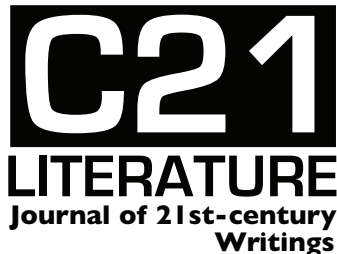




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Review

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REVIEW

Wojciech Drag, *Collage in Twenty-First Century Literature in English*, New York & London: Routledge (1st edition), hbk: Dec. 2019, ISBN 978-0367437428, 230 Pages, £120.00

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As Wojciech Drag notes in this new study, *Collage in Twenty-First Century Literature in English*, collage is an act of violence followed by active repair (23). The initial deconstruction is the cutting or tearing involved in the making of a collage. The making good is the pasting required to create something new and to give it the 'strangeness' or otherness that is the definition of collage. For art or a text to qualify it has to be, at least in part, appropriated and be constituted of ready-made materials. These factors, in turn, must be juxtaposed or rearranged in some way that is different from their original state (ibid). The complexity of the resulting work demands from its audience a greater engagement than might ordinarily be the case so that intellectual sense can be made from it. In the light of this premise Drag quotes Rona Cran, who states that collage is an 'invitation to participate' and to be 'experienced' (21).

The fact that the book's tagline is 'Art in Crisis' is significant. Already in his introduction, Drag explains how critics are lamenting 'the death of the novel' (Will Self) and the danger of print publications being displaced by electronic literature and audiobooks (5). The texts of each of the writers Drag discusses tell a story of a kind of crisis. In most cases it is of a personal nature: loss, grief, heartbreak, a subversion of

the writer's or main protagonist's sense of self. Intertwined with the ideas explored, are also aesthetic, sociopolitical and cultural concerns of the twenty-first century: fashion, consumerism, capitalism and the influence of social media. Furthermore, it is the innovative manner in which these authors present their work, as fragments of appropriated quotations placed amidst lots of white space on the page, indicating conflict, hesitation and confusion, being joined together in alternative ways, which demonstrates the collage-like nature of what they have created.

Drag divides his study of *Collage in Twenty-First Century Literature in English* into three parts, bookended by an extended Introduction and a Conclusion. The Introduction is subdivided into sections in which Drag examines the history of collage in art and literature, the poetics of collage, the politics of collage, and the scholarly assessment of collage-like literary texts. In this section he also investigates the theories of multimodality, that is the way in which texts convey their meanings through semiotics. Finally, in his Introduction, Drag looks at textual coherence through Rhetorical Theory Structure (RTS), with its focus on author intention.

Collage, as an art form is believed to have been the invention of the Cubist movement with Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963) regarded as the first exponents of the form. Drag explains that the term, derived from the French word, *coller*, to 'paste' or 'glue', can also be French colloquialism for 'having an affair' or 'living in sin' (10). This notion, then, of daring and co-existence is the theory behind collage. The Surrealist, Max Ernst (1891–1976), another advocate of collage, supposedly called it 'the coupling of two realities' (ibid). Made up of a series of nonsensical woodcuts with short subtitles, the first collage novel was Ernst's book-length narrative, *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) (14). Drag describes collage as a product of the social, economic, aesthetic and philosophical conditions prevailing in the early twentieth century (15). In literary texts the ready-made element of collage usually takes the form of quotes or images, both attributed and unattributed. That is certainly the case in the texts Drag discusses in the book under review.

Collage has frequently been employed as a political vehicle. The anti-Nazi photomontages of the visual artist John Heartfield (1891–1968) are just one such example (25). The Russian avant-garde artists who flourished between 1890 and 1930

also used collage to promote their anti-capitalist sentiments (ibid). Less extreme, but equally forceful, is the use of collage as a response to the rise of consumerism – think of the work of Andy Warhol (1930–1987) and of some of the Abstractionists, such as Willem De Kooning (1904–1997), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970) (26). To illustrate a literary example, Drag cites the American artist and critic, Gwen Raaberg (b.1932) as a prime proponent of writing about collage, not only in the context of visual art, but as having a place, too, in feminist literature (25). Modernist poetry, says Drag, depended on the fragmentary nature of collage far more than the novel. The most often cited passage of modernist poetry being the concluding eight lines of *The Wasteland* (1922), in which T.S. Eliot juxtaposes excerpts from seven sources (28).

All but one of the authors Drag reviews are American. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the definition of collage – the idea of appropriation, use of ready-made materials and their juxtaposition to create something new – means that there is some overlap in the way these writers create their literary works.

In Part 1, subtitled 'Art in Crisis', Drag examines the late novels of David Markson (1927–2010). In his lifetime Markson created a rich oeuvre of work, but due to its unconventional, experimental nature his name only gained wider recognition after his death. Critics regard his last four books as a tetralogy, connected as they are by Markson's method of cutting, pasting and juxtaposing fragments of quotes and random text to form their narratives (48). The books, all quite short – between 150 and 200 pages – are *Reader's Block* (1996); *This is Not a Novel* (2001); *Vanishing Point* (2004) and *The Last Novel* (2007).

Drag analyses the nature and source of many of the fragments making up the four Markson novels he studies, attempting to explain their function in order to make sense of their meaning and purpose. About the last one cited in the previous paragraph, for example, Drag explains that it concerns Auden's assessment of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and is one of several hundred quotations Markson used in his narrative which are biographical or encyclopedic in nature (51).

Part II is titled 'Society in Crisis'. In it Drag assesses two multimodal short stories by the experimental writer, Lance Olson (b.1956) and co-authored with the writer's

wife, Andi, from his collection, *Sewing Shut My Eyes* (2000) as well as two of Olson's novels, *Head in Flames* (2009) and *Dreamlives of Debris* (2017). The author of fourteen novels, four collections of short stories and numerous instances of co-authored works of non-fiction, Olson's writing has become increasingly collage-like over the last twenty years, incorporating hybrid black and white images reminiscent of graphic novels with the focus on juxtaposition and multimodality (99).

As Drag explains, the stories making up Olson's collection, *Sewing Shut My Eyes*, came to be associated with the movement known as Avant-Pop which encouraged non-linear writing and is thought to have signalled the end of postmodernism in literature (100). 'Telegenicide', a short story from *Sewing Shut My Eyes* is concerned with the shallow nature of celebrity culture and is a comment on the influence of television on American society. It features seven top female models remarking on the pain they have to endure to keep their shape and the pressure the fashion industry puts on them. The accompanying images, or 'panels' created by Olsen's wife, Andi, are finished off by Olsen with slogans taken from commercial adverts for Coca-Cola, Pepsi and the US Army. The panels show television screens in different contexts. One of them is an open mouth with white teeth which, Drag notes, 'resemble plastic bags packed with cocaine' (106). In his analysis of 'Telegenicide' Drag refers to the work of the French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) and his essay, titled 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in which Baudrillard writes that 'advertising invades everything as public space disappears' (149). 'Dreamlives of Debris' is a retelling of the Minotaur myth and features forty characters, among them Sophocles, Plato, St. Augustine; contemporaries such as Julian Assange, Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden and mythical figures like Ariadne, Daedalus and Odysseus who, by way of appropriated citations, address themes which, Drag explains, are especially relevant to life in the twenty-first century: disease, cataclysm, chaos and conflict (115).

'Head of Flames', inspired by the murder of the Dutch film-maker, Theo Van Gogh by Muslim fundamentalists in November 2004, tells the story of his death in incomplete sentences from the view points of three narrators: Vincent Van Gogh, Theo Van Gogh and Theo's murderer, Mohammed Bouyeri. These POVs are made up

of quotations from Heinrich Heine, Strindberg and Julian Barnes and are occasionally interspersed with lines from popular songs, by singers such as Cher and Britney Spears (111). Olsen has Theo Van Gogh humming passages from Spears' song 'Hit Me Baby One More Time' as he cycles to the scene of his murder (ibid). As in his short story, 'Telegenicide', Olson's focus in 'Head of Flames' is on the anxieties that make up twenty-first century life, its traumas, discontents and the influence of social media (118).

Part III is titled 'The Self in Crisis' and is an assessment of Graham Rawle's novel, *Woman's World* (2006), which Drag calls 'the quintessence of collage literature' (159). Rawle is a British writer and collage artist whose visual work incorporates illustration, design, photography and installation. His series, 'Lost Consonants', which explored the comic effects of letters being omitted from sayings or quotations, appeared weekly in the *Weekend Guardian* between 1990 and 2005. Other series, such as 'Lying Doggo' and 'Graham Rawle's Wonder Quiz', were published in *The Observer*, *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine* and *The Times* (ibid). His first novel, *The Diary of an Amateur Photographer* (1998), is a multimodal murder mystery comprising images, newspaper clippings and some cut up text placed in an envelope at the end of the book (ibid).

Woman's World is a huge undertaking for which Rawle spent seventeen hours every day for five years cutting up women's magazines from the 1950s and 1960s, finding single words, whole chunks of text and small images and arranging them to tell the story of Norma Fontaine who lives in a perfect woman's world of handy tips and sensible advice. Whether it is choosing the right foundation garment or practising feminine allure through meticulous grooming, Norma measures her life, and the people in it, by the standards set out in the magazines she reads (160). Drag describes *Woman's World* as 'radical in its reliance on appropriation', since it is 'composed entirely of external elements' (167). Ultimately, the novel represents an image of 'the self immersed in, and defined by, consumer practices' (170).

In the conclusion to *Collage in Twenty-First Century Literature in English* Drag points out that despite the similarities in the methods of creation and even, on occasion, in the content and sources used, each of the works reviewed 'have been shown

to vary in their incorporation of the collage principle' (205). Drag reminds us that although the purpose of collage in art and literature during the second half of the twentieth-century was to shock and provoke its audience, in the last two decades collage has become much more of an artistic and aesthetic form of expression (208). Furthermore, advances in digital technology and the rise of electronic literature and ebooks have enabled the creation of more daring multimodal literature (209). More generally, each chapter ends with a comprehensive list of notes and works cited. Drag's research and analysis of the texts he chooses to examine is meticulous and exhaustive. Writing in the first person imbues his material with a sense of ownership that is both bold and reassuring. The book also manages to be eminently accessible to non-academics interested in learning about the use of collage as a way of creating innovative contemporary literature.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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