

Technique of montage in cinema media essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I have selected two films to help me to illustrate the significance of the technique of montage in cinema. They are David Wark Griffiths Birth of a Nation and Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin. I will be using the points of view of an ordinary audience as well as a cultural & military historian to examine the impact of montage on our reading of the film cited.

What is Montage?

Montage in general parlance is a method of organising and editing the visuals - 'scenes whose emotional impact and visual design are achieved through the editing together of many brief shots..... montage may expand or contract time and space. In other words, it is an editing technique that combines or separates frames to construct narrative, sense of continuity and discontinuity and juxtapositions.

Classic Examples

- Bollywood cinema showing a montage sequence where two "brothers jump off a train and suddenly they are seven years older"
- Montage of the mall-dwellers relaxing and having a fun time in the mall.

Threshold of change

In 1920s, montage was ahead of its time. Eisenstein's prescience strikes us from the vantage point of the present, when we are at the cusp of a changeover from analogue modes of perception and representation to the dispersed sensibility of the digital technology. The modern television screen typifies this shift as a site where montage and collage conflate all at once. The viewer is expected to, and does, multi-task, taking in several elements and actions simultaneously - the talking heads, the intervening

visuals, the text scrolls, the flash news, the sensex bar in a corner, the advertisement pop-ups and so on. Unilinear attentiveness and experience of the media are being replaced by a non-linear grasp of the clutter. True, the average mainstream star-strapped cinema, with its iconising impulse, yet uses this digital possibility very superficially. But already with digital surround sound in cinema theatres, the sound track is an experience of severalness. What montage might do to deconstruct the conventional rectangular screen we are riveted to and similarly unbundled and disperse our viewing experience is a fascinating thought.

‘ Battleship Potemkin’- An Analysis

How sound & image juxtapositions express meaning

Eisenstein (1898-1948), a graduate of Russia State Film School, has been renowned as an advocate of Soviet theories of film montage. His montage theory is also ideological in some ways like Griffith's but his is more revolutionary in terms of aesthetics and political circumstances (dialectical montage punctuated by Marxism), and his theory aims chiefly at the audience' psyche.

He argues that film has its greatest impact not by the smooth unrolling of images, but by their juxtaposition - ' montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots - shots even opposing to one another'.

His central concept is the collision of elements, in other words, shots should not be seen as linked, but rather as conflicting with one another. Eisenstein considers montage as a creative film element that is significant in creating:

- Dramatic Form - Metric Montage

- Rhythm in the Narrative - Rhythmic Montage
- Metaphor and Analogy- Overtonal Montage
- Dynamic in building up the film's meaning - Intellectual Montage

The fourth point is the most important because no matter they are ideological or anti-ideological tools, films are made to help the audience to produce new perceptions, emotions and cognitions in the mind and to visualise the invisible conflict between the film elements.

Battleship Potemkin is a class-conscious revolutionary propaganda, ordered up by the Russian revolutionary leadership for the 20th anniversary of the Potemkin uprising in 1905. The reason was because Lenin believed this film could encourage his people to support and join the proletariat in overthrowing old order. Despite of its multifarious responsibilities, the film has created an impact as montage being the form's most important film grammar.

I will now move on to dialectical montage. Eisenstein suggests that we should achieve conflicts in film by using point, counterpoint and fusion. The following are examples of dialectical montage in Battleship Potemkin:

How montage stimulates meaning for the viewer

- Cutting between the Battleship's surgeon and the maggot-infested meat that the sailors are meant to eat to suggest a contradiction and absurdity of the order (to eat the rotten meat).
- Cutting between ghostly figures hanging and clenched fists, furthered by an inter-title 'Down with the tyrants!' to legitimise people's anger.

- Cutting between the fearful faces of the unarmed citizens and the faceless militia in uniform to give a reason for the people against the ruthless czarist state.
- The numerous cuts in the Odessa steps sequence build the individual moments of terror into an unbearable emotional climax. This is a perfect example to demonstrate Eisenstein's montage theory in relation to the forming of intellectual concepts and associations.

How Sound & Image juxtapositions produce meaning

Firstly, he uses images of still objects to line up with images of the massacre to create a metaphorical juxtaposition: through the dynamic editing of three lion statues, he implies the awakening of anger and rebellion. The juxtaposition of these two different subjects of images (one of human, the other of symbolic image or prop) is a valuable propaganda device because it encourages viewers to deduce for themselves that the symbol describes the character.

Secondly, in a fragmentary way, he shows the attacking militia by a line of marching boots advancing down the steps, this is to emphasise the militia's impersonal and oppressive nature. He further contrasts it with the powerlessness of the revolutionary citizens-victims by showing a legless man who escapes with difficulty from the cold bullets. And as the troops march ahead, a military boot crushes a child's hand. There is also an old woman who is seen with eyeglasses in her first appearance then in the second shot of her, one of the glasses has been pierced by a bullet which signifies her death.

Thirdly, there are shots of a mother with a baby carriage. As the mother is shot by the militia and begins to fall, there are cuts to her carriage perched dangerously close to the edge of a step. Interspersed with these individual scenes of cruelty are shots of the fleeing crowd and the approaching line of militia occasionally firing into the crowd. The fear generated by this montage is reinforced as the mother collapses and sends the carriage hurtling out of control down the steps. Eisenstein uses a lot of close-ups of the citizens like the old woman whose glasses are pierced through by bullet, the legless man, the small boy whose hand is trampled, and his terrified mother to increase the emotional impact of the sequence. The average length of each shot in this sequence is about two seconds, giving the audience barely a chance to breathe amongst the chaos. In the above examples we see that montage involves a dialectical process that creates a new third meaning from combining the meanings of two sets of adjacent shots. Although the real 1905 revolution was repressed by the Czarist regime, Eisenstein does not depict the sailors' final downfall, opting instead for an ambiguous, deliberately mythologised ending.

The Story of the Montage

In the film, the story goes like this: news of the uprising on Potemkin reaches the Russian squadron, which speeds towards Odessa to put it down. The Potemkin and a destroyer, also commanded by revolutionaries, steam out to meet them. Again Eisenstein uses montage to cut between the approaching squadron, the brave Potemkin, and details of the onboard preparation, he creates a tension for the precarious situation. At the very last moment, the men of the Potemkin signal their comrades in the squadron to join them,

after a few good minutes of suspension, the Potemkin eventually steams among the oncoming ships without a shot being fired at it – the sailors of the rival Russian fleets do not open fire on the Potemkin, responding humanely to her pleas to join them instead. Amid much cheering from sailors on all ships, the inter-title ‘ Brothers!’ appears. The very specific dialectic approach to film form, which Eisenstein is engaged with, surrounds the idea of art always being conflict; its social mission is to make manifest the contradictions of being. Eisenstein acknowledges that montage is the most suitable for the expression of ideological statements; the film’s last sequence I have just gone through in the previous paragraph has demonstrated the brotherhood of man and the solidarity of the working-class. As a reinforcement of the ideology of revolution, Eisenstein’s ending for the film is directed towards the unwritten future, rather than the recreation of the past.

‘ Birth of a Nation’ – An Analysis

Birth of a Nation is one of the complex subjects in American film history. Apart from the controversial representation of the black race and the ambitious depiction of American history during the period of Civil War and Reconstruction, the cinematic language developed by Griffith is influential within the film-making sphere. This language is comprehensive and allows effective communication with the audience. One of the essential skills in the language system is the technique of montage. In addition to exploring the potential of flashbacks, eyeline matches and camera distances, his earliest pictures also showed that individual shots were cinematic phrases that could be edited together into meaningful sequence without a concrete dramatic logic to link them. For instance, by using rapid cutting, the scene in which

Lynch attempts to force marriage to Elsie intersects with three other sequences: first, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) speeding to rescue the victim (Elsie); second, the KKK clearing the rest of the unruly blacks out of town; third, the KKK approaching to rescue the trapped Cameron family.

4. In the above series of shots, audience are watching Elsie under increasingly dangerous moral and sexual threat, 'at the same location in time', audience sees the glorious KKK troops riding to rescue, the tension grows until it gets to a point 'when the two (sequences of shots) are finally brought together' which is the victory of the KKK over Lynch and the other blacks. The symbolic arrangement of shots does not only create a rhythm for the narrative, it also generates a tense juxtaposition that carries the audience's emotion to 'the next higher power'.

By using montage, Griffith has established the KKK as the heroes of the drama - in all these different scenarios, the KKK make every effort to fight for the interest of the whites. It may not be very impressive for audience in today's cultural and intellectual environment, however for the American audience in 1915, the experience was different; this scene literally involved them with its convincing images and ideological message. As a matter of fact, many of those who had watched Birth of a Nation were so motivated that they gathered to join the rejuvenated KKK. This film is a facsimile, but it is a powerful one that is perceived by many people as true, Carter puts it this way: 'The picture projects one of the most persistent cultural illusions; it presents vividly and dramatically the ways in which a whole people have reacted to their history'

With the awareness of a cultural historian, we should take a step back from these scenes and appreciate the careful direction and choreography of the mass and individual movements. We can also look into Griffith's proficient use of montage which like what I have pointed out, functions ideologically in Birth of a Nation.

Conclusion

As I have said, in silent cinema where visual images are the major elements, montage is particularly important. In both Birth of a Nation and Battleship Potemkin, images cutting back and forth, amid the repetitive and rhythmic score composed by keyboard, percussion, half-heard cries, speech and choral, create a rapid rhythm, aggressive and dangerous atmosphere.

On a higher level, montage is used to provoke the audience's emotional recognition and go further to stimulate their intellectual reflexivity and perception. Montage is creative and abstract, a cinematic abstraction of reality that is able to explicitly shape events for maximum effect of agitation. Montage can open up new non-narrative avenues in film-making. It still has considerable impact on the cinema, both in an aesthetic or cult manner, like the Wong Kar-wai's and Quentin Tarantino's films, and in a political or ideological sense, like Oliver Stone's JFK and R Zemeckis's Forrest Gump. Nevertheless, montage is no longer the only channel through which images can be played around, when film-making nowadays is often partially or largely aided by digital technology, the space for the potential of visuals to expand is indeed unlimited.

NOTES ON EDITING

Editing is one of the most important parts of modern television lest modern television would cease to exist.

Creation of Topic/Story

The story is the skeleton of the edit and helps organise the edit into chapters and topics much as in writing.

Rhythm and Pacing

Rhythm and pacing are very important within edits because if we are editing a news story then it must be very fast with shots not lasting more than around 3 seconds. If we take the feature film and look at it's basic structure then we may be able to edit the project down to around 25 minutes to fit within television schedules. The pacing will be much faster and more information will be given. If it is edited properly then the viewer should have the same feeling seeing a half hour version as for a 1hr 36 minutes version.

When watching an action film such as Die Another Day we expect the cutting to be very fast, many shots to show various angles and to extend the action as far as possible to amaze the audience and in parts to contribute a little humour. In contrast if we were to watch Pride and Prejudice we would see far longer shots with a lower variety of shot sizes and elements.

Although the definition of montage is editing, the term montage refers to many aspects of cinema. It is often used to suggest artistic editing, or to suggest rapid, stimulating editing. However, montage theory influences a range of filmmaking including imagery, pace and timing of editing and spectator response. The film which demonstrates preeminently the various

uses of montage is *The Battleship Potemkin*. Conversely, montage is often a diverse and personal form of expression and there are many good examples, such as *Un Chein Andalou* (1929; Luis Bunuel & Salvador Dali) and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles; 1941).

The theory of montage arises from the work of Lev Kuleshov, who established the $a + b = c$ definition of montage. He discovered that a picture followed by another picture produces a thought; this phenomenon is often called the Kuleshov effect. Kuleshov conducted a series of experiments, which included showing a picture of a silent, open mouth followed by a bird flying through the sky, which made people think that the mouth was singing. When he showed people the open mouth followed by a picture of food, people thought the mouth was hungry. It was from those experiments that our concept of montage developed. The imagery of the Kuleshov effect is shown below in the montage triangle.

The $a + b = c$ definition is useful because the letters can be substituted for other things. For instance, during the Kuleshov effect the spectator is effectively shown two noun-pictures, a picture of an open mouth followed by a flying bird. The spectator thought the mouth was singing, which is a verb. When Kuleshov showed the open mouth followed by a plate of bread, people thought the mouth was hungry, which is an adjective. The Kuleshov effect allows us to show pictures of nouns in such a way that people can think of words from different parts of speech, such as a verb or an adjective. It is this type of communication, achieved by montage, which gives cinema so much artistic and intellectual value.