How Has Photomontage Been Used in the Creation of Landscape Images?

Introduction
Photomontage images have changed considerably over the period of the mid 19th to the end of the 20th century. By examining the work of four noted practitioners, this study considers how photomontage has been used to produce landscape images and investigates how techniques and intentions have changed. The controversy over the manipulation of photographic images is also considered.

Definition
The definitions in art dictionaries, e.g. Chilvers (2009) and Lucie-Smith (2003), tend to reflect the techniques of photomontage used in the early part of the 20th century. They generally refer to the cutting and pasting of photographs from newspapers and magazines. Since its first use, the method of creating photomontages has changed dramatically and the definition needs to be updated accordingly. A more appropriate version is used by Martin Krause in his foreword to the book *Surrational Images: PHOTOMONTAGES* where he describes Scott Mutter's photomontages as "composite pictures of objects which when joined together assume a new and more complex definition" *(Mutter 1992)*. This succinctly defines not just how photomontages are created but also the purpose of their creation, and this is the definition adopted for this study.

Origins - Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901)
Combination printing was commonly used in the 19th century "to add figures to a landscape photograph, and to print in a different sky" Ades (1986 p11). Henry Peach Robinson made full use of this process, combining multiple images and staging outdoor studio scenes. He "hired actors or costumed society ladies to pose, defending the idea that photography was to mimic the creativity of painting" (Henry Peach Robinson [s.d.]).

This was controversial at the time. Goldberg describes the dispute between Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson as to the validity of the use of artifice as opposed to 'straight' photography. She considers that Robinson "was trying to make photographs that rivalled paintings on painting's terms, and any artifice that aided the cause was permissible" (Goldberg 1994), whereas Emerson "denounced artifice and photographed people in their natural settings" (ibid).

For Robinson the aesthetic or artistic merit of a photograph was of prime importance. He used his photograph *Storm Clearing Off* (1894), to illustrate what he calls "expression in landscape" (Robinson 1896, p62). He describes the image as appearing to be one of those fortunate circumstances in which everything comes together to produce a wonderful picture, but then goes on to say that the photo was produced by "*deliberate intention*" (ibid. p63). He describes his original intent as portraying "the contrast between sunshine and storm, and the effect of rain".

Image removed for copyright reasons.

It can be viewed at:

http://earlyphotographers.blogspot.com/2011/04/henry-peach-robinson-1830-1901-storm.html

Storm Clearing Off, 1894, Platinum Print, 495 x 385 mm

Without explaining the detail of how the final image was put together, Robinson suggests that the photographs of the sky, ground, rain and sheep were taken at different times and probably different locations. He even leaves open the suggestion that dogs may have been used to herd the sheep into the closely packed formation seen in the final image (ibid. p63).

Robinson argues in his book that the way in which the image has been constructed is of little consequence, what is important is that "the result is due to close and constant observation of nature" (ibid. p63). The scene is unusual in being composed in portrait format, but this does allow the large expanse of sky to be included, which, together with the rain, indicates the power of nature. It is an aesthetically pleasing image which, in the small scale images available for study, is convincing as a final image with no sign of combination printing having been used. It successfully conveys the contrasting weather and the effect of the storm which causes the sheep to herd together.

Dada - John Heartfield (1891-1968)
A major shift occurred just after the First World War with the rise of the Dada art movement; Ades (1986 p12) states that the term photomontage was first used by the Berlin Dadaists. Dadaism was an art movement "characterised by a spirit of revolt against traditional values" Chilvers (2009 p161). It was a revolt against the slaughter of the war and the corrupt bourgeois society that followed.

Artists cut and pasted pictures from magazines and newspapers to form "composite images whose jumbled scale and perspective challenged conventional expectations" Marien (2014 p244) . John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch produced photomontages to dislocate and subvert values of realism, this they achieved "with considerable aesthetic and political effect" Bate (2015 p51).

Not many of the Dada photomontages feature landscapes though one good example is John Heartfield's *The Witching Hour.* This image illustrates the strongly political message that epitomises Heartfield's work. In a graveyard at moonlight, with stormclouds gathering behind, soldiers and politicians gather, while on the left a stone angel looks forlornly to the skies. In 2018 it is more difficult to interpret the

image as, apart from the figure of Adolf Hitler, the other characters are not recognisable.

Image removed for copyright reasons.

It can be viewed at (sixth image):
https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/1849761841/ref=oh_aui_detailpage_o03_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

The Witching Hour, 1932, Photomontage

The scene is described by King and Volland (2015 p90) "As the Weimar republic totters to its doom, corpses from a hideous past loom from their graves hoping for the resurrection of their rotten regime, a ghostly company of generals and bierkeller politicians." As well as Hitler, they identify prominent military and political figures in the montage. The total image is powerful and heavily symbolic, commenting on the rise of National Socialism and the militarisation of the country. Situating soldiers and politicians in a graveyard suggests the country is heading for war. The eerie nature of the scene is emphasised by the full moon and storm clouds.

The image however is not just propaganda; Heartfield was meticulous in his choice of component images and their placement in an overall composition. He "shrewdly combined formal innovation with political analysis, in such a way that aesthetics did not suffer at the expense of politics" Kriebel (2008 p 101).

The image also illustrates a point made by John Berger about photomontage: "The peculiar advantage of photo-montage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at *things* and only afterwards at symbols" (Berger, 1969 p652). So even in this highly symbolic image, the spectator looks first to see who the individual characters are, the

interactions between them and the setting, before considering their symbolic meaning.

Spiral - Romare Bearden (1911-1988)
In 1963 Bearden and others created Spiral "a group formed to promote the work of black artists and explore ways in which they could contribute to the ongoing Civil Rights movement" (Lewis 2011 p25). The artists wanted "to be a part of their times without relinquishing their commitment to aesthetics" (Gelburd 1997 p18).

At one of their meetings, Bearden took along a large number of photographs that he had collected and suggested that the group use them to make a mural. Other members of the group soon lost interest but it gave Bearden the idea to make collages from the photos, which he then photographically enlarged, calling them Projections (Greenberg 2003 p33).

Image removed for copyright reasons.

It can be viewed at:

https://humanitiesusa.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/romare-bearden-the-dove-c-1964/

The Dove, 1964, Projection, 338 x 475 mm

The Dove c1964 is one such Projection or photomontage. It depicts a bustling Harlem street scene, teeming with people. The individual characters are all made from different images, many of them totally out of proportion - half a head peers from an upstairs window with impossibly large fingers below it. The image has a cubist feel, with people and objects examined from different perspectives at the same time. There is little depth to the image, but a strong sense of energy; one can almost hear the bustle of the street. The fracturing of the bodies and limbs gives a jarring edge when examined individually, but the overall sense of the photomontage is one of inclusion. All the people represented are African Americans and the way Bearden has portrayed the scene suggests a series of interactions and activities going

simultaneously. The title of the piece is *The Dove* and the bird is placed centrally on a ledge at the top of the image, looking down at a white cat in the bottom left corner. The Dove is a symbol and "attribute of peace personified" Hall (2008 p112). It could represent hope for the future of the people in the scene (the image was produced at the time of the Civil Rights movement in America), but the cats below may imply a sense of danger.

The nature of the fractured images of people are very reminiscent of the Dadaist photomontages. It is interesting to note that Bearden studied under George Grosz at the Arts Student League (Fine 2011 p185). Grosz was a prominent member of the Berlin Dada movement and is credited, with others, for the invention of the term photomontage (Ades 1986 p12).

Beginning of the 21st century - Jeff Wall
Other artists made use of photomontage from the mid to the end of the 20th century; Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Hamilton, Peter Kennard and Martha Rosler all used the technique.

The final case study is of an image created from 1998-2000. *The Flooded Grave* was composed from photographs of two different Vancouver cemeteries as well as a studio based tank (Art Institute of Chicago [s.d.]). Wall describes the image as "made up of hundreds of computer-generated images superimposed onto a 10-foot photo of a grave". (Cousineau-Levine 2003, p64).

Image removed for copyright reasons.

It can be viewed at:

https://curiator.com/art/jeff-wall/the-flooded-grave

The Flooded Grave, 1998–2000, Transparency in lightbox, 2285 x 2820 mm

A graveyard is depicted on an overcast day, devoid of human presence, with a freshly dug grave prominent in the foreground. The grave seems disproportionately large and viewed from a different perspective compared to that of the rest of the picture. It is filled with water containing marine animals. Wall has used painstaking detail (it took two years to produce) to create a seemingly 'normal' image of something that could not exist, a surreal image of sea-life within a grave. It is this surreal element that gives the image impact, we know it cannot happen, that it is an artifice, but it produces a source of fascination.

The way in which Wall has intricately composed the scene and his use of colour is reminiscent of past painters. The image is displayed in a light box on a large scale (2.29 x 2.82m). Honour and Fleming compare it to Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* and consider that Wall's work "sits in the tradition of history painting" (Honour and Fleming 2009 p901). Wagstaff states that Wall "has a painter's concern with composition , volume, colour, texture and perspective" (Howarth 2005 p120). The basing of scenes on the work of great painters of the past is one that Wall acknowledges with some of his work referencing, among others, Delacroix and Hokusai (Jeff Wall MoMA Interactives [s.d.]).

Conclusion
Since the introduction of photomontage images some 150 years ago there have been three significant developments; in the style of the image, the technology available to produce it; finally the purpose of the image.

To take the first of these, the style of image produced by Jeff Wall bears a greater resemblance to the work of Henry Peach Robinson than to either of the other artists considered. The Dadaists produced images that were intentionally fractured, as did Romare Bearden. Both Robinson and Wall are striving to produce images that look believable and where there is no evidence of the combination of many photographs into a single final image. In this way the style of photomontage has gone full circle.

Digital manipulation technology has advanced considerably in the last two decades and the tools at Wall's disposal enable him to produce convincing images that are far more complex than could have been attempted earlier. This has extended the scope for photomontage immensely.

The purpose of the image changed with the Dada movement. Robinson's photographs were concerned with the aesthetic effect of the final image whereas Heartfield's had a strong political message. This dichotomy continues today; it could be argued that the much of the work of Wall and Gursky is more concerned with aesthetics and that of Kennard and Rosler with politics.

One factor that has not changed is the dispute over 'straight' photography and the use of artifice. Many people now take photographs and manipulate the image on their mobile phones and the old saying 'the camera never lies' is less appropriate than it has ever been. One might, therefore, reasonably expect the techniques used by Wall and Gursky to be generally accepted; however the debate over the use of

artifice in photography still persists. A review of a recent Gursky exhibition said "photography has a particular relationship to truth. Fiddling with it in this sneaky fashion adds layers of complexity to Gursky's meanings, but it also violates a trust and makes me feel uneasy" (Januszczak 2018).

What is the role of the photographer in photomontage? It is self-evident that the photographs used in the montage need to be taken by a photographer, but it is interesting to note that two of the artists studied, Heartfield and Bearden, were not recognised photographers and generally used photographs from other sources. Their images were deliberately fractured and would never be mistaken for a seamless single image. The two photographers, Robinson and Wall, were concerned with producing a final image that showed no sign of the manipulation used to construct it.

What is common to each of the four case studies is that they were all trained to some degree in art. Robinson "was well educated in art" (Bate 2015 p34), Heartfield studied at art school in Munich (King and Volland 2015 p12), Bearden studied under George Grosz (Fine 2011 p185) and Wall studied art history in Canada and London (Guggenheim - Jeff Wall [s.d.]). So whereas to produce a photomontage image one does not *need* to have studied photography, memorable photomontage has been produced by those who have studied art.

2021 words excluding quotations
2345 words including quotations

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