

From Advertising to the Avant-Garde: Rethinking the Invention of Collage

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PMC 14.2

I see no reason why the artistic world can't absolutely merge with Madison Avenue

--William S. Burroughs ("Art of Fiction" 29)

Cutting Up Consumer Culture: "Big Daddy"

1. In her article "The Invention of Collage," Marjorie Perloff begins the story of collage at what she considers its end, a playful and private work created by her own children. Nancy and Carey Perloff have cut up newspapers and magazines to create a sentimental birthday card for their father, "Big Daddy" (see Figure 1).



[Raoul Hausmann] asserts that the germ of the idea was planted while he and Hannah Höch were on holiday in the summer of 1918 on the Baltic coast, where they saw in almost every house a framed coloured lithograph with the image of a soldier against a background of barracks. "To make this military memento more personal, a photographic portrait had been stuck on in the place of the head." (Ades 19)

The family of a soldier pasting in the picture of their own son's face over the anonymous image on the patriotic, illustrated postcards of the time performs the public-to-private transformation that Perloff identifies in "Big Daddy." However, the Dadaists saw this as more than a one-way street. The patriotic postcard could not be a more literal expression of ideological interpolation, as the individual is literally inserted into an abstract image of official patriotism. Yet the Dadaists also recognized the power of such cut-

and-paste techniques to challenge the very forces which in this case it served.

- There is a strange, one-way logic to Perloff's playful evocation of her own family's private use of collage. She concludes her survey of collage, which concentrates almost exclusively on avant-garde works, with the following statement:

Indeed, to collage elements from impersonal, external sources--the newspaper, magazines, television, billboards--as did my daughters in their birthday collage is, as it were, to establish continuity between one's own private universe and the world outside, to make from what is already there something that is one's own. (43)

- While Perloff is certainly right that making such ready-made elements something of one's own is an important part of the collage impulse, she nonetheless presents it as a process in which the artistic act of appropriation completely transforms the materials that the artist has chosen to cut up. She does not, for instance, suggest that the materials her daughters have chosen are primarily propaganda for an abstract notion of the California Lifestyle: "The Best of the Beaches' is removed from its Sunday Supplement context [. . .] to poke gentle fun at Daddy's chauvinistic enthusiasm for the California he had just moved to after years in the cold grey east" (6). Far from being turned into some completely personal artifact, these choices might just as well reveal the way such commercial images and ideologies have penetrated the private, domestic space of the family, even becoming a means to express affection itself through ready-made images. Indeed, what is most striking about "Big Daddy" as a collage is that all of its elements are of purely commercial origins.

Perloff's analysis is of a piece with the critical tendency in discussions of collage to insist, emphatically, that the technique is itself almost a guarantee of a critical position, but in the celebratory images and exclamations of this work such a critical posture is not quite so obvious.

- Like critics such as David Antin, Gregory Ulmer, and many others, Perloff locates what is most important about collage, its particular power, in its severing of narrative and syntactic relationships. Unlike traditional modes of narrative and visual art, collage technique is based on radical parataxis. According to Perloff,

collage, even at this rudimentary level ["Big Daddy"], is thus quite unlike traditional modes of discourse, whether verbal or visual. Regarded historically, this "revolution in picture making" as Robert Rosenblum calls it, is the peculiar

invention of the first two decades of the twentieth century. (8)

- Perloff goes on to identify Picasso and Braque as the real inventors of collage. However, Perloff's decision to concentrate on the role of these heroic modernists occludes the role of one of the most significant discourses to transform aesthetics and everyday life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the mass media in the form of newspapers and advertising. The very materials that the creators of "Big Daddy" cut up were themselves already cut-ups, paratactic assemblages of ready-made materials. As I will argue at length, collage has deep roots in the rise of mass media and commercial culture that both precede and make possible the avant-garde innovations of modernists and postmodernists. It is the ubiquity of the mass media spectacle and the attendant typographical and visual forms and techniques of advertising that provide the context, inspiration, and technical means for the collage culture of the twentieth century, and thus the very genealogy of collage brings with it not only critical possibilities and formal innovations, but also the problems that animate consumer culture as a whole: reification and alienation in the face of the commodities and ideologies of consumer capitalism.

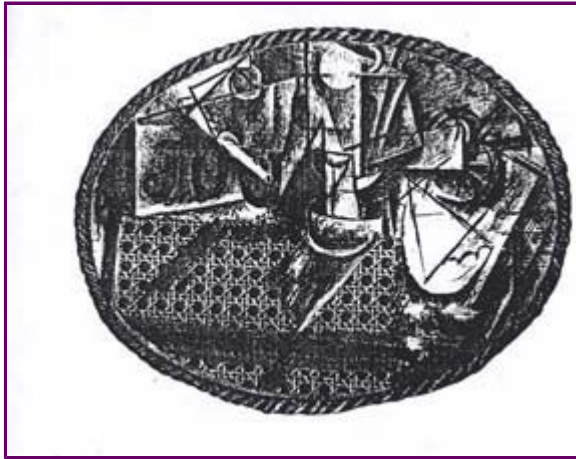
Rethinking Collage

- Critics readily recognize collage as one of the most important techniques of the twentieth century. For Katherine Hoffman, "collage may be seen as a quintessential twentieth-century art form with multiple layers and signposts pointing to a variety of forms and realities and to the possibility or suggestion of countless new realities" (1). Even more emphatically, Ulmer argues that "collage is the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation to occur in our century" (84). This view is echoed by Jochen Schulte-Sasse in his forward to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, where he argues that understanding collage is the key to understanding the most important and radical developments of the historical avant-garde of the twentieth century: "the success of any theory of the avant-garde can be measured by how convincingly it can anchor the avant-garde formal principle of the collage and montage" (xxix). Schulte-Sasse's association of collage with the historical avant-garde and Ulmer's assertion that collage carries a revolutionary potential both rest on assumptions about the invention of collage itself. However, the story that art historians usually tell is deeply problematic in the context of modernism's complex relationship to the emergent mass media.
- According to most critics, collage was invented by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso on the eve of World War I. Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (see Figure 2) is usually put forward as the first true collage, as it incorporates a ready-made oilcloth print of chair caning and a frame made out of a rope. In an

encyclopedic study entitled *Collage*, Herta Wescher examines this work closely:

The first time that some component was ever glued into a Cubist painting was early in 1912, when Pablo Picasso inserted a piece of oilcloth into a still life. The design on the oilcloth was an imitation of chair caning, and Picasso painted wooden strips around it to enhance the illusion of a piece of furniture. Behind it, their planes overlapping in typical Cubist fashion, painted glass, pipe, and newspaper, lemon, and other objects are so crammed together that what strikes the eye is the large and otherwise empty insert of oilcloth, without which the small oval picture, painted in subdued, mat colors and framed with twisted cord, would have little interest. (20)

What is most striking about Picasso's collage, and Wescher's reading of it, is not its radical incorporation of ready-made materials, but the formalism. After all, the chair caning that most distinguishes this work as a collage is not itself real caning, but only a manufactured reproduction.



depicted flatness-- that is, the facet-planes--had to be kept separate from *literal* flatness to permit a minimal illusion of three dimensional space to survive between the two" (69). Collage provided the answer, but it did so only to the extent that the pasted elements thematized the flatness of the canvas or paper itself. The function of the collage elements was completely formal, a technical solution to a technical problem.

- That the formalist view of Cubist collage is so widespread is in part due to comments made by Picasso and Braque themselves. For instance, in her *Life with Picasso*, Françoise Gilot records one of Picasso's frequently reiterated explanations of Cubist collage:

The purpose of *papier collé* was to give

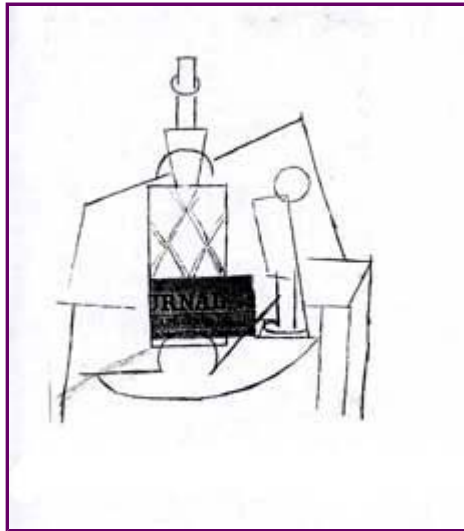
the idea that different textures can enter into composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. We tried to get rid of *trompe l'oeil* to find a *trompe-l'esprit*. We didn't any longer want to fool the eye; we wanted to fool the mind. The sheet of newspaper was never used to make a newspaper. It was used to become a bottle or something like that. It was never used literally but always as an element displaced from its habitual meaning into another meaning to produce a shock between the usual definition at the point of departure and its new definition at the point of arrival.

(77)

- In "The Invention of Collage," Perloff reproduces the essential details of this story, taking Picasso at his word. She gives little attention to the context of advertising, the rise of the mass media, and the relationship of such popular discourses to the work of collage for the Cubists or later practitioners. For Perloff, collage is essentially another technical innovation which allows the artist to call "into question the representability of the sign" (10). Why collage should emerge during the *avant-guerre* is far from clear. If for Greenberg collage is merely a self-referential development which thematizes painting itself, for Perloff collage is simply a formalist device of parataxis which completely transforms its material. As she puts it, "the cutting up and fragmenting of the newspapers forces us to see them as compositional rather than referential entities" (12). In both cases, the invention of collage is an affair of artists, and if it did exist as a response to a changing world there is no suggestion that the rise of advertising and the mass media were themselves a major factor in the appearance of collage on the eve of World War I. In part, this typical conclusion has allowed critics to situate the invention of collage as a *sui generis* revolutionary moment.

- Just as art historians occlude the role of the mass media, Picasso's disingenuous claims about the role of ready-made elements in Cubist collage should be taken with more than a grain of salt. For instance, there are numerous collages in which the title includes the word "newspaper," and the banner of the Paris *Journal* clearly plays the role of newspaper itself. In essence, the banner must be read as an element of the real rupturing the painter's presentation of an illusionistic imaginary. Consider Picasso's *Table with Bottle, Wineglass and Newspaper* from 1912 (see Figure 3). In this simple collage, it is clear that the fragment of the *Journal*'s banner is a part neither of the bottle nor the glass. And while the newspaper is represented through a series of broad, straight lines in the background, this fragment of the banner is the newspaper as well, presented not as an illusion but as the thing in itself. There is no shortage of examples of such literal use of ready-made elements. Whatever claims Picasso may want to

make about the role of ready-made elements, in this typical case it is clear that the real has entered the picture plane, and it is doing something more than metonymically becoming something else.



- The very presence of the newspaper in these early Cubist collages is itself a clue to the changes in the relationship between art and the emerging mass media, which Christine Poggi explores in her article "Mallarmé, Picasso, and the Newspaper as Commodity." According to Poggi, the "eruption of the newspaper fragments within the previously homogeneous and pure domain of painting must be interpreted as a critique of Symbolist ideals and, indeed, of Symbolist theories of representation" (180). For Poggi, the newspaper is the very antithesis of the "autonomous, pure realm of art" (180). Through the medium of the newspaper and advertisements, the space of painting is put in conversation with popular culture in the form of "political and social events, serialized romances, scientific discoveries, advertisements of all kinds, the want ads" (180). However, while Poggi and other critics are quick to investigate the ways Picasso uses this material to initiate a conversation about aesthetics, there is still little sense that this was also a conversation with and about popular culture. Indeed, critics have done little to investigate the ways in which the emerging mass media must surely have been part of what prompted the Cubist invention of collage itself.

- If, as I am arguing, the rise of the mass media and the discourse of advertising are major influences in the invention of collage, why should critics consistently avoid a thorough investigation of it? The answer is rooted in the ideologies of high art and avant-gardism which coordinate most discussions of modernism. As Renato Poggioli argues in his seminal book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, antagonism is an essential characteristic of almost all avant-garde movements. For Poggioli, antagonism is "certainly the most noticeable and showy avant-

garde posture" (30). Antagonism is essential, argues Poggioli, because

on the one hand, the anarchistic state of mind presupposes the individualistic revolt of the "unique' against society in the largest sense. On the other, it presupposes solidarity within a society in the restricted sense of that word--that is to say, solidarity within the community of rebels and libertarians. (30)

- Though many critics have questioned to what extent the historical avant-garde offered any sort of efficacious or legitimate forms of resistance to dominant cultural norms, few will debate that the rhetorical pose of antagonism--understood as critique of norms and the creation of revolutionary alternatives--has in fact been a defining element of the avant-garde in almost all critical appraisals. Insofar as collage is seen as the most characteristic avant-garde technique, it has been associated with just such resistance. In the introduction to his *Faces of Modernity: Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, Matei Calinescu describes the oppositional posture associated with all the movements of modernism: "What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty" (3). Calinescu captures the oppositional values of modernity, and his description is telling insofar as it all but outlines an aesthetic based on the principles of collage. Not only is collage the most innovative form of modernism, it is also an aesthetic defined by its use of ephemeral materials presented *tel quel* within both visual and literary works--in short, an art defined by the transitory and the immanent.
- Critics far more invested in the fine art traditions of high modernism tend to focus on the relationship of radical modernism to fine art traditions rather than social norms and practices broadly understood. Yet, even for such formalist critics the idea of antagonism remains a central tenet of their understanding of the modernist movement. For instance, Clement Greenberg characterizes the invention of collage as a critical moment which turns the means of representation against their own illusions, thus forcing the audience to rethink the very notion of painting itself. Formalist critics tend to limit their investigations to the relation of collage to the hermetic discourse of the fine arts, articulating even collage as a technique hostile to artistic traditions, popular culture, and the advertisers of the mass media. Both socially oriented avant-garde theorists and the more narrow scope of fine art formalists find their synthesis in the work of Peter Bürger. Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* also tells the orthodox story of the invention of collage, which he

subsumes under the broader category of montage: "montage first emerges in connection with cubism, that movement in modern painting which most consciously destroyed the representational system that had prevailed since the Renaissance" (73). Thus BÃ¼rger, like other theorists of the avant-garde, situates collage in the familiar position of oppositional technique. However, like other formalists, BÃ¼rger sees collage as an affair of the fine arts, designed to simply shock traditionalists, and, according to BÃ¼rger, "nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock, it is a unique experience. As a result of repetition, it changes fundamentally" (81). Thus collage, though initially antithetical to both traditional means of representation and popular culture, is finally a dead-end: "the recipient's attention no longer turns to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of construction" (81). For BÃ¼rger, collage fails in just the same ways that he feels the entire avant-garde failed, deteriorating into something much too close to a reactionary "commodity aesthetics" (54). Of course BÃ¼rger is writing against the more utopian claims that animate the work of earlier theorists of the avant-garde, especially that of Poggioli and Calinescu. The problem for BÃ¼rger is not that the avant-garde did little more than adopt the collage means that already dominated consumer aesthetics of advertising, but that the avant-garde's critique of art was co-opted into advertising. As I hope to show below, BÃ¼rger and others have missed the crucial fact that advertising preceded and informed the avant-garde invention of collage.

- For formalist critics and more politically committed theorists of the avant-garde alike, collage is always opposed to whatever it is that the critic considers the dominant mode: collage is a critique of traditional modes of pictorial illusion, collage deconstructs the very concept of the sign itself, and collage is always a liberation. In part, it is this temptation that makes collage so important to theorists of the avant-garde. After all, any avant-garde worthy of the name must present itself in a posture that is oppositional to popular culture. Just as the formalists want to protect Picasso's invention of collage for a revolution in painting by occluding the role of the mass media itself, the theorists of the avant-garde want to guarantee the oppositional posture of collage by separating it from the instrumental means and ends of the rising mass media. To redraw the genealogy of collage, identifying it first and foremost as a technique of the advertising industry and its attendant mass media is to put more traditional ideas about both advertising and the avant-garde into question. It is indeed a troubling move given the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture coupled with a more general theoretical tendency to equate formally difficult art with progressive politics. The theory of mass media developed in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno suggests that the culture industry is incapable of producing anything but works in which "the whole and the parts are alike; there is no antithesis and no

connection. Their prearranged harmony is a mockery of what had to be striven against in the great bourgeois works of art" (126).

This evaluation of the culture industry is all but universal in critical theory, for a formally complex text which provides the space for active reading, or which demands an engaged reading, would seem to be antithetical to the purposes of advertising. For example, consider Roland Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts. For Barthes, the texts of advertisements and most popular culture fall into the category of the readerly, those texts which can only be consumed. In contrast, and here Barthes certainly has in mind the more formally complex texts of modernism and the avant-garde, the writerly text is that which forces the reader into the position of author, producer, and, by extension, politically engaged and progressive subject. With few exceptions, the above represents the pervasive attitude of criticism and theoretical models toward the text of the advertisement.

- To locate the invention of collage solely in the work of Picasso and Braque is to miss the ways in which it was implicated in the complex and ambivalent relations between serious art and the rise of mass media. The fundamental moves of collage techniques, cutting and pasting ready-made materials, chance juxtaposition, and paratactic relationships, were in the air of the *avant-guerre*. It was in the techniques of advertising, with their reliance on the ready-made and radically abstract forms, that the materials and basic elements of collage first emerged. The first true mass medium of industrialism was the newspaper.

[1]

- With the rise of the newspaper and other forms of mass media, and especially its saturation by advertising, formally transgressive techniques that had been developing for over two hundred years become ubiquitous in public spaces and discourses. In *Advertising Fictions*, Jennifer Wicke exhaustively traces the tremendous changes wrought by the development of industrial capitalism and mass media: "the sudden profusion of ads and their creation of social narrative in a newly discontinuous way naturally reshaped the reception of narrativity as a whole" (120). Coextensive with the rise of newspapers, consumerism becomes a new way of reading and representing the world, a method that is based on discontinuity and rupture at a number of levels. Newspapers themselves represent an assemblage of fragments. As for advertisements, Wicke explains that, in the interest of concision and power, "advertising succeeded because it pried loose other languages from their referents, and set them in juxtaposition, creating a new representational system" (120). For Wicke, the narrative world of early advertising is thus coordinated by the same kinds of moves that animate the parietic essence of collage. As advertisers abandoned any respect for notions of aesthetic wholeness and work with the incorporation of fragmented images, names,

typography, and hype, they moved beyond the rules governing fine art painting and literature. This formulation is extraordinarily suggestive, for not only does the advertisement work through the violation of aesthetic wholeness and the valorization of the fragment and the image, but there also seems to be something of this process in the very machines and techniques of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Hand in hand with capital, advertising disseminates the radical fragmentation that would define collage throughout the emerging mass media. Certainly, the use of collage in advertising is one of the key moments of a vast and alienating reification. The inflated claims of advertising mobilize the strategies of collage to disguise a product's lack of use value and, by associating it with

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- Advertising and collage both have long histories; they surely encompass the entire nineteenth century. For instance, both private scrapbooks and the carnivalesque chromolithographic advertising posters demonstrate the ways in which private individuals and public businesses transgressed the tightly regulated ideologies and techniques that governed fine art and literature well before the rise of the modernists. While advertising and collage have many antecedents, I would like to demonstrate the ways in which advertising and newspapers were developing disjunctive, paratactic, and progressive modes of representation in the years just before the fine art invention of collage. My purpose is not to claim that these particular images are themselves some pure and more authentic origin of collage, but rather that the context of the avant-garde invention and use of these techniques should be understood in the context of these commercial and popular developments. Too often developments in advertising emphasize the work of fine art painters such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Gustave Mucha, and others who created some of the colorful advertising posters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This emphasis supports the idea that advertising and mass media simply co-opted the developments of artists. However, I hope to show that the anonymous illustrators, copywriters, and graphic designers also contributed significantly to the revolutions in representation that would make collage the definitive technique of the twentieth century.
- By the 1880s, the process of creating text and illustrations for advertisements could make use of assembly line processes. Newspaper ads, handbills, and posters were created, at least in part, with ready-made elements. In fact, type foundries in Europe and America created not only typefaces, borders, and other decorative elements, but also detailed illustrations of every imaginable object. As Irving Zucker notes, the catalogs of French type foundries "represent a pictorial social history of the affluent French society at the turn of the century" (3) (see Figure 4).



- Johanna Drucker was one of the first critics to challenge formalist and avant-gardist accounts of the invention of collage and other modernist techniques. In *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*, she identifies the importance of advertising to avant-garde sensibilities. According to Drucker, the incorporation of innovative typography into both literary and visual works of the avant-garde was, in large part, made possible by the discourse of advertising, which was revolutionizing the possibilities of representation:

But the most important context for the typographic experimentation, the realm in which these printed artifacts gain their specificity, is in their relation to mainstream publications, including advertising graphics. The graphic arts witnessed the development of typographic forms to accommodate the burgeoning needs of the advertising industry. In tandem with the increased production of consumer goods resulting from industrial capitalism, the advertising industry provoked production of an unprecedented variety of typographic means. These had been fully exploited by composers stretching to invent ways of catching the attention of the reading public, and the forms of graphic design which would become hallmark elements of avant-garde typography were already fully in place in advertising and commercial work by the end of the nineteenth century. (3)

Drucker goes on to offer a comprehensive series of examples of commercial typography which anticipates, and indeed makes possible, the innovative typography usually attributed to the avant-garde work of the Cubists, Futurists, and Dadaists. Indeed, she identifies in commercial typography the initial impulses that would later remake the very look of modernism in all its forms. Just as typography was being revolutionized by advertising, so advertising contributed to a new approach to images and their relationship to traditional, illusionistic

painting. Drucker's analysis is supported by Arthur Cohen in his article "The Typographic Revolution." According to Cohen, developments of innovative and paratactic typography such as Marinetti's "Words in Freedom" is made possible against a horizon of "the placard, the sandwich man, the poster, the sign, the advertisement, the leaflet, the broadside, prospectus, prier d'inserer, ticket, handbill." As Cohen has it, "typographic novelty began in the marketplace" (76).

- The most ambitious and rigorous investigation of the relationships among Cubism, other emerging modernisms, and the mass media is *Art et Publicité 1890-1990*, an exhibition presented by Le Centre Georges Pompidou in 1990. Focusing on the relationship between Cubism and advertising, Pierre Daix argues that "the increasingly marked intrusion of advertising in the visual field of city dwellers [. . .] created a reflection in painting" (136). The overwhelming presence of advertising images and the rise of posters are thus, for Daix, a major influence on the modernist rethinking of both the formal constraints of painting, and the relationship between fine art and commercial culture. Taking the cue from the abstract and conceptual images of advertising, artists began to see that "the space of painting was no longer a corollary of illusion but an autonomous field" (137). In a fascinating observation, which Daix himself does little to develop, he notes that advertising's technical developments were part of "the reorganization of graphic space indispensable for the diffusion of commercial messages" (136). In short, the rise of advertising changed the formal constraints of picture making, introducing radical elements of abstraction and fragmentation. Take for instance a series of ads which appeared in the Paris newspaper *Le Journal* on December 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1900 (see Figure 5). The ad itself is for a serialized novel by Daniel Lesueur entitled *L'Honneur d'une Femme*. Mimicking the serialization of the novel, the complete ad appears as a series of installments over the course of several days. However, what is striking is that in the first ad, fully two thirds of the picture remains as empty space, the askew slogan in the lower right merely assuring us that the rest will eventually appear. The ad presents itself to us as an autonomous, abstract space that might contain anything. The necessity of the advertisement to sell the novel results in a strikingly innovative use of space and images.



- Perhaps just as striking is the tension between the content of the ad, or more properly its product, and the ad itself. Where the novel is an utterly traditional work of art, the advertisement which sells it could not be more modern. In short, the progressive and fragmentary technique of the advertisement is in the service of the traditional. Even the most casual observers of *fin-de-si cle* and early twentieth-century newspapers and illustrated magazines cannot help but notice this tension. While the advertised novel will dutifully follow the conventions of mimeticism established over the previous two hundred years, the ad itself dispenses with concerns for verisimilitude. Other examples of these techniques and tendencies are not difficult to find.
- Consider *Le Figaro Illustr *, a deluxe, folio-sized illustrated magazine. The content itself consists of photographs, lavish engravings, and lithographs in both black and white and color. Throughout, the featured pictures are often reproductions of old masterworks, or they are newer

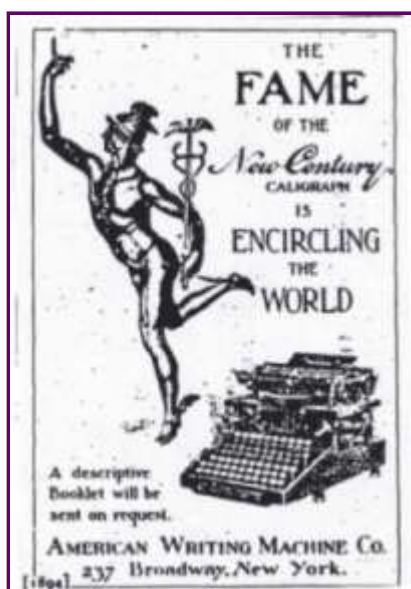
paintings that follow conventional modes of representation which do not significantly differ from those developed in the Renaissance. The presentation of these lavish features is marked by a thoroughly bourgeois devotion to the ideals of fine art in tasteful arrangements. However, the back pages are filled with ads that abandon any and all of these conventions, frequently using impossible perspectives, abstractions, and what can only be described as cut-and-paste techniques. For instance, take an advertisement for the Charron automobile from 1910 (see Figure 6).



- This process of cutting and pasting is further emphasized in another ad in *Le Figaro Illustré* for High-Life Tailor (see Figure 8).



- The technique of bringing together disparate images and texts into an abstract field is a staple of advertising that predates the avant-garde significantly. Consider the American Writing Machine Company's 1894 advertisement (see Figure 9).



- The sense of parataxis, the feeling and logic of collage, is further underscored in the presentation of multiple ads on a single page. In both the newspapers and illustrated magazines of the period, most advertisements were kept together in discrete sections. Thus ads for the most disparate products, created with vastly different techniques, occupy adjacent space with no regard for their obvious differences. Simply the fact that they are ads seems to provide a plane of

equivalence. Consider a typical page from the advertising section of *Le Figaro Illustré* (see Figure 10).



Every discovery made by printers has hitherto been absorbed in the most elementary fashion by the newspaper, and can be summed up in the word: Press. the result has been simply a plain sheet of paper upon which a flow of words is printed in the most unrefined manner. The immediacy of this system (which preceded the production of books) has undeniable advantages for the writer; with its endless line of posters and proof sheets it makes for improvisation. We have, in other words, a "daily paper." But who, then, can make the gradual discovery of the meaning of this format, or even of a sort of popular fairyland charm about it? [. . .] The newspaper with its full sheet on display makes improper use of that is it makes good packing paper. (??)

Mallarmé opposes the random, simultaneous play of surfaces that define the newspaper to the mysterious depths of the book, which he calls "that divine and intricate organism" (28).

- The radical differences between traditional fine-art painting and advertising, or between the careful and ordered layout of the book and the radical columns of the

newspaper, suggest that many of the most celebrated techniques of the avant-garde were already a part of the growing mass media, emergent elements that were present to some degree for some two hundred years. It should come as no surprise that the newspaper is the primary material of almost every twentieth-century invention of collage. For instance, consider its importance to Tristan Tzara. Tzara was fascinated with newspapers, and angered André Breton by reading from one as a provocation at an early *Littérature* Friday when he first came to Paris. Tzara was also profoundly conscious of the role of newspapers in creating realities, and he employed clipping services the world over to send him every mention of Dada in any paper. Just as innovative typography and paratactic juxtaposition provided the Cubists and the Futurists with collage materials, Tzara all but inaugurated the practice of literary collage with his famous newspaper recipe. In his "Manifesto on Feeble and Bitter Love," Tzara offers the following instructions to the would-be Dadaist:

To make a dadaist poem
Take a newspaper.
Take a pair of scissors.
Choose an article as long as you are
planning to make your poem.
Cut out the article.
Then cut out each of the words that
make up this article and put them in
a bag.
Shake it gently.
Then take out the scraps one after
another in the order in which they
left the bag.
Copy conscientiously.
The poem will be like you. And here
you are a writer, infinitely original
and endowed with a sensibility that
is charming beyond the understanding
of the vulgar. (92)

The implications of Tzara's collage poems are explained by
Rudolf Kuenzli:

By literally cutting the grid of semantic connections Tzara liberates the words and forms with them an arbitrary collage in which the signifying aspect of the sign is stressed. The function of these liberated signs seems to be a metasemiotic one: to point out that the daily historiography of newspapers, their reproduction of the state of the world consists of

arbitrary cultural signs which can only produce illusions. (59)

Kuenzli emphasizes the critical function of Tzara's uses of collage as a technique to deconstruct the truth claims of journalism. From Kuenzli's perspective, Tzara is cutting through the ideology of journalism as a reflection of the true state of the world. This is certainly the critical target of

Tzara's recipe, but to articulate it as such does not acknowledge that Tzara's operation is taking advantage of the form of the paper itself. The newspaper is already a paratactic, random assemblage of elements. Cutting up the newspaper simply brings this formal aspect of it into extreme relief, in essence mobilizing the form against the content. Tzara's recipe is thus less a radical departure from the form of mass media than a tactic which takes advantage of it. Rather than cutting up a monolithic form, Tzara's collage tactic reminds us that a newspaper is a fragmented and intertextual work from the beginning. The heroic story of the avant-garde suggests that the mass media co-opts the innovations of the outsider artist, but careful attention to these forms suggests a more complicated dialectic in which avant-garde artists like Tzara recognize potentials emerging in these forms and emphasize them in new, extreme, or unexpected modes.

William S. Burroughs: The Subversive Ad Man

- William S. Burroughs is arguably the most innovative and influential collage artist of the postwar period. Though Burroughs is best known for his literary collages, throughout the 1960s he developed collage techniques in a variety of media, including film, audiotape, and less well-known visual assemblages composed of found mass-media elements including newspapers, advertisements, photographs, and other fragments of media culture. Throughout this period, Burroughs believed that collage techniques held incredible powers, which he described in both scientific and supernatural terms. He believed that collage techniques held tactical abilities to diagnose and disrupt the ideological functions of the mass media, as well as supernatural potentials for communicating with the dead. In *The Third Mind* he writes, "cut the word lines and see how they fall. Shakespeare Rimbaud live in their words. Cut the word lines and you will hear their voices. Cut-ups often come through as code messages with special meaning for the cutter. Table tapping? Perhaps" (32). Indeed, Burroughs became so convinced of the powers of cut-up techniques that he would slice and rearrange letters from his friends and associates, close reading the results to

ascertain just who they might be working for or what they really meant.[2] Asked if he believed that cut-ups could uncover subliminal meanings, Burroughs replied that "you'll find this when you cut-up political speeches. Here, quite often, you'll find that some of the real meanings will emerge. And you'll also find that the politician usually means the exact opposite of what he's saying" (qtd. in Lotringer 262). In *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs recommends the use of collage techniques to effect material resistance to government powers by starting riots, disrupting official ideologies, and creating *ex nihilo* a variety of events, from the assassination of leaders to revolutions in consciousness: "so stir in news stories, TV plays, stock market quotations, adverts and put the altered mutter line out on the streets" (8). Burroughs's emphasis on collage as a form of political resistance aligns him with the projects of this historical avant-garde. However, where these more militantly organized movements had an interest in drawing clearer rhetorical lines between their work and the popular media, Burroughs was consistently and unflinchingly frank about his complicated relationship to mass media.

- Burroughs's interest in collage was inspired by his collaboration with the artist Brion Gysin. Gysin, primarily a painter, had been experimenting with the use of calligraphy as the basis for a new style of painting that emphasized the materiality of language. In 1959, while living in Paris with Burroughs at the Beat Hotel, Gysin rediscovered the collage techniques of the historical avant-garde. On a September afternoon, Gysin was alone in his room working on his drawings:

While cutting a mount for a drawing in room #15, I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley blade and thought of what I had said to Burroughs some six months earlier about the necessity for turning painters' techniques directly into writing. I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts that later appeared as "First Cut-Ups" in "Minutes to Go." At the time I thought them hilariously funny and hysterically meaningful. I laughed so hard my neighbors thought I'd flipped. I hope you may discover this unusual pleasure for yourselves--this short lived but unique intoxication. Cut up this page you are reading and see what happens. See what I say as well as hear it. (Burroughs and Gysin

44)

Gysin's account, frequently retold by everyone from Allen Ginsberg to Genesis P-Orridge, has become a kind of myth about the origins of postmodernism itself. Once again, it is the newspaper, this most ubiquitous form of mass media, that provides the initial example and inspiration for a fundamental avant-garde technique. Like Picasso, Tzara, and Breton, Gysin had found in the material of newspapers a powerful means to reinvent public discourses, transform and critique ideology, and ultimately to transform reality. However, the cut-ups produced by these methods depended in no small part on the very same chance techniques that were at work structurally in the layout of any newspaper, illustrated magazine, or advertisement. Rather than inventing something entirely new, Gysin was more precisely actualizing potentials in the medium that were already there. Burroughs himself makes this point as he demonstrates one way to produce a cut-up literary collage:

Now for example, if I wanted to make a cut-up of this (*picking up a copy of The Nation*), there are many ways I could do it. I could read cross-column. I could say: "Today's men's nerves surround us. Each technological extension gone outside is electrical involves as act of collective environment. The human nervous system itself can be reprogrammed with all its private and social values because it is content. He programs logically as readily as any radio net is swallowed by the new environment. The sensory order." You find that it often makes quite as much sense as the original [. . .] . Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That's a cut-up. (Burroughs and Gysin

4)

Burroughs makes explicit the random structure of newspaper pages that so vexed Mallarmé. However, Burroughs was a good deal more sanguine about the role and possibilities of mass media than many other artists and critics both before and after him.

- Like other intellectuals of the early 1960s, Burroughs had a complex attitude toward the media environment that Guy Debord would describe as the spectacle. Indeed, Debord and Burroughs shared a similar analysis of the media, as well as a belief in the power of collage to transform consciousness. However, unlike Debord and most Marxist intellectuals, Burroughs credits the media as a progressive force favorably transforming everyday life, and throughout the 1960s and 1970s he frequently made comments about the liberatory possibilities of mass media: "the media are really accessible to everyone. People talk about establishment media, but the establishment itself would like to suppress the media altogether" (qtd. in Lotringer 262). In 1972 Burroughs went so far as to credit the social transformations of the 1960s to technologies such as television: "a real revolution would have to involve a total change in consciousness, using television and other media that have been responsible for most of the evolution in the last ten years" (qtd. in Lotringer 133). For Burroughs, "establishment" power meant the rigid and repressive forces of inherited wealth, religion, and unchecked governmental power, and he believed that in comparison commercial mass media held a tremendous possibility for resisting such forces. He attributes the key social changes of the 1960s to sitting in front of televisions rather than to sit-ins. In this, Burroughs is most typically postmodern in his insistence that the social transformations are more a matter of media than muscle. In a 1970 interview, he forcefully articulates his position:

A great deal of revolutionary tactics I see now are really 19th century tactics. People think in terms of small arms and barricades, in terms of bombing police stations and post offices like the IRA of 1916. What I'm taking about in *The Job*, and in this treatise [*The Electronic Revolution*] is bringing the revolution into the 20th century which includes, above all, the use of mass media. That's where the real battle will be fought. (qtd. in Lotringer 150)

Burroughs would maintain that even mainstream media had an important role in progressive social transformations throughout his life. In 1983, Burroughs could confidently proclaim the success of the media:

The past 40 years has seen a worldwide revolution without

precedent owing to the mass media which has cursed and blessed us with immediate worldwide communication. Everything that happens anywhere now happens everywhere on the TV screen. I am old enough to remember when the idea that Gays, Hispanics, and Blacks had any rights at all was simply absurd. A Black was a nigger, a Hispanic was a spic and a Gay was a fucking queer. And that was that. Tremendous progress has been made in leading ordinary people to confront these issues which now crop up in soap operas. Gay and junky are household words. Believe me, they were not household words 40 years ago. (qtd. in Lotringer 588)

Burroughs's critique of repression, and especially his attacks against the establishment in the form of big business (i.e. Coca-Cola, etc. in *Nova Express*) coexist with a strange attraction to the darker side of advertising. One of Burroughs's short-lived jobs after graduating from college was as an ad copywriter, and he frequently mentioned Ivy Lee, his maternal uncle, who worked as a public relations agent for both the Rockefellers and, briefly, for Adolf Hitler. It is not difficult to find examples of Burroughs commenting on the beauty of advertisements, and in one surprising example, imagining himself in the role of literary ad man. Speaking about J. Paul Getty's rather dull autobiography, Burroughs suggests that he might have been hired to do a better job for the tycoon, and this prompts him to imagine rather accurately the future of art and advertising:

Well, yes, I wouldn't mind doing that sort of job myself. I'd like to take somebody like Getty and try to find an image for him that would be of some interest. If Getty wants to build an image, why doesn't he hire a first-class writer to write his story? For that matter, advertising has a long way to go. I'd like to see a story by Norman Mailer or John O'Hara which just makes some mention of a product, say Southern Comfort. I can see the O'Hara story. It would be about someone who went into a bar and asked for Southern Comfort; they didn't have it, and he gets in to a long stupid argument with the bartender. It shouldn't be obtrusive; the story must be interesting in

itself so that people read this just as they read any story in *Playboy*, and *Southern Comfort* would be guaranteed that people will look at that advertisement for a certain number of minutes. You see what I mean? Now, there are many other ideas; you could have serialized comic strips, serial stories. Well, all we have to do is have James Bond smoking a certain brand of cigarettes. ("Art of Fiction" 39)

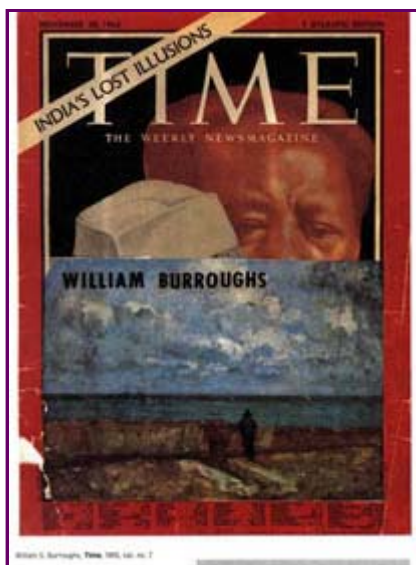
Burroughs's sympathy for advertising is not generally mentioned in critical accounts of his work. However, he was given to exaggerated statements about it. In the same interview, he goes on to say

I see no reason why the artistic world can't absolutely merge with Madison Avenue. Pop art is a move in that direction. Why can't we have advertisements with beautiful words and beautiful images? Already some of the very beautiful color photography appears in whisky ads, I notice. Science will also discover for us how association blocks actually form. ("Art of Fiction" 29)

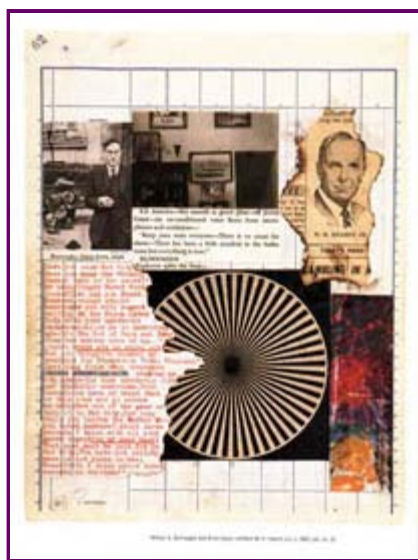
- It is no coincidence that Burroughs should be thinking about the relationship between advertisements and the total immediacy of thought through simultaneous associations. After all, the ideal advertisement is apprehended and understood immediately, its words and images creating an overwhelming desire for its product. For Burroughs, narrative itself, with its dependence on verbal units such as sentences, forcing the reader to plod through individual words, traps people in routine patterns of thought. To escape this aspect of language would mean moving beyond words. As he explains it, "a special use of words and pictures can conduce silence. The scrapbooks and time travel are exercises to expand consciousness, to teach me to think in association blocks rather than word" ("Art of Fiction" 22). In a series of largely unpublished scrapbooks, Burroughs constructed thousands of collages which he used to think through simultaneous associations. Sometimes commenting directly on his writing, sometimes reworking themes from his books or providing images for them, and sometimes existing as purely independent works, these visual collages provided Burroughs a new means of thinking, but one that is often more reminiscent of newspapers, illustrated magazines, and

their ubiquitous advertisements than of the Egyptian hieroglyphics he often invoked to explain the idea of associational blocks.

- Much of Burroughs's visual art remains to be published, but *Ports of Entry: William Burroughs and the Visual Arts* provides beautiful reproductions of some of the most suggestive collages Burroughs created. Quickly glancing through the reproductions, one is immediately struck by the fact that Burroughs constantly made use of media forms, parodying the layouts of newspapers and illustrated magazines, even going so far as to make treated copies of *Time* (see Figure 11) as well as many pages of his fictional *Coldspring News* (see Figure 12), whose slogan he invented as a parody of *The New York Times*, "All the news that fits we print."



- In addition to his own writing and personal photographs, Burroughs based most of these collages on ready-made materials from advertisements, and often created collages inspired by advertisements. Many of these collages are critical interventions into the public discourse of the time, operating in the same critical modes in which collage has been used since the earliest days of Dada photomontage. Like a Heartfield montage, a Burroughs collage cuts and parodies the mass media, continuing visually the critique of power and ideology developed in his cut-up trilogy (see Figure 13). Clearly, "Mr. Anshelinger, Hurst, Ford, Rockefeller, and you Board members" is a powerful indictment of these tycoons, associating their names with apocalyptic disaster (68). Burroughs is presented as a witness of the damage that these powerful establishment figures have perpetrated, as he stands in a personal photograph before a derelict. The edges of this collage are jagged, and some singed, suggesting that they have been recovered from some violent disaster, such as the sinking of an ocean liner, the other major image of the collage. There are a significant number of these collages in both the scrapbooks and *The Third Mind*, taking on interests from oil companies (the Esso logo making frequent appearances) to parodies of the sensational appeals of tabloids. In one collage, disaster headlines containing the number 23 cover an entire page (see Figure 14) (69).





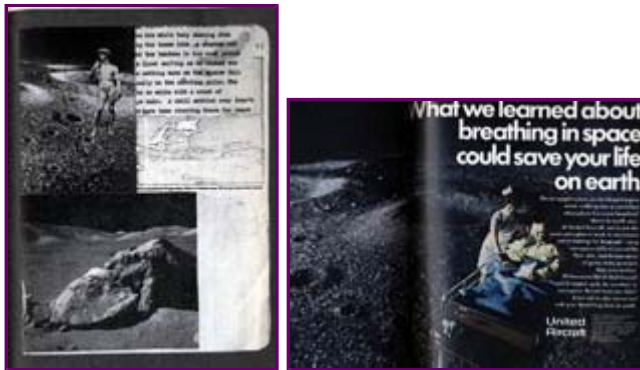
- In many of his collage creations, Burroughs seems to be doing all he can to take advantage of the fragmented, chance-ridden, and immediate forms of mass media. Consider the following untitled collage on which he collaborated with Gysin in 1965 (see Figure 15). Indeed, rather than a critique of mass media, this collage invokes its power. The collage is laid out in the form of a newspaper's front page, or perhaps that of a regular feature in an illustrated magazine, entitled "Españ+a Sucesos."



The Nova Express. Burroughs includes a photograph of himself in the lower corner, preparing proper English tea. There is no absolutely clear or legible relationship between the elements of this collage. In *The Electronic Revolution*, Burroughs argues that the mass media can make events happen, and in his scrapbooks Burroughs would often try to coordinate fragments of his own writing with chance events. In some instances, Burroughs believed that his own writing was responsible for these events in the same way that the media functioned (Morgan 323). Perhaps Burroughs believed that in this case the four deaths from the headlines were again evidence of the power of his

writing. Just as newspapers and advertisements worked through the assemblage of fragmented words and images, this collage operates by bringing together a heterogeneous selection of materials into paratactic relationships. For Burroughs, creating a collage like this as an associational block provided the possibilities of new powers and insights.

- Burroughs's concept of associational blocks, and the collages that he created based on this concept, are deeply indebted to the procedures of advertising. In another scrapbook collage (see Figure 16), Burroughs brings together two moonscapes, a fragment of prose, and an image of the Mary Celeste, the nineteenth-century ghost ship made famous by Arthur Conan Doyle. The upper panel in Burroughs's collage has pasted onto it Michelangelo's *David*, while the bottom shows an astronaut confronting a gigantic rock.



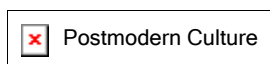
- Burroughs's collage (see Figure 16) is hardly more legible than the advertisement, and more significantly it clearly operates using the same principles. Instead of the image of the nurse and patient, Burroughs has placed Michelangelo's statue on the moonscape. This placement is mirrored below by the image of an astronaut confronting a large moon rock. Does this image suggest that, just as the artist saw in the stone an ideal human form, so too the astronaut might see similar ideal possibilities in the rock he confronts? Does the image suggest that humanity has attained an artistic ideal simply by arriving on the moon? Such readings are all possible but must be tempered by the other image in the collage, that of the Marie Celeste. The prose cut-ups in Burroughs's collage all deal with what seems to be a sea disaster. In the fragments he presents we see gulls circling, as well as images of blood and starvation. Yet how should we

make sense of this in relation to the moonscape? Is this to suggest that a voyage in space is a similarly doomed endeavor, or that either the moon or the earth itself should be seen as an abandoned wreck? Burroughs's choice of these images and words suggests a deep caution about the moon shot and the space age. Yet is there substantially more caution or criticism in Burroughs's images than in those of the commercial advertisement? Both present deeply ambiguous images through virtually identical means. While the advertisement is arguably more legible, leaving less room for critical play, the same is certainly true of Burroughs's more explicitly critical collages as well, where its targets, from tycoons to tabloids, are clear. Similarly, there are many deeply ambiguous advertising images which are quite difficult to read. While advertising and the avant-garde hardly share the same rhetorical aims, the former has had a large influence on the development of collage, providing not only a great deal of the raw material, but more often than not pioneering the techniques of which the latter takes advantage. In large part, this is because advertising itself is animated by a critical dialectic between the instrumental management of desire and carnivalesque excess.

- What Burroughs's collages show so clearly is that avant-garde practice and advertising are not so far apart, and neither comes with any guarantees. Burroughs's belief that it was necessary to "rub out the word" and find a new way of thinking bears more than a passing resemblance to Jackson Lears's analysis of advertising in *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. According to Lears, America's Puritan roots instilled in the culture a strong distrust of images, which depend upon the immediate play of surfaces, and promoted a preference for the depths of words. Throughout the nineteenth century, advertising grew in sophistication, reinforcing the need for the educated classes to make distinctions between the superficial play of advertising images and the deeper truths of serious literature and art. As Lears argues, "the puritanical tendency to prefer depths to surfaces survived in secular idioms and shaped Americans' perception of a novel situation: the emergence of art in the market place, the development of graven images as mass-produced commodities" (323). This fundamental split would remain throughout the twentieth century,

animating the modernist hostility toward popular culture, the critical desire to distinguish the avant-garde from the mass media, and culminating in a situation where "dualism has inhibited the free play of ideas by implying the existence of only two alternatives: to relax our critical sensibilities in a warm bath of floating signifiers, embracing the emancipatory potential of commodity civilization; or to base our critique in an attitude of renunciation, devaluing the here and now of immediate sensuous experience" (263). Lears chooses Joseph Cornell as the exemplary artist to bridge this divide, for Cornell's surreal boxes were more often than not financed by his work as a freelance commercial artist at *Vogue* and other popular magazines, and depended largely upon the images and object of consumer culture. Yet he might just as well have chosen Burroughs to make much the same point. If the avant-garde uses collage techniques as a way to cut the control lines of larger ideological forces, advertising and the mass media have themselves had more complex relationships to those same forces than most critics typically acknowledge. Both formalist accounts of collage techniques and postmodern analysis of media spectacles must be rethought with a clearer eye toward the relationship between avant-garde collage and mass media and advertising techniques and images.

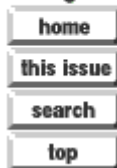
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Notes

1. However, even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, newspapers were still distributed irregularly (usually weekly rather than daily) and were still too expensive to have a mass audience. There were a number of technological reasons for this. Prior to the introduction of the steam-driven cylinder press, the printing time for even a modest newspaper prevented a daily circulation. In addition, even with the introduction of the steam press, the time-consuming art of cold typesetting remained both costly and slow, usually keeping papers to eight pages or less. Though job printing and newspapers continued to become more important throughout the nineteenth century, it was the invention of the linotype machine in the early 1880s that made the newspaper a mass medium. According to Meggs, the introduction of the linotype machine fundamentally altered the place of the newspaper: "the three-cent price of an 1880s newspaper, which was too steep for the average citizen, plunged to one or two pennies, while the number of pages multiplied and circulation soared" (199).

2. An account of Burroughs's paranoia and the role of cut-ups can be found in Miles.

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Talk Back