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The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film

David Bordwell

Some questions in film history can be answered in terms of cinema alone. Other questions demand that the historian place film-making in a larger context. For example, the historically significant European film-maker often has artistic alliances outside film, in stage directing (e.g., Sjöström, Visconti, and Bergman), painting (e.g., Antonioni, Bresson), or even poetry (e.g., the Prévertes). For this reason, many problems in European film history can be solved only by an investigation of the relationship between film and the other arts.

The history of Soviet cinema offers a problem of this kind. Between 1924 and 1930, several Soviet films exhibited a radically original film style, generally known as the montage style. Montage was used to build a narrative (by formulating an artificial time and space or guiding the viewer's attention from one narrative point to another), to control rhythm, to create metaphors, and to make rhetorical points. The most celebrated exponents of this style—Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov, and Eisenstein—were also its most eloquent theoreticians, all of whose theories assumed that filmic meaning is built out of an assemblage of shots which creates a new synthesis, an overall meaning that lies not within each part but in the very fact of juxtaposition. Yet despite a certain broad agreement on the foundations of montage, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Vertov were not a unified school; significant aesthetic disagreements separated them. Why, then, did these directors formulate a theory of montage and employ the montage style in their films at the precise time they did? And why did montage cease to become the characteristic strategy of Soviet film-making around 1930? Film historians have traditionally offered three answers to the first question:

1. Kuleshov conducted certain montage experiments between 1919 and 1924 which influenced other directors.
2. There was a shortage of raw film stock.
3. Griffith's *Intolerance*, whose formal structure utilizes the montage principle, was first screened in the Soviet Union in 1919, and directors took it as a model.

These explanations seem not so much wrong as incomplete. Undoubtedly these three factors were important in the situation, but as historical explana-

tions they lack coherence and precision. First, Kuleshov's experiments were not so innovative as many believe; Vertov was working along similar lines at about the same time, and he soon became deeply hostile to Kuleshov's work in the narrative film. Second, a shortage of raw film stock is itself hardly a precondition for the creation of the montage style; *Mother* was not the invention of necessity. Finally, *Intolerance* was seen and praised in many countries, yet no other nation developed montage in exactly the Russian manner. In short, while these occurrences played a part in the Soviet montage style, certain other factors must have influenced the direction and timing of the style's development. These factors, I believe, can be discovered in the larger context of Soviet artistic activity of the time.

It is clear that the theory of montage, viewed most abstractly, can be applied outside film. The fundamental principles—assemblage of heterogeneous parts, juxtaposition of fragments, the demand for the audience to make conceptual connections, in all a radically new relation among parts of a whole—seem transferable to drama, music, literature, painting, and sculpture. Vsevolod Meyerhold put it well: "Given man's power of memory, the existence of two facts in juxtaposition prompts their correlation; no sooner do we begin to recognize this correlation than a composition is born and its ideas begin to assert themselves."¹ Without looking for precise historical influences, we can see principles of montage at work in cubism, the poetry of Apollinaire, the graphic designs of the Dadaists Grosz and Heartfield, and the *musique concrète* of the Italian Futurists.²

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC ALLIANCES

The possibility of the montage principle's application in various arts becomes more likely when we notice that the Soviet montage films reveal two fairly distinct tendencies. Kuleshov's films, and most of Pudovkin's, use montage solely for rhythmic and narrative ends; the juxtaposition of shots becomes a way to bring out the shape and nuances of a story. Eisenstein's and Vertov's films, though, constantly go beyond narrative editing to make metaphorical and rhetorical statements by means of montage. The theories of Eisenstein and Vertov are often extravagantly ambitious. Eisenstein claims that his theory foresaw "transmuting to screen form the abstract concept, the course and halt of concepts and ideas—without intermediary. Without recourse to story, or invented plot."³ Vertov asserted that the newsreel can include ideological argument, "any political, economic, or other motif."⁴ Both the films and theories of Vertov and Eisenstein are more

¹ Meyerhold on *Theatre*, trans. and ed. by Edward Braun (New York, 1969), p. 322.

² For interesting if general attempts to account for such similarities, see Georges Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov* (Paris, 1971), pp. 17-54; Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. IV (New York, n.d.), pp. 239-259; and Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York, 1968), pp. 331-352.

³ S. M. Eisenstein, *Film Form* (New York, 1963), p. 125.

⁴ Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks Revolution," reprinted in Harry M. Geduld, ed., *Film Makers on Film Making* (Bloomington, 1967), p. 88.

radically experimental than those of Kuleshov and Pudovkin. But why?

The artistic situation of the time offers some clues. On one hand, while Kuleshov was trained as a painter, his work and that of his pupil Pudovkin seem to have remained relatively outside the general artistic activity of the crucial years 1917-1924. Both young men worked chiefly within film. In contrast, Vertov and Eisenstein were immersed in contemporary artistic activity. Before Vertov entered the cinema, he wrote novels, poetry, and satires and composed *musique concrète*; once in the cinema, he retained strong ties with the Futurists. Eisenstein was a polymath who had immense knowledge of the arts, particularly theatre and the graphic arts; he designed posters and stage sets and directed several theatre productions.⁵ Moreover, unlike the Kuleshov group, Vertov and Eisenstein allied themselves with LEF, a faction of artists who were politically and aesthetically revolutionary. Finally, the theories which Vertov and Eisenstein built were sharply opposed to those of the Kuleshov group. Luda and Jean Schnitzer have usefully defined the essential differences: Kuleshov and Pudovkin stood in the artistically advanced wing of the conservative cinéastes, while Vertov and Eisenstein were firmly in the advanced sector of the extreme-left artists.⁶ In short, whereas the standard explanations for the flowering of montage have emphasized the role of Kuleshov, a historically complete account must also consider the context within which Vertov and Eisenstein were working. This context reveals that the principle of montage was a salient strategy of much avant-garde Soviet art.

The impulses of avant-garde Soviet art have their roots in the artistic trends of pre-Revolutionary Russia. Around 1910, the Russian Futurist movement attracted many of the most creative minds of the day. Influenced both by French cubism and Italian Futurism, the Russian Futurists declared that conventional art must be destroyed and that a new art, appropriate to the machine age, must be created. Hence the Futurists took their subjects from modern life and exploited a technique of shocking juxtapositions. The movement gathered force in both painting and literature: 1912 saw the first major exhibition of the works of the painters Larianov, Goncharova, Malevich, and Tatlin, as well as the meeting of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky with the painter David Burliuk, during which, as Mayakovsky put it, "Russian Futurism was born."⁷ Several factors served to isolate and unite the Futurists: a Futurist tour of Russian cities and villages, a visit from the leading Italian Futurist Marinetti, and especially the blockade of Russia in 1914, which cut the Futurists off from European influences. During these years an exploration of the Futurist aesthetic began.

Much of this exploration was concerned with the technique of montage.

⁵ Although Eisenstein studied briefly with Kuleshov in 1923, his earlier work with the Proletcult and particularly Meyerhold seems to have more decisively influenced his theory and films.

⁶ Luda and Jean Schnitzer, *Vingt Ans de Cinéma Soviétique* (Paris, 1963), pp. 26-31.

⁷ Quoted in Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky* (London, 1965), pp. 83-84.

Malevich's cubo-Futurist paintings juxtaposed various elements in a kind of visual *mélange*; *An Englishman in Paris* (1914), for example, mixes various objects (fish, spoon, sabre, candle, ladder, building) with numerals, lettering, arrows, sawtooth shapes, and fractured planes. Similarly, Tatlin's doctrine of "real materials in real space" found expression in such works as *Relief* (1914) and *Corner Relief* (1914-15), which consist of heterogeneous materials and jagged shapes intersecting in a fierce collision. Comparable work was being done in stage design by Alexandra Exter.⁸ At the same time, Mayakovsky's poetry was shattering words and reassembling them into brutal images. In 1916, Denis Kaufman, who was to become famous in cinema as Dziga Vertov, began working in his "Laboratory of Hearing" on what he called "a montage of stenographic notes and sound recording";⁹ two years later Vertov was to begin his cinematic montage experiments. In all, the 1914-1917 period of avant-garde Russian art marks an initial stage in the pursuit of the montage principle.

In October of 1917, the avant-garde was, predictably, in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. "Cubism and Futurism were the revolutionary forms in art foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917," noted Malevich.¹⁰ "To accept or not to accept?" wrote Mayakovsky in his diary. "For me (as for the other Moscow Futurists) this question never arose. It is my revolution."¹¹ Putting themselves at the disposal of the Soviet regime, the Futurists served on the front of the Civil War, worked on agit-trains, and directed artistic events commemorating the Revolution. As a result of this cooperation, in 1918 Futurism became the official Soviet style. IZO (the Department of Fine arts) was created and Malevich, Tatlin, Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Altman, Brik, and Pounine—all leading Futurists—were named to head IZO's Moscow and Petrograd councils.¹²

By 1919 (the year *Intolerance* was shown), two figures who would later dominate Soviet film were allied with avant-garde tendencies: Vertov had supervised a newsreel series and had formed a vociferous documentary group, and Eisenstein had begun studying the theatre work of Meyerhold, who had recently directed Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*. Furthermore, after the Revolution, montage experiments continued—in poetry, in music (noise-symphonies consisting of foghorns, whistles, and other city sounds),¹³ and in Vertov's newsreels. In retrospect, even Kuleshov linked the revolution in politics with a revolutionary art style: "We were very young, we wanted to know everything; we thought, we argued. . . . We had the revolution, which, despite difficulties, gave us these possibilities. It

⁸ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* (New York, 1971), pp. 200-202.

⁹ Vertov, p. 89.

¹⁰ Quoted in Gray, p. 219.

¹¹ Quoted in Marshall, p. 88.

¹² Gray, p. 220.

¹³ Ronald Hunt, "The Constructivist Ethos," *Artform*, vol. VI, no. 2 (October 1967), p. 27.

liberated man, thought, and the artists who, under the czar and before, had been stifled. The time of montage had come. It had to be discovered. It was inevitable."¹⁴

But with Futurism's official supremacy came a problem. How could the aims of Futurism be integrated with the goals of Soviet society? Because the Futurists had traditionally sneered at the masses, proletarian groups attacked Futurism as elitist. The Futurists split: one group, led by the sculptor Vladimir Tatlin, believed that art should use industrial materials and be accessible to all; another faction, led by Kasimir Malevich, argued for a non-objective and thus non-ideological art. Tatlin's influence was decisive. His *Monument to the Third International* (conceived in 1920 but never built) provided an example of how the artist could be an ideologically functional member of the collective.

LEF AND THE CONSTRUCTIVISTS

Out of Tatlin's example came a new movement, Constructivism, which became prominent around 1922. The Constructivists, who came from literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, and film, were as aesthetically experimental as the Futurists had been, but they also saw the artist not as a member of the elite but as a creator of socially useful and revolutionary products. Constructivist painters began designing posters, books, furniture, clothes, graphics, fabric prints, and street decorations. Meyerhold's use of industrial decor and his theory of biomechanic acting carried Constructivism into the theatre. Within a year, the most radical Constructivists had clustered around Mayakovsky's avant-garde LEF group. The LEFists included the artists Rodchenko and Stepanova, the philologists Brik and Shklovsky, the poets Krouchonykh and Pasternak, the theatre directors Meyerhold and Eisenstein, and the film-maker Vertov. Many of the LEFists had been Futurists, and in the journal *Lef* they continued to argue that genuine Soviet art demanded the destruction of traditional art forms—a new style for a new society. "LEF," wrote Mayakovsky, "equals coverage of great social themes through all of Futurism's resources."¹⁵

One of these resources was to be the principle of montage. In 1923, the same year Kuleshov conducted his most important montage experiments, the poets of LEF announced: "We have now swept away the dust of verbal antiquity and shall only make use of fragments."¹⁶ Workers in other arts also began to explore various strategies of assemblage. Meyerhold's production of *Lake Lyul* (1923) chopped the play into several short episodes, juxtaposed by means of swiftly moving area lighting. The artist Alexander Rodchenko made his first photomontages to illustrate *Lef* and Mayakovsky's volume *About This*. In the same year, Eisenstein's production of *Ostrov-*

¹⁴ Andre S. Labarthe, "Entretien avec Lev Koulechov," *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 220-221 (May-June 1970), p. 91.

¹⁵ Quoted in Marshall, p. 90.

¹⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osep Brik, "Our Literary Work" reprinted in George Reavy and Marc Slonim, eds., *Soviet Literature: An Anthology* (New York, 1934), p. 399.

sky's *Every Wise Man* treated the text as a series of circus acts, pantomimes, and gags—a technique which he called “montage of attractions.” At the same time, Vertov was experimenting with montage in his *Kino-Pravda* documentaries. And early in 1924, Meyerhold staged *The Forest*, which fragmented the text into over thirty episodes. He explained that “Eisenstein advocated the juxtaposition of two conflicting shots. My production of *The Forest* was constructed on exactly the same principle, on the conflict of episodes.”¹⁷

During these years, the affinities of Eisenstein and Vertov with LEF were strongest. Eisenstein's first major theoretical essay, “Montage of Attractions,” and Vertov's central position-paper, “Kinoks-Revolution,” appeared in the same issue of LEF's journal, and neither can be fully understood without reference to LEF's Constructivist and social-revolutionary program. Eisenstein's essay defines an “attraction” as a “primary element in the construction of a theatrical production,” and sees in the montage of such “aggressive moments” the means of “guiding the spectator into a desired direction (or a desired mood), which is the main task of every functional theater (agit, poster, health education, etc.).”¹⁸ Some Futurist and Constructivist machine-worship shows through Vertov's essay, which claims that the mechanical eye of the camera can perfect and fulfill human vision: “I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.”¹⁹ And, like Eisenstein, Vertov insists that this world could be constructed out of fragments (“It is all a matter of juxtaposition of one visual moment with another”)²⁰ and used to replace timid bourgeois motion pictures. The subsequent film work of Eisenstein and Vertov constitutes an exploration of the principles of montage both outlined in their 1923 LEF-influenced essays.

But the influence was not all one-way, for this period saw an extraordinary cross-fertilization among Constructivists in various media. While Eisenstein developed his theatre style from his studies with Meyerhold and pointed to Rodchenko as a model exponent of montage in the visual arts,²¹ and while Vertov admitted his closeness to the poetry of Mayakovsky,²² LEFists in other arts gained a new respect for the cinema. Rodchenko began designing titles and posters for Vertov's films, while Meyerhold embarked on what he called a “cinefication” of the theatre, using principles of montage. The critics Shklovsky and Brik began to write scenarios. Mayakovsky, who ten years earlier had doubted the cinema's artistic possibilities, now wrote: “For you, the cinema is a spectacle. For me, it is almost a con-

¹⁷ Meyerhold, p. 322.

¹⁸ Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions,” reprinted in *The Film Sense* (New York, 1967), pp. 230-231.

¹⁹ Vertov, p. 86.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²¹ Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions,” p. 231.

²² Vertov, p. 94.

ception of the world."²³ There can be little doubt that the artists of LEF—even Mayakovsky—both influenced and were influenced by the montage theories of Vertov and Eisenstein. As Victor Shklovsky recalls: "The different arts . . . were developing and met in one common stream. It is impossible, however, to understand Eisenstein and Vertov . . . without Mayakovsky. Neither can the poem *About This*—whose hero passes from one circle to another and undergoes various metamorphoses—be understood without a knowledge of the cinematography of the time, without the awareness of what it meant then for artists to be violently confronted with fragments endowed with a unified overall sense, revealed in a number of conflicts."²⁴

This, then, was the context out of which Vertov and Eisenstein created their montage theories in 1923. The timing was perfect, for at the end of that year, the government's New Economic Policy had stabilized the economy and various cinema companies began to merge into the bloc Sovkino. The rise in production is striking: from 20 features in 1923 to 37 in 1924, 58 in 1925, and on to 112 by 1928.²⁵ Burgeoning production encouraged artistic experimentation, and so between 1924 and 1930, montage became the dominant style of avant-garde Soviet film. It was this period that produced not only Kuleshov's *Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), *Death Ray* (1925), and *By the Law* (1926) and Pudovkin's *Chess Fever* (1925), *Mother* (1926), *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and *Storm Over Asia* (1928) but also more idiosyncratic experiments like Vertov's *Lenin Kino-Pravda* (1924), *Kino-Eye* (1924), *A Sixth of the World* (1926), *Stride, Soviet!* (1926), *Eleventh Year* (1927), *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), and *Enthusiasm* (1930) and Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924), *Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927), and *The General Line* (1929).

BUREAUCRACY VS. THE AVANT-GARDE

Why did the montage style die out around 1930? Again I suggest that much of the answer lies in the context of Soviet artistic activity as a whole. By 1924, Constructivism in graphics and literature was coming under frequent attack. In Moscow, for instance, the "Discussion Exhibit" counterposed works of the conservative and Constructivist artists and stirred a debate which ended in a defeat of the latter.²⁶ At about the same time, orthodox artists began to attack Mayakovsky and LEF; eventually, such pressure resulted in the collapse of the group. The bureaucracy had become disenchanted with the avant-garde, while the public preferred less difficult art. By 1928, the conservative Association of Proletarian Writers was dictating

²³ Quoted in A. M. Ripellino, *Mayakovski et le Theatre Russe d'avant-garde* (Paris, 1965), p. 308.

²⁴ Quoted in Wiktor Woroszyński, *The Life of Mayakovsky* (New York, 1970), p. 320.

²⁵ Steven P. Hill, "A Quantitative View of Soviet Cinema," *Cinema Journal*, vol. XI, no. 2 (Spring 1972).

²⁶ Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 40.

literary activity. Although montage in film was not attacked as quickly as montage in other arts, Eisenstein and Vertov were taken to task for their experiments in *October* and *Eleventh Year*. By 1929, Trotsky had been exiled and Stalin's first Five Year Plan was under way; the elation of the period of "heroic Communism" had been replaced by a grim bureaucratic control of almost every sector of life. In 1930, the theatre censorship committee turned down Mayakovsky's *Bath House*; *Izvestia* attacked Dovjenco's *Earth* as "counter-revolutionary" and "defeatist"²⁷; and Mayakovsky committed suicide. The montage experimenters were no longer the privileged avant-garde of Soviet art. Stalin reorganized the film industry and placed it under the control of Boris Shumyatsky, who preferred traditional narrative form to expressive montage. With the Central Committee decree, "Reorganization of Literary and Art Institutions" (1932), the Party assumed complete control of all artistic activity and "Socialist realism" became the official style.²⁸ In every art, montage was now "formalism" and thus forbidden.

During the 1930's, bureaucratic pressure drove out experimental montage style. By 1937, Eisenstein had gone into teaching, Vertov had returned to newsreel editing, and even directors like Pudovkin and Dovjenco who accommodated the party by altering their styles were given little to do. The films that received the strongest government support at this time were *Chapayev* (1935) and the *Maxim* trilogy (1935-39)—films which repudiated classic montage style. In the visual arts and in literature as well, montage was replaced by a slick representational style, in adherence to the official policy that "artistic quality is judged by its content."²⁹ Socialist realism had triumphed over "formalism."

A historically complete account of Soviet film montage, then, must include both strands of development: that of Kuleshov and Pudovkin and that of Vertov and Eisenstein. No doubt the shortage of raw film stock encouraged the re-editing of old footage; no doubt the study of *Intolerance* contributed to a consciousness of the power of editing. But certain preconditions for the montage style lay in current avant-garde art movements of which Eisenstein and Vertov were part. Similarly, the purge of the montage style needs to be seen not only as a reaction to a series of increasingly difficult films but also as part of an attempt by the political bureaucracy and artistic coalitions to eliminate the montage style from all the arts.

The foregoing is a rough sketch of the historical situation that played a part in the rise of montage theories and styles. Obviously a Russian-speaking scholar could investigate the situation in much more detail, tracing precise relations among the LEF group and the Kuleshov group (as well as the FEX group, out of which came Kozintsev and Trauberg). More gen-

²⁷ Quoted in Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Cinema, 1930-1940, A History," reprinted in *On Movies* (New York, 1971), p. 226.

²⁸ Szechlocha and Mead, pp. 43-44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

erally, the study of European film needs to be undertaken with regard for similar contexts in other locales and periods. Why not study in detail the relation between German expressionist film makers and theatre workers or between Italian neorealist directors and the neorealist literary movement? And (most speculative but most intriguing of all) we need inquiries which place the history of film-making and film theory in the history of modern art as a whole; the problem is to trace both formal and stylistic similarities and precise historical relationships. In short, the history of film does not exist in pristine isolation from that of the other arts; if we are to write adequate film history, we need to study more than just film.