

## **Gustav Klucis, “Photomontage as a New Problem in Agit Art” (1931)**

A photomontage is a complex of elements organized according to a specific method, the so-called montage method. These elements are 1) the political slogan - a quotation, a caption, etc.; 2) the photograph of some social act or event as the pictorial element (including documentary photographs); 3) color for activation; 4) graphic elements; 5) the planar and perspectival design for the synthetic execution of photomontage and graphic representation.

The method of photomontage is divided into two organically related processes: 1) preparation of the individual elements (the photomechanical processes); 2) the process of montage itself (combination and organization of the elements).

To ensure the utmost activation of the materials photomontage employs the following principles for the organization of its materials (montage): a) use of different scales (with the aim of heightening the impact of the work and replacing the traditional and restrictive use of perspective) which itself offers very significant compositional possibilities; b) use of highly contrasting colors and forms; c) activation through liberated placement of elements (cutting them out from the passive background and actively coloring them; employing extreme contrasts of chromatic and achromatic color).

The production of a poster proceeds in the following sequence of steps: 1) IzoGIZ commission; 2) development of the theme (the content of the poster); 3) development of the overall structure (construction of the poster); 4) taking the relevant photographs in the factories and plants; 5) process of montage (organization). The principal task as far as organization of the materials is concerned is to manifest the class significance of the issue (the significance of the political slogan involved). One of the great merits of photomontage is precisely the way in which it has facilitated a new method for producing essentially activist posters. It is a characteristic feature of the latter that the poster surface is articulated and defined by the political content of the presented materials rather than by aesthetic principles. The old system for the composition of posters, based on the aesthetic principle, must be liquidated (by eliminating the framing border within the poster). The new principle is based upon the combination (montage) of topical materials (political slogans, documentary photographs, quotations, color, graphic elements, etc.) that present a consistent political line and take account of the concrete position of the viewer precisely in order to achieve the maximum expressive impact, political clarity and effective influence. This is the reason for the political significance and formal specificity of this principle. This also clarifies the fundamental difference between photomontage on the one hand, as a synthetic art that presents a number of essentially interdependent elements, and photography as a technical category on the other.

The photograph fixes a static moment, an isolated shot. Photomontage visualizes the dialectical unfolding of a theme of the given subject, the dialectical unity between political slogan and representation. Photography and the photograph are technical means for creating a representational form, they constitute documentary material but they are not ends in themselves. Like any other art, photomontage solves the problem of so-called pictoriality by presenting the manifold and interrelated character of reality, by revealing the concrete manifestations of the constructive socialist project precisely through the combination of elements (the method of photomontage).

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Photomontage is not a form but a method—a method that does not start from form, but from the conditions that determine all form: the task specific to the individual poster (or book, etc.), the broad mass for whom the individual work is intended, the relevant location (square, street, window display, department store), the processes of mass production (printing techniques).

Each work is treated in a different manner in accordance with the specific conditions of the individual concrete case. By its very essence, the technique of photomontage resists canonization and excludes the clichés of aesthetic convention. Its fundamental aim is to foreground the given phenomena in a dialectical manner, i.e. in their relationship to other forms and according to their significance for further development.

(Editorial comment from original publication in *Literatura I iskusstvo*.)

*The Section Office of the Spatial Arts of the LIJa (Institute of Literature, Art and Language) in the Communist Academy believes that comrade Klucis's extended discussion of the problems of photomontage, strongly emphasizing the importance of this visual art, was extremely timely and is generally correct. But we should add that the Section Office considers some of the hypotheses advanced in the discussion paper as incorrect and regards them as unreflective remnants of the artistic principles of the "October" group to which Klucis earlier belonged: i.e. the analyses of the specific character of photomontage, which strongly smells of "functionalism," the obvious overvaluation of photomontage, which the author singles out as the most important art at the expense, of all the others, and, finally, an insufficiently, critical attitude towards the early, perceptibly formalist products of photomontage in particular.*