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Modernism And The Collage Aesthetic

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Picasso, sometime near the end of 1911, created a small oval work, a cubist still life, that is generally regarded as art history's first collage. Across more than one third of its surface Picasso glued a piece of commercial oilcloth bearing the photographically reproduced image of chair caning. On the remainder of the canvas he painted a cubist still life—an image which is itself highly ambiguous—and allowed some brushstrokes to glide across the "perforated" oilcloth. Thus the painted areas appear to do the impossible: to exist flat and intact on a surface that is seemingly full of holes. The "real" and the "artificial" are thus locked into an open-ended equation which contains no fixed terms. Is the mechanically printed chair caning more—or less—artificial than Picasso's handpainted imagery? In this small seminal work the war between photography and painting as representational modes is both stated baldly and, through a series of subtle formal decisions, tentatively resolved.

To make things even more ambiguous, *Still Life With Chair Caning* was not framed in a traditional way. Instead, Picasso fastened a piece of rope around its oval circumference, underscoring its objecthood and even suggesting a similarity to the kind of round tray on which waiters carried drinks at cafés. In 1911, this radical intermixture of methods and materials gave birth to the physical medium of collage, a complex new hybrid in which the philosophical core of modernism received its most literal expression.

But the issue I want to emphasize here concerns collage not as a physical technique, a marriage of contrasting materials, but rather as a philosophical attitude, an aesthetic position that can suffuse virtually any expressive medium. The collage aesthetic is the sole methodological link between such modernist masterpieces as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, the music of Igor Stravinsky, and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and it lies, of course, at the very heart of the century's most important new art medium—the motion picture.

Film—and its step-child, television—is not only virtually omnipresent in our lives, but by its very nature is a collage, an assemblage of fragments and varying points of view, put together often in a non-linear way. In 1912, when Picasso and Braque were making cubist works (assemblages of fragments and varying points of view, put together with no unifying system of perspective), D. W. Griffith was filming *Birth of a Nation*.

Griffith's radical editing, intercutting the scene of a family at prayer with quick shots of their son in battle, created a new kind of elliptical narrative, requiring a new kind of mental agility from his viewers. Rather than heading to Y chronologically, moving from A to B to C while remaining at the same location, film editing tends to jump from A to L to X, and then, perhaps, back again to B—from location to location, from closeup to long shot. These editing procedures, which historian Iris Barry dates as early as Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903, are now so common that television commercials, which depend upon ease and speed of communication, use collage techniques—sequences of quick, disparate images—far more frequently than linear narrative. ("Montage" is perhaps the more accurate term for this technique, which is, after all, simply the filmic version of the collage aesthetic.)

As we will see, the collage aesthetic is shared by artists as diverse as Tom Stoppard, René Magritte, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Proust, and Constantin Brancusi. In fact, the roster of filmmakers, painters, poets, sculptors, and writers whose work rests upon this philosophical underpinning is as broad as modernism itself.

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Ours is a disturbingly pluralistic world in which we deal with infinitely more information, more contradictory social roles, more diverse "realities" than in any previous century. The smooth, continuous, unruffled space of older representational art is not appropriate to the disjunctions of our typical life experience. Consciously or unconsciously, contemporary artists work to create harmony from distinctly jarring material, forcing warring ideas, materials and spatial systems into a tense and perhaps arbitrary détente. Seen most broadly, the presence of the collage aesthetic is the sole defining quality of modernism in all the arts.

To further clarify its meaning, it is helpful to contrast my example of Picasso's *Still Life With Chair Caning* with an earlier work in which the collage aesthetic is virtually absent: a typical late reclining nude by Renoir. In the latter work each element, whether it is the depicted object, the quality of brushstroke, color, spatial construction, or whatever, each aspect reinforces the effect of the others, creating an untroubled harmony. The tenderness of Renoir's touch fits the tenderness of the image: "I want to paint a buttock as if I were stroking it." The warmth of his color fits the youth and loveliness of his model, with tree trunk and leaf radiating the same human sensuality. Renoir's close, snug space is appropriate to both the emotional tone of the work and his gently intertwined brush strokes. Everything in the painting seems equally edible and fragrant. Nothing belongs to a contradictory world of thought, feeling, or technique.

We accept the Renoir's smooth, virtually perfect unity now because of its *distance* from our sense of reality. For its admirers it is a lovely escapist dream, far from our jarringly complex modern reality. By comparison, the Picasso work embraces the disjunctive nature of that reality—in a sense illustrating it—yet managing at the same time to achieve a kind of tense harmony.

Again with regard to painting and sculpture, one can see the collage aesthetic as the

single philosophical premise shared by Cubism and Surrealism, manifesting itself formally in Cubism and iconographically in Surrealism. An excellent example of the latter is René Magritte's 1941 painting *Personal Values*. A work in oil painted quite realistically, it contains no literal collage element; no foreign material has been added to its uneventful surface. *Personal Values* depicts an object-filled room which we see doll's-house fashion, as if the back wall were missing. Inside the room is a bed supporting a (giant?) tortoise-shell comb. The comb is roughly twenty percent longer than the bed, and almost exactly the length of a centrally placed wineglass. Nearby there is a bar of soap which would fill the bed, and a matchstick that is the same size as a shaving brush which looms atop a mirrored wardrobe. All of these objects fit easily into the realistically depicted three-dimensional space. Nothing floats, the laws of gravity are obeyed, the objects are common, unexceptional. An unnerving mystery exists solely because we are deprived of a consistent system of scale in a painting centrally about objects. Is everything miniature? If so, some things are more miniature than others. Magritte's diabolical method is to offer a number of disjunctive scale suggestions without ever giving us any one controlling system. Even the room itself may be any size; in fact, it dematerializes itself as we study it, because of its illusionistic sky wallpaper. As this surrealist work eloquently shows, the collage aesthetic can be defined as the presence of several contradictory *systems* in a work of art, and the absence of a single controlling *system*.

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The collage aesthetic can be subtly apparent in works that outwardly seem to be quite simple, even "classical." For example, Brancusi, generally regarded as the greatest twentieth-century sculptor, is a master of reduction, of clarity and classical calm, three qualities one might think would war with the collage aesthetic. And yet a close examination of Brancusi's work shows him to be a master of complexity and internal contrast.

The forms in most of Brancusi's sculptures share a strict central axis, a principle which guarantees a sense of order and simplicity. But these works consist essentially of stacked sections made of different, highly contrasting materials. For example, the *Blond Negress* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art reads this way, from top to bottom: First, a stylized, highly reflective bronze head of a woman, stressing her lips, hairdo, and oval head. That unit sits upon a marble cylinder, about one fifth its height. Like the bronze, the marble is polished and somewhat reflective, but unlike it, it is completely geometrical. This cylinder rests upon a large, complex form, a kind of extruded cross, carved from yet another kind of stone, of a different texture and hue. In contrast with the cylinder above it, this large form is non-reflective and completely without curves.

Below that unit is a solid, rectangular block of wood, whose grain and largest dimensions run horizontally. (All three of the units above it are oriented vertically.) But below that block, taking up more than half of the sculpture's height, is a wooden "base" containing both rectilinear and organic carved forms, rivaling the bronze head in its range of sculptural incident. This bottom unit is carved somewhat loosely,

displaying a long, vertical fissure (the only "imperfection" in the work), and suggesting a set of tools and a physical technique different from that of any of the other units. Thus we have a "simple" sculpture consisting of *five* separate, disparate units, a stack of highly idiosyncratic parts made of wood, metal, and two different kinds of stone. Some of the units are geometrical, some highly organic. Some are reflective, some matte. Some of the surfaces are clean, some are rough and almost splintery. The viewer's feelings, both about these various contrasting materials and the artist's contradictory formal strategies, comprise a major portion of the meaning of the work. And yet, like Picasso's *Still Life With Chair Caning,* unity is achieved, in this case largely by Brancusi's method of stacking all five units and thereby causing them to share a central core and a common silhouette.

To understand the radical nature of Brancusi's strategies, one has only to visit a gallery of nineteenth-century sculpture, or, for that matter, a contemporary exhibition of traditional sculpture. Almost every work on display will not only seem single-mindedly representational, but also constructed entirely from one material: bronze or stone (usually marble), wood, plaster or clay. Like Rodin, many of the sculptors of his day worked with a variety of different materials and were acutely sensitive to their individual qualities. However, they and their contemporary counterparts choose to keep each individual sculpture physically and visually unified; the presence of more than one material in the same work would add contradictory formal and emotional issues. As with Renoir in my earlier example, traditional sculptors try to avoid internal disjunctions and hope thereby to achieve an absolute unity of material, technique, and subject matter. For them, Brancusi's "simple" works are probably far too complicated.

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Turning now to poetry and a monument of modernism, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* one finds that another unifying strategy common to the medium has virtually disappeared. In Eliot's great work, the poet's reassuring *voice* has slipped away. Readers no longer have the sense of listening, almost conversationally, to someone whose particular tone, inflection, and intimate way of thinking combine to provide an imaginary companion, someone whose personality we feel we have come to know. *The Waste Land,* instead, is a kind of collage, combining bits of near movie dialogue ("O O O O that Shakespearean Rag," "When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—/ I didn't mince my words . . .") with enough quotes from *Tristan und Isolde,* Ovid, Verlaine, and so on, to require six pages of footnotes. Though the author's voice is present from time to time, weaving the disparate elements together and lecturing us like a docent in a museum of literature, the final effect of his poem is more that of a vast, historical collage than an intimate conversation with a familiar companion.

The grand epic poetry of the past, in which a narrator (Dante, Milton, Homer) functions as a reliable guide to amazing events, has all but disappeared, along with history painting and depictions of mythological scenes. Since modern artists do not regard the past as a separate reality with its own obvious boundaries, they cannot easily behave like historians, detaching themselves from such distant subject matter in order to deal with it objectively and whole. Instead, writers and painters alike tend to plunder

the vast historical smorgasbord for people and events which they find useful to insert in contemporary contexts. For example, Tom Stoppard, in his play *Travesties,* removes familiar figures (Lenin, Joyce, and Tzara) from their historical niches in order to juxtapose them in ways not unlike Picasso's use of the piece of oilcloth in his cubist still life.

The collage aesthetic is at the heart of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Joyce's *Ulysses,* each of which unfolds in ways closer to modern cinema than that of the traditional novel with its linear chronology and unity of voice and technique. The rise of all methods of reproduction—the phonograph, the cheap camera, tape recorders, video—has led to a situation in which one's past is easily caught and held and thereby made to co-exist with one's present. Proust used a madeleine to trigger memory but the contemporary American family has its past literally available on videocassette, ready to be popped into the VCR for immediate viewing.

In earlier times, in cultures dominated by a single religion and a fixed political structure, and having little bewildering information to deal with, artists could easily achieve a simple and ideal unity. In the France of Louis XIV, in the theater of Racine and Molière, the unities of time, place, and action guaranteed logical continuity and internal consistency. The stately passage of time in the novels of even so late a figure as Charles Dickens has given way in contemporary literature and film to a self-conscious simultaneity of different moments in which past and present are intercut rather than sequential. Today the archetypal modern creator is not the traditional storyteller or playwright but rather the filmmaker, cutting, editing, transposing reality and fantasy, close-up and panorama, present and past, into a collage whose parts, seen together, metaphorically recreate the complex reality in which we actually live.

Traditionally, in Western art each medium depended upon a closed, a priori framework: in painting it was the illusion of consistent deep space; in the novel, the logical development of plot and character; in theater, the illusion of peeping through a proscenium arch into a three-sided, open-fronted box, where actors spoke to one another as if the audience didn't exist. What was "real" in the theater—the living actors, their fixed distance from the audience—and what was "false"—the illusionistic scenery, the memorized play—were parts of a closed system. The development of moving pictures in the early years of the century devastated all of these theatrical norms. Real scenery, mountains, horses, waterfalls, interacted with real actors performing artificial scenarios, but on film, with no fixed distance from a seated audience. Close-ups— perfected, as we have seen, at the time of cubism—led to the star phenomenon: the actor played a fictitious role, but was simultaneously a real and familiar celebrity, appearing in intimate close-ups on the screen as if he were a friend in a home movie. This nearly absolute disjunction of the star from his role—Bing Crosby playing Bing Crosby in a movie—was a new phenomenon. More powerfully than any stage actor, the film star in close-up was part of an illusory fiction while at the same time appearing as his / her real self. Greta Garbo, for example, performed in film somewhat the way a polished perfect circle of mirrored glass performed in a Brancusi sculpture: part of a larger artwork but undeniably and completely herself.

Noting the relationship of film to modern painting and sculpture, the art historian Arnold Hauser christened the twentieth century the "Film Age." While acknowledging

the influence of the motion picture, I believe the era of a shared modernist spirit is more properly referred to as the age of the collage aesthetic.

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Modern architecture represents yet another sphere in which the collage aesthetic is the unifying force, and as examples I will cite two seminal works, virtual icons in the modernist canon: Frank Lloyd Wright's 1937 Kaufman House ("Falling Water") and Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion.

Looking at the mass of designs Frank Lloyd Wright created over his long career, one is struck by the fact that he harbored two radically opposed formal and emotional obsessions. First is the house as a primitive lair or den, an organic kind of structure which he once even buried in the side of a hill (the Second Jacobs House of 1948). Wright favored massive sheltering overhangs which often lend the interiors a cave-like quality, and huge impractical open fireplaces, ubiquitous in the living areas he designed. Primitive materials, such as rough-hewn stone and heavy wooden ceiling beams are often employed in these structures, suggesting the building methods of an earlier time.

On the other hand, Wright was obsessed with pure geometry, with the obviously machine-made, the frankly artificial. In his Guggenheim Museum, for example, he was so haunted by the circle that even the elevators and the restrooms repeat the curves of the main structure. (One might think that the whole building had been designed with a protractor.) In addition to pure geometry, Wright was equally drawn to new engineering techniques, new materials, and the appearance of sleekness and modernity, as the Johnson Wax buildings, among others, so clearly demonstrate.

These contrasting areas of feeling in Wright's work—the primitive and the ultramodern—are contradictory in virtually every way. And yet in the Kaufman House they are both as integrated and as distinct as Picasso's brush strokes and printed oilcloth. Like a tribal camp, "Falling Water" actually sits partially astride a small stream, with many of its walls constructed of rough-hewn stone quarried at the site. In the living area there is a gigantic fireplace with an iron hook and soup kettle more appropriate to Valley Forge than to an expensive modern home. Next to the fireplace and jutting up out of the stone floor is a scarp of rough stone which Wright neglected to have blasted away when the house was built. By doing so he deliberately invited raw nature into the building, adding to our sense of it as a primitive den.

And yet much of the Kaufman House is made up of reinforced concrete slabs, clean, rectilinear, and more typical of a downtown parking garage than a rough, countrified lair. Further, these massive geometrical units are stacked at right angles in an irregular, cantilevered fashion, underlining the magical strength and lightness of modern construction methods while contradicting the post-and-lintel stodginess of the adjoining masonry walls.

Despite these dramatic contrasts of material, construction technique, and emotional content, "Falling Water" is not only immensely satisfying and architecturally successful, but it has also become the most famous house in all of modernism. In its simultaneous harmony and disjunctions it is as clear an example of the collage aesthetic as one can imagine.

The buildings of Mies van der Rohe—he of the "less is more" slogan—would not seem to be candidates for the expressive complexity I have been describing. Yet his (no longer extant) 1929 Barcelona Pavilion achieved a somewhat jarring complexity, largely because of the wide range of contrasting materials he employed in an otherwise simple building plan. All of the surfaces and structural units of this extraordinarily influential building were clean and highly visible, and each material radiated its own specific emotional associations. The floor was made of travertine, a somewhat pocked form of pale yellow limestone, which contrasted dramatically with a long, smooth, uninflected green marble wall. The nearby glass walls were of a gray tint, thereby calling attention to their texture and hue in a way that plain window glass cannot.

Inside the building there were two reflecting pools lined with black glass, and the roof was supported by brilliantly polished, chromium-plated columns in the form of an extruded cross, which served to increase the number of interior reflections. The furniture—centrally Mies's famous Barcelona Chair—was finished in rich, buttery leather and stood upon a dark woolen rug of rough weave. Each structural element and each item of interior furnishing was chosen to contrast, one with another. Organic leather (the tanned skin of an animal); machine-made, chromium-plated steel columns; primitive travertine; elegant, highly polished green marble; black pools of water—all of these together turned the structure's geometrical purity into a vast collage of contrasting materials, colors, and textures. As with Brancusi, Mies van der Rohe's apparent simplicity was belied by a collagist's sense of the subtle conflict and elegant disjunctions implicit in such a wide range of discrete, isolated units. No one could describe the Pavilion simply as a "stone" building or a "steel and glass" building; the mixture of materials was so rich that the viewer was denied that overarching certainty.

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When one considers the basic technological changes that have occurred in the last hundred years and the ways they have altered the texture of life, one can see why collage has become the most appropriate metaphor for modern existence. Today it takes a great imaginative leap for us to imagine the unity of daily life before the advent of the electric light. Daybreak and sundown, events only casually noticed in current urban life—at that time bracketed existence and marked its sequential flow. The majority of the world's population was just as much connected to nature's fixed system of light and dark as was the animal kingdom.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the arrival of electric light provided an arbitrary counter-system; day and night could finally be arranged at will, and sleep was no longer dictated by lack of light. With increased freedom came increased disjunction between everyday urban life and nature, and further gains in technology helped speed the breakdown of old unities. Previously, if one wanted to communicate with someone, one could either visit the person or send a message by letter or through a third party. The invention of the telephone, which began offering service in 1877, supplied a welcome third alternative. However, the convenience of telephone service brought with it a peculiar new disjunction: one could now talk as intimately as one wished with someone who nevertheless remained invisible and remote. Though the range of human

intercourse was widened by the telephone, it was also split in two when a substantial portion of our everyday communication—intimacy with an invisible person—became a species of collage.

Transportation, which a century ago involved laborious daily increments of travel by horse, by boat, or on foot, began its evolution with the advent of trains, automobiles, and now, jet aircraft. The result is that we often do not experience travel as a form of human endeavor. We fly from one airport to another in a few hours so that our experience is more that of an immediate *juxtaposition* of locations than a slow, arduous moving towards a distant destination. Travel has become more a collage of places than a process, and, with airports the world over seeming ever more the same, arrivals are little different than departures. Significantly, the word "journey" has almost disappeared from our vocabulary.

Technological advances have so speeded up the rate at which we are forced to absorb information and events, that the slower, more unified, more linear art forms of the past do not adequately represent our everyday experience. We do not have to be shown A leading to B and on to C, step by step, until we reach V. We can jump from A to D immediately, and then on to L and V. We can easily grasp a sequence that has missing parts, and we can make connections between seemingly disjunctive units. Our minds and the very texture of our worldly experience enable us to find unity within observed disparity. The collage aesthetic, like earlier aesthetic systems, has no objective moral or emotional content. Intrinsically it is neither inferior nor superior to any other—it simply describes the way we've come to view the world.