

## REVIEWS

### **Collage Was Never Gone**

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**Drag, Wojciech. *Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis*. New York and London: Routledge, 2019. 216 pages. ISBN 9780367437428. Hb. £120.00.**

The definition and application at an interdisciplinary level of collage, the well-known concept among scholars and beyond academic environments; due to its ever-changing form and aesthetics since Pablo Picasso composed *Still Life with Chair Caning* in 1912, often fall into fetishism or misuse. The dispute over the core terminology becomes more intricate as one traces earlier antecedents, such as “Persian leather-bound books of images” or “Japanese calligraphic poems” (13). Similarly, keywords such as mosaic, assemblage, or montage add another layer that blurs the semantic boundaries of collage, often acquiring a commonly interchangeable status with such terms.

*Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis* acknowledges these entanglements and addresses them directly in its first chapter, “Theory and Practice of Collage.” Wojciech Drag leads the reader through a comprehensive and clear overview of these critical debates and builds his own set of criteria in order to define collage in a literary context as “the use of heterogeneous, fragmentary and conflicting components; the absence (or serious disruption) of linear plot development; and the incorporation of a sizeable proportion of appropriated material” (11). He stresses the rarely mentioned and often-assumed collage dynamic of theft, as Joshua Clover puts it, to expose and remind us that appropriation is one of the basic tenets of visual collage (Drag 93). This particular criterion problematizes

authorship and the ontology of the work of art even more emphatically when transferred to contemporary novels.

Drag's overarching thesis, based on the instability intrinsic to collage, examines multiple types of global and personal crises around the turn of the century. The mere form and poetics of collage advocate a dual process of destruction and recomposition. As simple as cutting and pasting may seem, this technique entails the clash and gathering of a plethora of elements from different origins, often revealing traces and residual constituents of these tensions and reparations. The author combines multimodality studies (Alison Gibbons) in juxtaposition with Rhetorical Structure Theory (William C. Mann and Sandra A. Thompson) to approach formally a literary corpus representative of a series of contemporary crises. His selection of texts includes works by six American authors (David Markson, Maggie Nelson, Jenny Offill, Lance Olsen, David Shields, and Steve Tomasula) and one from the United Kingdom (Graham Rawle). Interestingly, all of the authors from the United States share a literary background whereas Rawle has specialized in the visual arts.

The first part of the book, "Art in Crisis," reconsiders the status of the novel and the role of traditional literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. The first chapter in this section shows that Markson's late works purvey an array of collage-like features that challenge not only our conceptions of the novel, but also the reader's agency in the act of interpretation. We, as agents in the process of reading the novel, become "virtual co-author[s] of its meaning" (54). The collage qualities found in these works, such as the use of appropriated materials, offer a dialogical experience for readers to make their way through an open and strikingly fragmentary array of texts, which makes Markson one of the most inventive US authors. The second half of this section is devoted to Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) and *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013), two additional examples that defy preconceived assumptions about contemporary novels, such as the clear separation

between the diegetic and the extradiegetic. The heterogeneity of (appropriated) materials and genres intertwined in his writings calls for the resurgence of the anti-novel. Drag acutely shows that collage conventionally brings together pieces of reality to create unexpected encounters between them, a resourceful technique that Shields explores as part of his manifesto to instigate the clash between fiction and reality, questioning whether actual pieces of reality can exist in a fictional collage-like framework.

Drag moves beyond the aforementioned collapse of literary modes and novelistic limitations to address the topic of the “Society in Crisis.” This section starts with the provocative and highly visual works of Lance Olsen, *Sewing Shut My Eyes* (2000), *Head in Flames* (2009), and *Dreamlives of Debris* (2017). Each reflects on a variety of social crises such as the ill influence of celebrities and television, the West’s perceived threats of Islamist fundamentalism, and the disquieting advances of digital culture. The chaotic non-writerly character of these texts, when paired with images, shows that graphic elements do not merely serve an illustrative role, thereby recovering the balancing principle that collage inaugurated by combining the visual and the written “on an equal footing” (100). Tomasula’s *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002) and *The Book of Portraiture* (2006) add to this panoramic view of twenty-first-century crisis by questioning the ontological category of the human in the light of scientific and biotechnological developments. In a world of genetic mutations and manipulations, collage conveys a technical trope of the editable and displaceable found in texts and DNA codes alike. Drag finds in the posthuman and digital-era debates a place to discuss how the decline of the printed book points towards a revaluation of the human body in a hyper-mediated world.

Narrowing the scope from the social to the individual, the third part returns to the question of the human regarding identity and personal entanglements. Out of the seven chapters in this volume, the last but one chapter masterfully exposes the closest relation

between form and content found in Drag's selection of collage novels. Rawle's *Woman's World's* (2005) incredibly long crafting process presents Drag with a pedagogical opportunity to demonstrate why this novel is "the quintessence of collage literature" (159). Through collage, this work artfully portrays the constructiveness of Roy Little's identity: the narrator-protagonist adopts a transvestite persona named Norma. Collage-like dynamics, such as appropriation from different sources or juxtaposition of the borrowed elements, fittingly complement the gender performative theories that Drag embraces in his analysis. The second half of part three offers an exploration of the psychological distress of the narrators in Nelson's *Bluets* (2009) and Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014). Although both novels may be regarded as less experimental examples than the previous ones discussed in this volume, they still make use of the same poetics of collage based on quotation, fragmentation, and juxtaposition. These two texts deal with the theme of loss that destabilizes their narrators and the stylistic assemblage at the page level. Whereas in *Dept. of Speculation*, Drag sensibly observes that changes in form correspond to an overcoming of personal crisis towards the end of the novel, *Bluet* shows a deeper disconnection that reflects a darker psychological state of mind of the narrator.

*Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis* presents every chapter using a uniform yet useful formula that offers both the expert and the student of collage two approaches to each work: an in-depth anatomical scrutiny and a consideration of the substantial relation between the structure and the content of each work analyzed. Rhetorical Structure Theory and multimodality studies provide the recipe for the author's dissection of each work he analyzes by pinpointing recurrent strategies pertaining to collage. Although this exhaustive, almost scientific, process may appear tedious as the reader advances, it becomes invaluable to those unfamiliar with the chosen body of work. It all comes together in the second half of every chapter when Drag offers a refreshing and diverse

insight into the work in question. Although I have reservations whether the formal analysis competes with the originality of his contributions in some of the chapters, I appreciate the pristine methodology that the author clearly outlines beginning with the very opening sections, as well as his dedication to this field of research.

Following Routledge's recent publications in collage, such as Scarlett Higgins's *Collage and Literature: The Persistence of Vision* (2019) and Magda Dragu's *Form and Meaning in Avant-Garde Collage and Montage* (2020), Dragu's *Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis* traces a solid historical and theoretical background of how visual collage has permeated the textual realm. This current trend, as the author concludes, emphasizes the importance of acknowledging that the way we experience reality is, more than ever before, highly multimodal and fragmentary. We consume pieces of reality at a very fast pace and in different media that frustrate any attempt to comprehend our existence using traditional methods. Collage embodies, uncomfortably, these tensions and difficulties and, at the same time, provides our generation with an accessible way to embrace crises, ruptures, and chaos. With all of these considerations, Dragu is correct to presage in his last section's subheading that "Collage Is Here to Stay."

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