Chapter 7

Collage Strategy: A Robust and Flexible Tool for Knowledge Visualization

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author analyzes and defines collage in some of its many forms and media. He introduces three terms (the gap, the seam, and contested space) necessary to characterize the unique aesthetics of collage. Via a review of specific artists and art historical movements he creates taxonomy that typifies three distinctive collage strategies. He extends this review into other media including artists’ books, cinematic film, and digital media. In the second part of the chapter he describes the work of three artists (including the author) and their relevance to this theory of collage and scientific visualization. Following that, he reviews the use of digital software and the pedagogical implications of collage.

INTRODUCTION

Collage enables us to experience everyday life in such a way that its disparate and idiosyncratic fragments resist coalescing into a unifying whole, which philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983) refer to as ‘disjunctive synthesis’. Instead of a totalizing body of knowledge, the composition of collage consists of a heterogeneous field of coexisting and contesting images and ideas. Its cognitive dissociation provides the perspectival multiplicity necessary for critical engagement. Dialectical tension occurs within the silent, in-between spaces of collage, as its fragments, its signifying images and ideas interact and oppose one another. Such complexity and contradictions represent the substance of creative cognition and cultural transformation (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 63).

As many have commented, collage is the art form of the 20th and 21st Century (Ulmer, 1983; Durant, 2002; Kohler, 2012). The word collage will be used broadly and inclusively within this chapter. Strictly speaking, collage refers to the gluing of elements historically considered to be outside of the realm of painting, onto paintings or simply onto a flat surface. Assemblage extends this into three dimensions;

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Photomontage consists of multiple images combined in a single photograph, and montage refers to the cuts between film clips in motion pictures. Collage will stand in comprehensively for these and the multitude of other “–ages” that exist, in addition to other words such as cut-up, mashup, etc. In many cases installation art and performance art can also be a collage. A more complete definition of collage will be found in the Background section of this chapter, and numerous examples will follow throughout.

Collage strategies are uniquely suited for visual presentations of information. However, there are few scholarly resources that really grapple with the theoretical implications of collage and the strategies used to create them. In 1975, art critic Harold Rosenberg (1989) lodged this complaint, and unfortunately little has changed in the 40 years since. In both educational settings and in too many fine art environments, collage is taken to be simply the combination of different elements on a page (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). A notable example of the debasement of this word includes a Groupon advertisement called “A Collage Of Our Best Deals: This Collage Is Crafted With Care,” which was simply a web page grid of links to merchants (sent via email September 12, 2013). This confusion over collage is extensive and often begins in public schools. According to the authors Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius (2008) in their book Spectacle Pedagogy, Art, Politics and Visual Culture,

A visit to a public school would give us a learning environment replete with social studies collages, arithmetic collages, language collages, health collages, and even physical education collages, in addition to using this genre in art classes. Such ubiquity notwithstanding, we find little evidence that the aesthetic dimension and disjunctive narrative of collage is understood at any depth in schools (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 4).

This chapter is an effort toward resolving some of these shortcomings. Digital tools in particular have made the creation of collage easier and more affordable than ever before – well within the reach of most students. The downside of such ease of use is that students (and others) can easily fail to recognize the strategic and cognitive possibilities inherent in recombining various components. “Left to a ‘cut-and-paste’ mentality, the conceptual profundity of its [collage] narrative is easily misunderstood as a pastiche of essentialized images and ideas” (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, p. 68).

One of the challenges facing educators and students today is the gulf between the necessary expertise in visual communication and familiarity with technical content (Ursyn, 1997; Kosera, 2007). In spite of resources such as the series of books by Edward R. Tufte (1983, 1990, 1997) on design methods for knowledge visualization, it is rare to find people with skills in design, graphic software, and deep understanding of specific scientific concepts. At the commercial professional level it usually takes a team of at least two people to craft a visual experience, irrespective of media, that can accurately communicate the details of some aspect of scientific research. Furthermore, there is often a minimization of the skills or values of one group by the other. Of course, there are exceptions on both sides of the so-called two cultures divide as originally described by C. P. Snow (1993) in 1959. In spite of numerous reports as to how much artists and scientists have in common, it is critical to remember that there are fundamental differences between the goals and methodologies of scientists and those of artists. Science is about facts and falsifiability; art is about everything else.

Additionally, there are fundamental differences between the goals and methodologies of the quite distinct fields of “commercial arts” and “fine arts.” Although there is obvious overlap between visual judgment skill sets, the pedagogy and intention of both is significantly different (Kosera, 2007). In a typical university setting shared courses between students in both disciplines might include color theory and