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Sports Photomontage, France, 1926

Michel Frizot

The end of the 1920s in France was characterized by the widespread use of rotogravure printing to reproduce photographs in weekly magazines. The creation of *VU* (21 March 1928) provides a concrete example of this expansion, and was followed by a number of similar publications. *VU* firmly established a number of aesthetic and graphic practices in the mass circulation of photographs, particularly the presence of multiple photographs on every page and the use of photomontage as tool for social or political commentary.¹ I would like to highlight one of *VU*'s predecessors—the groundbreaking but little-known *Match l'intran*²—to demonstrate the causal relationship between techniques used to print images and the formal, iconic, and aesthetic possibilities available to “graphic designers,” page layout specialists, and art directors.

The introduction of halftone printing in the 1890s made it possible to publish an abundance of photographic illustrations. The 1910s then saw the spread of rotogravure, an intaglio process that provided more subtle reproduction of the formal nuances and tonal gradations characteristic of photography. Its establishment coincided with World War I and facilitated the publication of numerous magazines richly illustrated with photographs of the war, although they rarely took advantage of the technical possibilities of rotogravure. What were those possibilities? In intaglio printing, the tonal variation of the photograph is systematically broken down into microscopic squares forming an orthogonal grid. These squares are etched in an acid bath then filled with ink; their depth determining tonal density. This had major repercussions for the process of preparing images for print.

In halftone printing, each image became a metal plate, which was inserted into the form containing type for each page. The steps in rotogravure were completely different, and new, giving them transformative potential. First, positive prints of the images to be used (enlarged or not) were made on individual pieces of transparent celluloid *film*, which were used to prepare the printing plates. Metal plates for each photograph were replaced by these films—supple and inexpensive, quick to reprint in different sizes, and easy to add things to and to retouch. Above all, these film images could be *cut* with scissors and assembled—glued one next to another, or even one over the other, with adhesive paper. The process of assembling films carrying photographs, texts, and headlines (either cut out or painted) was the most innovative stage of rotogravure. It was done on a backlit table, an instrument inexistent in halftone or letterpress studios. Each magazine page became a large film mounted on a glass plate, and resulted from the careful composition of multiple smaller *positive* films. The strict, geometric organization of the



Figure 1.9 *Match l'intran*, no. 22, 5 April 1927 ("The 6-Days Man's Nightmare"). Musée Nicéphore Niépce, Chalon-sur-Saône.

halftone page gave way to the manifold possibilities created by the process of assembling photographic fragments that could be infinitely and easily manipulated, moved, and modified. This technical procedure led naturally to the production of “photomontages” (*montage* refers to the process of assembly in French), or compositions of individual cut-out photographs forming a new entity—an image that looks photographic but that wasn’t recorded as a unit. In this phase of magazine production, the artistic director becomes a graphic artist.

The principle of photomontage had been known since the 1850s and was given a new life by the Dada movement, but rotogravure revolutionized it, granting it unprecedented exposure. Although the ties between photomontage and the use of film in rotogravure haven’t gone unnoticed, they are generally associated with *VU* and the demands of its elaborate layouts. Other rotogravure magazines preceded *VU*, however—in particular *Match l’intran*, dedicated to sports and created by the publisher of *L’intransigeant*, a daily paper in existence since 1880.³ At the end of the nineteenth century, sports had become a theme for weekly French periodicals such as *La Vie au grand air* (1898–1914), printed in halftone.⁴ This publication elaborated a limited sort of photomontage using halftone, mainly presented in the central double page spread and sometimes on the cover.⁵ *Match l’intran, le plus grand hebdomadaire sportif* (its full title) was launched on 9 November 1926; it had sixteen pages and measured 45 x 31 cm. The first issue was printed with purple-brown ink, with the color changing each week (green for the second, greyish-brown for the third, etc.) which contributed to the magazine’s appeal. Graphic innovation related to rotogravure was conspicuous and regular from the start: spectacular full-page photographs appeared on the front and back covers, a large portrait was printed over the text on page 7, and there were photomontages on pages 10 and 12. Photomontages appeared on pages 2 and 10 starting with the seventh issue (then pages 2, 10, and 15); they were also published on the front and back covers (and in issue 23 ran on one and the other, and sometimes occupied the centerfold. There was lasting interest in the systematic use of photomontage and the superimposition of elements (photo films and text films) on at least three pages and sometimes up to six. Another characteristic of *Match l’intran* was the complexity and liveliness of its photomontages, especially on page 2, and the subtle intermingling or even fusion of elements obtained by retouching several photographs to unite them in a way that tricked visual perception. The consummate example presented here is impressive and surprising, with its strong diagonals.⁶

This handcrafted undertaking served to glorify sports. Visual energy, built using lines and apparent depth, became a metaphor for the athlete’s gestures and movements. A few years later, *VU*’s photomontages were more biting and in synch with current events, as practiced by professionals like Alexander Liberman and Marcel Ichac who were very much aware of the artistic and media-related developments of photomontage in Germany and the USSR in the wake of Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko. The designers and technicians at *Match l’intran* may not have had the same references. More likely, they were playing with their new freedom from the constraints of the halftone process and with the modernity of cutting and assembling elements, leading them to push the expressive potential of rotogravure and its malleable films and images to an exciting new level.

Notes

- 1 Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *VU, The Story of a Magazine that Made an Era* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

- 2 Despite its quality and inventiveness, *Match l'intran* isn't mentioned in Robert Lebeck and Bodo von Dewitz's excellent study *Kiosk, Eine Geschichte der Fotoreportage, A History of Photojournalism* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2001).
- 3 Also in 1928, *L'intransigeant* created *Pour vous l'intran* (1928–40), a cinema weekly printed in rotogravure.
- 4 See Thierry Gervais, "L'invention du magazine. La photographie mise en page dans *La Vie au grand air*," *Études photographiques* 20 (2007): 50–67. See also Gervais, chapter in this volume.
- 5 Halftone photomontages were more like collages, with a juxtaposition of geometrically shaped images, as opposed to photomontages of the 1920s, which fused their elements.
- 6 *Match l'intran* 22 (5 April 1927): 2. Thanks to the Musée Nicéphore Niépce in Chalon-sur Saône, which owns a set of *Match l'intran*.