

Distance, Proximity and Hannah Höch's radical imagination

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Abstract

In her pioneering photomontage Hannah Höch demonstrates her ambition to transform the viewer's perception through imagination, both hers and theirs. In the process of making photomontage complex relationships between the artist, viewer, and original source material arise in which the displacements involved create distance. Her use of the idea of the cross-section by contrast allows otherwise disparate elements to be brought into close proximity. This paper explores Höch's use of the spatial metaphors of the bridge and the abyss in relation to Salomo Friedländer's concept of Creative Indifference, the Die Brücke group and the influence of Nietzsche's use of the bridge metaphor and his use of the idea of polarity. Höch's metaphorical use of the image of the abyss could imply spatial relationships but these begin to break down and are replaced instead by irreducible and unbridgeable differences in conceptions of reality that imagination allows to coexist simultaneously.

Key words: photomontage, cross-section, metaphor, imagination, irreducibility

The modern German artist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) is best known for her pioneering work with photomontage, where print reproductions of photographs are cut up and collaged back together to create arresting new images. She made art throughout her life, from 1915 in Berlin, where she was a student, through the mid to late 1920s in the Hague, and then, from 1929, back in Berlin, where she remained for the remainder of her life. She was a member of the exclusive Club Dada in Berlin until the early 1920s when she forged her own artist's identity through her individual and collaborative work with artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber and the writer Til Brugman. Although her photomontages were made from the 1920s to the 1970s, they

have a contemporary appearance in which the historical distance between the viewer today and the moment of making is bridged. Höch often looked to the future - for example, her imaginary machine produced art - or to the past in her references to medieval poetry and prints. As well as operating between past and present, art can also reduce the psychological distance between artist and viewer. Art that reaches across time is not something unique to Höch, but there are particular features of Höch's working process, ideas and intentions that make use of issues related to proximity and distance. Examples of these are the working process of photomontage, her use of the idea of the cross-section and the use in her writing about her own art of the metaphors of the bridge and the abyss. This paper will consider these examples in turn but will first briefly touch on the role of imagination in Höch's transformative intention for her art.

Höch's overall project rests, I suggest, on her understanding of and strategic use of imagination as a method to create change. The radical imagination at play in her work focuses on the transformation of people's perception through their response to visual art as cultural imagery. The deliberate strategy to change people's attitudes, behaviours and actions is in response to a moral and social order that was seen by Höch and many of her contemporaries as bankrupt. The close association of the prevailing order and conditions, by artists such as Höch, with the surrounding visual culture, led them to conclude that they needed to be overturned through visual means. Evidence for this deliberate use of imagination as a strategy for change can be found in Höch's art as well as in her writing and correspondence. As a transformative strategy, imagination includes Höch's imagination and also the imagination of others, the viewer. This transformative imagination relies on the kind of everyday imagination that is integral to all psychic processes, including visualisation, perception, thought and feeling, for everyone and not, in this sense, as a particular and exceptional creative imagination possessed solely by Höch. Rather, it is a process that is involved in the translations between modes of communication, with art performing the role of a language that communicates mental phenomena. Visual art as the transformation into visual form of thoughts or feelings that are represented in images can simultaneously exist in both psychic and social fields so that one can affect the other. Distance and proximity can be understood as having a significant role in this overall intention as the rest of this paper will show.

The starting material for Höch's photomontage is often made up of photographic reproductions from popular magazines, especially women's magazines. Höch worked for Ullstein, a publisher of popular picture magazines, illustrated news and journals, and so her starting point in her creative process was material already in circulation, in print, and therefore, already in people's minds as part of their constructions of reality and their understanding of the world. This material was the familiar everyday imagery with which 1920s Berlin was saturated; images that had their own purposes as advertising, propaganda, entertainment, and which were intended for mass reproduction and for mass consumption. These images surrounded people and influenced the way they thought about looking, the urban landscape and the textures that they inhabited. The images corresponded to the cultures and ideas that they were intended to visually represent. Höch took these published photographic images changed them and then returned them to people in a different form, having been cut up

and then reassembled in her studio.

The new forms introduce a distance between the original intention and the new intention of Höch's. They also distance the viewer from their previous understanding or response to the same material in published form. There are at least three different ways that distance is introduced by the process of making photomontages. Firstly, further steps are added to what had been intended to be an relatively direct chain of distribution. The first act of distancing is to dislodge the visual material from its previously efficient journey from the subject of the photograph towards mass print and circulation, and, as part of the process of creation, to displace the images into their new context in the form of a photomontage that will be exhibited in a gallery as a single original work. The photographs in reproduction now become entwined in further layers of meaning and presentation. In their original context these printed photographs make certain claims about the world, for example, about how people look or dress, or about films they might like and figures they might identify with. They say, in other words, 'this is how modern woman in Berlin in 1926 looks' for example. However, once they are displaced into Höch's photomontage, these claims are disrupted and in some cases contradicted. Because the new image appears to the viewer in part as a result of their own experience, memories and internal references, it operates more closely to the realm of the imagination than to its previous context, in which it was expected to carry assumptions of external objectivity and the authenticity of the photograph. Höch relies, for this effect, on the part that the viewer contributes by looking. Her imagination meets the viewer's imagination in the shift of response from the everyday assumptions of an external objective reality towards the suggestion of more subjective possibilities.

A second distancing occurs when the connection to material is reinforced through this displacement. Instead of the slick seamless editing of the photo-journal, Höch's work is deliberately messy and hand-produced with abrupt cut edges, creases and folds. Höch achieves more immediacy through her working method, by the overt reference to her own hand in production, and through the removal of the distancing effect of reproduction. However, this newly found closeness is to the physical material – the paper fragments – rather than to the original representation with its own illusions and distortions.

Thirdly, in the process of making these collages, Höch often brings distant characteristics and qualities into close proximity, for instance when she combines human and animal, male and female, organic and mechanical or hand-drawn and technologically produced images. In our understanding of the world there are conventions of separation and distinction, which in Höch's art are often overturned so that things that were previously thought of as separate are shown as joined and vice versa. Figures that have been detached from their heads are a common example of the separation of elements that the viewer would normally expect to be joined. Decapitation is a frequent characteristic of Höch's work and especially of her photomontage. The visual metaphors she uses often rely on juxtaposing different or similar images, bringing visual ideas together in ways that are unexpected. In addition to the displacement of the printed photographs from their original site of publication and the process of colliding of forms, with unexpected removals and additions, Höch's photomontages also have the effect

of concretising some important abstract themes, such as those of polarity, for example between spirit and matter or figure and ground, history and time. This is all the more effective having been achieved using images from the familiar everyday visual storm of information that the viewer recognises.

Höch's most well known photomontage, *Cut with the Dada kitchen knife through the last German Weimar beer-belly cultural epoch* (1919) uses idea of the cross-section. This is a form of visualisation or imaginary modelling that, in spite of its connotations of rational presentation of knowledge, in Höch's hands, contests underlying assumptions about reality. In this photomontage there is a cross-section through the epoch, with fragments of machinery, landscape, and the political map of women's suffrage in Europe placed alongside topical events such as the First World War and well-known figures such as Albert Einstein. The title of the work has some elements in common with an article by Raoul Hausmann called *Cut Through Time*, written in 1919. The 'cut-through' part of Höch's title is slightly obscured by insertion of the reference to the Dada kitchen knife but it could be summarised as 'cut through the epoch' or 'cross-section through the epoch'. The Dada kitchen knife appropriately interrupts and separates key parts of the title in a way that echoes the collage used in making the work.

Höch's employer, Ullstein, published an illustrated journal called *Die Querschnitt* or *The Cross-Section* which combined writing with photographs, placed side by side on opposite pages, making striking visual contrasts. This journal represented a very strongly binary model of thought through visual images, where comparison or contrast is made by bringing two distant elements together. The idea of the cross-section was commonly used in Weimar culture. As an alternative to a chronological or linear perspective, the cross-section is a format that uses mental imaging, relying heavily on imagination. It was commonly used in film where instead of a sequence of visual images implying a causal connection between events, connections are made instead between simultaneous images. In Höch's photomontage, the cross-section is used to reveal interior and hidden information. The Dada kitchen knife reveals new relationships between layers, and connections are made between otherwise disparate elements that would otherwise usually be separated by space and time.

I will now turn to two quotations from Höch which show the importance of a sense of connection and distance in Höch's thinking. The first uses the metaphor of the bridge in relation to her use of imagination to influence people's engagement with the world. In a 1929 catalogue text accompanying a solo exhibition she writes:

Today I would rather depict the world as seen by an ant, tomorrow as the moon, but I am a human being; I can, however, through my imagination, be a bridge. I wish to convey that what seems impossible is possible. I want to help people experience a richer world, so that we can engage more benevolently with the world we know (Höch in Aliaga, 2004: 311).

In this scenario, in which Höch proposes the use of her imagination as a bridge, the distance between thoughts and feelings on the one hand, and attitudes and

actions on the other, is reduced. Richness of experience is expected potentially to lead the viewer to a different set of attitudes toward external issues. The imaginary bridge implies both a connection between two separate shores and a separation from the flow beneath. There is also the sense of connection that allows crossing from one side to another. The bridge metaphor would have been familiar to Höch from the Expressionist *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) group, which regularly cited Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which the bridge metaphor represents the journey to freedom from the oppressive culture. The bridge in this instance, in *Die Brücke*, is a structure that facilitates social change (Perry, 1993). Expressionist connotations of the bridge metaphor were of the transcendence or passage to higher states of being and also the linking of past and future. These connotations draw on the physical properties and use of bridges in a similar way to Höch's. Höch's creation of herself as the bridge, through her imagination is a metaphorical expression of her idea of the role her imagination might play in relation to how others experience the world.

The second quotation from Höch is from another exhibition catalogue, from 1946, and can be understood as an expression of intention or explanation of the work that she was exhibiting:

Noch nie klappte der Abgrund zwischen wirklicher Welt und der Idee so wie heute. Noch nie war dieser Abgrund so geladen mit tragischen, grotesken, zerstörerischen Spannungen. Unsere bisherige Wirklichkeit liegt zertrümmert am Boden, und darüber erhebt sich fern noch und hoch das Idealbild einer neuen. (...)
Solange die Durchrationalisierung der Wirklichkeit noch nicht erreicht ist – völlig wird sie es nie sein – wird die „fantastische“ Kunst anzeigen, was zwischen diesem Ziel und seiner Wirklichkeit nicht stimmt (Höch, 2008: 11).

[Never has there been such an abyss between the real world and the idea as there is today. Never has this abyss been so loaded with tragic, grotesque, destructive tensions. Our previous reality lies smashed on the ground, and above it the ideal image of a new fully rationalised world still rises far and high. (...)
As long as the full rationalisation of reality is not yet achieved - it will never be completely - "fantastic" art will demonstrate the dissonance between the aim and its reality (Höch, 2008: 11).]

Unlike in the earlier quotation, the distance in this example, between the real world and the idea, is not bridged by her fantastic art. Rather the art demonstrates the abyss and the impossibility of its bridging. The real world and the world of the idea remain explicitly separate and distant, and Höch's art is intended neither to reconcile them nor to produce a compromise. The way that Höch sees her art, in the second quotation above, as demonstrating a tension between two poles is likely to have been influenced by the philosophy of her friend and colleague Salomo Friedländer's concept of *Creative Indifference* as set out in detail in 1911 (Friedländer, 2009). Walter Benjamin explains Friedländer's Creative Indifference in the following way:

[S]uch creative indifference can never of course be found in the golden middle way. It is an unceasingly renewed dialectical compromise; it is no geometric location, but the focal point of a process, the force field of a discharge (Benjamin, 1999: 133).

This explanation, perhaps, as in Hoch's abyss, acknowledges the idea of the unbridgeable tension or distance. In her metaphor of the abyss, the ideal is part of a polar pair with a rationalised reality. Höch's role, or the role of her art, is to expose the fully rationalised reality that she sees as soaring high above the abyss as an ideal, and, in so doing, to question assumptions of truth in visual culture. *Creative Indifference* is introduced by Friedländer in his definition of the infinite: he writes, '[i]t is vivacious, it equilibrates its definitions, balances its extremes, indifferentiates polar differences' (Friedländer in Taylor, 1990: 124). The polarities he is concerned with come in part from his reading of Nietzsche and include examples such as subject and object, good and evil, material and spirit.

Issues of proximity and distance are integral to some of the methods used by Höch, for example in collage or in her use of the idea of the cross-section. Spatial metaphors involving proximity and distance can suggest a continuum where something could be less distant or more proximate. However, there is no halfway across the abyss as there might be across a bridge. The separation, although represented metaphorically by distance, is both irreducible and essential. The language of spatial metaphor slightly mis-registers the visual images of the bridge and the abyss in relation to *Creative Indifference* and imagination. The focal point or as Benjamin puts it, 'the force field of discharge' of *Creative Difference* allows two positions to be held in play at the same time and here is where spatial analogies of distance and proximity break down. This, I suggest, is the way that imagination works; imagination maintains polar oppositions and takes its transformative energy from simultaneous positions.

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Biography

Kay Tabernacle is a PhD student at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL. She is researching concepts of imagination in the art of Hannah Höch (1889-1978), proposing a radical imagination as a deliberate strategy for transformation by Höch. This involves an investigation into the visual representability of psychic states such as dream, the presentation of images, the role of empathy and an embodied imagination and Höch's use of word in relation to image as text collages, poetry, or fiction. She is interested in the connections between image and imagination, image and body and body and language as they relate to imagination in art. This study is practice-related and includes the use of painting, drawing and animation as part of a method of investigation and reflection.