

ART

Preview



Cut and thrust

Sarah Kent on John Heartfield

The exaggerated rhetoric of Adolf Hitler was a gift for the political satirist. In their brilliant video, *Gorilla Tapes* have doctored documentary footage to reveal the Führer, during addresses to the Volk, assaulting a chicken and brandishing a gargantuan toothbrush. Their 'deconstruction' transforms him into a clown to be jeered at, rather than a force to be reckoned with. Surely it was there for all to see — the Germans must have been simpletons, one opines with the wisdom of hindsight, not to notice the absurdity of this portly poseur with the stick-on moustache.

The Nazis, the video points out, were the first party to exploit the media to publicise their message. John Heartfield, the inventor of photomontage, courageously pitted his scissors against the Führer's publicity machine revealing, by brilliant sleight of hand, some truths behind the bluster.

'Millions stand behind me', claimed Hitler. In one of his simplest but most brilliant transformations, Heartfield pasted a giant banker behind the Führer, shoving notes into Hitler's upturned hand: reducing the leader to a diminutive puppet and the famous salute into a receptacle for graft. 'Hurrah the Butter is All Gone', shows a family dining on a bike, the baby munching an axe, the dog gnawing a steel bolt, so pinpointing the hardship

concealed behind Goering's assertion that 'Iron makes a nation strong, but butter and lard only make people fat'.

Those stupid enough to swallow the propaganda are shown in 'Those who Read the Bourgeois Press' to be cabbage-heads (the German equivalent of cloth-heads), blinded by reams of paper.

Hitler had the advantage of exploiting a naive public. But 60 years on, weaned on a diet of visual images, surely people have become adept at spotting hype and bluster. Or have they? During the election campaign, Steve Bell's vitriolic pen portrayed John Major as Hedgerman, a weakling in Y-fronts who 'while appearing normal' is actually 'denser than a speeding train, more boring than a bag of sand, stupider than a wagonload of headless chickens' — 'when there's less to you than meets the eye, it's harder for the shit to stick'. Hedgerman's only answer to social and economic crisis is to trim the curls of a topiary Margaret Thatcher.

Spitting Image coloured their Major puppet grey to reflect the dynamism of a character as 'interesting as a single coat of grey emulsion'. Yet, despite these timely warnings of total inertia, we still voted the Cons into office for a further five years: proving that bluff still conquers reason.

By juxtaposing Heartfield's work with that of recent political satirists (under the title 'The Cutting Edge'), most of whom owe an enormous debt to the father of photomontage, the Barbican affirms his impact on contemporary culture.

But the German curators seem intent on establishing Heartfield as a fine artist. The show opens with a reconstruction of the First International Dada Fair — a 1920 Berlin exhibition of work by artists like Grosz, Höch, Albers and Ernst as well as Heartfield. Also resurrected is Heartfield's room in a Stuttgart exhibition of 1929. This archival approach is of interest only to art historians. It would be far more pertinent to contextualise him (as the catalogue does) with work by other innovators like Raoul Hausman, Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky and Aleksandr Rodchenko who also crossed from fine art to revitalise graphic design.

The exhibition makes sense only through the vibrant video of *Gorilla Tapes*, who employ Heartfield's photomontage tactics to demonstrate his seminal impact on advertising and the mass media — montage is such a basic ingredient of our culture that it is impossible to envisage contemporary visuals (of any kind) without it. By locating Heartfield in a fine art bubble, the curators have achieved the impossible — they have minimised his importance.

John Heartfield and 'The Cutting Edge' are at the Barbican until Oct 18.

CRITICS' CHOICE

1. John Heartfield, *The Cutting Edge*
Barbican
2. Manet
National Gallery
3. Flora Photographica
Serpentine
4. Pierre & Gilles
Raab
5. Young British Artists
Saatchi Collection

TIME OUT, London.

9th September, 1992.