MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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The Digital Image Montage from Jihadistic Propaganda to Cyberwar

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One of John Heartfield's best known self-portraits shows him armed with a pair of scissors, just about to make the decisive cut that threatens to behead the Berlin police commissioner Karl Zörgiebel. Benütze Foto als Waffe (Use Photo as a Weapon) is the title of this photomontage that was published in der Arbeiter-Illustrierten-Zeitung in 1929, parallel to a retrospective of the artist's work. The now iconic self-portrait clearly illustrates how very aware Heartfield was of the explosive political power of his montages.

Modern-day terrorist militias around the world have appropriated the concept of using images as a means of agitation, and they are sometimes even strategically used as visual weapons. This is particularly evident in the image strategy used to record suicide bombings. In addition to eyewitness videos and news photos, which first show the damage caused by an attack, in most cases video statements are circulated – produced by the terrorist militias themselves. They often deal the perpetrators' own attestations of martyrdom, which are combined with footage of the attacks and other scenes. In contrast to press documentation, these videos are characterised by a high degree of editing, including all methods of digital post-production and montage. Sequences are recombined, slowed down or sped up, altered by special effects, highlighted with subtitles, voiceovers or Jihadistic songs and are sometimes enhanced with computer-generated elements.

While Heartfield's montages were shaped by a will to enlighten and expose, the audiovisual montages used by today's terrorist militias are campaign offensives employed as a means of propagandistic control. Prominent examples include video statements made by the 9/11 hijackers. Using the blue screen method, these recordings were subsequently montaged with other footage to make them appear as if they were shot live directly in front of the World Trade Center's burning twin towers (ill. 1). The surreal intertwining of two moments separated in time not only makes the threats of the perpetrators seem like prophecies, but also turns the focus on those who died for their deeds, who now speak to us like survivors from the hereafter, stylising themselves as martyrs. Another video attestation of the Islamic State (IS), released after three suicide bombings in Iraq in 2008, also made use of blue screen montages for visual conviction.

1 – Al-Qaida / As-Saḥāb Media, *The Wills of the Martyrs of New York & Washington*, 66:29 mins., 16 April 2002, video statement by Ahmed Ibrahim al-Haznawi, in Arabic with English subtitles, film still


2–3 – Islamic State in Iraq / al-Furqān Media Production Agency, *Knights of the Testimony* 5, 45:17 mins., 2008, in Arabic, film stills

For instance, when the video imagery presents the assassins emerging from an explosion of flames as if rising from the dead (ill. 2), or when they are integrated into computer-generated representations of heaven (ill. 3). The montage, designed with digital means, makes a sensuous experience of the alleged transformation from the earthly realm to the heavenly plane.

These digital productions of suicide assassinations are by no means intended to simulate documentary reality. Instead, the montages are presented in their digital "made character". Principles of fact and fake are consciously rejected. This becomes especially apparent in an example of a video statement that the IS media agency released in 2017, where all the typical conventions of the genre – covering the drive to the site as well as attestations about the actual attack – are reconstructed in computer simulations (ill. 4). Given the otherwise hyperrealistic design, the scene of the bomb attack stands out for its unrealistic portrayal. The detonation's dark cloud of smoke dissolves completely within only a few seconds, openings the view onto buildings which show no trace of the destruction. As if nothing had happened, the target of the attack reappears intact in the light of the setting sun (ill. 5) – providing all the more reason to question and define what this "attestation" is meant to bear witness to, because it doesn't seem to be about legitimating an actual suicide attack or intent on highlighting military exploits. Instead the simulated assassination attempt has the character of a fictitious training exercise which can be practiced again and again. The computer simulation is the corollary development in a gamification of the video testimony, consciously built up with the aesthetics of first-person shooter games, that shifts viewers and/or players into the role of perpetrators.[1] The vision of suicide assassins as immortal avatars serves fantasies of omnipotence and connects the Jihad to the gaming world. Lack of factual evidence exposes the affective purpose of these images: For the creators of Jihadist montage, the purpose seems to have less to do with attesting to an actual attack, but is instead about convincing viewers through immersive audiovisual means. This is precisely where the images unfold their power as weapons.

The image constructions of the terror militias inevitably raise questions about possibilities for visual counterattacks – about visual "weapons" that make use of Heartfieldian sensibilities. The artistic strategies Heartfield established at the start of the 20th century seem more relevant today than ever before. In view of the abundant possibilities to manipulate images using Photoshop, the wide circulation of images through social media, and the ubiquitous commentary of image-text couplings in that so-called memes, we are experiencing an overwhelming expansion of digital image montages on the internet. Even the propaganda images of the Islamic State have been countered with numerous satire campaigns, as part of a call for a cyberwar against the IS.[2] A recording of one of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's first speeches, in which he made inflammatory remarks against the West, shows him wearing a silver wristwatch that was inter-
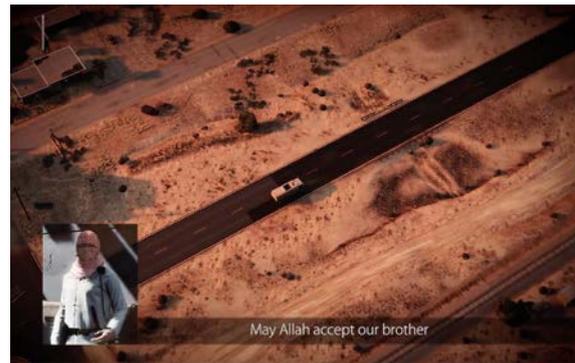
4–5 – Islamic State / Al-Haqq Mujahideen media agency, *All praise is due to Allah*, 6:38 mins., 2017, in Arabic with English subtitles, film stills

6 – *Anonymous@AnonyOpNews*, Twitter, 8 December 2015, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1052305-operation-isis-opisis, accessed on 13 June 2020

preted as a luxury brand made by an expensive Swiss watch-maker. Baghdadi's Choice was the title of a corresponding photomontage that went viral. Depicting the IS leader as the model for an "Omega" ad, it blatantly contradicts his anti-West propaganda. Photoshop parodies of the self-portrayals of Jihad-ist fighters combined with digitally montaged duck faces – under the hashtag #AllahuQuackbar – also rapidly became internet successes (ill. 6). Very few of these satirical memes are so well thought out and profound as John Heartfield's photomontages. Nevertheless, in this cyberwar of images they show that digital montages are currently being used not just to incite violence, but also to attack visual propagandists.

Translated from German by Wendy Wallis

1 This is shown in a comparative analysis of video attestations released after suicide bombings, which the author researched as part of her dis-sertation. Straub's findings and analyses will appear in a forthcoming publication, Das Selbstmordattentat im Bild. Aktualität und Geschichte von Märtyrerdarstellungen. See also Verena Straub, "'Living Martyrs': Testifying What is to Come", Kerstin Schankweiler, Verena Straub, Tobias Wendl (eds.), Image Testimonies. Witnessing in Times of Social Media. London, 2019, pp. 139–153.
2 For example, in 2015 online activists from the hacker group Anonymous called for a "virtual war" against the self-appointed caliphate via a video message. In addition to attacks on IS websites and social media channels, the distribution of satirical photomontages and memes were also planned in such a cyberwar. See https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-terror-attacks/cyber-war-what-can-anonymous-really-do-isis-n465836, accessed on 15 June 2020.