

'Is that what Pop Art is all about?' Visual Ambiguities in Pop Art Collage

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Abstract

In the conditions when generic borders were blurred and significant cultural codes were almost exploited, the technique of collage became a universal substitute for artistic forms and their visual language. Without a doubt, this artistic expression was a remedy for conventional aesthetics and a way to stave off meanings accepted and fixed by society. The infinite number of discursive negations, contradictions, ambiguities, incoherence and lack of unified representation, deconstruction, intertextuality, textual and visual plurisignation, mingled with one another to reflect limitless heterogeneity and relativity of consumer society.

The aim of this article is to explore selected works by British pop artists (Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake and Eduardo Paolozzi) in which unified representation of the outside reality was replaced by a multimodal reconstruction of meanings. Words, objects and variable materials presented in Pop Art works gained a new signification thanks to the replacement of their prime context with the images produced by the mass media. The semantic shift in pop representations showed the way in which signs were coming to be regarded by a society exposed to a multitude of visual data. In such conditions, the categories of 'real' and 'artificial' became fluid notions. As there is no longer any division between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' arts, pop artists' visual imagery is an attempt to accentuate and comment on the presence of simulacrum formed by the consumer industry.¹

Keywords: Collage, Pop Art, representation, popular culture, consumerism, the Swinging Sixties, visual perception, the loss of real, heterogeneity



Collage's heterogeneity, even if it is reduced to be every operation of composition, imposes itself on the reading as stimulation to produce signification which could be neither univocal nor stable. Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to an ambiguity and a double reading [...] of never entirely suppressing alterity of the elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus

¹ This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation.²

As Gregory Ulmer points out, a technique of collage with its multimodal visual character was perceived by artists as a *lingua franca* to depict the inadequacy of traditional representations. Together with the upheaval of Post-Impressionism and Cubism, collage became an antidote for the illusory perspective dominant in Western painting since the Renaissance. In fact, it was a break with the concept of mimesis, the values of the established canon of art, the Modernist concept of pictorial space and the assumptions of realism. What is more, a direct incorporation of visual material borrowed from the everyday environment, which was formerly alien to a painting technique, now accentuated the interplay between artistic expressions and common imagery. The idea that portrayals of the modern world should contain, according to Rudolf Arnheim, ‘an expression of a fundamental disorder that exists in the incompatibility inherent in space when self-contained, separate units are not part of a continuous whole but rather interact blindly and irrationally dominated the artistic world’.³ This method of visualization served as a medium of materiality, recording our civilization, its differentiation between humanity and inhumanity, capturing the topical, the transitory and the absurd. Inevitably, the discontinuity of an image, its transfer of materials from one context to another and the dissemination of the particular content emphasized the importance of the relative experience of an artistic vision and brought ‘art and life closer to being a simultaneous experience’, a combination that previously created perceptual ambiguities.⁴

1. The Spirit of Pluralism — Collage in the UK

In the course of time, collage became a visual language of young British painters of the 1950s. The Independent Group, formed during the decade at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, observed and studied an existing tension between highbrow and lowbrow culture and blurred the boundaries between art and everyday life.⁵ The IG consisted of a new generation of artists, architects and theorists, among them Lawrence Alloway, John McHale, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Alison and Peter Smithson. These artists applied a variety of signs and elements taken from a popular background to comment on the consumer society of post-war Britain and a former attitude towards visual arts. Soon, Pop artists began to treat this

² Gregory L. Ulmer, ‘The Object of Post-Criticism’ in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985) p. 88.

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) p. 302.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵ The Independent Group is known also as the IG and will be so referred to henceforth in this article.

kind of representation as a method of reflection of the new conditions of metropolitan life, a life transformed to a large extent by the impact of the mass media. ‘Popular, transient, expandable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, media dependent [...]’; these markers, among other things, aptly describe the source material used by British pop artists to depict the emergence of mass culture and its consequences upon the perception of reality.⁶ The world of art was presented independent of any interpretations, accessible to a modern citizen. A variety of artistic means, vernacular aspects of newly produced artworks, representations of the different environments mainly from the urban areas were appealing to wider audience. As Lucy Lipard observes, ‘Pop is a hybrid, a product of new humanism, known also as *New Image of Man*’.⁷ This image is transformed largely by the complex and heterogeneous aesthetics of advertising industry.

2 British Culture and New Sensibility

In the conditions of consumer society ‘we are witnessing a creation of a new kind of sensibility’ as Susan Sontag claims in her essay *One Culture and New Sensibility*.⁸ The new approach to life was largely rooted in mass production that multiplied its commodities at unbelievable rate and, as Sontag adds, ‘in the pan-cultural perspective on the arts that is possible through the mass production of art objects’.⁹ The process of mass production exerted a profound effect upon aesthetics. As Walter Benjamin highlights in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, modern technology meant that a picture no longer needed to be unique; a single image, reprinted over and over again, could flood the urban environment; art had developed forms in which there was no actual original. Hence, a unified, coherent image was replaced by a multi-modal representation, the repetition of brand names, copies of designer goods constantly blurring the distinction between actual and virtual. Just like widely promoted products, the image of a human being from the Fifties and Sixties reminds us of a picture of consumer goods. As a result, we receive a dehumanized picture with its hostility towards traditional visual categories. The image is deformed, multimodal, constructed mainly for marketing purposes. It seems that the term ‘pop’ is doubtless ‘riddled with ambiguity for it stands poised somewhere between the IG’s present and some imagined future, between artistic

⁶ Gablik Suzi and John Russell, *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969) p. 82.

⁷ Lucy Lipard, *Pop Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) p. 63.

⁸ Susan Sontag, ‘One Culture and New Sensibility’ in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing CO, 1969) p. 296.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 299.

aspirations and their cultural deprivation in Britain in the early Fifties.’¹⁰ The article presented gives insights into works that are motivated by a common pledge not only to produce a new kind of visual environment but also to analyse critically ‘the fabric of life and mass-produced imagery,’ its perceptual ambiguity, imitation and gradual loss of the ‘real’.¹¹

3. Richard Hamilton’s ‘Pop-Fine-Art’ perspective¹²

Richard Hamilton’s works of art from the late 1950s rely mainly on collage as the device to deconstruct the traditional mimesis. As an influential intellectual force of the IG, the artist’s major concern was with popular sources, which constituted a large part of his iconography. Assemblage, joining, adding, combining, linking, constructing, organising — these are the methods used by Hamilton to complete his final vision of a given representation. He constructs an object and mounts a process ‘in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality’.¹³ His works can be perceived as a constant motion to capture the exteriority, taste formation and the presence of opposite forces of formal and informal visual language. The spheres of coincidence and predictability are mixed to explore every kind of reversal, comparison between one of the systems of representation against another. This principle enables Hamilton to grasp the clash between realm of fine art and readymade metaphors to signalize changes within the visual arts. As the artist points out in his text published in *Collected Words (1953-1982)*, ‘perhaps [Pop Art] is Mama – a cross-fertilization of Futurism and Dada which upholds a respect for the culture of the masses and a conviction that the artist in twentieth century urban life is inevitably a consumer of mass culture and potentially a contributor to it’.¹⁴ It appears that the role of an artist in popular culture is ambivalent as it is very difficult if not impossible to clarify their position in the creative act. Is he an artist or simply a creator working on a manufacturing scale?

Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?, Hamilton’s small iconic collage displayed in 1956 during the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition, illustrates his creative reply to the problem of a mass society and the double faced relation between mass society and the world of art. It pictures the world of human beings yearning for the complete satisfaction that can be obtained only by commodities. The work consists of a wide range of signs and

¹⁰ Dick Hebdige, ‘In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop’ in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988) p. 80.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 81.

¹² By Pop-Fine-Art I mean here an expression of popular culture in fine art terms. This term appeared in texts referring to the *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition.

¹³ Ulmer. op.cit., p. 86.

¹⁴ Richard Hamilton, ‘For the Finest Art, Try Pop.’ In *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p. 743.

symbols borrowed from glossy magazines, advertisements and posters. A body-builder, a pinup queen and a television set are placed in the latest version of home design. All these images with their attractiveness become the embodiment of consumers' needs from the Fifties. 'In Hamilton's collage, virtually every aspect of kitsch and camp are touched on. Among its most notable features are tongue-in-cheek irreverence and a sense of irony, qualities that were to become a trademark of Pop art'.¹⁵ Inevitably, Hamilton insists on a 'reference to verifiable reality, but the result should be an insight which goes beyond the level simply of fact'.¹⁶ The presented interior design appears to conceptualize strategies of desire produced by the mass media mechanisms. The artist here depicts not only an alluring image, a view of objects and bodies but also the system of signs and representations through which desires and needs are voiced and interpreted, produced and satisfied by the consumer society. However, as Jean Baudrillard posited in his book *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, it is not so much commodities that we consume but the myths they stand for, the styles of consumption known to everyone.¹⁷ The artist's canvas is an environment in which categories of 'real' and 'artificial' become relative and it is extremely difficult to differentiate between these two elements. The collage with its infinite number of discursive ambiguities reflects limitless heterogeneity of mass society.

Additionally, the tension in the work of art is accentuated by interplay of textual messages that are placed on the same visual level with the other scraps taken from glossy magazines and advertisements. They replace the objects from traditional interior designs. The Ford logo is substituted here for a conventional lampshade; a billboard with Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* takes the place of the view from a window; a cover of comic book masquerades as a framed painting, a black arrow (indicating that 'ordinary cleaners reach only this far') directed at a vacuum cleaner describes its functions. There is a typical self-reference element in the tin labelled 'ham' placed on the table. Undoubtedly, there is no place for non-manufactured elements, since the whole representation is constructed with already existing objects and their designations. According to Derrida's montage practice, the nature of language does not function in terms of matched pairs (signifier/signified) but of couplers or couplings. In Umberto Eco's words, 'this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows

¹⁵ Diane Waldman, 'Assemblage and Pop Art' in *Collage, Assemblage and the Fund Object* (London: Phaidon, 1992) p. 269.

¹⁶ Richard Morphet, "Richard Hamilton: The Longer View". In *Richard Hamilton* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992) p. 18.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p. 49.

communicational process to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world'.¹⁸ Here the textual layer of Hamilton's work of art highlights that 'signified and signifiers are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations', changing their primary value.¹⁹ All the pictorial elements are in constant motion producing new meanings. Therefore, we are not able to face a univocal picture in the frame but have to read and interpret simultaneously contrasting, ambiguous messages consisting of text, object and the message. The confrontation with the picture has become a many-channelled activity. The critical voice about the consumer society and its shift from traditional vision and fascination with the mechanisms of visual formation are expressed here.

4. Peter Blake's Rejuvenated Pop Representations²⁰

Peter Blake's collage *On the Balcony*, completed between 1955 and 1957, is similar to the Hamilton work in that it aptly illustrates the mechanisms that contributed to the formation of multi-levelled representation. Even though Blake was an independent artist, working outside the IG, his output is to a large extent influenced by the artistic forms of post-war painting in Britain. As a representative of rejuvenated culture, he found himself in the focal point of the main artistic arena. As a result, his output from this time is embedded in the popular imagery that constituted 'Swinging London'.

The collage depicts within the frames of the canvas a vast accumulation of objects and figures associated with the decade of cultural changes. Apart from a small part of a path that cuts across the upper edge, the background of the picture is almost entirely taken up by a flat, green lawn. Though Blake applies traditional means of artistic expression, oil on canvas, the unification of both new and older symbols of British culture resemble a collage composition. There is no denying the fact that the objects gathered together in the painting represent a social and cultural background of the Fifties. This multiplicity of sources, including not only the work of other artists but also magazine covers, postcards, photographs of the Royal Family; cigarette packets highlight the materials around which a consumer identity is constructed. There is no distinct division and contrast between the presented images; everything merges and becomes equal in value. Moreover, this work of art presents pictures in which other visual images are attached to the bodies of figures, as either badges or elements of their clothes. We can arrive at

¹⁸ Peter E. Bondanella, 'From Semiotics to Narrative Theory in a Decade of Radical Social Change' In *Umberto Eco and The Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 82.

¹⁹ Ulmer, op. cit., p. 89.

²⁰ Here the heading refers to the rejuvenated culture at the turn of the Fifties and Sixties.

the conclusion that Blake's paintings are about the excitement of looking at pictures, about how we collect them, display them, form them and finally treat them simply like objects.

As the artist's work shows the eclecticism of images borrowed from formerly separate spheres, popular aesthetics appears to govern the visual experience of the viewers. As Kerry Freedman observes, visual culture in the Fifties became 'inherently, interdisciplinary and increasingly multi-modal'. In such conditions, as he adds, 'visual culture images and objects are continuously seen and instantaneously interpreted, forming new knowledge and new images of identity and environment'.²¹ A self-image is seen in relation to other forms of visual production and social communication. Therefore, Blake's popular iconography indicates that there is no longer any attachment to one grand narrative, a universal truth that will influence our perception of reality. On the contrary, we have to face a new visual system that will enable us to cross traditional perceptual barriers.

Blake expresses his outlook upon the times through the use of portraits of young, well-behaved people who were becoming the major cultural and social force of the Fifties and Sixties. For instance, this tendency is visible in Blake's other works such as *Got a Girl* with the dominant figure of Elvis and a mixed media work *Locker* that contains photographs of Kim Novak, Bridget Bardot and Marilyn Monroe. Without a doubt, the picture *On the Balcony* appears to be the artist's attempt to define a variety of discourses that exerted an impact upon the young generation in Great Britain. Youths are presented standing or sitting motionless, submissively on a kind of stage, hemmed in by a vast accumulation of images taken from popular culture and traditional art. Moreover, Blake decides to introduce into his canvas slightly deformed faces. This strategy eventually contributes to the fact that the people depicted are a little bit older or perhaps even more mature. Their representation is to a large extent influenced by the techniques, overused by technological solutions and the mass media that construct young people's identity for purely marketing and economical purposes. Besides, their involvement in the surroundings appears to be passive; they become puppets adopting the symbols and icons served by the popular culture. They are performing roles suggested and imposed on them by the consumer society. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, in a consumer society a desire 'is not so much related to achieve a particular type of identity, but rather to keep one's identity open so as not to miss any options that can be added to one's final image'.²² Blake's application of variable materials implies that the border between original and artificial is blurred and identity

²¹ Kerry Freedman. *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art*. (New York: Teachers Collage Press, 2003), p. 260.

²² Zygmunt Bauman. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 24.

created in the era of consumer culture is liquid. There is no stability in artistic creation. Illusory powers of representation combined with touchable materials govern our visual space in the mass society.

Conclusion

The analyzed works of art are intertextual spaces that absorb and modify other representations. The complex nature of the image as object, illusion as reality, and reality as illusion is predicated on a reconciliation of opposites on the picture plane. The dichotomies between high and low art, mimesis and the loss of the real explored in this paper define the visual tendencies of Pop Art. Thus, drawing on James Haywood Rolling, 'representation can be understood as an ongoing interpretation, an action that proliferates an expanding urban sprawl from diverse and loosely associated neighbourhoods, streets and centres'²³ Popular culture and market-driven commodities borrow multi-evocative imagery that is an integral part of the city life with an aim of constructing an adequate visual identity. This is an expression of a mass culture easily accessible through variable registers more often than not represented via the decontextualisation of certain forms. Nonetheless, the partial, deformed representations illustrate the condition of a consumer world that is governed by global capitalism 'which replicates the same chain stores, fast food outlets, brand names in every High Street across the land.'²⁴ In such conditions the mass culture imagery is usually based on a mosaic form, various and even contradictory criteria that ultimately highlight the artificiality of the visual material served to the viewers. Even though the distance between the artwork and audience has been shortened owing to the familiarity of the presented material, the technique of collage, as Ryszard Nycz notices in his conception towards signs, becomes a simulacrum that limits our direct access to the reality.²⁵

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²⁴ Tim Woods. *Beginning Postmodernism*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 16.

²⁵ Ryszard Nycz. *Tekstowy Świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*. (Kraków: Universitas, 2000, p. 288.

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