomontage’s many forms. This material is accompanied by a useful chronology of the interwar history of photomontage, a selection of writings by some of the artists and other contemporary commentators, and an informative analysis (by Adrian Sudhalter) of the artists’ own understanding of what it was they were trying to accomplish.

John Heartfield (1891-1968) was a German photomonteur (born Helmut Herzfeld) who had started out as a commercial artist but is best known today for political images that appeared in the Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (Workers’ Illustrated Newsmagazine) during the 1930s. Heartfield’s work for A-I-Z has attained lasting fame because of its sustained attack on the Nazis, whose eventual take-over of German politics forced both the magazine and the illustrator out of the country. Andrés Mario Zervigón’s book is a meticulous and discerning account of Heartfield’s evolution as a visual thinker and polemicist. The book contains many revealing dissections of the ways in which photomontage works, and Zervigón argues convincingly for Heartfield’s reputation as one of its most effective practitioners.

As in Heartfield’s case, much of the art discussed in these two books was created in the service of various social or political causes, rather than commercial advertising. Some of the most prominent European photomonteurs of the interwar period were left-leaning in their politics, and several of the Eastern Europeans among them were working for the Soviet cause. Nevertheless, as Stephen Prince has pointed out (in an article titled “Are There Bolsheviks in Your Breakfast Cereal?”), it is an irony of history that many persuasive techniques created by opponents of market economies have ended up as major marketing tools.\textsuperscript{1} The creative side of the commercial advertising industry has always been highly knowledgeable about, and responsive to, developments in the broader world of the visual arts. Moreover, as far as technique is concerned, the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial visual persuasion have always been quite porous.

What do these two books have to teach us about the role of montage in visual persuasion? One of the most fascinating sections of Zervigón’s book is his attempt to reconstruct the ideas that eventually led people such as Heartfield to develop photomontage. Zervigón goes back to a 1912 essay by Kurt Tucholsky, a writer for a socialist newspaper. Commenting on a photograph of the miserable living
conditions of the urban poor, Tucholsky suggested that the photograph’s impact would be heightened if it were to be exhibited side-by-side with a picture of wealthy people enjoying themselves and profiting from low-wage labor. Tucholsky emphasized, and Zervigón repeats, that such a juxtaposition would make its point entirely visually, without any need of words.²

Zervigón notes that German and Russian writers used the term “dialectical photomontage” for the type of visual contrast that Tucholsky had described. In a nutshell, what Tucholsky was proposing was indeed the essence of montage as we have come to know it since then. And yet, when we turn to the many images reproduced in Zervigón’s book and the photomontage exhibition catalog, it is striking how few of them come even close to the straightforward, side-by-side juxtaposition of pictures envisioned by Tucholsky. Heartfield did employ dialectical photomontage in one aspect of his work, as a designer of book covers. Several of his designs feature a contrast between the front cover and the back. For example, for a German edition of John Dos Passos’ *Three Soldiers*, he showed a scene of soldiers writing home on the front cover, and corpses lying unburied on the back.³ However, when he moved on from cover design to other kinds of graphic work, Heartfield seems to have abandoned his experimentation with that style of montage, and almost none of the other graphic designs represented in Zervignón’s book or the exhibition catalog are in this style either. Instead, the work of these *photomonteurs* was much more likely to integrate a number of components into a single picture, as in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

![Figure 3](image1.jpg)  
**Figure 3.** Figure 3 (from one of Heartfield’s later publications, not discussed in these books) was produced in 1943, and it shows a composite of Hitler’s head and an animal body squatting on the globe during the height of World War II. The title is a German translation of Galileo’s “And yet it moves!” Figure 4, from 1935, is Heartfield’s response to a speech by Hermann Göring, who was spearheading Germany’s interwar rearmament. Göring had talked about the difference between butter and metal: one makes a people fat, the other makes a nation strong. Heartfield’s photomontage shows a family trying to eat various metal items, while the title proclaims: “Hurrah, the butter is all gone!” Figure 5, by Dutch artist...
Paul Schuitema, is an advertising poster for a transport workers’ union. The central image is a graphic representation of the union’s creation of a single identity from the co-ordinated actions of many separate individuals.

Echoes of each of these compositions can be found throughout present-day advertising, both in the US and elsewhere. Before discussing why the original photomonteurs didn’t seem very interested in the kind of montage envisioned by Tucholsky, it may be useful to take a look at some contemporary ads that have followed in the footsteps of their early 20th century predecessors. Figures 6 and 7 replicate key ingredients of Figures 4 and 5. In Figure 4, Heartfield makes a negative connection between one object and another (butter; metal), but he leaves the first object out of the picture and substitutes the second one in its place. Figure 6, a Sony PSP ad, makes a positive connection between two objects (hand-cuffs; PSP = both equally gripping), and, again, the ad leaves the first object out of the picture and substitutes the second one in its place. In Figure 5, Schuitema’s union poster, a panoramic shot of a large group of individuals takes the shape of a single person’s body. Likewise, in Figure 7, a Chinese car ad, a panoramic shot of a large number of individual cars takes the shape of a single entity, the powerful and auspicious Chinese dragon. Finally, getting back to Figure 3, the montage of Hitler’s head on an animal’s body is one of numerous examples of the same formula that we found in Figure 2, namely, the graphic grafting of body parts from one creature onto another.

These body-part montages highlight the question that we started out with: If Heartfield wanted to compare Hitler to a gorilla or some other wild animal, why did he choose to do it in the style of Figure 2 (human head on animal body) rather than the style of Figure 1 (animal on one side, human on the other) – which happens to be the style of Tucholsky’s vision for the future of photomontage? Why do most of Heartfield’s fellow photomonteurs appear to have made a similar choice? What did they think they had to gain? And did they lose anything in the process?

Many of the artists who were experimenting with photomontage in the 1920s and 1930s were also articulate writers. In the essays that are included in the photomontage exhibition catalog, these writers talk openly about their goals. Among these essays, a short piece published in 1934 by Hannah Höch is
particularly noteworthy for its succinct description of photomontage’s past, present, and likely future.\textsuperscript{4} Together with Adrian Sudhalter’s illuminating introduction to the exhibition catalog and Zervigón’s careful reconstruction of Heartfield’s intellectual evolution, these essays give us a reasonable idea of the photomonteurs’ intentions. Their preference for a more integrated style of montage, as opposed to Tucholsky-style separation of images, seems to be a fairly direct offshoot of photomontage’s artistic roots.

As a style of picture-making, photomontage grew out of the Dada movement of the 1910s and 1920s. Dadaism was a reaction to the chaos and madness of World War I, and one of the central features of Dadaist art was the irrational splicing together of incongruous objects (for example, Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 addition of a mustache and goatee to a reproduction of the Mona Lisa). When graphic artists adapted photomontage to the needs of the “applied” arts, such as commercial advertising or political advocacy, the Dadaist taste for incongruous assemblages persisted. Instead of displaying different objects in separate images (e.g., a war-mongering dictator; a predatory beast), artists such as Heartfield produced single images by mixing different parts into one jumbled whole.

What did the artists gain by making that choice? In their study of visual metaphors in present-day advertising, Gkiouzepas & Hogg tested viewers’ responses to the two types of designs that we have been discussing here. As was noted earlier, Gkiouzepas and his co-author use the terms “juxtaposed” and “synthesized” for these two ways of putting together the components of a visual ad. In tests with college students, the synthesized designs elicited more positive reactions, both towards the ads and towards the products in them. Moreover, the study’s findings suggest that the synthesized designs were also more involving mentally.\textsuperscript{5} In that respect, the study fits in with earlier research by McQuarrie & Phillips.\textsuperscript{6}

However, Gkiouzepas & Hogg found that there are limits to the usefulness of synthesized compositions in ads. If the components of an image are too incongruous, a synthesized composition can backfire, and it can end up faring worse with viewers than an equivalent juxtaposed design. On the whole, it seems that juxtaposed designs are easier to understand. In a recent essay on Apple advertising, Linda Scott points out that the “Mac guy/PC guy” campaign “could have been done at any time in the past forty years and hit the target.”\textsuperscript{7} Scott’s observation is mainly a comment on the continuity of cultural attitudes toward computers, but the Mac/PC ads’ simple structure appears to have been a significant factor in the campaign’s longevity. When AdWeek named these ads the “Campaign of the Decade” in 2010, it praised the campaign for offering “transparent understanding of the aspirations of its audience.”\textsuperscript{8}

In a sense, then, the artists who experimented with photomontage in the 1920s and 1930s have bequeathed a somewhat ambiguous legacy to subsequent generations of graphic artists. Both of the books that we have been discussing here emphasize the fact that these pioneering photomonteurs were deeply committed to reaching a wide viewership among ordinary people. And yet they employed visual methods that many ordinary people may have found somewhat confusing. But that is not the whole story. For all their concern about producing images that conveyed a clear message, the photomonteurs
of the interwar period often retained an interest in experimenting with visual incongruity and paradox for its own sake.

In the 1934 essay mentioned earlier, Hannah Höch makes a distinction between “applied” photomontage (particularly advertising), on the one hand, and what she calls “free-form photomontage,” on the other. She describes the latter as “a new and immensely fantastic field for a creative human being: a new, magical territory, for the discovery of which freedom is the first prerequisite.”9 And, while Zervigón’s book ends with the public’s acceptance of Heartfield’s photomontage as “the form of an emerging, radical-left proletarian art,”10 an earlier chapter contains an intriguing account of Heartfield’s admiration for Hollywood cinema and his own plans for creating animated film, inspired by the visual zaniness of Mutt and Jeff cartoons.11

As we try to evaluate the long-term significance of early photomontage for the subsequent history of advertising, it is appropriate to recognize the value of the more irrational, Dada-inspired compositions that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s and then became part of the broad visual culture that future generations of artists dipped into for inspiration. In the world of advertising, that aspect of photomontage’s legacy can be found in ads that abandon the goal of making sense and, instead, use incongruous juxtapositions purely to amuse and to attract attention. Two highly successful video examples: Orangina’s realistically animated creatures with humanoid bodies and animal heads (Figure 8) and Morinaga’s very unrealistically animated candy with “live-action” heads (Figure 9).

Anyone who is interested in the creative trajectory that has led us to this type of advertising will find much to ponder in the Merrill C. Berman Collection’s outstanding exhibition catalog and in Zervigón’s abundantly illustrated, impressively thorough account of Hearfield’s art and the milieu in which it flourished. Both books are models of visual scholarship and exemplary analyses of the persuasive functions of images. Many of the artists that these books deal with believed, or hoped, that their work would help to bring about meaningful change in the world. Recalling again Stephen Prince’s ironic (and Dadaist) comment about Bolsheviks in our breakfast cereal, the final irony in this story is that the spirit of interwar photomontage has resurfaced in animated jokes that don’t seem to aspire to any meaning at
all. Those of us who appreciate visual wit and a touch of frivolity in our advertising should be grateful for that irony.

Paul Messaris is Lev Kuleshov Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He does research on visual communication and digital media, and is the author of Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising.

References


11. Zervigón, p. 239.