



Ideology as Form: Montage and the Aesthetics and Politics of Cinema

Ajay S. Sekher

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of English, SSUS Kalady, Kerala.

ISSN 2583-1836

Abstract: *The paper explores montage as a key cinematic technique and aesthetic element revealing the poetics and politics of cinema. The rise and development of montage as a basic practice of editing and film making are contextualized and critically historicized with reference to the Soviet school and the Hollywood narrative cinema. The early contributions of Eisenstein, Vertov, Kuleshov and other masters are critically relooked and evaluated in hindsight. An ethicopolitical and aesthetic critique of montage is also attempted in conclusion.*

Keywords: *Montage, Suture, Reality, Editing, Tonal, Metrical, Synthesis, Rhythmic, Intellectual, etc.*

Language is much closer to film than painting.

Sergei Eisenstein

The Russian master of montage Eisenstein was perhaps accenting on the generative or re-creative power of language and cinema linking them together in comparative ways, while he compared cinema with language. The third dimension or signification arising out of dissimilar or contradictory contexts, could be his implication here. It prompts us to further probe on the unique language or poetics of cinema and its multiple significations and possibilities in our own political contexts. Montage could be

identified as the basic technique and signifying element of film. It creates a third or different possibility or implication through the ingenious combination of discordance or different visuals. It is a formal element that enhances the content and political implications of the film. It distinguishes film from other art forms. It is a technique of editing as well as a way of narration in film. It is that aesthetics of cinema in which editing or cutting determines the power and impact of a film rather than its content or subject matter. In other words the medium or language becomes the message and the message in montage. It is the most illuminating and appealing element of films even among the blockbusters. From early Soviet cinema of the 1920s to the contemporary Hollywood hits montage is widely used with varying implications and improvisations. From Soviet early masters like Eisenstein to British hit-makers like Hitchcock we find the lavish use of montage as a unique element of their film making and style of editing and narration. Let us see the details and genealogies of this significant art or technique in cinema and explore it critically as a keyword and cherished jargon in cinema. Montage has evolved over the ages in unimaginable ways.

Montage and its Manifestations

It is not an English word, but drawn from the more culturally nuanced French language and abstracted in subtle ways in the genius of English language. The term montage in English is directly derived from the French word *monter*, meaning “to assemble” or to put together as if in suture. From early twentieth century onwards this new word was used to refer to the newly evolved art and technique of film editing. In film making and in the art and craft

of cinema and its aesthetics, it is used to refer to the creation of new meaning or suggestions through the combination of dissimilar visual images. It may be compared to collage technique in visual arts, but it differs from the collage as it creates a third greater dimension of meaning through the juxtapositions of images through intercutting and cross cutting. On the other hand the collage creates a holistic picture or mega structure through the juxtapositions and intermixture. So the technique of montage in film may be seen as more evolved, subtle and aesthetically and politically nuanced. The poetics or aesthetic and political constitution of montage is fascinating and enlightening for the students and general spectators of cinema.

Montage in its Political and Theoretical Contexts

The avant-garde Soviet film maker of early twentieth century Sergei Eisenstein in his 1925 essay “Montage of Cine-Attractions” elaborates the theory of montage as a combination of distinct units or shots in cinema to create a new meaning or suggestion in and through that combination process of editing. According to Eisenstein the essence of cinema is not in the images. It is there in the interrelations between the images. His implication is that the essence of cinema is nothing but montage. The director or the editor or both together thus will have to assemble individual cinematic shots into a composite whole. This montage was compared to an independent machine or an organism made up of cells by Eisenstein. In his interpretation and theory the collision, conflict and impact of cinematic images in human psyche, created the third dimension in montage and that caused the uniqueness of cinema as an art form and cultural articulation in modern times.

He was also able to provide a dialectical and Marxist interpretation to this phenomenon or theoretical understanding of the montage. The dialectical synthesis of opposing forces or interests in history, the continuous class conflicts and struggles created and justified the montage effect and principle in film, argued Eisenstein. The 1925 Eisenstein film *Battleship Potemkin* is the best example of the practice of this theoretical formulation. Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* also experimented with frequent intercuts and rhythmic cross-cuts to intensify the montage effect and contributed to the development of montage as a salient feature of early Soviet cinema. It is interesting to note that simple cuts and sutures are creating a lot of realities and diverse truths in cinema which make it a unique form of expression and communication.

Montage and its Cross-disciplinary Trajectories

This unique key characteristic of cinema has revolutionized literature and the whole arts in twentieth century. Montage the essence of modern cinema also determined the form and content of other art forms like poetry and the novel in Europe. Literary modernism in various modern European languages was inspired and enhanced by montage. It could be a simultaneous development in various arts and genres as well. Analytical explorations have unearthed the fact that the poetry of T S Eliot and the fiction of James Joyce and Woolf are perfect examples of the dialectical method of the montage. "Waste Land" the celebrated modernist poem by Eliot is a typical case in point where the heap of broken images create the fragmented and juxtaposed effect of inter and cross cutting and suture in film editing. It may also be observed that the fragmented and crisscrossing narratives of the postmodern

sensibility are also influenced by the filmic aesthetics of montage. It is interesting to see the evolving of this technique through various phases and turning points in the history of cinema.

The evolution of montage was not simple and linear. It is full of leaps and setbacks. Soon after its flourish in the 1920s, the montage aesthetic received its setbacks in the late 1930s. An increasingly totalitarian and repressive Soviet bureaucracy and the ascend of fascism proper in Nazi Germany or Italy regulated and controlled intellectual and political creativity in these parts of the world. New audio technology also provided collaterally, new grounds and forms of experimentation in film form and language. As a result Eisenstein responded creatively to this turn and improvised something that he called “vertical montage,” in which image and sound tracks operated in conflict or counterpoint rather than in quiet confluence, again pushing his dialectical philosophy in new modes. It may be observed that the evolution of this technique is very much close to the political and ideological formations of its times and contexts.

Montage Technique and its Composite Genealogies

Narrative cinema was based on a linear modes of storytelling in traditional conception in its origin. The regular practice of editing was based on a linear movement in time and progression of events in a narrative film. Montage technique was initiated in the films of American directors Edwin Porter (1870–1941) and D W Griffith (1875–1948). Griffith experimented with cross cuts and intercuts in his juxtapositions and produced a ground work for the montage. But generally montage is attributed to the

Russian editing techniques, especially its introduction to Hollywood viewers by the Serbian artist and montagist Slavko Verkapich in the 1930s. D W Griffith in America perfected and popularized the method called continuity editing. Here it is often used in the purpose of showing the passage of time, space or action within the narrative. On the other hand in early Soviet cinema of Eisenstein it served significant symbolic functions and suggestions. The evolution of formal technique as per the socio political and ideological context may be seen here.

Political context and patronage could be decisive in the development of arts in general. It is right in the case of cinema as well. Soon after the 1917 Russian revolution, films were encouraged in communist Russia for the purposes of class struggle and agitprop objectives. They faced the difficulty of getting adequate film stocks because of various economic and political reasons in the new communist country. The Russian school of film makers were exposed to the filmic works of D W Griffiths in particular and they were forced to experiment and improvise with the available stocks within limited conditions. The Russian director Lev Kuleshov improvised with some shots from these stocks. An insensitive face of a man was the anchoring shot in his experimental cut and suture. Kuleshov placed a bowl of soup and the image of a child along with the man's cold face. For the viewer the face linked with the image of the cup of soup suggested hunger and poverty and the face combined with the child invoked compassion and affection of the man for the child. The sequential order could be changed and different images could be added or removed or replaced to achieve different results and emotional responses or senses in the spectators.

Eisenstein and Pudovkin also quickly identified and stressed the impact and new connections or synthesis happening in the minds of the viewer and they used it in their film making and pedagogy. In general montage is classified into three categories. Narrative montage, graphic montage and ideational montage are the three. In narrative montage a single subject is followed in narrative throughout the sequence from one point to the end. In graphic montage various shots are mixed and juxtaposed on the basis of their visual appearance and not based on any continuity of action or events. In ideational montage two dissimilar images are related to a third dimension or suggested meaning. It is almost similar to the intellectual montage perfected by Eisenstein that we will deal with in detail. In films these categories and various types of montages often overlap and coexist.

Sports training montage is a montage technique popularized by American cinema and it spread to Asian and other film industries over the ages. It is a condensed visual sequence explaining and depicting the long sports training of the character through various intercuts and crossovers. In Asian cinema it became associated with the representation of martial arts and other forms of sports and physical action. The films of Bruce Lee and Jacky Chan are examples films using sports training montage. It also helps in characterization and the building up of the sustained hero. Such improvisations would add up to the rhythm and metre of visual narrative too. The overuse of this technique has created this montage into a filmic-cliché or ridiculous convention. But it is still the most symptomatic and characteristic feature of cinema. What is generally called cinematic is constituted by it.

Montage Methods and Types Improvised by Eisenstein

1. Metric Montage

This montage depends upon the length of the shots in a sequence or scene. The shots may be cut short and the number of shorts may be limited to achieve an intense effect. Multiple shots may be added and their frequency and length may be enhanced to create a longer scene or sequence. Time or tempo may be stretched or curtailed in metric montage. The people coming down the Odessa steps are a typical example. In real time the descend may take a minute or two for the running workers. But in the film it is stretched to seven minutes by adding various shorts and intercuts. The real time is surpassed and stretched to create longer sequence here. Metric montage is mostly based on the timing of the cut and combination of the shots.

2. Rhythmic Montage

If metric montage depends upon the timing and arrangement of shots in a scene, rhythmic montage is based on the content of the shots and scene. The movement or actions within the shots are of importance in it. The motion or action depicted in the various shorts also spurs the contrasting rhythmic effect of the montage. It creates continuity of movement within the scene and moves from edit to edit or cut to cut. The marching movements and the boot beats of the soldiers and the steps or the running workers and the jumping

physically challenged person down the steps in rhythmic motion are examples of this kind in *Battleship*. Timing of the cut, framing, images and combination in a sequence are also important in this montage.

3. Tonal Montage

It refers to the combination of shots with contrasting light and shade. The interplay of tone or shades or textures or colours provide new meaning, emotional touch and poise to the scene and narrative. It is not based on the timing of the cut and shots but its emotional appeal. Symbolic suggestions are achieved. Bright and shadowy shots are juxtaposed to raise the conflict and tension in the Odessa steps scene. Lighting and photography play an important role in the creation of this montage sequence. As the change in tone the mood of the viewer also changes. The falling of the baby carriage in *Battleship* is perfected with a range of light and shade moving shots by Eisenstein to intensify the emotional appeal and mood of the viewer.

4. Overtonal Montage

It is a combination of metric, rhythmic and tonal montages. The Odessa steps scene or the whole sequence at the port of Odessa is a perfect example of this complex montage. It is more comprehensive and complex and only masters of cinema like Eisenstein are able to perfect it. The Odessa port steps and this sequence in particular came to be known as 'Potemkin steps' after this path-breaking film.

5. Intellectual Montage

Eisenstein was a master of the intellectual or ideological montage. This is a montage in which new suggestive meanings are created through visual analogies and comparisons. The new meaning would not arise if the shots are shown separately or in a different order. The rising of the sleeping lion or the slaughter scene contrasted against brutal suppression are a few examples.

Critique of Montage, its Fall and Challenges ahead for Cinema

The fact we forget is that montage is only one technique involved in film making. The style and creative improvisations of the director and editor are many. Kuleshov viewed montage as secondary to the auteur or the filmmaker who used or improvised with it. Auteurism saw the director as the sole-creator of cinema. Perhaps the critique of montage began with this position that questioned the primacy of the montage in early Soviet times itself. The proper and more lasting critique of montage came from the French critic and theorist Bazin later. In the aftermath of the second World War, the French film-critic and master theorist André Bazin (1918-58), one of the founders of the ace film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, formulated a theory of film realism in which raw footage was valued over the cutting and pasting or editing of it. Bazin's film theory and aesthetics based on the long-take and deep-focus technique is often seen in direct disagreement to Eisenstein's theory of montage. But it is also interesting to see that most of the films appreciated by Bazin, like Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941),

follow the montage principle in multi-point of view or polyphonic narrative structure, as well as in framing, visualization, composition or at least in editing patterns. Montage was rediscovered in the 1960s by the political cinema exponents in Europe with the rise of the students, women and black movements. It was also a cultural turn of Marxism and the rise of the Gramscian neo left. Those were the days of decolonization and queer developments all over the world. Civil Rights movement and anti war slogans were also on the rise in America and in various European diasporic locations. Revolutionary film makers like Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Latin American filmmakers Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, Santiago Alvarez, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea used a modernist mode heavily influenced by a Soviet understanding of montage from the dialectical and Marxist point of view. With the rise of late capitalism and neo liberalism, after the mid-1970s, and particularly in the 1980s however, cinematic montage has receded again into counter cinema and parallel streams. It has been de-politicized and normalized and now most often denotes any visual narrative or video sequence where editing follows an associative, rather than a dialectical or synthetic, order or logical sequencing as in ads, promos, teasers and music videos or in the gaming industry. But the evolutionary history of montage is deeply inscribed in film history and the language and aesthetics of cinema. As animation, digital editing tools, augmented reality and artificial intelligence are revolutionizing cinema and visual cultures at large across languages and cultures it would be interesting to see the survival and transformations of montage and film form in near future.

Filmography

Battleship Potemkin. Directed by Eisenstein, 1925.

Ivan the Terrible I. Directed by Eisenstein, 1944.

Ivan the Terrible I. Directed by Eisenstein, 1945.

Man with a Movie Camera. Directed by Vertov, 1929.

October. Directed by Eisenstein, 1928.

Strike. Directed by Eisenstein, 1925.

Works Consulted

Aumont, J., and L. Hildreth. *Montage Eisenstein*, Indiana University Press, 1987.

Bazin, Andre. *What is Cinema?* University of California Press, 2005.

—. "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th edition, edited by Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Bordwell, David. *The Cinema of Eisenstein*. Harvard UP, 1993.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Translated by Jay Leyda, Harvest, 1977 (1949).

—. *Film Sense*. Translated by Jay Leyda, Harvest, 1975 (1942).

—. *The Battleship Potemkin* (Classic Film Scripts). Lorrimer, 2016.

—. *The Eisenstein Reader*. Translated and edited by Richard Taylor, British Film Institute, 1998.

—. *Towards a theory of Montage*. Tauris, 1998.

Hill and Gibson. *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, OUP, 1998, pp. 15-18.

Leyda, Jay, editor. *Eisenstein 2*. Translated by Alan Upchurch, et al., Seagull, 1985.

—. *Kino: A History of the Russian And Soviet Film*. Macmillan, 1960.

Villarejo, Amy. *Film Studies: The Basics*. Routledge, 2007.

WEB Links and Resources:

<https://www.britannica.com/art/montage-filmmaking>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montage_\(filmmaking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montage_(filmmaking))

<http://www.elementsofcinema.com/editing/montage.html>

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/montage>

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-montage-in-filmmaking-how-to-create-a-memorable-montage>

<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/overview/montage>

<http://balasubramanian-filmstudies.blogspot.com/>

(The inputs from Dr. Vellikeel Raghavan of CUK Kasarakod, with whom the author has done a UGC MOOC video on montage in 2020, are acknowledged. The ideas and notes are used in writing this essay)