

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

### Introduction

Photomontage images have changed considerably over the past 120 Years. By examining the work of four 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 used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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. Martin Krause describes Scott Mutter's photomontages as "composite pictures of objects which when joined together assume a new and more complex definition" (Mutter 1992). I consider this to be a better definition for the current time as it succinctly defines not just how photomontages are created but also the purpose of their creation.

### Origins - Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901)

Combination printing was commonly used in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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).

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.

### **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).

John Heartfield’s *The Witching Hour* illustrates the strongly political message that epitomises his 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.

*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).

### **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).

*The Dove c1964* 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. 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

*The Dove, 1964, Projection, 338 x 475 mm*

sense of energy; the fracturing of the bodies and limbs gives a jarring edge. 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.

To me, 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 21<sup>st</sup> century - Jeff Wall**

Other artists made use of photomontage from the mid to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Hamilton, Peter Kennard, Martha Rosler and Jerry Uelsmann all used the technique.

*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).

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 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. 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

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

past is one that Wall acknowledges with some of his work referencing, among others, Delacroix and Hokusai (Jeff Wall MoMA Interactives [s.d.]).

### **Landscape or Politics?**

Can Heartfield and Bearden's work be considered as landscape? The images studied here might not initially be classified as landscape as such, they are both overtly political. But I do not think that because an image has a political or social message then it cannot be described as landscape. To adopt such an approach would preclude, for example, Fay Godwin's *Forbidden Land* series from being called landscapes and labelling them as political.

What constitutes a landscape image is, perhaps, an essay title in itself, but I consider it to be a very wide ranging classification and that genres are not mutually exclusive, so an image can be described as both political and landscape.

### **Artifice or Straight Photography**

One factor that has not changed over the past century is the dispute over 'straight' photography and the use of artifice.

Yet artifice has always been an aspect of photography. Emerson criticised Robinson for his use of multiple images but are Emerson's images any more valid? Some believe that they do not portray the reality of East Anglian life "Emerson represents, then, a peculiar kind of imperial subject, using photography to construct the imagery of well-ordered labour for a similarly positioned imperial audience" (Ewing 2015 p19).

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 work of Wall and Gursky is more concerned with aesthetics and that of Kennard and Rosler with politics.

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).

It appears to me that if a photomontage has been made in such a way as to make its method of construction obvious, eg Heartfield and Bearden, then the aesthetics of the image may be criticised but not the way in which it was made. However if the final image shows no sign of having been constructed from multiple images then, in some circumstances, there are still those who will consider it inappropriate. I say 'in some circumstances' because certain photos, eg those of Peter Kennard, do not attract such comments. This may well have something to do with the overtly political message of the image. This seems to be a situation that is unique to photography "The contemporary artist, in all other areas, is no longer restricted to the traditional use of his materials or to the exclusive use of traditional materials" (Uelsmann 1967 p1).

### **Conclusion**

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. A similar point has been made about experimental photography by Jerry Uelsmann who stated that much of it “has been done by individuals whose commitment to photography is but one aspect of their commitment to art”(Uelsmann 1967 p1) .

1846 words excluding quotations  
2232 words including quotations

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