

Review:
**Magda Dragu, 2020. *Form and Meaning
in Avant-Garde Collage and Montage*
(New York and London: Routledge)**

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Form and Meaning in Avant-Garde Collage and Montage – an excellent new book by Dr Magda Dragu from Indiana University – is one in a recent series of Routledge’s monographs on collage, the other volumes being Scarlett Higgins’s *Collage and Literature: The Persistence of Vision* (2018) and my own *Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis* (2019). Several years previously, seminal works on literary collage had been published by David Banash (*Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*, 2013) and Rona Cran (*Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O’Hara, and Bob Dylan*, 2014). One hundred years after Pablo Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, widely regarded as the first work of collage, the form continues to attract critical attention and, as several of the above volumes testify, remains a very productive structural principle in literature and the visual arts.

Dragu’s study, however, is concerned with the origins of collage and its importance to the Modernist avant-garde rather than with its continued relevance to contemporary art. Most of the works she focuses on date back to the first half of the twentieth century. Among the collage (and montage practitioners) she is particularly interested in are visual artists such as Picasso, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield and László Moholy-Nagy (whose *Love Your Neighbor: Murder on the Railway* is the book’s cover image), filmmakers – Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, composers – Charles Ives, Eric Satie and Igor Stravinsky, and writers – Guillaume Apollinaire and John Dos Passos. That alone shows the impressive scope of Dragu’s volume, which comprises visual, filmic, musical and literary contributions to what Donald Barthelme called the “central principle of all art in the 20th century.” Besides, the author draws on primary and secondary works released in several European languages. All of that justifies

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the claim that *Form and Meaning* is a definitive study on the avant-garde origins of collage and montage.

The main argument of Dragu's monograph is that the concepts of collage and montage should be regarded as distinct artistic strategies whose main difference is that the former generates heterogeneous and the latter homogeneous meaning. In other words, collage juxtaposes elements (often appropriated from other sources) in such a way as to preserve their individual character whereas montage subjects those elements to a uniform meaning, which makes it far more suited to conveying a message (political or otherwise). Throughout the volume, Dragu details the ways in which the two practices interpenetrated in the work of several key avant-garde artists associated with Cubism and Dadaism.

The first part of the monograph, titled "Theories of intermediality: form and meaning," is concerned with the adopted methodology, namely the intermedial theories of Irina Rajewsky, Werner Wolf and Lars Elleström. Dragu examines the emergence of various concepts associated with intermediality, tracing their origins to Steven Paul Scher's and Wolf's analyses of the interrelations between literature and music. Among the discussed varieties are covert and overt intermediality, intracompositional and extracompositional intermediality, explicit and implicit intermedial reference and many others. Dragu also explains the distinction between such similar-sounding notions as mixed media, mixed-media and multimedia. A reader not very well-versed in academic categorizations may feel occasionally lost in those theoretical considerations and confused by the jargon such as "(intramedia) semiotic intermodality" even though the author is very meticulous about clarifying the subtle differences between those notions.

Part Two, "Collage," is devoted to an analysis of chosen examples of visual, verbal and musical collages. Dragu begins by correcting what she sees as the popular misconception that "anyone can make a collage." Although seemingly effortless and undemanding, visual collage, she argues, is a complex structural principle that requires an in-depth knowledge of the pictorial tradition. Among the many original observations she makes in that section is that text in visual collages is used in order to "confuse" rather than to "clarify" meaning, which is rooted in collage's earlier asserted inherently heterogeneous nature. The inner disunity is further enhanced by the incorporation of appropriated material, which, according to Dragu, has to remain unassimilated. (She goes so far as to say that "if the borrowed material is harmoniously integrated in the target text, one

cannot talk of a verbal collage.”) The chapter concerned with musical collage was, for me, the most illuminating, since ties between collage and music tend to be left out from most accounts of its artistic legacy. Dragu presents the structure of *Fourth of July*, a section in Charles Ives’s *Holidays Symphony* (1913), as the paradigm of musical collage, understood, after J. Peter Burkholder, as “the juxtaposition of multiple quotations, styles or textures so that each element maintains its individuality and the elements are perceived as excerpted from many sources.” (That definition, it appears to me, would work just as well in reference to other kinds of collage.) In that piece, Ives mixes fragments of a number of patriotic songs played by various sections of the orchestra to evoke the chaos and commotion of street celebrations on independence day. In his *Concord Sonata* (1915), he mixes Beethoven’s canonical “fate motif” with such songs as “Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater,” thus achieving a quintessentially collage-like marriage of the high and low.

In Part Three, titled “From collage to montage,” the author considers a number of examples of photomontage and montage in film, literature and music. Dragu reminds the reader that the principle of photomontage was established by Dadaists and Russian Constructivists around the year 1919. She sees it as a development of collage, brought to life by Picasso and Braque in 1912, or, to be precise, as “an intermedial transposition of the technique of visual collage into the medium of photography.” Dragu traces the gradual evolution from what she calls heterogeneous photomontage to the homogeneous type, whose aim is to communicate a clear meaning to the audience. It is the latter type that, in the hands of Berlin Dadaists such as John Heartfield, soon became a powerful tool of political propaganda. Political manipulation, Dragu demonstrates, was part of the aim of film montage – a technique theorized by Sergei Eisenstein, the author of such ideologically-engaged works as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928). In the chapter on literary montage, Dragu mentions the influence of another milestone of film montage – David Wark Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – on Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), a novel composed, in the writer’s own words, of “direct snapshots of life.”

One has to admire the broad sweep and ambition of *Form and Meaning in Avant-Garde Collage and Montage* – a volume surveying the emergence and flourishing of two crucial artistic principles of Modernism across the visual arts, film, literature and music. Such an achievement requires a great deal of multidisciplinary expertise and effort, which is evidenced in the volume’s impressive bibliography comprising over 500 sources in several languages.

The author's success in securing the copyright and the publisher's approval to include close to 70 illustrations also deserves the highest praise. (Otherwise, close analysis of such literary works as Apollinaire's "Lettre-Océan," let alone of photomontages, would be much less rewarding.) More importantly, Dragu makes a number of original observations about the practice of collage and montage. I was, for instance, intrigued by her assertion that their subversion of meaning makes them indebted to the principle of figures of thought. One idea of which I remain to be convinced is the importance of authorial intention in the formal analysis of intermedial works. Dragu's claim that "one cannot talk about a filmic novel or a literary montage if the author did not intend to build his novel according to these techniques" appears problematic to me as it imposes on the critic the need to seek evidence for a given work's formal properties in paratextual (or, more precisely, epitextual) material. As a whole, Dragu's book is a much-needed, meticulously researched and highly original contribution to a field that is undergoing a resurgence of critical interest.