

Johnny & Me: An animated film about left-wing German artist John Heartfield

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Writer-director Katrin Rothe, a former winner of the Grimme Prize—Germany’s most prestigious television award—has released a new film, *Johnny & Me—A Journey Through Time with John Heartfield*. The work is a strikingly topical tribute to her hero, German artist John Heartfield (1891-1968), the inventor and master of political photomontage.

The left-wing Heartfield’s artistic efforts of the 1920s and 1930s were directed against the same militarists, nationalists and fascists once again crawling out of the woodwork of today’s crisis-ridden capitalist society, reinforcing the state apparatus, police, military, judiciary and secret services. The parliamentary arm of these forces, the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), is currently achieving results in opinion polls similar to those of the Nazis in the early 1930s.

In this situation, it is vital that artists do not remain silent but, like Heartfield and others, use their art to challenge the far right. This is what Rothe seeks to do with her new film.

She employs animated film collage techniques in *Johnny & Me*, as she did in her film *The Real October* [*Der wahre Oktober*], which deals with the 1917 October Revolution through the eyes of Russian artists.

The writer-director has explained that her new film is in some respects a continuation of *The Real October*, extending into the subsequent decades. Heartfield was an artist “who can be wonderfully brought to life via collage animation.” Rothe is also fascinated by parallels to the present day. *Johnny & Me* deals with “how things are developing today and where it is all leading.” The film must be measured against this ambitious goal.

Rothe succeeds brilliantly in expressing the relevance of Heartfield’s work, not only by telling the vivid story of the artist and his struggle, but precisely because she uses his own collage technique to bring him to life and draw us into the present. The occasional animations of Heartfield’s collages are ingenious, making them even more vivid and relevant.

In the film, Rothe’s alter ego Stephanie (Stephanie Stremel) cuts figures out of paper and cardboard and makes them speak and move. This technique of doing everything by hand, cutting and pasting, creating movement through a series of photos, has been mastered by Rothe’s team. The mixture of feature film and animated documentary corresponds perfectly with Heartfield’s own way of working.

Heartfield began making animated films for UFA, the famed German film production company, during the First World War before turning to photomontage, which he increasingly developed into a potent political weapon.

To protest against anti-British propaganda in Germany, Heartfield anglicised his name (from Helmut Herzfeld) during the war and simulated a nervous condition to avoid going to the front. As mentioned in the film, he took part in the founding conference of the German Communist Party (KPD) in December 1918-January 1919 and received his party card personally from Rosa Luxemburg. In the early 1920s, he was part of the Dadaist movement, and developed his art provocatively as “Monteurdada.” In protest against the political and social establishment,

the Dadaists “mixed everything together: art, theatre, politics,” he recounts in the film.

Rothe, who grew up in Stalinist East Germany (GDR), was surprised “that this communist of the first hour, an incredibly courageous artist and communist, upon whose head the Nazis had put a price in 1939, hardly ever cropped up in the GDR.” She investigated the matter and researched Heartfield’s biography in federal archives. She came across a file that had been opened by the Central Control Commission of the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (SED). In it, she found answers to her questions and an explanation for Heartfield’s relatively low esteem in the Stalinist GDR, as well as an important theme for her film.

Johnny & Me opens with young graphic designer Stephanie in the throes of a creative crisis. She is fed up with trivial digital work that requires her to adapt opportunistically to her customers’ wishes (work that then is not even properly recognised). For example, she was told to include a photo of a cheerful blonde girl on the cover of a book about rubbish dumps in Africa—and regrets doing so. She takes some time off, goes to an exhibition and is captivated by Heartfield’s photomontages, which leave a lasting impression.

She is catapulted through a time tunnel into a studio full of film reels, paper files and old books. There, Heartfield, cut out of cardboard and brought to life as an animated figure, takes her on a journey through his life. A dialogue and comradesly complicity begins between the two “colleagues.” They discuss the meaning of their profession and Heartfield’s life.

In a dialogue with the Heartfield figure, Stephanie arranges collages, biographical documents and photos to trace the various stages of the artist’s life in a sort of timeline, which the pair transverse together.

One hundred years ago, in 1924, a decade after the start of WWI, Heartfield’s first political photomontage was published—“After Ten Years: Fathers and Sons.” The image shows General Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg with soldiers’ skeletons standing at attention behind him. Almost prophetically, a troop of children in uniform, future soldiers, walk past their dead fathers with rifles shouldered.

Heartfield’s most famous collages became the front pages of the AIZ, the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* [*Workers Pictorial Newspaper*], a publication founded in 1921 by Willi Münzenberg, and known and admired far beyond the KPD membership.

This magazine, whose circulation reached 500,000, was read and supported by many thousands of workers and unemployed, who ensured its distribution after Alfred Hugenberg—the “newspaper pope” of the time—blocked the usual distribution channels. The AIZ was published in Berlin from 1921 to 1933, and in exile in Prague from 1933 to 1938.

Heartfield’s AIZ covers produced after the Nazis came to power in 1933 are particularly impressive. In Rothe’s film, the collage of the Reichstag fire appears expressively animated. The flames are leaping out of the burning Reichstag, with Hermann Göring in front wearing a bloody butcher’s apron and holding an executioner’s axe. His figure symbolised

the pogrom of leftists by the Nazis in the immediate wake of the fire. Stephanie's comment on this seems inadequate: "You know what? That was social media back in the 1930s!"

Six weeks after the Reichstag fire, Nazi stormtroopers raided John Heartfield's flat. He only managed to escape by jumping out of a window and eventually fleeing to Prague.

Another AIZ cover with the ironic title "Through light to night" features flames reaching up into the sky. This time it is the burning of books written by left-wing, communist and Jewish poets and writers.

The tension between Heartfield and the KPD becomes very clear in a film sequence before the Reichstag elections in 1928. In the middle of the consultations for a poster motif, Heartfield sets off to the gate of a factory and photographs the hands of the workers. From hundreds of pictures, he chose one with five fingers spread apart and designed the famous election poster for the KPD: "With 5 you grab the enemy. Vote List 5 Communist Party." KPD leader Ernst Thälmann did not like it. Heartfield and Lene Rado from the propaganda department had trouble convincing him.

This scene has a certain key function. After that, Heartfield no longer worked according to the official party line. He explains to Stephanie that he had become an "anti-Stalinist Stalinist."

Heartfield's adherence to the KPD contains an element of tragedy, bound up with the bigger tragedies of the 20th century. On the one hand, his photomontages brilliantly showed the connection between the capitalist crisis, war and Nazism; on the other, he ignored—or remained quiet about—the KPD's horrific, paralyzing role in Hitler's seizure of power. In other words, he saw no alternative to the KPD, although he did not agree with its course. In a short scene, he complains that there was no unity with Social Democratic workers against the Nazis.

Some important historical questions remain unanswered in the film. A United Front policy aimed at a joint struggle of Communist and Social Democratic Party (SDP) workers against Hitler could undoubtedly have defeated fascism. Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought for such a united front, which would have exposed the bankrupt, pro-capitalist SPD leadership. However, it was thwarted by the KPD, which followed Stalin's fatal line that the SDP were "social fascists," thereby equating them with the Nazis.

After Hitler's victory in 1933, the Stalinists switched to a right-wing Popular Front policy, abandoning any independent perspective for the working class in favour of an "anti-fascist" unity between bourgeois and Communist parties. The thoroughly disastrous character of this policy of subordination to the interests of the bourgeoisie was demonstrated in France and Spain in the period 1936-39, which led to the strangling of social revolution in both countries.

Münzenberg, with whom Heartfield continued to work closely, was one of the most vehement supporters of the Popular Front policy. In line with the new policy, the AIZ was renamed *Volks-Illustrierte (People's Illustrated)* in 1936.

To deal with this complex issue in detail would perhaps have exceeded the scope of the film. However, a reference to this crucial conflict would have helped clarify the historical background to the dilemmas and tragic fate of serious artists such as Heartfield.

Heartfield was not alone in his political stance and trajectory. Kurt Tucholsky, Bertolt Brecht and many other artists and intellectuals chose to see the Soviet Union as the only and strongest force against fascism, despite Stalinism and the devastating, ultimately counter-revolutionary policies of the Comintern. They rejected the perspective and program of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, although Brecht at least was very familiar with them. Like many biographers of Heartfield's contemporaries and like-minded people, Rothe does not take up this question.

Expelled from Prague and unable to return to Germany, Heartfield did not seek and find exile in Moscow like the Stalinists of the group around Walter Ulbricht (future East German leader). Heartfield was one of a

group of critical-minded intellectuals who sympathised with the KPD in the Weimar period, but wisely did not emigrate to the Soviet Union, where the Stalinist bureaucracy had subjugated the working class. Heartfield fled to Britain, while Brecht, Hanns Eisler and Anna Seghers emigrated to either the US or South America. They thus escaped the show trials and purges of the late 1930s in the USSR that claimed the lives of thousands of convinced Communists and émigrés. Many of Stalin's victims remained in the gulag until well into the 1950s.

Among the victims was Brecht's colleague Sergei Tretyakov (1892-1937), with whom Heartfield had worked closely in 1931 when he spent a year in the Soviet Union and, as the film says, taught "Red Army soldiers" his collage technique.

At a key moment in the film, Stephanie leafs through Heartfield's SED personnel file, which was created by the Stalinist party in 1950 in connection with his return from exile in Britain. The curriculum vitae it contains, which he had to submit when he entered the GDR, serves as a guide for her timeline.

At the end of the 1940s, Brecht called on his friends, Heartfield and his brother Wieland Herzfelde (Brecht's publisher), to come to the GDR to help build a "better Germany." Although Brecht was watched with suspicion by the Stalinists, he was so well-known that the SED cultural functionaries did not dare to overly harass him. For Brecht, Heartfield was one of the most important European artists.

The SED saw things differently. The Ministry of Culture, headed by arch-Stalinist poet and novelist Johannes R. Becher, sent a letter of invitation to the two brothers. Becher even promised Heartfield a professorship and a major exhibition, but the relevant document from the East German Ministry of Culture "disappeared" from Heartfield's file.

Becher and Brecht had not reckoned with the SED Control Commission, for whom "all returnees from the West were under general suspicion." Rothe has the two functionaries Jobst and Gessel from the Central Control Commission appear as cardboard cut-outs who put all kinds of obstacles in the way of the "Western migrants" regarded as undesirables in the Stalinist GDR. It becomes clear that the party bureaucracy feared that artists like Heartfield could spread their "corrosive" spirit in the GDR. The possibility they had come into contact with anti-Stalinist arguments and forces was too terrifying for the officialdom.

Heartfield's return to East Germany in 1950 came at a time when Stalinist power and all areas of public life were strictly centralised. He was one of the suspect intellectual artist-communists tolerated by the Ulbricht regime, but whose creativity was subject to the strictest control.

Heartfield's file also contains two photomontages of newspaper covers that were created in the GDR. One was still published, the second was not. Heartfield's collages were now dismissed as gimmicks. His art was branded as "formalist" and banned. Another title page he designed was printed, but then the entire print run was cancelled.

Stalinism and revolutionary artists

Johnny & Me poses the question of why Heartfield was unable to resume and develop his revolutionary art after his return to the GDR. Rothe explains in an interview with *Filmdienst*:

"I only understood that when I had this file [from the Party Control Commission] in front of me. He had been in exile in the West for the SED and may have spoken to the wrong people there or been given a visa by the wrong people. That's why Heartfield wasn't particularly welcome in the GDR."

However, like many others, he was not only undesirable, but also highly endangered. At the beginning of the 1950s, a new wave of Stalinist purges

took place, with show trials in the Soviet Union and the newly created buffer states in Eastern Europe. Numerous opposition party members, or people thought to be such, stood trial and were imprisoned or even executed. In the film, Heartfield collapses in a train compartment for fear of being persecuted again.

The Stalinist bureaucracy rightly saw a free and self-confident working class as a danger. Any independent movement, including that of artists, was seen as a threat. It had to prevent the working class from playing a revolutionary role, which would have jeopardised its rule. The danger posed to the bureaucracy became clear with the uprisings in the GDR (1953), in Poland and above all in Hungary (both in 1956).

Art was therefore strictly censored. In connection with the “formalism” debate that was also launched against Brecht and Eisler, the film notes the bureaucrats’ argument: “What’s the point of pictures, we have slogans.” The denigration of works of art that did not conform to the doctrine of “socialist realism” (neither socialist nor realistic) was an important instrument for disciplining artists.

In the 1920s, Heartfield, like many others, was inspired by the October Revolution and the social and artistic upheaval in the Soviet Union. He effectively unleashed his creativity in the interests of a new social order. Increasing bureaucratisation shackled his creative energy, and during WWII he found himself caught between the fronts of imperialism and Stalinism. As a sick man, he ended up in the GDR and under the thumb of the bureaucracy. Although he was later rehabilitated and received honours, he was unable to resume his earlier artistic career in the GDR. This tragedy is expressed in Rothe’s film.

As Leon Trotsky noted in his brilliant essay “Art and Politics in Our Epoch” (1938)

The October revolution gave a magnificent impetus to all types of Soviet art. The bureaucratic reaction, on the contrary, has stifled artistic creation with a totalitarian hand. ... Art is basically a function of the nerves and demands complete sincerity.

In one scene in *Johnny & Me*, which links us to the political present, we see through a studio window Nazi jackboots on the march. Heartfield is immediately alarmed and runs out to confront the fascists. His little cardboard figure is mercilessly trampled on and torn to pieces. Stefanie picks them up and carefully patches them back together, admonishing them.

A political perspective for today remains a question for the filmmaker. The fight against the return of fascism must be waged—no question! But here it remains on a largely activist, individualistic level and therefore unresolved. Nevertheless, both Heartfield’s and Rothe’s images do much to clarify the situation in our age of overwhelming hypocrisy and lies, in which established politicians are passing “repatriation improvement laws,” while approving Germany’s biggest military budget since WWII and at the same time sanctimoniously marching in mass protests against the AfD and the shift to the right.

Johnny & Me ends with Stephanie asking Heartfield: “What would you be today: whistleblower, influencer or founder of a social media start-up?” Heartfield’s answer: “It doesn’t matter. The important thing is what you want.” To which she replies: “I’m looking for a new job. But before that, I’ll finish the book cover—the way I want it. Snip-snip.”



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