

## **Strategies of Montage: Postmodernity and the City**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is analysis of the aesthetics of collage/montage with the background of its significance in artistic representation during the emergence of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, focusing on the intersection of the formal invention of collage/montage with photography and artistic production that took place in the twenties and thirties within the origins of the technique of montage. The approach of this text is made transversely, considering certain authors and artists who have treated the practices of collage/montage indirectly or frontally. The use and aesthetic strategies of collage/montage in postmodernity are reflected in their different extensions and influences and this occur mainly in thinkers and philosophers of postmodern times. And as a final extension of the term of montage, the analysis refers to its spatialization in the production space of the city in relation to the aesthetic-artistic world of contemporary art.*

**Keywords:** collage, montage, city, postmodernism, avant-garde

### **1. Introduction**

During the 20's and 30's a general debate of cultural production arises from Bertold Brecht to Le Corbusier, Sergei Eisenstein, DzigaVertov, Jan Tischoed, etc., spanning through literature, theatre, typography, cinema, photography, etc. This debate is about the creation of new languages that insist on radical cultural innovation. All this is condensed into the historical avant-garde proposals and aesthetic theories that highlight new perception (New Vision) and technology as key points involving art in the praxis of life, to free all the ideological and cultural restrictions and barriers from everyday life that prevent the cultural revolution of a new society. This happens more clearly in the Russian avant-garde because of the political and cultural involvement of the artists after the 1917 revolution, but also is part of the manifestos of Surrealism, Futurism, Dadaism, etc.

What is interesting to emphasize here is the commitment in two ways of the artistic and social avant-garde between wars: firstly, the commitment to change our experiential, emotional, sensory experiences through conceptual vision formalism and secondly, the belief in technology as a tool to counter the alienating use that makes the nascent capitalism of the time. The combination of these two factors was the prerequisite of the avant-garde utopian hope to build a culture of mass emancipation.

The subsequent evolution of the post-war avant-garde seeks to recover the vitality of the historical avant-garde, but in the dialectic avant-garde/mass culture, monopoly capitalism has assumed through its cultural industry, and through the new technological media, the role of cultural front in the aesthetics of the commodities. This has become image, representation and spectacle.

Upon the historical use of the technique of montage in cinema and photography it is outlined firstly the extension of the term and the strategy of montage/collage in the recovery of its functionalities during the 60's and 70's and its influences in theories of postmodern art and culture, and in so doing recomposing the way this strategy is part of the aesthetic and philosophical thoughts of postmodernism. And secondly the transposition of these theories to the spatial and urban field finds in the city a place to develop in artistic contemporaneity.

## 2. Montage Strategies in Postmodernity

The extension of the term collage to other artistic fields and areas of knowledge has been a recent phenomenon and has attracted many theorists, from music, cinema, theater, poetry, architecture, philosophy, etc. This contemporary discussion has mainly centered on the footprints left by the project of modernity in the present era (Danto, 1997). Thus, it is also the center of controversy in the emergence of postmodernism and the effects produced there.

However, the scope of the various fields in which the collage/montage is inserted in one way or another, and understood in its broadest sense, is so vast that it is necessary to reduce the comments about its impact on the artists and their subjects covered in this text. There is a general perception that the term postmodernism has come to mean a wide range of cultural, political and social attitudes in which, in the broadest sense, it would represent a new perceptive mode encouraged by an era of instant communication.

The vision of the world through the media tells us to what extent the strategies of collage/montage, the camera cuts, overlays, juxtapositions of images, etc., have been assumed and appropriated by the contemporary world. Jack Solomon (1990) analyzes postmodernism from the point of view of our “decentered culture”; and so he makes this comment on the postmodern world:

Just as in the evening news, where rapid camera cuts can juxtapose images of international violence with adverts for fabric softeners and remedies for headaches, the postmodern experience is described best as a perceptual montage. Glancing at the world as a vast *show*, the postmodern eye perceives the course of events as a series of parodies without any narration or sense just like a long episode of Monty Python (Solomon, 1990, p. 212).

In this way the conventionally called postmodern culture has exploded around these facts. Among the features of postmodernist thought are the rejection of totalizing or of the essentialist tendencies of the classic theoretical systems of modernism, especially Marxism with its claim by reference to truth, science and belief in progress. Postmodernism, by contrast, is characterized by a way of thinking and representing where fragmentation and discontinuities predominate, and it contains a very heterogeneous set of practices in intellectual systems in architecture. Thus, theorists of postmodernism, such as Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Paul Virilio and others, use in their theoretical critique a type of writing marked precisely by the aesthetics of collage/montage:

Postmodernist analysis is often marked by forms of writing that are more literary, certainly more self-reflexive, than is common in critical writing—the critic as a self-conscious creator of new meanings upon the ground of the object of study, showing that object no special respect. It prefers montage to perspective, inter-textuality to referentiality, ‘bits-as-bits’ to unified totalities. It delights in excess, play, carnival, asymmetry, even mess, and in the emancipation of meanings from their bondage to mere lumpenreality (O’Sullivan, Hartley et al., 1994, p. 234).

On the other hand, there is a political dimension in which the ontological rupture of the aesthetics of collage/montage, that perpetuates the divisions in our contemporary perception of space and time, is inserted. The use of traditional techniques of montage has been an approach to the visual experience of a being in the city as a [...] succession of different images and angles that become part of a perception that contrasts sharply with the uniform and unifying perception of the village or the rural landscape, a perception, that of montage, faster and less continuous than those propagated by artistic expressions over tradition (Frank, 1991, p. 100).

This possibility of creating new spaces, indeed a space/no-space, by the collage/montage takes us to claims that have been made both by Walter Benjamin and Peter Bürger of a conception of the classical avant-garde of the 20’s as a first attempt to bridge the gap between aesthetic and intellectual activity of politics and daily life. In fact, Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the avant-garde*, concludes that an equation can be done in which the classical avant-garde virtually corresponds to the montage (1997, pp. 130-149).

It is in the city where montage takes shape, on the idea of the contemporary city as it has developed since industrialization. The city as a preferred location for expansion and dissemination of politics is what ultimately determines the political heart of montage. The equivalence of montage to the city has been a historical constant in the work of the classical montage such as Rodchenko, Heartfield, Hausmann and Hannah Höch.

It happens that at the juncture of the 60's and 70's, firstly there is a rapid expansion and appropriation of the photographic medium as an effective charge bearer in political or social criticism, from pop artists like Andy Warhol to conceptual art such as Edward Ruscha, Hans Haacke and others. Again they see photography as a potential agent to reintroduce politics within contemporary art. Again the city plays a pivotal role in raising awareness on the part of the artists about the need to restore the focus of their art, the immediate experience that the urban world offers.

Two trends overlap, which complicates the return of montage and practices. On the one hand, we have the recovery of classic design, with the publication of texts by Brik, Shklovsky, Brecht and Benjamin, in art magazines of the 70's, rediscovering in this way the art proposals from the avant-garde. These magazines, to some extent, open a debate about the involvement of art treated as montage in the inclusion of the fragmentary, satirical and political in the new postmodern view of the communication network of the city, administered culture, the avalanche of statistics, etc., and everything that makes up postcapitalist society.

On the other hand, we find that the assumption of montage strategies and the duplication of resources of the above mentioned mechanisms of appropriation, recycling, intertextuality, etc, by advertising, consumer society and contemporary art make both fields interact with an intensity never seen before. Contemporary art will be marked by this relationship and negotiation, in which the grounds are truly common while at the same time disparate in their projection. The question is how to position the montage legacy of an intricate network of eclectic experiences that form the basis of actual realism, according to Lyotard in his thesis of "derealization".

Capitalism inherently has the ability to de-realize the familiar objects, social roles and institutions to such an extent that the so called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia, farce, as an occasion for suffering rather than to satisfy (Docherty, 1993, p. 40).

We encounter similar situations in the context of the birth of montage in the 20's and in the explosion of postmodern concepts around the experience of reality, which Lyotard calls "the degree zero of contemporary general culture", that is to say, eclecticism. Put another way, the crisis of modernity, with consequent loss of real referents is replaced by others who carry out their function, derived in some way from something like the condition of collage/montage, or the "collapse of reality" in the words of Baudrillard (2002).

This collapse of reality would assume the implosion system suggested by Baudrillard, in which the reality principle of universality can no longer be sustained by archaic forms of representation, but must be reduced to an operative system of simulation in which all references are removed and reality is constructed from "[...] sign systems, more flexible material than meaning" (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 11). We are then approaching the condition of postmodernity as a collage effect, in which the fragmentation, the resistance to interpretation rejecting the totalization, the preference of deconstruction, the ambivalence and the paradoxical view of knowledge all take part.

The space occupied by the representation is one that contains neutrality, on the aesthetics of collage. It's what Thomas Brockelman called "hermeneutics of collage" (2001, p. 183) favoring the view of a postmodern event as a neutral space. This neutral space, according to Brockelman, will be occupied by knowledge and understanding of the paradoxical nature of reality.

The thought, then, in the postmodern era, running from his fear of falling into a totalization (Brockelman, 2001) will fall on a knowledge that only produces uncertainty in a constant and infinitely long division of the world. It is in this way, taking the fracture within the meaning of things as the precedent that collage mediated, that the significance of the current deconstruction philosophy can be interpreted. What deconstructionist thought is trying to avoid is falling into the irreducible aggregation into which cultural interpretation systems fell for much of the last century. The truth is presented, from this point of view, as a contingent value, and what really prevails is the uncertainty that generates the issues of certainty.

### ***3. The City as a Place of Montage***

All this is stated in order to recognize the inability to respond to the crisis of modernity understood as "reconstitution of modern politics with a utopian vision of the city" (Brockelman, 2001, pp. 186-187).

And the city as a generator of the aesthetics of collage/montage folds back into the same effect that this style promotes, and allows us to understand from a historical and current perspective the decline of the polis and the continued search for a paradoxical point in any of its spaces where it is possible to perpetuate the kind of political criticism, being this imaginative and skeptical at the same time.

If we accept the crisis of the polis as a paradigm of the crisis of modernity, this is expressed quite clearly with the bankruptcy of modern urbanism preached by Le Corbusier with his project of “city of the future”. Le Corbusier’s proposals are based on a restart of new rational planning from the very beginning. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter pose criticism of the collapse of Le Corbusier’s urban utopia in his book *Collage City* (1990) using the traditions of collage as a reference to propose an alternative to the totalization of the urban fabric and the image of the modern city derived from the utopian vision of Le Corbusier.

The criticism comes from the interpretation of the urban structure as a place of empty and full spaces, figure-ground, in which Le Corbusier marks vacuum spaces for modern totemic tower buildings. Instead, Rowe and Koetter intend to make the city from a given historical context, in which the demands of difference and indecision of collage set their heterogeneity, admitting the impossibility of transcending the historical determination of the city.

Morphological and hermeneutic unity of the object in the artwork has assumed contradiction and this contradiction finds its paradigmatic place in the city as the highest expression of montage. The phenomenological experience of the city is a constant re-appropriation of the urban in the terms expressed in our own spatial practices and places of encounter and exchange within the urban fabric. The city is represented semiologically as a theatrical space. This implies a multiplicity of signs that are always postponed and never permanently fixed. With its spatio-temporal meanings, which are the claims of the postmodern aesthetic, that is to say, the extraterritorial narratives.

The postmodern metropolis consists of a stratification of assembled fragments from the same city, which produces an image of the city in terms of aggregations, accumulations and patched pieces of the layers forming its own media landscape. Favoring urban fragmentation heterotopias above unity therefore represents spatial postmodern products.

Genocchio Benjamin (1995) sees two types of heterotopias in the spatial discourse of the city: the first is the otherness, external spaces and heterogeneous places capable of juxtaposing several spaces that are incompatible with each other in a single real place. The second heterotopia is the coexistence in an impossible space of a large number of fragments, where commands and incommensurable worlds would be put. He cites the heteropolis of Los Angeles, where there is no city hierarchical structure, nor any consistent form, without any center or any unity. In turn, Los Angeles is presented as an endless urbanized area.

The postmodern discourse presents the vision of the city as an abandonment of stable coordinates of sense of place and is based both on fragmentation and decomposition, as a collage city or simulative city. The fascination with all things related to limits and margins is the answer to the dissolution of traditional boundaries, replacing hierarchy and centrality. The postmodern city is thus seen as a succession of overlapping events, stratified, with the formation of a mental map and a cognitive image of the same city (Harvey, 1989, p. 66-98). Digital information technology has shortened distances and presences in space and time, overlapping spaces.

Henri Lefebvre develops a number of theories about the spatial production of the modern city (1992). The urban phenomenon is a concrete abstraction in the same way that the social space is. It is concrete because it has a particular substance, —and even more so when this belongs to our daily activity and forms part of it— which we resist or we obey. It is abstract by its definition and its more or less controllable measures, besides being active in our social existence.

Lefebvre examines the meanings of space in the urban fabric and believes that relations across different territories are endowed with a certain cultural significance. Lefebvre distributed the imaginary of urban space in three basic forms. These notions of strategic urban spaces follow the strategy of overlapping and juxtaposition of one space over the other, of a folded image over the previous one, which promotes the disintegration of the real space of the post-capitalist city in a virtual space.

The first notion of space, perceived space (*le perçu*) is a blend of the popular and the overview of place, a mixture of daily life and the common and universal perception that people have of a place.

The latter is ignored too often and hits the conceived space (*le conçu*) of cartographers, planners and property speculators, that is, the professional space. There is still one last notion of space: the lived space (*le vécu*). This is the one that represents the total human person and human development, it is the space that is inhabited and lived in. The latter space is the space of imagination, which is accessible to the arts and literature. Lefebvre believes this third space to be the most significant, as it has the ability to act as a balance between the first two spaces.

Lefebvre, with his system of notions of urban spaces, processes the city as an object of representation and processes urban spatialization as a system of signs and images that are subject to change by cultural and artistic practices. Lefebvre applies to the city as a spatial object an evaluation similar to that made by the pioneers of the strategy of collage/ montage to the artwork. The discourse on the multiplication of the image space and the notions of montage, bricolage, etc., is now implemented in the city. This is the viewpoint of David Harvey (1989).

At the same time the city is also seen as a text, or as a series of narratives. Harvey also sees the representation of the city in terms of combination of narrative and collective memory. Henri Foucault studied speech as a system of representation and thus has also referred to the discourses of urban spaces. For Foucault, space contemporary patterns differ from medieval hierarchical space and extensive exchange space of capitalism. The contemporary space is characterized, as Foucault suggests, by the site, the place, “our era is one in which space takes the form of relationships between places” (1986, p. 23). This idea expresses the concept of the city as a place where visual and spatial montage is possible.

The juxtaposition of urban imagery is now added to the phenomenon of place as a juxtaposition of other places, a kind of hybrid interface between electronic media and built environments, what is called *mediarchitecture* (Riewoldt, 1997), (Mitchell, 1996). The postmodern city has become a kind of *mediascape* that challenges traditional concepts of presence, distance and time.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“The city becomes a mosaic of episodes, each with its own individual life span, that contest each other through the medium of the Grid” (Koolhaas, 1994, p. 21).

In the form-experience of the city and the utopian theories the definition of the city becomes as postulated by Rowe and Koetter a kind of solid-void dialectic capable of allowing the joint existence of the openly planned and genuinely unplanned, between public and private, which can only be achieved, if the compositional collage method is proposed. Thus, Rowe and Koetter believe to properly address the problem of utopia in the city.

But there is another approach that tries to connect the spatialization and temporality of contemporary art to the urban phenomenon, to the experience and theory of spaces in the city linked to the genesis of modern art and its expansion in the form of contemporary art. I would end with a reflection from which to draw other paths of exploration of the urban, of the city and its connection to contemporary art. This interesting approach is what Peter Osborne (Osborne, 2013) suggests when he states that the contemporary visual arts are an urban phenomenon. In the strategy of appropriating spaces, contemporary art transcends the local in the same way that the contemporary metropolis transcends the classical city. And in today's urban metropolis defined by technological “spaces of flow” and “non-places” of transport and communication, they pose an “urban textuality” which can only be in a multidisciplinary approach to the method of collage (Koolhaas, 1994), (Rowe and Koetter, 1990), (Tschumi, 1996). As it is described by Brian O'Doherty:

The city provided the materials, models of process and primitive aesthetic of juxtaposition —congruity forced by mixed needs and intentions. On this account, the city is the indispensable context of collage and of gallery space. The mythos of the city is the organizing principal of collage, and collage is at the core of generic modernism (O'Doherty, 1999, p. 44).

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