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| **Montage (Film)** |
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| As an aesthetic principle, montage –– or the assemblage of disparate elements into a composite whole, often by way of juxtaposition –– is most often associated with the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, and especially with the theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Key elements of Montage include the ideas and works of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, the contemporaneous development of photo-montage in visual design, and the connections between these movements and those in modernist painting and literature. During the 1930s, with the advent of sound cinema and the suppression of experimental aesthetics in the Soviet Union, the practice of montage waned but was revived by political filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s. |
| Montage derives from the French verb *monter,* which means literally ‘to assemble’. With the advent of film technology, montage became a French term to denote the process of film editing. In aesthetics, montage has a more conceptual meaning. Here it refers to the technique of combining disparate images or elements to form a composite work. Montage is related to the practice of collage; however it differs from collage most fundamentally in the greater emphasis it places on juxtaposition –– often used to make a rhetorical point.  The theory of montage blossomed during the 1920s when it became a charged aesthetic concept for the Soviet avant-garde. In this historical context, the term is most strongly associated with Russian filmmaker and film-theorist Sergei Eisenstein. In his famous essay ‘Montage of Cine-Attractions’ (1925) and later writings, Eisenstein developed a theory of montage –– in effect, a theory of film –– where discrete units (raw footage) lacked specific meaning in themselves, but only acquired meaning in their controlled recombination with other units. ‘The essence of cinema,’ Eisenstein wrote, ‘does not lie in the images, but in the relation between the images!’ The filmmaker’s job was thus to assemble individual cinematic shots into a composite whole, which he compared to a machine or an organism composed of individual cells. Throughout his career Eisenstein enumerated several methods of montage –– from metrical montage, based on the length of shots, to intellectual montage based on the juxtaposition of visual symbols –– but routinely called for synthesis through *collision* and *conflict* rather than linkage. In this way, the principle of montage was reasoned to reflect a Marxist understanding of history as the dialectical synthesis of opposing forces.  Eisenstein’s most famous film, *Bronenosets Po'tyomkin* (trans: *The Battleship Potemkin*, [1925]), has become emblematic of his montage theory. Based on the Potemkin mutiny of 1905, and commissioned twenty years later as a pro-revolutionary testament, the film contains many canonical examples of montage-based editing, such as the apparent awakening of a lion statue and the Odessa steps sequence that distends time across several perspectives to great effect.  File: Lions.jpg  *No Caption Provided*  <http://unaffiliatedcritic.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/The-Lions.jpg>  Although Eisenstein was the most vocal and advanced theorist of montage, the fundamental principle permeated Soviet cinema and arts of the 1920s. In his film workshops, Lev Kuleshov demonstrated the viewer’s psychological tendency to project causality onto a sequence of unrelated shots. Dziga Vertov, one of the first documentary filmmakers, spoke of montage as ‘the organization of the seen world,’ applying the principle not only to editing, but also to decisions made while filming and even during everyday perceptual observation. Vertov’s most famous film, *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (trans: *Man with a Movie Camera* [1929]), used superimposition and highly rhythmic quick-cutting to simultaneously construct a representation of urban space and represent the process of that construction. In a famous sequence, Vertov alternates between an editor splicing film and the footage being spliced.  Contemporaneous with these developments in the cinema, a genre known as photomontage, based on the cropping and rearrangement of still photographs, emerged in both Moscow and Berlin. In the Soviet Union, visual artists such as El Lissitsky and Alexander Rodchenko employed principles of dynamic juxtaposition, overlay, and re-composition in their poster and book designs. In Germany, the Dada and Bauhaus movements influenced a generation of graphic artists, including Kurt Schwitters, Jan Tschichold and John Heartfield, who pioneered the use of photomontage in everyday visual communication. Heartfield’s photomontages, in particular, stand out for their political and rhetorical ingenuity. For example, in ‘The Meaning of Hitler’s Greeting,’ a magazine cover from 1932, Heartfield places a shrunk photograph of Hitler’s salute beside a larger man in a suit holding out money, using montage to deliver a trenchant political point.  [File: HitGreet.jpg]  *No Caption Provided*  <http://madamepickwickartblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/weimar28.png>  The principle of montage, while achieving the zenith of its expression in the film and photography in the 1920s, developed from artistic currents that arose at the start of the century. Between 1907 and 1914, Picasso and Braque’s cubist canvasses shattered the system of fixed, singular perspective that had dominated western art since the Renaissance. In its wake, they developed a pictorial structure predicated on the recombination of fragments into a dynamic amalgam of perspectives. Meanwhile, the American filmmaker D.W. Griffith developed formal structures for film narrative based on dramatic cross cutting, counterpoint, and juxtaposition. His film *Intolerance*, first screened in the Soviet Union in 1919 and often credited as an important precursor to Soviet montage, combines four separate histories into a narrative composite.  Recent scholarship has explored the possible interrelation between montage in the cinema and the literary modernism of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, John Dos Passos, and others. The ‘Wandering Rocks’ sequence of *Ulysses*, the last section of *To The Lighthouse*, and Eliot’s *The Wasteland* have all been read in relation to the practice of film editing. While some scholars have questioned these trans-disciplinary readings, the influence of montage on Dos Passos is inarguable. A translator of the Cubist poet Blaise Cendrars and an ardent admirer of Eisenstein, Dos Passos employed montage techniques borrowed from the cinema to create a panorama of American society in his U.S.A. trilogy.  After a period of florescence in the 1920s, the montage aesthetic waned in the 1930s. An increasingly repressive Soviet bureaucracy and the rise of fascism in Germany ended artistic experimentation in both countries. Contemporaneous developments in sound technology in the cinema made narrative continuity –– or the perceived unity of time and space –– more salient and seamless. (In response to these developments, Eisenstein extended his theories to what he called ‘vertical montage,’ where the image and sound tracks operated in counterpoint rather than reinforcing one another.)  After World War Two, the film-critic André Bazin developed a theory of film realism that valued the innate plenitude of raw footage over the artful manipulation of that footage. While Bazin’s long-take, deep-focus aesthetic is often understood in direct opposition to Eisenstein’s theory of montage, many of the works praised by Bazin –– notably Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) and Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941) –– make use of the montage principle in their multi-perspectival narrative structures as well as their framed compositions –– if not in local editing patterns. A still from *Citizen Kane*, for example, reveals montage *within the shot*, where two separate planes of action exist in juxtaposition.  [File: Kane.jpg]  *No Caption Provided*  http://ferdyonfilms.com/Kane%203.jpg  In the late 1960s, with the rise of a politicized cinema, many critics and filmmakers rediscovered the montage principle of 1920s Soviet film culture. Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, as well as Latin American filmmakers Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, Santiago Alvarez, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea all employed a modernist mode heavily influenced by a Soviet understanding of montage. After the mid-1970s, however, cinematic montage waned again. Freed from its theoretical, historical and political roots, ‘montage’ now most often denotes any film sequence whose editing proceeds by an associative, rather than narrative, logic –– as in many commercials or music videos. |
| Further reading:  (Andrew)  (Aumont)  (Eisenstein)  (Eisenstein, Film Form)  (Hollis)  (Leyda) |