

From Authentic Traces to Simulated Traces: The Material Reconstruction of Postmodern Collage in Contemporary Visual Design

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Abstract: This study examines the transmission of “authentic traces” in paper, such as texture, torn edges, halftone dots, ink smudges, and glue, in contemporary visual design based on the material tradition of postmodern collage. By building a three-dimensional analytical framework of “materiality—rhetoric—viewing,” this study compares historical handmade collages with contemporary digital visual samples and reveals the transmission logic of aesthetic changes from “authentic traces” to “simulated traces” and its impacts on layout hierarchy, readability of information, and visual ethics in a systematic way. Traces, as they are material evidences of creation processes, gradually become replicable stylistic symbols. The “trace translation” process weakens authenticity in design discourse and diffuses nostalgic rhetoric in a general way. The theoretical contribution of this study is to construct and explain the “trace translation” framework, which offers a new theoretical perspective to explore the material reconstruction logic of contemporary visual design in the digital age.

Keywords: Postmodern Collage; Materiality; Simulacra; Visual Rhetoric; Trace Translation; Contemporary Visual Design

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1.Introduction

From the very beginning, postmodern collage art radically emphasizes “material traces” in expression. Fiber texture, uneven torn edges, wrinkles left by glue, halftone dots, and ink smudges—elements once regarded as traditional fine aesthetics’ defects—were accepted as main carriers of meanings in postmodern collage. These “authentic traces” as indicative symbols are causally connected to the physical processes and material properties from which they come from and point directly to the creation site, just like fingerprints.^[1]

However, from the perspective of the new screen-based image era of social media and mobile terminals, the new visual pressure gradually appeared. High definition, smooth, and frictionless rapid distribution became the new visual pressure. For traditional “authentic traces,” there were two possible situations: to disappear through technological purification in order to better realize the seamless interface or to be reintroduced and recreated in a highly controlled and infinitely replicable “distressed” visual effect. The latter formed a new visual category—“simulated traces.” Although the traces look like authentic traces, the logic of their generation has completely broken connection with their material origins and totally depended on the simulation of digital algorithms and styled invocation.^[2]

Existing research on this phenomenon mostly focused on technological evolution or description of stylistic changes.^[3]

Although these studies are valuable, they often lack systematic examination of the fundamental change of semantics and function of traces from a “materiality—rhetoric—viewing” theoretical dimension. Therefore, this study adopted a historical and contemporary sample comparison method and combined qualitative coding and visual rhetoric analysis to explore the following core questions: First, how are “authentic traces” in postmodern collage translated into “simulated traces” in contemporary digital visual design? Second, how does this translation process affect layout hierarchy, readability of information, and ethics of the viewer–image relationship?

The academic connotation of this study is to construct the “trace translation” theoretical model, to reveal the logic of traces’ evolution from “indexical trace” directly connected with creating process to “symbolic trace”, and to explore the academic logic of such evolution.^[4]

2. Background and Related Research

From Dadaism’s photcollages to Pop Art’s use of commercial images, and then to the satire of main stream values in postmodern graphic design, the basic visual logic of collage art has always been the visual strategy of “heterogeneous juxtaposition” and “anti-grid”. In this case, the material trace is no longer a mere visual element, but an explicit declaration of “the visibility of the process”. The rough fibers of paper and hand-teared edges record the labor of the creator. In addition, it is an active resistance to the modernist design’s pursuit of purity, cleanliness and rationality. Creators often present a “failure aesthetic” or “poverty aesthetics”. Traces are an important way to declare an opposition to standardized production and to give a piece of work its own “aura”.^[5-6]

Based on the visual rhetoric theory, images are never just visual elements; they are active in constructing and conveying meaning. In the process of creating collages, traces of materials have strong rhetoric. They can be used as “anchorage” symbols to direct viewers to a certain direction of interpretation; they can create “confrontation” with smooth images and generate visual tension to convey critical awareness; they can also produce “irony” through juxtaposition and dismantle the authority of the original image. More importantly, the visibility of the traces and the presentation way of them will directly influence viewers’ visual entry path, reading rhythm and implicit judgments. They constitute a micro “politics of looking”.^[7]

With the arrival of the digital age, especially when mobile terminals become the main platform for image consumption, the visual environment has undergone tremendous changes. Thumbnail-level quick recognition, touch to view images, and pursuit of efficient information transmission all strongly limit visual design and drive image production to “dematerialization”—to remove any physical texture that may hinder the flow of information, to present a uniform smooth surface. Meanwhile, the “vintage distressed” style has flourished on social media. It seems that the material “traces” have not disappeared; instead, they have been taken out of context and re-encoded as a ready-to-call, easily recognizable style resource. They can be directly invoked and applied in production. Their inherent critical awareness is often weakened in the process.^[8]

Although the previous studies make certain contributions, there are still the following deficiencies: Firstly, there is a lack of comparative studies with “traces” as the smallest analytical unit and connecting the three theoretical dimensions of “materiality—rhetoric—viewing” organically. Secondly, there is no theoretical framework focusing on the semantic transition from “authentic” to “simulated” traces in the digital age. Therefore, this study attempts to construct a theoretical framework of “trace translation”.^[9]

3. Research Design and Methods

To systematically explore the logic of translation of material traces from “authentic” to “simulated”, this study follows a qualitative research path of historical and contemporary sample comparison. This study builds a three-dimensional analytical framework to code and compare two carefully selected visual samples.^[10]

Based on a purposive sampling principle, this study selects two representative groups of samples for comparison. Group A (historical handmade collage samples) includes 28 works from the mid-20th century, such as Dadaist publications (e.g. MERZ), surrealist experimental collages and well-known postmodern graphic design works. Group B (contemporary digital visual samples) selects 35 works from the most popular designs in recent years on Behance and Pinterest, as well as some well-known brands, such as Apple Music’s “Lo-fi” posters and Aesop’s digital brand design.^[11]

This study establishes a three-dimensional analytical matrix of “materiality—rhetoric—viewing” and codes the samples systematically. This study operationalizes the definition of each dimension, which is related to the following aspects: paper texture, torn edges, glue marks, halftone dots and inked areas.

4. Case Comparison: Trace Translation Pathways

In terms of historical samples, such as handmade collages in independent magazines, paper texture is the initial and most direct physical appearance of the whole handmade collage. In contemporary UI design, designers usually use transparent and seamless digital texture materials to simulate “paper texture”.

In handmade collages, torn edges are very random and irreproducible. They bring visual tension to the layout. In digital works, most of the “damage” effects are symmetric, uniform and easily to be predicted, and usually just for decoration.

Historical printing dots are the process of printing, which will affect the absorption of ink. In addition to the original printed dots, there are “distortions” in the image. In contemporary designs, designers often use filters to simulate halftone effects. They present a clear and rule-based pattern.^[12]

In handmade collages, there are definitely ink stains, fingerprints or scratches on the collage. They are all “accidents” in the process of making. These “accidents” are unpredictable, and they add narrative tension to the work. In the digital design workflow, these kinds of “accidents” are programmable. They are a kind of style in the “mood board” of designers.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Obviously, the essence of “trace translation” is not the transfer of visual content, but the transfer of symbolic meaning of traces from “indexical” to “symbolic”.

Authentic trace is an “indexical” trace that points directly to the process of creation; simulated trace is a “symbolic” trace that is cut off from the physical causality.

In the handmade collages in history, traces are “constructors” of visual contents that directly influence the layout structure and readability of collages; in the digital designs of today, simulated traces often become passive decorative layers that reduce the clarity of information.

The translation of traces also triggers new types of ethical issues of misrecognition of style as historical truth in the view of visual rhetoric that transfers from authentic traces to simulated traces. Especially, when the sender and viewer of a collage involving public issues and collective memory use this transfer of traces as a tool of communication, it is important to distinguish between authenticity and simulation.

6. Conclusion

This study follows the material tradition of postmodern collage and its drastic transformation in contemporary digital visual design through the framework of “trace translation”. From the perspective of stylistic transfer of traces from authentic to simulated, it is also an exploration of the transfer of cultural production of meaning.

Future research can further explore how audiences perceive these traces or apply this framework to other visual media, such as dynamic images or interactive installations.

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