Montage and Violence in Weimar Culture: Kurt Schwitters’ Reassembled Individuals

This essay examines the emergence of an innovative discourse on montage in Weimar culture in the early 1920s. In this context montage denotes both an aesthetic principle that encompasses a wide range of artistic practices – visual and literary collage, photomontage, and sculptural assemblage – and a discursive medium for problematizing the role violence played in constituting subjectivity after the trauma of World War I. After briefly tracing the relationship between montage, subjectivity, and violence during the breakthrough phase of montage practices in the 1920s and 1930s, the essay examines two narratives composed in 1919–20 by Kurt Schwitters, one of the most innovative practitioners of collage and montage in the twentieth century. Schwitters’ stories paradigmatically deploy a montage aesthetics in order to interrogate the role of violence in attaining agency. At the same time, they implicitly ask what kind of understanding of experience is enabled by montage, understood as a perspective that combines epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical considerations.

In his 1920 “dada manifesto on feeble love and bitter love” Tristan Tzara explained that to compose a Dadaist poem one simply needs to clip words from a newspaper article, place them in a bag and

Shake gently
Next take out each cutting one after the other
Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag
The poem will resemble you
And there you are – an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.¹

The provocation of Tzara’s instructions lies not only in the idea of the collage poem assembled according to the principle of chance, but also and especially in the suggestion that this montage principle of composition provides a blueprint for understanding subjectivity. If the poem can resemble the self that fabricated it, Tzara intimates, it is because both are at bottom the result of random cutting and pasting. While Tzara’s instructions rehearse the avant-garde attack on the myth of a singular subjectivity that exercises itself in original poetic acts, they also draw attention to an important problem that

the perspective of montage makes visible. This is the issue of how to rethink agency given the haphazard nature of subjectivity and artistic practice. Within this framework, active intervention appears to require the cutting and pasting of existing materials in acts that are bound to violate the integrity of the materials and are thus inherently violent.

In this essay, I will focus on the emergence of a discourse on montage in Weimar culture in the early 1920s. Montage denotes in this context an aesthetic principle whose ideological reach extends beyond the wide range of innovative practices it encompasses (visual and literary collage, photo-montage, and sculptural assemblage). My hypothesis is that at this time montage also functioned as a discursive medium for reconceptualizing subjectivity and agency after the trauma of the Great War – specifically, for problematizing the role of violence in the constitution of subjectivity within a framework that rejects the psychological and ethical postulates of late-nineteenth century humanism. Violence in this context connotes a number of entwined phenomena. At the aesthetic level, it encompasses the portrayal of the violated body, as well as depictions of larger processes of disruption and disfiguration that trespass on an explicit or intuitive normative threshold. Historically these accounts are framed by a perception of the novelty of the violence produced by World War I, both in terms of its quality and of its magnitude. Finally, violence refers here to specific defamiliarizing effects that textual montage procedures elicit in the reader and that have been customarily analyzed by drawing on the category of “shock”. After briefly tracing the relation between montage,

Tzara’s discourse is emblematic for a modernist understanding of randomly constituted subjectivity driven by a poetic principle that whimsically scrambles words and meanings. In this context, originality, the cherished chimera of the bourgeois artist supposedly endowed with unique genius as a source of inspiration, is recoded as the singularity of a random assemblage. Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) was one of the most radical and imaginative writers associated with Dadaism. Born in Romania, in 1916 he helped found the Cabaret Voltaire, the hub of Zurich Dada. Upon leaving Zurich at the end of World War I he settled in Paris, where he lived until his death. He authored a number of influential Dadaist manifestos and was a steady contributor to the main journals of Dadaism. In Paris he temporarily joined forces with André Breton in propagating the cause of Dadaism in the early 1920s, but he became marginalized as the Dada circle collapsed and Breton started building the following of intellectuals and artists that formed the core of Surrealism. See Gale: Dada and Surrealism. Pp. 35–80.

As is well known, the modernist discourse of defamiliarization and shock finds one of its first conceptualizations in the theories of the Russian formalists, especially the momentous articulation of poetic language offered by Victor Shklovsky: Art as Technique (1917). In: Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays. Ed. and trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1965. Pp. 3–24. Within the German-speaking context, Walter Benjamin was