

MONTAGE – THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF FILM

Tom Barrance

ABSTRACT

In the years between the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin, Soviet filmmakers invented radical new ways of using film. They explored how images could be combined and contrasted to get ideas across, and how the rhythm and pace of editing and the use of music could stir emotions. The montage techniques they developed offer exciting and creative opportunities for students to explore the relationships between picture, sound and editing. This session looked at the principles of Soviet montage, how these ideas are still used today, and how children can use montage in their own filmmaking.

Most scenes in modern films and television drama use camera, editing and sound in such a way as to create an illusion of reality. They do this by following a set of ‘rules’ about where the camera is positioned, how the subject is framed, and how images are edited together.

THE ‘RULES’ OF CONTINUITY

These include:

- 180 degree rule, which states that the camera has to stay on one side of the main ‘axis of action’
- looking space (if a character is looking at something, there needs to be more space in the direction they are looking)
- eyeline match (the direction of their gaze should align with the thing they are looking at)
- ‘editing on the action’ so that action seems smooth and continuous

Taken together, these rules – most of which were developed in the first two decades of the twentieth century – are known as the ‘continuity system’. Many modern filmmakers deliberately break some of these rules, but they are still the predominant way in which audiences understand time and space in narrative films.

Many filmmaking projects (including some of ours) have focused on teaching children how to imitate traditional film and television drama by following these rules. But children – particularly younger children – can find the rules difficult to grasp, so that adults constantly have to intervene during the filming and editing process to ensure that the children get satisfactory results. And even with this intervention, the end result is often a poor imitation of what they are used to seeing on television, with obvious weaknesses in sound, editing and acting.

MONTAGE

While continuity is clearly the dominant way to make films, it isn’t the only way. There is another tradition which can offer great scope for children to exercise independent creativity: it’s called montage.

The term ‘montage’ is loosely used to mean any sequence which combines images in a way that doesn’t depict continuous action. TV dramas use images from several different episodes, or from different periods of a character’s life, as a kind of shorthand. Some programmes use montages edited to a song: for example, ‘The Wire’ uses one of these at the end of each season to sum up the series, while ‘Holby City’ uses them to depict a character’s emotional state.

SOVIET MONTAGE

My session focused on a more tightly defined meaning of ‘montage’: specifically, the techniques that were invented by Soviet filmmakers in the years between the Russian revolution and the rise of Stalin. These techniques are still used by filmmakers today and provide exciting opportunities to explore how images, sound and ideas can work together.

‘Soviet montage’ was born out of both ideology and necessity. After the 1917 revolution, film stock was in short supply, so filmmakers learnt by experimenting with found footage, exploring different ways in which images could be combined. One of the things they discovered was that audiences would respond to images differently depending on context. In the ‘Kuleshov experiment’, audiences were shown a close-up of an actor followed by a shot of either a

bowl of soup, a coffin, or an attractive woman. They thought that the actor was expressing hunger, grief or desire and were impressed by his acting, though in fact each of his close-ups used exactly the same footage.

In the early Soviet era there was a huge demand for propaganda, and film was seen as the ideal medium to convey ideas to a largely illiterate audience. Lenin said, ‘...of all the arts, film is the most important to us’. Filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov thought that the continuity system was ‘bourgeois’ and created an illusion of reality: as committed Marxists they believed in ‘dialectic’, where meaning comes from the conflict between ideas. Eisenstein wanted to use cinema to stir emotions and inspire the audience to revolutionary action.

EISENSTEIN'S THEORIES OF MONTAGE

Eisenstein was the great theorist of montage in books such as ‘Film Form’. He’s not the easiest writer, and much of his writing tries to squeeze aesthetics into rigid ‘scientific’ principles and to make tenuous analogies to musical composition, but some of his theories are helpful. He developed a hierarchy of montage that increases in sophistication. The most basic kind of montage was ‘metric montage’. This was montage in which the duration of each shot was worked out according to strict mathematical ratios – so that if the main shots in a sequence are (say) eight seconds long, other shots could be four, two or one second. Metric montage was developed when films were still silent.

Things get more complicated with ‘rhythmic montage’, where shot durations become flexible and take account of movement within the frame. A further development is ‘tonal’ montage where the emotional content of the images are also taken into account. ‘Overtonal’ montage combines all of these kinds of montage techniques.

For getting ideas across – rather than just stirring emotions – Eisenstein used ‘intellectual montage’. This is where images are combined to make comparisons and analogies, so in *Strike* shots of a cow being slaughtered are intercut with shots of workers being killed by troops. *October* also uses intellectual montage: in one sequence, *For God and Country*, Christian symbols are juxtaposed with religious artefacts from other cultures with the aim of suggesting that all religions are the same.

The most famous montage sequence of all is the Odessa Steps scene from *Battleship Potemkin*, where protesting citizens are mowed down by Tsarist troops. This sequence uses a whole range of montage techniques: strong, graphic images; dramatic cuts from wide shots to extreme close-ups; movement conveyed by editing, by camera movement, and by horizontal and diagonal alignments of objects and people. The scene also uses ‘stretch time’, extending the headlong rush down the steps – which would, in reality, probably have taken no more than a minute or so – to seven minutes.

Vertical montage is a further development of Eisenstein’s ideas. Rather than considering individual images and how they relate to each other in sequence, ‘vertical montage’ refers to how different aspects of the content of images work in combination with the soundtrack. If we consider a modern title sequence, we can consider the diegetic (‘natural’) sound, the music, and different layers of text and images as ‘vertical’ montage.

DZIGA VERTOV AND ‘MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA’

Eisenstein’s films are much studied, but their emphasis on conflict and violence and their heavy-handed revolutionary messages make them hard to use with younger students. His contemporary, Dziga Vertov, is much more accessible.

Vertov used montage to try and depict reality in a transparent way, as an alternative to the illusion of reality created by the continuity system. The term he coined for this was ‘Kino Eye’. (Eisenstein stated ‘I do not believe in Kino Eye, I believe in Kino Fist’, which pretty much sums up the difference between the two filmmakers). Vertov’s 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* is a ‘city symphony’: one of a number of films made in the 1920s, which depicted a day in the life of a city, in this case, Moscow. Unlike much of Eisenstein’s work, this film is actually fun to watch, and I’ve found that it can inspire children’s filmmaking and writing. The morning scene, for example, uses fragments and close-ups, low and high angle shots, and patterns and shapes. We see repeated groups of numbers; three windows followed by three park benches, for example.

The film covers a huge variety of activities: football, dance, swimming, factory workers, a funeral, a (very graphic) birth, firemen answering a call, an accident; it ends with a furiously powerful and rapid accumulation of shots, with images overlaid over each other, split screen, and animation (the camera nods and takes a bow). Vertov also wants us to be aware of the filmmaking process, so we see a shot of a car racing along a street, then a shot of the camera car; the final sequence cuts from the film to the audience viewing the film, and we see the camera filming, a woman (Vertov’s wife, Elizaveta Svilova) editing the film, and the camera overlaid over crowd scenes.

MONTAGE IN MODERN FILMS

The 1980s film *Koyaanisqatsi* (*Life out of Balance*) uses many of Vertov's techniques, but for diametrically opposed purposes: where Vertov wanted to celebrate the crowd and the modern city, director Geoffrey Reggio made an environmentalist diatribe, using a range of techniques including time-lapse footage to depict modern life as a nightmare and contrasting it with the 'natural' wisdom of the Hopi Indians. Like Eisenstein he employed 'intellectual montage': in one sequence he compares commuters on an escalator to sausages being extruded from a machine. It's a frequently beautiful film and worth using in small extracts, though parts of it can be overwhelming for children.

One of the most powerful examples of modern 'rhythmic montage' is the three-man confrontation in the spaghetti western *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, where the characters face each other around a circular arena. Sergio Leone uses a whole raft of Soviet montage techniques: dramatic cuts from wide shots to close-up and extreme close-up, cuts between close-ups, and accelerating editing, all co-ordinated with Sergio Morricone's spectacular score.

A simpler example of 'rhythmic montage' comes from Alex Cox's punk sci-fi film *Repo Man*, in which shots of sections from a map are edited precisely to a driving Iggy Pop soundtrack, with the cuts coming sometimes every bar and sometimes every beat.

CHILDREN'S MONTAGE

We've used montage widely with children, particularly with poetry and music. It's a very accessible way for children to concentrate on close-ups, camera angles, colour, texture and pattern, rather than getting bogged down in trying to imitate reality. In the workshop, I showed a Year 6 music-based montage from our 'Ffilmschool 2' project, in which children were given a set of abstract still images, asked to create a piece of music based on four of the images, and then edit the images to the beat of their music and added effects. I also showed some poem films from a one-day workshop where children had explored a local canal centre, shot images, written and recorded poems and edited the images to match the text.

CREATING MONTAGE

In the practical part of the workshop, I gave participants an unedited continuity sequence. In this sequence (from Media Education Wales' forthcoming resource 'Editsense') a boy stands on a beach looking out to sea, while a girl dressed in black appears from behind a rock and approaches him. The task was to create a rhythmic montage, ignoring the rules of continuity and concentrating on the rhythm of the editing and the dramatic juxtaposition of images. We used iMovie 09 for this, taking a suitably Eisensteinian piece of music ('Dogma', one of the music clips included in the iLife sound effects) and adding beat markers in time to the music. Instead of putting markers on the first beat of each bar, participants put some of them on every bar and some of them on every beat, varying the pace for effect.

In many of the participants' films the transformation was dramatic, completely altering the feel of the sequence and drawing the viewer's attention to different aspects of the scene and the relationship between the two characters. This could be taken further by choosing a scene from a film adaptation, and using montage techniques to emphasise different aspects of the scene's meaning; alternatively students could plan to adapt a scene themselves as a montage rather than a continuity sequence.

REFERENCES

'Film Form', Sergei Eisenstein, Harcourt Publishers, 1969

Strike (1925), dir. Eisenstein

October (1928), dir. Eisenstein

Battleship Potemkin (1925), dir. Eisenstein

Man with a Movie Camera (1929), dir. Vertov

Koyaanisqatsi (1982), dir. Reggio

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (1966), dir. Leone

Repo Man (1984), dir. Cox

Tom is Director of Media Education Wales, www.mediaedwales.org.uk, a Cardiff-based non-profit organisation which supports media and moving image education and filmmaking with children, young people and adults. He has run projects and workshops and delivered training in all four countries of the UK and beyond. Tom is particularly interested in ensuring that children's filmmaking is informed by an understanding of film language, and using non-mainstream and non-traditional film forms to encourage creativity and extend children's awareness of moving image culture and heritage. Recently Tom has led several projects in areas of social deprivation which have linked filmmaking to creative writing, music-making and poetry.