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Spider's Stratagem

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DAVID SHIELDS

Spider's Stratagem

"If you grow up not with toys bought in the shop but things that are found around the farmyard, you do a sort of bricolage. Bits of string and wood. Making all sorts of things, like webs across the legs of a chair. And then you sit there, like the spider. The urge to connect bits that don't seem to belong together has fascinated me all my life." (W.G. Sebald)

...

"The line of beauty is the line of perfect economy." (Emerson)

...

"Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it." (Donald Kuspit)

...

"While we tend to conceive of the operations of the mind as unified and transparent, he [Daniel Dennett, author of *Consciousness Explained*] suggests that they are chaotic and opaque. There is no invisible 'boss' in the brain, no 'central meander,' no unitary self in command of our activities and utterances. There is no internal spectator of a 'Cartesian theatre' in our heads to applaud the march of consciousness across its stage." (Adam Zeman)

...

"...the law of mosaics: how to deal with parts in the absence of wholes." (Ronald Sukenick)

...

“To tell a story has become strictly impossible. In short, it is not the anecdote that is lacking, only its character of certainty, its tranquility, its innocence.” (Alain Robbe-Grillet)

...

Story seems to say everything happens for a reason, and I want to say, no, it doesn't.

...

“Plots are for dead people.” (Lorrie Moore)

...

The absence of plot leaves the reader room to think about other things.

...

“All definitions of montage... imply that meaning is not inherent in any one shot but is created by the juxtaposition of shots. Simply and dramatically, this basic principle of editing was demonstrated by an experiment conducted by Lev Kuleshov, an early Russian filmmaker. He intercut images of an actor's expressionless face with images of a bowl of soup, a woman in a coffin, and a child with a toy. Audiences who saw the film praised the actor's performance; they saw in his face, emotionless as it was, hunger, grief, and affection. They saw, in other words, what was not really there in the separate images. Meaning and emotion, then, were created not by the content of the individual images, but by the relationship of the images to each other.” (Vivian and Thomas Sobchack)

...

“Everything I wrote, I believed instinctively, was to some extent collage. Meaning, ultimately, seemed a matter of adjacent data.” (William Gibson)

...

For Kuleshov, montage meant a juxtaposition of disparate, or clashing, scenes. But as Eisenstein used the term, it didn't refer strictly to clashing scenes, but to the use of individual and separate scenes that "added up" to a meaning or an overall context—a context that isn't contained in any individual scene.

...

Renata Adler's collage-novel *Speedboat* captivates by tension, its jagged and frenetic changes of pitch and tone and voice. She confides, she reflects, she tells a story, aphorizes, undercuts it, then undercuts that. If she's cryptic in one paragraph, she's clear in the next. She changes subjects like a brilliant schizophrenic, making unpredictable leaps that make a kind of irrational sense. Bed talk, uninhibited by conventions. Ideas, experiences, and emotions are inseparable. She's always present, teasing things apart. There's very little that's abstract. I can feel her breathe. "The point has never quite been entrusted to me," she says, and so we must keep reading, for we know there will be another way of looking at everything. The book has suspense and momentum. She's promising us something; something is around the corner. How long can she go on this way? I don't know, but timing is everything. She has to quit before we do, and still give an oblique, sly sense of satisfaction, of closure. You can see her working hard in the last paragraph.

...

"A great painting comes together, just barely." (Picasso)

...

Momentum, in literary mosaic, derives not from narrative but the subtle, progressive build-up of thematic resonances.

...

“...the shapely swirl of energy holding shattered fragments in place, but only just.” (Sven Birkerts’s description of John Edgar Wideman’s novel *Philadelphia Fire*)

...

Collage is pieces of other things. Their edges don’t meet.

...

“The collage technique, that art of reassembling fragments of pre-existing images in such a way as to form a new image, is the most important innovation in the art of the [twentieth] century.... Found objects, chance creations, ready-mades (mass-produced items promoted into art objects) abolish the separation between art and life. The commonplace is miraculous if rightly seen, if recognized.” (Charles Simic)

...

“You don’t make art, you find it.” (Simic)

...

“The question is not what you look at, but what you see.” (Thoreau)

...

“...plunged into a world of complete happiness in which every triviality becomes imbued with a significance...” (Joseph Cornell)

...

“...the singular obsessions endlessly revised...” (Thomas Lux)

...

“The task is not primarily to have a story, but to penetrate the story, to discard the elements of it that are merely shell, or husk, that give apparent form to the story, but actually obscure the essence. In other words, the problem is to transcend the givens of a narrative.” (Deborah Eisenberg)

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As a moon rocket ascends, different stages of the engine do what they must to accelerate the capsule. Then each is jettisoned until only the capsule is left with the astronauts on its way to the moon. In linear fiction, the whole structure is accelerating toward the epiphanic moment, and certainly the parts are necessary for the final experience, but I still feel that we could jettison all the pages leading to the epiphany, so I’m left with Gabriel Conroy and his falling faintly, faintly falling, and I’m heading to the moon in the capsule. In collage, every fragment is a capsule: I’m on my way to the moon on every page.

• • •

“Method of this project: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only exhibit. I won’t filch anything of value or appropriate any ingenious turns of phrase. Only the trivia, the trash—which I don’t want to inventory, but simply allow it to come into its own in the only way possible: by putting it to use. This project must raise the art of quotation without quotation marks to the very highest degree.” (Walter Benjamin)

• • •

“In collage, writing is stripped of the pretense of originality and appears as a practice of mediation, of selection and contextualization, a practice, almost, of reading.” (Shelley Jackson)

• • •

“There are two kinds of filmmaking: Hitchcock’s (the film is complete in the director’s mind) and Coppola’s (which thrives on process). For Hitchcock, any variation from the complete internal idea is seen as a defect. The perfection already exists. Francis’s approach is to harvest the random elements that the process throws up, things that were not in the filmmaker’s mind when he began.” (Coppola’s editor Walter Murch)

...

“The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and suggests that man is in control of totality. The desire of the essay, though is not to filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal.” (Theodor Adorno)

...

“... nonlinear, discontinuous, collage-like, semi-fictional, semi-non-fictional assemblage...” (David Markson’s description of his own work)

...

Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Ghosts in the Mirror*, which he calls a “romanesque,” is a quasi-memoir with philosophical reflections, intimate flashes, and personal addresses to the reader. The problem of scale is interesting. How long will the reader stay engaged? I don’t mean stay dutifully but stay charmed, seduced, and beguiled. About this length, I think. In his case, 174 pages.

...

“The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.” (Victor Shklovsky)

...

“It may be that nowadays in order to move us, abstract pictures need, if not humor, then at least some admission of their own absurdity—expressed in genuine awkwardness, or in an authentic disorder.” (Adam Gopnik)

• • •

“Any opportunity that a writer has to engage the reader intimately in the very act of creating the text is an opportunity to grab onto. White space does that. . . . I don’t ever want to be bored, and I certainly don’t ever want any of my readers to be bored. I’d much rather risk them getting annoyed and frustrated than bored.” (John D’Agata)

• • •

“I use the example of a grandfather clock, a wristwatch, and one of these new liquid-crystal watches. The grandfather clock is the reflection of its historical period when time was orderly and slow. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. When there was something monumental and solid about time. It stood there in the front hall in its great, carved case, with a pendulum like the sun or the moon. By the 1930s and ’40s, my era, we had wristwatches that were neurotic and talked very fast, tick-tick-tick-tick—with a sweep-second hand going around. Today, we have watches that don’t show any time at all until you press a button. Then the numbers show up. And when you take your finger off, time disappears.” (Robert Dana)

• • •

“If fiction has a main theme, a primary character, an occupation, a methodology, a criterion, a standard, a purpose (is there anything left for fiction to have?), it would be time itself. One basic meaning of narrative, then: to create time where there was none. A fiction writer who tells stories is a maker of time. Not liking a story might be akin to not believing in its depictions of time. To the writer searching for the obstacle to surpass, time would look plenty worthy a hurdle. If something must be overcome, ruined, subverted in order for fiction to stay matterful (yes, maybe the metaphor of progress in literary art is pretentious and tired *at this point* (there’s time again, aging what

was once such a fine idea)), then time would be the thing to beat, the thing fiction seemingly cannot do without, and therefore, to grow or change, must. Time must die.” (Ben Marcus)

...

“Stephen Dobyns has said that every lyric poem implies a narrative. What he means is a sequence of past events, left out of the poem, that brought the speaker to the present, intensified moment in the poem But the lyric poet might just as easily say that every narrative poem obscures a lyric. The man in the restaurant crushing a wine glass in his hand acts out an emotional complex not wholly explained by a hard day at the office, or being cheated in the taxi, or what his companion just said. If the narrative writer is instinctively curious about the individuating ‘story,’ the distinct sequence of events preceding that table and that wine glass, the lyric poet may be as naturally drawn to the isolated human moment of frustration, the distilled indelible peak on the emotional chart.” (Ellen Bryant Voigt)

...

When plot shapes a narrative, it’s like knitting a scarf. You have this long, long piece of string and many choices about how to knit, but we understand a sequence was involved, a beginning and an end, with one part of the weave logically and sequentially connected to the next. You can figure out where the beginning is and where the last stitch was cast off.

Webs look orderly, too, but unless you watch the spider weaving, you’ll never know where it started. It could be attached to branches or table legs or eaves in six or eight places. You won’t know the sequence in which the different cells were spun and attached to each other. You have to decide for yourself how to read its patterning, but if you pluck it at any point, the entire web will vibrate.