

Montage Writing

Montage writing, also called segmented, snapshot, or collage writing, is immediately recognizable on the page: Sections of writing, often very short, are separated one from the next by asterisks or white space. Montage is also immediately recognizable in the reading; there is a sense that a camera shutter closes and opens, closes and opens as we move from segment to segment. The effect is familiar; films are almost always montaged editings of separate "moments." We move through films with that steady closing out of one scene and the unannounced opening of the next, fluidly and confidently. We expect this constantly shifting "eye" in a film. In the same way, as readers of montaged essays, we make the shift intuitively from segment to segment. A montaged essay draws the reader and writer together in an interpretive duet.

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The asterisk signals a shift. The lens shutter closes and snaps open in a new and mostly unconnected realm. A discontinuity of images, scenes, and observations creates a dialogue in space and time, asking the reader to close and open the eyes,

close and open the eyes, at each opening discovering another component of a suggested truth. The segments of a montaged essay accrue to new and larger ideas that might weight a continuous narrative into opacity. In each new opening of the lens shutter, the reader is invited anew, moment to moment, to imagine the scaffolding, the architecture of the whole.

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Perhaps the montage is a chronicle, as in Sherman Alexie's "Captivity," which is numbered one to fourteen:

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All we can depend on are the slow-motion replays of our lives. Frame 1: Lester reaches for the next beer.

Frame 2: He pulls it to his face by memory, drinks it like a 20th-century vision. Frame 3: He tells a joke, sings another song: *Well, they sent me off to boarding school and made me learn the white man's rules.*

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Each segment is a juxtaposition of narrative or image or reflection. What is left out is as important as what is said; the white field in between creates tension, expectation, just as the stanzas of a poem signal a shift forward, to the side, back. A montaged essay excludes much more than it writes.

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Perhaps the montaged essay is a list, like this, each segment a shift

in time

In his memoir *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje travels to India, moving backward and forward through family memory. He opens the first segment by telling us, "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto." Later he moves backward, opening a short segment with this: "The early twenties had been a busy and expensive time for my grandparents." He gets confused as he walks back into his family story and opens a segment protesting, "Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I'm trying to get it straight. . . ."

in interior time

Primo Levi, in *Survival in Auschwitz*, moves from memory to memory steadily, inexorably, suggesting the unspeakable. He opens one segment, "And for the first time since I entered the camp the reveille catches me in a deep sleep and its ringing is a return from nothingness." Another: "We fought with all our strength to prevent the arrival of winter." Then: "We have a great many things to learn, but we have learned many already." Just before rescue: "We lay in a world of death and phantoms. The last trace of civilization has vanished around and inside us."

in place

John McPhee, in "The Search for Marvin Gardens," moves between a Monopoly game board and the parallel world of streets

and social history. Atlantic City becomes a dream landscape. We play the game with him: "Go. Roll the dice—a six and a two." Then: "The dogs are moving (some are limping) through ruins, rubble, fire damage, open garbage," and "Visiting hours are daily, eleven to two . . . Immediate Family Only Allowed in Jail."

from image to reflection

Annie Dillard invites us to witness an eclipse, leaping from image to reflection, physics to metaphysics: "It began with no ado." Later: "The second before the sun went out we saw a wall of shadow come speeding at us. We no sooner saw it than it was upon us, like thunder. . . . It slammed the hill and knocked us out." Then her leap: "The world which lay under darkness and stillness following the closing of the lid was not the world we know."

and from image to metaphor

Albert Goldbarth, in "Delft," studies fleas as he shifts between Vermeer's vision of Delft and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek's vision through the lens of the first microscope: Goldbarth opens, "He cometh unto his kingdom now. . . . Call him Leeuwenhoek." Later: "If we enter Delft through his [Vermeer's] *View of Delft* . . ." and finally, "This story's this simple: the tiniest units that introduce love, conduct huge suffering."

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The montaged essay is an intuitive gesture, for writer and for reader. The shutter clicks, and the film moves on. Click, and

we are caught by the memory of our father's hands. Click, and those hands belong to a young man at boot camp. Click, and the light of an early-winter snowfall carries us to the sadness of a quiet house many years ago. Click, and our own hands weave the story. What we include is vital. Each segment is a small universe, suggestive, seductive, elliptical. What we choose not to say is vital; the empty space on the page adds its voice to the idea, which is perhaps larger, less definable, less confined than it might be if it moved in a more dialectical way through the essay. There are no transitions, a wonderful freedom, and also a warning to the writer: There is no road map. Beware! Your reader may wander off your path. The writer must ask: Where am I going? In the end, exacting strategies for cohesion and movement provide the architecture, an invitation to your reader to trust you.

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Or perhaps the shift is

from the now to the backstory

or

between points of view

or

from prayer to prayer

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Themes emerge unannounced to the writer, surprising and mysterious. We make choices: Now I shall write this segment. Not this. Yes, this. We do not know the reasons yet. But suddenly water flows through every segment. Light illuminates.

Loss, or reclaimed belief, or the perpetual need to be loved. History and beauty and dreams and small spoken words are, for the moment, all there is. We focus attention. The intensity of the moment concedes to the next, and the next, those spaces in between offering respite, time enough for the reader to imagine, to splice together the whole. The shutter clicks, and the reader is ready.

The Narrative Impulse

It's been ten years since James Atlas declared ours "the age of the literary memoir" in the *New York Times*, and the public's appetite for true tales of the self, imaginatively told, seems boundless. The demand for fiction continues to fizzle, while first-time memoirists build the kind of buzz that once befitted big-name novelists. Some claim it's a fad, a filling of the literary troughs with sentimental slop. Yet recent research regarding the brain would suggest that narratives of self—both the telling (writing) and the hearing (reading)—stem from impulses basic to our being.

We've learned that the mind is malleable, that the brain's neural pathways constantly rewrite themselves to order sensory input, creating connections among disparate facts and ultimately spinning explanations about the self in the world. In essence, the mind "is telling itself a story," notes David Suzuki in *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*. He argues that this knack for narrative enabled our ancestors to recognize, understand, and remember the meaning of patterns in nature, such as the migrations of animals, the sequencing of the seasons, and the duration of night and day.

These observations become memories, and the meanings