The terms *montage* and *collage* have become synonymous with the radical experimentation that altered the status and physiognomy of art in early twentieth-century Europe. They encompass a wide array of practices premised on quoting, combining, and juxtaposing materials that straddle the bounds of old and new media—from literature and stage drama to painting, sculpture, photography, film, and radio. Common to these practices is the exuberant transgression of the canons of normative aesthetics, coupled with an often belligerent contempt for the institutions of academic art and an optimistic willingness to draw inspiration from the world of consumer culture, advertisement, and the mass media. *Montage*, the term that emerged in German as the overarching category encompassing diverse procedures of dissemblage and recomposition, marks the confluence of two distinct strands of experimentation. One was inspired by the turn to collage of cubism and the intermingling of verbal and visual expression within Italian futurism, as influenced by the experiments of artists like Apollinaire; this strand also includes the linguistic practice of the Expressionist *Wortkunst* circle around August Stramm and precursors to concrete poetry like Christian Morgenstern. After the mid-1920s crucial impulses came from the reception of Soviet film and photography, especially given the centrality ascribed to montage in the film poetics of pioneering experimental directors like Vertov, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, and Eisenstein. While in a German context the initial inspiration for experimentation with visual and verbal collage may well have come from cubism’s “pasted-paper revolution,” it is significant that terms like *Klebebilder* and *geklebte Bilder* (pasted images) were soon supplanted by the generic term *montage*. To the radical artists associated with Dada and Constructivism, montage appeared preferable to the clumsy translations of the French *collage* because it directly evoked the world of machines, industrial
production, and mass consumption, thus emphasizing the constructed quality of artifacts and their reliance on found materials and ready-made parts.\textsuperscript{1}

The iconoclasm and antiestablishment streak of interwar montage practices have long been associated with an all-out assault on traditional notions of representation and narrative. In undermining the integrity of the artistic object, montage challenges the idealist premises that governed aesthetic discourse in the nineteenth century, first and foremost the requirement that the artwork display a character of unity and organicity and thus allow for a hermeneutic mode of reception based on the congruence between the whole and its component parts. Montage hinges on yanking elements out of their trusted environments and inserting them into new contexts. It thus deploys them as signs that acquire new valences depending on the relations they enter with surrounding objects, while never completely suppressing their link to the contexts from which they were taken. The ensuing semantic interferences produce an undecidability that dramatizes the split nature of the sign and arbitrary mechanism of signification, calling into question the possibility of transparent meaning, stable reference, and trustworthy representation. Especially in the early practices of futurism and Dada, montage works ranging from visual collages to opto-phonetic compositions and sound poems demonstratively flouted the established conventions that framed narrative in verbal and visual media—the need for hierarchically ordering space and time, construing a stable point of view and motivated sequence of events, and establishing clear extratextual references that would aid in disambiguating meaning.\textsuperscript{2} Yet by the mid-1920s the Dadaist assault on representation gave way to more structured compositions bent on manipulating perception by imitating forms in a variety of media and genres. These compositions aimed to elicit modes of interaction whose peculiar expressivity was at time associated with an unorthodox notion of narrative. At stake was a type of performance that no longer hinged on trading meanings extracted from stories through acts of interpretation but rather directly reshuffled the ties that existed among objects. In this chapter I will trace the general contours of this link between expression and narrative, describing the anthropological underpinnings of the imitative behavior it presupposes, the mechanism of analogy and parody that propels it in a montage aesthetics, and its distinctive phenomenological materialism.

- Berlin Dada makes for a useful point of departure in tracing the development of the nexus between expression and narrative that fueled the aesthetics of montage in the 1920s. Montage artifacts figured prominently at the
First International Dada Fair, the Dadaists’ sardonic take on the contemporary art exhibition that opened in Berlin in June 1920. Wieland Herzfelde, the brother of John Heartfield and a prominent member of Berlin’s Club Dada, penned the introduction to the exhibition’s catalog, which is tasked with laying out Dada’s response to contemporary art—including its reasons for worrying about art in the first place—without betraying the Dadaists’ signature belligerence and self-undermining gesture. Dadaism emerges from Herzfelde’s portrayal as an iconoclastic dilettantism that ditches conventional aesthetic standards and privileges mechanical media like photography. Especially the cut-and-paste art this medium makes possible poses a deliberate challenge to the contemporary art establishment:

The Dadaists say: When in the past colossal quantities of time, love, and effort were directed toward the painting of a body, a flower, a hat, a heavy shadow, and so forth, now we need merely to take scissors and cut out all that we require from paintings and photographic representations of these things; when something on a smaller scale is involved, we do not need representations at all but take instead the objects themselves, for example, pocketknives, ashtrays, books, etc., all things that, in the museums of old art, have been painted very beautifully indeed, but have been, nonetheless, merely painted. . . . Any product that is manufactured uninfluenced and unencumbered by public authorities and concepts of value is in and of itself Dadaistic, as long as the means of presentation are anti-illusionistic and proceed from the requirement to further the disfiguration of the contemporary world, which already finds itself in a state of disintegration, of metamorphosis. . . . The Dadaists acknowledge as their sole program the obligation to make what is happening here and now—temporally as well as spatially—the content of their pictures.³

The passage well captures the benefits Herzfelde and his fellow Dadaists ascribed to montage. Its incorporation of unsublimated objects—“pocketknives, ashtrays, books”—appears as an authentic and efficient way for engaging experience, one that saves the artist the pesky labor of representation. Using scissors to mercilessly cut around reality’s fabric is also a fitting response to the brutality and ethical bankruptcy of the newly established German republic, as telescoped by the commentaries placed at the end of the introduction and devoted to composite artifacts exhibited at the fair, which paint a bleak portrayal of an immediate postwar period marked by the dehumanizing treatment of war veterans, the moral and ideological decay of the
Hannah Höch, Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany) (1919). Photomontage and collage on paper.

ruling elite, and the cravenness of the middle class. This is a landscape that screams to be cut open by Dada’s kitchen knife, to paraphrase the title of Hannah Höch’s 1920 photomontage, a barbed cross section of life in Weimar Germany that was also on display at the fair, and montage’s systematic defiling of putatively intact experience does just that. Indeed, its stroke of genius lies in rendering, at a basic structural level, the semblance of a world in shambles while avoiding depicting it in an illusionistic or naturalistic fashion. Montage thus turns the splintering and degradation of contemporary experience into an inexorable aesthetic principle, one that refuses to sublimate reality through embellishing representation and rather embraces it for what it is.

Herzfelde’s text also comments on the radical streak of montage strategies, which are not just another style but rather promise to subvert representation altogether. In pondering what becomes of art’s content if one bypasses representation and merely incorporates found objects, Herzfelde seems content to chuck all demands that art express a content at all. “The Dadaists acknowledge as their sole program the obligation to make what is happening here and now . . . the content of their pictures,” he insists. That is to say, for the Dadaists experience in its unmediated form is its own content. This grants them license to bypass the mediating function of representation and allow the incorporated fragments to simply be, that is, to function in an indexical mode in order “to further the disfiguration of the contemporary world, which already finds itself in a state of disintegration, of metamorphosis.” Thus for Herzfelde montage displays an awareness of the world as a semiotic tapestry in which objects double-task as signs. Its activist streak allows for unhinging them from the orders of the real that compel them to signify in specific ways and to exhibit them in their immediate materiality. This may well throw a wrench into reality’s chain of signification and cause its fabric to unravel, hastening a process of decomposition that is presumably well under way.

In sum, montage appears in the text as a strategy that enables the Dadaists to construe allegorical compositions that denounce the status quo and simultaneously stage their own unraveling to undermine the residual representational structure in which they are embedded. This involves exploiting the demonstrative force of the montaged fragments, which, as Theodor W. Adorno recognized, insistently point outside the artifact to the context from which they were yanked, only to fold back onto themselves. Such indexical pull enables the objects to resist appropriation for a mimetic representational regime that would reduce them to signs split between an ideational signified and a material signifier. It is a strategy that both thematizes and undermines the allegorical signification of montage artifacts, signaling that their meaning is makeshift and transient. Allegorical compositions are premised on es-
establishing a conceptual link between material object and allegorical message that relates the object’s physical appearance purposefully to its meaning. This tie is not intrinsically given but rather rests on social and cultural convention—of the type, for example, that turns a scale in the hands of a blindfolded woman into an emblem of justice in the iconographic tradition of the West. Montage exploits the fact that allegorical meaning and material signifier can come unglued in the absence of obvious guidelines for attributing meaning. In other words, images can easily become unintelligible if the right clues for semantic disambiguation are withheld, for instance, if recipients are unable to connect the dots in linking the signifier “woman with scale” with the signified “justice.”

Let me return, by way of example, to the portrayal of upper-class heedlessness in The Multi-Millionaire, the 1923 photomontage by Hannah Höch discussed in the introduction. Here the depiction of the two financiers who walk atop fairgrounds with guns sticking out of their head and metal tools in their hands intimates associations with industrialist exploitation. This reading is supported by the clever double coding the image conjures for the metal tools, which evoke the world of industrial labor while also looking like improper weapons. One could, however, speculate further about the meaning of these rods. The disparate connections they entertain with other fragments do not exclude the possibility that a third meaning may be in play—for instance, that the rods may be stand-ins for walking sticks, an attribute of manly elegance one could well expect the men to have. This would potentially suggest a different reading of the men’s function in the composition, one that complicates or even undercuts an understanding of the image as mounting a critique of capitalist violence. In the end the rods function like material relics that allow for multiple semantic connections without endorsing any of them, thus threatening the composition with unraveling in a heap of incongruous fragments.

It is easy to see how the theoretical reception of the 1970s and 1980s seized on pronouncements like Herzfelde’s to make sense of the jarring works of Dada, often finding in montage the discursive pivot of a destructive aesthetics that subverts conventional models of representation and narrative by parodying them in eviscerating fashion. Especially the semiotically inflected readings of poststructuralism emphasized the attack on signification mounted by montage strategies, which were credited with mercilessly debunking the mechanisms of substitution that conceal the absence at the heart of language. As incisive as these critical readings may be in undercutting the logocentric bias of Western philosophical thought, their understanding of the sign as a stand-in for an absent referent tends to underplay
the issue of how, specifically, the material qualities of the montage inserts impact communication. This blind spot is already present in Herzfelde’s discourse on montage, which pursues the dream of disentangling objects from the signifying web that ensnares them in order to polemically display them in their obstinate materiality. It is a vision that implicitly pits materiality against language, understanding the former as a phantasmatic condition of matter suspended in a state of grace prior to inscription.

An examination of montage practices going back to cubism shows, however, that they rarely lend themselves to upholding a neat dichotomy that opposes language to materiality. Instead, they often explicitly query the status of objects as complex signifying entities whose material qualities are inextricably bound up with linguistic dynamics. A case in point is the manufacturer’s inscription on the tire in Höch’s *Multi-Millionaire*, which challenges the viewer to solve the riddle posed by its presence in the composition by displaying fragments of its manufacturer’s name. The writing assigns the tire a specific status as a commodity, and in so doing reminds the viewer that the linguistic marking is an intrinsic component of the object as commodity. The larger point here is that the inscription should be seen as part and parcel of the thing’s thingness, and not simply as an effect of signifying strategies that superficially overlay the object. Conversely, in dramatizing how objects are made to function as signs, the montage procedure also calls attention to the material status of language as reliant on the physical properties of specific media and modes of inscription. One can conclude that montage practices may well dramatize the dynamics of language and communication. They do so, however, while conjuring a concept of materiality that, following Katherine Hayles, does not stand in antithesis to signification but is rather the result of a complex interplay between an object’s (or medium’s) physical qualities and available signifying modes.

Herzfelde’s strategy to turn the physicality of found objects into a weapon against representation did not succeed in bringing down the academic art business that was a premier target of Dadaist vituperation. It did, however, chip away at the hegemony of a late-idealistic aesthetics that treated artworks as self-enclosed totalities endowed with a quasi-religious meaning. In so doing it also shone a new light on the disjuncture between allegorical message and artifact’s physicality that was the hallmark of a montage aesthetics. In the course of the 1920s this disjunction was explored in practices that abandoned the exuberant chaos of Dadaist montage for more structured, and often openly figurative, compositions, which opened the way for the
ubiquitous deployment of photography in advertisement and the print media. Enabled by the introduction of cost-effective halftone printing and rotogravure in the early decades of the twentieth century, the use of photographs in both the high-brow and the leisure press was a decisive factor in the phenomenal growth of journalistic media in the immediate postwar period. Hanno Hardt has described the many roles photography was called to play in a culture that placed a new premium on the value of documentary information and factual reporting, promising to deliver unbiased depictions of actual events that transcended cultural and linguistic barriers on account of the universality and immediacy of visual communication, while at the same time entering relations of both complementarity and competition with the printed word.\(^9\) Especially photo-reportage lent itself to unfolding complex stories made up of photographic sequences supplemented by textual inserts. In the mainstream press these photo stories often propagated a self-congratulatory view of German culture that affirmed middle-class values while remaining largely unconcerned with the actual conditions of life in the Weimar Republic. By contrast the deployment of photography and reportage by the militant Left displayed a bitingly critical edge aimed at dismantling the fraudulent semblance of a wholesome world propagated by the bourgeois press and documenting the corruption of the political elites and the exploitation of the working class.\(^{10}\) Especially the photomontages that John Heartfield produced for the leftist *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ; Workers’ Illustrated Magazine)* elevated this dismantling to an unremitting formal principle by packing their scathing critique into carefully rephotographed compositions that were designed to be taken in as straight photographs at first sight. In so doing Heartfield’s montages drove home the point that the contemporary world had all the integrity and harmony of a doctored photograph.

Significantly, it was the aesthetic experimentation of left-leaning enterprises like the *AIZ* and the Malik Verlag, the publishing house founded by Wieland Herzfelde in 1916, that nudged the change-averse mainstream press toward innovative uses of photography and graphic design during the 1920s.\(^{11}\) This generally involved mixing different media—photography, verbal inserts, and abstract design elements—in narrative compositions that relinquished illusionism while incorporating some measure of figuration and even realistic representation.\(^{12}\) Sally Stein has observed that the more structured compositions found in advertisements and the illustrated press hinged on balancing incongruous demands. On the one hand, they sought to titillate the reader’s curiosity with the promise of surprising juxtapositions. On the other, they endeavored to contain the range of possible meanings so as to
steer reception toward specific accounts. At issue was the need for shaping the complex spatiotemporal processes of reading without undermining the valuable connotations of transgression and open-endedness associated with montage. These concerns often congealed around the tricky concept of “simultaneity,” which in this context does not simply denote a reader’s ability to take in a sprawling medley of verbal and visual information at once—a dream of omniscience that was given the lie by experiments in the physiology and psychology of perception, which detailed the eminently serial quality of verbal and visual information-processing. Rather, simultaneity was a rhetorical strategy of composition that promised to yield boundless semantic permutations by allowing for multiple and crisscrossing paths of reception. This strategy could both confound readers and place them in an omniscient position of control, all the while downplaying the fact that the elements of the composition were visually and semantically calibrated to direct attention in calculated ways. This kind of manipulation dispenses a specific type of pleasure that hinges on enjoying both the thrilling anarchy of anti-illusionism and the comfort of successful navigation.

Montage thus delivered artifacts that fused open-endedness and the satisfaction of meaning in a precarious balance tantalizingly threatened by the possibility that the tie between allegorical message and artifact’s physical appearance might unravel. Nowhere is this disjuncture more cunningly exploited than in John Heartfield’s AIZ photomontages, whose visibly fabricated illusionism both exemplified and mocked the return of naturalistic representation and visual narrative in contemporary advertisement and graphic design. A case in point is Heartfield’s famous “cabbage head” montage, which appeared in the June 1930 issue of the AIZ. The image features the bust-level portrait of a man in working-class clothes, slightly slouching in his seat, his head covered in sheets of newspaper that bear the titles of two prominent dailies, Vorwärts, the official organ of the Socialist Party, and Tempo, a left-liberal newspaper. Lines of pedestrian verse in the image’s bottom-right corner have the man declaring, in his own voice, his indoctrination by the mainstream press, which makes him blind to its complicity in the exploitation suffered by the working class in the Weimar Republic. This message is reinforced by the caption at the bottom of the image, which cautions that “those who read bourgeois newspapers becomes blind and deaf. Away with the stultifying bandages!” By lumping the Socialist newspaper with the bourgeois press, the image weighs into the ideological war raging within the German Left in the latter years of the republic, which pitted the antiparliamentarian and collectivist line of the Communist Party against the liberal reformism of Social Democracy. In warning against the stultifying ef-

(The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Copyright 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)
fect of the bourgeois press, the photomontage implicitly presents the radical leftist content of the *AIZ* as an eye-opening tool for the working class.

In self-identifying as a “Kohlkopf” (cabbage head) proud of his own “Blätter,” the man further highlights the pun that connects image and text. The German word *Blatt* means both leaf and a sheet of paper, and in this latter meaning also functions as metonymic stand-in for “newspaper.” The interplay of image and text thus suggests that the liberal press turns its readers into blind newspaper cabbage heads. Yet this portrait of a duped worker exceeds the visual pun of the cabbage head blinded by its own leaves. Much of the image’s impact lies in its manipulation of the conventions of the eye-level portrait, which demand that the depicted person’s eyes stare out of the picture so as to potentially lock in with the recipient’s gaze. In both conjuring and frustrating this expectation the image invokes an anthropomorphic naturalism that demands that the man’s depiction be taken literally, suggesting that the newspapers hampering the man’s vision function as an actual blindfold rather than as a metaphor for the immaterial veil of ideology. In this way the montage avoids portraying the rift within the Left as a clash between rivaling worldviews and instead presents it as a conflict grounding in material relations. The image’s literalizing strategy further involves stretching the newspaper title *Vorwärts* (“Forward”) across the head’s lower portion as a mouth of sorts that double-tasks as an injunction to move forward in what appears as a striking conflation of utterance and organ of speech. The injunction is countermanded by the leather straps in which the man is dressed. They seem to bind the man to an invisible spot behind his back, making movement unlikely.

Such punning and literalizing strategy, which is typical for the photomontages Heartfield produced for the *AIZ* from the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, harkens back to the Dadaist deployment of allegory in steering viewers’ reception and providing conceptual paths for deciphering the riddle posed by the composition. The image’s play with the conventions of portraiture and calibrated assemblage of visual and verbal material make it possible to overcome the first impression of an incongruous mélange of elements and ascribe meaning to the assembled fragments by prompting the viewer to choose from the multiple paradigmatic options available for each element so as to string them together in a meaningful syntagmatic sequence. This allegorical procedure was not new to the visual tradition of the West, though since the Renaissance it had been increasingly marginalized by the growing identification of realist representation with verisimilitude and illusionism, with whose effects it was seen as interfering. Neither is the thrill of allegorical compositions new, which hinges on the incongruous sense of empowerment
and frustration produced by the task of solving a complex riddle. What appears new is that montage compositions pointedly foregrounded the moment of incorporation; that is, the inserted materials were to be recognized as having been pasted. This entails that the moment of construction not only remains at some level perspicuous but is made to carry a proposition in itself.

This statement lies in the mesmerizing chattering of forms that propels the distinctive experimentation of Weimar-era montage, particularly as it became increasingly focused, in the mid-1920s, on the ways in which perception interacts with physical forms in shaping the contours of the material world. A case in point is the bewildering intermingling of objects and shapes that breathes a strange life into Heartfield’s composite image, casting the physiognomic attributes of each element into sharp relief and enacting a dynamic play of forms that is in excess of, though not necessarily in opposition to, other processes of signification. The montage straddles the line between metaphorical claim and literal statement, thus taking seriously the materiality of the objects that carry allegorical meaning—for instance, the newspaper as a blindfold that hampers the man’s vision. In the end the image will of course be read allegorically when placed in the context of its own textual inserts and other content in the _AIZ_, suggesting that the working class is being duped by the disingenuous reformism that Germany’s social democracy peddles in the pages of _Vorwärts_. Yet its vividness goes beyond the visual joke of the cabbage head, asking what it might be like for someone to have a bundle of paper where the head should be. As John Berger once noted, Heartfield uniquely excelled at this literal handling of objects, his images being most compelling when they present objects as things, and only secondarily as symbols, so that their thingness is never completely subsumed under the allegorical messages they carry.18 Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin’s characterization of allegory in his treatise on the German mourning play, one could say that in Heartfield’s literalizing photomontages the thingness of objects is never reduced to serving as the inert shell of allegorical content but rather shines forth with unsettling effects.19

- Photomontages like Heartfield’s thus raise the question of how contemporaries negotiated the physical allure of objects in composite artifacts, including photography, that functioned as the repository of a tantalizing instability that both promised openness and threatened to undo allegorical meaning. A sharp awareness of the literal force of photomontage is found in Franz Roh’s introduction to _Foto-Auge_ (Photo-Eye, 1929), one of two illustrated volumes that appeared in conjunction with the pathbreaking exhibi-
The Chatter of the Visible

tion Film und Foto held under the auspices of the Deutscher Werkbund in Stuttgart in 1929. A noted art historian and eloquent champion of the modern movement in art, Roh focused his essay on largely familiar debates on photography before offering a survey of contemporary photographic forms that devoted significant attention to photomontage, a medium with which he himself experimented. Writing barely nine years after Herzfelde’s introduction to the Dada Fair catalog, Roh observed that the formal destructive-ness and compositional anarchy of Futurist and Dadaist montage had gradually been displaced by streamlined compositions marked by “almost classical moderation and calm.” Roh paid explicit homage to recent work by the Malik Verlag, presenting it as part of a new trend that needed to be set off from previous experimentation with collage, most notably cubism. In casting his account in the language of Constructivism Roh argued that cubism had focused primarily on formal experimentation in its endeavor to represent objects by dissecting them into simple geometric forms. By contrast the cut and paste of contemporary photomontage was more akin to manipulating fragments torn from the objects themselves. In other words, while cubism’s geometrical abstractions were still operating within a representational logic, albeit an anti-illusionistic one, photomontage for Roh came closer to Herzfelde’s indexical understanding of montage artifacts. It entailed constructing new material units that Roh dubbed “graftings of reality.”

These experiential offshoots did not so much depict reality as modify it by their very existence. In this discourse the traditional logic of representation, which hinges on transposing a content into a linguistic or symbolic code, is replaced by a logic of recombination that emphasizes the medium’s physical ability to directly alter the orders of the real. Roh did not specify what this may mean in the concrete, and it may be tempting to dismiss the clumsy term Wirklich-keitspropfung as a conceptually fuzzy and argumentatively inconsequential metaphor. Yet earlier statements by him show that he took the material force of photomontage literally, querying the unorthodox narratives that were produced by such grafts of the real, which he linked to a depychologized understanding of expression that was rooted in the philosophical anthropology of the Weimar period.

The question of expression looms large in his early Nach-Expressionismus (Post-Expressionism, 1925), a remarkable investigation of the perplexing realist aesthetics that displaced the metaphysical pathos of Expressionism in the visual arts and that was subsumed under the label of Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, from the mid-1920s on. Roh manifestly struggled to find suitable terms of analysis for appraising the resurfacing interest in the “world of objects” (Gegenstandswelt) that drove the return of figuration and illu-
sionistic representation in the visual idioms of his day. Concerned that the contemporary focus on *Gegenständlichkeit*, or the object-ness of things, might be mistaken for the return of a dubiously affirmative realism, Roh insisted that the new figurative trends rather displayed a material world transfixed in a state of mesmerizing strangeness. Their fascination with “the world of objects” was not an affirmation of reality’s unyielding facticity and objective status, but rather provided a venue for rediscovering the awe-inspiring magic of the forms found in experience, understood as the trigger for a perception that did not simply record experience but rather shaped it in fundamental ways.23 Roh thus championed the new art for its ability to foreground the uncanny concreteness and alluring strangeness of the phenomenal world, as grounding in awareness that the very thingness of the real was inseparable from the event of perception. As a result, the new aesthetics of *Gegenständlichkeit* could no longer rely on a traditional notion of mimesis hinging on providing representations that enlisted the artist’s ingenuity and transformative intervention to animate an inarticulate world. In other words, the artist’s task was no longer to make a mute universe speak by lending the silence of things expressive power, but was rather about capturing, in the moment of perception, the giddiness of a world saturated with inherent expressivity.24

Photomontage, Roh believed, epitomized this new aesthetic sensibility by enjoining the exactness of photography in capturing the absolute expressive power of objects, while at the same time showcasing the dynamics of a technologically augmented perception. Its piecemeal aesthetics lent itself to emphasizing the nonorganic quality of its artifacts and thus foregrounded the constructive streak of perception, which fabricated objects in accordance with the forms of the phenomenal world rather than serving as a passive vehicle for their sensuous recognition. For Roh, photomontage’s ability to capture an experience saturated by the overwhelming expressivity of things made it into a unique conceptual pivot for rethinking the entire field of art, and in fact, of all human expression.25 Understanding the new aesthetics through the lens of montage helped to redefine the central category of *Ausdruck* (expression), a staple of Expressionism’s aesthetic discourse. *Ausdruck* in Roh’s study no longer stood for the outward expression of an artist’s inner vision but rather entailed an utterly externalized *Ausdrücken*, a stamping out of experience to be obtained through the interaction of perception and form. This in turn called for an imitative engagement with the objects of the phenomenal world that was not premised on reproducing their semblance, but rather aimed at a generative duplication of forms, a type of mimicry that could shape the ways in which the world was to be grasped through percep-
tion. Mimesis as mimicry thus configured itself as a powerful tool for manipulating perception in a dynamic that directly produced experience.

Roh’s rejection of an anthropocentric notion of mimesis and depsychologized understanding of the artistic process resonated with contemporary inquiries into the imitative triggers of animal and human behavior. His understanding of expression as marking the congruence between the sensory apparatus and the forms of the experiential world strikingly echoes the account of *Ausdruck* that formed the core of Helmuth Plessner’s philosophical anthropology from the early 1920s on. Plessner defined expression as a non-instrumental bodily routine that discloses the individual’s essential orientation toward his environment. As a feature that defines humans as embodied beings, *Ausdruck* was fundamentally indeterminate, a zone of psychophysiological indifference drained of specific emotional or cognitive directionality. As such it lent itself to investigating the vital role that interaction with an embodied world plays in the individual’s constitution. This was grounded for Plessner in the double-edged relation humans entertain to their bodies—both inhabiting them as the incarnated locus of the self and using them as another material tool for engaging their environment. In this split experience of incarnation, Plessner argued, the self should not be seen as a psychic or spiritual entity emanating from the body that houses it, but is rather an interpolation of body and environment, the product of a phenomenological “here” realized through the interaction between the individual and the embodied world. This interaction is itself based on a fundamental expectation of reciprocity that ties the individual to the world. As Plessner insisted, what constitutes the body as *Leib*, as the incarnated locus of the self, is the presence of an environment that both affects it and which it in turn affects.

Thus for Plessner *Ausdruck*, as a bodily routine that is cognitively and emotionally blank, marked a degree zero in the human interaction with the phenomenal world while at the same time foregrounding the expectation of reciprocation that made this very interaction possible. Franz Roh’s celebration of a world of objects drenched in intrinsic expressivity (Eigenausdruck) may be seen as voicing the awestruck awareness about this fundamental reciprocity—indeed, as marveling at the intuition of a self formed in the encounter between the body and the forms of the world, of which the body is itself one. If seen from this perspective, the principle of montage cherished by Roh dramatizes a fundamental relation to the world, including one’s own body, which grasps it as at once already formed (gestaltet) and open to further forming (Gestaltung). *Gestaltung* in this context entails an ex-pression, a pressing out or outwardly oriented action that does not so much involve a meaning—as the externalization of an inward content—as a making. *Aus-
druck, as a degree-zero mode of interaction with the world, acknowledges the mutual character of this making, which involves a self shaped by a world that it shapes in return. Transposed into the conceptual register of a phenomenological aesthetics, Ausdruck provides the foundation for a poietic process in which interaction with the forms of the experiential world produces other forms in an imitative process in which each new form is not an inferior copy of the one that triggered repetition, but is rather situated on the same phenomenological plane.

Mimesis in this respect becomes a principle of direct intervention into a world whose physiognomy can presumably be redrawn by means of a creative miming of forms. Within the discursive matrix of Constructivism from which Roh was drawing, this entailed “to think and produce forms elementally” so as to enact the principles of “simplicity, balance, self-evidence, highly refined economy” that sustained the equilibrium governing the relations among objects and living creatures in the experiential world, as Werner Gräff put it in an essay that appeared in the inaugural issue of G, the journal of art and design founded by Hans Richter in 1923. The Gestaltung or creative forming championed by Gräff was meant to reveal the underlying unity of a phenomenal world defaced by the chaos of proliferating life-spheres and ideological claims. Along these lines, in a programmatic text published the previous year László Moholy-Nagy had called for a new art predicated not on reproducing the semblance of the real but on “creating ever new, previously unknown relations” that would renew the equilibrium that sustains the experiential world while at the same time making it perspicuous. Moholy pleaded for enlisting the new mechanical technologies of film and photography in amplifying the enlivening congruence between the body and the world given to perception, and thus exploit to the fullest the biological potential of humans. This resonated closely with the Bauhaus’s agenda of revitalizing experience by radically remaking the objects that give everyday life its form, an agenda that Moholy helped further after his appointment as instructor of the Bauhaus’s pioneering “basic course.” It involved the return to an ancient notion of technē that refused to abide by the traditional divide separating the purposeless sphere of art from that of utilitarian, industrial production, thus encouraging artists to move freely between commercial and nonutilitarian spheres. Not surprisingly, then, many artists associated with Constructivism did not see a conflict between their endorsement of an art devoted to emancipating humanity by refashioning the material world and their pursuit of the very same principles in the exploitative world of commerce and industrial production. This apparent blind spot was further compounded by the open contempt some of them voiced for contemporary po-
itical ideologies and philosophical discourses that would have provided a salutary testing ground for the suspiciously abstract vision of a world marked by simplicity, clarity, and balance that frequently authorized their work.

This is a familiar criticism of Constructivism’s role in fostering dubious aspects of technological modernity, and it needs to be acknowledged. At the same time it is also important to recognize the insight afforded by the understanding of reality that authorized its practices. Indeed, the appeal and reach of a montage aesthetics is hard to grasp if one does not take seriously the phenomenological vision of experience as a relational web woven through the reciprocal interaction of bodies and objects. In this respect one should note that the interest in manipulating perception by altering the relations of the real was rarely motivated by a reductive behaviorism, that is, by a view of human conduct as deterministically shaped by a stimulus-response mechanism. In the discourse of Moholy and other artists associated with the Bauhaus, the technological enhancement of human perception served both utilitarian aims and was an end in itself, marking a heightening of being and enlargement of nonconceptual knowledge that were worth pursuing in their own right. In borrowing key terms from the conceptual arsenal of Constructivism Franz Roh also evoked its sense of wonder at the awe-inspiring blurring of nature and technology in a poietic activity that revived the Aristotelian vision of a world caught in a process of immanent self-actualization. Accordingly, montage for him denoted the ability to contribute to weaving the dynamic ties that hold experience together by cutting out and grafting its pieces through artifacts that did not represent the world but rather directly renewed it.

For Roh, as for many artists associated with Constructivism, the new art dramatized a world that was at once rational and full of marvel. He coined the term “magical realism” to capture its aesthetic outlook, and while acknowledging that this was a flawed and potentially misleading label, he also insisted that it came closest to describing a state of affairs for which there seemed to be no better designation. In particular, the term “magical” suggested itself for its ability to convey both the sense of awe elicited by the phenomenal world and the eerie power of the antiorganicist aesthetics epitomized by the montage principle, which promised to meddle with the world by altering its forms. Magic was to be understood literally as an active intervention into the world that operated by appropriating its physiognomy, that is, through acts of manipulative mimicry.

Walter Benjamin keenly described the resurgence of this submerged mi-
mimetic mode in the sensuous power of commodities and the proliferation of mimetic technologies like photography and film. At stake for him was a concept of imitation that stresses the moment of embodiment, and which Michael Taussig describes as a fundamental cognitive function that approaches the otherness encountered in the world through acts of sensuous assimilation. In replicating a person’s or an object’s physiognomy as embodied form, Taussig notes, one produces a copy that is not merely meant to convey a semblance, but is rather invested with the power of the original—an imitative procedure he dubs “sympathetic magic,” borrowing the phrase from James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. Its power of magic derives from the assumption of physical contact that lends force to imitative behavior, and that Taussig ascribes to the “unstoppable merging of the object of perception with the body of the perceiver and not just with the mind’s eye.” In other words, because perception always involves the incarnated body, the value of making concrete copies does not exhaust itself in their conceptual or representational content, but also resides in the physiological resonance with the object that is elicited by the process of imitation. Taussig is keen to emphasize the cognitive import that lies in engaging the experiential world through imitative acts that lift one out of oneself and into the otherness of the fabricated copy.

One can extrapolate that all inscription technologies, whether based on textual, visual, or aural media, are ultimately modalities of sympathetic magic according to Taussig’s Benjaminian framework, as they involve making copies that mobilize the body at a physiological level. While this power of mobilization was overlooked by a Western philosophical discourse constrained by its conceptual neglect of the material role of media in communication, Taussig points to Benjamin’s discussion of montage strategies in advertising as evidence of the forceful resurgence of this “primitive” understanding of mimesis within industrial modernity. At issue is the aphorism from *One-Way Street* (1928) in which Benjamin describes the visceral mimetic force of advertisement, its ability to touch its recipients and move them out of themselves in ways that potentially exceed the pull of the commodities it peddles. This mimetic impact was premised for Benjamin on the deployment of montage strategies that bypassed argumentative discourse and contemplative modes of reception and instead hit their recipients with rapid-fire juxtapositions, which hinged on collapsing the conventional distance separating the represented objects as well as the distance between object and recipient. In Taussig’s discussion of Benjamin’s gloss, montage epitomizes the sympathetic magic of inscription by explicitly enlisting and thematizing the physiological dimension of the mimetic.
Taussig’s discussion of mimesis as sympathetic magic finds important resonances in Sally Stein’s comparative analysis of the montage practices adopted by German and American commercial artists in the interwar period. Stein contrasts the open aversion American advertisers demonstrated to the more experimental forms of photomontage, especially in cases that visibly tampered with the human figure, with the practices of the German avant-garde, which involved conspicuously antinaturalistic compositions that were tolerant of violating the body’s integrity. For Stein this difference is to be traced back to the risk-adverse attitude of American advertising agencies, which feared alienating audiences that may interpret the nonnaturalistic representation of the human body as an actual violation. While one can debate whether American advertisers rightly gauged or underestimated their audience’s ability to deal with patently distorted representations of the body and the natural world, their anxiety evinces an at least implicit awareness of the mimetic “magic” of montage. That manipulating representations of the human figure could come across as a literal defilement underscores how producing “copies” that disarticulated and reassembled the elements of the real was potentially understood as a disconcerting rupture of intact experience. American commercial artists, Stein maintains, sought to defuse this sense of rupture by couching the disjunctive moment of montage within an overall naturalistic composition.37

In emphasizing the prevalence of an antinaturalistic montage aesthetics in Germany, Stein’s findings have implications that go beyond its underlying rejection of an aesthetics of verisimilitude or illusionism. At stake is the demise of the understanding of mimesis as imitatio that the modern period inherited from the Renaissance, and that hinged on capturing the likeness of things by means of transfiguring representations that had the power to shed light on experience, yet whose character as copies endowed them with a structural bad conscience, sealing their subordinate status vis-à-vis a reality to which they were by constitution inferior.38 By contrast, mimesis as duplication of forms erases the hierarchical relation between original and copy, its proliferating forms meddling directly with the orders of the real, collapsing distance and transgressing boundaries. Narrative in this context hinges on imitative behavior that affects perception by miming forms in a variety of media and genres rather than a paradigm for constructing stories that function as an analogon to experience.

This concept of mimesis is unsettling in different, and arguably more profound, ways than any notion of mimesis predicated on reproducing semblance as schöner Schein. In surveying the enthrallment with physiognomic boundary-crossing and the propensity for blurring media and modes of in-
scription in many montage works of this time, one obtains a strong sense of distortion and violation that forms the dark underbelly of the feeling of awe for which Roh celebrated the aesthetics of the New Objectivity. The mimetic impulse, as described by Taussig, may well make possible an encounter with the embodied world that yields a knowledge untainted by consciousness, yet “to get hold of something by means of its likeness,” that is, to engage in acts of sensuous assimilation to otherness comports a threat of depersonalization or even the possibility of an organism’s dispersion in space.39 This danger is made especially urgent by the proliferation of mechanically reproduced images in the media. While objects and their “reproductions” may well occupy different functional positions, their categorical difference is never secured ontologically and is always at risk of collapsing.

Put in the conceptual terms of Helmuth Plessner’s anthropology, assuming that the self is the by-product of an imitative interaction between body and environment also postulates a structural disjuncture between the self-awareness that is constitutive of selfhood and the body that enables this very awareness through its encounter with the world. In other words, the very interaction that allows for the self’s constitution harbors the potential for its unraveling, understood as the self’s decentering with respect to its sustaining body, which becomes one of countless objects and bodies littering experiential space.40 This threat of dissipation is often thematized in the physiognomic explorations of montage. It involves becoming unable to discern where the body stops and the surrounding world begins, or being unable to tell what belongs with what in a world of endlessly overlapping forms and bodies. In this regard montage lends itself to interrogating the unstable and constructed bounds of personhood, not as a psychological phenomenon but as consigned to the fragile equilibrium between the perceiving body and the world with which it interacts.41

The imitative performance that undergirds a montage aesthetics is at bottom a form of parody that emphasizes the material physiognomy of the mimed object. To once again take Höch’s *Multi-Millionaire* as an example, parody here concerns the relation between the photographic inserts and the objects they reproduce evocatively, both as individual fragments (the men’s half faces, the guns’ segments, the metal tools, etc.) and in their physiognomic permutations as component parts of the assembled image (the gun segments as the unsettling substitute for the back of one of the men’s heads). To assert that the gun fragments function as a parodic supplement to the man’s head requires, however, a more capacious concept of parody than the
one suggested by traditional practices aimed at casting ridicule on an object or a person by means of distorting imitation. In this respect it is helpful to recall Linda Hutcheon’s expanded understanding of the parodic as a “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”

Emphasizing repetition instead of belittling ridicule enables Hutcheon to highlight the cultural labor performed by parody’s mimicry, which lies in staging a dialectic of similarity and difference that subjects cultural and social codes to scrutiny. At bottom, this augmented notion of parody encompasses distancing practices bent on producing “copies” whose twist on the original engenders critical insight.

At a perceptual level, the interweaving of similarity and difference that ties the parodic object to its referent rests on the operations of analogy. Analogy, as defined by Barbara Stafford, revolves around “the proportion or similarity that exists between two or more apparently dissimilar things.” In marking a partial overlap of singular objects that does not require generalizations or universal categories, analogy rests on a “vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference.”

While acknowledging analogy’s role in conceptual and cognitive processes, Stafford especially emphasizes its embodied nature, which for her is tied primarily to vision and its ability to glean and exploit resemblance. As she argues, analogy’s foundation in the basic mechanisms of perception drives its ability to draw meaningful connections that may well be “seen,” but are not immediately expressible in conceptual, discursive terms. In dubbing analogy “the art of connecting,” Stafford insists that it be regarded as “a demonstrative or evidentiary practice” that does not entail observing and verbalizing relations of similarity found in experience so much as dynamically producing them in the event of perception. This involves, in the arts as in other domains, replicating these relations in a “participatory performance” that is bound to produce artifacts that demonstrate analogical ties by enacting them. It is significant, in this regard, that Stafford marshals various forms of montage art (collage, photo-montage, and assemblage) that all dramatize the process of “compelling disparate things to converge,” as illustration of the “inherent mimeticism” and active, processual nature of analogy.

If Stafford’s discussion of analogy and Hutcheon’s examination of parody are both premised on an imitative interaction with the experiential world that feeds off a productive tension between similarity and difference, their distinctive emphases also result in different assessments of this interplay. Stafford emphasizes the connecting moment of analogy, specifically its ability to weave together discordant particulars in acts of discernment that dramatize the intuitive processes at the heart of thinking and cognition. Hutcheon, by con-
trast, stresses the critical insights engendered by the moment of disunity that characterizes parody. In other words, if Stafford valorizes analogy for its ability to glean similarity in difference, Hutcheon’s parody inverts the terms of the relation by foregrounding the moment of difference in similarity. This does not mean that the two categories are at odds with each other, however, quite to the contrary. Parody is a specific deployment of analogy, a strategic mode of repetition that mobilizes the analogical ability to make connections in order to mine the insights produced by the moment of difference thematized by the very act of connecting. Underscoring the analogical operations of parody has several advantages. In the first place, it illuminates the physiognomic level at which parody operates, and that involves the dynamic interplay between perception and the forms of the experiential world. Second, it highlights the fact that parody, as a mode of imitative repetition, is about connecting as much as it is about separating; it produces contiguities at the same time as it distances. This dialectic of disjunction and conjunction aptly captures the multiple codings of montage artifacts, indeed, the multivalence of its acts of transcontextualization and frequent flip-flopping between critique and affirmation. Finally, this movement is not to be understood as a predictable oscillation between stable entities. Emphasizing that parody is based on the dynamic nature of analogy as a perceptual process allows for describing the parodic imitation of montage as a spiraling interaction between sensory apparatus, technologies and media, and the modes of representation and communication they sustain at a given historical moment.

Let me recapitulate, in closing, the main features of the narratives that are framed by the understanding of expression, mimesis, and parody I have sketched so far. To do so it will be helpful to draw on the diagnosis of a crisis of the novel that drove debates on narrative in the early decades of the twentieth century and contributed to setting the parameters for the scholarly discourse on the modernist novel in post–World War II Europe. In an essay from 1964 Hans Blumenberg posited that the novel’s difficulties in the modern period stemmed from a structural disjunction whose description also provided an account of the modern condition—a claim that captures the main premise of much discussion about the novel in the first half of the twentieth century. For Blumenberg the novel is the modern aesthetic form that uniquely bears witness to the dynamism of a world whose infinite potentiality is realized in time. Under this experience of open-ended temporality, reality is no longer pictured as a fundamental quality of experience that one could make manifest through appropriate sensuous forms, but is rather
viewed as an internally consistent syntax of elements, a text that infinitely constitutes itself by following rules that immanently define its coherence. According to Blumenberg, this new understanding of reality is inscribed in the task that defines the novel as a genre, and that consists of creating worlds whose relational structure and inner consistency possess what Blumenberg calls *Wirklichkeitswert* (value or quality of reality). Yet the novel’s material finitude, as determined by the fixity of print, is fundamentally at odds with the temporal dynamism that defines reality’s relational web. One can conclude that the novel’s difficulties stem from the demand that it live up to an impossible task, namely, that it provide a correlate to the dynamism of time through a form that is temporally fixed. Accordingly, modernist masterpieces like Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* (1930–32) dramatize a reality whose dynamism resists fixation through their unruly and inconclusive structure.

Blumenberg’s account of the novel’s quandary may at first recall Hegel’s verdict on the structural shortcomings of aesthetic forms, whose sensuous finitude constitutively falls short of the demand of presenting a nonsensuous Idea unfolding in time. Its attempt to link specific understandings of art to evolving notions of reality further evokes the philosophy of aesthetic forms developed by Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* (1914–15), which hinges on establishing a congruence between seminal stages in the self-understanding of consciousness and corresponding moments in the development of aesthetic forms. Yet Blumenberg departs from the metaphysical teleology of history endorsed by Hegel and Lukács in ways that provide an illuminating foil for discussing the mode of narrative ascribed to montage. If for Lukács the temporal open-endedness of the modern condition registered by the novel makes it impossible to construct a stable hermeneutic horizon that would lend itself to making sense of experience, for Blumenberg the question that haunts the novel concerns its failure to produce a correlate to the dynamic syntax of relations that constitutes the real. Significantly, Blumenberg traces this inability back to the anachronistic notion of mimesis that ties narrative to reality in a relation of mutual implication and legitimation. That is to say, for Blumenberg the novel’s problem does not lie primarily in its inability to represent the open-ended time of modernity but rather in the demand that mimetic representation produce images that correspond to reality—in this case, that the novel’s relational structure make reality’s syntax of elements perspicuous. The criterion of *adaequatio* at the heart of this demand, Blumenberg notes, goes back to a notion of mimesis centered on presenting reality as momentarily self-evident truth, which grew out of the Platonic understanding of being as exemplary, static, and self-contained.
Defining mimesis as the production of enlightening congruence, whether at a semantic or formal level, turns the dynamism of time into an intractable problem given the novel's static form.48

Blumenberg’s analysis helps to outline key aspects of narrative as it unfolds within the discursive matrix of montage. They include, in the first place, conceiving of both experience and narrative as relational structures. Narrative furthermore relates to experience in a mimetic mode. The mimetic mode enacted by montage is, however, not driven by the criterion of congruence Blumenberg deemed problematic. Instead it involves a form of mimicry that seeks to refashion the physiognomy of experience by producing artifacts and engendering events designed to manipulate perception. Mimesis in this framework no longer hinges on summoning images that correspond to reality at either a semantic or formal level, but rather involves a parodic repetition that produces forms endowed with the same status as the objects they imitate. By their sheer existence, the new objects reconfigure the relations of the real. Narrative thus defined is not an object or a practice that abstracts from experience in order to adequately represent its truth, but is rather implicated in the “making” of experience at a par with other practices. This understanding departs from a vertical model of narrative as a portal that grants access to reality’s deep meaning and reconfigures it as one of many practices spread across a horizontal axis, one that involves stamping out experience by altering its relations through imitative behavior.

This horizontal understanding of mimesis helps illuminate the role that analogical ties play in the parodic practice of narrative. To be sure, the production of resemblances or correspondences is at the heart of imitative behavior. After all, repetition hinges on producing analogical overlaps, that is, it involves a calibrated interplay of similarity and difference that establishes relations of partial correspondence between two objects. In the mimetic paradigm described by Blumenberg, however, analogical correspondence does not simply stake out the terrain of imitative behavior; it also supplies the principal criterion for assessing the relation between narrative and reality. In this account the novel, as an artifact, is set apart from reality, a cognitive or experiential construct, and the two stand in an uneasy relation to each other due to faulty correspondence. Proper correspondence would produce the cognitive surplus that could make that relation meaningful, that is, that would allow for elucidating reality’s relational web through narrative. In montage narrative, by contrast, analogical overlaps establish connections that are understood as spatiotemporal ties in an embodied world whose physiognomy they seek to alter. They are not necessarily a means for extracting meaning through enlightening resemblance; put differently, the produc-
tion of meaning—as a cognitive or ideological content—is not a primary criterion for engendering analogical practice. This is not to say that meaning has no place in this understanding of narrative. Rather meaning becomes one factor among others, an important one, to be sure, but not the crucial, defining factor, as is the case for hermeneutically driven accounts. De-emphasizing the role that cognitive sense-making plays in narrative allows for foregrounding aspects that normally get short shrift, such as the interplay between the sensory apparatus and specific technologies and the import of a medium’s specific material qualities in the event of communication.

It is significant, in this respect, that Blumenberg’s characterization of reality as a dynamic relational network is patterned on a notion of linguistic structure as only marginally inflected, if at all, by the material qualities of the medium in which it is instantiated. The linguistic and textual biases of his account are inscribed in the essay’s presumption that the novel constitutes the foremost narrative form of the modern period—a bias that reflects an understanding of narrative dominant up to structuralism. This assumption underwrites Blumenberg’s discussion of mimesis as the requirement that there be congruence between the novel, a linguistic artifact, and a reality conceived as a dynamic syntax of elements, that is, as a signifying unit whose successful instantiation rests on specific rules whose enactment will guarantee its inner consistency. In pointing to this limitation, my aim is not to critique Blumenberg’s account from the perspective of hindsight but rather to use its conceptual constraints as a foil for outlining the reconceptualization of narrative at play in montage practices. At stake is the assumption that the print media that propelled the novel in modernity successfully efface their materiality in encoding and transmitting content. This assumption goes hand in hand with an understanding of the book as a tool for conveying an immaterial content that is minimally, if at all, affected by the medium’s physical qualities. The discourse and practice of montage corrects the literary and linguistic bias of this influential concept of narrative. In particular, the new awareness about the perceptual potential of technologies like film and photography redirects attention to a medium’s physical qualities, including those of print. This involves a concept of materiality that, in the words of Katherine Hayles, does not simply map onto the physical qualities of objects and media but rather acknowledges their boundedness with signifying processes. As Hayles explains,

It is impossible to specify precisely what a book—or any other text—is as a physical object, for there are an infinite number of ways its physical characteristics can be described. Speaking of an electronic text, for
example, we could focus on the polymers used to make the plastic case or the palladium used in the power cord. . . . What matters for understanding literature, however, is how the text creates the possibilities for meaning by mobilizing certain aspects of its physicality. These will necessarily be a small subset of all possible characteristics.  

By noting that only a small set of physical qualities is relevant in describing how texts and artifacts produce signifying effects under specific circumstances, Hayles is able to conclude that “the materiality of an embodied text” is not synonymous with the sum total of its physical properties, but is rather “the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies,” which include “the social, cultural, and technological processes that brought it into being.” The montage practices under examination here are often precisely about exploring the border between the physical and the material through multiple forms of mimicry, indeed, about pushing the physical until it tips over into the material, that is, until it produces semantic and rhetorical effects. They thus dramatize materiality as “an emergent property,” to use another of Hayles’s formulations, a construction that is processual and constantly reshaped in the manipulative interplay of perception, technology, modes of signification, and relations of power.

This tipping of the physical into the material is at the heart of Walter Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling and related interest in the effects of filmic montage, which form the focus of the next two chapters. In his essay on *The Storyteller* (1936) Benjamin was among the first to historicize the relation between narrative practice and material media and forms of communication by reconstructing, in a speculative vein, the conditions of possibility of storytelling in oral cultures, which for him grounded in mnemonic processes supported by routines of the body. In deemphasizing the involvement of consciousness, meaning, and interpretation for narrative practice Benjamin called attention to the limiting conceptual framework that dominated current debates on a crisis of narrative, which rested on the uninspected association of narrative with the novel as a print medium. Unlike many contemporaries, Benjamin neither celebrated nor bemoaned the demise of the printed novel following the rise of new media and instead sought to describe the realignment of narrative practices that was bolstered by the rapidly shifting media-scape of his day. This endeavor enabled him, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935–39), to reconceptualize mimesis as form of mimicry that finds its most advanced technological enactment in filmic montage.

Both “The Storyteller” and the artwork essays were drafted in the mid-
1930s, at a time when much of Weimar-era montage art had been proscribed by the Nazis. Yet the material and the concerns mined in the essays relate directly to Benjamin’s engagement with the work of artists associated with Dada, Constructivism, and surrealism during the Weimar years. They thus offer an illuminating reflection on the peculiar mimetic force and technological adaptability of the understanding of narrative associated with montage in the 1920s.