

## Photomontage

David Evans

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Technique by which a composite photographic image is formed by combining images from separate photographic sources. The term was coined by Berlin Dada c. 1918 and was employed by artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, and Hannah Höch for images often composed from mass-produced sources such as newspapers and magazines (e.g. *Astronomy and Movement Dada*, 1922)

Photomontages are made using photographic negatives or positives. Negative montages are produced in the darkroom by, for example, sandwiching negatives in an enlarger or masking sections of photographic paper. Positive montages are usually made by combining photographic prints or reproductions. Both approaches and endless variants, such as photographing constructed objects, were used by a specialist such as John Heartfield.



O. G. Rejlander: *Two Ways of Life*, carbon print, image: 406×762 mm, frame: 714×1042 mm, 1857, printed 1920s (The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom); image © Royal Photographic Society/NMEM/SSPL

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A wide range of photomontage-type work was produced in the 19th century. This can be categorized according to its naturalist or formalist orientation. Famous examples of the first type are O(scar) G(ustav) Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life* (1857; Bath, Royal Phot. Soc.) and Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away* (1858; Rochester, NY, Int. Mus. Phot.). Rejlander composed his work with over thirty negatives (a combination print), and Robinson pasted together five separate photographs, both producing composite images that tried to achieve the naturalism of a single shot. Formalist work such as fantasy postcards from the turn of the century made no attempt to disguise spatial disharmonies or incongruities of scale. This second tendency, playing with impossibilities and rooted in popular art, was to be developed by avant-garde artists in the 20th century.

Dadaist photomontage was related to, but distinct from, earlier Cubist, Futurist, and Suprematist collage. The latter occasionally included photographs, but never as a dominant element, unlike many Dada works. There is also frequent use of a third term, photocollage, to describe a work such as Grosz's and John Heartfield's *Universal City* (1919; Berlin, Akad. Kst.), which combined photographs with a wide range of typography and non-photographic imagery.

The invention of photomontage cannot be attributed to one person, although Raoul Hausmann described how he was inspired to invent it during a vacation on the Baltic coast in 1918 (see R. Hausmann: *Courrier Dada*, Paris, 1958, p. 42):

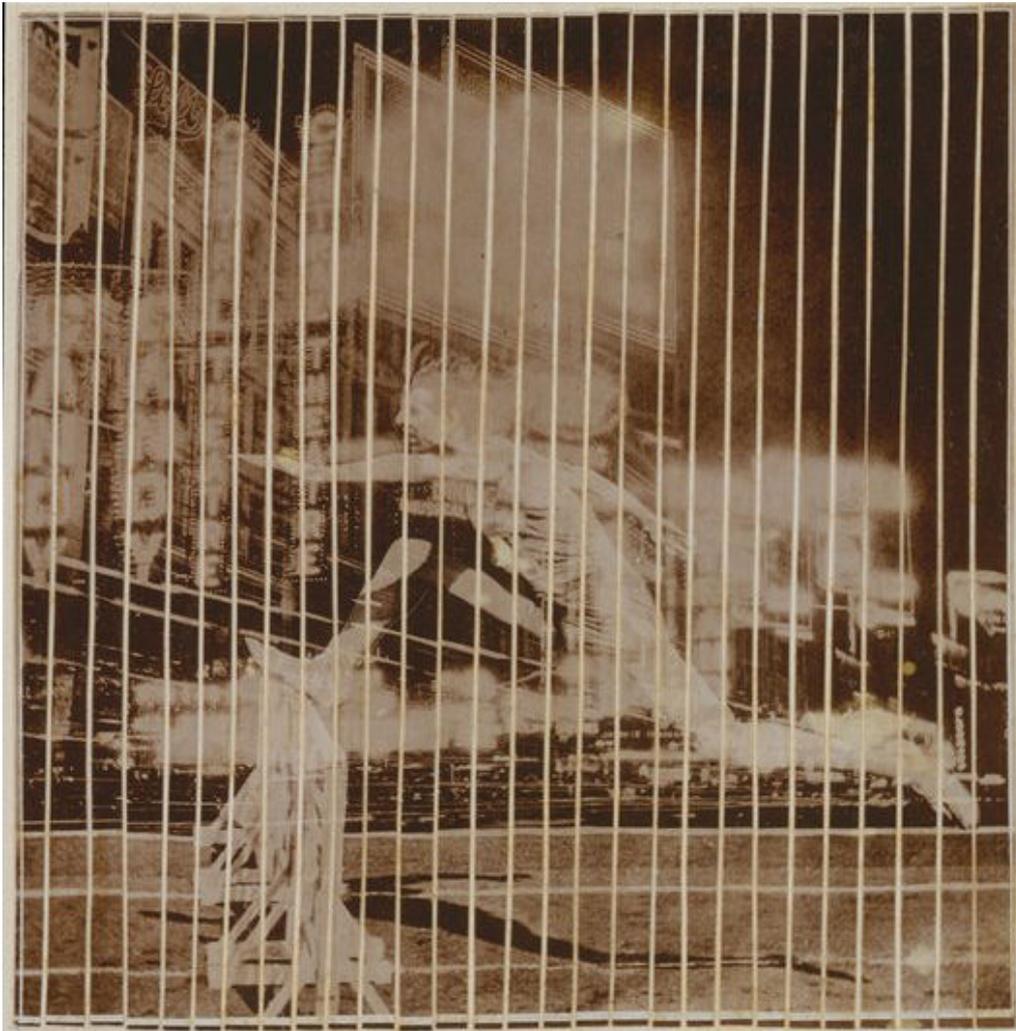
In nearly all the homes was found, hung on the wall, a coloured lithograph representing the image of a grenadier in front of barracks. In order to make this military memento more personal, a photographic portrait of the soldier was glued on the head. It was like a flash; I saw instantly that one could make *pictures* composed entirely of cut-up photos.

The novelty of the work of the Berlin Dadaists lay in their motives rather than their techniques. They were particularly interested in photomontage as a product of, and a comment on, the chaos of World War I. More specifically, they saw it as a mechanical, impersonal alternative to what was considered the excessive subjectivism of German Expressionist art and attitudes. This movement had greatly affected many of the Dadaists, but they felt it had been discredited by the war and made redundant by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Photomontage began as an anti-art provocation, but became a respected medium in Germany and elsewhere by the mid-1920s. As well as becoming a subdivision of fine art, it was also rapidly assimilated by the applied arts of advertising and political propaganda.

Among the exponents of photomontage in advertising were Paul Schuitema (1897–1973) and Piet Zwart in Holland; Herbert Bayer, Max Burchartz (1887–1961), and László Moholy-Nagy in Germany. Bayer regularly used photomontage as a Bauhaus master in typography and advertising, and in the advertising agency that he ran in Berlin from 1928 to 1938. Reflecting on his life's work in

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1969, he noted that 'the photomontage has shown itself to be particularly suitable for advertising in which psychological suggestion or allusion are desired' (Eng. trans. in A. A. Cohen: *Herbert Bayer: The Complete Work*, Cambridge, MA, 1984, pp. 358-60).



El Lissitzky: *Runner in the City*, gelatin silver print, 13.1 x 12.8 cm (5 3/16 x 5 1/16 in.), c. 1926 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987, Accession ID: 1987.1100.47); © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190017326> <<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190017326>>

Photomontage was used for political propaganda from an early date in the former Soviet Union, notably by Gustav Klucis, El Lissitzky (see fig.), Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Sergey Senkin (1894-1963). Their work tended to emphasize and encourage commitment to Communist aims and achievements. In Germany, by contrast, Heartfield pioneered the use of photomontage for political satire. His most famous works appeared in Communist magazines between

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1930 and 1938, using a variety of techniques to ridicule the pretensions of Nazism; *Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk*, published in *Arbeiter-illustrierte-Zeitung* in 1932, was typical of his satirical photomontages.

The first photomontage retrospective was held at the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, in 1931. It was organized by César Domela and included a section on historical precedents, but the bulk of the exhibition lay in the work of around 50 contemporary artists, mainly from Germany and the former Soviet Union. Their work defines the parameters of photomontage.

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