

M o n t a g e

an introduction

Montage: history

A definition: The process or technique of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of film or video to form a continuous whole.

The American school, exemplified in D.W. Griffith, relies on oppositions (rich/poor, men/women), but attempts to give to them the unity in a whole. The Soviet school, in particular Sergei Eisenstein, sees montage as developmental and revolutionary: opposite ideas giving birth to something new. Pre-war French montage puts the emphasis on movement. German expressionist montage emphasizes color and light and is essentially a montage of visual contrasts.

Montage: history

A montage sequence is a technique in editing (i.e. using rapid editing, special effects and music) in a series of short shots edited into a sequence to condense narrative. It is usually used to advance the story as a whole (often to suggest the passage of time), rather than to create symbolic meaning as it does in Soviet montage theory.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, montage sequences often combined numerous short shots with special optical effects (fades, dissolves, split screens, double and triple exposures) and music.

Soviet montage theory is an approach to understanding and creating cinema that relies heavily upon editing (montage is French for "putting together"). Although Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s disagreed about how exactly to view montage, Sergei Eisenstein marked a note of accord in "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" when he noted that montage is "the nerve of cinema," and that "to determine the nature of montage is to solve the specific problem of cinema."

While no Soviet filmmakers, such as Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, and Vsevolod Pudovkin put forth explanations of what constitutes the montage effect, Eisenstein's view that "montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots" wherein "each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other" has become most widely accepted.

Montage: methods of montage

1. Metric - where the editing follows a specific number of frames (based purely on the physical nature of time), cutting to the next shot no matter what is happening within the image. This montage is used to elicit the most basal and emotional of reactions in the audience.

* Metric montage example from Eisenstein's October.

2. Rhythmic - includes cutting based on time, but using the visual composition of the shots -- along with a change in the speed of the metric cuts -- to induce more complex meanings than what is possible with metric montage. Once sound was introduced, rhythmic montage also included audial elements (music, dialogue, sounds).

* Rhythmic montage example from The Battleship Potemkin's "Odessa steps" sequence.

3. Tonal - a tonal montage uses the emotional meaning of the shots -- not just manipulating the temporal length of the cuts or its rhythmical characteristics -- to elicit a reaction from the audience even more complex than from the metric or rhythmic montage. For example, a sleeping baby would evoke calmness and relaxation.

* Tonal example from Eisenstein's The Battleship Potemkin. This is the clip following the death of the revolutionary sailor Vakulinchuk, a martyr for sailors and workers.

Montage: methods of montage cont.

4. Overtonal/Associational - the overtonal montage is the cumulation of metric, rhythmic, and tonal montage to synthesize its effect on the audience for an even more abstract and complicated effect.

* Overtonal example from Pudovkin's *Mother*. In this clip, the men are workers walking towards a confrontation at their factory, and later in the movie, the protagonist uses ice as a means of escape.

5. Intellectual - uses shots which, combined, elicit an intellectual meaning.

* Intellectual montage examples from Eisenstein's *October* and *Strike*. In *Strike*, a shot of striking workers being attacked cut with a shot of a bull being slaughtered creates a film metaphor suggesting that the workers are being treated like cattle. This meaning does not exist in the individual shots; it only arises when they are juxtaposed.

* Some contemporary examples of intellectual montage:

- In *The Godfather*, during Michael's nephew's baptism, the priest performs the sacrament of baptism while we see killings ordered by Michael take place elsewhere. The murders thus "baptize" Michael into a life of crime.
 - At the end of *Apocalypse Now* the execution of Colonel Kurtz is juxtaposed with the villagers' slaughter of a water buffalo.
- In *Boogie Nights*, Dirk Diggler announces at the conclusion of filming a pornographic scene that he can "do it again". There is then a quick cut to a champagne bottle uncorking at a post-shoot party, representing both ejaculation and Dirk's celebratory initiation into the world of porn.

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potyomkin), 1925, 69:00 min. (varies)

Plot Summary

The film celebrates the limited 1905 Revolution against tsarism in Russia. Sailors on the battleship Potemkin begin to rebel when they are given maggot-infested food to eat. The ship's doctor denying that there are maggots in the meat, symbolizes the cowardly section of the middle class. The ship's captain orders those who protest to be shot on deck, but sailor Vakulinchuk asks, "Brothers! Do you realize who you are shooting?" The shooting squad lowers their rifles, and mutiny on the ship begins. The sailors attack the officers and gain control of the ship, although Vakulinchuk is killed by a senior officer. The sailors take him to the port city of Odessa, where his body serves as a symbol of martyrdom of those who would give their lives for the revolution. Citizens come out to pay respect and offer their support for the Potemkin. Many are gathered on the steps of Odessa when, suddenly, a tsarist militia arrives and begins firing into the crowd. The battleship responds by firing at the headquarters of the tsarist generals located nearby onshore. A squadron has been sent out against the Potemkin, and the sailors decide to sail out and face it. Two battleships approach, and the Potemkin readies its cannons but sends up a signal, "Don't fight—join us." On the verge of a battle, a title reads, "Brothers!", and sailors on all of the ships begin celebrating. The Potemkin and its jubilant crew pass without being attacked and with added support.

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potyomkin), 1925

Eisenstein sought to tell the story of the Battleship Potemkin uprising in 1905 in order to inspire his comrades towards Bolshevism. Eisenstein wrote the film as a revolutionary propaganda film, but also used it to test his theories of "montage". The revolutionary Soviet filmmakers of the Kuleshov school of filmmaking were experimenting with the effect of film editing on audiences, and Eisenstein attempted to edit the film in such a way as to produce the greatest emotional response, so that the viewer would feel sympathy for the rebellious sailors of the Battleship Potemkin and hatred for their cruel overlords. In the manner of most propaganda, the characterization is simple, so that the audience could clearly see with whom they should sympathize.

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Battleship Potemkin was acclaimed critically worldwide. But it was mostly his international critical renown which enabled Eisenstein to direct further films such as *October* (aka *Ten Days That Shook The World*) as part of a grand tenth anniversary celebration of the October Revolution of 1917. The critics of the outside world praised them, but at home, Eisenstein's focus in these films on structural issues such as camera angles, crowd movements and montage, brought him and like-minded others, such as Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, under fire from the Soviet film community, forcing him to issue public articles of self-criticism and commitments to reform his cinematic visions to conform to socialist realism's increasingly specific doctrines.

Potemkin has been called one of the most influential films of all time, and was named the greatest film of all time at the World's Fair at Brussels, Belgium, in 1958.

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Odessa Steps sequence

The most famous scene in the film is the massacre of civilians on the Odessa Steps (also known as the Primorsky or Potemkin Stairs). In this scene, the Tsar's Cossacks in their white summer tunics march down a seemingly endless flight of steps in a rhythmic, machine-like fashion, slaughtering a crowd, including a young boy, as they flee. After the boy falls, his mother picks up his body and yells at the soldiers to stop firing. They do, only to shoot her minutes later. Toward the end of the sequence, the soldiers shoot a mother who is pushing a baby in a baby carriage. As she falls to the ground, dying, she leans against the carriage, nudging it away; it rolls down the steps amidst the fleeing crowd.

The scene is perhaps the best example of Eisenstein's theory on montage, and many films pay homage to the scene, including Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables*, and George Lucas's *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. Several films spoof it, including Woody Allen's *Bananas and Love and Death*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, Zucker and Segal's *Naked Gun 33⅓: The Final Insult*, and the Italian comedy "*il secondo tragico Fantozzi*" (in English, "*The Second Tragic Fantozzi Movie*").

The massacre on the steps is fictional, presumably created by Eisenstein for its dramatic venue and effect, as well as for propaganda and to demonize the Czar and the Imperial regime. It is, however, based on the fact that there were widespread demonstrations in the area, sparked off by the arrival of the Potemkin in Odessa Harbor, and both the Times of London and the resident British Consul reported that troops fired on the crowds with accompanying loss of life (the actual casualties are unrecorded). Film critic Roger Ebert writes, "That there was, in fact, no czarist massacre on the Odessa Steps scarcely diminishes the power of the scene ... It is ironic that [Eisenstein] did it so well that today the bloodshed on the Odessa steps is often referred to as if it really happened."

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Odessa Steps sequence

A wide shot of the massacre on the "Odessa Steps"



The boots of the Tsarist soldiers shown marching down the "Odessa Steps"



The baby in the carriage falling down the "Odessa Steps"

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"

The Odessa Steps sequence



The Tsarist soldiers shown marching down the "Odessa Steps"



The mother carrying her dead child towards the soldiers. She turns to the side, speaking directly to the camera: lamenting, accusing and appealing all at the same time.

Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin"



142-metre-long (466FT) Potemkin Stairs

The Untouchables (1987)

Federal Agent Elliot Ness sets out to take out Al Capone; because of rampant corruption, he assembles a small, hand-picked team.

Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult (1994)

Frank Drebin comes out of retirement to help Police Squad infiltrate a gang of terrorists planning to detonate a bomb at the Academy Awards.