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TOWARDS A RHETORIC OF COLLAGE: READING AND REPETITION ACROSS MODE AND MEDIA[1]

Abstract: No longer confined to the analysis of the word on the page, contemporary narratology has expanded to define and critique a dizzying array of media theories and textual practices – from Marshall McLuhan's media-messaging to Henry Jenkins's media-convergence, from political campaigns to Star Wars, and from virtual gameworlds to multimedia storyworlds – and yet scant attention has been paid to the formative role played by collage as both a transmedial narrative structure and a dominant form of multimodal practice. This paper represents an attempt to better define the theory and practice of collage and collage narrative, and, in so doing, to make the case for a more holistic approach to the definition of collage and the rhetoric of the various reading strategies employed in comprehending the patterns and messages conveyed by the collage.

Beginning with an assessment of the narrativity of collage, this paper considers the communicative and structural poetics involved in modernist visual parody and postmodern textual art, and how these collage elements are also integral to the visual poetics of contemporary graphic storytelling. Citing examples from Marcel Duchamp, Donald Barthelme, and Chris Ware, this brief study represents an attempt to better define the theory and practice of collage and collage narrative, and, thereby, provide a means of more accurately understanding the rhetorical processes involved in the creation and comprehension of collage as a storytelling mechanism.

Key words: rhetoric, transmediality, multimodality, intertextuality, collage, narratology

When confronted with a work of visual or verbal collage, a unique set of reading practices is required in order for the text to communicate narrative meaning to the reader or audience. As in the interpretation and critical appreciation of parody, pastiche, and other similar intertextual narrative forms, the reading of multimodal and transmedial collage texts not only privileges a level of generic familiarity with the source texts and discourses involved in (or related to) their production, beyond the generic recognition or identification of a given collage's textual components, collage reading also requires a specific sequencing or synthesis of these components into a pattern that might allow for narrative meaning to be imagined and/or comprehend-

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ed. The necessary convergence of these two reading practices provides the basis for a rhetoric of collage.

As James Phelan articulates in his assessment of narrative rhetoric in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*:

> Rhetorical approaches conceive of narrative as an art of communication, and they typically have one of two major emphases: (1) on the language of the narrative text, particularly the logic of its patterns; (2) on narrative as an interaction between an author and an audience through the medium of a text for some purpose.[2]

Analysis of three characteristic examples of multimodal collage and collage narrative – Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), Donald Barthelme's *Natural History* (1971), and Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) – suggests that the processes involved in the comprehension of collage not only require the set of generic and specific reading practices listed above, but further, that these interrelated reading practices actually bridge the gap between both of the rhetorical emphases mentioned by Phelan. For, as this article maintains, collage reading not only entails a decoding of the visual/verbal/gestural languages of the text, collage reading also necessitates an active engagement with the visual/verbal/gestural patterns that constitute the text's grammar and unite to form (or suggest) the syntax of the message(s) communicated by the collage.

Certainly, this isn't to say that the assessment of narrative rhetoric forwarded by Phelan is in any way flawed or insufficiently nuanced in its appraisal – quite to the contrary. Phelan is immediately forthcoming in his recognition that linguistic and communicative reader-response strategies are both integrated into the majority of contemporary rhetorical approaches to narrative. As Phelan writes:

> The two emphases are of course not mutually exclusive: those who analyse the linguistic patterns of the text typically consider the consequences of that analysis for the overall communication, and those who emphasise the communication typically pay attention to the linguistic patterns. Indeed, since most analyses of narrative involve some attention to linguistic patterns and overall communication, rhetorical considerations are central to contemporary narrative studies.[3]

And with these considerations in mind, this article argues that *pattern* and *communication* should not be viewed as autonomous aspects of a text that can be weighed next to each other as separate qualities, but are better conceived as interrelated factors in a set of cyclical reading processes involving the interpretation – and re-interpretation – of a coded text. And as an explicitly encoded textual mode or, "multimode," which implicitly requires these cyclical reading processes in order for narrative meaning to emerge, the collage offers an ideal set of textual relations through which

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[2]   J. Phelan, *Rhetorical Approaches to Narrative*, [in:] D. Herman, M. Jahn, M.-L. Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Routledge, London 2008, p. 500.

[3]   *Ibidem*.

a rhetorical understanding of the interrelated components of narrative pattern and communication can be analyzed.

Of course, the utility of the term *collage* resides in the scope of its definition. In the widest sense of the term, the transmedial, multimodal processes of collage might well be said to occur within – and inform the arrangement of – all textual systems: from paintings on a museum wall, to words in a novel. For, in the widest sense, collage processes are as omnipresent in the ways a painting interacts and communicates (both visually and verbally) with its own title, context, and audience, as they are present in the ways the words in a novel interact and communicate (both visually and verbally) across and between sentence, volume, and reader. Furthermore, because the patterned structures of language, gesture, and image are always simultaneously combinatory and differential (whether in internal structure and/or in external context), it might also be said that collage is a basic structural factor in all modes and methods of human communication.[4]

Indeed (especially from a narratological perspective), this is certainly one way of comprehending the significance of collage to the patterns and communications of both story (narrative content) and discourse (narrative mediation). However, without neglecting to acknowledge the greater role of collage in the structures and cognitive mechanisms of all forms and methods of creative expression and critical interpretation, this article proposes a somewhat more limited definition of *collage* – sensitive, in some degree, to the ways this term is usually applied in the description of multimodal narrative communications.

For the purposes of this article's analysis of collage rhetoric, the term *collage* is considered to be applicable to any text that simultaneously engages in two or more distinct forms, modes, or channels of media discourse and/or any text that simultaneously involves two or more distinct semiotic resources (i.e., language, gesture, or image) for some purpose that can only be achieved through citation, juxtaposition, and/or augmentation.[5]

Obviously, this definition is still incredibly inclusive in its applicability, and continues to tend toward the holistic view of collage as mentioned above. Nevertheless,

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[4] This is certainly the basic collage premise operating within the "bricological", parodic, and referential conceptions of language, art, history, and culture forwarded, respectively, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory L. Ulmer. See C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, trans. J. Weightman, D. Weightman, Harper Colophon, New York, p. 13, 20; J. Derrida, *Signature event context*, "Glyph" 1977, no 1, p. 185; G.L. Ulmer, *The Object of Post-Criticism*, [in:] H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend 1983, p. 89. See also L. Olsen, *Fourteen Notes Toward the Musicality of Creative Disjunction, or Fiction by Collage*, [in:] R.M. Berry, J.R. Di Leo (eds.), *Fiction's Present: Situating Contemporary Narrative Innovation*, SUNY, Albany 2008, p. 187.

[5] While a matrix of visual/verbal/gestural languages, actions, and textual components are involved in the patterns and communicative mechanisms of collage narrative (especially in multimedia performance and film), this article will be focusing primarily upon the interactions that occur across and between the visual and the verbal.

a sufficiently broad definition of collage is necessary, in part, because the notion of collage itself is inherently multiple and dynamic in its mixing of various forms and functions. Indeed, any accurate definition of collage must be capable of including texts as disparate in content, genre, mode, and discourse as musical composition (e.g., Charles Ives's orchestral soundscape, *Central Park in the Dark*, 1906), graphic collage (e.g., Hannah Höch's political montage, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919), prose collage (e.g., Kathy Acker's "avant-punk" collage novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 1978), spoken-word and performance art (e.g., Miranda July's *The Binet-Simon Test*, 1998), as well as video and hypertext collage (e.g., Shelley Jackson's Web-based fiction, *Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl*, 2003), while also remaining open to developments in collage that have yet to be conceived.

But, despite the obvious differences in content, genre, mode, and discourse that delineate each of these texts, the central collage principle that is common to each of these texts, as Lance Olsen describes it in his *Fourteen Notes Toward the Musicality of Creative Disjunction, or Fiction by Collage*: "(...) is one committed to liberating juxtaposition, mosaic, conflation, fusion and confusion".[6] According to Olsen, the critically and creatively divergent "collage imagination" that resides at the core of collage narrative facilitates and embodies "a poetics of beautiful monstrosity," the praxis of which involves an amalgamation of modes.[7]

While Olsen's work in this area is primarily focused on the various philosophical and philological issues surrounding the production and interpretation of verbal collage narrative (i.e., written forms of collage; especially prose fragments and the collage novel), his collage-like collection of notes on collage is perhaps most significant – at least for the purposes of this article – for its proposed "narratological continuum of textual possibilities."[8]

In an attempt to project some continuity between the numerous formulations available to both the artist and the audience of collage narrative, Olsen suggests that the collage text exists along a continuum that spans between the poles of linear, realist narrative and nonlinear, metafictional disjunction. At the realist end of the continuum, Olsen explains, we discover controlled, conventional, linear texts, such as "scholarly works with their will toward intellectual authority through collaged citation."[9] Shifting toward the middle of the continuum, Olsen writes, "we discover particulate fictions that assume but do not require a reading strategy that arcs from beginning to end"[10]. Exemplary texts existing in the middle section of Olsen's continuum might include Ishmael Reed's cryptically illustrated detective novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Jonathan Safran Foer's die-cut sculptural text, *Tree of Codes* (2010). And further

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[6]   L. Olsen, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
[7]   *Ibidem*, p. 185, 189.
[8]   *Ibidem*, p. 188.
[9]   *Ibidem*.
[10]   *Ibidem*, p. 189.

down, at the more radically self-referential, metafictional end of the collage continuum, we find multidirectional, highly unstable texts, such as Max Ernst's collection of altered images in *Hundred-headed woman* (1929), and B.S. Johnson's prose-in-a-box collection of fragments in *The Unfortunates* (1969), as well as other similarly self-referential "compositions requiring a reading strategy uninterested in or even actively antagonistic to notions of beginning, middle, and end."[11] In summary, what Olsen's collage continuum describes is a spectrum of narrative differences that range from: (1) collage texts that display a high level of referential linearity; (2) collage texts that display or create some significant level of structural or cognitive ambiguity; and (3) collage texts that display a high level of self-referential non-linearity.

As will become apparent in the sections that follow, Olsen's proposed continuum of collage is useful to the analysis of collage rhetoric not only because it provides a structural basis for the comparison of textual practices and interpretative options, but also because it makes a clear attempt to balance the patterns of narrative with the kinds of narrative communication familiar to the reader.

Applying this critical framework to the rhetorical analysis of a selection of characteristic collage texts from a range of narratological discourses (i.e., visual narrative, verbal narrative, and comics narrative) at once reinforces the plausibility of Olsen's continuum and also serves as a necessary reminder that collage narrative – as the phrasing of the term implies – is inherently multimodal, intertextual, and transmedial in the range of textual practices it serves to describe, involve, and explore.

Marcel Duchamp, L.H.O.O.Q., 1919

While not precisely beginning at the beginning (if an ontology of collage might even be possible, given its formidable catalogue and history of global precedents), nevertheless, the Cubist and Dadaist movements that took place during the early years of the twentieth century did much to provide a body of revolutionary collage texts and thereby advance the basis for a critical theory that might begin to encompass the forms and ideas surrounding the collage. The Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, in coordination with the subsequent Dadaist works of Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and André Breton (to name but a few), all had a tremendous influence on the development of the collage during the early Modernist period. But among the many artists, writers, and critics active during this period of extreme social, cultural, and historical unrest, it was Marcel Duchamp whose move from Cubism to Dadaism shifted the entire practical and theoretical focus of the art-world from mention (*Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*, 1912), to use (*Fountain*, 1917), to the ironic use of mentioning (*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919). And while Duchamp's "use" of a urinal in *Fountain* clearly fits within the bounds of this article's study of collage rhetoric, it is with Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* that this analysis will begin.

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[11]   *Ibidem.*

Although Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* was not the first visual parody of Leonardo da Vinci's *La Joconde* (Eugène Bataille's *Le rire*, 1883, also features the painting's subject smoking a pipe and blowing smoke-rings), nevertheless, the unique contribution of Duchamp's work to the development of twentieth-century collage theory and practice is incontrovertible. Furthermore, the reading practices that it requires and the relative simplicity of its textual elements make it an ideal text with which to begin this analysis of collage rhetoric.

When encountering this collage for the first time (especially in a gallery setting), the viewer's initial point of contact is undoubtedly with the overall visual image itself (possibly from a distance at which the precise details of the collage might not be discernable).[12] It is at this point that the generic reading of the text takes place. During the generic reading the average viewer is first likely to notice that Duchamp's work bears a distinct resemblance to the well-known painting by da Vinci, and also that Duchamp's reproduced facsimile of the painting has been augmented by the addition of facial hair and a series of capital letters. It is during this initial, generic reading that the viewer begins to recognize the text as a work of collage engaged in a parodic, intertextual dialogue with a precedent work.

This generic reading sets the stage for the specific reading of the collage and the interpretation of the patterns deployed by the spatial arrangements of the graphic imagery, by the systems of verbal/phonetic iconography, and by the presence/absence of paratextual information (e.g., title card, museum pamphlet blurb, audio-guide track, etc.).[13] Regardless of whether the viewer is aided by some knowledge of Modernist aesthetic practice, or is coming to the text without an in-depth art-critical understanding of the collage's particular history and cultural context, Duchamp's collage still requires the viewer to connect the various elements and, thereby, begin to construct a means of interpreting the narrative of the text. Most viewers of the collage (especially those without a sophisticated linguistic competency in French) are apt to look to a paratext for clues with which to solve the visual and verbal riddles present in the text. However, even without appealing to a directly related paratext, the viewer must nevertheless appeal to conventional patterns of language (i.e., a general corpus of French language usage and/or French phonetics; which operate in an identical fashion to a directly related paratext) in order to decode the verbal components of the collage (i.e., the sequence of letters: "L.H.O.O.Q.") and thus begin to place each of the discrete textual elements into a relational order.

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12   Other potential factors influencing the generic reading of this particular text might include its media and/or environmental context (i.e., its actual placement within a certain space, its location within the imposed or implied narrative of an exhibition, or its placement within a museum catalogue, a magazine, or some other textual medium), as well as the lighting of the piece, the size of the text/reproduction, and the presence/absence of moulding or some other form of framing mechanism.

13   For a more precise definition of the "paratext," "peritext," and "narrative paratextuality," see G. Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. J.E. Lewin, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1997, p. xviii.

Once the matter of decoding the phonetic pun is temporarily satisfied (i.e., reading the letters as: *elle à chaud au cul*; "she has a hot ass"), the task of relating and decoding the presence of the goatee and mustache remains (although, the decoding of this element could quite easily precede the decoding of the phonetic pun). Here the viewer is required to proceed through a secondary generic reading of the text in an attempt to synthesize the elements and/or order the elements into a comprehensible sequence toward the creation of a narrative. This process, at least as it relates to *L.H.O.O.Q.*, is cyclical in its implied vectors – rotating through the written inscription to the augmented face of the subject and back to the inscription. And with each rotation, the interpretation of the collage requires the viewer to formulate or imagine some means of sequential and/or synthetic closure between these elements.

Obviously, the viewer's final (or, at least tentatively conclusive) interpretation of the collage's visual/verbal content is reliant upon the meaning(s) located within or projected upon each of the elements of the sequence. Art critic Donald P. Kuspit's reading of this sequence, for example, formulates the following:

> [*L.H.O.O.Q.*] is a multilayered pun: the letters become words which become a devaluing male comment on the beautiful, dignified woman – she's just another slut. She's smiling because she's thinking of being fucked – more probably, of masturbating, that is, fucking herself.[14]

And in Kuspit's reading of the text, the addition of the mustache and goatee further serve to reinforce this "devaluing male comment" through a graphic language of rude defacement akin to graffiti scrawled on the door of a men's lavatory.[15]

What is communicated to Kuspit – as an exemplary reader of the collage – is a message of sexual depravity and male-chauvinistic insult. But this reading is only possible if da Vinci's painting is taken as an instance of what Olsen defines as "collaged citation."[16] Clearly the intellectual authority involved in Duchamp's pornographically parodic collage is of a rather low order of politesse, but in Kuspit's reading it nevertheless stands as a relatively linear, conventional example of intertextual citation and transmedial patterning. And by applying the linguistics and phonetics of the text's encoded pun to a syntactical interpretation of the conventional logic of the collage's symbolic graffiti and overt use of graphic citation, a communicated message is arrived at through a cyclical decoding of the generic and specific patterns employed and the synthetic/sequential ordering of these textual components.

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14 D. Kuspit, *Using Art to Laugh Oneself Sick: Two Examples of Punning in Early Avant-Garde Art*, "Art Criticism" 1998, no. 13 (1), p. 111.
15 *Ibidem*, p. 112.
16 L. Olsen, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

Donald Barthelme, *Natural History*, 1971

Arriving hot on the heals of the American "Beat Movement" of the 1940s and 50s (with its own numerous Duchamp-influenced endeavors in collage, multimedia, and intertextuality),[17] the subsequent era of "postmodern" artistic experimentation that exploded across the arts in the 1960s and 70s significantly expanded the range of collage modes and formal practices that artists such as Duchamp pioneered during the early Modernist period. Postmodern writers, musicians, and artists such as William H. Gass, Jasper Johns, Laurie Anderson, Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, John Cage, and Andy Warhol, all directly engaged with the collage as a means of interpreting the world and the multiplying the dimensions of artistic expression. And Donald Barthelme's contribution to this engagement with the collage was no less explosive and otherworldly.

In many ways, Barthelme's "readymade writing" carries forward the same project that Duchamp's "readymade sculpture" initiated – especially in Barthelme's use of "found" language such as the cliché and the proverb, as well as Barthelme's characteristic use of the meaning-shifting capacity of mixed metaphors and his playful, pataphysical arrangements of non-sequitur logic. And, as is immediately apparent upon comparison, Barthelme's illustrated collage narrative, *Natural History*, has much in common with Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and even figures an altered reproduction of the same work by da Vinci as its opening image.[18] However, among the many things that distinguish Barthelme's collage from the work by Duchamp are the pattern of its the deployment of collage image(s) and its use of ambiguous fragments of prose with which to describe the absurdly juxtaposed images that provide the graphic basis of the narrative. But before continuing with the comparison of these works, it is necessary to investigate the generic and specific reading practices that inform a comprehension of Barthelme's collage.

The initial generic reading of Barthelme's collage narrative – in coordination with the general import of the text's title – conveys to the reader a sense that each of the narrative's nine collage fragments (i.e., prose and collage-image pairings) might be read either individually, or as a components in a larger inter-linked sequence. Imitating the formal structure of entries in a dictionary, encyclopedia, or textbook, each of the collage fragments that appear in the narrative give the impression of possessing some objective, typological authority regarding the odd imagery to which each written "entry" seems to pertain. However, even before the specific process of reading commences, it is clear that the juxtaposed images (which attend each of the nine prose segments) are quite incongruously matched. Indeed, the generic reading of the

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[17] For example: Robert Motherwell's *papier collés*, Joseph Cornell's boxes, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin's cut-ups, and Isidore Isou and Gil J. Wolman's Lettrist "hypergraphics."

[18] It is also important to note that both the title and the concept of Barthelme's "Natural History" had significant precedents in the area of collage; see M. Ernst, *Histoire Naturelle* (*Natural History*, 1926); and Joseph Cornell, *L'Egypte de Mlle Cléo de Mérode: cours élémentaire d'Histoire Naturelle* (1940).

text immediately communicates to the reader that, rather than a conventional work of "natural history," the items in this collage text are, at best, dubiously historical and quite questionably natural.

As the secondary specific reading of the collage narrative makes adequately clear to the reader, unlike Duchamp's more-or-less direct "quotation" of da Vinci's painting – which relies upon the viewer's recognition of the original – Barthleme's collage narrative complicates its own series of graphic quotations and descriptive fragments by actively undermining the authority of any extratextual or paratextual information that might otherwise serve to qualify the absurd claims made about the items, characters, and images in the prose fragments.[19] As the following passage (which attends the collage in the first prose/image pairing) makes clear, appeal to any authority other than the text itself is of little or no utility:

> The original canvas of *La Gioconda* (1503–05?) showed, according to Cassola, an octopus hurriedly departing the picture plane, on the right side. During the Frisbian Wars (1661–70) the octopus was either scraped off, or fell off. Winckelmann asserts that the octopus, in Leonardo's iconography, represents either virility or uncollectible debts. In either case the animal was clearly not trustworthy.[20]

Whereas the subject of the first sentence does contain factual data, ("*La Gioconda* [1503–05?]"), it is with the phrase at the end of the fragment ("clearly not trustworthy") that a recognizable wink is made to the discourse being ironically rendered.

Applying Olsen's collage continuum to the analysis of Barthelme's text, it is evident that this work of collage fits comfortably into the middle section of the continuum, which Olsen refers to as "particulate fictions."[21] As can be observed in the example above, Barthelme's text is not completely self-referential, although it is much closer to that end of the continuum than Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*; furthermore, the formal parody of textbook discourse that is employed as the structural mechanism of the narrative – in line with Olsen's definition of "particulate fictions" – does not require a linear reading strategy, though such a reading strategy is not impossible

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[19] As I have written in a previous study of this text: "While [the] anecdotes [in *Natural History*] are clearly playful and this ironic play provides ample clues to the decoding of the parody that is taking place, Barthelme's play also involves an aggressive disruption of privileged discourse and the nonfictional language and rhetoric that supports such discourse. By interspersing his collage narratives with textbook-truisms, factoids, familiar characters, and historical events (some true, some questionable, some purely fictional), Barthelme's ironic re-writing of this discourse reveals the arbitrary nature of these narrated items and the thin metaphorical framework that conceals the socio-cultural power mechanisms embedded in the nonfictional language of 'factual' history"; see M. Heitkemper-Yates, *Irregular Illuminations: Distortions of Meaning & Metaphor in the Collage Narratives of Donald Barthelme*, [in:] M. Heitkemper-Yates, K. Kaczmarczyk (eds.), *Learning to See: The Meanings, Modes, and Methods of Visual Literacy*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford 2014, p. 103.

[20] D. Barthelme, *The Teachings of Don B.: Satires, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme*, ed. K. Herzinger, Counterpoint, Berkeley 1992, p. 31.

[21] L. Olsen, *op. cit*., p. 189.

(especially as the narrative does contain a clearly discernable introduction [31] and conclusion [36]). And as the specific reading of the text confirms, each of the narrative's semi-autonomous prose-collage pairings is comprehensible both with and without the other "entries" listed in the collection.

However, as each of these fragments is semi-autonomous, there are clearly two distinct patterns to the reading vectors present in Barthelme's narrative. The primary vector, while clearly ironic, is discernable in the deceptively linear progression of the narrative from fragment to fragment (i.e., the formal structure that allows the text to parody the discourse of natural history). Intertextually, this reading vector is one that connects each collage object to its own nexus of extratextual precedents. The decoding processes involved in this primary reading vector allow the overall sequence of the text to cohere into a comprehensible, unified pattern due, in part, to the structural similarity of each entry and the maintenance of a singular narratorial voice throughout the text.

The secondary, fragment-localized vector involved in the reading of the text is one that loops back and forth between each individual collage-image and its attendant prose. This particulate reading vector (similar to the cyclical reading processes involved in the decoding of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*) requires the reader to verify the decoding of each collage-prose pairing by cycling back and forth between the visual and verbal components of each fragment; synthetic closure between each discrete element is thus achieved through a decoding of the ironic visual and verbal dialogue which takes place within each respective fragment.

Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012

While the two works investigated above certainly introduce some of the reading strategies necessary for the comprehension of collage narrative, the rhetorical consideration of a sprawling, internally-intertextual, multi-discourse, multimodal, homo- and hetero-diegetically narrated, intermittently non-linear collage text such as Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (which includes: newspapers, flip-books, pamphlets, a graphic diary, a game-board, a cloth-bound work, and much else) finds the critical latitude of these rhetorical approaches sadly lacking in the sophistication required to adequately describe the dizzying multiplicity of collage texts that occur toward the outer limits of Olsen's collage continuum.

Despite the fact that a sufficiently detailed analysis (let alone a sufficiently detailed summary) of the many inter-related narratives that comprise Ware's 14-volume graphic multi-text (chronicling the everyday experiences of a one-legged woman; narrated largely from the perspective of the three-story apartment building in which she lives), would require far more space than is available for this article, nevertheless, some basic observations can be made about Ware's epic multi-text and the reading practices required for an understanding of its myriad patterns, vectors, and codes by

focusing on one of the central artifacts included in the collection – the diagrammatic "game-board."

Like the individual components of the conceptually-scattered, self-referential texts by Max Ernst and B.S. Johnson mentioned previously (i.e., *Hundred-headed woman* and *The Unfortunates*, respectively), each semi-autonomous "volume" of Ware's *Building Stories* seems to occur *in media res*. Although a careful reading of the panels and graphic sequences of the text does suggest the potential for a temporal chronology to the collection (and the many narratives do connect and intersect at several points), no overt attempt is made to impose a precise order to the reading of the collection as a whole. Instead, an intricately vectored diagram of the supposed location (within the apartment of the central protagonist) of each volume of the collection is provided on the bottom of the box itself. Unfortunately (or not), this diagram offers very little in the way of aiding in the reader's construction of a linear reading strategy, as the protagonist's apartment might be navigated in any number of directions and with a vast variety of beginning and ending points. However, the game-board, which figures as a central metaphor in the game-box-like structure of the entire collection, does provide a useful point of analytical departure.

Of course, any generic reading of Ware's *Building Stories* must first confront the physicality of the work, which presents itself through the vast array of media discourses, physical metaphors, and self-referential forms that make up the inter-connected parts of the text(s) as a whole. Like pieces in an architectural puzzle, or game-worlds in an RPG, each component must first be placed conceptually and spatially in coordination with all of the other components (and the order imposed by the publisher and/or author in the original, in-box, layered sequencing of the textual components can quite easily be lost once the contents of the box are unpacked – though the order to this original sequencing does not appear to be any less arbitrary than any other choice of sequencing). As such, the initial impression upon opening the box is that any supposed order to the overall sequence of the parts must be arrived at through the efforts of each individual reader. Once this realization has been made, the specific reading processes involved in the deciphering and sequencing the graphic panels and verbal elements of the text can commence. And as the specific, instantial alignments of character, event, location, and plot become increasingly central to the comprehension of the text's multiple narratives, the reader is also required to pay simultaneous attention to each of the components of the text on both a generic and specific level.

The artifact of the game-board is significant in this process because it not only serves as a metaphor for the entire collage text as a whole (i.e., in its capacity to suggest that life/memory/experience is similar to a multimodal, intertextual role-playing game), it also ties together several of the unresolved episodes that originate elsewhere in the collection of the text.

In this volume of the text, the precise architectural layout of each floor of the apartment building is illustrated on the bottom of what appears to be a four-section, fold-out game-board. And on the top side of this object, a series of inter-linked epi-

sodes involving each of the central characters (i.e., the female protagonist, the constantly-quarreling neighbors, Branford the bee, the landlady, and the sentient building itself) is graphically described over the course of four seasons (although the progression of the seasons – from winter to summer to autumn to spring – does not follow a typical temporal sequence). Adding to the already formidable spatial and temporal complexity of these four interconnected episodes, a sequential reading of these panels reveals that not only does this relatively simple four-section volume depict four moments in the interconnected lives of the characters, but that each of these moments is simultaneously interspersed with flashes of memory, imagined fantasies, and projected potentialities.

In the first section ("winter"), the illustrated panels describe the text's one-legged protagonist as she prepares for a dinner date arranged through her placement of a "women seeking men" advertisement in a local dating magazine. A series of iconic clocks and arrow-vectors aid the reader in following the sequence of events as she paints her toenails, wonders what her date might look like, and eventually makes her way to the restaurant where the date is to take place. Her dinner date never arrives. The final panel sequence shows her in bed, dejected, looking down at the naïve absurdity of her false-leg with its plastic toenails painted to match the toes on her real leg.

In the subsequent section ("summer"), some moments during a day in the lives of the quarrelling-neighbors are graphically described. Again, iconic clocks and arrow-vectors lead the reader through a series of sequences involving the couple's argument, the man's fantasy of having sex with the one-legged protagonist, and the woman's meeting of the protagonist in the flower shop in which the protagonist works.

In the third section ("autumn"), an illustrated biography of the building's landlady – depicting the events that led to her assumption of responsibility for the administration of the building – is graphically described. The panels and arrow-vectors in this section lead the reader through the death of the landlady's mother, through a botched teenage romance, and into the solitude of the landlady's lonely contemplations of her own impending death.

And in the final section ("spring"), the final moments of Branford the bee's brief life are described. Somehow finding himself trapped in the basement of the building, Branford is eventually emancipated by the protagonist and alights for a moment of refreshment beside a pool of spilled soda at the feet of the quarreling neighbors. The man, spotting the bee near his foot, becomes alarmed and squashes Brandford. And in the final panel of the volume, Branford's bee family is shown gazing tearfully at his portrait on the wall of their beehive.

As these inter-linked narrative elements and episodes clearly indicate, Ware's internally-intertextual, multimodal, graphic collage narrative requires an extremely self-referential level of interpretation and communicates its graphic message directly through the patterns employed in the (grammatical) sequencing of the panels. Sequential closure of these panels (simultaneously, on both generic and specific levels)

allows the sequences of the text to eventually unite – through the connective efforts, memories, and interpretative strategies of the reader – to form the vast network of relations that comprise the text as a rhizomatic whole.

Tentative Conclusion: Towards a Rhetoric of Collage

As each of these three analyses makes abundantly clear, collage literacy requires a certain competency in the comprehension of visual and verbal patterns and conventions. Successful decoding and interpretation of these patterns not only involves the repetition of cyclical reading strategies that cognitively loop back and forth between the generic and the specific (and, thereby, facilitate the comprehension or imagination of some sequence or synthetic structure to the relations between each of the narrative elements), these textual decoding practices are also directly related to the comprehension of the message being communicated through the narrative syntax of the collage.

And, as the application of Olsen's collage continuum to the analysis of collage texts by Duchamp, Barthelme, and Ware distinctly suggests, the multimodal, intertextual, and transmedial aspects of these texts not only verify the narrative potential inherent in the multiple structures of the collage, this article's attempt to sketch-out the visual and verbal contours of these structures – towards a rhetoric of collage – clearly indicates that collage, as a multimodal method of artistic communication, unites the two rhetorical emphases specified by Phelan. For it is only by means of the inferential negotiations and/or encoded interactions of the artist and audience, through the medium of the collage, that the logic of the verbal and non-verbal patterns can be deciphered and the narrative sense of the collage can be pieced together, recognized, or imagined.

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