YOU ARE HERE
THE JOURNAL OF CREATIVE GEOGRAPHY

ISSUE XVII
THE MONTAGE EFFECT

Founded in 1998
University of Arizona · School of Geography & Development
It became apparent that through montage it was possible to create a new earthly terrain that did not exist anywhere.”

(Kuleshov 1974 [1929], 52).

The term ‘creative geography,’ attributed to the Soviet pioneer of cinematic montage, Lev Kuleshov, is intended to capture the capacity of continuity editing to bring into view new worlds. Like many filmmaking techniques – the tracking shot; stop-motion; etc. –, what retrospectively seems unremarkable was initially far from obvious and arose almost entirely fortuitously.

All the fundamental principles of montage … were first used by me in the film Engineer Prite’s Project [1917–1918]. In shooting Engineer Prite’s Project we encountered a certain difficulty. It was necessary for our leading characters, a father and his daughter, to walk across a meadow and look at a pole from which electrical cables were strung. Due to technical circumstances, we were not able to shoot all this at the same location. We had to shoot the pole in one location and separately shoot the father and daughter in another place. We shot them looking upward, talking about the pole and walking on. We intercut the shot of the pole, taken elsewhere, into the walk across the meadow. (Kuleshov 1974, 51)

Whilst Kuleshov cannot claim sole credit for developing such techniques, his conceptual leap towards ‘creative geography’ is nonetheless noteworthy: ‘In simply matching the spatial cues of an actor’s movements, the movements within the film frame suggested that disparate locales constitute a contiguous space for the duration of the editing sequence’s linear continuity in its dramatic action’ (Goodwin 1993, 34). The imputed sense of ‘linear continuity’ and a ‘contiguous space’ perhaps sounds closer to the ‘narrative space’ of classic Hollywood cinema – which Heath (1981) decried as an ideological means of interpolating the viewer in an illusory position of mastery – than it does to the Soviet tradition of montage. The latter sought not to efface but to foreground both cinema’s productive apparatus and the constructed nature of the image – destabilizing the viewer’s position, defamiliarizing received understandings, and thus provoking thought and action.

In theorizing film as montage, early Soviet cinema emphasized form over content. Indeed, Kuleshov’s most famous experiment sought to demonstrate that the juxtaposition of shots had a determinate effect on their perceived content. The so-called ‘Kuleshov effect’ refers to reported audience responses to a series of filmic experiments conducted in the 1910s and 1920s (see Tsivian et al. 1996); notably, in relation to spectators’ perceptions of the acting prowess of
Ivan Mozhukhin (a romantic lead of Tsarist cinema) in one particular short experimental film. Comprised solely of found footage, Kuleshov’s film intercut the same stock footage of Mozhukhin – in close-up and maintaining a relatively neutral facial expression – with a bowl of soup; the body of a child in a coffin; and a woman on a divan. Viewers reputedly detected in Mozhukhin’s unchanging ‘performance’ the subtle emoting of pensive hunger; profound sorrow; and libidinous desire, respectively. Such is the power of montage – not least because the world itself possesses a montage-like quality, as Sergei Eisenstein sought to demonstrate both in his filmmaking practice and his theoretical writings (Eisenstein 1949).

For Eisenstein, an ‘architectural assemblage’ is ‘a montage from the point of view of a moving spectator, but if the spectator cannot move, he has to gather in one point the elements of that which is dispersed in reality, unseizable to a single gaze’ (cited by Bois; see Eisenstein et al. 1989, 110). By extension, ‘Cinematographic montage is, too, a means to ‘link’ in one point – the screen – various elements (fragments) of a phenomenon filmed in diverse dimensions, from diverse points of view’ (ibid.). Now, Lefebvre (1991, 96) typically railed against the false power of the image: ‘Where there is error or illusion, the image is more likely to secrete it and reinforce it than to reveal it.’ Montage hardly escapes Lefebvre’s opprobrium: ‘Cutting things up and rearranging them, découpage and montage – these are the alpha and omega of the art of image-making,’ Lefebvre (ibid., 97) complained, on the grounds that exhibiting fragmentation ‘fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm’ (ibid.). Yet Lefebvre grants a notable exception to the ‘dialectical montage’ practised in early Soviet cinema, insofar as its express purpose was to render abstraction tangible, even visceral. ‘Eisenstein was able to shatter photographic realism, treating images not as mere reflections of objects but as the raw material for the world of art; through montage he achieved a reality which was far more profound than immediate reality, making room in his images for the imaginary, for fiction, for emotion, for thought’ (Lefebvre 1995, 107).

Whilst dialectical montage – exposing contradictions as a way of prompting forms of consciousness that might effect their resolution – invokes a particular image of time (as well as envisioning a particular role for art), what of Benjamin’s (1999, 462 [N2a, 3]) recognition that the ‘image is dialectics at a standstill’ or his notion of the ‘dialectical image … flashing up in the now of its recognizability’ (ibid., 473 [N9, 7])?

Benjamin’s conception rests not merely on the subjection of temporality to a kind of spectral decomposition but also – especially – to a temporally aligned rearticulation of space defined in visual terms. It relates to the awakening of consciousness that Benjamin associated with the ‘pathos of nearness’ (Pathos
a notion marking a contrast with the appeal to ‘empathy’ implicit in the distant gaze (Fernsicht) of Romanticism: a gaze transfixed on the eternity of history. As Doherty (2006, 160) avers, ‘Benjamin invokes montage in connection with his efforts to produce a heightened perceptibility or vividness (gesteigerte Anschaulichkeit)’ that appeals to a conception of history as ‘a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]’ (Benjamin 1968a, 261). Such an appeal is evident in Benjamin’s famous passage in convolute N of *The Arcades Project*:

> It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin 1999, 462 [N2a, 3])

In a detailed exposition of this conception, Pensky (2004, 177) begins by rhetorically posing a series of questions: ‘What possible philosophy of history could explicate the difference between the past and “what-has-been,” between the present and the “now”? What could it mean to claim that an alternative version of historical happening depends on a “flash” of synthesis between what has been and a now?’ Starting from a discussion of the role of montage in the films of Guy Debord, Agamben (2002) undertakes an explication that points up the resonance between the conditions of possibility of cinema and Benjamin’s conception of history.

For Benjamin (1999, 471 [N8, 1]), ‘history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [Eingedenken]. What science has “determined;” remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.’ If this initially appears enigmatic, its sense becomes apparent as soon as one comes to recognize that ‘that’s also the definition of cinema,’ Agamben (2002, 316) proposes. In its capacity to cut and reconnect, to repeat and differ, cinema ‘restores the possibility of what was, renders it possible anew’ (ibid., 316). Indeed, cinema is a machine harnessing the ‘capacity to de-create the real’ (ibid, 318); subjecting what has become ossified and obdurate to ‘the dynamite of the tenth of a second’ (Benjamin 1968b, 236; cf. Canales 2009). After Benjamin, ‘The camera was no longer an instrument that recorded presences, it was a way of making the world disappear, a technique for encountering the invisible’ (to recontextualize a formulation from Auster (1992, 64)). And therein ‘lies the proximity of repetition and memory [Eingedenken]. Memory cannot give us back what was…. Instead,
memory restores possibility to the past ... makes the unfulfilled into the fulfilled and the fulfilled into the unfulfilled’ (Agamben 2002, 316). Cinema deterritorializes and reterritorializes. It creates a new earthly terrain.

Another way of putting this is to recognize that ‘memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium’ (Benjamin 2005, 576).

It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the ‘matter itself’ is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights. (ibid.)

On this archaeological conception of history, Benjamin’s sense of ‘nearness’ resurfaces in a manner apposite to montage: no longer beholden to the metric of the near and far; just as the ‘now’ of Jetztzeit is no longer coincident with the present; nor the past with ‘what-has-been’ (in the sense of being over and done with, dead and buried). Proximity has become a mode of appearance: the ‘distant’ is shrouded in the aura of history; the ‘near’ is an unearthing, the excavation of a trace. ‘The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain the thing that calls it forth; in the aura, it takes possession of us’ (Benjamin 1999, 467 [M1 6a, 4]).

There is one final sense in which this scrambling of frames of reference reaches beyond any possible subsumation of montage within the confines of a given metric, which Lyotard (2011) broaches in relation to Freud’s essay, ‘A child is being beaten’ (S.E. xvii). Freud’s essay presents a montage of multiple identifications entailed by one particular fantasy, in turn recalling Lacan’s (1979, 169) conception that ‘the drive is a montage ... in the sense in which one speaks of a montage in a surrealist collage.’ Lacan’s point concerns the distinction between instinct (Instinkt) and drive (Trieb). Instinct is far from montage-like, amounting to an automated response (such as the pupil contacting in bright light), which coordinates the body and the world in a sensori-motor fashion (after the model of a pre-programmed thermostat). In contrast, the four constituents of the drive – source, pressure, aim, and object – are, like montage, heterogeneous and fundamentally uncoordinated (akin to the blueprint of a prototype desiring-machine: ‘the resulting image would show the working of a dynamo connected up to a gas-tap, a peacock’s feather emerges, and tickles the belly of a pretty woman’ (ibid.)). But whilst, for the most part, ‘Stage and screen – that is, the representational frame – come with the drama,’ Lyotard (2011,
(ibid.)

REFERENCES


