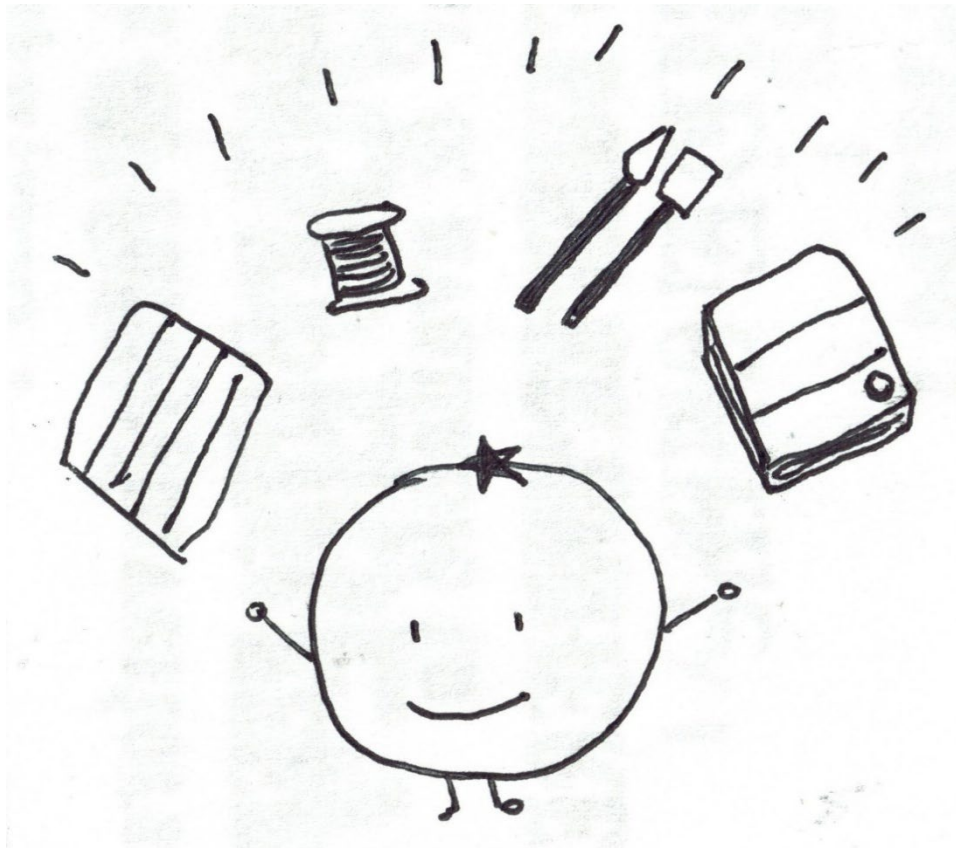


Comparative Literature as Collage: A Zine



Made by Cythera15

This zine was created as part of Academizines, a special issue of *Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship*, forthcoming in January 2026.

This zine argues (what an ugly word!) that making collages parallels a project in comparative literature, in that both create a collision of two or more worlds.

1. A Disappearing Discipline

Comparative literature is a disappearing discipline. Mostly because of budget cuts due to the so-called unmarketability of literary studies. But also because it's turned into an acceptable methodology that has infiltrated other national literature or area studies departments. This was ultimately the fate of comparative literature: its success is contingent upon its eventual disappearance.

But it is upsetting for me when comparative literature is explained as “English literature but more.” *It's basically English, except we get to study more material, whether that is text in foreign languages or various art forms like film, painting, songs, etc.* I think there's something missing in this description, namely, a serious reflection on the methodology of comparative literature, i.e., the art of it. If this methodology was simply “but more,” then yes, the discipline deserves to disappear, to move into English literature or whatever department it can expand. But I see that this addendum—this “pasting” on top—should fundamentally change the “national literature” by revealing the internal contradictions and structures that are taken for granted. In other words, (back to the ugly argument) there needs to be a collision of two (or more) worlds that change both objects, rather than a mere addendum or proliferation of existing material. My hope is that through this zine, I can be more confident in referring myself as a “comparatist” rather than a Germanist, and that more people will wonder about the rupture that “but more” of comparative literature can create.

Despite all this grand talk, I feel very inadequate to talk about this subject but also competent at the same time. I wrote my “argument” so proudly, but the more I learn about collage artists, I realize that the world of collaging is big, and my own practice lacks finesse. Who am I to write about collage and comparative literature? Who am I to write about anything, really? Yet, at the same time, I really want to say something about the topic, and about the two things that gave me artistic and academic home, where I feel comfortable playing with new ideas and thoughts. But zine as a medium helps me work through these discomforts. I get to write in my true voice, I get to write what I think and feel at the moment, in the most contingent way. I’m simply illustrating my own thought process in conceptualizing how I differentiate and approach a comparative project, rather than an end-all statement what comparative literature is. (How could it be, when the search for its identity seems to be fundamental to comparative literature’s existence?)

2. “Punctum” or the Cut

Roland Barthes uses the term “punctum” in *Camera Lucida* (1980) to refer to something that moves him that is not the representative subject of the photograph. It’s not the “point” of the image and yet it prickles the viewer, evoking an unusual emotional response.

Often, it is the “punctum” that I am driven to cut out when making collages. It is not the centerpiece, or what the images meant to represent. Deciding which element to extract and focus on from the image relies entirely on the individual (me).

I’m drawn to certain images as well as to certain texts. This is where both collage and a comparative project begin. The attraction itself is not rational but affective. I answer this call by first isolating them (i.e. cutting them out or doing a close reading) and then making sense of them later (often by putting them in conversation with different objects.) In doing so, I first satisfy feelings but also establish some form of internal logic—at least if I want to share my work with others.

Because I often work with advertisements and magazines (images that tend to be more commercial than informative), the removal of images from their designated function feels all the more apparent. They were meant to entice consumption but when they are taken out of this context, they transform into something else. (I want to say “art,” but I am scared.) Seeing this change makes me feel so hopeful—even from trash and ruins of capitalism art can emerge. While this probably is obvious to artists, it was a soft revelation for me as an academic. We talk

about thinking with ruins (Anna Tsing) and “staying with the trouble” (Donna Haraway). Collaging with these discardable materials makes me feel the hope that knowledge production can *actually* continue (not only theoretically, within the walls of the institution) from what remains after the destruction of neoliberal capitalism, of attack on higher education, of climate crisis, and so on & so forth.

I started making this work-in-progress collage, thinking that it was going to be an example of a “bad collage,” where it’s simply an accumulation of similar attractive women who were selling us fashion, without any collision of worlds. But as I was putting them together, I realized yet again how process of assembling transforms the material. I think I could be humorous and strategic in the covering of certain bodies that makes the result feel like more than a collection of “hot women,” but something else altogether.



Work in Progress



Die Welt des Papiers (The World of Paper) ,2025.
Mini collages on playing cards

3. Thinking with Max Ernst

Max Ernst, the Dadaist, answers three questions about collage.

What is collage? “It is something like the alchemy of the visual image. THE MIRACLE OF THE TOTAL TRANSFIGURATION OF BEINGS AND OBJECTS WITH OR WITHOUT MODIFICATION OF THEIR PHYSICAL OR ANATOMICAL ASPECT.”

What is the mechanism of collage? “The mechanism of collage, it seems to me, is revealed by this very simple example. The complete transmutation, followed by pure act, as that of love, will make itself known naturally *every time* the conditions are rendered favorably by the given facts: the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane¹ which apparently does not suit them.”

They seem contradictory but actually merely in a state of conflict. Here, I return to Jasbir Puar’s “I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess” (2012), where she writes “Yet they need not be oppositional but rather, I argue, frictional.” “They” refers in her essay to intersectionality and assemblage. But here, I am lifting it away from context to think about any two images that are brought together in collage/comparatist project. They need not be oppositional but rather, I argue, frictional.”

¹ Plane—Is this where theory belongs? There was a time when literary theory was the domain of comparative literature. But theory has to be the way of cutting and pasting—because they do the work of revealing *otherwise* what was already there.

What is the most noble conquest of collage? “The irrational. The magisterial eruption of the irrational in all domains of art, of poetry, of science, in the private life of individuals, in the public life of people.”

Collage and comparative projects both exist to challenge the borders drawn by the rational, to overcome thought process that is one-way.

A final quote from Ernst:

“If it is the plumes that make the plumage, it is not the glue that makes the gluing (*ce n’est pas la colle qui fait le collage*).”²

² I am normally against the dominance of French literature in comparative literature—especially its unapologetic lack of translation. Not all of us speak French, and if we were supposed to (some people seem to believe this is “academic rigor”), then we should call our department “French but more.” But here, I think it makes sense to include the similarities between “colle” and “collage.”



Pause, 2025.
Experimenting with Geometrical Cut

4. Notes on the Four Essential Characteristics of Collage

In the text “Twelve Fragments to Take Off (in 40,000 Signs),” collage collective Groupe µ identifies four essential characteristics of collage (while also admitting the impossibility of defining collage). They are:

- (1) Cutting out
- (2) Pre-performed messages
- (3) Assemblage
- (4) Internal Ruptures

I find their categorization useful to think with.

Cutting Out

With the cutting, we are back to “punctum.” Cutting is so important. Finding a quote that speaks to you is also the first step to a literary studies project. What remains with you after reading a novel? What bothers you about it? We cut it out and then we begin.

The importance of “cutting” also highlights the significance of the process-as-art in collage. Quoting Heather Colby from a fantastic zine “Shortcut: A Collage Zine” (2024) “the process [...] of making a collage feels just as crucial as the end piece.”

Pre-performed Messages

Using ready-made images was what was appealing about collage; it is a modern phenomenon, only possible in the age of mechanical reproduction.³

Comparative literature also, in some ways, works with pre-defined objects. We work with materials that are created in the bounds of other disciplines as generalists learning from the in-depth research that others have done in respective academic fields. I don't know how I could've started my own dissertation on robots without referring to works done in history, linguistics, German studies, East Asian studies, American studies, media studies, robotics....

This of course speaks to the need for different disciplines to co-exist. A comparatist can become someone that cuts, only when there are enough pre-performed messages to cut from.

³ I am sometimes tired of quoting Walter Benjamin. It seems like he has said everything about everything already, or at least we (especially in German studies) believe he did. That said, I've come to appreciate him more when I started thinking about him as a zinester. After all, that's what he did, comment on every interesting thing that he could think of in a unique voice. Now maybe I am guilty of turning him into whatever I see fit.

Assemblage

Assemblage refers to the process of organization. It reminds me of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage.⁴ What better way to understand the process of organizing and arranging than to actually do it through the process of collage? They write, "we will call an assemblage every constellation of singularities and traits deducted from the flow – selected, organized, stratified – in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable invention" (*A Thousand Plateaus*). This process makes so much more sense when you engage in the actual process of collage making, to experience the becoming itself, the simultaneity of coming together and moving apart at the same time, and of fluid and contingent.

Rearranging also shows the hidden potential of the original object. It enacts new potential for the object that was never known to itself.

⁴ "Assemblage" is another word that irritates me because academics have constantly commented on the impossibility of understanding it in English, as opposed to *agencement*. Why can't we just accept that when a language crosses borders through translation, it will have new connotations that can still be generative?



Internal Ruptures

Perhaps the most important element. The necessity of a rupture suggests that a collage or a comparatist project is not a mere “more than” that adds and affirms existing structures, but rather one that erupts. To paraphrase Ben Morea: *Don't glue yourself to the sidewalk but destroy it!* (So I read in *The Anarchist Review of Books* some time ago.) The same mantra works when it comes to both collage and a comparative project. Don't let the original logic of the text/image frame your way of thinking. Let it explode from within.

Give Up, 2025

Paper collage

Inspired by an inspirational speech because I hate them



Red, 2025

Digital collage, made from my smartphone
(Yes, you can "cut" and "paste" digitally! Who cares?)



Hands, 2025
Paper collage, digitally altered

5. Contingent and Material Encounters

Both collage and comparative project rely on contingent material encounters. What magazines/texts/images do you have access to?

For example, for this project I used:

- UNIQLO LifeWear magazine that I picked up from my trip to Seattle because I *happened* to vacation there.
- Images from the magazine *BOMB* that I *happened* to pick up for \$1 at English department book sale.
- Dartmouth alumni magazine because I *happened* to have graduated from there.
- UMass Magazine because I *happened* to be there for a conference.
- *Elle* and *InStyle* that my friend *happened* to gift me for my collage projects.
- Paper bag from Panera because my family *happened* to order delivery from there.

So on and so forth. These all reflect coincidental circumstances of my life that inevitably make their way into my art.

Thinking about comparative literature as collage makes this materiality immediate. In writing a comparatist project, everyone wants to know why you selected the materials. They ask for any form of acceptable, institutionalized standards. *Are they by the same author? From the same time period? On the same subject? Responding to the same historical event?* Once you pass this test, then it's about whether the example you chose is paradigmatic. *Is this the best possible version to talk about this matter?* Here's

the thing though: we need to start writing from whatever path of life we come from, and that means writing with images and texts that we have access to. I am a Germanist that writes about contemporary German novels that I can get my hands on in North America because that is where I live, and my current socioeconomic condition doesn't allow me to regularly travel to German-speaking countries for research purposes. *But if you were serious about your work, you would spend time learning Sütterlin, applying to DAAD grant to study in Germany, or arrange an interview with the writers...* Well, maybe I enjoy being unrigorous and letting that fantasy of academic rigor collapse from within!

Recognizing the contingency of collage makes this comparatist feel less apologetic. It's a limitation if we believe we are searching for "universal truth." But it's affirming when we think of it as a partial encounter, where how we came about the texts and what we do with them matter as much as the texts themselves. A writer and collagist Kara McKeever suggests, "Don't be precious. There is truly no shortage of materials and there will always be interesting ways that scraps of paper can fit together." I think her advice works for an academic project, too. My knowledge and my life as they are now should not be the last comment on the subject matter. There will be more novels, films, and art works that we come across and can write about. There will always be interesting ways that different cuts from these works fit together nicely.



Share with Friends, 2025
Created with junk mail from another century

This zine was an attempt to arrange a combination of heterogenous parts into a provisional, contingent whole. Perhaps all my projects are.



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