John Heartfield's Communism

A Review of Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield by Sabine T. Kriebel

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Abstract

Sabine T. Kriebel's *Revolutionary Beauty* is the most thorough study to date of the Communist photomontage artist John Heartfield's work for the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) in the late 1920s and 1930s. Kriebel analyses Heartfield's production through the frame of 'suture', a concept she derives from film theory. She argues that Heartfield's work at once stimulated collective solidarity at the same time as it cultivated habits of visual suspicion and active political thinking in ways that may not have always coincided with official Communist aesthetic doctrine. Although Kriebel's approach yields many valuable insights, there is nonetheless a danger that her theory of subject-formation may preclude a more critical understanding of representative politics as a form of mediation.

Keywords

art – art history – Communist Party of Germany – John Heartfield – photography – photomontage – Weimar Republic

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Sabine T. Kriebel has written the most thorough study to date, and in any language, of John Heartfield's artistic practice in the late 1920s and 1930s. This alone is reason to take note of her achievement. Yet the interest of *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* exceeds the merely academic. Heartfield – born Helmut Herzfeld in Berlin, 1891 –

was in his time Germany's most widely recognised practitioner of political photomontage; alongside Bertolt Brecht, he was also, perhaps, the nation's most compelling proponent of an explicitly communist aesthetic. Heartfield's compositions for Willi Münzenberg's *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (*Workers' Illustrated Magazine*; henceforth *AIZ*) were among the most widely circulated images in late Weimar Germany, where they competed – successfully – against commercial advertising and rival political propaganda for a share of attention in an emerging field of mass photographic media. His example therefore illuminates both the potentials and the pitfalls of a radically engaged artistic practice. Lessons from the German experience of some eighty years past may still be relevant not only for present-day militants, but also to anyone with a stake in – or against – the mobilisation of aesthetic strategies in the interest of party politics.

Kriebel's great service is to have reckoned with Heartfield as a political artist by way of close attention to visual form and a theoretically sophisticated model of the relation between artworks and their audiences. Another recent book, Andrés Mario Zervigón's *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage*, published in 2013, traces the development of the artist's work from World War I through the 1920s, with an emphasis on his passage through the orbit of Berlin Dada.¹ Kriebel, by contrast, zeroes in on the brief but critical window of 1929–33 – the final years of the Weimar Republic, and also, not coincidentally, the period when Heartfield created his most iconic photomontages. The initial date marks the start of the artist's collaboration with the *AIZ*. This magazine was a remarkable and, indeed, from the present perspective, nearly an incomprehensible phenomenon: a stridently communist weekly answering directly to the Comintern rather than the national Party, it nonetheless achieved a weekly print run of around half a million copies by 1931 – well below that of the more moderate *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, but sufficient nonetheless to secure its status as one the era's most widely-circulated popular magazines. (Indeed its actual readership was likely far higher than circulation figures suggest, given that the *AIZ* encouraged workers to read each issue collectively and then to pass it on, for the benefit of those who could not afford such an investment themselves.) 1933, of course, marks Hitler's rise to power. Heartfield then fled to Prague, where a new incarnation of the *AIZ* would continue publishing to a much-diminished audience consisting primarily of fellow German refugees. Within this general frame, the organisation of Kriebel's book is at once chronological and thematic. Her five chapters trace

1 Zervigón 2012.

the development of Heartfield's work from his first contributions to the *AIZ* through to the dramatic elections of 1932, and finally to the nearly surreal work of his exile years. At the same time, she continuously builds an ever-more complex description of the visual and psychic operations of the photomontage medium.

Revolutionary Beauty is light on new archival discoveries. Perhaps there is simply not much left to unearth. Kriebel's originality is methodological, then. She applies insights from psychoanalysis and film theory in order to explain the way in which Heartfield's photomontages both enveloped their viewers in a convincing illusion of reality and, at the same time, jolted them out of it through various uncanny effects. The end product (in the most optimistic scenario) is thus an active, politically conscious viewer. This line of interpretation leans heavily on a tradition of leftist aesthetic thought that took shape precisely in Heartfield's own time. Kriebel is indeed careful to acknowledge these precedents: among her points of reference are the Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii (theorist of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarisation), Bertolt Brecht's concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), and Walter Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction. Where Kriebel breaks rank from this set of canonical forebears, however, is in her sensitivity to the ambiguous nature of Heartfield's most powerful images. It is not only the case that his works generate a stereotypical revolutionary subject: they are also shot through with complex and sometimes contradictory circuits of desire and identification, the political ramifications of which are not inevitably progressive. Her approach is valuable for its willingness to criticise Heartfield's politics – and certainly those of the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, henceforth KPD) – by way of an attunement to the specificity of given political conjunctures, rather than blanket dismissal.

Kriebel's most effective tool for exploring these many valences is the dynamic that she calls 'suture'. She borrows this concept from 1970s-vintage film theorists such as Jacques-Alain Miller, Kaja Silverman and Christian Metz, all of whom operated under the powerful dual influence of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. In this body of theory, 'suture' for the most part refers to the psychic mechanism by which subjects are interpellated by a symbolic, ideological order (paradigmatically, the fictive space of classic Hollywood film) – they emerge *as* subjects through their insertion into a discourse that promises to compensate for their lack. Kriebel's somewhat paradoxical aim is to bring this theory to bear in order to show how Heartfield 'sutured' his viewers *out* of an ideological field, so to speak – but also *into* another. Even as he aimed to trigger identification with the Communist movement, his recourse to negation and his manifest doubt

as to the veracity of the photograph's indexical link to reality nonetheless prevented his image-world from congealing into the smooth, totalised space typical of, for instance, Socialist Realism. Hence the process of suture comes to look significantly less cut-and-dry than typical ideology-critique would have us believe. Kriebel's most comprehensive statement of her argument is likely the following:

This book's line of inquiry suggests that a leftist political critique, in Heartfield's case, *resides in* suture. In their organic illusionism, Heartfield's *AIZ* works, by internalizing and miming photography's means through photomontage, offer a radical Left appraisal of the mass-circulated photograph and its production of political consciousness. Through that mimicry – which Heartfield exceeds or semiotically saturates with parody and caricature – these works critically intervene in a photographically reproduced reality. Rather than producing a holistic Communist imagery of desire, Heartfield's fictions of wholeness slide into the realm of the absurd, the hallucinatory, and the chimerical, welding together a world of psychic instability. His photomontages stage our illusory, unstable apprehension of the world by *exploiting* the discourses of illusion, of false cognition, by engaging in and reproducing its very terms. Heartfield's work functions within the conventions of photographic practice while subverting them, thus questioning the privileged place of photography in the production of consciousness. Thus, the viewer experiences a constant relay between illusion and disillusionment, myth and demystification, accompanied by a baseline of seditious laughter. (p. 12.)²

Nearer to the end of this review I will take issue with some of Kriebel's manoeuvres here. First, though, it will be useful to see how she brings these claims to bear on specific sequences in Heartfield's production – for it is here that the book does its most interesting work.

Kriebel's first chapter turns on Heartfield's iconic photomontaged self-portrait of September 1929 – his introduction to the readers of the *AIZ*. In it, Heartfield appears to slice off the head of the Berlin police chief Karl Zörgiebel with a pair of scissors; headlines exhort readers to 'Use photography as a weapon!' Kriebel patiently reconstructs the political context of the artist's rhetoric. 1929, as she explains, in fact marked a turning point in the KPD's development. In the autumn of the previous year, the Party had been wracked by the so-called Wittorf Affair: its leader, Ernst Thälmann, was found to have

² Emphasis in the original.

covered up acts of embezzlement by a member of the Central Committee and was pressured to resign his post. A number of Thälmann's opponents within the KPD, dubbed the *Versöhnlergruppe* (or 'conciliator faction'), attempted to use this crisis as an opportunity to nudge the Party away from the aggressively anti-coalition policies of the so-called Third Period that had been proclaimed at the Comintern's World Congress earlier that summer. Thälmann was reinstated as a result of Stalin's personal intervention, however, and the *Versöhnlergruppe* quickly became marginalised. Any possible alliance with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), officially described as 'social fascists', was then definitively ruled out. These events coincided with an intensification of political street violence and state repression in Germany, one consequence of which was the 'Bloody May' of 1929, when Zörgiebel's police killed dozens of May Day demonstrators in Berlin.

Heartfield, Kriebel argues, attempted to carefully position himself in relation to these developments – in part out of a certain of insecurity vis-à-vis his comrades. The artist had connections with members of the *Versöhnlergruppe*. His stridently bloodthirsty self-portrayal as Zörgiebel's decapitator was, Kriebel argues, an attempt to find his way back into the Party's good graces, though, importantly, it was an overture he launched from the more comfortable position of Münzenberg's independent *AIZ* rather than the KPD's official organ, the *Rote Fahne*, for which he had previously worked. The image is therefore a material record of complex identification and self-staging at a moment of upheaval within the German left. Kriebel likewise uses this episode to draw out the many gradations between full allegiance to the Party and a wider range of dissident opinion. Heartfield, she argues, may not in fact have always been in lockstep with the Party line: rather, he operated in the more diffuse field addressed par excellence by the *AIZ* itself, of which Kriebel writes that its 'brilliance lay in its ability to speak to the broad spectrum of Lefts during the Weimar Republic, many of which felt disenfranchised by both the radical KPD and the more moderate Socialist Party' (pp. 28–29). Her most interesting suggestion here is that the aesthetic of shock and physical violence – inherited, in part, from Heartfield's participation in Berlin Dada³ – that so characterises this image results from a complex psychic reaction to the specific circumstances both of its production and of Heartfield's personal history, and cannot adequately be described as a straightforwardly orthodox specimen of KPD propaganda.

3 In this connection, Kriebel cites Brigid Doherty's important writings on Dada montage. See Doherty 1997.

This analysis constitutes a fine demonstration of the methodology known as the social history of art, as that term has come to be understood since the 1970s: not merely a tautological statement of the class interests of patrons and producers, but rather a finely textured description of how the various publics of art go into the making of it, that is, into its morphology. The chapter serves as an introduction to the readings that follow, most of which maintain the same high level of historical sensitivity. The second, for example, builds on the psychoanalytic frame proposed in the Introduction to describe the role of mechanically reproduced photographic images in the Weimar Republic's rapidly growing print culture. Photomontage, she here argues, was able to play a subversive, deconstructive role with respect to the emerging photojournalistic conventions that it cannibalised. Particularly compelling is Kriebel's discussion of 'Photomontage in the Year 1932', as she titles her third chapter. At the beginning of this year, Heartfield was, in fact, not in Germany at all, but rather in the USSR: he had travelled to Moscow late in 1931 and would remain there through the spring.⁴ Kriebel explores both the still somewhat murky relationship between Heartfield and the Soviet avant-garde – at a moment when the latter was coming under intense attack from the new ideologues of Socialist Realism – as well as the dire political crisis that met him on his return to Berlin. A series of emergency elections during that year brought the KPD into its most intense conflict with the Nazis to date. Heartfield responded in kind with some of his most biting photomontages: images of Hitler as a puppet of capital, and the party he led as a collection of brutes.

Ironically, one of the most interesting sections in the entire book barely touches on Heartfield at all. Kriebel reconstructs the brief but fascinating Nazi experiment with photomontage. Until 1932, the medium had been closely associated with the political left, largely thanks to Heartfield's dominance. The Nazis first made significant use of it in the context of a massive expansion of the political press that accompanied the nearly apocalyptic instability of this pivotal election year. Kriebel proposes that 'photomontage emerged front and center as *the* pictorial means of mass agitation just at the moment of capitalism's crisis and democracy's demise' (p. 110).⁵ The SPD, too, dabbled in the technique as a way to ratchet up the intensity of its visual rhetoric. The aesthetics of shock, visceral interpellation, and violent caricature that

4 Kriebel here builds on the important work of Maria Gough and Hubertus Gäßner. Despite their superb archival research, there are still a number of unresolved questions about the exact dates of Heartfield's trip. See Gäßner 1991, Gough 2009.

5 Emphasis in the original.

Heartfield had pioneered over the previous few years then briefly saturated the political spectrum, only to disappear again as the Nazis consolidated their more familiarly classicising aesthetic following their ascent to power.⁶

Another of Kriebel's claims, here, is that even in the furnace of election-year propagandising, Heartfield's (slight) deviations from KPD orthodoxy remain perceptible. One of her exhibits is Heartfield's *AIZ* cover of 24 July 1932, which depicts three bared proletarian arms firmly grasping the banner of antifascist unity: one sporting a hammer and sickle armband, another with the triple arrow insignia of the SPD's Iron Front, and the last evidently unaffiliated. The slogan beneath proclaims that 'Red Unity will set you free!' Given that the KPD and the Comintern did not waver on the doctrine of social fascism during this period, and hence maintained an undiminished official hostility to the SPD, Kriebel is surely right to call this image 'at once visually compelling and politically controversial' (p. 141). Aside from perpetuating the hallowed if dubious trope of left unity as the salvation from fascism that never was, however, Kriebel's reading may overstate Heartfield's independence. The image appeared on the magazine's cover, after all, and presumably would not have been approved if it had conflicted with the *AIZ*'s editorial policy (which itself may, of course, have conflicted with the KPD's line, at least momentarily). The slogan of united antifascist action may well have been more broadly disseminated within the Party and among its fellow travellers than the letter of its doctrine suggests.

This is but one of a number of instances in which Kriebel attempts to rescue Heartfield from abject subservience to the KPD. She claims that the artist is better seen as a '*Gefühlskommunist*, or a radical left-wing humanist driven by his deep sense of injustice, than a dogmatic devotee of the party of the working class' (p. 46). Granting that almost no one's personal politics are ever identical with a given party affiliation, it is nonetheless difficult to concede Kriebel's point. To this reviewer, at least, the evidence for heterodoxy looks slim. Heartfield's entanglement in the Wittorf Affair seems to have been a matter of contingency rather than principle. Moreover, Heartfield's later difficulties with Stalinist authorities do not in themselves argue for tacit dissent (as Kriebel acknowledges). Any number of impeccably enthusiastic comrades were to meet far more dire fates. So it was, for instance, with Heartfield's erstwhile competitor, the Soviet photomonteur Gustav Klucis, whose propaganda work toed the Stalinist line up to the very eve of his execution in 1938 (evidently for the sin of being an old Bolshevik and a Latvian to boot). In any case, Heartfield's one real chance to throw his lot in with a competing version of the

6 The literature on Nazi photomontage is surprisingly thin. For an important, though perfunctory, assessment see Buchloh 1984.

left had come much earlier. The artist and his brother, the publisher Wieland Herzfelde, were among the first recruits at the KPD's founding conference in December 1918, or at any rate so they later claimed in an origin story of doubtful literal, but substantial symbolic, truth.⁷ Heartfield remained loyal to the party throughout the period of its dispute with the KAPD (*Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands*, or Communist Workers' Party of Germany) and other fractions of the communist left in the early 1920s; the suppression of the USSR's Left Opposition likewise passed without a murmur. By the time he began working for the AIZ the window of opportunity for dissent had therefore almost certainly closed – as had the real prospect of world communist revolution. Heartfield himself was tight-lipped on these matters. We are left, then, with the testimony of the work – and this, it seems to me, is unambiguous enough. Although it may be possible to excavate traces of subterranean opposition here and there, the manifest content of his images quite precisely tracks the official line (with all due allowance for possible divergences between the KPD and the Comintern), from the Third Period doctrine of 'social fascism' to conciliation under the banner of the Popular Front a few years later. Perhaps it is better to leave the question at this and to admit that Heartfield's innermost (political) life is as inaccessible to us as anyone else's.

Fortunately, the matter of Heartfield's loyalty to the Stalinist KPD does no fatal damage to Kriebel's broader argument, which resumes in a consideration of laughter's role as a political weapon. Here she draws on Sigmund Freud's and Henri Bergson's theories of humour in order to argue for a 'structural analogy between photomontage and joke work' (p. 168). This chapter, the fourth, limns transformations of 'left-wing laughter' in Heartfield's imagery following the Nazi rise to power – a desperate situation, in political terms, that nonetheless stimulated a number of the artist's most striking inventions. Georg Lukács once said, rather dismissively, that the effect of a good photomontage is the same as that of a good joke. Hence it is all the more pleasing that Kriebel, in this chapter, makes use of a little-known and in fact untranslated essay of his from 1932, '*Zur Frage der Satire* [On the Question of Satire]'. Satire, in Kriebel's paraphrase of Lukács, produces 'holy hate', unsublated revulsion, rather than 'reconciliation or propitiation; its aim is to unmask, not to give pleasure' (pp. 182–183). But

7 Kriebel points out that it is implausible that Heartfield received the Parteibuch (a document confirming party membership) on 30 December 1918, as the brothers later claimed, given that in all probability no such thing had yet been printed. Zervigón likewise questions this story; see Zervigón 2012, p. 154. Kriebel's account of the relationship between the two brothers and the psychic effects of their difficult childhood is very interesting, but addressing it would take us too far afield from the central concerns of this review.

humour is also rooted in the realm of the corporeal, the sensual; laughter activates a dimension of 'uncanny liveness' with the potential to show up the travesty of life under capital's dominance. Kriebel constellates Lukács with Anatolii Lunacharskii and Mikhail Bakhtin, Soviet figures who were also, in the same period, committed to theorising laughter as a subversive, embodied manifestation of proletarian revolt; the debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno over the progressive qualities of humour in mass cultural forms such as Mickey Mouse cartoons also helps to fill out Kriebel's picture. Heartfield's photomontages after 1933 revive some of the uncanny violence of the Dada period in order to 'provoke psychosomatic experiences in the viewer, intertwining photographic specificity, familiar cultural references, and the dialectics of pleasure and horror, desire and denial' (p. 208). These pictures frequently border on bad taste, or even, indeed, encroach on the aesthetics of Heartfield's enemies, the Nazis (imagery of physical and mental degeneracy proliferates in these years). Kriebel's accomplishment in this chapter is to show that Heartfield's grotesqueries of the 1930s partook of a broader leftist discourse on humour, the conditions of which included the inexorable Stalinisation of official Communist artistic doctrine as well as the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Europe.

The question of leftist satire's fate during (very) bad times for the left carries through in Kriebel's final chapter. She begins with an account of a surprisingly little-researched episode: the Nazi censorship of a caricature exhibition staged by the Mánes Art Association in Prague, in the spring of 1934. Czechoslovakia was, of course, still sovereign at that time; nonetheless, the German envoy stationed there demanded the removal of seven works from the show – five of them Heartfield's. A discussion of the artist's precarious position in exile leads, somewhat unexpectedly, to another of Kriebel's concerns: the relation of Heartfield's work to the contemporaneous phenomenon of Surrealism. She does so via a diagnosis of the German artist's 'aesthetic politics of transience, instability, and contingency – in short, a rhetoric of temporality' (p. 225). What exactly this means, and why it is interesting, takes Kriebel some effort to explain, and consequently the argument here is perhaps not her strongest. Heartfield, she notes, reacted to the literal disappearance of his images from the Mánes exhibition with a photomontage in which a wall of his own *AIZ* images fade away, ghostlike, to reveal a Nazi prison and a battered corpse. The legend below reads: 'The more pictures they remove, the more visible becomes reality!' Kriebel takes the somewhat counterintuitive but ultimately convincing approach of reading this image not so much as a protest against the vulnerability of pictures to political intervention, but rather as a mobilisation of their mutability – and transience – to antiauthoritarian ends. His photomontages

are a kind of training ground for visual scepticism. Party solidarity takes a backseat here to a more individualistic politics of revolt. In the total failure of the existing Communist Party to mount an effective resistance to the Nazi state, communism itself becomes a matter of political redemption, an idea or potential, that Heartfield evokes only negatively through a dreamlike world of horror and distant hope, rather than through an official rhetoric of inevitable progress.

It will not be surprising to find, then, that Kriebel once again links Heartfield to Walter Benjamin. (The two had in fact met in Paris in 1935.) Much of her interpretation in this chapter proceeds under the sign of the critic's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and in particular the theory of allegory that he develops there.⁸ Heartfield's imagery of death, and especially his repeated use of the *Totenkopf* or death's head motif, not only points to a literal fixation on Europe's grim geopolitics but also shares a sensibility with Benjamin's 'representations of history as a calamitous failure' (p. 247). This vision has its roots as much in the experience of World War I and its attendant traumas as in later developments. Kriebel argues, again, that Heartfield's use of fragmentary, allegorical imagery implicitly contests the ideology of Socialist Realism, which by contrast demanded transparency in representation. Heartfield's works thus 'figure visual knowledge as incomplete, uncertain and irrational' (p. 250). Another key reference in this chapter is Louis Aragon's 1935 essay on Heartfield, from which Kriebel in fact borrows her book's title. Like Benjamin, Aragon – a former Surrealist himself who had by this time joined the French Communist Party – insisted on the dimensions of irrational fantasy and imagination as part of the repertoire of leftist aesthetics; Heartfield suggested, for him (in Kriebel's paraphrase), 'the groundwork for an accessible avant-gardist Socialist Realism that fuses the individual psyche with the collective psyche, the poetic with the revolutionary, the imagination with the real, the unconscious with the material' (p. 232). Benjamin's work in the 1930s also famously reflects the modulation of his earlier insights by an attraction to the new French avant-garde. By conjoining Benjamin to Aragon, Kriebel is thus able to raise the question of 'a socialist surrealism' (p. 229): a chimera, of sorts, that nonetheless persists as one of the most fascinating products of European art at the moment of its descent into the inferno. It is also a reminder of the very high stakes that were once set on the question of unconscious psychic reality and its link to political action – a sobering reminder, perhaps, in a moment when vaguely

8 Benjamin 1994. Kriebel also references the work of Paul de Man, another influential theorist of allegory.

surrealist strategies have been generalised throughout the art world and the common culture alike, evidently to little subversive effect.

In this chapter, as throughout the book, Kriebel's method links a discourse on surrealism that took form in the 1980s – particularly thanks to the writings of Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and other critics associated with the journal *October* – to a more recent tendency in art-historical scholarship on the interwar period. This latter trend marks a turn away from a fixation on the avant-garde – its successes and retreat – to a perspective that sees evidently reactionary phenomena such as the post-World War I 'Return to Order' in a more complexly mediated (one is tempted to use the word 'dialectical') fashion. What distinguishes this move from an earlier generation's post- or anti-modernist revisionism is that the value of the avant-garde itself is generally not thereby put in question: the stake is rather to read signs of the continual development of avant-gardist ruptures *within* the forms that followed and displaced them. Kriebel's text could thus be taken as a further contribution to a history of 'realism after modernism', to invoke the title of an exceptional recent book by Devin Fore.⁹ We can thus speak of an emerging holistic art history of the first half of the last century. Undoubtedly this signifies a more complete and nuanced understanding of the period. Yet one may, nonetheless, occasionally be forgiven nostalgia for the polemical habits of the 1980s, when the legacy of modernism was more painfully near.¹⁰

This, in fact, leads me to my political rather than art-historical critique of Kriebel's text. Though one can hardly blame her for it, given the scope of her project, a politically engaged reader may at times be frustrated that the content of Heartfield's work seems here to be occluded by an emphasis on form. I should clarify that I do not mean to repeat a hackneyed Marxist attack on 'formalism': it is rather that in *Revolutionary Beauty* the means by which Heartfield's work constructs an 'active' viewing subject – itself a political matter, of course – may leave one unsure as to what that subject is supposed to

9 Fore 2012.

10 I should add that a history remains to be written that would properly link the anti-avant-gardist thrust of late 1920s German culture to contemporaneous economic and technological developments. Scholarship on the *Retour à l'ordre*, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and related phenomena has overwhelmingly focused on ideological factors. However, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, among others, pointed out long ago that it was during the late Weimar period that German industry rationalised to a wholly new extent. What we see as a revulsion against Dadaist and Expressionist chaos in favour of order may, then, not only index the ebbing of the global revolutionary tide, but also (in fact the two dynamics are not separate) the advent of new productive forces and a new organisation of capitalist enterprise. See Sohn-Rethel 1987.

do, or, alternately, where exactly it came from. This may however be a broader, even a structural, problem in scholarship on the radical interwar avant-gardes. Any such endeavour today will necessarily aim to reconstruct its objects from the standpoint of a profoundly different political and historical context – namely, one in which the spectre of international proletarian revolution has all but vanished.

Kriebel's approach has certain points in common, for instance, with Christina Kiaer's in her 2005 book, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*.¹¹ (This may not be entirely fortuitous, as both authors received their doctorates in art history at the University of California, Berkeley, within a few years of each other.) In this text, Kiaer approaches early Soviet advertising and design through the notion of the 'comradely object' – a phrase she extracts from the Constructivist critic Boris Arvatov, and which designates manufactured things that the new revolutionary subject was not only intended to manipulate but which also in some active way were to struggle *alongside* their human makers and users. This is, for her, a way to answer the question she poses at the beginning of the book: 'what happens to the individual fantasies and desires organized under capitalism by the commodity fetish and the market after the revolution?'¹² For Kiaer, the stimulation of appetitive desire was not antithetical to Russian socialism, but was rather essential to it, if it was not to cede ground to the supposed libidinal pull of Western commodity aesthetics. Soviet objects would cajole their consumers into revolutionary solidarity. In the process, however, the line between communist agitprop and capitalist advertising comes to look very thin indeed. Kriebel likewise fixates on the relation between objects – in this case, Heartfield's photomontages – and their imagined consumers. Her gambit, like Kiaer's, is to resituate artefacts that an older anticommunist perspective would happily write off as 'propaganda' in terms of the consumer's desire rather than simple indoctrination. But this is a curious sort of defence: the agency of the consumer is recognised, as per a longstanding insight of Marxist cultural studies, but *as* consumer, in other words, as a subject structured fundamentally by a certain susceptibility to enticement, whether political or gustatory. Then, in a second torsion, this subject-of-consumption becomes identified with the revolutionary subject, due to the specific quality of the symbolic or appetitive structure into which it is interpellated (left-wing, Soviet, etc.).

And here is where the problem with Kriebel's 'suture' becomes evident. The point may, indeed, be to produce an 'active' viewer, but there is a danger that

11 Kiaer 2005.

12 Kiaer 2005, p. 1.

this will turn out to be a dismayingly passive sort of activity. The presumed scenario is something like this: an undifferentiated subject (or pre-subjective individual) comes into contact with a cultural artefact – or a commodity – by which she is then subjectivised: either as consumer or as member of a revolutionary collective, or, somehow, as both. Which way things actually turn out is evidently contingent on the texture of the mediatic sphere. This, at any rate, is what one gathers from Kriebel's frequent references to subjectivity being 'constructed' or 'produced' by, among other things, photography. The possibility that viewers/consumers may come to artefacts with pre-existing interests, interests that may in fact conflict with *both* the desiring structures of capitalism *and* with modes of leftist political representation, is oddly repressed in Kriebel's account – as is the fact that the commodity fetish's structuration of the subject is not a matter of the allure of individual objects of consumption, but is rather primarily a result of the 'real abstraction' operative at a more fundamental level in every instance of exchange.¹³ Because her critique of capitalist socialisation is posed at this level, it ends up fixating on matters of consciousness and persuasion, rather than class interest per se. Another way to put this is that Kriebel's perspective remains that of 'the left', which forever aims to rally the indifferent masses to its side.

The result is an unexpected confluence of advertising psychology with classical vanguardism, though with the latter now leached of its determinacy. The subject produced is no longer a particular sort of militant, but rather a generic political and 'active' individual. At this point it is perhaps worth returning to Kiaer. One of her concerns in *Imagine No Possessions* is to evade a common leftist criticism of the USSR's New Economic Policy (or NEP, initiated in 1921), namely the charge that this period marks the definitive end to the revolutionary process that had begun in 1917. Politically, Kiaer's reasoning may not be entirely sound, but since this matter is of no direct relevance to the present review I will let it pass without further comment. It is, however, worth noting that once again a focus on the mechanisms by which leftist subjectivation takes place, in and through the media or consumer products – a concern that is laudable in its own right, to be sure – unfortunately seems to enforce a kind of methodological indifference to the social *content* that these forms mediate. Kiaer's book, for all its many virtues, therefore displaces the content of revolutionary social relations onto relations between things, or between people and things – a process that may well have happened under the aegis of the NEP, but which ought to be named and criticised as such. In other words, decommodification is not identical to the institution of communist

13 See Sohn-Rethel 1978.

relations, and to the extent it falls short, a consistently radical position ought to be interested in how and why.

Kriebel, for her part, is little concerned to define the conditions of possibility for a successful communist revolution: although she does emphasise that the KPD was perhaps nearer than ever to power in the autumn of 1932, the fact that the party had, by that time, been effectively *counter* revolutionary for many years is a point both acknowledged and curiously elided at many points in her text. Here we might well speak, with Lauren Berlant, of a 'cruel optimism' at work in the latter-day historian's 'suture' to a prior moment in the history of the left.¹⁴ Heartfield's entire career as a photomonteur played out in the wake of the defeat of the Communists in the 1918–19 German Revolution. It is perhaps a matter of debate whether the KPD would have been capable of taking power at some later point, had various contingent factors been different; there can be little doubt, however, that the results of KPD victory in 1932–3 would have been fairly grisly (somewhere between Stalinisation and civil war, one suspects, although a social-democratic turn cannot be ruled out *a priori*, of course).¹⁵ But counterfactuals are meaningless; the historical record is what it is, and it shows the Party for which Heartfield was a dogged propagandist to have been both authoritarian and feckless, for all that it also nurtured a vastly important proletarian culture. The final ambiguity of Kriebel's account is that she lacks an adequate description of the *separation* between the KPD (and the various quasi-independent organisations such as the Münzenberg concern with which it was affiliated) and the mass of the German proletariat, whose voices are unfortunately absent in most of *Revolutionary Beauty*.¹⁶ Greater attention to the KPD's role as a political mediation of working-class struggle would perhaps have counterbalanced the excessively schematic Freudo-Leninist mechanics of her theory of subject-formation. And it may have shown Heartfield in a rather more sinister light.

14 See Berlant 2011.

15 Heartfield's biography after World War II is a sad testament to the experience of actually-existing socialism. After extended difficulties with the new Stalinist authorities, he eventually settled into a diminished echo of his former career. An adequate study of Heartfield's postwar production does not yet exist. His 1955 set designs for David Berg's play *Mother Riba*, for example, strangely prefigure a Pop Art aesthetic, and could very usefully be analysed in terms of the role of the commodity-form in East German art and culture.

16 This is not a matter of irreducible subalternity alone, given the existence of the typical Weimar genres of workers' photography and the proletarian novel – granting that each of these is itself a complex form, and not an unmediated expression of some 'authentic' subjective position.

By the late 1920s neither the KPD nor the Comintern were in the least capable of leading a proletarian revolution, as their disastrous responses to the rise of Italian, German, and Spanish fascism amply demonstrate. That Heartfield's case – among the most powerful examples of radical art, or cultural labour, that we have – nonetheless ultimately throws us back on these dour recognitions perhaps indicates that we should reconsider our usual models of 'engaged' artistic production altogether. Criticism aside, Kriebel's excellent art-historical work leaves future scholars in a better position to do so. Perhaps the book's most interesting proposition is that Heartfield's images served a largely therapeutic purpose for their viewers and, implicitly, for the artist himself. They softened the blow of political frustration: the German left took comfort in satire when it could not triumph in reality. *Revolutionary Beauty* goes a long way towards explicating the aesthetic and psychic means by which Heartfield played this role, but it does not have many suggestions for how we, in the present, might better dwell with the 'experience of defeat', to invoke a theme that Kriebel's one-time advisor academic T.J. Clark has considered in a much-discussed essay of 2012.¹⁷ Heartfield stands, ultimately, for the tactics of a left that was confronting a disastrous, global defeat of the working class. Not a bad example for communists today, perhaps – with the caveat that most of the lessons to be learned are about what to avoid, or rather, what has become impossible.

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