

## A juxtaposition of signifiers: radical collage in children's literature

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### Abstract

Collage is a form found in many classic and popular picturebooks for children, and contemporary picturebook artists have increasingly used the cross-mediality of the form, but its more radical use is perhaps less well known. This paper explores collage as a particularly interdisciplinary artistic expression, pointing to plural readings and understandings across its intermedial form, drawing on a number of 'cutting-edge' artists' picturebooks for children that have posed radical political questions through collage design, including Hannah Höch's *Picturebook* (1945), Umberto Eco & Eugenio Carmi's *The Bomb and the General* (1989), Davide Cali & Serge Bloch's *The Enemy* (2009) and André Leblanc & Barroux's *The Red Piano* (2009).

Now recognised as a major turning point in the evolution of modernist art—a form that always seeks change—collage is a developing element of children's literature. Many of the images in anti-establishment or anti-war picturebooks act as riposte to political rhetoric. Such questions are posed as a fundamental part of the urgent artistic expression of collage, where absurdist and paradoxical images expose truths and ridicule fictions, created to surprise and shock the reader or viewer. The special relationship of collage as anti-war activism and 'avant-guerre' art is explored, viewing collage as a form which can challenge the seeming realities of a point in history, present political critique and point to possibilities for change, using as its material ripped-out, torn, cut, stuck and pasted visual refuse of its time. Thus war becomes literally war-torn.

**Key words:** Collage, Politics, Picturebook, Avant-garde, War

### Resumen

El *collage* es una técnica que se utiliza en muchos álbumes ilustrados infantiles clásicos y populares; los artistas de álbumes ilustrados contemporáneos han utilizado cada vez más la mediación cruzada de la forma, pero su uso más radical es quizás menos conocido. Este trabajo explora el *collage* como una expresión artística particularmente interdisciplinaria, apuntando a interpretaciones y lecturas plurales a través de su forma intermedia, recurriendo a una serie de álbumes ilustrados infantiles de 'vanguardia' que han planteado cuestiones políticas radicales a través de sus diseños de *collage*, incluyendo *Picturebook* (1945), de Hannah Höch, *The Bomb and the General* (1989), de Umberto Eco y Eugenio Carmi, *The Enemy* (2009), de Davide Cali y Serge Bloch, y *The Red Piano* (2009), de André Leblanc y Barroux.

Siendo ahora reconocido como un importante punto de inflexión en la evolución del arte modernista, una forma que siempre busca el cambio, el *collage* es un elemento en desarrollo en la literatura infantil. Muchas de las imágenes contra el establecimiento o contra la guerra presentes en álbumes ilustrados actúan como respuesta a la retórica política. Tales preguntas se plantean como una parte fundamental de la expresión artística urgente del *collage*, donde las imágenes absurdas y paradójicas exponen verdades y ficciones ridículas, creadas para sorprender e impactar al lector o al espectador. Se explora la relación especial entre el *collage* como activismo contra la guerra y el arte de 'avant-guerre', considerando el *collage* como una forma que puede desafiar las realidades aparentes de un punto de la historia, presentar una crítica política y señalar posibilidades de cambio, utilizando como

material basura visual de su tiempo desgarrada, rasgada, cortada, adherida y pegada. Por lo tanto, la guerra se convierte literalmente en un desgarro de guerra.

**Palabras clave:** Collage, Política, Álbum ilustrado, Vanguardias, Guerra.

### Resum

El *collage* és una tècnica que s'utilitza en molts àlbums il·lustrats infantils clàssics i populars; els artistes d'àlbums il·lustrats contemporanis han utilitzat cada vegada més la mediació creuada de la forma, però el seu ús més radical és potser menys conegut. Aquest treball explora el *collage* com una expressió artística particularment interdisciplinària, tot apuntant a interpretacions i lectures plurals a través de la seua forma intermèdia, recurrent a una sèrie d'àlbums il·lustrats infantils d' 'avantguarda' que han plantejat qüestions polítiques radicals a través dels seus dissenys de *collage*, incloent *Picturebook* (1945), de Hannah Höch, *The Bomb and the General* (1989), d'Umberto Eco i Eugenio Carmi, *The Enemy* (2009), de Davide Cali i Serge Bloch, i *The Red Piano* (2009), d'André Leblanc i Barroux.

A hores d'ara és reconegut com un important punt d'inflexió en l'evolució de l'art modernista, una forma que sempre busca el canvi; el *collage* és un element en desenvolupament en la literatura infantil. Moltes de les imatges contra l'establiment o contra la guerra presents en àlbums il·lustrats actuen com a resposta a la retòrica política. Tals preguntes es plantegen com una part fonamental de l'expressió artística urgent del *collage*, on les imatges absurdes i paradoxals exposen veritats i ficcions ridícules, creades per sorprendre i impactar el lector o l'espectador. S'explora la relació especial entre el *collage* com activisme contra la guerra i l'art de 'avant-guerre', considerant el collage com una forma que pot desafiar les realitats aparents d'un punt de la història, presentar una crítica política i assenyalar possibilitats de canvi, utilitzant com a material escombraries visuals del seu temps esquinçades, tallades, adherides i enganxades. Per tant, la guerra es converteix literalment en un esquinç de guerra.

**Paraules clau:** Collage, Política, Àlbum il·lustrat, Avantguardes, Guerra

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### Introduction

Collage is a form found in many classic and popular picturebooks for children, and contemporary picturebook artists have increasingly used the cross-mediality of the form, but its more radical use is perhaps less well known. This article will explore collage as a particularly interdisciplinary artistic expression, pointing to plural readings and understandings across its intermedial form. I will draw on a number of 'cutting-edge' artists' picturebooks for children that have posed radical political questions through collage design; namely Hannah Höch's *Picturebook* (1945) Umberto Eco & Eugenio Carmi's *The Bomb and the General*, (1989) Davide Cali & Serge Bloch's *The Enemy* (2009), and André Leblanc & Barroux's *The Red Piano* (2009).

Now recognised as a major turning point in the evolution of modernist art- a form that always seeks change- 21st collage is a developing element of children's literature. Many of the images

in these anti-establishment or anti-war picturebooks act as riposte to political rhetoric. Such questions are posed as a fundamental part of the urgent artistic expression of collage, where absurdist and paradoxical images expose truths and ridicule fictions, created to surprise and shock the reader or viewer.

## 1 Collage

Collage has a long, largely untold history of the craft and ritual assemblages and religious folk art from many cultural traditions and native peoples, women and children. Other than these, collage came to the west via C12th Japanese calligraphic poems on torn and pasted sheets of paper, scraps of leather and paper in C13th Persian bookbinding, Mexican garments decorated in beads and feathers brought back in the C16th from the New World by explorers, and an C18th trend for hand-crafted Valentine's cards and fans. In western Europe from the C19th onwards, collage began to particularly interest those working with children, exemplified by educationalists Rudolf Steiner, Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori's creative approach to materials, or children's writer Hans Christian Andersen's collage and paper cut books.



**Figure 1. Hans Christian Anderson (c.1859) [paper cut-out on music score]**

Though collage has a French name, and is associated with Braque and Picasso's experiments of 'Papier-Collé' with newspaper and card, the Russians arguably invented its most interdisciplinary form, with distinctly individual female artists from the Russian avant-garde such as Olga Rosanova and Lyubov Popova collaborating with poets in collaged illustrations, book jackets and posters. Their and other powerful children's illustrated books from the Soviet period (such as Dmitri Bulanov's *The Zoo*, 1928, or Nikolai Denisovsky *The Machine Got Going*, 1929) enact the principle that 'the Soviet children's book was intended to become an active participant in the public consciousness.' This may well have had a 'regulative role in enforcing a uniform social identity', but it is important to add that 'this meta-commentary also insists on aesthetic media as powerful sources of individual agency in an oppressive society' (Bird, 2011, p. 53).

Kazimir Malevich, who did a series of collages in his teens that he called 'alogical' associations, wrote: 'the alogical collusion of two forms...illustrates the moment of struggle between logic, the natural law, bourgeois sense and prejudice' (Malevich in Wescher, 1968, p. 94). Tellingly, avant-garde poets, artists and writers in Russia who became hounded under Stalin retreated into children's literature as a less monitored space where they could experiment visually and playfully. The poet Samuil Marshak, (who created 40 works of children's literature with Vladimir Lebedev) wrote to nonsense poet Kornei Chukovsky 'We both could have perished; the children saved us.' (Marshak in Rothenstein & Budashevskaya, 2013, p. 99).

Collage is also a form of academic scholarly practice, or citation; such as critic Walter Benjamin's use of collage-allegory to shock people into new understandings. In his own career Benjamin abandoned the book in favour of collage-style essays or fragments, also exploring children's books and cartoon, using collage as a kind of metaphor that could be applied to child-centred new forms of literature, arts and pedagogies, such as his recognising children's play as 'bringing together materials of widely different kinds in a new, intuitive relationship' (Benjamin, 1924, p. 408).

Similarly, for poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, 'the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation' (collages, p. 34-5) and the contamination between language and its user. This is what the Dada poet Tristan Tzara – on seeing a Hans Arp exhibition in Zürich in 1915- called 'uproar collage', or the *noise* made visible in the work (Motherwell, 1989, p. 235). Noise is a particular quality of collage. Collage's apparent imperfections are part of the aesthetic because the cut, the tear, the texture, the impossibility of the perfect outline is intrinsic to the form - and demonstrates that the mix of shapes and textures in relation to each other is more important than aesthetic perfection or realism. The cut is document of a *happening*.

## 2 Collage and War



**Figure 2. Malevich, M. (1914) *Private of the First Division* [oil on canvas with collage of printed paper, postage stamp, and thermometer] New York: MOMA**

Malevich's collage titled *Private of the First Division* (1914) brings together letters, words such as 'Thursday', 'President', 'snuff box', images such as an ear, a military cross, blank squares and a thermometer, and thus requires the viewer to float around disconcerting realities. It has an immediacy and spontaneity; it is both raw and refined. Russian art of this time channelled the disruption, deconstruction and displacement in materials as a direct reaction to Russian involvement in the First World War, and collage was the medium to express this.

Thus, as dualism and pluralism replaced C19th monism, psychoanalytic theory shattered rationalism, sociologists coined the term 'consumption' and Einstein 'relativity', so the cultural themes of disintegration, fragmentation and integration became those of collage. The cultural critic Frederic Jameson, citing psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, described the schizophrenic experience as a feature of postmodernism- as 'an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence' (Jameson, 1983, p. 115). 'What collage achieves', states Rosalind Krauss, in her work on Picasso (1981, p. 20) 'is a metalanguage of the visual'. If collage is about encounters; bringing ideas into conversation with each other, collage's lasting dispute over war is one of its most striking achievements.

Close examination of the newspaper used in Pablo Picasso's 'papier-collés' collages (produced largely between 1912-14) reveal reports of the events that heralded the approach of WW1; a world gone mad, depicted with the blackest humour. For Picasso, art 'is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy,' though 'it is not necessary to paint a man with a gun. An apple can be just as revolutionary' (Danchev, 2010, npn). Critic Jeanine Parisier Plottel sees papier-collé as a significant moment in the course of art history, as it:

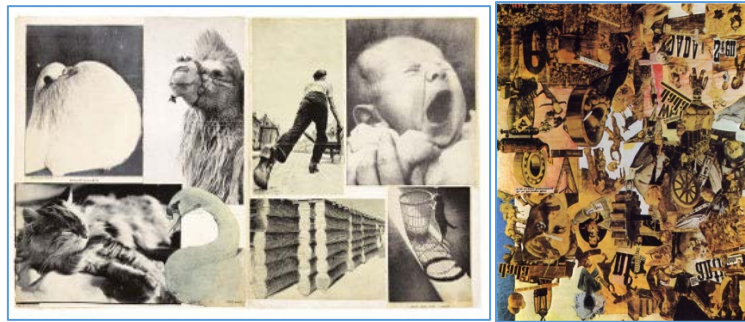
made physical and literal the juxtaposing of forms that was the occupation of cubism (and of abstract painting). It was to flower, in the case of collage, first in the combining

of representation of almost anything with representations of almost anything else, and somewhat later, in assemblage, in the combining of things themselves. (Plottel, 1983, p. 198)

Much of this artistic activity was deliberately unconscious, random, accidental, even plagerised. Artist Hannah Höch admitted that the Dada group “discovered” photomontage by theft, inverting its original use to suggest unreality:

actually we borrowed the idea from a trick of the official photographer of the Prussian army regiments. They used to have elaborate oleolithographed mounts, representing a group of uniformed men with a barracks or a landscape in the background, but with the faces cut out; in these mounts, the photographers then inserted photographic portraits of the faces of their customers, generally coloring them later by hand. But the aesthetic purpose, if any, of this very primitive kind of photo-montage was to idealize reality, whereas the Dada photo-monteur set out to give to something entirely unreal all the appearances of something real that had actually been photographed... in an imaginative composition, we used to bring together elements borrowed from books, newspapers, posters, or leaflets, in an arrangement that no machine could yet compose. (Höch in Chipp, 1968, p. 396)

In 1925, the art historian and photographer Franz Roh characterized photomontage as ‘precarious synthesis between pictorial techniques of modernist abstraction and the realism of the photographic fragment,’ (Roh, 1925, p. 45-46). Maud Levin’s study of Höch’s Weimar oeuvre foregrounds the artist’s critical satirical and comic engagement with Berlin popular print culture. Cut-out images of pets in Höch’s ‘Albums’- encyclopedias of images- show dozens of cut out cats juxtaposed with birds and babies, sleek women and waves, fluffy kittens with building materials, chicks with baby’s cheeks or fish with dancers leaping. The art critic and author of the first monograph on Höch, Heinz Ohff, describes how she began cutting and pasting into scrapbooks as a young girl; reflecting a ‘childish love of collecting and ‘a feminine sense of order’ (Ohff, 1968, p. 10). Collage seems to invite gendered reading. There is no doubt that Höch’s collages, such as *Cut With the Kitchen Knife through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic* were often as critical of her fellow (male) Dada artists’ ersatz proto-feminism as they were of wartime Germany.



**Figure 3. Höch, H. (1925) *Album and Cut With the Kitchen Knife through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic* [photomontage and collage] Berlin Nationalgalerie**

### 3 Collage, War and the C20th Picturebook

Two soldiers in army green peer out of holes, torn through the page as if by bullets. They are separated by a large expanse of white gutter. Each defends his position: “The enemy is there but I have never seen him. Every morning, I shoot at him. Then he shoots at me.” They are both hungry and exhausted. They are both hungry and exhausted: they each believe the other deserves to be so. In each case they believe the other deserves to be killed. He is a beast. (At least that is what the war manual says). Neither makes the first move. They wait, in an endless stalemate. Finally, one soldier sneaks out at night, ready to attack, so does the other, and they swap places. The enemy’s foxhole is exactly the same. They see scraps of family, friends, dreams. Why are they fighting? They have been conditioned. Artists Davide Cali and Serge Bloch break down war to its simplest element: the fact that it requires an enemy. What might it mean to communicate with one another? The photo-montage of sun behind a troubled grey and cloudy sky emphasise the enormity of courage to throw that message in a bottle.

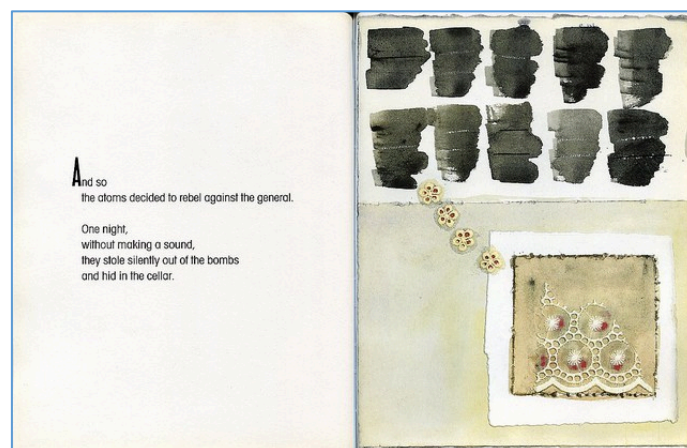


**Figure 4. Cali, D & Bloch, S. (2009) *The Enemy* [pen & ink mixed media collage]**

In the same book, *The Enemy* (2009) the generals, chests festooned with medals, are in uniforms that, on close inspection, are collaged from lace. Military epillettes are suggested by lace print

trimmings, and medals are badges, buttons or photographs of actual medals. Lace as signifier, particularly its physical form, suggested status and luxurious wealth in Renaissance portraiture, yet it is also traditionally feminine. The use of lace in these picturebook collages produces a series of visual jokes and metaphoric juxtapositions between lacy femininity and masculine militarism- just as Hannah Höch's cutting with the kitchen knife was a conscious reference to feminist artists' 'femme' drawing on the fabrics of women's cultural experience- and at odds with the 'hard' science of the atom and the bomb. There is a revolutionary mood to these books: a call to communicate rather than a call to arms.

The delicacy of detail evokes Umberto Eco and Eugenio Carmi's *The Bomb and the General*, (1989) where a general stockpiles nuclear bombs so that when he has lots and lots he can 'start a beautiful war. And he laughed.' However, the atoms themselves –depicted in collage of intricate lace- 'decided to rebel against the general... and stole silently out of the bombs and hid in the cellar.'



**Figure 5. Eco, U. & Carmi, E. (1989) *The Bomb and the General* [mixed media collage]**

As Maria Popova has observed, Eco challenges his own idea of the children's picturebook genre as a 'closed' semiotic text for one more open to interpretation, despite being presented as

...a cautionary tale of the Atomic Age wrapped in a clear message of peace, environmentalism, and tolerance. But what makes the project extraordinary is the parallel visual and textual narrative reinforcing the message — the beautiful abstract illustrations by Italian artist Eugenio Carmi contain recurring symbols that reiterate the story in a visceral way as the child learns to draw connections between the meaning of the images with the meaning of the words. (Popova, 2012, npn)

The text reads: 'The atoms shut up in the bombs were very unhappy. /Thanks to them/ There was going to be a huge catastrophe. / Many children would die.' (Eco and Carmi, 1989, npn).



The unique perspective is of the atoms ‘shut up’ in the bomb as if against their will, dreading the consequence of their fission. Though the collage takes a sculptural, even ‘carved’ approach through its relationship with *objet trouvé*, in the picturebook these ready-mades become *objet échappé*.

What this means for art is that the very material of their existence reflects a mixed condition where whole and part object relations co-exist. This is particularly so in the case of collage. (Williamson, 2017, p. 34)

Object on object, or fragments of objects, are layered in collage, just as the secret life of objects is subordinated into systems yet independent. As art critic Adrian Stokes reflected in his ‘Collages’ essay (1951):

The art of collage and the carving approach to visual art, the sense of the independent object, the actuality of the material... symbolises both the body and naked mental structures. (Stokes in Williamson, 2017, p. 34)

For Stokes, both the whole and part can co-exist on and in this layered surface of collage, if ‘fitfully’. Thus, atoms, capable of unspeakable human acts of terror in fission are also capable of moral action in part. In rebellion the atoms unpick themselves like embroidery from the ominous black ink forms of the atomic bomb. Consequently, when war is declared, the bomb cannot explode and the general has to become a hotel doorman, ‘to make use of his uniform with all the braid,’ opening the door for tourists, former enemies and ‘even the soldiers whom in the old days the general had ordered about.’ Poetic justice and a happy ending this time, but also perhaps a reminder of the lack of order in modernity, and the (collage-like) instability of the nuclear.



**Figure 6. Bloch, S. (2015) Battle of the Bean, illustration for Los Angeles Magazine**

Collage uses allegory, analogy and metaphor as suggestive of transformation: here Bloch substitutes a hill for coffee beans – as a visual pun- the expression ‘it don’t amount to a hill of

beans' meaning something is worthless, to expose what armies go to war for. The effect is comical, if the message is grave. Dadaists and Surrealists described the writing of a poem as making a collage, -as poetry, like Cubism is visual punning. Collage plays on jokes, puns; what Freud called condensation (such as 'alcholidays'), entendre, disparate juxtapositions, quirks, allegories (connecting dissimilars), analogies, and knowing naiveties.

Anti-war literature can be a deeply serious business, but the collaborations between author and illustrator can offer counterpoint in these disparate juxtapositions. Author of *The Red Piano* (2009) André Leblanc actually met the inspiration for the story –internationally acclaimed classical pianist Zhu Xiao –Mei - and was shown the tiny little notebook she had kept secret in the camp with piano scores reproduced in her childish handwriting. He described the meeting as 'profoundly moving' and he decided to write around her experience, without naming her as she suggested. Leblanc shared photographic archival material with Barroux, the illustrator, plus images and commentaries by a Chinese photographer who himself spent years in a camp. He describes the difficulty of writing a fictional version of real-life events aimed at children, whilst the close collaboration with Barroux 'allowed a greater complicity: I let him carry the emotion and poetry, while I could write something more sober' (Leblanc interview, 2009).



**Figure 7. Leblanc, A. & Barroux (2009) *The Red Piano* [mixed media collage]. A double page spread in *The Red Piano*: soft, grainy black, grey and red pen-and-ink watercolour of workers in a field with text reading:**

From sunrise to sunset, she has to learn a new way of life: how to plant rice, collect vegetables, pick fruit and chop wood in her working group. They call it 'learning through labour and self-criticism'. The Great Chinese Cultural Revolution continues. (Leblanc, 2009, npn)

Disrupting the page is a torn stamped letter, red newsprint or travel tickets, and under the glowering red sky on the extreme right of the page, is a fragment from a revolutionary propaganda poster of an upstanding Maoist worker with a shovel, smiling, fists clenched, heroically raised. The cut-out has not been integrated with the rest of the image but deliberately looks absurd, as if he is rising from a hole in the ground. It is a reminder that ‘collage radically changed the relation between painting and the world outside painting, as ‘a form assumed by ambiguities’ and ‘comical questioning of appearances’ (Rosenberg in UCLA, 1989, p. 52).

Similarly, the page describing Chairman Mao’s death emphasises the missionary aspect of the re-education camps where pianists were considered ‘criminal’, abutting an actual photograph of Mao’s *Little Red Book* which acts as an ironic contradiction of what the book was intended for, as the reader knows the pianist of the book hid her sheet music inside her copy. The use of red is a powerful intermedial metaphor throughout the book: carrying the urgency of Russian and Chinese art’s bold red lines and diagonal forms. In the otherwise pen and ink soft wash of *The Enemy*, red is blood spilt, general’s medals are red, and the war manual full of lies is red. Red thus becomes the ‘noise’ visible in the work.

A final counterpoint is that Zhu Xiao –Mei herself, researching the first edition and sole surviving manuscript to Bach’s Goldberg Variations with handwritten additions, points to the paper in his hand shown in the final portrait of the composer (by Hausman, 1746). She reflects on the two concerns of Bach’s later years: ‘variation and polyphony’; neatly drawing together the musical, textual and visual repetitions in altered forms and simultaneous lines of independence that also happen to characterise the collaged picturebook.

## Conclusion

Finally, I would argue that collage – whether in children’s picturebook or adult exhibition- is a medium that means to provoke change. According to Jason Matherly, ‘Whether it is put to the use of assimilation, subversion or an independent, polyvocal expression, collage is above all aesthetics-as-activism par excellence’ (Matherly, 2013, p. 218). By way of its medial nature, collage is often perceived to signify the spirit of contemporary culture, particularly in relation to its hybridisation. In the picturebooks cited, collage is both a subversive medium and a political tool; it tells of and is itself a violent, disruptive act, but also a theatrical one in the sense that it speaks of the ‘event’ or action of cutting and pasting. The verbs used to describe collage work carry ontological resonance: cutting, ripping, tearing, separating, abutting, contradicting, augmenting, substituting, - with an important strain of critical mockery inherent in the practice,

resulting in what the poet Tristan Tzara called 'the most poetic, the most revolutionary moment in the evolution of painting' (cited in Rosenberg, 1983, p.173).

Collage as it features in these picturebooks, is the play of representation and illusion, collapsing distinctions of high and low cultures, carrying the speed and dynamism of the machine age, odd rhythms, play of historical moments (the past pasted onto/under/over/beside the present), play of planes (flatness, surface, space, dimension) and sensations (tactile, hands-on, crafted, kinaesthetic). Just as Höch's picturebook pushes the boundaries of what any of us might imagine to be animal, vegetable or mineral; what Rona Cran (2014, p. 12) calls 'the continuous cross-pollination of discrete fragments', *The Bomb and the General*, *The Enemy* and *The Red Piano* present a postmodern rejection of rationality and coherence with respect to war. Collage effectively attacks the possibility of single histories rationalising war, by deliberately choosing the medium of deleting, shifting, rapidly changing, chopped up soundbites of meaning. What new collage picturebooks might emerge into our turbulent and unstable C21st? The scissors are out!



**Figure 8. Unauthored internet image *Scissors for thought* [manipulated photograph]**

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