

Collage and its Significance in Writing¹

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Introduction to Collage

Etymologically, collage comes from the French word *coller*, which means to paste or to glue. And, this designation is still at the core of many existing definitions. Harold Osborne, for instance, defines collage as pictorial technique that uses “photographs, news cuttings, and all kinds of objects in certain arrangements by pasting, and often combining with painted passages” (251).

Essentially, collage involves two typical operations: dissection and composition. Of the two, the first is wrenching fragments from various sources, and the second is putting the fragments in particular space (Acharya 2004). So, collage is that form of art in which the artist’s function is primarily selection and juxtaposition of prefabricated elements into a visual entity.

Characteristically, collage was a technique in a radical disagreement with the paintings ranging from renaissance to the beginning of cubism. The collage artists, in a sense, freed the notion of painting as an imitation of reality, and established it as an exploration and utilization of various motifs in canvas. As observed by Fox:

Sometimes arrangements are made of fragments of such materials plus somehow related, drawn, painted, or three-dimensional passages; sometimes painted or drawn passages are added to, or incorporated into, photographs, illustrations and the like; sometimes whole-cut-out images are inserted into the midst of already existing pictorial composition. (Fox 233)

As observed by Fox, collage artists enjoy the freedom of making unexpected and often bizarre juxtapositions.

History of Collage

The technique of combining bizarre materials is not new; its history dates back to ancient times. For instance, Hindu God Ganesh is a collage of elephant’s head and human body; Sati’s father, Dakshya Prajapati, is a collage of he-goat’s head and human body. Ancient art, folk art, and primitive art also provide examples of collage; they include a great variety of materials, chosen and united mainly for decorative purposes. But, the term collage as

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distinguished from the phenomenon is a recent development. Outlining the modern history of collage, William Seitz calls it a twentieth century phenomenon:

Although pasting had been a common technique used in decorative and folk art for centuries, its adaptation by modern artists began with Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Canning*, an oil painting to which the artist added a fragment of oilcloth printed to simulate chair caning. (233)

Once popularized by the Cubists like Picasso, collage turned out to be a very handy tool for other artists of later movements. Surrealism, which is termed "a completely revolutionary conception of art" (Read 41), also used collage method. Max Ernst, in his paintings, used this technique by using cut out parts of old engravings from adventure and love stories, and illustrations from technical treaties. The futurists carried the technique to its shocking level; they produced three-dimensional objects made from agglomeration of diverse materials. Sand, hair, post office receipts, string, among many other materials were used.

The influence of collage on photography is no less important. Photographers also took up collage technique in the last quarter of twentieth century. David Hockney's technique, according to Gombrich, is of a collagist:

David Hockney has enjoyed using his camera for multiple images somewhat reminiscent of Cubist paintings such as Picasso's picture of *Violin and Grapes* of 1912. His portrait of his mother [*My Mother, Bradford, Yorkshire, 1982*] is a mosaic of various shots taken from slightly different angles. (625)

Summarizing the contour of collage technique, it can be said that this art form began as an influence of cubism and now persists not only in painting but also in other forms of art. It can be said that the trend that started from Picasso is hence the most dominant technique in the twentieth century. There is hardly any art that is not touched if not shaped by the use of collage.

Collage and Writing

Collage, in apparent perception too, is different from writing, for the former reveals the visual appearance of objects and events, whereas the latter inscribes sounds. Another apparent difference is associated with perception: literary works rarely provide possibility of perceiving the matter all at once as we usually do in collage. Nonetheless, any writing now easily gets trapped into a dominant mode of painting – collage.

People are right when they understand that the lexis collage had its association only with painting in its coinage. This however does not mean that collage is exclusively visual artists' technique: as discussed in the subheading above, the passage of time has slackened the grip of collage from painters' grip. Artists of both temporal and spatial domain now widely practice the technique of collage in presenting their arts. Acknowledging the proliferation, Seitz states

that collage is much more than a substitute for drawing and painting in the development and aesthetics of 20th century art. Similar is the view of Fox: “The various techniques described have had great influence in various fields of artistic work: advertising art, illustrations, packaging, store –window display, photography, stage of decoration, and many other have been profoundly affected” (234).

The change may be mainly due to the corpus of available writings that make it impossible for anyone to write anything totally new. In a sense, the existing writings do not allow new writings any possibility to be outside already existing canons, and styles. Hence, writers find it almost impossible to escape spatial artists’ technique of gluing together of bits and pieces from different sources.

One could look for early version of collage in Stanislavski’s theatre – in 1904 Stanislavski proposed what he called a “peasant spectacle” which would be collage of bits and scenes from Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, and Gorky. Theoretically, Roland Barthes’ postulation provides strong ground for the defense of collage activity in writings. “A text,” Barthes says, “consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogues, into parody, into contestation” (1132).

Texts in a sense become like canvases where artists put various components together, sometimes in linear arrangement, and sometimes in heterogeneous manner. Like in collage painting, writers use two fundamental processes in collaged text: segmentation, which produces units; and integration, which gathers these units into canvas.

The Role of a Writer: A Collagist or a Progenitor

Collage method in writing is likely to be criticized on the ground that it deconstructs long time understood relationship of an author and the text. But, it is necessary to note that many writers are already enmeshed in the writing of the past due to which their act largely gets limited within fusing. Consequently, our temptation to assign any text to a single author becomes paradoxical. Hence, the text turns out to be the outcome of an artist’s attempt to combine the things that already exist in “an immense dictionary” of literature, society, and culture:

...the scripiter [writer] no longer contains passions, moods, sentiments, impressions, but that immense dictionary from which he draws a writing which will be incessant: life merely imitates the book, and this book itself is but a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed. (Barthes 1132)

Roman Seldon, in his explanation of Barthes’ statement also supports collage activity in writing: “Writers have the power to mix already existing writings, to reassemble or redeploy them; writers cannot use writing to express themselves, but only to draw upon that immense dictionary of language and culture” (52). Apparently, Seldon problematizes long standing idea

of an author as a progenitor, and assigns the role of collagist. Though in different context, Edward Said too has postulated a similar view: “First of all, there is the reproducible material existence of a text, which in the most recent phase of Walter Benjamins’s age of mechanical reproduction has multiplied and re-multiplied so much as to exceed almost any imaginable limits” (Abrams 1211). Given profound advocacy of these scholars, it may not be inappropriate to recall the very famous maxim – writer’s entry into the field begins with his appreciation of the writings of the past.

Sources and Techniques for Collage Writing

In pictorial art, the artists gather various “motifs” wrenching from different sources and paste them on canvas. This analogy is very helpful in discussing the technique required for collage writing. A writer can utilize texts of the past and societal happenings in numerous ways. Very often, texts of the past and societal happenings are materials with which writers work, and thus produce texts by lifting and integrating a number of devices like parody, repetition, allusion, and adaptation.

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