

‘The idea of film-making as construction and montage as the putting together of parts of a machine (a machine for signifying, rather as Le Corbusier conceived of houses as machines for living in) had a strong appeal in modernist circles in the early years of the Russian Revolution.’

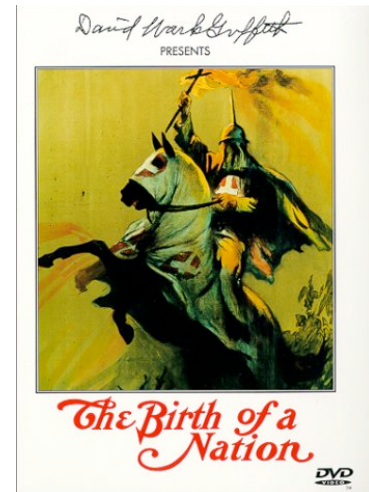
(Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Eisenstein on Montage*, from Michael Glenny, Richard Taylor (eds.), Michael Glenny (trans.), *S.M. Eisenstein Selected Work Volume II, Towards a Theory of Montage*, London: British Film Institute, 1991, p.xiii)

Among the films we studied on the course, I have chosen two films to help me to illustrate the significance of the technique of montage in cinema. They are David Wark Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). I will be using the points of view of an ordinary audience as well as a cultural historian to examine the impact of montage on our reading of the films mentioned.

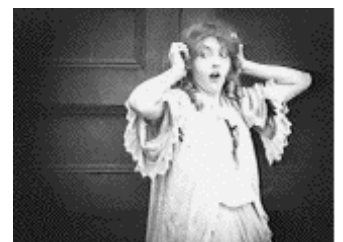
Before the sound cinema came to light, visual elements like images and imageries were dominant in films. This point worth bringing up because the experience and perception audience had with silent cinema relied dependently on the visuals and while the film-makers were in control of the methodology of such representation, it is therefore sound to say that the methodology of representation of visuals, like montage, had a direct effect on the audience in terms of psychology and metaphysics.

Montage in general terms 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/ or space’¹ It is an editing technique that combines or separates frames to construct narrative (or narratives in the post-modernist films), sense of continuity and discontinuity and juxtapositions.

Birth of a Nation is one of the most 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 grammars (skills) in this language system is the technique of montage. 'In addition to exploring the potential of flashbacks, "eyeline matches" and camera distances, his (Griffith) earliest pictures also showed that individual shots were cinematic phrases that could be edited together into meaningful sequences without a concrete dramatic logic to link them.'²



For instance, by using rapid cutting, the scene in which Lynch attempts to forced 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. (see pictures of the clip below³)

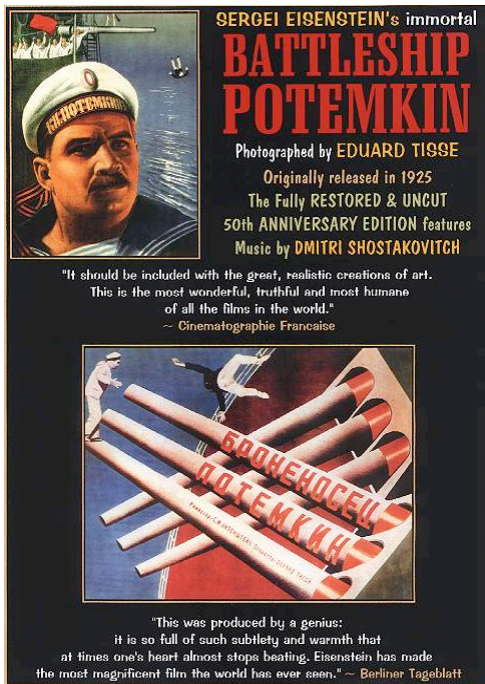


Carter provides a good description on the use of montage here: '...the intercutting of parallel scenes occurring at different locations in space, but at the same location in time, each of which has a bearing upon the other, with the meanings of both carefully interwoven, and with the tensions of either relieved only when the two are finally brought together'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 (or glorified) 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'⁵.

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. Having watched the film at the White House, president and former history professor Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the film was not only historically accurate, but was 'like history written with lightning'⁶. Like Wilson, a lot of white American audience actually believed the film was a truthful and accurate representation of racial politics and of history. They identified themselves with the white characters in the film who stand against the blacks. 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'⁷. 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*.



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's psyche.⁸ 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'⁹. 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:

1. Dramatic Form
2. Rhythm in the Narrative
3. Metaphor and Analogy
4. Dynamic in building up the film's Meaning

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 political and ideological responsibilities, the film has successfully generated its power and impact through metaphysical and figurative form with

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:

1. 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).
2. Cutting between ghostly figures hanging and clenched fists, furthered by an inter-title 'Down with the tyrants!' to legitimise people's anger.
3. 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.
4. 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.

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 (fig. a)¹⁰, 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 (fig. b), 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. (fig. c)



fig. a

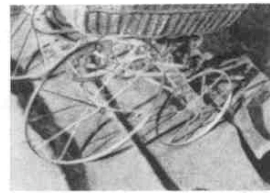


fig. c



fig. b

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 (fig. d) to increase the emotional impact of the sequence.



fig. d



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. This dialectical montage in fact only involves two methods: cutting and overlapping of shots, and yet the output sequence is so emotionally draining, that we can develop a new perspective on how powerful and manipulating cinema can be.

The film's final sequence has the Potemkin's revolutionaries preparing for battle with the squadron sent out by the government. 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. 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,

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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.

Some people argue that montage is too manipulative and obstruct the rational thinking of the audience. I agree with this comment however this is not a necessarily negative thing if we look from the point of view of certain film-makers, for instance those Russian film-makers in the years of revolution and those German film-makers during Nazi rule. What those film-makers want is actually the 'irrational' thinking of their audience, because it means their propaganda works and that their films have an ideological influence on their audience.

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.

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- 1 Valerie Orpen, *Film Editing the Art of the Expressive* (London: Wallflower, 2003), p.126
2 Winona State University, <http://course1.winona.msus.edu/pjohnson/h140/early%20film.html>
(retrieved 12/04/2004)
- 3 All pictures of *The Birth of a Nation* are from Museum of Modern Art, Film Stills Archive,
4 http://www.pbs.org/.../theater/birthofanation_big.html (retrieved 15/04/2004)
- 5 Everett Carter, *Cultural History Written with Lightning: The Significance of The Birth of a Nation*
(1915), from P. Rollins, *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in its Cultural Context* (Kentucky:
6 Kentucky U.P., 1998), p.16
- 7 Henry MacMahon, *The Art of the Movies*, (New York: New York Times, 6 June 1915), section 6, p.8
8 Carter, *op. cit.*, p.9
- 9 *Ibid*, p.10
- 10 In Eisenstein's definition of film art, the film must plough the psyche of the viewer according to class
principles, it is like comparing montage to the explosions of an internal combustion engine which
drive the tractor/ film forward
- S. Eisenstein, *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form*, from *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda, (Dennis
Dobson, 1963), p.49
- All pictures of *Battleship Potemkin* are from Heritage Film Art & Photo Archive,
<http://www.easy.com.au/heritage/gallery-potemkin.htm> (retrieved 12/04/2004)

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