

COLLAGE AND CRISIS IN STEVE TOMASULA'S
VAS: AN OPERA IN FLATLAND AND
LANCE OLSEN'S HEAD IN FLAMES

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In *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and Postmodernism* (2001), Thomas P. Brockelman observes, without elaborating, that collage is “a technique whose existence depends upon a contradiction” and can be regarded as “an art of crisis—an art *in* perpetual crisis” (35). The aim of my current book project is to develop Brockelman’s insight and argue that collage and crisis are closely entwined. I argue that the formal crisis at the heart of collage—the inner disunity resulting from a juxtaposition of incompatible components—makes it particularly suited to represent various experiences of crisis. My study is therefore concerned with the structure as well as content of a range of twenty-first century literary collages by American and British authors. In this article, I wish to outline the poetics of collage in contemporary fiction and examine its relationship with crisis on the basis of two novels—Steve Tomasula’s *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002) and Lance Olsen’s *Head in Flames* (2009).

Those two texts are part of a larger body of twentieth-first century literature which displays a strong formal indebtedness to collage while engaging with the theme of crisis. In my project, I have divided the works depending on the kind of crisis experience which they address. Along those responding to the sense of exhaustion of the traditional novel are David Markson’s four last works, which are often referred to as the *Reader’s Block* tetralogy (1996-2007), and David Shields’s *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) and *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013). Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005), Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* (2009) and Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) can all be interpreted as representing the self in crisis. Finally, the earlier mentioned works by Tomasula and Olsen, alongside the former’s *The Book of Portraiture* (2006) and the latter’s *Sewing Shut My Eyes* (2000) and *Dreamlives of Debris* (2017), are engaged with the social challenges of the new millennium.

Collage is a concept which is often used interchangeably with the notions of montage and the mosaic. In that broad understanding, it can refer to any work which is composed of a number of smaller elements. My conceptualization of collage is more rigorous and depends on the fulfilment of several formal criteria. The most important element of the poetics of col-

lage is the text's strong reliance on appropriated material. Whereas the first works of visual collage—such as Picasso's *Bottle, Glass and Violin* (1912-13) and Braque's *Glass Carafe and Newspapers* (1914)—employed “real objects, such as bits of newspaper or other mass-produced images” (Kostelanetz 124), in literary texts the readymade usually takes the form of an unintegrated (and often unacknowledged) quotation or a photograph. As a result, in the words of Joshua Clover, there is “no collage without theft” (qtd. in McLeod and Kuenzli 19).

The second criterion is connected with the arrangement of multiple components. Instead of organizing them into an organic and logical whole, collage favors juxtaposition. According to Peter Bürger, the “negation of synthesis” becomes its “structural principle” (82). Its preferred logic is that of parataxis—a rhetorical strategy of placing phrases, clauses or sentences alongside one another without the use of any conjunctions (Perloff 75)—can be illustrated by the following excerpt from Markson's *This Is Not a Novel*:

Gammer Guiton's Needle.

Goldengrove unleaving.

It took Eliot forty years to allow that the word Jew in *Gerontion* might be capitalized.

Then Abraham fell upon his face and laughed.

June 16, 1904.

Stephen Dedalus has not had a bath since October 1903. (65)

In the six consecutive passages, being also a perfect example of appropriation, Markson juxtaposes the title of a sixteenth-century English comedy, a fragment of the second line of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem “Spring and Fall,” a fact about T. S. Eliot, the beginning of a line from the Book of Genesis (17:17), the date on which James Joyce's *Ulysses* is set, and a commentary on its protagonist. None of those elements is connected by a conjunction which would account for the logic of this sequence. Instead, the reader may only observe the looser relations of thematic analogy, which revolve around the figure of the child, the notion of Jewishness and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

The above passage is also a good illustration of the third criterion—the heterogeneity of material. Collage often embraces the radical incompatibil-

ity of its components, on the thematic, stylistic or generic level. The underlying strategy of collage, according to Olsen, is to welcome diverse material, both humble and noble in origin, and thus to celebrate “conflation, fusion and confusion, Frankensteinian fictions, cyborg scripts, centaur texts, and the narratologically amphibious writings that embrace a poetics of beautiful monstrosity” (“Fourteen Notes” 130). The fourth criterion of collage poetics is the use of fragmentation. A literary collage cannot be a mere collection of self-contained vignettes or microfictions; as in a visual collage, where readymades are visibly cut, or torn, out of their original contexts, the text needs to preserve that sense of incompleteness, which can be achieved by the use of the blank page, as well as of interrupted sentences and words. For instance, the second line of the excerpt from *This Is Not a Novel* is composed out of the two closing words of the opening line of Hopkins’s poem: “Márgarét, áre you grieving/ Over Goldengrove unleaving?”

In his article “Fourteen Notes Toward the Musicality of Creative Disjunction, Or: Fiction by Collage,” Olsen cites Milorad Pavić’s distinction between “nonreversible” and “reversible” art. Whereas the former—traditionally the domain of literature and music—is “unidirectional” and needs to be experienced in a pre-arranged order, the latter—a category including most visual arts—is “multidirectional and rhizomic” (131). Both Pavić and Olsen argue that reversibility is one of the aspirations of literary collage. This criterion is difficult to meet in a bound book, and so authors such as Mark Saporta, B.S. Johnson and Robert Coover chose to reject the codex and arrange their texts as collections of loose pages. Olsen’s *Theories of Forgetting* (2014), on the other hand, adopts an experimental layout offering the opportunity to begin reading the book from either end. Other ways of securing a degree of reversibility are through renouncing pagination or constructing the text as a compendium of fragments and images which do not necessarily need to be read in the order in which they have been bound. Reversible works thus cannot be driven by plot development, which relies on a temporal sequence.

The last criterion of collage that I would like to put forward, though one which I do not consider an absolute prerequisite, is multimodality. Understood as the use of multiple semiotic modes to convey its meanings (Gibbons 4), it involves the incorporation of images, the use of various fonts and layouts, as well as the employment of different generic conventions in a single work. Among the examples of literary collages which exploit the myriad possibilities of multimodality are Tomasula’s *VAS* and *The Book of Portraiture*. Both of them incorporate a great number of photographs and drawings which are combined with textual fragments in a variety of typefac-

es, sizes and colors in such a way as to resemble visual collages. As a result, many of their pages could be exhibited in an art gallery as self-contained visual works, as has been the case with individual pages from Olsen's *Sewing Shut My Eyes*.

Having outlined the formal criteria of literary collage, I wish to examine two works which best exemplify the poetics of twenty-first century collage fiction and which actively engage with the contemporary experience of crisis. Tomasula's novelistic debut, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* is a monumental (close to 370 pages long) collage novel addressing the dilemmas, anxieties and discontents of humanity on the brink of entering its post-human phase. *VAS* borrows its two-dimensional setting and its cast of characters from the nineteenth-century science-fiction classic *Flatland* (1882) by Edwin A. Abbott. Whereas Abbott's aim was to satirize certain social and scientific notions held in Victorian England, Tomasula's scope is much broader and *VAS* can be read as a meditation on the precariousness of the human, a bitter catalogue of the failed certitudes of science, an expression of deep skepticism about the idea of progress and an assertion of humanity's myopia.

The fragmentation, chaos and media-saturation of twenty-first century experience is rendered by Tomasula in the form of an exuberant multimodal collage, which Paweł Frelik refers to as "one of the most challenging-looking novels of the last fifty years" (233) and Anthony Enns names "one of the most ambitious collage novels ever created" (51). Each page of *VAS* features some unique departure from the appearance of the traditional page. The book is a compendium of multimodal possibilities including experiments in typography, layout, page format and size, extensive use of images and generic hybridity. The visual aspect of *VAS* is so important to the reader experience that the cover credits both Tomasula and Stephen Farrell, who was responsible for the art design, as co-authors of the book. The novel's reliance on appropriation is not restricted to the mentioned images, which take the form of drawings, photographs, scans and printscreens of websites, but involves over fifty acknowledged quotations—by figures from Galileo to Charles Darwin to Adolf Hitler—most of which endorse various aspects of eugenics and genetic manipulation. Many of the cited statements strike the reader as outrageously misguided—for instance, Knut Hamsun's statement that "[n]o one has written more idealistically about mankind than Dr. Goebbels" (*VAS* 132)—and disturbingly recent, as is the case with a proposal made in the 1969 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* to establish a "more lavish version of the Indian reservation" for certain groups of America's population to stop them from breeding (245).

The dominant structural principle in *VAS* is juxtaposition rather than

narrative sequence. Although the novel succeeds in conveying the story of Square's mental preparation for undergoing vasectomy, it is not driven by plot development and over two-thirds of its pages make no reference to Flatland or any of its characters. As a result, *VAS* has a largely reversible form, and most of its pages do not seem tied to their location in the codex. Among the myriad elements that Tomasula and Farrell place alongside one another on page 269 are one photograph, one slogo, a quotation from Gunther von Hagens (with a corresponding thumb index entry), red and brown stains, several black and red lines as well as nine other portions of text, all in different sizes and typefaces, and some of them barely legible or obliterated by other elements. In the words of Françoise Sammarcelli, “[d]ispersion, fragmentation, and random association prevail” and “draw our attention to the page as (dis)organized space” (85, 87).

The sense of confusion and disorientation emanating from the pages of *VAS* corresponds to the turmoil experienced by its protagonist. The novel begins with Square holding the hospital form needed to sign up for vasectomy and ends with an account of that procedure. In the meantime, he struggles with the implications of the decision which turns out to be much harder to make than he expected. Prevented from withdrawing the application only by his wife's continued insistence and the wish to spare her the suffering of further miscarriages, Square goes through a process of preparatory mourning for what he is about to lose—the comfort of “being” rather than only “having” one's body (180). Finding his attachment to the old body “irrational” and the alternatives to vasectomy—“sentimental and absurd,” he longs for a reassurance “that it was okay to feel like you owed your body a fond farewell” (178, 181). However, no understanding or consolation is forthcoming, and he is even denied an appropriate musical setting for his “transubstantiation” (315)—the tragic pathos of a Wagner opera, which his doctor was inclined to play. Instead, he loses his original body to the accompaniment of David Cassidy's 1970s hit “I Think I Love You.”

Square's story of quiet but agonized submission to the *Zeitgeist*—the aura of medical possibilities previously unavailable—has been read as symbolic of “the elusive moment of change in our relation to our own body” (Maziarczyk 247). Cristina Iuli calls *VAS* “a narrative of cultural evolution from biological to post-biological life and identity, and from a humanist to a post-humanist logic” (66). Enns, in turn, interprets the novel as highlighting the dangers of bodies being reduced to texts and people becoming “manipulable” while, at the same time, declining to revert to “reactionary” nostalgia (56). In his article “Visualization, Scale, and the Emergence of Posthuman Narrative,” Tomasula cites Michel Foucault's idea that “man is an inven-

tion of recent date” and “one perhaps nearing its end” alongside Gerald Bruns’s observation that “the human has never been a stable, much less determinate, homogeneous concept.” In the light of those remarks, the personal crisis experienced by Square can be viewed as illustrating no less than the crisis of the human brought about by the arrival of scientific technology capable of enhancing humanity, or, in other words, changing it into something altogether different.

The second collage work I wish to examine is Olsen’s *Head in Flames*—a novel inspired by the widely discussed murder of the controversial Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh by Muslim fundamentalist of Moroccan origin Mohammed Bouyeri in Amsterdam on 2 November 2004. The reason for the attack was van Gogh’s unceremonious critique of Islam articulated in his televised interviews, on his website *The Healthy Smoker* and in his recent film *Submission* (2004). That ten-minute feature targeting Islam’s treatment of women was the result of his collaboration with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the first Muslim member of the Dutch parliament, who was the addressee of a violent letter that Bouyeri affixed with a kitchen knife to van Gogh’s body after shooting at him multiple times. Olsen’s novel is told through three alternating perspectives—those of Bouyeri, van Gogh and the brother of his great-grandfather—Vincent van Gogh. Broken down into brief, often one-line snippets, *Head in Flames* witnesses its three ill-fated protagonist on the last day of their lives or—in Bouyeri’s case—freedom.

Head in Flames is a collage on the formal as well as thematic level. The author has admitted that while searching for a literary form to represent the relationship between Vincent van Gogh, Theo van Gogh and Mohammed Bouyeri he realized that collage would be the best tool to “bring together such radically different consciousnesses, perspectives, and time periods in a single text while actively refusing to privilege any” (Interview by Madera). The collage of personalities and styles is accompanied in *Head in Flames* by a collage of fonts allotted to each protagonist: the “gentle, graceful” Times New Roman for Vincent, its bold version for the self-assertive and insolent Theo and Courier New for Bouyeri—“the courier delivering a message that the western world doesn’t want to listen to” (Interview by Madera). The arguably most significant collage feature of the novel is its heavy dependence on appropriation. Of the many texts which Olsen used to source exact and slightly edited quotations the most important ones are Vincent van Gogh’s letters to his brother; Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s script for *Submission* and her autobiography *Infidel: My Life* (2006); imam Saifu Deen al Muwahhied’s letter to Hirsi Ali, which was knifed by Bouyeri into Theo van Gogh’s chest; and Ian Buruma’s book *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and*

the Limits of Tolerance (2006). Bouyeri's part also employs salient passages from the Quran, such as the calls to "strike [unbelievers] in the neck" (38) and "flog [fornicators] with a hundred stripes" (115). Those brutal words of religious sanction are counterbalanced in Theo's part by quotations attacking or mocking religion by such authors as Voltaire and Émile Zola.

Vincent's consistent immersion in art throughout the novel situates him as the antithesis of the other—intensely political and highly emotional—voices, not only of Theo and Bouyeri but also of those whose voices are channeled by their sections. An example of such a disharmonious polyphony is the following block from the middle of *Head in Flames*:

It smelled like chicken shit.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI YOU WILL SMASH YOURSELF TO BITS AGAINST ISLAM!

Monsieur Vincent leaving behind patches of quick thick paint wherever they fell among patches of uncovered fabric. (93)

The first is one of the concluding narraticules (Olsen's term for the smallest unit of narrative) reporting on the painful ritual of female genital mutilation to which Hirsi Ali was subjected at the age of five. It conveys Hirsi Ali's memory of the breath of her male mutilator. The middle passage is the culmination of the earlier mentioned threatening letter to Hirsi Ali penned by an imam. The religiously sanctioned violence of the first two passages is confronted with the serenity of artistic composition. Referring to van Gogh as "monsieur Vincent" evokes the elegant style of a nineteenth-century novel, which further distances the passage from the vulgarity of "shit" and block capitals. The above excerpt is an example of the collage-like principle of paratactic confrontation, which is prevalent in *Head in Flames*.

Olsen's novel engages with crisis on the level of individual characters and of the social context. It can be argued that each of the novel's three focalizers is shown at a critical point of their life—shortly before taking his life, losing his life or committing a murder that will confine them to life imprisonment without parole. The notion that Olsen's novel is a portrayal of a self, or selves, in crisis is also implied by the title phrase. A "head in flames" evokes associations with an individual whose equilibrium is disturbed as a result of an emotional upheaval, and, as such, it refers metaphorically to all the protagonists, while, on the literal level, it is a reference to Vincent van Gogh's famous self-portraits in a yellow hat.

Bouyeri can be regarded both as a victim and a catalyst of a social

crisis in Holland. Following the first interpretation, it is possible to see his radicalization as primarily determined by the continued humiliation that he has experienced since his school days but which he has only recently learnt to notice, name and rebel against. Olsen shows the process of Bouyeri's growing disgust at the hypocrisy of the Dutch "boasting about their long history of tolerance while willfully forgetting the opportunism wrapped up inside it" and at their sense of racial superiority implicit in the statement "Welcome to our country now shut the fuck up and scour our fucking toilets you fucking muzzies" (62). The sobering realization of socioeconomic exclusion, aggravated by the rise of the political right represented by outspoken critics of Islam such as Fortuyn and van Gogh, is indicated by the novel as the genesis for Bouyeri's act, which was to deepen the social divisions in Holland to an alarming degree. The wordless violence of Bouyeri's gratuitously brutal murder confronted with Theo van Gogh's agonized plea to "talk about this" (reputedly his last words uttered upon receiving the first bullets) could be viewed as a graphic illustration of Samuel P. Huntington's thesis (formulated a decade earlier) about the upcoming "clash of civilizations." The fact that in the relationship between van Gogh and Bouyeri sharing Dutch nationality as well as language was of far less importance than their experience of coming from radically different religious traditions could be regarded as a confirmation of Huntington's intuition that, following the end of Cold War, cultural and religious allegiances were going to replace political ones as "the flash points for crisis and bloodshed." Huntington closes his famous 1993 article with a prediction that in the near future "there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations" and that each of them "will have to learn to coexist with the others." In view of that statement, Bouyeri's act can be interpreted as a blow to the belief in the possibility of creating a harmonious multicultural state and as evidence of the potential consequences of failed intercultural coexistence.

As has been argued, *Head in Flames* and *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* both use the poetics of collage to respond to contemporary crises and address urgent social concerns. Their choice of form is closely connected with their objectives. Despite their radical departure from the standard devices of realist fiction, both novels should be seen as attempts to create a realism of their time and through collage to "evoke the experience of a radically fragmented world" (Banash 14). Because of its formal reliance on conflict, heterogeneity and fragmentation, collage has been rediscovered by authors like Tomasula and Olsen as a vehicle for representing the contemporary experience of constant exposure to the cacophony of multiple voices and visual stimuli battling for our attention.

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